Nabob of the No-huddle

The National Football League (NFL) has had only one head coach with a Harvard degree, but he was an awfully good one. This year, Marv Levy, A.M. ’51, who led the Buffalo Bills to four straight Super Bowl appearances—a feat matched by no other coach—was inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. At the ceremony, ESPN’s Chris Berman introduced Levy by booming out the coach’s signature line: “Where would you rather be than right here, right now?”

That question, embodying a Zen-like wisdom, helped focus athletes for the battle. Levy used it before every game for 44 years. His NFL teams compiled a regular-season record of 143-112 and went 11-8 in the postseason. The Bills destroyed opponents with their famous “no-huddle” offense run by flashy quarterback Jim Kelly, and boasted stars like running back Thurman Thomas, receiver André Reed, and defensive end Bruce Smith.

But perhaps Levy’s greatest coaching achievement came in remobilizing the Bills each fall during their four-year Super Bowl run, since the team lost each of those big games. “Losing each one was tremendously disappointing,” says Levy, who was 65 when the streak began. “I’d like to be able to say that we won one of them, or all four, but that’s not going to change. Yet each time, our athletes showed their resilience—they got right back to work. The only way to win a Super Bowl is to get into it.” After the first loss, a 20-19 heartbreaker to the New York Giants, the coach recalled a small book of poetry his mother had given him when he went into the service, and typed out four lines from an unknown British poet:

Fight on, my men, Sir Andrew said,
A little I’m hurt but not yet slain.
I’ll just lie down and bleed awhile,
And I’ll rise and fight again.

“Eight or ten players came up and asked for a copy of that poem,” says Levy, who on another occasion cited Hemingway’s definition of character as “grace under pressure,” suggesting why one newspaper called him a “Renaissance man on the sidelines.”

His own college-football career took place at Coe College in Iowa, where Levy was both a running back and a member of Phi Beta Kappa. “I loved the coaches at that small college—their high ideals,” he recalls. “They were models who embodied everything I wanted to be.” After graduation in 1950, he “reluctantly trudged off” to Harvard Law School, but immediately found himself sitting in classes thinking, “I don’t want to be a lawyer—I can’t take this.” Levy called home to tell his father he was dropping out of law school, and that what he really wanted to do was be a football coach. “There were 30 seconds of painful silence,” he recalls, before his father said, “Be a good one.”

Levy quickly transferred into a master’s program in history at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, where he studied under luminaries such as Arthur Schlesinger Sr., Merle Fainsod, and Sidney B. Fay, who advised Levy’s thesis on the Lend-Lease program. The future leader also attended every Harvard football game. “I cannot aver that what I learned at Harvard prepared me precisely for a career as a football coach,” Levy wrote in a 1994 memoir for the Phi Beta Kappa newsletter, the Key Reporter. “Perhaps being in an environment where such earnest enthusiasm pervaded all the activities—intellectual and nonacademic—of those who made up the Harvard community helped me understand how important it is to be associated with people who are intrinsically motivated.”

Levy’s coaching career began at St. Louis Country Day School, and included college jobs at Coe, New Mexico, William and Mary, and Berkeley, where future San Francisco 49er coach Bill Walsh was his assistant. (In 1970 Levy would be a finalist for the Harvard head coaching job that ultimately went to Joe Restic.) In 1978 he got his first NFL head coaching job with the Kansas City Chiefs and joined the Bills in 1986, staying through the 1997 season. When Levy took charge of the New Mexico program, he was the youngest head coach of a major college team in America, and by 1994 he had become the NFL’s oldest head coach. “Challenge my coaching accomplishments if you wish,” he wrote in the memoir. “But my stamina, at least, defies criticism.”

“I went into football because I enjoyed it,” he says. “You are surrounded by these great role models, playing a game that’s energizing—and that’s your life’s work? How lucky can you get?”

—Craig Lambert