

How Jon Gruden pounds the rock

As a graduate assistant at the University of Tennessee, football coaching prodigy-to-be Jon Gruden found himself passing a note to assistant coach Walt Harris during an important game against Auburn.

“DP8 Go? Check the post,” read the note, which advocated a particular pass play, based on Gruden’s observation of the Auburn defense. Harris called the play, resulting in a big Tennessee gain.

Gruden, who later became the youngest head coach in NFL history to win a Super Bowl, remembers the next day, when the coaches viewed films of the game. When the big pass play appeared on the screen, Gruden’s heart started pounding.

“That’s a good call, Walt,” Tennessee head coach Johnny Majors told Harris. “That’s a good job.”

Gruden says he would have been satisfied right there, but Harris said, “Jon called that.” Majors walked over, patted Gruden on the back and said, “Atta boy!”

“That was a highlight of my career,” Gruden remembers. “That was one of the greatest days of my life.”

Now, Gruden pays it forward.

As head coach of the NFL’s Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Gruden says he realizes that the players “get a little sick of hearing from me all the time,” so he breaks up the monotony by letting one assistant coach address the team before each week’s game. Each coach has to come up with a theme and the keys to winning that game.

The first game of the 2002 season belonged to defensive line coach Rod Marinelli. Marinelli started off by talking about a rock: “That rock is your opponent and you’ve got to keep pounding on it with a hammer.”

For his part, Marinelli kept pounding on that metaphor, and Gruden noticed the players using it, too, during practices. “Pound the rock!” started appearing on signs all over the stadium, then on T-shirts.

Perhaps no coincidence, the Bucs won the Super Bowl that season.

“I need help to lead,” Gruden explains. “I rely on the coaches to give me some juice.” So, Marinelli gets credit for the rock. But of course, so does Gruden.

— Adapted from *Do You Love Football?!*, Jon Gruden with Vic Carucci, HarperCollins.