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## Coach Bill Parcells: ACG's Exclusive Interview With the NFL Coaching Icon

By [John Ingoldsby](#) On 9/12/2011 @ 1:07 pm In [War College](#) | [1 Comment](#)



Parcells (kneeling, second from right) with his fellow West Point coaches including head coach Tom Cahill (standing, center). (Courtesy, U.S. Military Academy At West Point)

*Editor's Note: The November 2011 issue of Armchair General features John Ingoldsby's "10 Questions" interview with legendary NFL coach Bill Parcells. In this "web extra" we present the complete text of the interview, including several additional questions and answers.*

**Q. What years did you coach at Army and who was your Head Coach when you were the linebackers coach?**

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A. I was at Army from 1967 through '69, so I coached there for three years. Tom Cahill was the Head Coach, and he coincidentally happened to be my high school coach in New Jersey, and he had taken a job at West Point as the freshman coach after my senior year in high school. And Paul Dietzel, I believe, was the Head Coach at the time, and then Dietzel left Army for South Carolina some years later, and then Cahill became the Head Coach. And, fortunately enough for me, I was able to get a job with him.

**Q. And how exactly did you end up getting the job with Coach Cahill?**

A. Well, of course, he knew me. I was already coaching – I had been coaching for about three

years in the Midwest. I started at a Division 3 school named Hastings College in Nebraska as a part-time job. And then I went back to my Alma Mater, which was Wichita State at the time, and was there for a couple of years, and then the opportunity at West Point came along. It was late 1966 when that happened, and I went there and met a lot of good people. That was a good place to really develop as a coach and learn a lot; I met Bobby Knight there, and we've been lifelong friends.

**Q. You mentioned part-time coaching, and I found it interesting, as I did research, that you were a part-time assistant with Bob Knight's West Point basketball team. How was that experience?**

A. I did help him occasionally either scouting or with his basketball camps and those kinds of things. We were just friends, and we enjoyed spending time together and he found something for me to do while I was there. We were both really in our formative years in coaching because neither of us had been at it very long, and wound up being a good sounding board for one another regarding our thoughts about coaching and organization and the team concepts and managing problems, those kinds of things that all come up for young coaches. These are problems that coaches never really are aware of as just player participants and so there's always a lot of things that need your attention that are related to the team, but not exactly the hands-on of practicing game preparation. So having gone through those experiences together, and really myself witnessing some of his experiences as a head coach while I was still an assistant coach and being kind of on the inside a little bit, that was very, very helpful to me as time went on, and later when I became the head coach.

**Q. I can imagine that it certainly didn't hurt to have players like Mike Krzyzewski to coach on the West Point basketball team.**

A. Well, that's right. I remember when Mike was playing, and he was the recipient of some coaching wrath from time to time. I remember that vividly, but I think too that Mike was the beneficiary of having that experience as well.

**Q. Coach Bob Knight is terrific. Ever since he and I met up here in Boston a couple of years ago, he has treated me well and I've always been a big fan.**

A. Yeah, he is a good guy, and his image is really somewhat different than the reality of the situation, and people don't really understand his benevolence and kindness to people and what he does to assist people. I think those of us that know him well, we know that other side that he doesn't reveal too often to other people, but he really is quite a guy.

**Q. What did you take away from coaching at West Point that you've used throughout your career?**



After one season as an assistant coach at his alma mater Wichita State, Parcells joined his former

high school coach Tom Cahill at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. (Courtesy, U.S. Military Academy at West Point)

A. Some of the things that were important to me there were time management because there were constraints on the Cadets in terms of time and the opportunities that you had to actually coach are limited compared to other places that you coach. So one of the main things that I learned at West Point was having to decide exactly what the most important things are that you need to get across to your players in a limited amount of time. And that served me well personally because I always felt as a coach that I did better with less time than I did with more time. And part of that was my background at West Point because the time available to you was never excessive, it was always limited. The Cadets had to be at the dining hall at a certain time, got out of class at a certain time, had to get dressed, come to practice and be at the dining hall at a certain time, etc. So you just had them for a certain period of time, and you had to decide what exactly were the important things that you had to teach them that day or go over with them or practice with them, and so I think that time management in that organization served me well throughout my coaching career because, as I said, I always felt that limited time was not necessarily a bad thing. So that's one thing, and the other thing was discipline, a major factor at that institution. There's a constant reminder of discipline, not only personal discipline but team discipline. They're just constant reminders of why you are there, of how important that can be to the success of a team. That's a place where that was stressed, and I carried that with me to other coaching areas, and even into the pros to a large degree. The background that I had at West Point in that area was important. The other thing was that I gained a greater appreciation for the Military and the problems that they're confronted with while I was there. It helped me form opinions certainly about our country and certainly about the history of our country, and sacrifices a lot of people made on behalf of our country, some of which I saw first-hand because it was the time when the Vietnam War was going on. That was not the most popular thing to be involved in and, yet, I saw a lot of young guys graduate from school and go off to Vietnam and, of course my brother was one of those. You just gain a little appreciation for someone that has to go do that. That image and impression stayed with me pretty much throughout my lifetime.

**Q. I made a couple of trips to West Point, and I learned about their time management, the discipline, everything you mentioned. It's sacred ground to put it mildly.**

A. Yes, it is. Actually West Point is a very unique place, although I didn't live nearby for many years after I coached there. But while I was coaching the (New York) Giants, I was really in close proximity to the Academy, only about a 35-minute drive from my home in New Jersey. That was a place that I would go to, just get in my car and drive there and just drive through the campus, you know the main area there, and of course having coached there, I knew some of the other places on the reservation that existed. There were some places we had training camp out at Camp Buckner, and there's another place that was the Superintendent's rest area so to speak, a place called Bull Pond. And I would occasionally visit those places and that always kind of quieted me down mentally. I remember countless times just driving my car at the academy, going down, walking around Trophy Point, going down to the old field house, up to the stadium, out to Camp Buckner and just kind of revisiting the place and recalling the time that I was there. And, of course, I had a home there, the quarters that were provided for us coaches. I'd always go by that neighborhood, and did it many, many times. Actually, I also went and watched the football team in spring practice a couple of times, and it just was a place that I have a very strong feeling for and I liked being there. It relaxed me mentally, and it was a place that I enjoyed being, and was a happy place for me when I was there. Going back from time to time just brings back those good memories.

I pass there a lot in the summer because I have a home in Saratoga Springs, New York. So I drive south to New Jersey occasionally when I have business down that way or in New York,

and I go right by it, so it's hard for me not to just stop and go in there, even if it's just for ten or 15 minutes, it's just a special place for me. And I enjoyed my time there a lot, and I've enjoyed those visits a great deal.

**Q. I've been to Saratoga two of the last three summers in August since one of our friends has a box there. I grew up going to the races with my father in Charlestown, West Virginia.**

A. If you come there next summer, I'll be there because I have a box there as well. I only got three days of racing this summer because we had training camp, but now that I'm kind of out and the summers aren't going to be involved with training camp I don't believe, I'll certainly spend August in Saratoga, no question.

**Q. Coach, is there anyone, Coach Knight aside of course, who was at West Point when you coached there who left a lasting impression on you?**

A. There's a fellow that I coached that was one of our players, and he's five or six years younger than I am. His name is Steve Yarnell, and we have remained very close friends. Actually, after Steve got out of the Army, he was in the FBI for 20-some odd years, and then when he got out of the FBI, I hired him as a security man for the New York Jets when I was working there. Steve still has that job and is at the Jets currently. When I was a young coach and he was a young player at the time when I coached there, we just hit it off and he's been a close friend of mine for a very long time. I'd say Steve is probably the one that I would be closest to that was there when I was there.

**Q. Speaking of players, what's the biggest difference between coaching Army Cadets and coaching NFL players?**

A. I don't think there's a big difference in the coaching, I really don't. Your job as the coach is to try to give your players a good design and try to get them to play hard and play well, and that's basically what I did as a coach at Army – try to give them a good design and try to get them to play well. So I don't think that's different. Now at West Point, there was nobody around the players other than other cadets, their commanding officers and their peers and instructors. Now in professional football, there's an awful lot of other people on the periphery of your athletes, and you never really know what they're hearing from those other people. There are media, of course, media. We didn't have that at West Point, player agents and all sorts of other factions that have other agendas that want to be around the athletes. So professionally you have that aspect that's somewhat different. But when it comes to the coaching, I mean you just coach pretty much the way your nature tells you to coach, and you try to get the situation in hand. As I said, you try to give your players a good design and try to give your team the best chance to win.



Parcells took his first head coaching job in 1978 at the U.S. Air Force

Academy. (Courtesy, U.S. Air Force Academy)

**Q. I'm looking on my computer at a picture of you with the Air Force Falcon on your shoulder from 1978, and I know you were the head coach there. What are your memories when you think of your one year coaching at Air Force?**

A. Well, that was a good experience because that was my first opportunity at a head coaching job. It was really a difficult situation at the time. The Air Force had been under one man, Ben Martin, for a very, very long time, and he did an outstanding job there. The program fell a little bit on hard times in the latter years that he was there, so it was trying to get things back going and philosophically get the interest back in the football team and the recruiting to start making advances acquiring better athletes.

In the short time I was there, I know that I hired some people that had a good long- range effect on the academy's program – the most notable would have been a fellow named Ken Hatfield who wound up being the head coach after I left there, and he really did an outstanding job at Air Force for quite a number of years.

**Q. Do you have an interest in military history overall?**

A. I've read quite a bit about the Civil War, the military, and the Indian Nations in this country, but as far as the World Wars, I would not say that I really know very much about those, other than some of the obvious things that you've heard and some of the footage I've seen and some of the more prominent world leaders and generals and those kinds of things. But I did have a pretty strong interest in the Civil War and again the settling of the West and the Indian Nations, and I've read quite a bit about those things, and found that pretty interesting, but I'm not well versed in military history really in any aspect. Of course, I've heard an awful lot from my brother when he was alive, about Vietnam and what was going on there when he was on the front lines of that place. I have some memories of that, but I can't say that I have really much knowledge about much of anything else.

**Q. Knowing your leadership skills, is there a particular military leader that you admire or that you would consider a favorite or someone you read about that stuck with you?**

A. Churchill was a military leader, and I have a pretty high regard for him and his fortitude and his ability to function under extreme duress, when all around him was seemingly collapsing in the European theater, and England was the last remaining place. I thought that was awfully commendable the way he handled that.

**Q. Coach, you had mentioned your brother Don, and I know he played in the 1962 Army/Navy game, and scored a touchdown in front of President John F. Kennedy. When I interviewed Roger Staubach in his Dallas office in May, he spoke with great affection for that particular game, as well as the '63 game, of course. So I'm just curious if have you been to Army/Navy games?**

A. I've been to three of them as a coach, but, no, I haven't been to any since I left. Of course, one of my long-time coaches who now is a very successful head coach, Bill Belichick at New England where he's had a great career, his dad was a coach in Navy, and I knew his dad well. So Bill and I always had a little friendly competition all the time that we were coaching together – the Army/Navy game where we'd always make a small wager – that was our way of being interested in it, and we paid close attention to the game and who was going to do what and whoever had a winning streak going and those kinds of things. Other than that, I do watch the game. I don't think there have been many of them I missed, other than when I was traveling with a pro team on the Saturday that the game was played.

*John Ingoldsby, a leading writer on the intersection of sports and the military, conducted this interview. He is president of IIR Sports & Entertainment, Inc. (WWW.IIRsports.COM) in Boston, a public relations and media firm. As a former newspaper reporter covering Fort*

*Devens, he was the first New England media representative ever chosen by the Pentagon to cover NATO war games in Europe. His father was a Lieutenant Colonel in General Patton's legendary Third Army during World War II.*

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