

# MARV LEVY

By Joe Horrigan  
Courtesy of the Pro Football Hall of Fame

Marv Levy was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Coe College and earned a masters degree in English history from Harvard University. He lists Winston Churchill, Charles Dickens, Leon Uris, Thomas Wolfe, and Herman Wouk as his favorites authors, while his hobbies include, English history, reading, travel, and music.

Although Marv's interests and educational resume may be more typical of an academician, his career resume is unmistakably that of a successful football coach – a very successful football coach. So successful, in fact, that it has earned him the ultimate form of career recognition, membership in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, only the eighteenth coach to be so honored.

Marv's long coaching odyssey began in 1951, as the head coach of Country Day, a St. Louis prep school. His long climb up the coaching ladder ended 46 years later, when he retired in 1997 as the most successful head coach in the history of the Buffalo Bills and the only NFL coach to take a team to four consecutive Super Bowls.

Marvin Daniel Levy was born on August 3, 1925, in Chicago, Illinois. His father, Sam Levy, immigrated to the United States from England, when he was six years old. When he was 16, he lied about his age and enlisted in the U. S. Marines Corp. A veteran of World War I, the senior Levy was wounded and gassed at the famous battle of Belleau Wood in France, for which he was awarded the Purple Heart.

After the war, Sam and his Russian-born wife Ida, had two children, Marv, the elder and his sister Marilyn.

Sam Levy instilled in his son a deep-seated sense of patriotism, self-discipline, and a strong work ethic. One of Sam's favorite sayings was, "What you do speaks so loudly that no one can hear what you are saying." It was a saying that Marv, who became well known for his use inspirational quotes, would frequently share with his players.

"My dad was a totally honest, hard-working man," he remembered. "He taught me values about what this country should represent that I felt very strongly about – specifically opportunity."

Marv's academic interests, however, seemed to come from his mother, who despite having little formal education was an avid reader of English literature. "She was so well educated," Levy stated with admiration. "And it was all her own doing."

Blended nicely into Marv's parental influences is a personality that includes a seemingly effortless sense of humor, coupled with a refreshing prospective on life. Once when asked by a reporter if a particular game was, "a must win," he responded, "No. World War II was a must win."

Although he was an outstanding athlete at South Shore High School, Marv was admittedly just an average student. Following graduation in 1943, he enlisted in the Army Air Corp and spent the remainder of World War II in the military. It was while recuperating in an Army hospital from a leg injury that he became reacquainted with the English literature that his mother so loved. "The only book they had in the library," he said "was *A Tale of Two Cities*. I hated it in high school. But I read it and it fascinated me. It opened up my mind."

After his discharge from the Army, Marv enrolled at Coe. There he distinguished himself as a running back in football and a sprinter on the track team. He also, however, excelled in the classroom where he earned a degree in English. A natural leader, twice he was voted student council president.

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 23, No. 3 (2001)

---

Three years after graduating from Coe, he returned as an assistant football coach (1953-1955). In 1954 he joined the coaching staff at the University of New Mexico, and was named head coach in 1958. In two seasons as head coach, he guided the Lobos to a 14-6 record and earned Skyline Conference Coach of the Year honors both years. From 1960 through 1963 he was the head coach at the University of California (Berkeley). He finished his college-coaching career with a five-year stint as head coach at the College of William and Mary where he twice earned Southern Conference Coach of the Year honors.

His pro coaching career – which included time in the Canadian, United States, and National Football Leagues – began in 1969 as the kicking teams coach of the Philadelphia Eagles. A year later, he was chosen by the Los Angeles Rams' head coach George Allen to replace Dick Vermeil as special teams coach, a position that Allen introduced to the NFL. When Allen moved on to the Washington Redskins, Levy went with him.

"I liked his organization," Allen once said. "He always seemed to be in control of his emotions as well as his team."

Although Levy admits to having been emotional during games, he learned how to deal with the emotional highs and lows that a coach experiences. "I'm emotional during games," he once explained. "But as important as the game is to me, as important as my job is, I know it isn't life or death."

After his two seasons with the Redskins, Levy left the NFL to become the head coach of the Montreal Alouettes of the Canadian Football League. Marv took the Alouettes to the playoffs five consecutive years, competed for the Grey Cup three times and won it twice. His tremendous success with the Alouettes didn't go unnoticed south of the border.

On December 20, 1977 Levy returned to the NFL as head coach of the struggling Kansas City Chiefs. When he joined the Chiefs, the team was at a low point, coming off a disastrous 2-12 season. But with Levy at the helm improvement started immediately. In his first season, he surprised pro football observers when he featured the old Wing-T formation. It was, as he explained, a move made of necessity.

"When we went to the Wing-T, it was a situation where we took over a team that had the worst defensive record in the history of the National Football League," he explained. "We wanted to keep that defense off the field, so we ran the ball 60 times a game. You do what your personnel dictates."

That year he doubled the team's win total, followed by a 7-9 season in 1979, an 8-8 record in 1980 and an impressive 9-7 in 1981.

"To be realistic, we missed the playoffs by the field goal San Diego kicked with 13 seconds left in the ball game," Levy lamented at season's end in reference to an earlier loss. "Had we stopped them on that drive, we would have been 10-6 and the division champs and in the playoffs."

Nonetheless, for the Chiefs, it was their best finish since 1973, and in just four seasons, Levy had the waning franchise back in playoff contention.

Even though Levy's rebuilding plan in Kansas City was showing positive results, a tug-of-war developed between the coach and the team's general manager on how the team ought to be built. It was a battle that Marv would eventually lose.

Compounding the internal strife, the strike-shortened 1982 season was, to say the least, a disruptive and divisive one for pro football. The Kansas City Chiefs were no exception. Suddenly, the team that had showed such promise seemed to disintegrate, as the season was ripped apart with player dissent and labor unrest. After finishing a disappointing 3-6, Levy was fired.

In 1983, Bills head coach Chuck Knox left Buffalo for the Seattle Seahawks. Bills owner Ralph Wilson called Levy for an interview. By all accounts the meeting went well, but in the end Wilson went for a young Bills assistant Kat Stephenson.

The next few years were a challenge for Levy. After a one-year stint as head coach of the USFL's Chicago Blitz, a front office position with Montreal, and a brief venture into the broadcasting booth, Marv yearned to return to the sidelines. Midway through the 1986 season he got his chance.

Once again, the Bills who had fired Stephenson five games into the 1985 season and replaced him with Hank Bullough, called again. "When I decided we needed a change when Hank Bullough was here, I immediately thought of Marv," remembered Wilson. "I thought he was a very, very smart fellow, and I was impressed with him as a person."

Add to the scenario that the Bills general manager at the time was Bill Polian, who first met Marv when they worked for the Alouettes. He joined Levy as a scout with the Chiefs and was the pro personnel director of the Blitz. Polian, citing Marv's qualities of, "professionalism, organization, leadership, motivation, ability to make clear-cut decisions, ability to see the big picture and to implement what is needed to reach those goals," urged Wilson to hire Levy. It was an easy sell.

Rebuilding the Bills, however, wasn't so easy. Levy took over a team that had lost 28 of 32 games over two seasons. "Marv brought sunlight to a very dark situation when he came," remembered Polian. "He's an optimistic person. When outside forces make it seem like Armageddon, he's liable to drop a one-liner in the most serious discussion. He keeps everyone loose. You enjoy coming to work."

Marv took a cautious approach with his new team. "What the team needed was realism," he said. "This was a weary football team, beaten down mentally by losing. I never mentioned the word 'win.' I talked about performance."

"Marv has respect for everyone's personality," said veteran nose tackle Fred Smerlas. "He doesn't belittle people. He lets them be themselves. It's a whole new world."

"If there's one common thread among good coaches," Levy often said, "it's not necessarily that you're introverted or extroverted, a slave driver or soft-spoken. It's your ability to teach. Teaching is the key."

Levy, the coach and teacher, implemented game plans built around his team's strengths. "It's not that a player's fired up," Levy said. "It's that he knows what he is supposed to do; he's done it many times. All that comes from being taught well."

While the coach was working to get the most out of his players, he was also working to build a winning team by upgrading the talent. In his first full season as head coach he posted a respectable, if not previously thought impossible 7-8 record in yet another strike-shortened season.

Although the Bills quarterback was the strong-armed Jim Kelly, who had lit it up with the USFL's Houston Gamblers' "run and shoot offense," a supporting cast simply wasn't there yet. Kelly's only weapon was a young Andre Reed; forcing Marv to take what his critics said was a "too conservative" approach. It was a label that was destined to be short-lived. "I don't think I've ever been conservative," he proclaimed. "All I ever wanted was balance between the run and pass."

In 1988, the Bills drafted Thurman Thomas, who gave them a running back to compliment Kelly's passing. The results were immediate; as the team went 12-4 and captured the first of six AFC East titles, for his part, Levy was named NFL Coach of the Year.

In 1989, the rebuilding continued as the Bills added two deep-threat receivers to the roster, veteran James Lofton and rookie Don Bebee. The winning continued as well. Although the team lost three of their last four games to finish 9-7, they still won the division title.

The following season, the Bills were back, this time with a high-powered "no-huddle" offense that catapulted the team to the first of their four consecutive Super Bowl appearances. The Decade of the Nineties was clearly the decade of the Bills and their leader, Marv Levy.

From 1988 through 1997, the Bills were first in the AFC in winning percentage and second only to the San Francisco 49ers in the NFL. For Levy, during his 11½ seasons with the Bills, he recorded a 112-70 regular season record and was 11-8 in the playoffs. He was named NFL Coach of the Year in 1988 and AFC Coach of the Year in 1988, 1993, and 1995. And, although the Bills went 0-4 in the Super Bowl, they proved to be one of the most resilient teams in NFL history.

"The way he was able to handle guys like myself, Bruce (Smith), Thurman (Thomas), Cornelius (Bennett), Darryl (Talley), and Steve (Tasker), there's not many people who've been able to do that," said Kelly at

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 23, No. 3 (2001)

---

Marv's retirement press conference. "Marv knew exactly the right words to say at the right times. He knew how to handle the players, and everybody would do anything to help him and the team."

Prior to the start of every game, Marv would challenge his players with a rhetorical question. It became his trademark. The coach would ask aloud, "Gentlemen, where would you rather be than right here right now?" One can only imagine how many of his former players wanted to ask their old coach the same question when Marv Levy's name was announced as a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame's Class of 2001. The answer, however, was obvious.

---

### MARV LEVY

Levy, Marvin Daniel Col. Coe  
Born: August 3, 1926, Chicago, IL

Year	Team	W	L	T	Pct.	Finish	Playoffs
							W-L
1978	KC	4	12	0	.250	5 AFC-W	----
1979	KC	7	9	0	.438	5 AFC-W	----
1980	KC	8	8	0	.500	3 AFC-W	----
1981	KC	9	7	0	.563	3 AFC-W	----
1982	KC	3	6	0	.333	11 AFC	----
1986	Buf	2	5	0	.286	4 AFC-E	----
1987	Buf	7	8	0	.467	4 AFC-E	----
1988	Buf	12	4	0	.750	1 AFC-E	1-1
1989	Buf	9	7	0	.563	1 AFC-E	0-1
1990	Buf	13	3	0	.813	1 AFC-E	2-1
1991	Buf	13	3	0	.813	1 AFC-E	2-1
1992	Buf	11	5	0	.688	2 AFC-E	3-1
1993	Buf	12	4	0	.750	1 AFC-E	2-1
1994	Buf	7	9	0	.438	4 AFC-E	----
1995	Buf	10	6	0	.625	1 AFC-E	1-1
1996	Buf	10	6	0	.625	2 AFC-E	0-1
1997	Buf	6	10	0	.375	4 AFC-E	----
		143	112	0	.561		11-8