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Walt Harris

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Walt Harris may be one of the most underrated offensive coaches of his era. As quarterbacks coach (1992-94) of the New York Jets, he revitalized the career of former NFL MVP Boomer Esiason, who was the only Jets player to earn Pro Bowl honors in 1993.¹ In the collegiate ranks, Harris rebuilt the University of Pittsburgh football program, leading the Panthers to five consecutive bowl appearances (2000-04) and the 2004 Big East Conference championship. As a result, he was a two-time Big East Coach of the Year (1997, 2004). Harris also coached numerous players who experienced success in the NFL such as wide receivers Antonio Bryant and future Hall-of-Famer Larry Fitzgerald, running back Kevan Barlow and quarterback Tony Eason.²

Upon his arrival in New York, the Jets were in the midst of a catastrophe. The team had made just one postseason appearance (1991) in the past five seasons. Then head coach Bruce Coslet was brought in to improve the team after the Jets suffered mediocrity in the final three seasons (1987-89) under Joe Walton.³ Coslet was an outstanding assistant coach with the Cincinnati Bengals from 1981-89 that included two trips to the Super Bowl (XVI and XXIII). The Bengals' offenses under Coslet ranked in the top five in points scored in three of his last four seasons with the team (1986, 1988, 1989).⁴ The 1992 season began with drama when quarterback Doug O'Brien held out from training camp due to a contract dispute. As a result, backup quarterback Browning Nagle took the reigns, going 3-10 in 13 starts. The Jets started 1-5 and Nagle was eventually benched late in the season.⁵

Coslet made a defining move in the off-season. On March 17, 1993 the Jets acquired quarterback Boomer Esiason from the Cincinnati Bengals in exchange for a third-round draft choice in the 1993 NFL Draft.⁶ Esiason was the NFL MVP, a first-team all-pro choice and earned a trip the Pro Bowl in 1988. He threw a career best 28 touchdown passes and led the league in both Quarterback Rating (97.4) with three fourth-quarter comebacks.⁷ However, before coming to the Jets, Esiason showed regression in his play. In the previous two seasons, he had tossed more interceptions than touchdowns: 13 TDs versus 16 INTs in 1991 and 11 TDs versus 15 INTs in 1992.⁸ Harris was instrumental in rekindling Esiason's playing abilities.

During the offseason the team also traded for running back Johnny Johnson, who was a dual-threat player, from the Phoenix Cardinals. Johnson was second on the team with 641 receiving yards in 1993, behind receiver Rob Moore (64 receptions, 843 yards).⁹ Both players were important weapons in Esiason's resurgence.



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In his first game as a Jet, Esiason went off for 371 passing yards and two touchdowns, but New York lost the game, 26-20. He threw a season high four touchdowns against the Philadelphia Eagles three weeks later, but the Jets fell, 35-30.¹⁰ Later in the season the Jets orchestrated a five-game winning streak. Esiason threw just five touchdown passes during it, but he did an excellent job at protecting the football, committing just two turnovers. The streak included a 17-12 victory over his former team, the Cincinnati Bengals.¹¹ New York appeared to be in prime position for the playoffs, sitting at 8-5. However, a three-game losing streak to end the regular season killed the hopes. They were drilled, 28-7, by the eventual Super Bowl champion Dallas Cowboys, then lost a nailbiter, 16-14, to the Buffalo Bills, where the Jets lost the lead in the fourth-quarter, when the Bills' Steve Christie drilled a 40-yard field goal to win it.¹² The Jets finished at 8-8, one game out of a playoff spot. On a positive note, Boomer Esiason earned a Pro Bowl berth, his first since 1989. He was the only Jets' player to earn Pro Bowl honors that season.¹³ On Harris' mentoring Esiason remarked, "Walt Harris is right there with the best. There's nobody better."¹⁴

There was renewed hope in 1994. The Jets started 2-0 after a thrilling overtime win in Week 2 over the Denver Broncos. Esiason led the game-winning drive in overtime. The key play was a 24-yard strike to receiver Art Monk, that put New York in field goal range.¹⁵ New York was unable to sustain the momentum, losing five of its next eight. A 31-21 win at the Minnesota Vikings ended the losing, but the next game on November 27 against the Miami Dolphins may have defined the season.¹⁶ New York was in complete control, scoring the game's first 17 points that included a 30-yard Johnny Mitchell touchdown reception from Esiason. Entering the fourth quarter, the Jets held a 24-14

1 "1993 New York Jets Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [1993 New York Jets Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/jets/1993-rosters).

2 "Pittsburgh Players/Alumni," ProFootballReference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Pittsburgh Players/Alumni | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/pittsburgh-players/alumni).

3 "New York Jets Franchise Encyclopedia," profootballreference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [New York Jets Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/jets/franchise-encyclopedia).

4 "Bruce Coslet," profootballreference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Bruce Coslet Record, Statistics, and Category Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/players/bruce-coslet).

5 "1992 New York Jets Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," profootballreference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [1992 New York Jets Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/jets/1992-rosters).

6 "Boomer Esiason," prosportstransactions.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Football Transactions Search Results](https://www.prosportstransactions.com/players/boomer-esiason).

7 "Boomer Esiason," profootballreference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Boomer Esiason Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/players/boomer-esiason).

8 "Boomer Esiason," profootballreference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Boomer Esiason Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/players/boomer-esiason).

9 "Johnny Johnson," profootballreference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Johnny Johnson Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/players/johnny-johnson).



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lead. The game then began to unravel. Esiason threw an interception on the ensuing drive, then Miami struck quickly for a touchdown to bring the game to within three points. After exchanging punts, the Dolphins had the ball, marching from their 16-yard line to the Jets' eight. Marino executed a fake spike, that completely caught the New York defense off-guard, and connected with receiver Mark Ingram for the touchdown, to not only give Miami the lead, but also the 28-24 victory.¹⁷ The Jets never recovered, losing their final five games of the regular season.

Walter William Harris was born on November 9, 1946 in South San Francisco, California. He attended El Camino South High School, graduating in 1964. Harris attended the College of San Mateo for two years (1964, 1965), then nearby University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, where he played defensive back on the football team for two years. The defense was led by coordinator Buddy Ryan.¹⁸ Harris graduated in 1958 with a bachelor's degree in history/physical education, and earned a master's degree in 1969. He started his foray into coaching in 1970, leading his alma mater, El Camino South High School, for one season.¹⁹

In 1971 he returned to the University of the Pacific as the defensive backs coach under head coach Homer Smith. The Tigers stumbled to a 3-8 record.²⁰ The next year, the team vastly improved to 8-3, including a second-place finish in the Pacific Coast Athletic

1 0 "Boomer Esiason 1993 Game Log," profootballreference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Boomer Esiason 1993 Game Log | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/game-logs/boomer-esiason-1993).

1 1 "Boomer Esiason 1993 Game Log," profootballreference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Boomer Esiason 1993 Game Log | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/game-logs/boomer-esiason-1993).

1 2 "1993 New York Jets Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," profootballreference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [1993 New York Jets Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/rosters/1993-new-york-jets).

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1 4 "Player bio: Walt Harris," gostanford.com, November 11, 2006, accessed September 19, 2025, [Player Bio: Walt Harris - Stanford Cardinal - Official Athletics Website](https://gostanford.com/sports/football/roster/walt-harris).

1 5 "Denver Broncos at New York Jets – September 11th, 1994," profootballreference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Denver Broncos at New York Jets - September 11th, 1994 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/games/denver-broncos-at-new-york-jets-september-11-1994).

1 6 "1994 New York Jets Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," profootballreference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [1994 New York Jets Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/rosters/1994-new-york-jets).

1 7 "Miami Dolphins at New York Jets – November 27th, 1994," profootballreference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Miami Dolphins at New York Jets - November 27th, 1994 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/games/miami-dolphins-at-new-york-jets-november-27-1994).

1 8 "Quarterbacks Coach, Walt Harris," buckeyeroasters.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Walt Harris: Ohio State Football Bio | Buckeye Rosters](https://buckeyeroasters.com/coaches/walt-harris).

1 9 "Quarterbacks Coach, Walt Harris," buckeyeroasters.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Walt Harris: Ohio State Football Bio | Buckeye Rosters](https://buckeyeroasters.com/coaches/walt-harris).



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Association. Their only conference loss was to the San Diego State Aztecs, who were coached by future Hall of Famer Don Coryell. The eight wins was the most by the program since going 11-0 in 1949.²¹ Ironically, one of Harris' first recruits was future college and NFL head coach Pete Carroll. Throughout their coaching careers, the two would cross paths multiple times, both on the same and opposite sidelines. They would also develop a strong personal relationship.²² On Carroll Harris said, "I've got nothing but great respect for Pete and his take on football. In fact, I followed him to the (New York) Jets because I believe in him. I'm excited for all the things he's accomplished. He has a big place in my coaching career."²³ Carroll returned the praise for Harris stating, "Walt gave me my outlook on how to work at this job. He worked really hard to understand how things worked and dug deep about the little aspects of techniques and schemes and things like that. About my fifth or sixth year of coaching, it started to make sense to me what he was talking about. The principles he taught me were sound and they are sound now."²⁴

From Pacific, Harris moved on to the University of California as the linebackers coach under head coach Mike White. White took over Cal in 1972, guiding the team to 3-8 and 4-7 marks before turning the program around in 1974, when it posted a 7-3-1 record.²⁵ White coached future NFL talent in quarterback Steve Bartkowski and running back Chuck Muncie. Bartkowski was drafted first overall in the 1975 NFL Draft by the Atlanta Falcons. The following season, the Golden Bears went 8-3 and were co-champions of the Pacific Eight Conference, sharing the title with the UCLA Bruins.²⁶ The Bruins went on to play in the Rose Bowl because of their tie-breaking victory over California. The conference co-championship was the first conference title for the school in 18 seasons.

2 0 "Pacific Tigers School History," sports-reference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Pacific Tigers College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

2 1 "Pacific Tigers School History," sports-reference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Pacific Tigers College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

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2 3 Smith, Michelle. "REUNITED AS RIVALS / Carroll, Harris meet as coaches on opposite sidelines," sfgate.com, November 4, 2005, accessed September 19, 2025, [REUNITED AS RIVALS / Carroll, Harris meet as coaches on opposite sidelines](#).

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The 1976 team had six players selected in the 1977 NFL Draft, two of which were linebackers: Jeff Barnes and Phil Heck.²⁷

Harris spent the next three years coaching the defensive backs at the Air Force Academy under the legendary Bill Parcells, and 1978-79 as linebackers coach at Michigan State University.²⁸ In 1980, Harris reunited with Mike White at the University of Illinois, where he switched to coaching offense, specifically the quarterbacks. At Illinois, he began the development of college quarterback talent that he would send to the NFL. His first prospect was Dave Wilson, who led the Big Ten Conference in pass attempts (463), completions (245), passing yards (3,145) and passing touchdowns (19).²⁹ In a game on November 8 at Ohio State, Wilson set the then NCAA record for most passing yards in a game with 621.³⁰ Despite the offensive success, the Fighting Illini won just three games.

Wilson was drafted by the New Orleans Saints in the supplemental draft in exchange for a first-round draft choice. It was the highest draft pick in NFL history a team gave up to draft a player in the supplemental draft.³¹ Saints head coach Bum Phillips commented on Wilson saying, "We feel that Dave is definitely a first-round choice. We have added a top quarterback to our roster."³² Wilson went on to play nine seasons (1981-89) for New Orleans. Tony Eason took over the reigns for Illinois in 1981. He led the Big Ten Conference in pass completions (248), completion percentage (61.1%), passing yards (3,360) and 20 passing touchdowns, earning him first-team All-Big Ten Conference honors.³³ Also, the Fighting Illini improved its win total to seven, finishing in a tie for third place in the conference standings. He repeated his outstanding performance in 1982, again leading the Big Ten Conference in passing attempts (450), completions (278), passing yards (3,248) and 17 passing touchdowns.³⁴ He was chosen as the Illinois team most valuable player, and repeated his first-team All-Big Ten Conference honors. Eason

2 5 "California Golden Bears School History," sports-reference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [California Golden Bears College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

2 6 "California Golden Bears School History," sports-reference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [California Golden Bears College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

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2 9 "Dave Wilson," sports-reference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Dave Wilson College Stats, School, Draft, Gamelog, Splits | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

3 0 "Wilson, Schlichter shatter records," *Eugene Register-Guard*, November 9, 1980, 6B.



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also earned third-team All-American honors, as Illinois went 7-5 and earned its first bowl berth since the 1964 Rose Bowl.³⁵

Harris' next venture in the college ranks was two years (1995-96) at Ohio State University where he continued to coach the quarterbacks.³⁶ John Cooper's Buckeyes were routinely at the top of the Big Ten Conference in the 1990s, earning three conference titles and four runner up finishes.³⁷ The 1995 Ohio State football media guide described Harris, "During his career Harris has helped develop a number of college quarterbacks who would later go on to become starters in the National Football League. Those players include Tony Eason, Dave Wilson and Jack Trudeau, all of whom played for Harris at Illinois. For the past two years, he played a key role in the resurgence of Jets signal caller Boomer Esiason."³⁸

3 1 "Dave Wilson," profootballreference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Dave Wilson Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

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3 3 "Tony Eason," sports-reference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Tony Eason College Stats, School, Draft, Gamelog, Splits | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

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Starting in 1997, Harris undertook his second opportunity as head coach, with the University of Pittsburgh. Harris was hired to replace his former mentor, Johnny Majors, who, in his second stint with the school, failed to post a record better than 4-7.³⁹ The Panthers improved immediately under Harris, posting a 6-5 regular season mark, the school's best since 1989, earning him Big East Coach of the Year honors. The season included ranked wins at home over Miami (FL) 21-17 and Virginia Tech 30-23, and a thrilling, three-overtime victory against the West Virginia Mountaineers in the Backyard Brawl rivalry.⁴⁰ Pitt would regress in 1998 and 1999, but Harris' strong recruiting skills would show as the team qualified for five consecutive bowl games beginning in 2000.⁴¹

He developed NFL caliber talents in running back Kevan Barlow, receivers Antonio Bryant and Larry Fitzgerald, and defensive players Gerald Hayes, Torrie Cox and Andy Lee. Bryant and Fitzgerald won the Biletnikoff Award for the nation's best wide receiver in 2000 and 2003 respectively.⁴² Fitzgerald also finished runner up in the 2003 Heisman Trophy race. Harris' 2003 team won nine games for the first time since 1989 and held a pre-season Top 10 rank. His tenure culminated in a share of the 2004 Big East

3 9 "Pitt Panthers School History," sports-reference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Pitt Panthers College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](https://www.sports-reference.com/college-football/schools/pitt-panthers/).

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4 1 "Pitt Panthers School History," sports-reference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Pitt Panthers College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](https://www.sports-reference.com/college-football/schools/pitt-panthers/).

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Conference championship that included a Fiesta Bowl berth against the University of Utah Utes.⁴³ He finished with a 52-44 overall record, including a 28-27 mark in the Big East Conference, and the school's first ever football conference title. For his efforts, Harris was named the Big East Coach of the Year, for the second time.⁴⁴ For over 15 years, Harris was known as the most recent coach to beat archrival Penn State University, when the Panthers defeated the Nittany Lions, 12-0, on September 16, 2000. The rivalry then went on hiatus until 2016. After the school would not extend his contract, Harris moved on to Stanford University, where he coached the Cardinal football team for the 2005 and 2006 seasons.⁴⁵

Harris returned to the Bay Area where he grew up and spent his college days. He replaced Buddy Teevens, who accepted the head coaching position at Dartmouth University. Unfortunately for Harris, he did not endure similar success that he experienced at the University of Pittsburgh.⁴⁶ In his first season, the Cardinal posted a 5-6 record. It was the best mark by the school since 2001, when it went 9-3 and played in the Seattle Bowl.⁴⁷ For what odd reason, the Cardinal were road warriors, winning four of its five road contests. Conversely, they won just one home game in 2005.⁴⁸ In 2006, Stanford went 1-11, the school's worst record since 1960. Two days following the close of the regular season, Harris was fired.⁴⁹

Harris's coaching career also had a stop at the University of Tennessee from 1983-88 where he served as offensive coordinator under Johnny Majors.⁵⁰ There, the Volunteers became known as the era's "Wide Receiver U," as they put a number of talented receivers in the NFL such as: Clyde Duncan, Tim McGee, Eric Swanson, Joey Clinkscales and Anthony Miller.⁵¹ The talent led Tennessee to win four bowl games in five seasons from 1983-87.⁵²

Following his stint at Stanford, Harris moved back to where he had his most college success, the Pittsburgh area. He dabbled in coaching a little bit more spending one season

4 3 "Pitt Panthers School History," sports-reference.com, accessed September 19, 2025, [Pitt Panthers College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](https://www.sports-reference.com/college-football/schools/Pitt-Panthers-College-Football-History-Stats-Records/).

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(2009) as quarterbacks coach and passing game coordinator at the University of Akron and one season (2010) as offensive coordinator at California University of Pennsylvania. That was the end of his coaching career. Harris finished with an overall 69-85 head coaching record. Since then he has been known to attend Pitt games and practices and he was the honorary captain for Pitt's 2016 game against Penn State and in 2018, Harris and Johnny Majors were honorary captains for Pitt's annual Blue-Gold game.

Harris has three children.

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