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# Super Bowl: The Harbaughs' sibling rivalry sheds light of the intricacies of playing against family

Scott Niedermayer celebrated the Devils' Game 7 triumph in the 2003 Stanley Cup Finals in the customary way — throwing himself into a hugging, clutching, glove-tossing, falling-over-one-another scramble of teammates.

Winning the Stanley Cup can turn a man into a 10-year-old this way. For that moment, nothing else matters.

Out of the pile Niedermayer looked up and over toward the defeated opposition, picking out his brother Rob, sullen, skating in an aimless circle, kicking lightly at the ice. He turned for more embraces, then searched for his brother again, never quite sinking into the jubilation that encircled him.

"Back and forth, back and forth," said Niedermayer. "I couldn't help myself. I kept looking down there. We're all happy, but I knew what he was going through."

For two weeks now, the Harbaugh brothers have straightforwardly insisted that in coaching against one another in the Super Bowl, it is business as normal. To Niedermayer and others who have competed with and against their brothers at the highest level of sports, the Harbaughs are not putting anyone on. The grind of preparing dictates a focus that blots out most other emotions.

But once the game is done, they say, there will be an inevitable tug — the bittersweet realization for both men that one has climbed to the top of the sport and the other has been left behind.

Sibling rivalry is a complicated thing, rarely played out in front of millions, sometimes a contest to outdo the other, but more often — and more subtly — a struggle at an early age to chisel an identity and claim accomplishments distinct from the other.

With these notions as a starting point, professor Jon Caspi says sibling combos like Ravens coach John Harbaugh, and his younger brother, Jim, the 49ers coach, each high achieving in the same field, are a striking rarity, like the Williams sisters of tennis and the football Mannings.

"It is hard to grow up in the shadow of superstar siblings," says Caspi. "It leads you to shrink or to carve out your own niche."

Examining sibling relationships has brought Caspi, who directs the doctoral program in family studies at Montclair State, to a basic conclusion — that brothers and sisters develop or are given labels early on that persist into adulthood. Even siblings who choose the same field, he said, gravitate toward a different position or style — like the Niedermayers. Scott, 16 months older than Rob, was a defenseman. Rob, now playing in Switzerland, was a forward and center.

"This is a way of diversifying," Caspi says. "Each one succeeds in his own way."

This sorting out of roles is something Albert King, a one-time high school sensation and a former Net, understands. One of five boys growing up in the Fort Greene projects in Brooklyn, he and his brothers, all about 6-6, developed fast legends in the school yards.

Albert, three years younger than Bernard, overshadowed his brother, but ultimately they reversed roles, Bernard becoming the bigger NBA star with the Nets and Knicks over a 15-season career from 1977 to 1993. Their evolution as basketball players fits the professor's analysis. While both forwards, Bernard King became more of a power scorer, known for an aggressive game. Albert's game relied more on touch and finesse.

There is often a presumption, Albert King says, that brothers automatically know each other's games through and through, but he said, like the Harbaughs, their lives and careers took them on divergent paths.

"The younger kids never played with the older kids," said King, the owner of three Wendy's franchises in New Jersey. "Really, when do older brothers want their younger brothers around?"

The playground in their housing development went by an unspoken but pinpoint schedule that slotted different ages on the basketball courts at different times. At home, in a three-bedroom apartment, they shared a room, often with two other brothers, sleeping on bunk beds and trundle beds.

King said that and Bernard had played together no more than three times before 1980, during Albert's rookie year with the Nets. Bernard King was with the Golden State Warriors at the time. The Nets organized a Family Night around the King brothers coming together for their second meeting a few months later, giving him even more anxiety, said Albert King.

"It just became a big thing," Albert said. His parents and other relatives were there to watch. "Then he lit me up. He might have played harder against me than others because he didn't want anyone to say he didn't play his brother tough."

In a game at Madison Square Garden, Albert King said, he tried to steal the ball from his brother but poked him in the eye. Bernard King went down, while one of Albert's teammates, Darryl Dawkins, shouted at him to retrieve the ball.

Suggesting that the game is not always the main thing, Albert King was seized by a primal instinct and instead put a hand on his brother to comfort him.

Jeff Van Gundy and his brother Stan made their names as head coaches in the NBA and on occasion, had to strategize against one another like John and Jim Harbaugh are doing.

He unsentimentally dismisses all questions about sibling rivalry as over-analysis and empathizes with the Super Bowl coaches having to endure constant questions about their relationship.

"They're asking them to lie down on the coach," said Jeff Van Gundy, without a trace of sentimentality. "For us, there were no moments when the lights went on and we said, 'Wow, look at what we're doing.' There were no lie-down-on-the-couch moments."

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