

SUPER BOWL 31

to get better as the season goes on. That is a key characteristic when you evaluate the best coaches."

This wasn't a team that quickly embraced him. The players had a love affair with Dungy, who had been the inspiration in the transformation of the Bucs from inept to formidable. But he couldn't pull them into the Super Bowl, and that led to his dismissal. Gruden still is winning over his players, who found Gruden's whirlwind personality a stark change from the laid-back Dungy. But, obviously, his credibility with players has taken a huge leap, especially now that they have rings.

"The game is changing right in front of us, and Gruden is right there at the front of that change," says Sporting News Radio and Fox analyst Brian Baldinger. "This is a passing league, and he knows the passing game as well as anyone and can teach it as well as anyone. He is the right guy for the right time."

His capacity for dealing with the stress and intricacies of an event even this large is incredibly impressive. Whether it was his connection with Al Davis or with Callahan or with Gannon, or tip-dancing around his strained relations with his former Raiders players, or paying proper homage to Dungy, he dealt with it all in a measured and modest manner, with just the right touch. How could any coach feel more pressure in his first year, knowing he was brought to Tampa to win a Super Bowl after costing his club a king's ransom (four high draft choices and \$8 million)?

But it was Gruden who turned this pillage of a trade into a coup for the Glazer family, who made a mess of filling the Dungy vacancy, what with Bill Parcells bolting on them and their rejection of Marvin Lewis. Despite themselves, here were the Bucs and their boy wonder atop the league. What a league.

And here was Gruden, playing quarterback against his defense during a midweek practice, imitating Gannon, giving the Bucs the best look possible against the quarterback he knew so well. And here was Gruden wanting the game to be just a game, not about him, not about all the off-field stuff, fighting the emotion of it all, feeling it tear him up but refusing to say or do anything to hurt his Bucs.

"This feels absolutely awesome," says safety John Lynch, who with Warren Sapp and Derrick Brooks is the foundation of the Bucs' defense. "Jon Gruden was brought in here for one thing: to do this, and he delivered. And we were a bunch of guys who believed."



Smith's first of two touchdowns completed a 34-point run that sealed the victory.

A few days before kickoff, Ravens coach Brian Billick joked that he knew how owners and coaches were looking at this game. "The coaches are rooting for Jon, and the owners for the Raiders," he said, laughing. As the shape of football has evolved, chiseled by the dual forces of the free-agent market and the salary cap, the value of the head coach has taken on its own exploding form. A decade ago, to pay \$1 million annually for this position was shocking and rare. Now, that's chump change.

"Owners are seeing that it is such an even playing field among teams that good coaching can make a difference in getting to a Super Bowl," says Billick, who won the NFL championship in his second season with Baltimore. "They have seen if you have a good coach, you have to hold on to him because he is worth keeping. Leadership always has mattered, but perhaps it is more so today. And owners are willing to pay a premium price for it."

That premium hasn't found a ceiling. Redskins owner Dan Snyder was willing to pay Steve Spurrier an average of \$5 million annually, highest in the league, in hopes he could mold a champion. Dallas owner Jerry Jones lured Bill Parcells to the Cowboys with a \$4.25 million annual salary, third behind Mike Holmgren's \$4.5 million. Gruden, who was making \$1 million in Oakland, jumped to \$3.5 million in Tampa Bay—and that was before Sunday. Billick happily acknowledges the trickle-down effect of the Spurrier and Gruden agreements on a new contract the Ravens gave him that pays him \$2.75 million per year.

"You can argue that today the importance of coaches is even more crucial because the league is so balanced and has such fluidity within the rosters from year to year," Texans general manager Charley Casserly says. "The one stabilizing element now is the coach. It's harder than ever for him because of free agency. You have a guy making \$2 million sitting next to a guy making \$200,000 who may be playing better. That's common on every team and very difficult to deal with."

Unlike Chuck Noll, Don Shula or Vince Lombardi, coaches no longer have the luxury of developing players over a four- or five-year period. They must groom them to play quickly; owners want no part of slowly evolving success. And because of the constant roster turnover, coaches need to formulate offensive and defensive systems that can be absorbed in short order. It does no good to have a masterful plan if it takes most of a season to install. And coaches now must be recruiters, too, much like their college brethren, enticing free agents to a new home. So those without a personality need not apply.

"There has to be more homework done when hiring a head coach," Baldinger says. "You can't make mistakes these days, because the punishment is too severe. That one bad move can get your franchise way behind the chase for a long time. I don't think you can put a price tag on what a great coach is worth to a franchise."

Of course, not every club is buying in. They weren't willing to give Steve Mariucci a raise him at market value, somewhere in the \$3.5 range, and are likely to hire a new coach for less. They only have to look across the bay at the Raiders, who promoted the obscure Callahan, are paying him \$1 million, yet his handling of this season has been impressive. A Jaguars also went low-profile in hiring Panthers defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio, who doesn't have any head-coaching experience.

A view from the couch

When defenses win championships, offenses aren't the only ones who take hits. Although that's the way big football games ought to be won, it doesn't translate into viewer-friendly Super Bowls.

The Bucs' 48-21 rout of the Raiders was no exception. It was reminiscent of what the 1985 Bears and 2000 Ravens did; their defensive dominance created a snowball effect on the scoreboard.

■ Count on one of those stingy Bucs defense players, Dexter Jackson, making several videotape copies of his MVP-winning prime-time performance. With his two picks, the free safety is sure to be a hot commodity on the free-agent market this offseason—just as former Cowboy Larry Brown was after Super Bowl 30.

■ Instant replay once again saved a shaky year for officiating. It may slow down the game, but it has become essential.

■ Considering that many more Super Bowl viewers are on their couch than in the stands, starting the game in the West Coast shadows makes it hard to follow the action, even after much fiddling with the contrast button. Full stadium lights in twilight always should be the rule.

■ The large NFL logo adorning the end-zone net was a welcome addition, but it should have been tipped around so it wasn't promoting something called the LFN.

■ The commercials were dominated by movie trailers, touting future blockbuster sequels for *Bad Boys*, *Charlie's Angels*, *The Matrix* and *The Terminator*. It's a bad sign when the action in those spots rivals what's going on in the game.

■ Seeing the energetic trio of Shania Twain, Sting and No Doubt's Gwen Stefani showing off their fat-free bodies at halftime, *Billy Total Fitness* should have been a sponsor. What better incentive for a chip-and-dip-heavy audience to hit the gym?

—Vivian Iyer

