

# Harbaughs set to meet biggest fan – each other

By Judy Battista, New York Times

Until last season, when they faced each other across a football field for the first time, John Harbaugh had never rooted against his little brother, Jim. Except for the one time they were on different American Legion baseball teams in high school – and John wants it known his team won, 1-0 – the brothers were always on the same side, whether it was on their high school football team or on the ice rink they made in the backyard of their childhood home.

On Feb. 3, the brothers, separated by just 15 months but alike in so many other ways, will be on different sides of the country's biggest sporting event when the Baltimore Ravens – the team John has coached for five seasons – play the San Francisco 49ers – the team Jim has coached for two – in the Super Bowl. The Harbaughs are the first brothers to be head coaches in the N.F.L. There are only 32 such jobs, making the odds of brothers securing two of them at the same time slim. But for two weeks at least, the Harbaughs will supplant the Mannings as the first family of football, the title game serving as the next installment of a sibling rivalry that used to include competitions to see who could throw a football over a towering tree and fights over which brother was scheduled to mow the big backyard lawn at their parents' home in Ann Arbor, Mich.

The brothers, who had not spoken to each other by late Monday afternoon, do not seem impressed by their impending meeting.

“Is it really going to be written about?” John Harbaugh said. “It's not exactly like Churchill and Roosevelt.”

Maybe not. But when Jim Harbaugh arrived in San Francisco to

rebuild the 49ers last season, he took with him an exhortation his father used to dispense to the entire family.

"Who's got it better than us?" their father, Jack, a former college coach to whom the sons still send game film, would ask.

"Nooobody!" the family would respond in unison.

Certainly nobody in the N.F.L. has it better than the Harbaughs do right now. In seven combined seasons, John and Jim have never failed to get their teams into the postseason. Indeed, the brothers act as if they expected this extraordinary confluence all along, indicating they are already tired of the sentimental story line.

Jim Harbaugh said that playing his brother in the Super Bowl was "a blessing and a curse."

"We're not that interesting," John Harbaugh said. "There is nothing more to learn. It's just like any other family. We get it, it's really cool and it's exciting and all that. It's really about the players."

Good luck with that. Last year, both teams lost in their conference championship games. This year, Jim's team beat the Atlanta Falcons on Sunday afternoon, leaving him to cheer on the Ravens as they beat the New England Patriots a few hours later. Their father and their mother, Jackie, watched from their home in Mequon, Wis. And when asked what his father might have been thinking Sunday night, John Harbaugh said he hoped he had drunk four or five beers.

The elder Harbaughs are expected to attend the Super Bowl in New Orleans, though, just as they attended the Thanksgiving night game during the 2011 season, when the Ravens beat the 49ers, 16-6, on the day before Jack and Jackie's 50th wedding anniversary.

That the brothers have reached the pinnacles of their careers at exactly the same moment seems fitting, because their lives have wound around each other, fierce competition and football since they were children. Among many stops in his long coaching career, Jack Harbaugh was an assistant to Bo Schembechler at Michigan. The boys would go to practice, but they were also budding businessmen. They would take wristbands and write the name of the starting quarterback at the time on them, selling them to their classmates as if they were all game-worn wristbands.

John was supposed to be the starting quarterback his senior year at Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor. But by then, Jim had grown taller – and better. He started as a sophomore and John switched to fullback and defensive back.

John Harbaugh has joked that he dominated his brother for most of their lives, but Jim had the far better athletic career, going on to become an all-American at Michigan and then a first-round draft pick of the Chicago Bears. John was mostly a nonstarting defensive back at Miami of Ohio.

But while his brother played 15 years in the N.F.L., John Harbaugh's coaching career began in anonymity, and after 10 years as an assistant with the Philadelphia Eagles, he became the coach of the Ravens in 2008 – after Patriots Coach Bill Belichick, whose team the Ravens vanquished Sunday night, called the Ravens' owner, Steve Bisciotti, to recommend Harbaugh.

Even while Jim Harbaugh played in the N.F.L., he served as an assistant to his father, who was then the coach at Western Kentucky. In 2002, his playing days final over, Jim Harbaugh became the Raiders' quarterbacks coach.

But the job that led him to the N.F.L. was at Stanford, where he tutored Andrew Luck – who was the first pick last year – and returned the Cardinal to national prominence.

On Monday, Jim Harbaugh was asked if, while growing up, he ever dreamed of coaching in the Super Bowl, and he flashed the sense of humor that his brother has said he possessed.

“I don’t think I had that dream,” Jim Harbaugh said. “I will share this with you, just the way Colin Kaepernick runs, the gracefulness of his stride, it reminds me of me when I run. Then I wake up.”

After Sunday’s games, John Harbaugh said he would like to think the Ravens and the 49ers are mirror images: physically imposing, able to run the ball, but with quarterbacks who throw well, and possessing “roughhouse” defenses. It is impossible, though, to miss the brothers’ differences in personality.

John Harbaugh smiles more, making a point to thank everyone for coming when he begins his postgame news conferences. Jim Harbaugh, who seems to wear the same black 49ers sweatshirt tucked into khaki pants every day, has been known for his wild-eyed, emotional style since his playing days.

He had an epic meltdown after what he considered a bad call Sunday, sending the marker that always hangs from a lanyard around his neck swinging furiously.

The brothers said they had not fought since they were about 25, but they used to fight so vigorously that their mother cried as she begged them to stop.

“He’s an incredibly competitive person,” John Harbaugh said of his brother. “He will fight you for anything. That’s what made him a great player. What makes him the man he is. The gym teacher in fourth grade said he was too competitive, and he needs to ease off. My dad said ‘No, he doesn’t need to ease off.’”

Last year, John Harbaugh told an associate that the brothers had vacationed together recently. They were goofing off in the

water and their horseplay – as it has since they were schoolboys – got a little heated.

Jim Harbaugh held his brother under the water, the Ravens' public-relations chief Kevin Byrne said, until bubbles started coming out of his nose. Then he finally let go of him.

But when the Harbaughs surface with their teams at the Superdome, they will not ease off, any more than they did in grade school.