

# Barrier-breaking Bengals coach still making a difference in retirement

Jay Morrison (/author/jay-morrison/) 1h ago



When Jim Anderson, the first African-American coach to work for the Cincinnati Bengals, retired six years ago to snap the longest uninterrupted coaching tenure in franchise history, he felt a little like so many of the rookie running backs he had mentored for 29 seasons.

The ball was in his hands, but he was unsure of when to cut, where to pivot, which hole to hit. It was going to take some time, and some coaching, to figure things out, so Anderson took cues from the person he trusted most, his wife Marcia.

“She cautioned me about not getting involved in too much, too fast because everyone is going to want you to do something,” Jim said.

Marcia, a former high school teacher and principal and college professor, wasn't more experienced in retirement, having stepped away from education at the same time Jim left football, in 2013. But she is an expert when it comes to knowing her husband.

"I just know how hard it is for him to say 'no' to anything, especially if it's philanthropic and you get involved in these different committees and everything," Marcia said. "I told him whenever you say yes, it's always more than you think. So beware. He took heed for a little bit, but he didn't listen long because he's an all-in type of guy. So he jumped in and said 'yes' and there he goes."

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Where he goes depends on the day, but most of his time is spent at a pair of elementary schools, Bond Hill Academy and Winton Hills Academy, where Anderson is the chairman of the Donald Spencer Reading Academy.

Anderson also serves as the vice president of the alumni chapter of the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, which awarded \$20,000 worth of scholarships to inner-city students last year. And he's the chairman of the social action committee for Alpha Delta Boulé, an invitation-only fraternity of roughly 50 men of high achievement in the Greater Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky area.

Anderson visits the two schools three or four days a week, sometimes multiple times on a given day depending on what events are going on.

"I work with them in reading and science and math and try to coordinate things with them, activities beyond the classroom," he said. "I work with them just to show them, 'You know what, you can do this.' If you show them a little light

out there, maybe they'll just reach out and grab that light, and it will make a difference in their life.”

Anderson, inspired by the work the National Youth Foundation was doing in Philadelphia with a youth writing workshop, raised enough money to bring a second chapter to Cincinnati. That set off an explosion of growth that has seen the organization expand into 14 cities from Washington D.C. to Oakland, California.

“Jim is my hero,” said Sophia Hanson, co-founder of the National Youth Foundation. “A lot of the people we talked to didn't really grasp the concept, but Jim was not only able to buy in on the vision and comprehend it, he was a part of the journey.”

Anderson and Hanson teamed as project coordinators for books on civil rights icon and retired federal judge Nathaniel Jones and Basketball Hall of Famer Oscar Robertson, both of which were authored and illustrated by students at Winton Hills and Bond Hill.

Former President Jimmy Carter wrote the foreword for the book created by the Bond Hill students, titled “Judge Jones.” And Magic Johnson wrote the foreword for “The Big O,” created by the Winton Hills group. Anderson joined the students in January for a ceremony where they presented the books to Jones and Robertson while donating copies to the Cincinnati Public Library for circulation.



Jim Anderson, back center, with Winton Hills students and Oscar Robertson, front center. (Provided)

Anderson also teamed with Bengals defensive end **Carlos Dunlap and his foundation's anti-bullying campaign** (<http://xxxx> <https://theathletic.com/698915/2018/12/10/carlos-dunlap-working-toward-a-bullyproof-life-for-at-risk-teens/>) on the “Misunderstanding Micah” book that was authored by students at Winton Hills and won the 2018 National Student Book Scholar Competition.

“Working with these children has been such a rewarding experience,” Anderson said. “When I first started I kind of eased into it, but I realized we needed to do more. And we’re doing so much more now because I have the time. The whole thing when you’re working with kids, it’s consistency. If kids see you being

consistent and know you're going to be there, they respond. But if you're going to be there every now and then and they only see you once every five months or whatever, it's different. You know how they say all in? You're not all in.

“I'm still coaching, just at a different level,” he added. “It really is just like coaching. You want to form those good habits early, and then those things will carry through and they'll have a successful career and a successful life.”

The longest coaching run in Bengals history almost never happened. To be more clear, it probably never should have. At least that's how Anderson sees it.

He was part of a Stanford coaching staff in 1982 that, thanks to one of quarterback John Elway's patented late-game rallies, was four seconds away from a victory against arch-rival California, a win that would have sent the program to its first bowl berth in four years.

But on the final play of the game – a squib kickoff – Cal lateralled the ball five times, the last of which came with players sharing the field with fans and confused members of the Stanford marching band – “The band is on the field!” – and scored the most memorable touchdown in the history of college football.

## Cal Bears Football 82: The Play



“The Play” – as it was dubbed, needing no further explanation – not only changed the outcome of the game, it changed lives. Stanford had beaten highly ranked Ohio State and Washington earlier in the season, and representatives from the Hall of Fame Classic Bowl game were in attendance for the season finale, prepared to extend an invitation to the Cardinal if they won.

But the loss dropped Stanford to 5-6, making the team ineligible for a bowl and signaling the beginning of the end for head coach Paul Wiggin, Anderson and the rest of the assistants, all of whom were fired following another losing season in 1983.

“I still have a visceral reaction any time I see that play, and even when I hear people talk about it,” Anderson said. “I think back on it in two ways. I think about how shocking and unbelievable and disappointing it was. But I also think about this way: If that wouldn’t have happened, we probably never would have ended up in Cincinnati. In the long run, it was fate.”

Anderson had never had to wonder what the next season held because every job switch came by choice. He had a brief stint at his collegiate alma mater Cal Western, then rose through the mostly white coaching ranks from Morse High School in San Diego to Scottsdale (Ariz.) Community College to Division II Nevada-Las Vegas, to Division I Southern Methodist and eventually to Stanford, which he hoped would be the final step toward realizing his dream of coaching in the NFL.

“It seemed like most, if not all, of the black coaches breaking into the National Football League were coming out of the Pac-10,” Anderson said. “That’s where they were throwing the football way more than the other conferences. I knew that’s where I needed to go.”

Anderson was less sure of where to turn after getting fired from Stanford. But when he heard the Bengals had hired Sam Wyche in late December of 1983, Anderson immediately contacted a mutual friend, UCLA assistant coach Billie Matthews, who put him in touch with Wyche.

Wyche flew to California a week later with Bengals offensive coordinator Bruce Coslet and defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau to interview Anderson, who picked up the trio at the airport and took them to a burger joint to talk football.

“I didn’t know Jim, but I had heard too many good things from too many people about Jim to overlook him,” Wyche said. “And after I spent some time with him in the interview, he was the guy. Sometimes interviews are not about totally about football. I mean you have to ask some questions to make sure he knows what he’s talking about and thinks the same way you do. But it’s more about personality and how you’re going to fit within the coaching staff. And Jim is probably as friendly a guy and as easy to get along with as anybody I’ve ever been around.”

Anderson had Wyche’s approval, and Coslet’s and LeBeau’s. But none of that would matter if team owner Paul Brown wasn’t on board. Anderson was back in a familiar spot a few days later, on the field inside Stanford Stadium, when he met Brown for the first time. The Bengals owner was there to watch practice for the East-West Shrine Game, and he and Anderson started discussing the talents and flaws of some of the players.

“The next thing you know, he says we’d like to have you be a part of our team,” Anderson said. “A few days later I got a contract in the mail.”

Anderson signed it and officially became the first black coach in Bengals history in January 1984.



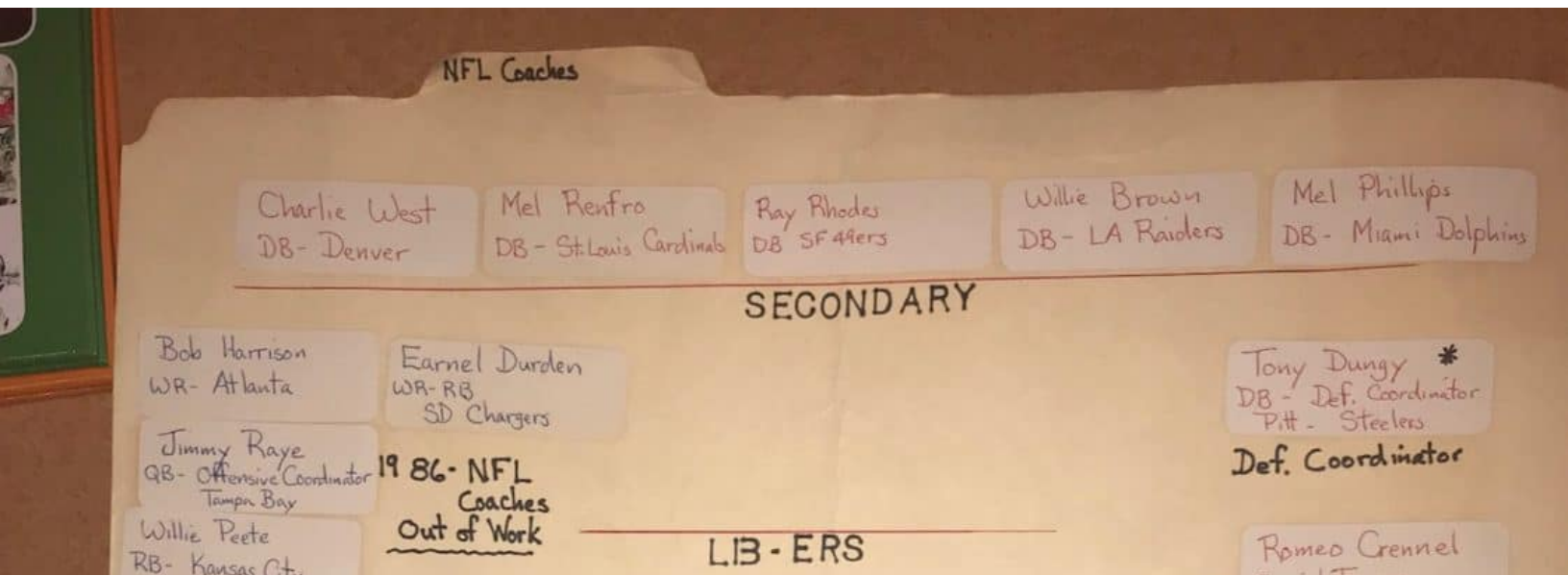
Hundreds of memories from Anderson's 29-year Bengals career are seared in his brain, and there are countless more permanently stored in boxes, drawers, closets and who knows where else in his Evendale home.

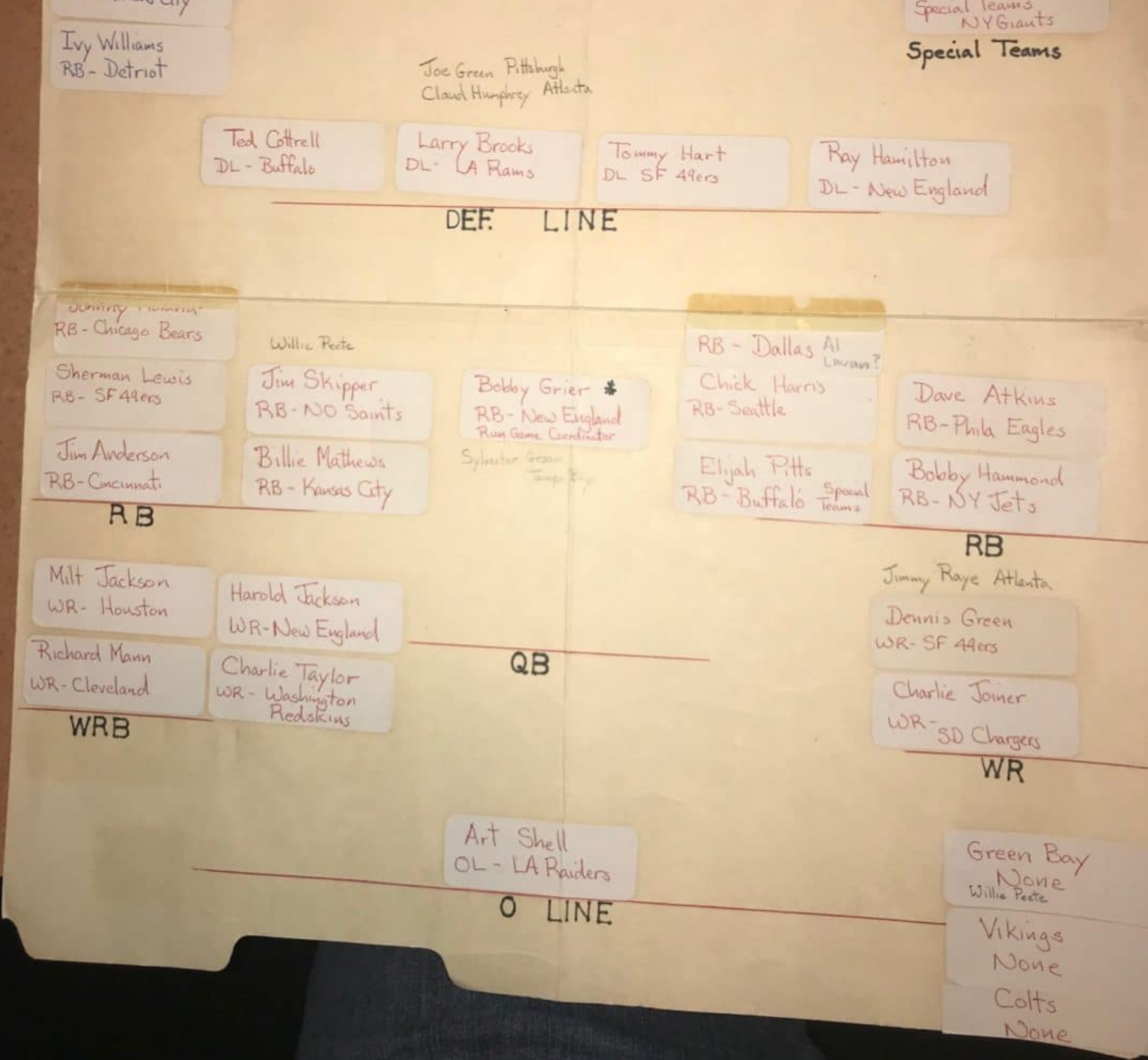
"I'm a pack rat," he says. "I've saved so many things I can go back and look at it. I keep saying I'm going to throw stuff away, but every time I look at something, it brings back a memory and makes me smile."

On the day he sat down to talk about his long, successful, barrier-breaking career, Anderson carried just one piece of memorabilia from his coaching days. It was a manila folder with soft and fuzzy edges, and its spine had been reinforced with tape after years of wear. As Anderson peels it open, it appears whatever contents it once held had escaped.

But it quickly becomes obvious the folder isn't empty. It's stuffed with history, lined with the names of every black assistant coach in the league and the teams they worked for written on labels and aligned by position in the fashion of a depth chart.

"I made it in 1986, two years after I came to Cincinnati," Anderson said. "When you look at it, you see how things have changed."





Jim Anderson's folder with a chart of African-American assistant NFL coaches. (Provided)

At the time there were no black quarterback or linebacker coaches. There was one offensive line coach, Art Shell, who three years later became the NFL's first black coach in the sport's modern era.

There were no offensive coordinators and one defensive coordinator, Pittsburgh's Tony Dungy, who 10 years later became the head coach in Tampa Bay and 20 years later led the Colts to a Super Bowl championship. Dungy, of course, became the first black coach to accomplish winning a Super Bowl.

When Anderson created the folder, the Colts were one of three teams with no black assistants, along with the Packers and Vikings.

Several other assistants went on to become head coaches in the league – Ray Rhodes, Romeo Crennel and Dennis Green, who was Anderson's former teammate at John Harris High School in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

“Some of these guys were great mentors to me,” Anderson said. “They were guys I could talk to and they would share things with you, qualities and stories, and they gave you pointers on what you're looking for and things they have seen throughout their careers.

“Some of these guys are still here, some are gone,” he added. “A lot of guys on the folder, we're still really good friends.”

It was a small as the group but Anderson said he never felt like a minority or an outsider.

Breaking into the NFL as a minority coach in the mid-1980s was in no way comparable to what Jackie Robinson had to endure when he broke baseball's color barrier in 1947. Or what Marion Motley or Bill Willis dealt with in 1946 when they became the first African-Americans to play in the modern NFL, suiting up for the Cleveland Browns and first-year head coach Paul Brown, the same man who hired Anderson 38 years later.

And there certainly weren't any instances like the ones Anderson had to deal with as a young college assistant, such as the time in the late 1970s when a group of SMU boosters invited head coach Ron Meyer and his staff to play a round of golf with one caveat.

"They said, 'But you can't bring your colored coach,'" Anderson recalled. "And Ron, with all due respect to him, he declined that invitation. I'm not a golfer anyhow, but it wasn't about that. For him, it was a matter of principle."

Or the time in 1974, when Anderson was in his first season at UNLV and the Running Rebels made it to the Grantland Rice Bowl – a Division II national semifinal game in Baton Rouge. The coaching staff tried to go out for a meal one night only to be told, "We don't serve you coloreds here," Anderson said.

Anderson said he never felt any sort of resistance once he entered the NFL, but there was a pervading sense of responsibility that never left.

"You knew if you did your job and did it well, what you did was give another guy an opportunity," he said. "It wasn't written where they said you're going to have one minority coach or two minority coaches. You knew it was up to you, that if you did your job well, people would have more confidence that they could hire the next guy."

The folder Anderson created is proof that guys were paying attention and tracking minority hires, but there was no fanfare or front-page headlines when Anderson became the first African-American in Bengals history.

"I never thought much about it at the time," said Bengals owner and President Mike Brown, who was a team executive working for his father at the time.

“I never thought of him as a good, young, black coach,” Brown added. “He was just a good, young coach who really knew his stuff. I grew to understand some as the years rolled along that others considered him a pioneer.”

You can count Marvin Lewis among them.

Lewis was still coaching in college when the Bengals hired Anderson in 1984. Lewis broke into the league in 1992 and met Anderson in 1996 when they shared a bus ride to the commissioner’s party the Friday night before Super Bowl XXX in Tempe, Ariz.

“When I came into the league in 1992, I watched him, observed him,” Lewis said. “You try to emulate guys like that when you’re a young coach. There weren’t a lot of black coaches back then, maybe an average of one or one and a half per team. These guys were role models for coaches like myself. We were very fortunate to have coaches like Jim Anderson.”

James Brooks arrived in Cincinnati the same year Anderson did after the Bengals acquired him in a trade with the San Diego Chargers. Brooks admits now he was less than thrilled with the situation. It was bad enough that the only experience Brooks had with Cincinnati was the horribly frigid weather he played in as a rookie in the Freezer Bowl, but then he found out his position coach had no NFL experience.

“I’d been around new coaches in my past, and I’d seen guys who didn’t have a clue what they were talking about,” Brooks said. “By the time you’re in your fourth year in the league, you have an idea of what pro ball is all about. And

when you have a coach without much experience, you're looking at him like, 'OK, what can you bring to the table to help me?'

"I sat there and just tried to get a feel for him, and once I got to know him, I had so much respect for him as a coach and as a man," Brooks added.

Brooks in 1987 became the first of seven backs Anderson coached to a 1,000-yard season. Eighteen times in Anderson's 29 seasons, one of his backs broke the 1,000-yard mark. Brooks did it three times, along with Ickey Woods (one), Harold Green (one), Corey Dillon (six), Rudi Johnson (three), Cedric Benson (three) and BenJarvus Green-Ellis (one).

The Bengals led the NFL in rushing twice under Anderson (1988, 1989) and were second two other times (1986, 2000). They were top 5 six times, and 10 times they finished in the top 10.

"He gave so much of himself to make us better," Green said. "He took it personally. How you played was a reflection of him as a coach, and you weren't going to make Jim Anderson look like he didn't have his stuff together."

That's why Anderson's meetings and film sessions are something the players still talk about decades after leaving the game. No slouching or reclining was allowed when Anderson was running a meeting. Players had to sit up straight and weren't allowed to wear hats so that Anderson could see their eyes and know whether they were focused.

And those meetings went on and on and on.

"He never stopped talking," Dillon said. "He demanded that you know what you were doing. He would quiz you all the time. He was always asking questions to make you sharp. He wanted you to understand the reason behind

the way the play was designed and what they were asking of you.”



Bengals running back Corey Dillon walks off the practice field with Jim Anderson at training camp in 2001. (AP Photo/Al Behrman)

No position group on any team spends more time in meetings than quarterbacks, but Anderson’s running backs made it a close competition.

“We might have given the quarterbacks a run for it,” Green said. “They might have beaten us there in the morning, but we were the last group to leave pretty much every day of my six years there. Boomer (Esiason) would walk by on his way home and be like, ‘C’mon, Jimmy, give ’em a break. Cut ’em loose.”

Despite all the success Anderson’s backs had on the field, it’s many of the moments off the field that the players remember most. Back in September when the Bengals held a 30-year reunion for the 1988 Super Bowl team, Brooks stood up before the team and addressed the Andersons – Jim and Marcia – personally.

“I talked about how much I love them and how they’re like family to me still to this day,” Brooks said. “They mean so much. When you find someone who really cares about, not just sports-wise, but you as a person, it’s really special.”

It’s not just Brooks. Anderson has remained close with just about every running back he’s ever coached, even if it meant he had to learn some new tricks.

“I learned to text just so I could communicate with them,” he said. “I do everything I can to stay in touch with them and see how they’re doing because I care about them, not only as former football players, but I care about them as people. And I think they know that.”

Dillon affirms that they do.

“He’s cool people,” Dillon said. “When you’re playing and going through all of it, you can’t see all the coolness. But as you get older and mature and start thinking back on stuff, you realize damn, Jim was an outstanding coach, but he also was one hell of a dude. He was cool. He had to be cool. He had a room full of misfits. He had to hold that together.”



Jim and Marcia were planning to build an addition on their house in Evendale midway through the 29 years with the Bengals. But those were dark days in Bengals history, with a run of 12 consecutive non-winning seasons, the last five of which saw the team post double-digit losses.

“Things weren’t going good at all, and Marcia asked me, ‘Do we really want to do this?’”

Anderson didn’t flinch.

“I said, ‘We’ll never live life like that,’” he recalled. “We’ve always lived life in the positive. Whatever happens is going to happen. We can’t control it. We’re going to put the addition on. A house is meant to be sold. If something happens and we have to sell it, we’ll sell it. But there’s not going to be any would’ve, could’ve, should’ve.”

They still live in that same house, the one they built in 1989 so that their only child, Derek, would have a more diverse high school experience in the Princeton school district. Shortly after the addition was finished, Anderson’s job was in limbo when the Bengals fired then head coach LeBeau following the 2002 season.

Anderson interviewed for the head coach job, but the Bengals hired Lewis instead. Assistants rarely survive a head-coaching change, but Anderson had already had made it through three of them. This one, however, marked the first time the new boss had no ties to the organization.

But Lewis said keeping Anderson was an easy choice.

“When I made the decision to keep Bob Bratkowski as offensive coordinator, I listened to Bob’s input as far as the coaches on the offensive staff,” Lewis said. “And I worked with Dick Hoak in Pittsburgh, and Dick held Jim in very, very high regard forever.”



Jim Anderson looks on from the sideline during a game against the Steelers at Heinz Field in 2011. (George Gojkovich/Getty Images)

Hoak is one of the few assistants in NFL history to have a longer run with the same team than Anderson, coaching running backs for the Steelers for 34 years. And a year after Lewis' arrival in Cincinnati, Anderson threw his name in the mix to become Hoak's boss as Steelers offensive coordinator.

It was one of two times during his Bengals career he applied for jobs outside of the organization, the first of which was in 1999 when he interviewed for the O.C. job in Chicago. But Bears head coach Dick Jauron hired Gary Crowton instead, and in 2004 Steelers coach Bill Cowher picked Ken Whisenhunt over Anderson.

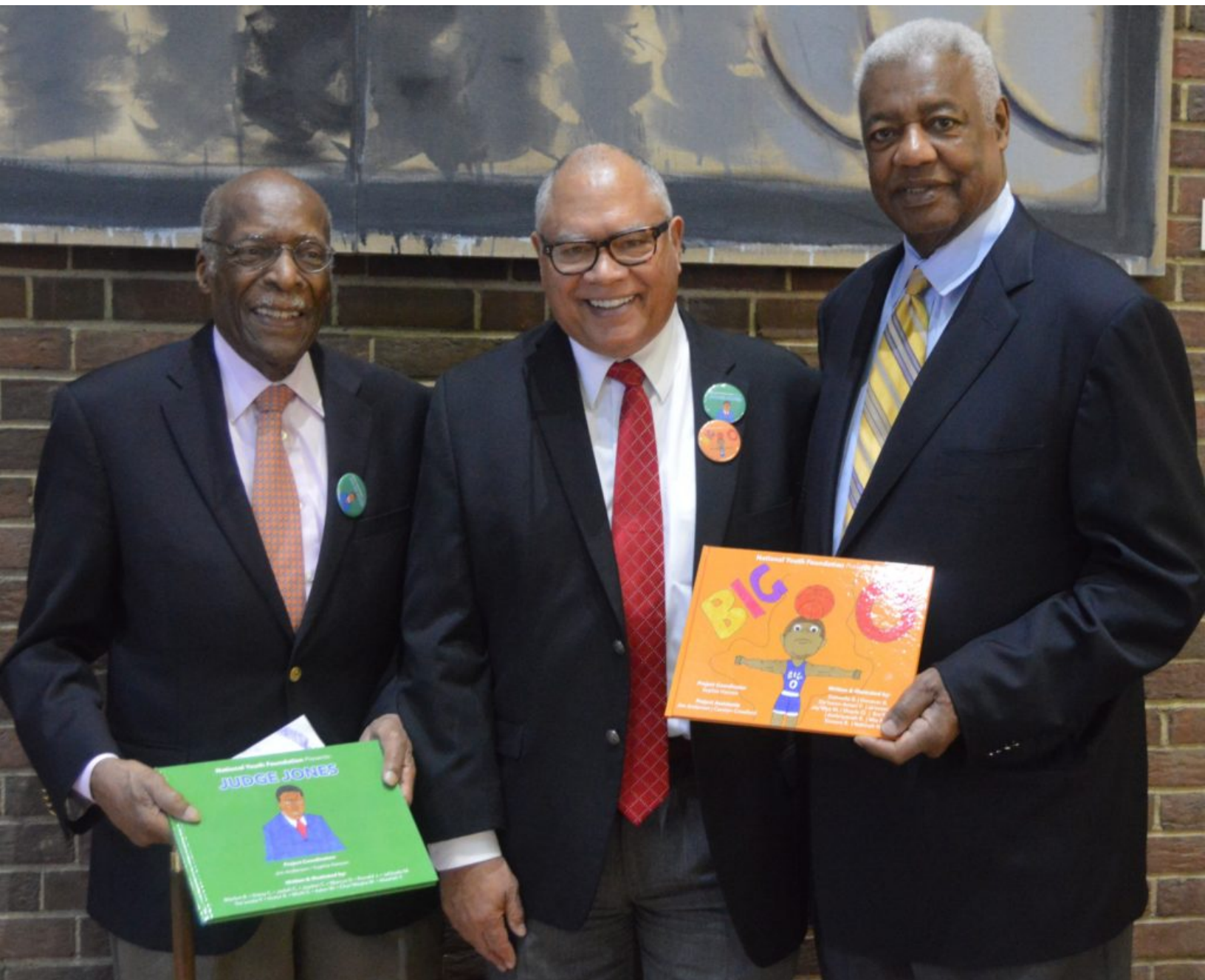
There are doubts in Anderson's mind whether he got a fair shake in Pittsburgh or if he was just a token minority candidate to meet the requirement of the Rooney Rule that was implemented in 2003.

"Put it like this, I worked with Dick (LeBeau) and Dick didn't even know I was coming in to interview," Anderson said. "If you knew somebody was coming in and you knew that person had worked with somebody on your staff, then you would think they would have told the old timer – that's what I call Dick affectionately – and the old timer would've been there. You would have thought that would've happened, but it didn't. So that was telling."

So Jim and Marcia continued to enjoy the new addition on their house as he coached another nine seasons with the Bengals before retiring at the end of the 2012 season.

"I'm glad he was here all those years," Mike Brown said. "I think of him as a friend, and he has my complete respect. He was – no, he is an example of what you think of as the best kind of guy associated with the NFL. He's exceptional. But you don't think about it in those terms when you're around him. He's just a regular guy."

Anderson received the Fritz Pollard Lifetime Achievement Award after retiring, named for the man who became the first African-American assistant coach in 1921. Anderson has since received numerous other honors, including being inducted into the Central Pennsylvania Chapter of the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame, as well as winning the Cincinnati NAACP Blue and Gold Award and the Commitment to Excellence Award from his hometown of Harrisburg, where he met Marcia while the two were attending different high schools.



Their life together has come full circle. After changing jobs every couple of years in their 20s before settling into one place for 29 years, Jim and Marcia are on the move again.

In addition to frequent short trips to Columbus to see their son, daughter-in-law and two young grandsons, the Andersons are making up for all of those years of being tied down by the grueling schedule of an NFL coach by traveling the globe.

“The day he retired and signed the paper, the ink wasn’t even dry yet and we were off to Australia,” Marcia said.

They’ve visited New Zealand, Thailand, China, England, Hawaii, along with multiple trips to France.

And they’re still taking their annual cruise, something they began doing after Jim joined the Bengals during the five-week summer break in the NFL schedule. They’ve been on 35 cruises with another one scheduled this summer.

“We’re on the back nine and we’re walking to the clubhouse, and we’re not in a hurry,” Jim said. “And if we get a mulligan along the way, we’ll take it. I’m not a golfer, but I’ll take all the strokes I can get. We’re just enjoying life.”

*(Top image: Jim Anderson before a 2010 game. AP Photo/Al Behrman)*

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