

# Detroit Free Press

**MITCH ALBOM**

## Mitch Albom: Dan Campbell's roots helped make him Detroit Lions savior



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The fire inside began in grade school, when his little Texas town organized a basketball tournament. Teams of kids competed for eight minutes. The winners played on. The losers sat.

On a buzzer beater, young Dan Campbell's team lost.

"I'm bawling, I'm angry," he recalls, "and then I look around and the other kids are drinking punch. And I remember, I just felt compelled to say something. Like, 'this is not OK.' I kind of lost it a little bit. I was yelling, and everybody's looking at me ...

"I'm in tears. I've just got this raw passion coming out of me. Emotion. Frustration. It wasn't directed at them. I was yelling, 'We had this game, and we lost!'

"And then, it happened. They looked at me like ... they got it. I got to them. They understood me, you know?"

A coach was born.

You want to know what makes Dan Campbell tick? What makes him that rarest of football leaders, a guy the players, fans and the media all seem to want to play for? A guy whose locker room speeches are now must-see TV? A guy who, with apologies to Justin Timberlake, is bringing gritty back?

Here is a 48 year-old head coach, in only his fourth year at the helm, facing an unprecedented high-pressure, regular-season finale Sunday night, his 14-2 Detroit Lions against the 14-2 team Minnesota Vikings for all the marbles in the NFC playoffs. Yet his

reaction is like one of those Bond villains when a chair is smashed over his head. All he does is grin.

A Man in Full, as Tom Wolfe once penned. That is Dan Campbell at this moment. His operation is humming. His men are stoutly behind him. Like that famous scene from “Braveheart,” he is on his horse, invoking honor as he bellows, his sword ready to carve his legacy.

But an iron blade doesn’t fall from the sky. It is forged by relentless pounding.

**TRENDING:** Vikings infiltrate Ford Field with sneaky scheme to buy Lions tickets

Here, then, are some pummeling lessons that forged Dan Campbell.

## 1. The never quit lesson

The first one came from his father, a rancher in a patch of Texas that was so unpopulated, you had to drive 10 miles just to get to the nearest small town, Meridian (population 1,396). Larry Campbell wore a cattleman hat and a workingman’s boots. His clothes, at the end of the day, were clotted “with mud, blood and sweat” his son recalls. Hardworking? Larry would make the cowboys in “Yellowstone” look like a book club.

“My Dad was a Marine,” Dan recalls, while sitting in a meeting room recently at the Lions practice facility. “So between that and working on the ranch (the message was) hard work. If you’re going to do a job, then you put everything you got into that job. You don’t half-ass anything.”

When Dan was 12 years old, he was practicing the high jump as his father looked on. It was a Sunday, just after church. Dan was missing. He couldn’t clear the height. He got frustrated, took the bar, threw it and stalked away.

Suddenly, he heard the clapping of cowboy boots charging hard on the track.

“I look behind me — and my father tackles me, you know? And he yells ‘You do not quit! You never quit!’

“You get lessons before, but that one was like, ‘OK, this is real.’ The cinder in your face, the whole thing? You’re ashamed. You’re embarrassed.

“But I deserved that. Once you catch your breath you realize, 'Hey, I'm the one at fault here. Look what you did. You did just quit.' ”

Young Dan retrieved the bar, set it back in place and began jumping. And he got over it.

The bar, and the incident.

And he never quit anything again.

## 2. The empathy lesson

Did you know that Campbell was called “Boone” all through his childhood? His brother gave him the nickname — “After Daniel Boone, the great frontiersman” Campbell says — but mostly because he liked the old TV show. “You’re Daniel Boone, Daniel Boone,” his brother would coo, until the moniker stuck.

But Campbell’s actual name came from his mother, who chose Daniel for the biblical hero who gets tossed into a lions’ den because he refuses to give up his beliefs. It was Betty Campbell who taught her son the second lesson that would shape his coaching technique.

Empathy.

“We didn’t have a lot of money growing up,” the coach recalls. “When you’re young, you just know if you can have something or you can’t. Most of the time, you can’t.

“But then you see we’re giving so-and-so our old coats, or we’re giving them food, or this car has been in the family for years and we’re going to give it to another family because they had a house fire.

“As a kid, it doesn’t make sense, because these are people you don’t even know. But it taught me that you don’t ever have it as bad as you think you have it. Someone’s always got it worse. My mother taught me that. My mother and father both. Be thankful for what you got. And treat everyone equally.”

Those lessons came into play when Campbell, an excellent high school football player, enrolled at Texas A&M in 1995. Coming from a tiny, rural environment, he hadn’t really been exposed to many kids who didn’t look like him. As a freshman, he says, his three dormmates were white, black and Vietnamese. But it didn’t throw him. He’d been taught that everyone is the same, everyone is worthy of your respect and anyone might have it tougher than you.

“Treat everybody equally,” he recalls. “And with respect.”

He coaches the same way.

### 3. The limited talent lesson

Campbell was a part-time starter at tight end in college. But he was always realistic about his NFL skills. When I ask how good he thought he could be upon being drafted in the third round by the New York Giants, he replies: “I think I always knew I was going to be a grunt.”

Others felt the same. One scout wrote he was the “best blocker” in the draft. Another wrote “not a factor in the passing game.”

Here is how Campbell saw it: “I didn’t move great. I wasn’t this real fluid athlete, you know? I was quick. I was powerful. I had strength, so my protection was good. ...

“If you said, ‘There’s a Hall of Fame for blockers,’ I’d be like, ‘I can do that. I can make that Hall of Fame.’ But the receiving aspect, I was never really that good.”

It didn’t help that just as Campbell was coming into his own in New York, the Giants drafted Jeremy Shockey, who would go to four Pro Bowls.

“You realize, ‘OK, that’s what (a tight end) is supposed to look like,’ ” Campbell admits.

Then the next year, after Campbell signed with Dallas, the Cowboys drafted Jason Witten, who would make 11 Pro Bowls.

“It teaches you that you better find your niche right away,” Campbell says, “or you’re not going to play.”

Appreciated by every coach who had him in a locker room, Campbell found enough niche to play 10 years in the NFL, although much of the time he was injured. But never achieving greatness allowed him to hone another skill.

“I do think some of the best coaches are the least talented players,” he explains. “Because that’s how you had to play, you had to do every little thing right. You didn’t have the talent to just get away with things. Your fundamentals and techniques had to be spot-on.”

It’s the reason for Campbell’s intense dedication to detail. It’s also the reason he makes special room for players like Kalif Raymond, Dan Skipper or Malcolm Rodriguez, guys who may not have superstar pedigrees, but will do whatever it takes for as long as it takes.

Like him.

## 4. The grind lesson

Campbell takes power naps. If he's watching film and his eyes are getting blurry, it makes no sense, he says, for him to continue. "It's like the Navy Seals. You go hard for a minute, take a power nap, you get back up, go for a couple hours, power nap again."

When he was an assistant coach, he sneaked his sleep by lying flat under his desk for 10 minutes. As a head coach, he admits, "The accommodations have improved."

Still, Campbell doesn't like to sleep overnight in the office, although he sometimes does. That's hard on his wife, he says, and has been hard on his kids. He does it, he explains, because the grind is what makes him good.

"When you're not around football, you realize the hardest part is the part you miss," he said. "Yes, you miss the camaraderie. Being around the guys, being around something bigger than yourself. But it's the grind. You miss the grind. And for somebody like me, that was always what separated me from a lot of people. That's how you got your edge."

"Playing is one kind of grind. Preparing your body. But coaching is about preparing your mind. And knowing you're able to do something that you don't feel like everybody can do, or they're not willing to go to the places you're willing to go to, that's how you get your edge."

## 5. The health lesson

Campbell can't remember how many surgeries he endured in the NFL. "Thirteen or 15?" he says. Knee, foot, elbow, an appendectomy.

"I joke about this, and Holly (his wife) gets mad at me," he says, "but it's like, my first three surgeries, man, she's there, she's right with me. But by four, five, six, she's just pulls up to the front of the hospital, drops me off and says, 'Tell him to call me when you're done.'"

He laughs heartily. But the scars are real. And they've given Dan Campbell an empathy for players with injuries, as well as an acceptance that injuries are as much a part of the NFL as truck commercials, so you'd better find depth on your roster or you'll be out of luck.

It's also a reason he refuses to use injuries as an excuse. The Lions this year are like the intake desk at an emergency room, with nearly two dozen players — and a massive chunk of

their defensive stars — going on injured reserve.

Campbell was no stranger to that list. But two specific times, in back-to-back seasons, taught him lessons that shaped his coaching. The first was the worst year in Lions history, 2008, when the team lost every game of the season. Campbell got hurt early that year and was done, unable to help stave off the ugliness. That hurt.

The second stint was a year later, 2009, when he signed with New Orleans, reuniting with Sean Payton, who was his offensive coordinator in New York and Dallas. That year, Campbell also got hurt early, went on injured reserve and missed out on a Super Bowl run that resulted in a championship, the only one in his NFL career.

**More:** Dan Campbell believes his Detroit Lions can handle late-season pressure — and they can

He didn't play a down.

"That was hard," he admits. But in addition to developing his empathy for injured players, it also taught him something precious about the NFL, which is ...

## 6. The Super Bowl lesson

When I ask Campbell the difference between making a Super Bowl and winning one, he leans in and his eyes narrow.

"Yeah, they're two totally different things," he said. "Because I've been to one with the Giants. I went (in 2001) and we got smacked by Baltimore (a 34-7 defeat). And you know, people keep telling me, one day you're gonna look back on that and be like, 'Man it was awesome. You got to play in a Super Bowl.'"

"I haven't gotten there yet. To me, you're there to win it. That's the ultimate prize. So, no, the making it — you got to make it to win it, all right? But it's all about winning this thing, man. Because otherwise, just for me, personally, you're short of where you want to be."

## The bottom line

If you spend an hour with Campbell, you want to spend two. If you spend a day watching him coach, you want to spend a week. There is an undeniable energy about him, and it will no doubt be on display Sunday night at Ford Field, in all its gritty glory.

But we are all a byproduct of the things that shaped us. And before Campbell began shaping men in Lions uniforms, he himself was shaped by the people and situations around him. His steel was forged in never quitting, never treating people unequally, never ceasing to grind, never underestimating injuries, never stopping until the ultimate prize is in hand.

And sometimes never sleeping.

He is, as his mother foresaw, Daniel in the lions' den, his belief as his shield. And he is, as his brother suggested, Daniel Boone, guiding his team to a new frontier. And he surely is, in Sunday night's big game, Braveheart on that horse, his gravelly voice exhorting his men to victory.

A Man in Full. From that childhood defeat when he saw his young teammates responding to his passion, to this nationally televised NFL regular season finale, destiny seems to be steering him. Coaching, Campbell says, "is why God put me on this Earth."

Given how far he's come, could anyone disagree?

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