

Sid Gillman USIU Coach

...Until 1977, when the phone call came from Chicago. The Bears, who hadn't had a winning team for nine years, needed an offensive coordinator, and 65-year-old Sid Gillman was the man they wanted. He was on the next plane. Those Bears went to the playoffs for the first time in 14 seasons, and when they asked Walter Payton about Sid, he said, "I haven't figured him out yet. I don't know where he gets all his enthusiasm."

One day someone approached Gillman to do some work for the Gray Panthers. "What is it?" he asked. A senior citizens' group, he was told. "It's not for me," he said. "Hell, I live like I did when I was 35. I don't believe in retirement groups because I don't believe in retirement. How long can I keep coaching? How about forever? I'll never walk off the field."

But that's exactly what he did after the '77 season. He wanted to open up the offense. The Chicago brain trust wanted to keep it closed. "Younger coaches with old minds," Gillman said, and he went back to La Costa and his film room.

The next phone call came from left-field. United States International University, formerly known as Cal Western, wanted to know if he was interested in coaching its team—USIU with 3,450 students on its San Diego campus, including 1,500 undergrads, about a third of them foreign; USIU with campuses in London, Nairobi and Mexico City. Sid Gillman working there would be like Henry Ford working at a local garage.

"My president told me to make the call," says Al Palmiotto, USIU's athletic director at the time. "I was practically laughing when I phoned Sid. I mean Sid Gillman, the father of modern offensive football. I said, 'You wouldn't by any chance be interested?' and he said, 'Sure, why not?'"

"What a lucky sonofabitch I am," Gillman said afterward, "finding a place like this for the last years of my life." It was December 1978. He was 67 years old. Four months later he was gone, having signed on with the Philadelphia Eagles to put in a passing attack for coach Dick Vermeil's offense. But what he did in those four months at USIU became something of a West Coast legend.

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