By T. Scott Dewey II ’13

Often, success in the National Football League starts with success at a major football program in the college ranks. For Seattle Seahawks defensive coordinator Dan Quinn ’94, the path to coaching at the highest levels of his profession – and leading his defense to a dominating win in Super Bowl XLVIII – began as a Sea Gull.

The Morristown, NJ, native was a two-sport athlete at Salisbury, as a member of the football and track teams. He lettered in football from 1989-93 and was a team captain for the 1992 and 1993 seasons. In addition, he was on the track team in 1990 and then 1992-94. Quinn missed the 1990 football season and 1991 track season with injury, but he came back strong to finish his collegiate career.

“(Quinn) has always been a first-class person and a very tough competitor,” said current SU Defensive Coordinator Robb Disbennett, who started his coaching career at Salisbury during Quinn’s playing days. “He was a key player for us, a guy the defensive coaches had to know where he was. Dan was a hard worker and a great leader for us.”

“For me, when I think back on that time, I think about the people and relationships with guys like Mike Vienna and Pat Lamboni and Robb Disbennett and guys I’ve known for a long time and have had a really big influence on my career,” Quinn said of his memories of Salisbury.

A Competitor as a Player and a Coach

The qualities that made the Class of 2005 Athletics Hall of Fame inductee a fierce competitor on the field have translated well during his coaching career.

“The thing about Dan Quinn is that the players love him,” Fox Sports football insider Jay Glazer said about the coach. “He commands the room and is going to be successful at whatever he does because he’s real. A lot of these guys change into something they’re not. Not him.”

After graduation, Quinn began his coaching career as a defensive line coach at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA, for the 1994 season. The following season, he held the same position at the Virginia Military Institute before moving on to Hofstra University. Quinn was the defensive line coach for the Pride from 1996-99 before being promoted to defensive coordinator for the 2000 season.

After getting his start in the coaching world in the college ranks, the former defensive lineman bull-rushed his way to the National Football League. Two of his players from Hofstra made their way to the NFL and the San Francisco 49ers and were able to get Quinn an interview with then-49ers Defensive Coordinator Jim Mora Jr. Quinn’s blue-collar mentality was evident to the 49ers, and the rest, as they say, is history.

“I think anytime you come from humble beginnings, you always have a chip on your shoulder,” former NFL player and current ESPN NFL analyst Mark Schlereth said about the mentality that comes with starting from less-than-heralded beginnings. “You see a guy like Tom Brady who gets emotional about his draft status. There is always a point where you feel disrespected, where you want to prove everyone who never gave you a chance wrong. You have great pride in what you are able to accomplish and I don’t think you ever feel satisfied. When you come from a small school, you’re always trying to prove the naysayers wrong.”

Quinn impressed Mora enough to win a position on the defensive staff. He
was a defensive quality control assistant for the 2001 and 2002 seasons for the 49ers, before being promoted to the defensive line coach for the 2003-04 seasons. He was tabbed as the defensive line coach for the Miami Dolphins for the 2005 season by Nick Saban, spending two seasons in Miami, before moving on to the New York Jets in the same position for the 2007-08 season.

Quinn went back to the West Coast for the 2009 season, joining the Seahawks staff as a defensive line coach for two seasons, before being tabbed as the defensive coordinator of the Florida Gators by Will Muschamp, whom he coached with in Miami under Saban. He would lead a top-10 Gator defense for two seasons before coming back to Seattle under Pete Carroll for the 2013 season as the defensive coordinator.

Heading Back to the Northwest
Coach Carroll needed to fill his defensive coordinator position when then-Seattle coordinator Gus Bradley took the head coaching position in Jacksonville going into the 2013 season. Carroll turned to a familiar face in Quinn, who had experience improving an already dominate defense.

“(Quinn) does a great job,“ Carroll said. “It’s a major transition when you change coordinators, but we were fortunate that we didn’t skip a beat. His familiarity and his background added in ... it’s why we hired him in the first place. To get him to come back, he made it a great transition and it really worked out great for us.”

A passion for teaching has served Quinn well, a career in education is why he came to Salisbury in the first place. He has been able to take what he learned during his time on campus and apply it to his real-world situations.

“I got to watch the coaches (at Salisbury),” Quinn said about his college mentors, including Head Coach Joe Rotellini. “When I first went to college, I thought I wanted to major in education and go back to teach high school, but when I got there, I wanted to follow them and (get into coaching).”

Being able to break down the Xs and Os of football has played dividends for his players, including Seahawks starting defensive end Red Bryant. Bryant came into the league in 2008 as a defensive tackle, but Quinn worked with him to improve his game and switch positions in 2010. With that transition, Bryant has become a starter for one of the best defensive units in the NFL.

“He did a great job teaching me the game and how to watch film,” Bryant said about his former defensive line coach and current coordinator. “He was the big advocate in persuading Coach Carroll to move me to defensive end and that has worked out great for me. To get him back as defensive coordinator, that was just icing on the cake. He really is a great defensive mind; great at communicating with different personalities.”

Coaching in the Biggest Game
Quinn has been fortunate to land in good situations, but that is a testament to his hard work and authenticity. His Seahawk defense ranked as the top unit in the NFL for the 2013 season, allowing the fewest points and yards per game while creating the most turnovers in the league. In part because of that production on the defensive side, Seattle advanced to Super Bowl XLVIII, allowing just eight points in a win against the Denver Broncos, which included among the best offenses the game has ever seen.

“This has just been an awesome time for us, just to be a part of it with this team and this group of guys, that’s one of the things that is most enjoyable,” Quinn said at the Super Bowl Media Day. “We have a really tight group of players and coaches, and to get the chance to compete for [the Super Bowl], we couldn’t be more excited to be here.”

A benefit of being the coordinator for the top-ranked defense is that Quinn is likely to make the jump to being a head coach in the near future. With that will come a new set of challenges, ones that Quinn will be prepared to take head on, in part because of what he carries with him every day from his time at Salisbury.