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INTRODUCTION

It's often said that football is a game of inches; sometimes it's an inch to the first down marker, sometimes it's a receiver an inch away from making a big play, and sometimes, you're just an inch from getting the win. All the inches add up, and one of the best ways to ensure that you take every one you possibly can is to develop proper practice habits.

This doesn't just mean running as hard as you can or drilling the same things over and over. It's not just what you're doing in practice, but how you do it that will ultimately make the difference. Ask yourself...

- Are you making time each practice to teach and work on proper fundamentals?
- Are you spending the time dissecting game film, so that you can point out the critical errors each player made and how they can fix them?
- Have you taken the time to work on the little things, like getting the playcall from the sideline to the quarterback without any hitches?

In the grand scheme, these may not seem like the most important things for a team, but when you put them altogether, they are the grand scheme. Games are won and lost on the practice field, and if you want to have a successful season, you need to ensure that practicing hard and smart is of the utmost importance each and every minute of each and every practice.

This eBook will take you through 9 practice keys to designed to work with all ages and ability levels. For each one, we'll begin with an explanation of the concept. Next, we'll discuss why it's important to achieving flawless execution. And finally, how you can implement this concept in your own practices.

Ready? Let's get started!

TEACH AND COACH FUNDAMENTALS



CORE CONCEPT

This may sound like a very simple concept, but as you get through the season the teaching and coaching of fundamentals tends to be ignored as coaches focus more on design and game plan.

WHY IT MATTERS

As you get further and further into the year – usually around the sixth or seventh game – you’ll start to see a drop off in sound fundamentals. After working on and focusing on gameplanning and adding plays for so long, coaches often neglect to put the necessary time in in practice to ensure we’re working on the fundamentals.

This will cause a huge drop-off in offensive production, in everything from the crispness of execution to the number of penalties per game.

ON THE FIELD

The best way to make sure that fundamentals don’t drop off is to make sure you have enough time each practice for the players to spend some time individually, working on and perfecting their fundamentals.

Of course, this doesn’t mean they shouldn’t be working on their fundamentals in team practice as well – you need to make sure it’s a point of emphasis no matter what you’re doing in practice.

There’s an especially good opportunity to do just that whenever you’re in a light practice, walking through plays or working the no pads or just shoulder pads. The players aren’t going to be pushing themselves physically, but they should be drilling themselves and exaggerating their techniques the whole time.

REFUSE TO TOLERATE MISTAKES



CORE CONCEPT

The first way to win a football game is to not lose it for yourself by making mistakes. There are layers and layers of football strategy, but often what it comes down to when it's all said and done is who had less mistakes.

WHY IT MATTERS

Mistakes lead to penalties and turnovers, and it's no secret that avoiding these two things is key to putting together a win. As a coach, it's your job to drive home the fact that you will not tolerate these kinds of mistakes.

One of the things we do when looking at the game film is grading players, looking for critical errors throughout the game. When a player has a critical error, we mark it down and let him know. The difference between an offense that has three critical errors in a game and an offense that has thirteen is the difference between a win and a loss – and we need to drive this home for our players.

ON THE FIELD

When it comes to mistakes like false starts or fumbles, we need to take note and do something about it as a coach. One way to deal with them is to 'reward' mistakes.

By this I mean if a running back is having trouble holding onto the ball, then you give him two footballs, have him tuck them in tight and run the length of the field as his 'reward'. If an offensive lineman keeps jumping before the ball is snapped, you're going to reward him by subbing him out and having him do burpees.

The player will remember his 'reward' and have the lesson that protecting the ball or forgetting the snap count are critical mistakes and they will not be tolerated on your team.

As far as the more major mistakes – like missing a blocking assignment or messing up the timing on a play – the only way you're going to fix those is through repetition. So keep note throughout practice of the plays that have these major mistakes, and then do your after practice conditioning by having the team run those same plays over and over again until they get it right. Sometimes you'll end up with shorter after practice conditioning – but that's a good thing, it means you had a good practice!

TEACH THE RULES



CORE CONCEPT

It's important to take the time to make sure your players understand the rules of the game. Most coaches don't take enough time to do so, but making sure to make the time is a great way to find another small edge that you can give your team.

WHY IT MATTERS

It may seem trivial, but it can make a huge difference, especially in terms of avoiding penalties; how many players are allowed on the line of scrimmage? What exactly is clipping? And so on.

Knowing exactly what the rules are is the only way your players are going to figure out what they need to execute and what they can and can't do.

ON THE FIELD

A good way to work this into your time with the team is to just highlight a couple rules in the rulebook, and then when you're having your unit meetings before the game, read out a rule as a question, let the players think about it, and then pick one to answer. It's a good idea to do this in a lighthearted way - we're not going to have players running sprints or anything like that if they get a question wrong.

You'll want to pick about six to eight rules, and make sure they are rules from all aspects of the game - offense and defense as well as all aspects of special teams.

COACH BALL SECURITY



CORE CONCEPT

Every once in a while, you might hear a coach speculate that ball security is an innate ability, and that it can't be taught. Well, that statement is just as wrong as $2+2=5$. It can be taught, as there are clear fundamentals that when taught and drilled correctly will have a huge impact on your team's ability to hold onto the ball and prevent unnecessary fumbles.

WHY IT MATTERS

There is one statistic that has stood the test of time as having a monstrous effect on wins and losses – turnovers. Regardless of whether it's via interception or fumble, a team that is on the negative end of the turnover differential is going to be on the losing end of the game more often than not.

By taking the time to teach the fundamentals, and then making sure to take the time to practice those fundamentals throughout the year, you can ensure a drop off in fumbles, which will lead to a drop off in turnovers and in the end, an increase in wins.

ON THE FIELD

The fundamental keys to proper ball security include the player locking the ball into his armpit, with that elbow locked underneath the armpit nice and tight, so that there is no air between the football and the armpit.

Also, as far as the fingers on the front of the ball, they should split two fingers over the end, instead of putting one directly over the front of the ball, as it could get smashed, leading to a loosening of the grip and the ball slipping out.

Just as teaching the fundamentals is key, finding the time to work on ball security drills is vital as well. There are a number of ways to do this, from ensuring your running backs are taking the ball with solid handoff technique to having them run a gauntlet drill, with teammates forming two lines and attempting to poke the ball out as the ball carrier runs through the middle.

Even if you can only work on these drills for a short time, running these drills will not only improve their ability to protect the ball but also has the added bonus of emphasizing the importance of ball security on your team.

PRACTICE SUBBING AND SIDELINE/ HUDDLE COMMUNICATION



CORE CONCEPT

Despite the fact that for most teams, player substitutions are the primary method of sideline to huddle communication, many coaches make the mistake of completely ignoring this aspect of the game, just assuming that it will figure itself out or that it's not that big a deal.

This couldn't be farther from the truth, and learning how to properly substitute and communicate with your huddle is something you need to spend time on in practice.

WHY IT MATTERS

If you fail to spend the proper amount of time practicing your sideline to huddle communication, you're going to see an uptick in miscommunication errors. If you ever played the game of telephone as a kid, when you pass a message around a circle via whisper, you've seen just how quickly a simple message can erode into something else.

This may lead to players misunderstanding the play and running the wrong routes, missing blocking assignments, the quarterback and running back might even end up accidentally going to opposite sides on a handoff!

You could also end up needing to constantly repeat the call, taking valuable time off the play clock which could result in less time to make pre-snap reads or even delay of game penalties. There are countless ways that an inability to effectively communicate via substitute can hurt your team, and spending the time to avoid that needs to be a priority for coaches at all levels of football.

ON THE FIELD

One of the best ways to work on this is to simply have all the coaches get off the field during practice. Often times coaches will stand behind the play, coming into the huddle and giving plays to the offense during an offense only practice or even a scrimmage. Instead, pull the coaches and substitutes off the field to the sideline, and deliver plays to the huddle the same way you would in a game situation.

The player coming in off the sideline should stand right in front of the coach giving the play, listening as well as reading his lips and not trailing off to take off early towards the end of the play. The substitute should listen to the whole play, sprint directly to the quarterback, and then repeat the play, making sure to announce and look the quarterback right in the eye as he does so. The quarterback will also read the substitutes lips as he listens, then step into the huddle and deliver the call to the team, clearly and loudly announcing each and every syllable.

PRACTICE CRITICAL SITUATION OFFENSE



CORE CONCEPT

Keeping your base offense tight and simple is always a good idea, but that doesn't mean those should be the only plays in your playbook. There are certain situations where you need specific play packages to be successful, and developing the rest of your playbook so as to be ready to handle any of these situations if and when they come up is the most efficient way to expand your playbook.

WHY IT MATTERS

All too often coaches will work on their base offense by simply lining the ball up between the hashes, running through their offense for two hours, then call it a day to go home. This is a huge disservice to their team, as they are not even preparing their team for the most basic of situation changes - the ball is only going to be in the middle of the field about 20% of the time, spending the other 80% of the time split between the two hashes - but they're also completely ignoring critical situation offense.

While you want to keep your base offensive package small, with a limited number of run and pass plays, that doesn't mean it should be the only part of your playbook. Throughout every game there a number of critical situations where an offense's regular base offense wouldn't be maximizing it's potential output.

These situations include but are not limited to: goal line, red zone, 3rd down, short yardage, killing the clock, two minute offense, desperation plays, 2 point conversions and even a last play sequence. Designing specific packages so that you can best attack in specific situations is the only way you're going to be consistently successful.

Like when you're on the goal line both the offense and defense will likely be going to big heavy personnel, with very limited passing room due to the congestion of the defense, or in the red zone, where you're likely going to be seeing a lot of blitz and pressures to limit the quarterback's time in the pocket.

ON THE FIELD

Don't elaborate on the base offense - concentrate on specifically developing packages for critical situations. And then make sure that you spend a bit of time each practice when just working on those packages, first maybe with no defense, but you also need to also work these critical situations into scrimmages. You don't want the first time your team executes your last play sequence to be with three seconds on the clock on a real game, so create these situations in practice as often as possible and you'll see great results.

KEEP IT SUPER SIMPLE (KISS)



CORE CONCEPT

It can be tempting to make things more and more complex, but as you expand your playbook you're going to see a drop off in execution, and your offense is going to suffer.

As a coach, you need to keep in mind that what you do doesn't matter anywhere near as much as how you do it, as that is what is going to ultimately decide your success.

WHY IT MATTERS

As the playbook expands and you get further and further away from keeping it simple, you're making things much more difficult for yourself. Not only is it going to be harder to teach your entire offense, but even if they have learned it all, they aren't going to be able to execute it at a high level since they don't get the time to practice each play to perfection.

The quarterback is the most important player on your offense, and needs to know what every player is doing on any given play. So therefore, you should dictate the number of plays in your playbook largely on the amount that your quarterback can handle.

ON THE FIELD

The best way to teach your offense is to give your players small, condensed info packages, that are uncomplicated and are painting broad strokes as opposed to tiny details. Instead of giving them a big phonebook to sort through, give them something more akin to a comic book - thin and easy to understand.

It's also important that when you're teaching plays and concepts, you teach to the players that are going to have the most trouble learning the play. Teach them why it's important that a square in come all the way across the field; because we need the cross route coming the other way to intersect with it, and throttling down too early could create a logjam that would be easier for the defense to cover.

When you can explain why a receiver needs to run a route a certain way, why a running back needs to stick behind the double team, why a lineman needs to execute a down block - they'll have a much easier time picking up the concept.

Lastly, yes, you should be refining your offense every year, based on personnel changes or perhaps a new play or two you want to put in, but you shouldn't be revamping the entire offense every offseason. Design an offense that you know is versatile right off the bat, so that all you have to do is tinker with here and there. This will give the players a sense of consistency, and make it easier for both the new and old players to pick up the offense.

LUCK IS WHEN PREPARATION MEETS OPPORTUNITY



CORE CONCEPT

One thing you'll often see from teams and players that are performing poorly is that they'll point to those that are succeeding and performing well and accuse them of being lucky. While it is true that there is a certain aspect of luck in football and in all things really, preparing so that you're in the best position to take advantage of that luck is the only way you can get it.

WHY IT MATTERS

There are parts of the game that are out of our control on offense. There's no doubt about that. But the only way you're going to be in a position to receive those favorable bounces is if you put yourself there.

Most people will admit, that fumble recoveries are largely a product of luck, and will split 50/50 in terms of offense and defensive recoveries. But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't teach your players how to properly recover a football so as to give themselves the best chance to get the football on each and every fumble.

You're chances of getting a 'lucky' bounce are going to drastically improve if you have 11 guys chasing down the football instead of 6. That doesn't mean that fumble recovery is a skill, but it does mean that you can prepare your team so that when the opportunity presents itself to recover that fumble, you can be the ones that get 'lucky'.

ON THE FIELD

If luck is when preparation meets opportunity, then the only thing you have control over is preparation.

That means you need to work on having good strong fundamentals during practice, and develop clear concise game plans, so that your players are always ready when those rare opportunities avail themselves to you.

GREAT OFFENSES MAKE IT HAPPEN



CORE CONCEPT

As an offense, you need to be proactive, probing and attacking, creating opportunities for yourself rather than waiting for them to pop up on their own.

WHY IT MATTERS

Waiting for the defense to present an opening for you to attack is a terrible way to go about coaching offense.

The word offense means the action of attacking, so you need to do just that, because playing defensively on offense will lead to your offense coming off the field, and your defense coming onto it.

ON THE FIELD

Use your practice time to run your offense against the defenses you are likely to see from your next opponent. And be prepared to make adjustments on the fly.

For example, if you're a run heavy team, and the defense is stuffing the run, you need to be prepared ahead of time for that possibility and have adjustments that you can make throughout the game so that you can get that 'W.'

Maybe that's going to the screen game, or working the playaction, maybe even a trick play - whatever you have to do to make it happen, do it!