

Top Gun
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Mental Preparation for Quarterbacks

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May 2003

Introduction

Once you learn the proper mechanics of playing quarterback, you have made your job a lot easier. In fact, you should be able to throw the ball further, and with more velocity. You should also be able to throw all types of passes with greater accuracy.

We now focus on the most important aspect of playing quarterback: the mental part of the game. I would guess that up to this point, no one has ever attempted to teach you how to think while playing a sport. This chapter will deal with three things: 1 – becoming aware of your thoughts and how those thoughts become feelings, which then lead to behaviors and outcomes; 2 – learning how to better control and focus your thoughts; and 3 – coming up with thought process routines that will help you optimize your performance.

Talent and Playing

At the NFL level, you would be surprised that those who have the most talent (and it is usually obvious to see in training camp) are not always the best performers on the field. I was told several times as a player at the NFL level, that the mental part of the game was 95% of a player's of success. The difference between being a Pro Bowl player and someone who can't make a roster is mostly due to what is going on in a player's head (just look at all the players drafted in the first round because of talent who washed out quickly). Moreover, you might have more talent than the player in front of you, but that player (at least in the coach's mind) will be a better performer come game time. The bottom line is that the players that have the most talent *don't* always play in part because

of the way they think, control their emotions, and react in performance situations. The good news is that with work, this can be corrected.

Thoughts Affect Performance

The way an athlete thinks and how he talks to himself has a tremendous affect on how he performs. Those athletes who are more aware of their thoughts and self-talk (and can come up with a plan to deal with negative thoughts) are usually more consistent performers, and therefore perform better in pressure situations (Voight, 2003, p.5). These players can play in the “ZONE” more often because they can control how they process information, which then leads to better control of their state of mind.

Think of a time when you played “in the zone”. It was probably a time when you played at your best. When you are in the zone, the activity is thoroughly engrossing and there is not enough attention left over to allow a person to consider either the past or the future, or any other temporarily irrelevant stimuli (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.62).

Uncontrolled Thought Processes

Generally speaking, a person’s thoughts dictate how they feel, which then leads to certain predictable behaviors. For example, if a player allows himself to think “I can’t throw a spiral now to save my life”(a thought), he will then feel frustration (an emotion). This will lead to behaviors like looking down at the ground, and talking negatively to himself and those around him (behavior), which, in turn, leads to more poor play (outcome). Such thinking just exacerbates the problem into a downward spiral, which then leads to a “bad game”.

A Routine

A “routine” (a *process* of thinking and doing things) is usually a good way for an athlete to maintain proper control over his thoughts. Some players use superstitions – which is actually the subconscious’ way of trying to gain control over what is occurring. Superstitions are not the most effective way to accomplish this however. This would be the same as trying to bench press with only one hand – you might be able to get one side of the bar off the rack, but the outcome would be far from optimal. This kind of routine’s focus is not designed to enhance performance.

Learning Self-control

One of the first things you can do to begin to control what and how you think is to first realize what you can’t control. For example, you cannot control the weather during a game. Many times players will focus their attention on bad weather (something they have no control over) and worry about it. Their mental focus and control is wasted on this event, which now takes away from what they should be focusing on: the process of playing the game. Athletes should focus only on what they can control to reach optimal performance. However, learning how to control the thought process and focus, takes a great deal of practice and trust that it will be beneficial to you.

During the Course of the Game

Ideally, while you are on the field, you will limit and prioritize your thinking processes. This game-time routine will follow these five simple steps. I am going to walk you through these steps, starting from the time the previous play has just ended.

Five Specific Mental Steps during a Single Play

1 – After a play, you will be assessing its results objectively, meaning you will be focused on what went right and what could have been done better (if anything at all).

You will do this evaluation without placing any kind emotion, or subjective blame, either on yourself or others. You also want to recognize the down and distance, the time on the clock, as well as the field position. This is called ***broad external focus***. **Broad**, because you are focusing on more than one specific thing right now. **External**, because you are focusing on things outside of your mind that are not directed to you. Once you get to step number two, you must forget the previous play – it’s over! Sometimes this can be difficult. The reality, however, is that whatever happened in the past is in the past. If you stay there, and in that mindset, you’re not able to focus your entire attention on the next task, which will stop you from attaining optimal performance. You need to practice letting go of events that just occurred. Make a daily practice of this. It may be difficult at first, but just like learning to drive a car, it will become second nature to you, and will improve your performance. The next time you throw a bad ball, tell yourself what you need to do to correct the problem; then block the event from your mind. The more you do this, the more it will become automatic.

2 – Next, as the play-call comes into you (either by signal, messenger, or verbally from the coach), your focus becomes ***narrow external***. **Narrow**, because you are focused on only one thing (the playcall), and **external** because the information is coming from outside your mind and is directed to you.

3 – Next, your focus is ***broad internal***. It’s **broad**, because you are focused on several things and **internal** because this process is going on inside your mind. You are analyzing the playcall, realizing how your offense will execute the play, what your specific responsibilities are (throw, play-fake, run), and you are communicating the play call and the snap count to your team in the huddle.

4 – Once the huddle breaks, your focus becomes ***narrow internal***, in which you give special attention to a narrow range of cues. For example, during a pass play, you will be assessing the defensive alignment in relation to your linemen and your receivers. You may evaluate the potential for a blitz or eliminate some of your receivers as throwing options based on the coverage and / or leverage of the defender(s).

5 – The final and most important mental task you will perform in this sequence is to put your mind into automatic processing (reacting – ***narrow external*** focus), and letting all of your practice, preparation, talent, and skill take over. ***This is what all the most successful quarterbacks can do on a regular basis, and what holds most quarterbacks from playing to their potential.*** Thinking is replaced by ***automatically reacting*** to what you see and what the situation dictates – allowing you to be in the zone.

The Routine

This play routine (or thinking process) is very beneficial in helping you block out any negative thoughts or things out of your control, and helps you play each play “one at a time.” Everyone has a limited capacity for the number of things they can acknowledge and do in their minds (working memory). When working memory gets flooded with too much information, the individual shuts down (chokes) because he can’t focus solely on the information that he needs to use to succeed. Using this thinking process will help you focus on the task at hand and leave little room (if any) for potential distractions.

References

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