

Chapter 17



Evaluating Your Players

We've all heard the media proclaim that certain coaches are "great judges of talent." But those of us who've coached know judging talent isn't so difficult, it's *finding* the talent that's the hard part.

Actually, talent assessment is just a small part of the player evaluation process. In this chapter we'll look at individual and team evaluations a football coach should make. Although player evaluation is a continual process, we'll look at the key elements of evaluating your athletes during

- off-season,
- preseason,
- practices,
- games, and
- postgames.

Individual Evaluations

The first step in evaluation is to identify your best athletes—those who have speed, those who are agile, and those who have great hands to catch the football. And identify players who have the greatest attributes for excelling in certain roles within your system.

Also look for intangible qualities that make up what we call "winners." The most important intangible is a strong desire that won't ever quit. Another prized intangible quality is character.

Each fall we have the players fill out a personal profile questionnaire. The more you know about the young men on your team, the better. Examine each player's work

Football Player's Personal Profile Questionnaire

Name: _____

Age: _____ Birthdate: _____ Grade: _____

Home address: _____ Phone: _____

Father's name: _____

Mother's name: _____

Father's occupation: _____

Mother's occupation: _____

Siblings' names and ages: _____

College majors: _____

Other sports you participate in at Augustana: _____

Football position played last year: _____

The position you would like to play this year: _____

Your personal goals for the football season: _____

How can you best help the team this year: _____

What time can you come in? _____

ethic, attitude toward other people, and personal discipline. This judgment is sometimes easier to make in smaller high school situations where you have a chance to see the athletes frequently out of school. You can also use players' performances in school—grades, attendance, behavior—to monitor how they are doing away from football.



KNOWING YOUR PLAYERS

I remember going to a Fellowship of Christian Athletes conference years ago at which a hot topic was the individual recognition and attention we give our players.

During the conversation, the former great high school coach at Lawrence High School, Al

Woolard, asked a Division I coach, "Did you ever think of putting nametags on the kids' helmets the first day of practice?"

The coach looked slightly puzzled and responded, "Why do you ask?"

Al said, "Well, when you recruit a boy, he's your long-lost friend. You put your arm around him all the time. You're super-friendly to his parents, his brother, his sister, and even his dog. Then you get him on the field and you say, 'Hey, you, come here.'"

The Division I coach nodded and shrugged, acknowledging that the type of individual attention given players in his program changed once they put the pads on.

The better you understand your players' tangible and intangible qualities, the better

you can place the athletes with the strongest character in key positions. Correct positioning of players is critical to a football team's success. Your athletes' ability to carry out their assignments will be greatly enhanced if they are prepared and confident in their roles. In turn, your team's performance will reflect how ready and able each player is to succeed at his position.

Just one caution: Don't let one evaluation of a player influence how you perceive him during a later evaluation. Your program should be designed to improve players' athletic skills and conduct on and off the field. Young players often will develop more confidence and want to lead.

If your program has this effect, your early evaluations of players are likely to grow inaccurate as the season progresses. Other players, despite our best efforts, will slip in attitude or performance. Whatever the case, frequently reevaluate your players and make warranted changes and adjustments in personnel.

Team Evaluations

While all players deserve and need personal attention, successful football players must realize they are but a part of a group—that the team's needs must supersede those of any single player. So after you make your individual evaluations and determine where each player can most help the team, your athletes should be ready to accept their assigned role for the good of the program.

Evaluating the combined efforts of all your athletes is sometimes more difficult than individual evaluations. How do you measure the team's performance?

Do you use the easiest tool, the scoreboard? Do you look at offensive, defensive, and special team stats? Or do you check more subjective indicators, such as appraisals from the coaching staff, coaching colleagues, and fans?

To me, a team evaluation has to consider how well your team played given the talent and the game plan for that week. Did your offense and defense execute and avoid mental mistakes? Most important is whether the players played with total effort.

Satisfaction with mediocrity ensures more mediocrity. Always evaluate and strive to make your team better. If you don't, you'll get worse.

No Scoreboard Watcher

I advise against using the final score to evaluate team performance and effort. I've also said that I'm not big on statistics as a barometer. Teams that focus on holding opponents to fewer than 100 yards rushing or fewer than 12 first downs lose sight of the big picture—the overall success of the team.

No Poll Watcher

Some coaches measure their team's success by their poll rankings. That's not for me because, again, you are basing your assessment of your team on the opinions of people who don't know it as well as you do.

You can't control—or, in some ways, believe—the polls. They often look at point margins and perceived strength of schedule. Rarely do the poll voters see all of the teams, and they usually have a vested interest in the teams that they do see regularly.



SCORE PUT IN PERSPECTIVE

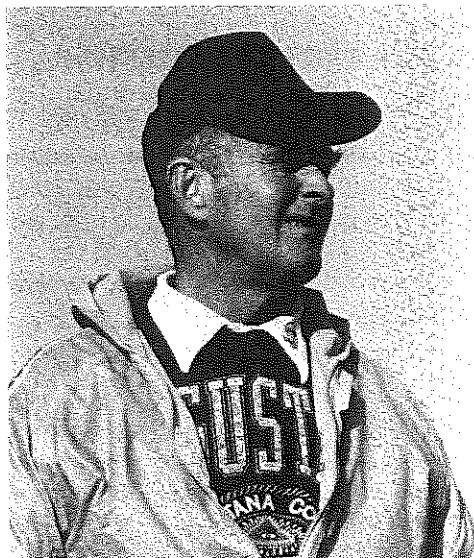
In 1970, our high school team was ranked Number 1 in the state in the poll of middle-sized schools (800 to 1,300 enrollment). The next-to-last game of the season we played the Number 5 ranked team in the large school poll (1,300 students and more). The game became a state spotlight because each team, remarkably, had won 51 of its last 52 games.

It was a great, emotional game with the final score 42-6 in our favor. After the game the editor of the polling paper said that the score was the deciding factor—we would remain the state champion in the poll. My irritation with that comment led me to say that if it was the difference in score that convinced him, he should vote the Number 2 team as Number 1. The game was really a lot closer until near the end when we scored on turnovers. I also reminded him that the other undefeated school in our class could not and would not go on the field with a school as large as the one we had just beaten. He agreed, and we were the state champions. This was before Illinois had state playoffs.

Off-Season Evaluations

Between December and August is when you can focus on the talents of returning players and those entering your program. Study them in terms of how they can best fit into your system. Use film, information from position coaches and coaches at the lower levels, personal observations, and talk with the players themselves to learn about their football interest and aptitude.

This is also a time to assess and help boys trying to overcome personal problems with their schoolwork or character. Show interest in your boys beyond football. The better adjusted they are off the field, the more they'll contribute to the football program.



Off-season may be when we move a player to a different position to give him more playing time and to make us a better team. If he balks at the change, we explain our reasoning and ask him to give it his best shot in terms of preparing for the season.

We don't pencil in starters or create a depth chart during off-season. I've never believed in determining a lineup by how much weight players can bench press. We want to wait and see what players do when they take the practice field in the preseason.

In high school we always tried to develop our senior leaders in the off-season. They needed to set the tone for next season's preparation, to show the way.

Our seniors-to-be knew that they would have first crack at the position, that an

underclassman would have to beat them out for a starting slot when we opened drills. Beyond that, there were no guarantees. It's amazing how much improvement some boys made from their junior to senior year.



NO FREEBIES FOR SENIORS

Our 1976 state championship team had nine senior starters. Our 1977 state title winner also had nine seniors in its starting lineup. Our 1978 state championship team had only five senior starters, but in August when practice began we had all seniors in starting positions.

Although strong senior leadership had been the key to our two previous state championships, we did not let that keep us from fairly evaluating the underclassmen's practice effort and performance. The seniors who dropped to second team lost their jobs on the field, not in the coach's office.

Cutting Players

As a football coach, I have never cut a player. No matter how poor his ability, I don't think it's right to deprive a boy who wants to participate and meets the requirements of the team. And as I've said, all players can learn important values through their participation. Why should I deny someone that opportunity?

Football also is a game that requires numbers. With its many positions, specialty teams, and injury toll, you need a good turnout to practice effectively.

Finally, if you cut a player, you never know if you're robbing a boy or the team. Most every coach has had a "diamond in the rough" or a "late bloomer." If you cut these players at a young age, they're not likely to try out again.

Less talented upperclassmen can add a lot to a program. We've had many seniors who despite being short on ability were the backbone of the team by their dedication and by the examples they set for other players.



A REAL KEEPER

When I came to Augustana, we had one senior who just barely made the traveling squad. He had to play on the scout squad during the week, along with what were primarily freshmen. But what a great leader he was!

He was a senior who liked the program well enough to put his ego aside and work as hard as anyone on the scout team. He provided a great

model for our freshmen, who were still thinking of themselves as all-stars (which they had been the previous year in high school).

Instead of getting down in the dumps about not playing, the freshmen were inspired by this senior, who gave it his all even though he had little chance of playing on Saturday. I always have felt his unselfish attitude helped us tremendously in building our program to the level we eventually reached.

Practice Evaluations

By now you know how much I value practice. "You play like you practice" is more than a cliché to me. It's the truth.

Therefore, players' performance and effort each day in practice are very important in my evaluation. They must show progress toward the game. If you prepare and organize your practice effectively (chapter 6), you should see your players improve their readiness.

Does your defense read the scout team offense better on Thursday than it did on Wednesday? Do your offensive linemen block more efficiently and correctly later in the week? Is the mental focus of your team better on Friday than it was on Tuesday?

If your practices don't facilitate these improvements, you're planning your practices poorly. Maybe it's you, not the players, who needs evaluating.

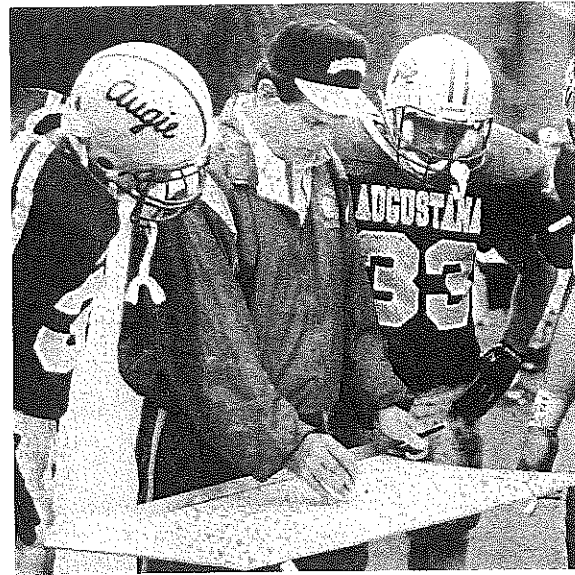
Game Evaluations

Any football coach knows that what the naked eye sees happening on the field during a game is not always accurate. Even if you have coaches in the press box, you can determine only so much during a contest.

One thing that really helps a coach evaluate from the sidelines during a game is calling the offensive and defensive plays. When you know ahead of time what play was called, you can focus on the area and make adjustments. If you have to react to recognizing the play and then focus, you will lose time in seeing the play's execution.

On game day, about the only thing you can definitely measure is your teams' effort and enthusiasm. Look at your players as they warm up. Watch how fast they run onto and off the field. Look at how the offensive

line approaches the line of scrimmage. Note the crispness of the offensive backfield's execution and of the receivers' routes. Check the authority of the defensive players' hits. Note whether the linebackers and defensive backs are responding instantly to the run and to the pass. Watch the speed with which the kicking and punting teams get downfield. Sense the players' moods on the sideline. All are indicators of your team's intensity.



Because game-day evaluation of performance is so difficult, use video to help. Study the team's execution of plays and individuals' performance of specific techniques. Watch each play until you can determine why it did or did not succeed. Break your video analyses down into macro (team) and micro (player).

Use this game film information wisely to correct and teach players. Not only will this make them better football players, but you can bet if your next opponent sees the same weaknesses in your team on the video, it will exploit them.

Postgame Evaluations

Meaningful postgame study of its performance is vital to any football program's continued success. By meaningful, I don't mean just looking at the final score or statistics. I mean looking beyond the obvious—what any fan could see—and examining the *causes* of the score and the statistics. As I said, you

can accomplish this through videotape analysis.

After the game, only the players truly know how well they did. You're probably still emotionally involved in the the game and aren't

as analytical as you will be later. Therefore, until you watch the game video closely, you're better off to withhold any serious evaluation about the team's performance.

Summary

Successful football coaches don't make off-hand judgments about their players or their team. They evaluate closely, interpret the information, then take the necessary action. Here are the specific points emphasized on player evaluation in this chapter:

1. Individual evaluation is continual, beginning with an examination of who your best athletes are and how they best fit into your offensive or defensive schemes.
2. Team evaluation involves looking at how all the parts function as a unit. Don't allow one individual to disrupt the smooth operation of the rest of the team.
3. One of the most important things to look for in off-season evaluations is how well your seniors-to-be assume leadership roles. This often determines what kind of season you'll have next fall.
4. The most important evaluation you make after practice is determining if your team made progress in preparing for the next game.
5. The only true determination possible during a game is whether your team was mentally and physically prepared to play.
6. Postgame is not the time to give players, media, or fans emotion-filled remarks or highly specific comments about execution. Wait until you've calmed down and studied the game video before evaluating individual and team performance.