

Chapter 18



Evaluating Your Program

In addition to the careful evaluation we make of our players, we must monitor our program's overall health. This is critical, because if parts of our operation slip, that will be reflected on the field.

Even after a successful season, program evaluation is necessary. You can't stand pat. You have to anticipate problems and always look for areas that need strengthening. As we know, football coaches don't have to look very long or hard to find parts of their programs to improve. If your program is in really bad shape, you need to get help.

As a guide for program evaluation and prescription, I recommend looking at the very best football programs our sport has known.

You can become the best only if you follow examples provided by the best.

Evaluating Champion Programs

Study the great dynasties of sport and the first thing you learn is there is no doubt who is in charge. Whether it was the Packers of the '60s, the Crimson Tide of the '70s, or Nittany Lions of the '80s, there's no doubt who was running the show.

The second thing you learn from studying dynasties is that great unity, teamwork, and

cooperation are essential. When you go back to the great New York Yankee dynasty, you realize how the players depended upon each other.



SENSE OF CONFIDENCE

I can remember reading about a World Series game when San Francisco was facing the Yankee team that included Elston Howard, Roger Maris, Mickey Mantle, and Bob Richardson. After one game, the press and fans were second-guessing whether the Giants had blown the game by holding a runner at third base when it appeared he could score to win the series. Giant great Willie McCovey was up next, so the Giants chose not to gamble. The Yankees retired McCovey and won the game and the World Series.

Afterward, Elston Howard was quoted as saying, "If [the runner at third] would have tried to score, Bobby would have thrown him out. No question my teammate would have done his job and got him out." It is that type of confidence players must have to have a top-notch program.

Next, you learn from great dynasties to have great respect for the rules and great respect for each individual. Too many people look for the quick way, take short cuts, and wind up with bad characters in their program because they seek the easy way out. Sure, it's probably quicker to buy some great players, but how long will that program sustain itself? Such coaches may get rich, but they have only short-term success or have players who are always in trouble. That is not by accident.

On the other hand, some coaches don't win as much as they apparently could. You look at them and ask why they don't have a better record with their great knowledge of the game. They know their Xs and Os inside and out, so why don't they win? Again, it's that intangible backbone of the program—the philosophy—that may be missing.

Evaluating Your Own Program

As I said in chapter 17, the most important individual evaluation that any athlete or coach makes is the honest look each of us takes at ourself. It is essential that each of us do this frequently.

Look at yourself, your staff, your team, and your opponents as honestly as possible. See the strengths and the weaknesses. Then look for the answers for improvement.

Sometimes what you find can be painful. And the decisions you may have to make in the best interest of the program can be even more painful. But in a team situation, you can have no sacred cows if you expect to succeed.

Player Feedback

Players can be great teachers for you if you watch and listen. Through their actions and words they'll give you insight into what is and isn't working; where you failed to communicate effectively; whether they are conditioned well enough or perhaps have overtrained; and whether they feel a sense of enthusiasm about and loyalty to the program.

Of one thing you can be certain: If there's a problem, your players will know it before you do. And you and your coaching staff will have to play a role in correcting it.

A team with good leadership will correct itself if internal problems arise. As the coach, you will usually hear about the problems after the season. The less you have to discipline a squad for personal problems, the better your team will perform.

Keep the doors open. No one has all the solutions. On a team, everyone wins or loses together. Impress this upon your players so they will be honest and constructive in bringing problems or solutions to you.

At the end of the season, seek out the players' evaluation of the program and its various parts. You might do this both informally through individual and group meetings and formally through a written questionnaire like the one presented on the right.

Coaching Staff Feedback

I've been blessed with a great staff. We are friends, which means we share ideas and work together very well. We've been together a long time.

It's vital your staff be honest with one another and with the players. No one should be afraid to bring up problems—real or perceived.

Name (optional) _____

Program Evaluation Form for Players

Please complete each of the following questions. Be as honest and constructive as possible. Your input into this football program is essential for its future success.

1. In terms of football skills and strategies, I learned...

| | | | | | | |
|---------|---|---|---|---|---|-------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| nothing | | | | | | a lot |

2. My performance of football skills and strategies improved...

| | | | | | | |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|-------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| not at all | | | | | | a lot |

3. I enjoyed playing football this season.

| | | | | | | |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|-------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| not at all | | | | | | a lot |

4. The coaching staff helped me develop as a player.

| | | | | | | |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|-------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| not at all | | | | | | a lot |

5. The coaching staff helped me develop as a person.

| | | | | | | |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|-------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| not at all | | | | | | a lot |

6. Players are treated fairly on the team.

| | | | | | | |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|-------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| not at all | | | | | | a lot |

7. Players on the team respected team rules.

| | | | | | | |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|-----------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| not at all | | | | | | very true |

8. Practices were well organized, challenging, and fun.

| | | | | | | |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|-----------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| not at all | | | | | | very true |

9. The role I played in games was the best for the program.

| | | | | | | |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|-----------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| not at all | | | | | | very true |

10. I feel more positively about the program now than I did at the beginning of the season.

| | | | | | | |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|-----------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| not at all | | | | | | very true |

The best thing about being a player in this football program:

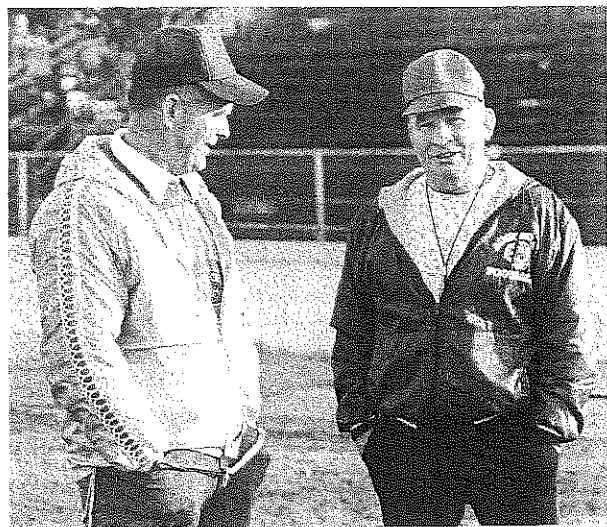
The worst thing about being a player in this football program:

Explain changes you would make to improve or eliminate the worst things about the program (be specific):

What can the coaching staff do to make the program better than it was this past season?

Additional comments (use reverse side):

Throughout the season you'll discuss day-to-day and game-to-game evaluations with your staff. But you really should take some time at the end of the season to look at the total picture. Is the staff working well together? Is each member of the staff being used in a way that best serves the program? Is everyone on the staff satisfied with their roles?



If only one staff member is dissatisfied, it may be best for that coach to leave. His continued presence might be even less enjoyable for him and more counterproductive to the program the next year. On the other hand, if several coaches indicate dissatisfaction, perhaps the head coach is communicating poorly or delegating inappropriately.

Peer evaluations, in which each member of the staff is evaluated by the other members, can be helpful if staff members make their evaluations in the spirit of improving the program rather than for personal or professional gain.

Look For the Positive

As you examine your program critically, note the good as well as the bad. Even the harshest critics—if they are fair—cite positives in their review. A balanced perspective is necessary for an accurate assessment.



MAKING MOST OF WHO'S AVAILABLE

After our undefeated 1966 season, we returned both of our All-State running backs, Barry Pear-

son and Steve Penny. We had great backs but no line, so we decided to take our best and quickest athletes from our sophomore team and make them linemen. We then played "home run" football, using our quickness and speed for big plays. The results were an undefeated team in 1967 and an average halftime score of 27-0. In 1968, we used two linemen from the 1967 team as fullback and tailback.

Highlighting the positive is also important in building the program for the future. In other words, you can't just focus on the problems (what you don't want to do) if you expect to improve. You must also identify what works well (what you want to continue to do) and determine how to strengthen those aspects.

Sometimes, strengths and weaknesses can be addressed simultaneously. For example, if you have great support from the student body and community but your practice facilities are inadequate, invite your boosters to open practices (strengthening their support of the program) and make them aware of the your team's facility problem. Who knows, this might prompt some fund-raising activities to improve the practice site.

However you decide to evaluate, avoid making one part of the program the scapegoat for all of your problems. If you do, you'll probably miss many other areas that need your attention and overlook positive elements. And your negative obsession is not likely to get any better until you quit griping about it and do something about it!

The easiest thing in the world is to blame a player, a coach, an administrator, lack of funds, or poor facilities for unpleasant things your evaluation reveals. Instead, take the information you gather and seek *possible* solutions. If an area needs shoring up, take on the challenge of doing it. After all, that's what you ask your players to do. We would all like perfect facilities and an unlimited budget, but as in other parts of life, we must learn to do all we can with what we have.

Recordkeeping

When you say "record" to a football coach, most think of team's victories and losses. And there's no denying that the ratio of Ws to Ls will be part of your postseason evaluation.

But it's important to get beyond that in your total evaluation. If your team went 5-5, it might be on the rise or on the skids. An 8-2 team might have underachieved. A 2-8 team might have maximized its potential and built a solid base for future improvement.

Other statistics can be equally deceiving. Does it mean much if you had 30 more first downs than your opponents? Perhaps they scored on long runs and passes and didn't bother moving the chains before they scored!

Stats can help you evaluate your program, but only if they are interpreted wisely. Look at what you were trying to accomplish during the season (your goals), take the information from your evaluation of opponents' strengths and weaknesses, and then determine which statistics are meaningful to your program. If your program is closer to your goal(s) than it was at the end of the previous season, you can feel like you've made progress.



STARTING FROM THE BOTTOM

In 1962, when we began our high school program, I was the third head football coach at the school in the last 3 years. Over the two previous seasons, the varsity had produced a dismal 1-17 record. We were hoping to win two games, just to start a positive attitude. Fortunately, we won four games the first year and established an attitude. We won six games in 1964, eight games in 1965, and then did not lose again for six years. But even though we reached the top, we never forgot where we started and what it took to improve.

Take injuries into account during this part of your evaluation. Perhaps a lack of progress stems from several key players missing practices or games. If so, consider what you can do to prevent similar injuries from recurring next season. Discuss injury reports with your sports medicine staff. Develop off-season conditioning programs for the team. Don't wait for more injuries to happen next season and then say that "things would be better if we could just stay healthy."

Building for the Future

As you evaluate, in the back of your mind remember that you either get better or worse, you don't stay the same. Football is always changing and so are your players.

Take what you learn from your postseason evaluation and apply it optimally to the situation your program will face the next season. No matter how successful your past season was, next year everyone will ask, "What have you done for me lately?"

What have you done lately, or better still, what has coaching football done for you? As a college student (100 years ago), I first thought I wanted to be an engineer. But after my first 2 years at a liberal arts college, I knew I wanted to coach. My concerns then remain today—that so many coaches lose their jobs and really are not well compensated financially for all the personal ridicule they received.

My high school coach, Leo Cabalka, was the man who sort of took me under his wing after my father passed away. So I went home and discussed my concerns with Leo. I will never forget his words. He said, "Bob, you are right. You will never get rich coaching, but I can assure you that you will never find a job you will like better and that will be as rewarding in other ways."

With all the good things that have happened to me in the coaching profession, surely God put me in the right place, and the true meaning of Coach Cabalka's words are still loud and clear to me.

Evaluating Your Position

If you are a candidate for a job, by all means be yourself. Never try to get hired by telling people what you think they want to hear. For instance, you can't say, "I run the Wing-T at school X, but I'm looking to really open it up with a pro set at school Z." If you start trying to tell others what you think they want to hear, you'll get caught in a lie and lose whatever credibility you have. That's what I meant earlier about shooting straight with everyone. Be yourself, and let the administration decide if you're the right guy.



ON BEING HONEST

We tell children, "If you tell the truth all the time, then you will always tell the same story and won't have to remember what story you told the last time." The same is true for adults. If instead of shooting straight you tell one person one thing and another something different, they may compare notes and find you out. Or you may forget what story you told which person. In either case

you've created an unnecessary dilemma because you didn't start out with the truth.

You have to be honest and hope to be accepted. Simply try to sell those considering you on your coaching philosophy; then leave it to them to decide whether they prefer your philosophy over another candidate's. Some coaches are willing to sell their souls for certain positions, or so it seems.

A coach at one of the most prestigious colleges in the country recently did that. He sold his soul, doing everything possible to get the job he'd always wanted, but then suffered the embarrassment of failing worse than anyone who had ever coached at that school. If you're not ready, you're not sure you can do the job, or you don't want to pay the price to do it justice, stay where you are.

Some research about the job may help. Knowing things like what style the school has used, what type of players you would have, and who you have to beat may impress the administration. It shows that you're really interested. You can't make any concrete decisions from such research, but it is helpful for your own information base and good for public relations. It's the same as preparing for any interview you might have, in any business. You need background knowledge to speak effectively about what you would do in the position.

On the other hand, don't worry too much about what the school has done in the past. I wouldn't watch a lot of film, except perhaps of the opponents you'll be facing. You don't want to prejudge the players who are coming back; wait and judge them on how they play for you in your system.

It might also help to network with other coaches about the position you're considering, although I always preferred to just go and look the situation over for myself. Then if I had the opportunity to decide, I could always be independent to turn it down if I saw something I didn't like.



JOB BY DEFAULT

The first job I took, I think I took because nobody else would. The program was really poor and had a long losing streak. But I wanted the job so bad, I wanted to be head coach so bad, I was willing to take anything. Sure, I still thought it out; but I was young and foolish, and I thought we would win. We did win, but I often wonder whether I would have had all that time to devote to the school if I'd had a family.

Levels of Coaching

I could be equally happy at Augustana or Geneseo. Coaching is coaching, on any level that you experience it. The problem many coaches run into, and why they fail to ever really establish a base, is being too busy worrying about the ladder, about coaching at a bigger high school, at a major college, or in the pros.

The competitive nature of human beings is to always want to try another level, to see how you stack up. The nature of athletes is the same. An athlete always wants to test himself. I wonder how many guys getting out of college would just love a chance to try at pro ball and find out if they could or couldn't play. And it's the same with coaching. I think all of us would like to see how we could do at the next rung on the ladder. But you do the players on your team a disservice if you're not focusing on the present, giving them the best opportunity they have to be successful.

There isn't any coach who wouldn't love the challenge of standing across the sideline from a Ken Hatfield or a LaVell Edwards. It doesn't mean you would be successful the same way, but you would like to find out how you'd do. It's like that question, Why do you climb the mountain? Because it's there. Why do coaches seek more challenging positions? Because they are there—because they are challenging.

My advice is to do all you can with what you have where you are. Don't sit looking at other programs saying, "Boy, if I had his material [or, if I was at Notre Dame], I could win the national championship." That's a terrible mistake some coaches make: They worry so much about what others have that they don't focus on making their own programs the best they can be.

No coach can win them all; somewhere along the line you're going to have a setback. And even the properly focused coach at some point questions whether a particular loss or a sub-.500 season record will hurt his career. It won't, if you're doing things the right way. Everyone will recognize that it was a blip in the screen, an exception.

All any football coach can do, no matter where he is, is as well as he can. You go on from there. People have asked me about the pressure of keeping some of our long winning streaks going. I really never felt it. Sure, I want our team to be successful on Friday

night, Saturday, whenever we are playing. But I also know the pressure will not change. I'm going to do just as well as I can every week, and if that's not good enough then I suspect somebody else will take my job and do better, or he'll soon be gone too. The most important thing to me throughout so-called pressure games or winning streaks is being sure I will do as well as I can. That's the key.

If you do all you can and still fail, you can at least hold your head up and walk out. But if you end saying, "I wish I had scouted them," or "I wish I would have done this or that" then you have to second-guess. The same is true in business. The businessperson must ask, "Did I do everything possible to put the deal together?" Perhaps he played golf Thursday afternoon and maybe lost a sale because of that and now has to be asking "what ifs." But you would still like to think you have done everything you could.

Career Objectives

Is your objective to get the most prestigious head coaching position in the country? If that's it, then go for it. But be prepared to fall short. On the other hand, if your ambition is to simply stay in your present position and not change, then don't say that you *could* have had this job or that if you wanted it.

A funny thing about our competitive nature was impressed upon me when I was talking to Mike White about Howard Schnellenberger's lifetime contract offer from the U.S.F.L. I was joking with Mike, telling him he ought to do something like that and coach till retirement for \$100,000 a year. But we both realized he couldn't, because Mike has to feel that competition, that struggle for life every weekend. That kind of contract would have gone against his competitive nature. It would have taken some of the thrill out of

coaching if the score didn't matter. And I think a lot of coaches couldn't just wait a contract out, so it is amazing that so many have that one big long-term contract as a dream. One of the greatest, Woody Hayes, had more than 20 1-year contracts at Ohio State.

The size or glamour of the school is often not as important as the economic benefits and security. And if you should be a father responsible for being a primary wage earner in a family, I believe you owe it to your wife and children to take the best opportunity available if it is a position that is consistent with your values.

I could still be happy coaching at the high school level, but I felt the move to Augustana was best for me and my family. I thought it all out, and decided to come to Augustana College for these two reasons:

- *To show that my approach could be equally successful in collegiate football.* Because of the unusual success that I enjoyed in high school football, I wanted to see if the system would work somewhere else. I believed strongly in what we did, yet I was curious whether it would work at the college level, where it had never worked before. I felt the opportunity at a small college would let me show that my approach was a sound one and could work at that level.
- *To do what was best for my family.* I have a very large family. And because Augustana offers tuition waivers to children of all of its faculty, I could afford to educate my children at a very good college if they chose to go on to school. Although any job I would ever take would have to be a greater professional challenge, more importantly it would have to be a better situation for my family and for the coaching staff that I feel responsible for.

Summary

This closing chapter described evaluations every good football program makes at the end of the season. Here are some of the key points that were presented:

1. Study the great programs and use them as prototypes to help you evaluate and improve your own program.
2. "To thine own self be true." Be honest in your appraisal of yourself, your staff, and your team.
3. Seek out valuable input from players and coaching colleagues about your program's health.

4. Be tough but optimistic in your evaluation. Don't be afraid to find the bad; if you do, develop positive solutions.
5. Always look ahead. Fame is fleeting in athletics, so don't get too satisfied with your program. Enjoy your successes, work through your failures, and always remember that you are part of a great game—football.

