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How Football is Ruining the Culture of High School – And How You Can Fight the Trend

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Is football ruining high school? I say yes! Actually, let's ba  Sports are ruining high school.

But, because this is a website about football we will stay with that topic and focus on the ways in which, over the last ten years or so, football, and more specifically football coaches, have begun to undermine the high school experience. We will also establish some ways that you can fight the trends and reestablish football as what it is supposed to be...something fun that kids get to do for four years.

Before I start, I must preface this with a disclaimer. A lot of these lessons are things that I have learned through trial and error. I have not always agreed with everything I am about to write, but as time has progressed I have seen my mistakes and have come to certain realizations about what high school football can and should be.

Why is football ruining high school culture?

### **1) Year Round Programs**

Football used to be a 4-5 month commitment. Kids were expected to commit from July-November. The summers were dedicated to lifting and conditioning, August was two-a-days, and the season started in September. If you were lucky, you played to till Thanksgiving. Then, you took a week off and went out for another sport for the next few months.

In the last 10 years or so, we have seen an increasing pressure for kids to specialize. That, combined with states' relaxation or elimination of off season training rules, has greatly increased the level of commitment necessary to play high school football. (I will say that my current state of Washington is at least trying to preserve the in-season and off-season distinctions, while my old state of California completely eliminated most off season rules a few years ago). Of course, as soon as one team decides to practice year round, every team will soon follow suit so as not to be passed up by their competition. We have passing leagues in March and April. Kids go to combines and run the 40 and test their vertical. They have personal trainers and Quarterback coaches. It's too much!

When I got my first head coaching job, I knew that we had to become a year-round program in order to compete with the other schools in our area. So, I launched a mandatory 7AM weight training class. I think we may have even started at 6:30 that first year. For a while it was fine. It was new and kids were seeing results. But once we established a certain base of strength, this became the biggest detriment to my program. Kids dreaded it. Parents, especially those of the younger kids that could not drive, hated it. I alienated coaches of other sports, because kids were either exhausted at practice, over-trained, or simply did not come out for another sport because they wanted to focus on the weight room. Teachers despised it and, at least in their minds, saw a reduction in focus and the ability to stay awake during class. It alienated my football players and disconnected them from the school culture. They couldn't hang out with their friends in the parking lot before school. They couldn't run for student government as it met before school. They couldn't catch up on homework in the hallways. They had their own special little club and they became disconnected. Most of all, It wasn't fun. It was a grind. But, I convinced myself that it was necessary and I sold it to my kids. My intentions were good, but my execution was poor.

This is not what football is supposed to be. Kids should be so excited for July 1st because they haven't played football for 6 months. Every kid should be able to come out for the team regardless of whether or not he chose to come to passing league in March or weight training in February.

So, how do you get the best of both worlds? How can you compete and train with teams that are practicing year round if you have chosen to only practice and train for 4-5 months? Here are three steps that you can take in order to get your guys ready for the season without burning them out on football.

### 1) Build a comprehensive weight training program through your PE department

I believe in year-round weight training. I just don't believe in year round football weight training. There is a difference. If you want to fight the trends and change the perceptions around your program, there is an easy solution. Get everyone on campus to buy into the weight room. All athletes should have a training requirement, regardless of the sport they play. It helps to reduce injury and it allows them to be competitive once the season begins. Your goal should be to get the majority of your athletes into a weight training PE class. The weight training coach or PE teacher should create individualized plans for each student-athlete depending on whether or not they are in season or out of season.

This is easier said than done for many of us. If you already have a weight training program built into your PE curriculum, your job is easy. You just have to make sure all your players are registered in a Weights Class and then work with the instructor to make sure they aren't just doing biceps. But, if you do not have this built into your curriculum already, there are several ways to make it happen. Start with one or two class periods and build from there. Funding can be an issue in a lot of districts, but there are solutions to that as well. Get a couple of your on-campus coaches to volunteer to teach one section without compensation or get a parent to underwrite the cost of a personal trainer. If your school board or principal will not will not approve a new class, make it a weight training club or let all the kids sign up as Teachers' Aides to the PE teacher. There are a lot of solutions.

There are a lot of ways to go about it, but your ultimate goal should be to get as many of your athletes as possible training year round for football, without feeling like they are training year round for football. If it is built into the PE curriculum, it feels like class, the get a grade, they can play other sports, but they are still getting ready for the upcoming season. If you want some hints on how to build a comprehensive strength program, check out this free video series about our high school strength program.

(<http://www.winwiththepass.com/weight-room-video-series/>)

### 2) Forge relationships with the other coaches at your school

The competition for athletes is killing the desire that kids have to play multiple sports. Some of this goes back to Point #1, but let's say, for example, that you are planning to have weights every day after school from 3-5pm. Your quarterback wants to be a leader, but he also wants to play basketball and baseball. The modern day solution is to tell him that he has to choose or he won't be ready for the season. In fact, some coaches go so far as to say that he is a bad teammate if he isn't in the weight room every day after school. Let's say that you aren't able to build weight training into your curriculum. What if you convinced the basketball coach that the basketball team should also be lifting during their season? What if you talked to him about his summer schedule before you set up your passing league tournaments? It is a very simple solution, but you have to be willing to work with other coaches and you have to be flexible.

### 3) Run a no-huddle offense in practice

If you have spent any time on my site or watched any of my videos, you will know that I am a huge proponent of the no-huddle offense in practice. It may seem strange to see it mentioned in a post about year round programs. But think about the reasons that most coaches go year round. They want to get a leg up on the competition. If you run an efficient practice, you can steal reps during the season that most coaches waste with inefficient drills and ineffective conversation. So, even though they are out there running 7 on 7 drills in February, you can be just as sharp on Friday night because you had 500 reps during the week and they only had 75

Why Is Football Ruining High School?

## 2) The Scholarship Lure

The scholarship lure is not the only reason This isn't only a high school problem. It's a cultural problem. And, we aren't going to solve it simply by writing about it or talking about it. I think the problem starts with the astronomical cost of college and ends with Oregon's cool uniforms. Everyone wants to find a way to pay for school and everyone wants to play on TV. And in football, more so than in other sports, the high school experience is central to that opportunity. But, it's more than that. It is bragging rights for parents and grandparents. It is recognition in the newspaper during a signing ceremony. It all stems from the same trend...that sports are about your own personal achievement. That is a trend that we need to fight one athlete and one family at a time.

The problem is that the football scholarship is simply not a reality for most athletes. Most of us are aware of some of the numbers but parents and kids simply do not understand the reality. There are 291 football programs between FBS, FCS, and DII. Schools can give out somewhere between 15 and 25 scholarships per year depending on the year and the classification. So even at the high end that is only 7,275 scholarships per year. There are about 1.2 million high school football players, so let's say there are 260,000 graduating seniors that play high school football. That is less than 3% that get a football scholarship and around 1% that go DI. Look at it this way. If there are 50 kids on your team, and you play 9 games, that is 450 football players that will set foot on your field this year. Maybe 10 of them will get a college scholarship. Maybe 4 of them will go D1. So, if your kid thinks he is a D1 athlete, ask this question: Was he the best player in every single game that he played this year? Was he obviously the most dominant player on every single field on which he set foot? If the answer is no, he is probably not a scholarship kid.

But guess what...that doesn't matter!! When did the college scholarship become our measuring stick or our validation. High School football is great and virtuous in and of itself.

All of the things that we preach...hard work, dedication, commitment, camaraderie, sacrifice, character, love, integrity have nothing to do with whether or not a kid gets a scholarship. Don't get me wrong, college coaches care about these things too. Some of my college coaches are the greatest mentors, and teachers, and men in my life. But, the fact is that 99% of our kids don't have enough natural talent for any of these other traits to matter. Natural talent is the #1 defining characteristic of college athletes. Once a base of talent is established, these character traits start to separate and distinguish kids, but talent comes first.

Kids chase the scholarship so hard and for so long that, if they don't receive one, it somehow feels like a disappointment. I think that's tragic. Worse yet, some kids give up so much in order to chase something that was out of their reach to begin with. They don't play other sports. They don't join a club. They transfer schools and leave their friends. They don't go to the movies on Saturday night. And they do it all chasing a unicorn that will forever elude them.

I think it is our job to fight this trend. So, how do we do it?

1) If you are defining success based on how many of your kids play at the next level, STOP!

This really has nothing to do with your success as a coach. I suppose for some of us, if you have been doing it long enough with enough success, kids with college-level talent might choose to come to your school. So, in a way the amount of potential college athletes is a reflection upon your aptitude. This especially holds true for private school coaches with tuition assistance dollars and enrollment flexibility. But, for most of us, this is not a reality. Even if we go 10-2 for 4 years in a row, our district is our district, our school is our school. The kids that walk through the door are the same kids that would have walked through the door if we went 4-6.

Your success as a coach is defined by how your players act on and off the field, by their development, by whether or not they got better over the course of their career, by whether or not they will commit to fitness for the rest of their lives, by whether they are good husbands and fathers. It has nothing to do with how many kids play football at the next level.

2) STOP spamming college coaches with 14 HUDL highlight videos per week.

I have to admit that I am completely guilty on this one. When HUDL first came out, I thought, "This is great. Finally colleges are going to see my guys." So, I took the approach that I think most of us did. I collected addresses and sent off massive amounts of highlights to colleges. This was completely fruitless and a total waste of time. But, more than that, this created a problem with my guys. I became their window to the world of college football and their recruitment was based on my ability to promote them. What I have discovered is that this approach is completely backward.

The great thing about HUDL is the kids can promote themselves. They can make their own highlights. They can reach out to coaches. They can take some responsibility for their own future. Your job is to coach them on how to do it, not to do it for them.

So, here are some practical steps. #1 At your parent meeting every year, talk to your parents about the realities of recruiting and give them the numbers. #2, explain that your job is to coach the team and that team success will bring more awareness about your program and open up conversation with potential recruiters. #3, teach them how to use HUDL, how to find a college coach's email address, and what to say in an introductory email to a college coach.

If you take this approach, you will find three things are true. First, Parents and kids will stop blaming you for not getting their kid a scholarship. Second, the kids that can actually play and actually work to get themselves seen, will get seen and will get a shot. Third, you can actually focus on your real job...

coaching the team.

### 3) IF YOU DON'T READ ANYTHING ELSE IN THIS POST, READ THIS!

This is the most important thing you can do to fight the scholarship lure. Stop touting the virtues of college football. Stop talking about how to get to the next level. Stop using it as motivation. Build your program in such a way that high school football feels like the culmination of your players' athletic experience....because for most of them it is!

My high school coach was a master at this. He made all of us believe that there was no better place to be than in our locker room, on our field, and under our lights. Our experience was special. Our team was different. There was no greater athletic experience than this moment. Everyone who played for him knows the speech, "Look around. You are Valley Christian Football (insert year) it will never be like this again. Go out there and Make a difference." Man, I love that guy!

Of course, this was and wasn't true. In a way, we weren't really that special. There were a million kids across the country hearing a similar speech and playing a similar game. There would be another team in our locker room next year, told the same story and fed the same lines. In the great scheme of things, we weren't really unique. But, for 99% of the guys sitting in that room, there would never be a greater game on a bigger stage. Most of us had 5 football games left in our lives and we would never put the pads on again. So, in that regard, he was completely right. This was the biggest game. High school football was the greatest experience we would ever have as an athlete. And, because, he made us believe it, we laid down everything for the team, the game, and the experience. It is why my high school coach is a legend in our community. Everyone that played for him knew that high school football was the culmination of sport. He never talked about college football. He never defined success of our program based on how many kids got scholarships. Our program was about here and now, this moment, and this day.

(On a side note, there is a huge difference between a high school game being the culmination of your athletic career and it being the culmination of your life. That is a distinction that we need to make very clear. These kids are going to do way more important things in their lives...husbandry, fatherhood, vocation, etc. Football is only the peak of their athletic lives).

If you can convince your kids that this is the greatest moment of their athletic lives, then you will start to fight the growing motivation of so many kids when they choose their athletic endeavors. "In which sport do I have the best chance to get a scholarship?" Football is supposed to be fun. It is supposed to be

about student experience. And like other things that are fun, there are some lessons to be learned along the way. But, student experience should be central. So, focus on the here and now and let the college stuff take care of itself.

Why is Football Ruining High School?

### **3) The Culture of Me**

I could write a book about this one, because much like the lure for scholarships, this is not just a football issue, it is a societal issue. In fact, some kids and parents that are chasing scholarships are doing so because they have bought into the *Culture of Me*, so the two problems are not mutually exclusive. But, the *Culture of Me* runs deeper.

Simply put, The *Culture of Me* is a mindset that focuses on the role of the individual. The ultimate definition of good is my happiness and my contentment. If I am not happy, If my needs are not met, if I am faced with struggles, then the situation must be altered to satisfy me, please me, help me.

This mindset at best ignores or dismisses other people and at worst completely undermines or discredits them unless, of course, others can be used for my benefit. As soon as people become a threat or a challenge, they are viewed as inherently evil. After all, they are standing in the way of my goals and my happiness. How could they be anything other than Satan incarnate?

In a way this is a genetically engineered child of the American Dream. Our forefathers founded a nation based on freedom, individual choice, and personal liberty. Over the years, much to the credit of Hollywood and the advertising industry, those American values have morphed into something much uglier than intended. If we were to rewrite the Declaration of Independence today it would probably read, "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are Getting What I Want, Having My Voice Heard, and Achieving My Dream."

Ok, that's a little tongue and cheek, but there is actually something to this. People's worldview is screwed up. Its all about me, what I can do, how I can achieve my goals, and damn everyone that gets in my way.



This worldview is encouraged by a high school culture that glorifies SAT scores, GPA, college choice, and career path. Our high schools have become, in the minds of many, a vehicle for personal glory, recognition, and praise.

As an athletic director I deal with parents almost every day. I would say, that when you really break it down 80% of the complaints I receive fall into one of the following two categories:

- 1) My son or daughter isn't playing enough
- 2) My son or daughter isn't getting enough recognition

Think about that. This is what we talk to parents about. Johnny's stats weren't right in the paper. Jack should be the starting shortstop, because he hits way better than Jimmy in summer ball. The only reason Michelle is starting over my daughter is because the coach likes her better. Mary isn't going to play volleyball next year because she doesn't want to sit on the bench. The media guide doesn't list all of Jason's accolades, he was first team all conference the last two years.

What in the world is wrong with us?

I cannot remember a meeting with a parent where the primary focus was the team. Let me say that again... In TEAM sports, I cannot remember a parent meeting where the TEAM was the primary focus.

Like I said, this is a societal problem.

So, how can we lowly football coaches reverse a trend that seems to be at the heart of the new America? Let's look at a few practical steps.

- 1) Do not talk to parents about playing time

This is something I picked up from a coaching mentor of mine, and I have seen other coaches and other AD's mention it as well. If you set a standard with your parents that you will not discuss playing time, you can eliminate one of the me-centered voices in your players' lives. We have to remember that most parents see high school football as a vehicle to their son's glorification. Most me-centered kids are raised by me-centered parents. Meeting to discuss the role of an individual player only fuels this vanity.

So, set rules at your preseason meeting. Playing time discussions are off limits. If you have always been an "open-door" coach, this will catch some of your parents by surprise and they might be upset at first.

But, it's effective because when Johnny comes home and complains that he isn't playing, the only thing mom or dad can do is tell them to go and talk to their coach. The conversation becomes constructive and teaches the student how to solve a problem.

With some parents, this will never work. They feel entitled to an opinion and they think they know better than you. They may get into your office under some other pretense and simply want to discuss playing time. In this case, be very clear that you are here for the betterment of the team and not to discuss the roles of any individual.

## 2) Minimize the importance of statistics

I think it's important to self-scout and self-evaluate and stats can be a great tool for those purposes. I also think that they are important at your postseason meetings when you are voting for all-state and all-conference. As much as I hate recognizing individuals in a team sport, I also don't want to buck the whole system and ignore all-league and all-state certificates. When they are given the proper perspective, these moments of recognition are good and important.

But, if there is any way you can hide stats from your kids and your parents, it will go a long way toward eliminating the *Culture of Me* in your locker room and on your field. If you use Maxpreps and your stats are public, that can be a great thing for your fans and the media, but don't use them with your kids. Don't focus on them. Don't bring them up. Talk about team achievements, team goals, and ways the team needs to improve. You can honor a kid for great achievements or for breaking a record, but do this privately, in your locker room in front of his teammates. Also, make sure you recognize kids that don't have any stats. Recognize great effort. Recognize great humility. Recognize kids that improve the most.

## 3) Look the same, dress the same, be the same

I have to admit, this one is a pain in the butt and I have probably failed more than I have succeeded. There are very few things that I hate doing more than checking kids' pants or practice jerseys to make sure they are all the same. But, I also know that when kids are allowed to be individuals with the way they dress or the way they spit their shoes or the way they wear their towel, it draws attention to them instead of to the team. I also know that teams that do this the right way look awesome and seem to be more unified. I don't think that uniformity of dress magically increases team chemistry. Rather, if a team has chemistry and senior leadership, they will have no problem with this rule. It is not the be all end all. But, it helps.

If you have read my posts for a while, this one may seem weird to you. It doesn't sound very student centered. It sounds old school. Two answers to that...First, order uniforms and practice gear that is cool and kids actually want to wear. I don't think Oregon has a problem getting kids to wear their gear. Second, kids actually crave this, they just don't know it. Once they realize how good it looks and how it sets their team apart, they will embrace it and it will become "their" thing and not "your" thing.

Here is my tip. Put it on your seniors. Set the culture with them. When everyone leaves the locker room for practice or a game, they are dressed the same. Make it a badge of honor and let the seniors police it every single day. If you get them to buy in, everyone will follow.

## **Conclusion**

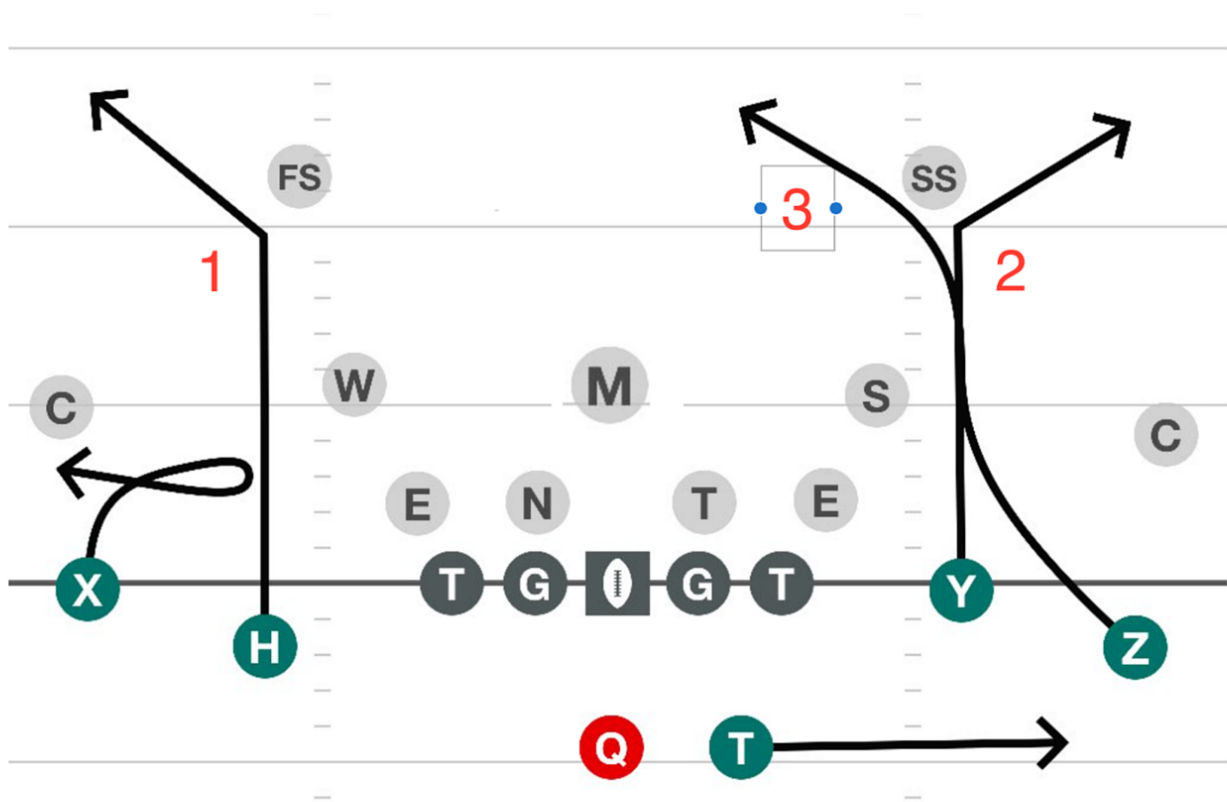
I really think that sports in general and specifically football can be a part of the solution to our societal problems. We know what it can do for kids. We know how much fun it can be. We know the kinds of memories it can create. But, we have to commit to some changes. We have to evaluate our own programs and ask ourselves some tough questions. Are we contributing positively to the overall high school experience? Are we coaching from a student centered perspective? What is our ultimate goal, the success of our students, or the recognition of our program?

In the comments section, please tell me about some of the trends you have noticed in your state or at your school. Suggest some ideas for how we can make football a better experience for everyone involved. Thanks guys. Let's go make a difference!

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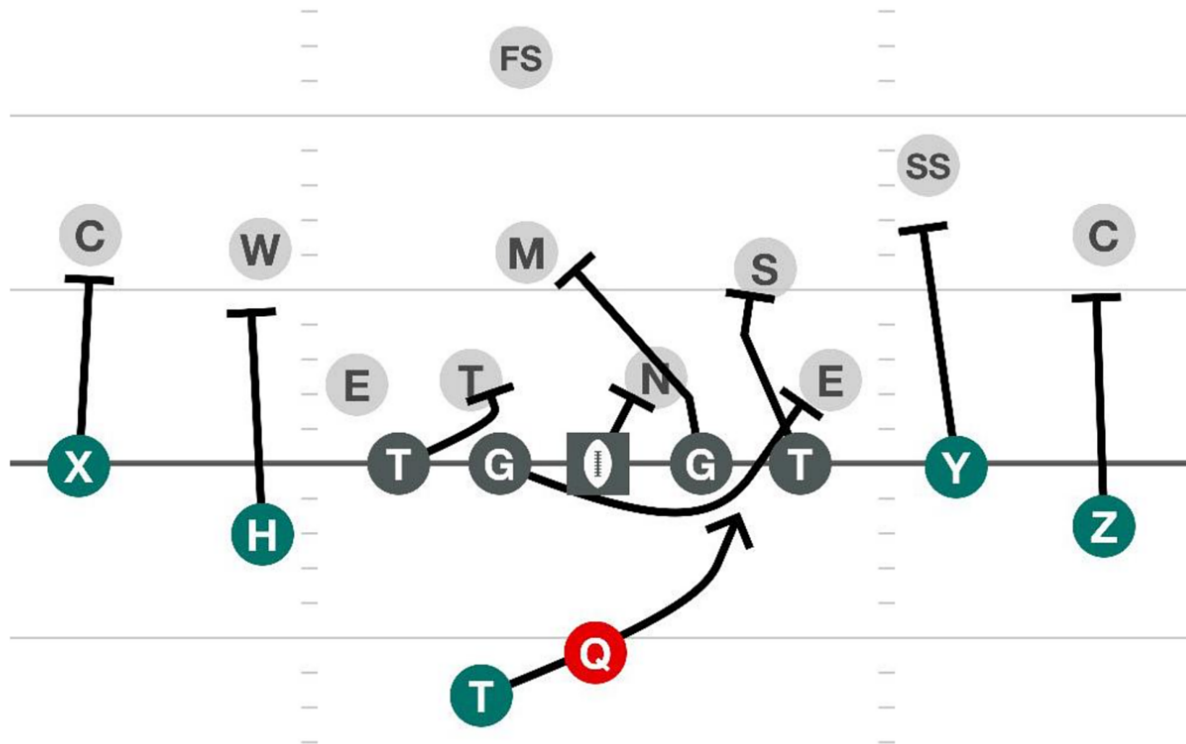
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Our core focus is the passing game, but we also examine other aspects of the spread offense, new offensive and defensive trends, philosophies and beliefs, and off season programs. We are a center of resources for new-school football coaches.

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