



The Modern Defensive Linemen and Defensive Line Coach

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The quote, “Football is a simple game made complicated by coaches”, is a quote that spans the history of the game of football. Even as a twelve-year coach, you reflect a lot about where you began and where you are now. Coaching double-digit years of football typically leads one to have coached in a variety of different roles, but usually, there are one or two positions that tend to be the primary focus of one’s career. In March of 2020, a Twitter chat on Tuesday night’s, called Disruption Chat, was created, aimed at connecting and communicating with defensive line coaches across the country to pick their brains for an hour each week and help each other increase their knowledge and understanding of the game and coaching this position. Over the past year, when a coach goes from a small 3A high school in South Texas to a 5A high school in Central Texas with a history and tradition of winning and producing quality defensive linemen, it becomes apparent how much how you communicate with the young men you coach is the most important thing when it comes to developing game ready football players. Communication is everything.

Why is communication everything? If you cannot explain or express your desire for your players' success, both on the field and off, then how can you expect them to perform at their best? When you go to a new school, there is a lot of learning that takes place. Learn the other coaches on staff, the expectations, the scheme, the district opponents, and the student-athletes.

Learning the scheme to execute through practice into the game night is part of the job, but it does not matter if you know the X’s and O’s if your athletes cannot execute their jobs to the best of their abilities. The Hendrickson Hawks enjoyed some on-field success in the crazy 2020 season. The defensive line received several all-district accolades and scholarship offers, but as the defensive tackles coach, I knew there was room for improvement

both for my returning student-athletes and for myself as their position coach. As the off-season has rolled on, I have spent many hours studying both current and older defensive line coaches at all levels. Ultimately, the job of a defensive lineman boils down to getting off a block and making a play. Sounds simple enough, but how does one execute these tasks and how do they do it efficiently?

This spring I simplified our defensive line rules into 5 bullets:

- **Pre-Snap**
- **Know Your job**
- **Line Up Correctly**
- **Post Snap**
- **Own Your Gap**
- **Find the Ball**
- **Go Get the Ball**

Pre-snap, each player should know their job, but also know the job of the guys around them, as well. Understand how their puzzle pieces fit into the big picture. During individual time and group practice times as well as film study, teaching job assignments based on the scheme and game plan requires constant communication as well as repetitions. The showing film, walking through gap assignments, getting players on the board to tactically express in their own words what their job is, is certainly key to getting them more confident to execute their job post-snap. The lining up correctly goes hand in hand with knowing their job/assignment. Where and how you line up is directly related to your job/assignment. Are you supposed to shade and take up a gap, are you on a stunt, what is the down and distance, etc?

Once the ball is snapped, this is time to execute your job. Defensively the entire unit goal is to be gap sound. No matter what the call is, the design is to minimize weaknesses and maximize the potential for success on that down or play. Owning your gap includes your get-off, shooting hands, establishing control

and leverage, and ultimately creating disruption on the line of scrimmage. Once you own your gap, it is time to find the ball. Finding the ball is where extension and separation or block destruction occurs, the getting off a block part of the defensive line's simplified job. Once you've found the ball it is time to go get the ball. Getting the ball requires violence, effort, and a relentless will to go get the most valuable item in the entire game, the football. So, how does a coach accomplish these 5 rules, and how does a player work towards accomplishing all of this?

As a coach, simplify your verbiage and coaching language so that it is short, fast, concise, and to the point. Whether you are coaching on the field in practice, in the film room, during the heat of game time, or at halftime trying to make adjustments, drills and verbiage should link and be easily understood, digested, and regurgitated by the player. If you look at the older defensive line coaches, the success they helped create for on-field performance came from many reps of a few things with layers upon layers. Pete Jenkins has a drill called the power scoot. This is where a defensive lineman has an arm locked out vs an out block from an opponent and is taking steps to move the opponent back into the neighboring gap. That is level one. This drill we did this past fall and simply referred to it at the LSU drill. So during film or practice, it was quick to explain to a player to LSU the blocker back into the gap. After gaining access to more of Coach Jenkins' teaching tape, I discovered there were more layers to this drill such as various ways to disengage from the block and attack the ball carrier. As I process the information, I am observing it occurs to me if I am to continue teaching this drill and its evolutions then changing the name to power scoot instead of LSU drill might be more beneficial. I have not just studied the old guys, but young and current coaches, they all have similar drills, but they all also preach about keeping things short and simple so that players can think less and play faster. When diagnosing your opponent and what they are doing to you on that play, we

have simplified blocks as either aggressive or non-aggressive- Is the blocker coming to me or away from me? If the block is aggressive then let's get busy it's time to lock up and tango with the blocker. If the blocker is non-aggressive is the man retreating backward well then, it's time to execute some form of pass rush move while building and keeping the QB caged and contained in the pocket. If the blocker is non-aggressive away from me where is he going? In the brain of the defensive lineman, there should be an alarm that says if something is going away from me, something else is coming towards me so find it. I tell my defensive lineman they have 4 eyes to play with- two in the head (eyes) and two hands. You can use your hands to extend and create separation while still using your eyes to locate the football.

As a defensive lineman, especially at the high school level, learn your job and the guys around you- other defensive linemen and the linebackers. Get your butt in the film room or log onto Hudl and spend time studying yourself and your level of execution, not looking for highlights, and study your opponent as well. Ask questions, find out why things are being done both to you from the offensive and the answer by your team's defensive scheme and calls. Get in the weight room, sprint, jump, work hand fighting moves, work your get-offs, spend time making yourself able to bend and change levels of height with mobile ankles, knees, hips, and shoulders. Every coach I have ever talked to desires next-level defensive linemen to be able to bend and move fluidly. The game is not played in a straight line or straight ahead, you must train in a multitude of directions but also be able to do so efficiently. I ask my position players how long does a typical football play last? The answer is anywhere from 4 to 6 seconds. My follow-up question is then, do you have time to waste? Their answer is typically no. If that is the case, then set yourself up from the start before the snap for success. Hence why we have 5 tasks for each play- know your job, line up right, own your gap, find the ball & go get the ball.

It is our job as coaches to cement the

knowledge and skill necessary for our position players to instinctually execute when it matters-practice! If you are not addressing, readdressing, and reteaching, or finding new ways of teaching ideas, concepts, or the line then how do you expect high-level performance on game day?

So, what is so modern about all this thought process if it has been there the whole time? Nothing. Communication is paramount. Building the relationship with your position players requires it, being able to explain to them the intricacies of the game plan and how the opponent plans to attack us requires it, connecting and learning from other coaches requires it. In my opinion, the modern defensive line coach is the one that understands this and strives to make himself a better communicator thereby making himself a better defensive line coach. The modern defensive lineman seeks to receive this communication and process it more in-depth to make themselves a better defensive lineman. Together coach and player make each other better which makes the team better.



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