

# What Coaching Football Taught Me about Teaching Writing

BY DAN HOLT

The best thing to happen to me as an English teacher didn't occur in a classroom or during the school year; it happened the summer when St. Joe's varsity football coach, the legendary Ike Muhlenkamp, pedaled up my driveway on a bicycle that looked way too small for him.

I was waxing my Toyota station wagon and just beginning to enjoy my summer vacation, assuming that the school-year ahead would be the familiar routine of poetry, prose and writing process. But, on that day, my life and my attitude about teaching were about to change. Ike remarked about how nice the day was. He asked about my family, my health and how my summer was going.

"Fine, Ike, and yours?"

"Great, but I'd be better if I had an 8th-grade football coach."

So began my football coaching career, one that now has spanned nearly 20 years, all of it in the St. Joe system. I have coached 8th- and 9th-grade and JV football and immersed myself in theory and terminology. I have also scouted and attended clinics. I have soaked up everything I could about the game because at St. Joe football is serious business. It has taken me years to appreciate how what I was learning on the field about coaching football could apply to teaching English.

The first similarity I discovered between coaching football and teaching writing was that I couldn't do either and stay on the sidelines. If I wanted my offensive linemen to get into the proper stance for a particular block, I had to get down into my own three-point stance to show them what I meant. I had to line up next to them and demonstrate how to fire out, how to pull, trap and double team. When I modeled for my players, they knew what I wanted them to do and they did it.

Writing students also benefit from demonstrations. They will emulate and execute what you show them... if you show them. If you want your students to write using figurative

language, then create metaphors with your class. If you want your students to write scintillating introductions using short narration, concoct one of your own to show them how it's done.

Now, some people might suggest that showing a film of an NFL lineman performing a scoop block would serve as a better model than the imperfect example you could deliver; or that a Faulkner paragraph *really* shows how using good comparisons can turn a piece of writing into a Pulitzer Prize winning novel. This is an attractive trap. Sure, you could and should show polished professional examples to your students, but it makes all the difference when your students see you doing the same activity you have asked them to perform. And frankly, they need to see the activity performed to the degree of proficiency that they can realistically hope to achieve.

Watching John Elway fling a frozen rope 40 yards to a wide receiver doesn't mean much to a 14-year-old boy who is just learning how to hold the ball and how to throw a pass that doesn't resemble a wounded duck. Neither does writing a perfect sonnet on the first try.

Set an example; don't try to achieve perfection. Whether it's pitching the ball to a halfback on the option or writing a poem using iambic rhythm, your players and students are looking for direction not an impossible standard. Your team and your class will be motivated if there are players and students who can perform the technique better than you can demonstrate it. In fact, you should make it a point to tell them often, "Wow, that was a killer block," or "That paragraph was tight." Statements such as these will turn

butterball 9th-grade boys into varsity linemen and insecure adolescents into aspiring poets.

## KISS your students

When a teacher begins to write with his students, he will find that he ceases to be the "Sage on the Stage" and becomes the

"Guide on the Side." In other words, he becomes a writing coach and he will discover that his students respond positively to his hands-on approach to teaching. He will also find that textbook theory is replaced by student activity, that students learn to write by writing, not by

reading about writing or hearing about writing. Every good coach will tell you the same is true for football: that X's and O's are good for coaches but don't help players understand the game much. In both teaching writing and coaching football, a little theory goes a long way.

Good coaches also understand the KISS theory to teaching football. "KISS" stands for Keep It Simple Stupid. KISS is a reminder to the coach not to get too ambitious, that it is better to teach a little football well than to teach a lot of football badly, that perhaps a freshman quarterback ought not to be given too many decisions to make on the field, that "audibles" (on-the-field-commands) are best used with care until a player has reached a higher skill level.

In the writing class, a student who has never written a poem needs to start with small verse forms such as cinquain or haiku before tackling longer free verse poems that make special use of line arrangements. Students can eventually graduate to writing sonnets or sestinas, just as a freshman quarterback can hope to run a triple option offense and read complicated coverages by the time he is a varsity signal caller.

A word of caution about the KISS strategy: don't oversimplify or you may end up boring your players and students. Judge the abilities of your charges and adjust your coaching and teaching direction accordingly. A wise coach/teacher knows how to challenge his students without confusing or overwhelming them. Every team and class is different; one group's challenge may be easy yardage for another.

Practice and routine drills are critically important for football players and writing students. Practice is a time when real improvement can take place because a teacher can focus on specific writing skills and introduce new techniques to their students. During practice sessions, teachers can help students identify problem areas just as coaches isolate specific aspects of football to help their players make adjustments and improvements.

In coaching, we watch game films, decide what parts of the game need special attention and

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design activities to address those needs. The team works on those problem areas in preparation for the next game. English teachers also need to design specific drills that work on particular skills. It is not enough to take the sometimes flabby approach of asking students to begin correcting mistakes only after they have written multiple drafts.

Specific drills help students learn to identify their errors before they become emotionally tied to passages and phrases in a reworked draft. Like a preemptive strike, coaching can introduce a new strategy to the writer/player-in-training before he has settled on a game plan. Of course, it's most effective when a

teacher introduces new techniques during practice sessions when writers are free to experiment and fail without penalty. And, student writers tend to benefit from working on a "dummy" version, rather than attacking their own work. It's one thing to ask a teenage writer to try out new concepts on an ugly, choppy paragraph provided by his teacher; it's another to ask a student to rewrite one of his own paragraphs. He may do it because it's an assignment, but he's likely to resist altering his style in part because he may be emotionally tied to his words and his work (as so many of us are).

Practice sessions help to reinforce that writing is a skill that requires regular effort and attention even for students with natural ability. As a football coach, I never expect my players to be able to perfectly execute a play or an offensive series immediately. It's the same with writing; we need to not only accept imperfect writing; we should encourage it. Good writers will tell you that they have to produce a lot of crap before they learn to craft something worth publishing. By focusing on practice, teachers help their students work new muscles that can put forth well-organized comparison and contrast papers or gripping stories about their summer vacations.

Of course, writing practice time should be organized and directed. The purpose of each drill should be explained so students know how the exercises are going to help with their writing. Practice sessions are more effective

when they adhere to a predictable routine. I have found that students and athletes appreciate knowing what will be covered ahead of time. They will gear up for a sequence that starts with stretching exercises, is followed by offensive group work, then defensive group work and so on. Writing students benefit from knowing when drills are scheduled and what will be covered, how much time they will have for sharing and rewriting, etc.

### The Adrenaline Rush of Writing

While practice, routine, and direction are important, it is equally important to emphasize the end goal or final product. As a football coach, I anticipate each game; I feel adrenaline rushing through my veins whether my team wins or loses. Shouldn't we also get excited about student writing?

When students finish their pieces and hand them in, we shouldn't simply collect the essays, poems and stories and slap grades on them. We should enthusiastically read select pieces out loud and comment on them and have students read them aloud for an audience or a partner. We should establish goal posts

such as submitting excellent work to literary magazines and writing contests. We should do everything we can to celebrate writing, to make good pieces visible and to create tangible, meaningful rewards like publishing. A grade is simply not enough; it never has been.

At St. Joe's, we publish work in a monthly news magazine and a yearly literary magazine, and often post broadsides, posters with student work on them in the halls. In addition, the Poetry Club hosts several well-attended readings each year and holds monthly meetings where students read their works-in-progress. Individual classroom teachers post student work on bulletin boards, and some teachers regularly set aside class time for students to read to their classmates. The

point is, we need to show students that what they're writing is important; we need to create public forums to celebrate their efforts just as we attend football games and cheer our athletes to victory.

I realize, of course, that no matter how much we try to jazz up writing, we won't be able to compete with Friday Night Lights. I'm not expecting marching bands, cheerleaders and thousands of fans. But teachers of English can take some lessons even from hard-nosed football coaches about the benefits of practice, setting realistic goals and getting down in the mud with your team. I haven't busted an elbow yet and I'm no Joe Namath, but my recruits have thrown some winning touchdowns all the same.

As Ike started to remount his teetering bicycle for the return trip, I pointed out that while I was flattered by his job offer, I didn't have any coaching experience.

"Hell, that's alright," he said. "You can teach, can't you?"

"Sure," I responded.

"Well, I just want you to teach on the field instead of in the classroom."

Now, 20 years later, I realize that I have also been coaching in the classroom, that teaching and coaching are two sides of the same educational coin.

