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Identifying and Developing Great Quarterbacks: 5 Core Values

There is a unique attitude and philosophy that goes along with playing the quarterback position. In addition to the physical demands on the athlete, the quarterback has the highest leadership and intellectual demands of any position on the field. The five core values outlined here are considered non-negotiable to start at this position, and are paramount to the natural athletic prowess a young man may possess coming into our program.

Leadership

First and foremost, the quarterback must be a leader on and off the field. Quarterbacks are 100% accountable and must do their part for the team in order to demonstrate their ability to lead. You are not the leader of the team simply because you *play* quarterback and have the title. The same is true for coaches and quarterbacks; a head coach isn't automatically a Level 5 Leader (see: J. Collins, Good to Great) the day he signs a contract to be the head coach. In both cases, an eager willingness to be a leader, accountability for all actions, and the drive to make other teammates better are the building blocks of sustainable leadership. So what does quarterback leadership look like? Actions and attitude will always speak louder than words. The best pre-game hype speech in the world will do nothing if everyone in the locker-room knows that he was disciplined over the winter for missing morning lifts. If nobody aspires or seeks to be like you, you're not a leader. On the field, quarterbacks must manage the offense and the game in a manner that allows us to win. If he exudes a flippant or apathetic demeanor about the final result between the white lines, he can never become the leader that your team and coaching staff need him to be. Off-field leadership must have as much value to the player and coaching staff as football leadership. What kind of leader is your quarterback in the classroom? What kind of leader is he around town? No person or leader is perfect, but if your quarterbacks aren't aspiring to be high-level leaders, your offense and your program won't ever reach its full potential.

Intelligence

The cerebral side of quarterback thinking begins with keeping themselves accountable for mastering the offense. Demonstrating a thorough understanding of the offense to the coaches and the players is a must. There are no excuses for missing plays or not comprehending the philosophy of a certain play package and/or personnel combination. Even though other members of the offensive unit may not take ownership for knowing the assignments of their peers, it is a quarterback's duty to do so. During a fall-camp film session, one of our younger quarterbacks said, "Coach, I just don't understand why Jimmy Football can't remember his routes at X and I'm here trying to learn everybody's route on every play." My response: "You're the quarterback." In addition to being a master of our offense, the quarterback has an obligation to know more about the opposing team and defense than anybody on the field. If he gets out-worked in film session and scouting report study, it's time to find somebody else. Furthermore, quarterbacks should use every opportunity they have to learn more about the game of football, and be able to grasp the concept that they will never "arrive" when it comes to having enough football knowledge. A great question to ask: is your QB a smart person? At nearly AFCA Convention, I have at least one rousing conversation with a coach that disagrees with this stance; i.e. the counter-argument that as long as he's "football smart" and can play, who cares? Certainly, not every quarterback has to be a straight-A, Valedictorian, but given the demands of

the position (studying, analysis, tendency predictors, defensive comprehension) it only makes sense that coaches should seek sharp, intelligent individuals to lead their team. Furthermore, at some point, a QB will have to make a decision without his coach's help. Given that there is often more than one right answer to things, the question then becomes, "will he make a smart one?" Ultimately a QB's GPA may *not* matter, but it comes as no surprise that Luck, Mariota, and Wentz were all 3.0+ college students. Lastly, a quarterback should never have eligibility issues in college or high school. Having coached and taught high school ball for over a decade, it is a truth that players that don't get the grades in high school simply aren't doing what they're supposed to do. In this case, we aren't even talking about academic intelligence, but rather the core value of leadership.

Toughness

There is a paradoxical dilemma that all coaches put ourselves into when we put a red/gold/blue practice jersey on our quarterbacks and tell the team they're "untouchable," while simultaneously demanding he be tough. We don't want to risk injury at the hands of our own players, but we must be able to gauge the toughness of the man directing traffic. The quarterback must be the toughest guy on the team, or at least on par with all the other "tough guys" on your squad. Why? His teammates are putting their bodies on the line to protect him, something that no other position has the luxury of having. To that end, nobody wants to protect something that's either too fragile to warrant protection or too selfish to not take hits for his own team. He must use his grit to show his teammates he's worth it. A quarterback that incessantly complains about getting hit has no purpose playing the game of football. Despite the coaching staff's best efforts and those of the players around him, the QB *will* get hit and *will* end up on the ground because the game is a violent, contact sport. Does he stand strong to deliver a pass even when he knows he's about to get drilled? Or, is he turning his back, ducking away and "whirly-birding?" Certainly, there is a fine line between taking unnecessary hits (that's actually a lack of intelligence) and demonstrating toughness to the team. This sport demands toughness from its true leaders. Moreover, every coach in America talks to his team about mental toughness, and this is just as critical for the quarterback. Is the leader of your offense mentally resilient? Can he "bounce back" from a bad call, a bad pass, or a bad break? If he can't, don't expect your offense to, either.

Effort

A quarterback's effort must be two things: absolute and consistent. He lets his teammates down when they cannot rely on 100% effort, 100% of the time. The mantra is seen in locker-rooms around the country, and it's true: the football gods did not bless you with effort; it is a behavior, decision, and mentality that can never be questioned. Although Ray Lewis is right when he says "effort is between you and you," a QB's effort must be demonstrated to his team and others in every aspect of his life. Does he give all out effort in the classroom, film sessions, and weight-room? Does he *always* finish with the lead pack during conditioning? Quarterbacks that pick-and-choose when they are giving their best effort are not leaders; it's that simple.

Accuracy

There are entire books dedicated to what a quarterback would/could/should do with his arm, but there is simply no substitute for accuracy. We define accuracy as putting the ball exactly where it needs to go on all plays, and this is not just limited to down-field passes. How our quarterbacks handle the football in the run game (even more so for option teams) is vital to our offensive success. He cannot become lackadaisical (nor his QB coach) when a run play is called, particularly in the pursuit of achieving flawless ball-security and limiting self-inflicted

turnovers. As for the aerial attack, “rocket arms” and guys that can throw the ball a country mile are great to have in your arsenal, but accuracy supersedes the likes of arm strength, velocity and overall sexiness of a piece of leather flying through the air. Great accuracy facilitates success and will limit mistakes, and can even compensate for other genetic shortcomings. Although there are often erroneous comparisons made between baseball pitching and quarterbacking, there is one accurate parallel that runs true: the best major-leaguers have incomparable ball-placement. Pitching 96mph fastballs doesn’t get you paid if you’re putting them in the dirt. In the words of former NFL player Raymond Berry, “You don’t aim at the bull’s-eye; you aim at the center of the bull’s eye.”

The five core values are the pillars of developing and honing a great quarterback. It is worth noting that 80% of them have nothing to do with the DNA floating in a player’s body, and even the other 20% (accuracy) can be improved and developed. As a college recruiter, it’s imperative that we have the best insight into these core values for a prospect before we undergo any extensive film evaluation. Some coaches refer to the “intangibles,” but there are measurable and tangible ways to observe and evaluate a quarterback’s leadership, intelligence, toughness, effort, and accuracy. Identify, demand, and develop those traits, and you’ll have an opportunity for sustained success at the program-changing position of quarterback.