

Coaching Football

FOR

DUMMIES®

**by National Alliance For Youth Sports
with Greg Bach**



Wiley Publishing, Inc.

Coaching Football

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Published by
Wiley Publishing, Inc.
111 River St.
Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774
www.wiley.com

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Published simultaneously in Canada

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2006925955

ISBN-13: 978-0-471-79331-1

ISBN-10: 0-471-79331-0

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

10/SR/QW/QW/IN



About the Authors

The **National Alliance For Youth Sports** has been America's leading advocate for positive and safe sports for children for the past 25 years. It serves volunteer coaches, parents with children involved in organized sports, game officials, youth sports administrators, league directors, and the youngsters who participate in organized sports. The Alliance's programs are utilized in more than 3,000 communities nationwide by parks and recreation departments, Boys & Girls Clubs, Police Athletic Leagues, YMCAs/YWCAs, and various independent youth service groups, as well as on military installations worldwide. For more information on the Alliance's programs, which are listed below, visit www.nays.org.

National Youth Sports Coaches Association — More than 2 million volunteer coaches have been trained through NYSCA, which provides training, support, and continuing education.

Parents Association for Youth Sports — Parents gain a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in youth sports through this sportsmanship training program, which is used in more than 500 communities nationwide.

Academy for Youth Sports Administrators — More than 2,000 administrators worldwide have gone through the Academy, which is a 20-hour certification program that raises the professionalism of those delivering youth sport services. A professional faculty presents the information, and participants earn Continuing Education Units (CEUs).

National Youth Sports Administrators Association — This program provides training, information, and resources for volunteer administrators responsible for the planning and implementation of out-of-school sports programs.

National Youth Sports Officials Association — Officials who go through this certification program gain valuable knowledge on skills, fundamentals, and the characteristics that every good official must possess.

Start Smart Sports Development Program — This proven instructional program prepares children for the world of organized sports without the threat of competition or the fear of getting hurt through an innovative approach that promotes parent-child bonding.

Hook A Kid On Golf — Thousands of children of all ages and skill levels tee it up every year in the nation's most comprehensive junior golf development program, which features an array of instructional clinics and tournaments to choose from.

Game On! Youth Sports — This worldwide effort introduces children to actual game experience by giving them the freedom to create and play on their own.

Greg Bach is the communications director for the National Alliance For Youth Sports, a position he has held since 1993. Before joining NAYS, he worked as the sports editor of the *Huron Daily Tribune* in Bad Axe, Michigan, where he captured numerous writing awards from the Associated Press, Michigan Press Association, and the Hearst Corporation. He has a journalism degree from Michigan State University, which he earned in 1989. He's an avid sports fan and has coached a variety of youth sports. He also wrote *Coaching Soccer For Dummies*.

Dedication

From National Alliance For Youth Sports: This book is dedicated to all the volunteer football coaches who give up countless hours of their free time to work with children and ensure that they have positive, safe, and rewarding experiences. We applaud their efforts and commend them for making a difference in the lives of youngsters everywhere.

From Greg Bach: This one's for Kayla and Evan, my two favorite football fans.

Authors' Acknowledgments

A successful youth football program doesn't just happen. It takes a real commitment not only from dedicated volunteer coaches but also from parents who understand their roles and responsibilities and league directors and administrators who know what it takes to ensure that every child who steps on the football field in their community has a safe, fun, and rewarding experience. Football plays an important role in the lives of millions of children and provides them with the opportunity to learn the skills of the game, as well as the chance to develop both emotionally and physically as individuals. The National Alliance For Youth Sports extends a heartfelt thank-you to every person who makes a positive difference through football in the life of a child.

This book is the result of a lot of hours of hard work from a lot of great people, and a huge thank-you goes out to the incredibly talented staff at Wiley. First, to Stacy Kennedy, the acquisitions editor, whose efforts behind the scenes in working with the National Alliance For Youth Sports has resulted in this being the second book in a series for youth coaches; Chrissy Guthrie and Danielle Voirol, the project editor and copy editor, whose editing touches, ideas, and insight made a tremendous difference in the quality of every chapter; the fabulous effort of the illustrators — Shelley Norris, Jake Mansfield, Joni Burns, and Karl Brandt — whose work will be great references as you teach your team all sorts of football skills; and Robert Patchett, who was a terrific asset with all of his valuable knowledge about every aspect of the game.

Publisher's Acknowledgments

We're proud of this book; please send us your comments through our Dummies online registration form located at www.dummies.com/register/.

Some of the people who helped bring this book to market include the following:

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Introduction

Welcome to *Coaching Football For Dummies*, a book dedicated to all the wonderful volunteer coaches everywhere who work with kids in this magnificent sport. We hope you find it informative, entertaining, and — most important of all — useful in helping ensure that every child on your team has a fun, safe, and rewarding experience. After all, that's what coaching's really all about.

About This Book

We wrote this book for first-time volunteer football coaches looking for some guidance before they step on the field, as well as those coaches who've been on the sidelines for a season or two and are interested in gaining more insight on specific areas of the game. If you're new to the sport, you may be somewhat nervous about what you've gotten yourself into. You can take comfort in knowing that this book can help you shove those concerns aside and put you at ease as you head into the season. It'll be your handy companion as you embark down the path toward guiding the kids to a fun-filled, stress-free season.

Each chapter is filled with all sorts of useful and straightforward information. The more chapters you knock off, the more knowledgeable you'll be about this great game and how to teach it, and the smiles on the kids' faces — as well as all the learning and skill development that take place — will be your payoff. We also include plenty of information for those of you who are veterans of the post-season pizza parties and have spent countless evenings at your local football field. We cover everything from drills you can use to raise players' skills a notch or two to details on offensive and defensive formations and how to coach special teams, among many other areas.

One of the really cool things about this book is that you can jump in anywhere. If you're a rookie coach, you probably have questions on everything from how to plan an effective practice to what to say to the team after a loss. Just check out the Table of Contents or the Index for the topic you want to find out more about, and then flip right there to get the scoop. Each chapter is divided into sections, and each section contains information on a specific topic concerning coaching youth football.

Conventions Used in This Book

To help you navigate through this book, we use the following conventions:

- ✓ *Italics* is used for emphasis and to highlight new words and terms defined in the text.
- ✓ **Boldfaced** text indicates keywords in bulleted lists or the action parts of numbered steps.
- ✓ **Monofont** is used for Web addresses. If you happen to find that a specific address in this book has changed, try scaling it back by going to the main site — the part of the address that ends in .com, .org, or .edu.
- ✓ Sidebars are shaded gray boxes that contain text that's interesting to know but not critical to your understanding of the chapter or topic.
- ✓ In many cases, girls have the legal right to play football, but because the boys in youth football outnumber the girls by so much, this book refers to players as though they were all male. However, most information in this book applies to girls as well.

We've also packed this book full of diagrams of practice drills that you can work on with your team. The following chart is the key to understanding all the hieroglyphics.



What You're Not to Read

Hey, if it were us, we'd read this book from front to back in just a couple days. That's how good — and informative — we think it is. If you're short on time, though, we'll let you in on a little secret: You don't have to read every single word, because this is a reference book. To help you get through the book a little more quickly, when you see sidebars, feel free to jump right over them like a running back hurdling a would-be tackler. You don't need that text to understand what it takes to be a top-quality football coach. So sit back, relax

and — excuse the pun — tackle these chapters at your own pace. If you have time, between your soon-to-be busy schedule of practices and games, we'd love to know what you think of the book.

Foolish Assumptions

Here are some things that we've assumed about you:

- ✓ You know that football is a contact sport played with lots of equipment.
- ✓ You have a child who's interested in strapping on a helmet this year, but you're a little unsure how to teach the game.
- ✓ You're a novice youth football coach and you need to get your coaching skills up to speed.
- ✓ You don't have aspirations of climbing the coaching ladder and pacing the sidelines as a high school football coach in the near future.
- ✓ You just want the basics on topics like what to do during the first practice of the season, how to determine who plays where, and how to teach youngsters the safe way to tackle.
- ✓ You're coaching an older and more advanced team for the first time and need some good drills to challenge the kids to help elevate their skills.
- ✓ The kids on your team have lots of football experience and you're unsure how to go about upgrading the offense, defense, and special teams.

If any of these descriptions hit the mark, you've come to the right place.

How This Book Is Organized

This book is divided into parts, each one pertaining to a specific aspect of coaching a youth football team. Parts contain related chapters. Here's a quick rundown of what you can find in each part of this book.

Part I: Kids' Play: Getting Started Coaching Football

Coaching youth football can be a real challenge, and what you do before you and your team ever step on the field can make the difference between a fun-drenched, problem-free season and one that crumbles amid chaos and confusion. In this part, you get the lowdown on constructing a coaching philosophy

that you're comfortable with, one that your players and their parents will accept rather than turn their backs on. You also find out what all those lines and numbers on the field mean and get a crash course on offside, illegal motion, and the other penalties and rules of the game.

Part II: Building Your Football Coaching Skills

This is where the real fun — and actual coaching — begin. Before you actually step on the field, though, this section provides valuable information on how to conduct a preseason parents meeting, an often overlooked aspect of coaching youth football that's crucial for opening the lines of communication, reducing the chances of misunderstandings and hurt feelings, and keeping your sanity. This part also answers questions such as

- ✓ How do I figure out who plays where?
- ✓ How do I conduct practices that the kids look forward to?
- ✓ How do I work with the uncoordinated, shy, and talented kids all at once?
- ✓ How do I assess my team at midseason and ensure it's headed in the right direction?

Plus, we show you the game-day ropes, touching on everything from your pre-game and post-game talks to conducting an efficient warm-up and making those critical halftime adjustments.

Part III: Working with Beginning and Intermediate Players

Teaching kids the basics of the game — from tackling and blocking to running and catching — is crucial for their long-term enjoyment of the sport. This section shares how you can do that by providing a variety of fun-filled drills that are highly effective for teaching skills. Also, when your team has a pretty good handle on some of the basics, check out the chapter devoted to kicking those skills up another notch or two.

Part IV: Advanced Football Strategies

When your players have a pretty good grasp of the basics of the game, they're hungry to learn more-advanced skills and continue their development. This section does the trick. The pages are filled with in-depth

techniques for raising the level of play on offense, defense, and special teams. There's also an assortment of drills that you can use to help your players maximize their development.

Part V: The Extra Points

This section is a smorgasbord of information on several topics that we hope you won't face much this season, such as recognizing injuries, confronting problem parents, and dealing with discipline problems on your team. You also find valuable information on pre- and post-game nutrition that you can share with your team to help boost their performance. And for those of you with your eye on coaching an All-Star team, you find all the information you need to help make your transition to a more competitive level of football a smooth one.

Part VI: The Part of Tens

A For Dummies book just wouldn't be complete without this section. Here you find all sorts of precious information that you can put to use to boost the fun and enjoyment your team has playing for you this season. We include information on how to make the season memorable and fun ways to end on a high note and keep 'em coming back next year.

Icons Used in This Book



This icon signals valuable tips that can save you time and frustration and really enhance your coaching skills. If you're scanning a chapter, take a moment to read these tips when you come across them, and then put them to work. You — and your players — will be glad you did.



A lot goes into coaching youth football. This icon alerts you to key information that's worth revisiting. You want to remember this info even after you close the book.



Watch out! This icon lets you know about situations that can be dangerous.

Where to Go from Here

If this season is your first on the sidelines as a volunteer youth football coach, you may be most comfortable digging in with Chapter 1 and moving forward from there. Please note, though, that the book is structured so that you can easily move around from chapter to chapter at your convenience. So if you need answers to some of your most pressing early-season questions, you can scan the Table of Contents or Index for those topics and jump right to those chapters. Otherwise, start from the beginning and use the information you gather along the way to help ensure that your youth football team has a fun, safe, and memorable season.

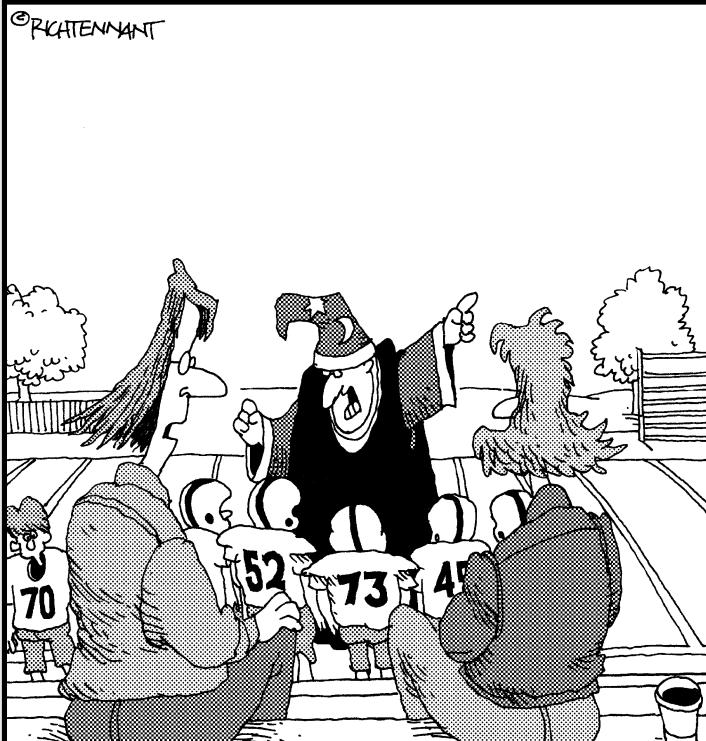
Part I

Kids' Play: Getting Started Coaching Football

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant

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"Cameron's approach to coaching youth football is a combination of Vince Lombardi, Dr. Phil, and Harry Potter."

In this part . . .

Before taking the field with your team for the first time, you can follow several steps to lay the groundwork for a smoothly running season. Defining your coaching philosophy, knowing your league's rules and regulations, having a handle on the basic rules of football, and gathering the parents for a preseason meeting can get your season headed in the right direction. You can find all that information, and more, right here.

Chapter 1

Teaching Football to Children

In This Chapter

- ▶ Pre-season preparation
- ▶ Planning for practices and games
- ▶ Finding a parent-coach balance

Few experiences are more rewarding than coaching a youth football team, so congratulations for taking on such a special role. Your journey through the season will be packed with moments that make you smile and that you and your players — regardless of their age, skill level, or experience playing the game — will remember for the rest of your lives.

Before you step on the field, please be aware that you're taking on a position that can have far-reaching implications on your players for years to come. How you approach the season and how you interact with your players during practices and games impact how they feel about themselves, the sport of football, and you. The methods you employ for handling all the responsibilities that come with the job can either help them develop an unquenchable passion for the game or bury their interest in ever putting on a helmet again.

But don't worry. All you need — besides a whistle and clipboard — is some quality information on all the different aspects of the game. In these pages, we give you everything you need to navigate your players through a safe, fun, and rewarding season.

Gearing Up

You may have volunteered to coach this season because you want to spend a little more time with your child and help introduce him to the exciting world of youth football. Maybe the league has a shortage of coaches and you're willing to step forward to help out. Or perhaps you love working with kids and want to give coaching football a shot. Whatever your reasons, you're accepting an enormous responsibility. Before any youngster puts on the shoulder pads and buckles his chin strap, you have lots of work to do behind the scenes to ensure that the season gets off to a smooth start.

Getting parents on your side

The overwhelming majority of parents with children in organized youth football programs are wonderful, supportive, and caring, and they only want the best for their kids. Of course, some of the parents in the minority can end up being a source of season-long aggravation that has you reaching for the aspirin.

Be prepared to deal with these situations quickly and efficiently so they don't become a distraction and detract from the kids' enjoyment of the season. You can sidestep a lot of potential problems by gathering the parents together before you start to work with their kids, laying the ground rules on what you expect in terms of behavior during games, and outlining the parents' roles and responsibilities.

As you work with your players, you'll stress the importance of teamwork all season long; your interaction with parents is really no different. When coaches and parents find ways to work together — the adult form of teamwork — you have a really special formula that produces tremendous benefits for the youngsters. On the other hand, coaches and parents who clash over playing time issues, bicker about who gets to play specific positions, and even argue over whether the team should use more passing plays spoil the experience for everyone involved. These types of disagreements cast a shadow over the entire team and can turn practices and games into activities the children no longer look forward to.



Parents play big roles in youth football programs. Keep the following advice in mind to help make your dealings with parents go smoothly:

✓ **Be proactive with parents.** Outline your expectations for them and their kids. Explain your coaching methods. Detail what you want everyone to take away from the experience before the first practice. Painting a clear picture leaves little room for those dreaded misunderstandings to occur, and parents who've never had a child involved in organized football before will especially appreciate the information.

Telling parents firsthand that you're committed to skill development over winning or that you adhere to the league's equal playing time rule can prevent petty squabbles. If you don't clarify these issues for parents well in advance, you'll invite more problems than you can imagine — and you'll get them, too. Chapter 2 helps you develop that all-important coaching philosophy and become knowledgeable about all your league's policies and rules so you can clearly communicate this information to the parents.

- ✓ **Involve them.** Parents invest a lot of time and money in their child's football experience. That experience can be much more enjoyable for them and their youngsters if you find ways to include Mom and Dad on your season-long journey — and that's a wonderful gesture. Parents can do so much more than bring snacks and drinks to games, too. Find ways to involve them at your practices, and recruit the right ones to assist on game day. You can make the season memorable and rewarding for everyone involved. In Chapter 4, you can find a variety of tips on boosting parental involvement.
- ✓ **Communicate with parents.** Besides conducting a preseason parents meeting (covered in Chapter 4), you have to keep those communication lines open all season long. Talk to parents about their children's progress; share your thoughts on areas of the game where the kids are really making improvements; offer suggestions for things parents can do to help their youngsters develop in other areas; and check in from time to time to make sure the kids are having fun when they play for you. Including parents in all facets of the season is the right thing to do, the smart thing to do, and the only way to ensure that the children have a positive experience.

Despite everything you do to include the parents and make them feel a valuable part of the season, problems may still arise. You should remain calm and in control of your emotions and never allow situations to escalate. In Chapter 19, we run down some of the more common problems that coaches have to address, and we offer the best approaches for solving them before they can impact the season.

Figuring out the rules and lingo

To be an effective coach, you need a really good handle on the basics of the game. Most importantly, you have to be able to explain rules, introduce terminology, and teach strategies to your young players. That's not as complicated as it may seem, but becoming comfortable with some of the quirkier rules that you're not completely familiar with — such as what types of blocks are allowed on kickoffs and punts — and new terms, such as *illegal motion* and *false start*, takes some time and effort.

We present the rule book and help you get a handle on everything from terminology to penalties in Chapter 3. Throughout Parts II, III, and IV of this book, we give you a detailed rundown of the skills, techniques, and strategies that you need to pass along to your players. And we've got you covered if you need a refresher on some of the fundamental skills to teach a beginning team or if you need more-detailed information for an older, more football-savvy squad.



Knowing any special rules that are in place in your league is important. Quite often, the rules that leagues utilize vary depending on the age and experience level of the players — everything from the size of the field to which rules are enforced change from community to community. Knowing these rules — and being able to share them with your players — make a tremendous difference in their enjoyment of the sport.

Taking the Field

The kids' smiles, the excitement in their eyes, and their enthusiasm to play and learn from you is what coaching youth football is all about. What you say — and how you say it — from day one and throughout the season make a significant difference. The kids may become passionate about the game and play it for years to come. Or they may walk away disappointed in their experience and will look to other sports in the future. Plan ahead, and you can keep interest levels soaring.

Practice planning

How you design your practices and the drills you choose to teach impact the kids' enjoyment of playing for you. Practices that kids look forward to can send the learning and skill development skyrocketing. Practices that you put together while sitting in your car five minutes before the players arrive tend to smother learning and fun.

While working with your team, keep the following thoughts in mind to help squeeze the most out of every practice:

- ✓ **Be more than a coach.** Sure, you'll teach kids the basics of football, but your impact on their lives can extend far beyond how to properly run a slant pattern or make a tackle. Your position as coach gives you a special opportunity to make a significant difference in a lot of other areas. For example, while the kids are warming up, you can briefly talk to them about the importance of doing well in school or speak about staying away from tobacco and drugs. The words you deliver may stick with a child for the rest of his life.
- ✓ **Create a positive atmosphere.** Make your practices stress-free sessions where youngsters can make mistakes without the fear of criticism or embarrassment. Let the kids know from the first practice of the season that mistakes are a part of the game and that all you ask is that they listen to your instructions and give their all. Kids who know they can make mistakes without unpleasant repercussions will be much more relaxed and will perform better.



When choosing practice drills, opt for those that keep kids moving and are challenging enough to hold their interest. Using drills that force kids to stand in line awaiting turns are boring and cut into how much time each child actually gets to work on that particular skill. The array of drills for offense, defense, and special teams in Chapters 11, 14, and 18 can challenge and excite beginning, intermediate, and advanced players.

Game day

Coaching youth football requires constantly adapting to ever-changing conditions. This is especially true on game day, when you're challenged to make all sorts of decisions with little time and lots of distractions. You have playing time to monitor, plays to call, formations to adjust, and pre-game, halftime, and post-game talks to deliver. Yes, game day brings a lengthy list of responsibilities, but don't go reaching for the antacid tablets just yet. In Chapter 7, you can find all you need to help your game day go smoothly.



Besides giving kids the chance to use their skills against opponents, game days provide some great teachable moments. Reinforce what you brought up during practice, such as the importance of working together as a team, displaying good sportsmanship toward the opponents and officials, abiding by the rules, doing their best at all times — and having fun, regardless of what the scoreboard reads.

Coaching Your Own Child

Climbing Mount Everest is hard. So are winning a Nobel Peace Prize, running a marathon — and coaching your own child in football. Most of you already know that being a parent presents daily challenges and is enormously difficult at times. Well, that doesn't stop after you step on the football field with your youngster and dozens of other kids. A number of parent-child issues can arise during the season. Most of these challenges are as minor as getting your child to go to bed on time so he gets plenty of rest for tomorrow's game. But problems that you never dreamed of when you volunteered to coach this season can appear. Don't panic!

Yes, the job of coaching your own child can be complex and confusing, but when you handle it properly, it's one of the most rewarding experiences you'll ever have. Sure, chances are pretty good that there'll be the occasional bump along the way, but by being aware of the potential problem areas and working together, you can enjoy some very special memories that you and your child will savor for a lifetime.

Kicking around the coaching decision with your kid

Before you decide to grab the clipboard and assume the role of football coach, sit down with your child and gauge how he feels about your coaching the team this season. The decision isn't about fulfilling your dream of coaching a football team. It's about ensuring that your child will be comfortable with your instructing him and his teammates all season long. If you don't ask him how he feels, you'll never know. Many kids are thrilled to have their parent as coach, and if you see that grin on your child's face and the sparkle in his eyes when you bring up the subject, that makes all the time and effort you'll be putting into the season well worth it.

On the other hand, some children — for whatever reasons — don't feel comfortable with the idea and would prefer that their parent didn't coach the team. Take their wishes into account before deciding to step forward.



Here are a few tips to help you reach the right decision on whether you and your child are ready for you to start diagramming plays, teaching tackling techniques, and giving pre-game pep talks:

- ✓ **With your child's help, put together a list of all the positives and negatives about being the coach.** On the positive side, you may list that the two of you can spend more time together than before and that as the coach, you'll ensure that your child and the rest of the team have fun as they learn new skills. Resolve the negatives by working with your child to develop solutions. For instance, your child may automatically expect that he'll play the position of his favorite professional player simply because you're his parent. Explain ahead of time that you must be fair to everyone and can't show favoritism and that your child and his teammates will have an equal chance to play different positions.
- ✓ **Examine your own motivations.** Don't take on the task of coaching your son if your goal is to make him a star. You have to be willing to do whatever is best for your child's overall development, and harboring thoughts of college scholarships and athletic stardom is simply a blueprint for trouble.
- ✓ **Explain to your child that being the coach is a great honor.** The fact that he'll be "sharing" you with the other kids during games and practice sessions doesn't mean you love him any less. Explain to him that your responsibility is to help all the players on the team. Taking the time to explain your role to your child helps promote better understanding and reduces the chance of problems arising after the season gets underway.

After the two of you have talked things through, take your child's thoughts seriously. If he still isn't comfortable with the idea, push your coaching aspirations to the side for the time being. Plenty of seasons are left in his future, and you can revisit the subject with him the following year to measure his feelings again. Just because he isn't ready this season doesn't mean he won't want you guiding his team next season or at some point in the future. The last thing you want to do is turn your child off from the sport and make him uncomfortable. So embrace your role as a supportive parent. Be a positive influence in the stands. At home, help your child work on skills his coach is teaching him, and your youngster may well be open to the idea of playing for you sooner than you think.

Acting as both parent and coach



If you and your child agree that coaching his team is a good idea, keep these tips in mind as you navigate through the season to help ensure that everything runs smoothly:

- ✓ **Remember that you're still the parent.** Whether the team wins or loses, you have to put down your playbook and keep in mind that you're a parent first and foremost — and that means asking your son whether he had fun and piling on the praise.
- ✓ **Keep talking.** To effectively monitor how the season is going, you want your child to understand that he can come to you with a concern or problem at any time. Just because you're the coach doesn't mean that certain topics are now off-limits.
- ✓ **Don't force extra practice at home.** If your child has a rough or somewhat unproductive practice, you may be tempted to continue working on a skill with him as soon as you get home. Refrain from pushing your child in this direction. It's okay in casual conversation to ask him whether he'd like to spend some time working on a certain skill at home if you sense he's really interested. If he is, that's great, but if not, let it go. Pushing your child to perform extra repetitions can drain his interest in the sport.
- ✓ **Never compare siblings.** Let your child develop at his own rate. He should never feel burdened by your expectations to match the skills or abilities of his older (or younger) brothers who play football, too. These types of comparisons can crush self-esteem, destroy confidence, and chase him away from playing football in the future.
- ✓ **Praise, praise, praise!** Be sure to praise your child's willingness, understanding, and cooperation in this special venture.



As a parent, you naturally want your child to excel on the football field or in any activity he's involved in. Just don't allow yourself to view your coaching position as an opportunity to control your child's destiny. When this happens, you push him harder than the other kids, demand more from him, and criticize him when he's unable to fulfill your unfair expectations. If you lose sight of the point of youth football, you'll encounter problems that impact your child's emotional well-being and his interest in football.

The multitude of parent-coaches

If you're coaching your kid, you may be interested to know that you're not alone in this endeavor. Roughly 85 percent of volunteer football coaches have their own child on the team, so you've ventured into common parenting territory that countless other parents have

successfully negotiated and reaped the rewards of. Other parents who've coached their own child can be great sources of advice. Check with your local recreation director for names of some parents who'd be good contacts.

Chapter 2

Preparing for a Fun and Successful Season

In This Chapter

- ▶ Setting standards
 - ▶ Knowing your league
 - ▶ Fitting equipment
-

Coaching a youth football team in which everyone develops skills, has fun, and wants to play for you again next season requires plenty of preparation before you ever reach the field. Sure, you may feel you're ready to get started if you have your whistle and clipboard, a minivan full of footballs, and enough orange cones to start your own construction project. You also probably have some thoughts on drills you'd like to use during practices or plays you're anxious to run on game day. But don't neglect other all-important areas that can make or break a season.

We're talking about how you'll motivate players, what type of team atmosphere you'll create, what you hope to accomplish with the kids, and what approach you'll take to help them reach those goals. If you haven't put much thought into those areas, don't worry. This chapter offers all sorts of useful advice on dealing with those aspects of coaching — and others. Take some time to carefully review the following pages, and by the time your first practice rolls around, you'll hit the field running.

Developing a Coaching Philosophy

Creating a coaching philosophy for yourself is fairly simple; living up to it game after game is the tricky part. You're probably already wondering what philosophy has to do with blocking and tackling. Don't worry — we're not dredging up your old high school philosophy class days or expecting you to know the works of Aristotle. But you do need to know how a good philosophy is important to your coaching.



Building on the Coaches' Code of Ethics

Many recreation departments have mission statements, as well as policies explaining their stances on sportsmanship, skill development, and parental behavior. These can serve as a great starting point for building your philosophy.

Volunteer coaches who receive training through the National Youth Sports Coaches Association sign the Coaches' Code of Ethics, pledging to meet the best interests of kids. When creating your coaching philosophy, we recommend having it cover the Ethics, which follow:

- ✓ I will place the emotional and physical well-being of my players ahead of a personal desire to win.
- ✓ I will treat each player as an individual, remembering the large range of emotional and physical development for the same age group.
- ✓ I will do my best to provide a safe playing situation for my players.
- ✓ I will promise to review and practice basic first aid principles needed to treat injuries of my players.
- ✓ I will do my best to organize practices that are fun and challenging for all my players.
- ✓ I will lead by example in demonstrating fair play and sportsmanship to all my players.
- ✓ I will provide a sports environment for my team that is free of drugs, tobacco, and alcohol, and I will refrain from their use at all youth sports events.
- ✓ I will be knowledgeable in the rules of each sport that I coach, and I will teach these rules to my players.
- ✓ I will use those coaching techniques appropriate for all of the skills that I teach.
- ✓ I will remember that I am a youth sports coach, and that the game is for children and not adults.

Basically, a *coaching philosophy* reflects the standards you set for yourself and your team, and it's the foundation of your coaching values and beliefs. A well thought-out philosophy keeps you on the right track as you negotiate your way through the season. (And explaining your coaching philosophy to the parents before the season gets underway, which we discuss in Chapter 4, can help you steer clear of many potential headaches.) Your coaching philosophy will speak volumes about you — not just as a coach but as a person. So take the time to put some real thought into it. In this section, we introduce the various components to consider when developing a philosophy that stresses respect, sportsmanship, skill development, safety, and fun.

Tailoring your goals to your age group

Every child on your team is different in so many ways. Some are gifted runners, others can make dazzling catches, and some struggle simply to grasp

the basic techniques of the game. Regardless of the strengths and weaknesses of the kids, which may be all over the map, youngsters possess general characteristics that are influenced by age. Children are continually growing and evolving, and part of your coaching responsibility is knowing and understanding what to expect — both physically and emotionally — from youngsters at various age levels.

Being fully aware of the general age-related differences we cover in the following sections can enhance your coaching skills and your ability to relate to your team. It can also ensure that you don't favor the players who are more mature and skilled at the expense of players whose skills are less developed. The following are some general characteristics that apply to specific age ranges.

Ages 6 and under

Children in this age bracket have probably never played football before, and this season may very well be their first experience in an organized team setting. Your job is simply to introduce them to some of football's most basic elements and whet their appetite for future participation. (We cover the fundamentals that you can focus on with this age group in Chapters 9 and 10.)

Children at this age generally aren't concerned about how their football skills compare to those of others on the team. These kids are primarily interested in being with friends and having fun learning and playing the sport.

Ages 7–9

Youngsters at this age become interested in mastering some of the basics of the sport. (Check out Chapters 9 and 10 for some fundamentals you can concentrate on.) They crave feedback from coaches and parents on how they perform certain skills and how they're progressing with new ones. They begin noticing their teammates' abilities and skill levels. When coaches verbally recognize one of their peers for properly executing a skill, they want to earn that same feedback.

The desire to compete carries much more prominence for some youngsters in this age range than for others. Children who have older siblings may be particularly competitive, because they've watched their brothers compete in football or other sports, and the younger siblings are finally getting their turn to display their skills.

Ages 10–12

More than likely, these children have had some experience playing football in the past and are continuing because it's piqued their interest. Keep the positive momentum going by adding to their foundation of skills. Fuel their desire to continue playing by conducting practices that are both challenging and fun.

Quite often, sports take on added importance at this juncture in kids' lives, and some of them really want to do well. (For more on skills and drills suitable for this age group, see Chapters 11 through 13.) As children hit this age range, many become more competitive. They begin embracing the challenge of putting their skills to the test and enjoy competing against others their age. When they're able to help the team prevail, these players feel immense satisfaction accompanied by a unique feeling of accomplishment that's specific to the wonderful world of football.

Ages 13–14

Welcome to the challenging world of the teenager! These kids have already developed many of the basic skills needed to play the sport and now want to improve them. (In Part IV, we cover more-advanced offensive and defensive techniques for older kids and provide an assortment of challenging drills.)



Be aware that children at this age are typically searching for their personal identity, so try getting to know them on a personal level by asking who their favorite football players or football teams are. Of course, this tip is great for building special coach-player bonds with kids of all ages.

Ages 15 and above

Gaining the respect of your players is always important to your coaching success, and that's particularly true when coaching kids ages 15 and older. These teens have developed a real passion for the sport. They attend football camps, perhaps lift weights year-round in preparation for the season, and in some cases, may actually be more knowledgeable in some areas of the sport than you are.

If you volunteer or get recruited to coach this age group, don't panic! Instead, welcome the chance to enhance your coaching abilities and embrace the opportunity to coach these kids, who have a deep-rooted love for the game. Be sure to let them know that you value their opinions, suggestions, and input regarding the team. A youngster's passion for football is wonderful, and that enthusiasm actually helps make your job easier.

Emphasizing teamwork

Football is the ultimate team game. Although the sport allows individuals in some positions (such as quarterbacks, who can elude defenders and scramble downfield) to create plays on their own, you and your team are much better off if you can get everyone to work together as a cohesive unit on the field. Of course, that's easier said than done.

Finding a surefire route to teaching the essence of teamwork among your players is difficult. Try getting the players to begin seeing the enormous benefits that accompany working as a team (rather than as a bunch of individuals) with the following pointers:

- ✓ **Praise team efforts in practices and after the game.** Recognize the efforts of the team whenever possible. For example, if you're conducting a passing drill and the offensive unit scores a touchdown, you may tend to acknowledge the youngster who caught the touchdown pass or the quarterback who delivered the ball. But what about the other players involved? How about the blocking by the offensive line? How about the wide receiver on the other side of the field who ran such a good pattern that he lured the safety over to cover him, providing an easier target for the quarterback on the other side?

At the end of a game, the kids who scored the touchdowns don't need additional praise because their trip to the end zone generated cheers and applause from the spectators. How about giving out post-game accolades to the player who delivered the block that opened the hole for the running back? When you spread your praise among all the players who play a role in scoring, players begin to understand that each of them plays a very important role on the team.
- ✓ **Get the kids to praise one another.** Encourage the kids who score touchdowns to acknowledge the teammates who helped get them to the end zone. Getting kids in the habit of giving one another high-fives or telling each other "great pass" or "nice block" forges bonds and strengthens team unity.
- ✓ **Promote sideline support.** Encourage players who aren't in the game to stay involved by cheering and supporting their teammates. This role keeps them involved in the action instead of glancing over to see what their parents are doing or what kind of food their friends are buying at the concession stand. Hearing teammates' cheers also provides extra encouragement for the players on the field.
- ✓ **Allow individual freedom — at times.** Although you should sometimes give players individual freedom to create plays on their own, you need to do so within the team setting. At some point during the game, you may want to give your quarterback a chance to run the ball after dropping back to pass, and calling these types of plays are part of the game. But when that player ignores an open teammate he could have passed to because he wants to run, he threatens team chemistry. Remind that player that he has teammates for a reason and to be sure to look out for them. (Dealing with these types of players is covered in Chapters 5 and 20.)

- ✓ **Avoid the captain syndrome.** Continually relying on two or three players to serve as team captains throughout the season elevates them above the rest of the squad, but giving every player the opportunity to lead warm-ups in practice or head a drill infuses the team with the sense that everyone's equal. In most youth football programs, "official" team captains usually aren't required until around the age of 14 or on All-Star teams (see Chapter 21), when the competition becomes more intense and the players are more experienced. At the younger levels, captains aren't necessary. Naming *temporary* captains is just another tool you can use to build kids' self-esteem and make them feel like valued team members.

Motivating players

Regardless of a youngster's age or how much experience he has playing football, every kid arrives at the field with vastly different motivations for playing the game. Some players are there to try something new, some are there because they love the game, and some come because Mom and Dad think football's the perfect sport for their child. Some of these kids will be strongly motivated individuals — you know, the type who'll push themselves to succeed and be awfully hard on themselves when they don't fulfill their own lofty expectations — while others will rely on your words of encouragement in order to improve and excel.

Some players will respond positively to your challenges, such as seeing whether they can catch a dozen passes in a row. For others, that task may turn out to be too much pressure to deal with and may actually detract from their motivation to participate. You have to discover for yourself what works for each child to help get the best out of him as both a football player and person.

Here are a few general tips you can employ to help spur your players on to become the best they can be after they buckle the chin straps:

- ✓ **Love what you're doing.** If you have a sincere passion for football and for teaching it to children, your excitement and enthusiasm will rub off on the team, and they'll respond accordingly.
- ✓ **Set attainable goals for youngsters.** Forget about trying to win every game or having the league's highest-scoring offense. Those aren't realistic goals for kids, some of whom are just learning how to properly put on all the safety equipment. Having reasonable expectations for the kids you're coaching and setting goals that are within their reach stimulates them to keep working. (See Chapter 8 for info on setting midseason goals.)



If a child senses that your expectations are far-fetched, he wonders what's the point of even trying, and his play on the field suffers. This negatively impacts the entire team. You want players knowing that the essence of participating is always putting forth their best effort. Instilling that habit in kids now carries over to how they approach everyday life.



- ✓ **Recognize the good things happening on the field.** Stop practice to point out when a player does something really well, not just when a player makes a mistake. Being positive is simply one of the best motivational tools around. If you halt practice for a moment to applaud the block the right guard delivered, you've made that youngster's day. Just watch, too, because he'll play that position with pride and continue giving you his best effort on every snap to get that recognition again.
- ✓ **Don't motivate through fear or threats.** Making a child run a lap for failing to perform at an expected level has no place in youth football. Kids are there to learn and to learn from their mistakes, not be humiliated or punished for them. This type of coaching approach handcuffs a youngster's ability to perform because he's now afraid of messing up again. Plus, this motivation-through-fear tactic is likely to chase members of your team away from the sport in the years to come. Instead, take a closer look at how you're teaching the child. If he's giving everything he's got and it's just not clicking for some reason, find another method or take a different approach to teach the skill.

Fostering a positive atmosphere

Creating a team environment in which children are comfortable and genuinely feel that they're valued and contributing members is imperative for any learning and skill development to take place. Building team bonds also ensures that the kids have fun and give you their best effort all season long.

Here are a couple ways you can help carve out an atmosphere that promotes team spirit, encourages participation, and rewards the ideal of doing your best at all times. You can find more ideas in Chapter 23.

- ✓ **Come up with a team cheer.** Work with everyone to come up with a clever team cheer that can be used before games to help remind players that they're taking the field as a team and working together as one. Something as basic as "One . . . two . . . three . . . team!" or "One . . . two . . . three . . . together!" is a positive reminder to play together and support one another.

✓ **Cheer players on when they make mistakes.** Yes, cheer even when a child makes a mistake or fails to perform a particular skill the way you demonstrated it — that's a part of playing football, and kids need to be reminded of that. Praising a player's effort rather than criticizing the result frees the child to keep trying until he gets it.

Of course, even though you're applauding effort, don't forget to provide that key instruction to correct the mistake. Serious mistakes — such as leading with the helmet while making a tackle — put that youngster and others at risk. Clearly explain what he did incorrectly so it doesn't happen again.

Keeping communication lines open

You want your players comfortable enough to come to you with any questions, problems, or concerns at any point during the season. Besides being their coach, you can also be their friend. During your time with them, talk about topics other than football. While they're stretching, ask them how they're doing in school, what their favorite subjects are, or who their favorite teacher is. Find out whether they have any brothers or sisters, the names of their pets, or what hobbies they enjoy. Getting to know kids on this non-football level lets them know you care about them as individuals, and it makes opening up to you much easier if they ever really need to. And that's more important than any pass rushing technique.

Making every kid count

All team members should feel prized, respected, and accepted. As the coach, your job is to work with, and pay close attention to, all the youngsters on your team, regardless of talent. Sometimes, this evenhandedness is a lot more difficult than it sounds. After all, becoming enamored with those kids who are more athletically gifted than the rest of the team is fairly easy, and you may end up showering them with all the attention, accolades, and praise.

Spreading the encouraging words around equally takes real focus and effort, but making sure that each child — no matter how big or small his actual contributions are during games and practices — feels appreciated for his efforts is the cornerstone of good coaching.

Providing immediate feedback and continually recognizing all players for their contributions are the most effective ways to boost their self-confidence and fuel their interest in giving their best effort all season long. Consider these points:

- ✓ **Acknowledge all on-the-field contributions.** Although the kids who score the touchdowns or sack the quarterback hear the gratifying applause from the stands, the crowds don't always recognize the roles of the other players. Take time to acknowledge the efforts of everyone who contributed to the play.
- ✓ **Seek out less tangible contributions.** Applaud good attitudes and strong work ethics as much as you praise a nice pass pattern or a good defensive play. Even lesser-skilled youngsters struggling to contribute during games can be recognized in ways that inflate their self-esteem and maintain their interest in football. You can applaud his hustle running down the field on a kickoff, acknowledge his team spirit and enthusiasm, and even point out to the rest of the squad the good sportsmanship he displayed during the game and how the rest of the team should follow the example he set. These attributes are what youngsters carry with them the rest of their lives, long after they've put their helmets away.
- ✓ **Provide awards for all.** Many coaches enjoy handing out awards to their players at the end of the season. If you elect to do so, make sure you come up with something for every player on the team instead of taking the old Most Valuable Player route. In Chapter 23, we discuss this idea in detail and provide some fun ideas that you can use to recognize the contributions of each team member.

Focusing on fun and skill development

As a youth football coach, make sure you don't let your vision of what's best for your players become blurred by trying to win every game so you can line your mantel with first-place trophies. Your team's win-loss record at the end of the season doesn't define how successful you are as a coach. The true measure of your coaching is whether the kids safely learned skills and had a great time doing so.

Certainly, at the more advanced levels of play, winning takes on a more prominent role, and the concept shouldn't be swept aside. After all, doing well on a test in school is a form of winning. So is edging out a business rival on a project bid. Winning is something we all strive for in order to achieve some level of success in everyday life.

But with youth football, coaches must exercise great caution. Children are highly impressionable. If they get a sense that winning is all that matters to you, then having fun and developing skills suddenly become secondary in their minds, and the season begins spiraling out of control. After you allow this to happen, altering the season's course and getting everything back on track becomes really difficult. The younger and less experienced the children are with the sport, the less you should focus on wins and the more you should concentrate on teaching skills and ensuring that the kids are having fun.

Children and their short attention spans can make coaching difficult at times but can also work to your advantage. Many youngsters just beginning in the sport will usually forget the score of the last game pretty quickly and direct their attention to something else. So even if you happened to lose 35-0, praise them for their effort on every down, which provides them with a boost of confidence and a sense that they're making strides in their play.



Keep in mind that simply because your team may have outscored the opposition doesn't necessarily mean that they performed to the best of their ability. A squad can put forth a poor or lackluster effort and still win because the other team played more poorly or simply didn't have many talented players on the team. Conversely, your team can play extremely well and still lose the contest, but that shouldn't detract from the kids' performance. So don't turn to the scoreboard for feedback on judging how the team played.

Never let scoreboards or opposing teams define how much fun you have on the football field or impede your team's progress in learning the game. The skill development process is constantly ongoing and occurs throughout the season. Use every practice and game as a building block to their development.



Consider using a team goal board for each game to steer the focus away from the scoreboard and give the kids something else to shoot for. These can feature basic goals for the younger kids, such as completing five passes if the team has worked on its passing attack in practice recently, or more advanced goals for higher-skilled kids, such as limiting the opponent to less than 100 yards rushing for the day.

Modeling good sportsmanship

Teaching good sportsmanship to youngsters can be tricky, especially because they're bombarded with television images of professional football players trash talking, showboating, and disrespecting opponents. But good sportsmanship is one of the most important ideals you can instill in your young players. Here are a few ways you can help accomplish that and make your squad one of the most liked and respected teams in the league:

- ✓ **During practices and before games, continually stress the importance of being a good sport at all times.** While your players go through warm-ups before practice, discuss a game they watched on TV and ask whether they saw a player display good sportsmanship.
- ✓ **Set the tone before each game by going across the field to shake the hand of the opposing coach.** The players, fans, and opposing coaches will notice your gesture of sportsmanship, and the gesture reminds everyone that football's just a game and that everyone's there for the kids. Shaking hands reminds your players of the importance of shaking hands with the opponent after the game, too.

- ✓ **Always model good sportsmanship.** That means no yelling at officials or questioning calls that you're sure should have gone your team's way. Remember, players take their cues from you, so if you rant and rave about a call to an official, expecting your players to show respect toward the refs is hardly fair.
- ✓ **During your post-game talk, recognize players who displayed good sportsmanship.** Perhaps one of your players went out of his way after the game to congratulate an opposing player who intercepted a pass or made a good tackle. Continually recognizing these displays reinforces that how players behave during and after games really is important.
- ✓ **Have your players shake hands after the game.** Regardless of the game's outcome, you want your players to line up and shake hands with the opposing team and its coaches. If your team won, your players should acknowledge that their opponents played a good game, and if your squad lost, your team should congratulate the opposition on their victory. It's also a classy move for your players to shake the ref's hand.
- ✓ **Deal with problems.** During the season, you may encounter a win-at-all-costs coach who prowls the sidelines yelling and berating his team. Or you may see an out-of-control parent who spends the entire game shouting instructions at his child or argues every call that doesn't go his way. In Chapter 20, we present tips on handling this type of behavior, which has no place in youth football.

Understanding Your League

Youth football programs around the country are as different as the millions of kids who put on shoulder pads to play in them. You can find 11-on-11 leagues, 7-on-7 leagues, and coed leagues. Along with this diversity comes the wide range of rules that are a part of each league. Some adhere strictly to the official rules of the sport and allow no modifications, while the majority of programs alter the rules to fit the age and experience level of the kids.

Your league's rules

Reading a football rule book won't exactly have you on the edge of your seat, but it should be bedside reading for you — and we don't mean as a sleep aid! To be successful at coaching, you have to know the rules of football, as well as which particular rules your league is enforcing this season. You also have to be able to teach them to your players. If you don't know and understand the rules, you can't expect your team to, either. And if the youngsters don't know the rules, playing football is going to be a pretty frustrating experience.



Rather than plunging in and attempting to memorize all the rules in a single sitting, review a few pages every night prior to the season's start until you're pretty comfortable with them. (For a quick primer on some rules of football — and some modifications — check out Chapter 3.)

Don't assume that older kids have a firm grasp on all the rules simply because they've played the sport for years. If no one took the time to explain certain rules that may be somewhat confusing, players may not have learned them. You can make a difference. Also, because the rules each league uses vary greatly as the kids gain more skills, most of the youngsters who are new to the league probably aren't familiar with some of the rules in place.



Even if you have an extensive knowledge of football and were a pretty good high school player, do yourself and your team a big favor and take a look at the league's rule book. Consider it a refresher before you take the field. Chances are good that the league is using some rules that were never applied in the same way when you played as a youngster.

Make-up games and weather policies

Some days, Mother Nature just isn't a football fan, and she can create havoc with your practice schedule or disrupt game day. Because football can be played in the rain — the types of conditions that kids love playing in, because they can get their uniforms muddy — you can still get in quality practices in these situations or play games if your league allows. Some programs don't allow practices or games while it's raining. In these cases, games are cancelled or postponed until a later date. Being aware of the league policy regarding cancellations alleviates a lot of the confusion with parents and team members when bad weather arrives.



Exercise great caution with approaching storms. Waiting for the first sign of lightning before canceling practice or stopping a game is flirting with serious trouble. Get your players off the field before lightning threatens the area. Storms should never be taken lightly, and attempting to squeeze in a few extra minutes of practice or finish the final minutes of a game before the storm hits simply isn't worth risking the lives of your players. If conditions become dangerous during a game, don't wait for an official to make the call. Get your kids off the field immediately. For more info on maintaining safety in poor weather conditions, see Chapter 19.

Practices, practices, practices

Your team members' ages usually dictate how much time you'll get to spend conducting practices during the season. With most beginner leagues, you'll generally have just one practice during the week and a game on the weekend. Many leagues restrict the number of practices a coach can hold, so be aware

of this rule before you put together your practice plans. (Chapter 6 features some in-depth tips on running great practices.)

Quite often, leagues set the practice schedule for the entire season based on the number of fields that are available and what other programs they have going on. This system eliminates a lot of scheduling headaches on your part.

Supplies provided

Before you hit the field with your team for the first time, you need to know what to bring — and what the league provides for you. Some programs may give you a bag of footballs, kicking tees, cones, a water cooler, and a fully stocked first aid kit, while in other programs, you'll be on your own to round up what you need for your practices. Be sure to find out well in advance whether you need to purchase any of these items.

For fun or first place

The two distinct classifications that exist for football programs are recreational and competitive. Each type requires vastly different approaches to coaching. Do you know what type of league you're coaching in this season? Prior to agreeing to volunteer, you should check with the recreation director to learn more about the league and make sure it's the right fit for you.

Recreational leagues

If you're coaching football for the first time this season, chances are pretty good that you're involved in a recreational league. These types of programs focus on teaching kids the basic skills of the game. Generally, the program has rules in place regarding equal playing time, which makes your job easier because all the kids will get a fair chance to play a variety of positions.

Often, with kids ages 10 and under, the league scales teams down to seven-on-seven, or even smaller, and has them play games on much smaller fields to allow each child plenty of chances to run, block, and make tackles.

Recreational leagues also feature rules that have been altered to meet the needs of the age and experience level of the kids. In the younger divisions, you won't see a lot of kickoffs or punts. Sometimes referees won't throw a flag on a penalty like offside but will tell the child that what he did is a no-no.

Another trademark of some recreational programs is that coaches are allowed on the field during games with the youngest kids. Usually, the league allows a coach from each team to stand on each half of the field, giving coaches a chance to talk to their players in the huddle and even during the course of play to provide positive feedback, instruction, and encouragement.



When meeting with the opposing coach before games, encourage him to provide positive feedback to your players when the action is near him, and let him know that you'll do the same when the play takes place near you. At this level, you just want kids running around and getting a feel for running with the ball, getting in on some tackles, and getting used to the contact of the game.

Competitive leagues

Children whose thirst for competition can't be quenched in their local recreational program can turn to the avalanche of competitive programs that exist. These leagues are typically referred to as *All-Star teams*, which we examine in greater detail in Chapter 21.

This type of program is for youngsters who have demonstrated higher skill levels than many other kids their age. These elite programs give kids the chance to compete against others of similar ability in their state or region of the country. Usually, kids involved in these programs have their eye on long-term advancement in the sport, such as playing at the collegiate level. (Or, as is often the case, their parents are thinking college scholarship and have pushed the child into this highly competitive environment.)

Coaches are usually only given the reins of an All-Star team if they have a strong coaching background with lots of experience and have proven to be well-versed in all areas of the game.



If you're in a highly competitive league that you don't believe you're adequately prepared for, notify the league director immediately. Let him know that in the best interests of the kids, you'd prefer to coach a less experienced team in a less competitive league. Do what you're better suited for at this time in your volunteer coaching career. Down the road, if you choose to go the All-Star coaching route, you'll be well prepared to do so with a couple seasons of recreational coaching on your side.

Focusing on Equipment

The physical aspect of football requires that players wear a wide assortment of protective gear. In order for the equipment to do its job, it must be in good condition, meet appropriate safety standards, and fit the youngsters properly.

Gathering the necessary gear

Here's a list of the gear every child should have in place before stepping on the field (see Figure 2-1 as well). (To find out how much of this equipment the league usually provides and how much parents will have to buy, check out Chapter 4.)

- ✓ **Helmet:** This is the most recognizable piece of football equipment, and most youngsters will always remember the first time they slip one on. It protects the head from collisions with other players and the ground. Lots of different types of helmets, featuring different types of padding structures, are on the market.
- ✓ **Face mask:** These are the bars on the helmet that protect the player's face. The styles of face masks vary greatly, depending on the position the youngster plays. Players at the youngest levels typically all receive the same style of helmet, but older and more experienced players begin wearing helmets that are appropriate for their position. Players on the offensive and defensive lines typically have more protection for the face because of the tight quarters they play in, while quarterbacks, receivers, and defensive backs generally have less facial protection, because they need to be able to see clearly to execute their responsibilities.
- ✓ **Mouth guard or mouthpiece:** Mouth guards protect a player's teeth and provide protection from concussions resulting from blows to the head. You can choose from a variety of styles. Some mouth guards are attached to the player's face mask, so they hang down when players take them out; other mouth guards are unattached, and the player simply holds it in his hands when not involved in a play.



We recommend that parents invest extra dollars in a top-quality mouth guard that attaches to the youngster's helmet. For around \$20, parents can buy a state-of-the art piece that can be molded to fit the youngster comfortably and greatly reduce the chances of a concussion. This is an extremely important piece of equipment, so go with the best available.

Youngsters new to the sport may have a little trouble getting used to having something in their mouths. To help them overcome the discomfort, encourage them to wear the mouthpieces around the house a few minutes every day, and eventually it'll become second nature to wear mouthpieces during practices and games.

- ✓ **Chin strap:** The player's chin rests in the center of the chin strap, which holds the helmet securely on the player's head.
- ✓ **Shoulder pads:** Shoulder pads protect a player's shoulders, chest, and back against impact from other players and the ground. Just like the face mask, different types are available for different positions. Players who are involved in more blocking and tackling usually wear bulkier pads for extra protection, while players who need more mobility — like wide receivers and quarterbacks — typically go with smaller pads.
- ✓ **Thigh pads:** The thigh pads are the biggest leg pads, and they fit into the lining of the player's pants. They protect the quadriceps from collisions with other players and the ground. Thigh pads come in various sizes for the different positions on the field. Players whose positions require a lot of mobility tend to wear smaller pads.

- ✓ **Hip and tailbone pads:** These are usually some of the smallest pads that players wear. These pads protect — you guessed it — the hip and tailbone areas. They're held in place by the girdle, which is an undergarment that the pads are attached to or sewn into. The padding should offer sufficient protection and should stay in place (over the hips, snug to the thighs, and down over the knees) when the child moves.
- ✓ **Knee pads:** These pads fit into the lining of the player's pants and help protect the knees.
- ✓ **Neck roll:** This is an optional piece of equipment worn by some players looking for a little added protection for their head and neck. It's a foam roll that fits around the back part of the jersey's neckline and is intended to protect the head from being pushed too far backward or to lessen the blow when the head's snapped back. It's usually worn by linebackers and defensive linemen, who are involved in a lot of one-on-one contact.
- ✓ **Rib pads:** At the more advanced levels of football, quarterbacks sometimes wear rib padding for an extra layer of protection against hits they take to their back and midsection when that area of their body is exposed after throwing a pass.
- ✓ **Athletic supporters/protective cups:** These are worn to protect a youngster's private areas.
- ✓ **Elbow pads:** Players who tend to hit the ground a lot, like running backs, wear these to protect their elbows.
- ✓ **Lineman gloves:** Offensive and defensive linemen often wear gloves to protect their hands, knuckles, and fingers.
- ✓ **Receiver gloves:** These are much lighter than lineman gloves and are worn by players who find them helpful in getting a good grip on the ball. Running backs and defensive backs also wear them at times, and if conditions are especially cold, players handling other positions often turn to them, too.
- ✓ **Cleats:** These are specially made athletic shoes that have spikes or studs attached to the sole to provide players with extra traction when they're running, moving, and changing directions, as well as making tackles, blocking, or taking hits. At the more advanced levels of football, players tend to choose cleats based on their position. High-top cleats extend above the player's ankle and are usually used by linemen looking for a little extra support when delivering and taking on blocks. Mid-cuts are a general all-around type cleat that are usually the choice of quarterbacks and running backs, while low-cut cleats provide little support but offer a lighter feel, which wide receivers and defensive backs generally prefer.
Molded cleats are permanently attached to the shoe and are usually made of rubber. Detachable cleats, which are usually more expensive, use studs that can be removed and replaced, allowing players to change

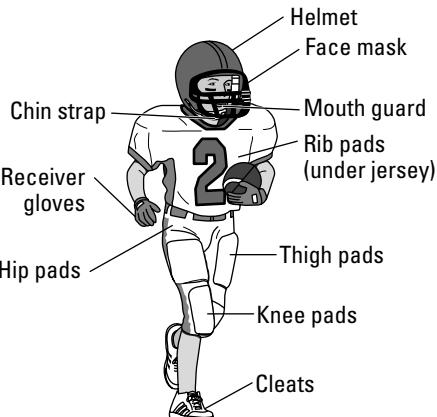
the studs based on the field conditions. These types of cleats are usually worn by experienced players at the more advanced levels of football. The studs are made of rubber, hard plastic, or metal. On a dry field with short grass, a shorter cleat is needed, while a wet and slippery field usually requires a longer cleat.



Most youth football leagues regulate what types of cleats players can wear. Many leagues don't allow metal cleats and have rules regarding how long cleats can be. Find out this type of information well before the season begins so that when you hold your preseason parents meeting (which we cover in Chapter 4) you can let the parents know what type of cleats to buy for their child.

Encourage kids to bring an extra set of laces for their cleats during the first week of practice. You can put the laces in a bag with the kids' names on them and keep them with your first aid equipment. If players are sidelined for extended periods of time because of a broken lace, the situation can disrupt practices and create confusion during games. Also, make sure players don't wear cleats as they walk through parking lots or any other concrete- or asphalt-covered areas that can grind down their cleats.

Figure 2-1:
Adequately
protecting a
young
football
player takes
plenty of
gear.



Fitting all the equipment on a child

Good football coaches bring more to the field than just the ability to organize practices and teach skills. They also have the knowledge of how to properly fit helmets and shoulder pads on young players, because the kids' safety depends on it.

Helmets

When it comes to helmets, proper fit is the key to providing valuable protection and comfort. A helmet that doesn't fit a child's head properly can put the child at risk and contribute to injuries rather than protection.

Instruct players on the dangers of using the helmet incorrectly and to treat it as a valuable piece of safety gear. Here are some areas to pay attention to when fitting helmets on your players:

- ✓ **Head size:** Measure each player's head with helmet tape (available at most sporting goods stores if it isn't provided by your league's recreation department) to determine proper shell size. Wrap the tape about 1 inch above the child's eyebrows.
- ✓ **Head shape:** Before fitting, pay close attention to the shape of each youngster's head, because any irregularities of the head may require a fitting adjustment. Two players with the same-sized heads may have two completely differently shaped heads.
- ✓ **Jaw pads:** Some youngsters have narrow faces, so make sure the helmet's jaw pads follow the contours of the cheek. These pads prevent the helmet from moving side to side.
- ✓ **Skull:** Make sure the helmet covers the base of the child's skull and that the back rim of the helmet doesn't cut into the back of the athlete's neck.
- ✓ **Faceguard:** This should be about 2 to 2½ finger-widths from the tip of the child's nose. If it's closer than that, the child is at risk of suffering an injury to his nose when making a tackle or taking a hit, and if it's farther away, that creates additional space for another player's hand or fingers to hurt the child's face.
- ✓ **Chinstrap:** Tighten the chinstrap so that the cup that rests on the child's chin fits snugly and is centered on the chin. Never allow a youngster to play football if his chinstrap's unsnapped or doesn't fit securely, because the helmet will likely get knocked off during contact.
- ✓ **Ear openings:** Make sure the holes located on each side of the helmet are centered over the child's ears.
- ✓ **Eyes:** Make sure that the child's eyebrows are 1 to 1½ inches below the helmet's edge.
- ✓ **Vision:** The youngster should be able to see about 180 degrees peripherally and up and down about 75 degrees.



Here are some tests you can use to check whether a helmet fits properly:

- ✓ **Rotate the helmet.** Try rotating the helmet from side to side on the youngster's head. The skin on his forehead and his hair should move with the helmet, but the helmet shouldn't slip.
- ✓ **Slide the helmet back and forth.** You can check the jaw pads by holding the face mask and moving the helmet forward and backward to see whether the helmet slides high on the forehead or down over the eyes. If this occurs, the helmet's too big.
- ✓ **Press on the top of the helmet.** Apply a little bit of pressure to the top of the helmet to check for any movement. If the helmet shifts around a lot, the helmet's too big; if it tends to pop up after you press down, then it's probably too small.



The helmet should always move as the head moves and should not move independently of the head. Before fitting kids for helmets, have them wet their hair down, which helps ensure a proper fit. Also, prior to the fitting, let the parents know that you'd like the child's hair cut at the length it's going to be at during the season.

Shoulder pads

The shoulder pads are another essential piece of equipment. Follow these steps for fitting shoulder pads on youngsters:

1. **Measure the distance from shoulder to shoulder and use that number to select the proper size from the manufacturer's chart.**
2. **Check to see that the laces on the shoulder pads in the middle of the player's chest are tied tightly.**
3. **Make sure all the slack is taken out of the straps underneath the shoulder pads and they're secure. Loose straps can chafe a youngster.**
4. **Check that there are a couple inches between the padding and the neck.**
5. **Make sure the shoulder pads go down in front to the player's nipples and out to just beyond the shoulder.**
6. **Check that the youngster has good range of motion.**

When the player shifts around, there should be minimal movement of the pads. He should have no problems raising and lowering his arms without the pads riding up into the neck opening.

7. To complete the fitting, do a dress rehearsal.

Have the youngster put on his helmet and jersey and go through some basic movements so you can verify that you haven't overlooked anything with the pads.

Jersey and pants

When fitting a youngster with his jersey and pants, the jersey should fit close to the body and always be tucked into the pants, which also helps hold the shoulder pads in place. The pants should hug the player's body to keep the thigh and knee guards in place but still allow the player full range of motion with his legs.

Inspecting equipment to ensure it meets safety standards

Even the best equipment can't provide youngsters with the protection it's designed for unless it's properly maintained and checked regularly for defects. Before handing any piece of equipment over to a youngster, be sure to check it over for any defects or signs of wear that could hamper its effectiveness in protecting youngsters.

When inspecting a helmet, make sure it bears a current National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment certification sticker.



Perform this equipment check days in advance of handing it out to the kids. There's just too much commotion for you to be able to properly examine equipment on the day you pass everything out.

Chapter 3

Tackling the Football Basics

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding the field
 - ▶ Looking at positions and the skills needed to play them
 - ▶ Mastering the rules and deciphering penalty signals
-

You may be able to recite all the statistics of your favorite football players as quickly as a 9-year-old rattles off the alphabet. Maybe you can recall the date your favorite team last won a championship more easily than your wedding anniversary or spouse's birthday. And perhaps you're one of those people who amazes friends and co-workers with your encyclopedic memory of big games and unbelievable plays from years ago.

Well, you can save all that knowledge for tailgating parties and weekend afternoons watching games with your buddies. Stepping onto the youth football sidelines requires knowledge of a much different sort. Whether you're a first-year volunteer or a veteran coach, one of your many responsibilities is knowing all the rules and being able to explain them to your players. You also need a good grasp on all the offensive and defensive positions, the skills and requirements that go along with playing them, and what types of kids are generally best suited to play these positions. All that valuable information — and more — awaits in this chapter. So go ahead — we'll give you a minute to throw on your lucky team shirt and get comfortable before getting started.

Going inside the Lines

If you ask us, you can't beat the sight of a football field with its perfectly straight yard lines, shiny goal posts, and immaculate end zones. If you're new to the sport, don't worry about all the markings on the field. They're all easily identified and serve specific purposes. In this section, you step between those lines and see what they're all about (see Figure 3-1 for an image of the field).

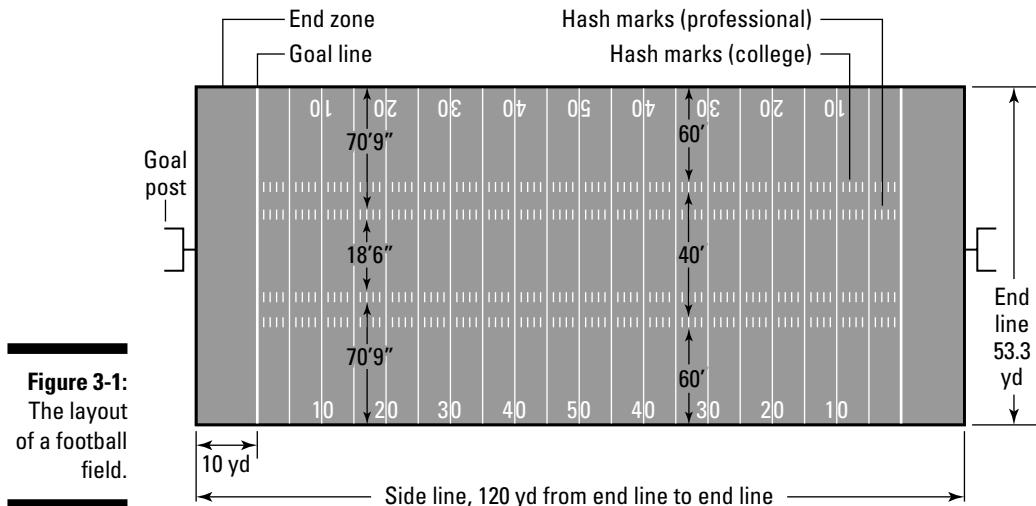


Figure 3-1:
The layout
of a football
field.

The playing field

A regulation football field, the one you see on weekends watching college and professional games, measures 120 yards long by 53½ yards wide. The field is 100 yards long, and the end zones at each end are 10 yards long. Here's what else you can find on the field:

- ✓ **Goal posts:** These Y-shaped or H-shaped structures are located on the back line of each end zone, and they're what crazy fans sometimes tear down to celebrate their team's win at the collegiate level. The crossbar stands 10 feet high and 18 feet, 6 inches wide at the collegiate level; at the high school level, it stands 10 feet high and 23 feet, 4 inches wide.
- ✓ **End zones:** These are those coveted patches of turf at each end of the field that offenses desperately want to reach every time they have the ball. Getting there produces lots of smiles, cheers, and congratulatory high-fives.
- ✓ **Goal line:** The point where the end zone meets the playing field is called the goal line. Cross this line with the ball in your hands, and your team has a touchdown and six points on the scoreboard. Only the ball must break the plane of the goal line for a touchdown to be awarded.
- ✓ **Yard lines:** Lines stretching across the width of the field mark the number of yards from the goal line in 5-yard intervals. The yardage number is marked on the field at every 10-yard interval, beginning with the 10-yard

line and working up to the 50-yard line, which is in the center of the field. From there, the yardage markers start at 40 and descend every 10 yards until they reach the opposite goal line.

- ✓ **Hash marks:** These are short lines that appear on the field at 1-yard intervals. Most fields typically have a set running down each side of the field.
- ✓ **Sideline:** This is the boundary line that extends the length of the field. If a youngster on the field of play steps on or over this line, he's out of bounds.
- ✓ **Player box:** These lines designate an area 1 yard off the sideline that extends between the 25-yard lines at each end of the field. Only coaches are allowed to stand in this area. It's there to give officials room to work during the game and helps protect the players not involved in the game when the action spills over to the sideline.

Here are some areas that aren't marked on the field because they move throughout the game, depending on where the ball is:

- ✓ **Line of scrimmage:** This designates where the ball is snapped (hiked) to begin a play.
- ✓ **Backfield:** This is the area approximately 5 yards behind the line of scrimmage where the running backs line up.
- ✓ **Neutral zone:** This is the imaginary area that extends from one tip of the football to the other before it's snapped. No players on either team (except the center, who has his hands on the ball) are allowed to enter the neutral zone before the ball is snapped, or a penalty is called.

Youth league modifications

One of the many great things about football is that you can easily modify the game to fit the age, experience, and skill level of the youngsters buckling on helmets. The beginning levels of youth football are all about teaching kids the basics of the game, not adhering to the rule book that the upper ranks of organized football use. Here we outline some rules that youth leagues often tweak and adjustments they typically make to help ensure that the kids get the most out of their participation. (See Chapter 2 for info on getting to know your league.)

Reduced field size for younger kids

In youth football, the younger the kids, the smaller the field. You can't expect youngsters in their size 5 cleats to cover a large field without becoming exhausted — and frustrated.

Keeping beginning players confined to a small playing area, perhaps one that's just 30 yards in length, allows them to stay involved in the action rather than spend all their time chasing around in a wide open area. As players get older and gain experience, the fields they run and make tackles on are gradually lengthened to account for their advanced skills and increased speed and strength.

Quite often, one regulation football field can accommodate a half-dozen youth games at one time. A combination of how much space is available and how many youngsters are participating often determines field sizes, which vary greatly from community to community.

Fewer players on the field at younger age levels

Although regulation football games feature 11 players on the field for each team, the younger the children are, the fewer players you have on the field at any one time. The idea at the youngest age levels is to introduce kids to the game by giving them lots of chances to run with the ball, make tackles, and of course, get that colorful uniform grass-stained and dirty. That can happen only with several players on the field at one time. Just imagine having a full squad of 6-year-olds on the field at one time. The kids would be lucky to get in on even a handful of plays during the game.

That's why scaled down games, such as 6-on-6, are quite common around the country. These smaller games are great for promoting an interest in the game because the kids can experience the action-packed thrill of running, catching, kicking, and tackling. This type of approach stirs interest in the sport and opens kids' eyes to how much fun playing this great game can be.



Designing plays and positioning players takes a backseat at younger age levels, because you just want the kids to learn the game's basics, like running and tackling, before introducing them to other aspects.

Appropriate-sized footballs

When you're teaching a kid how to ride a bike, you don't plop him on a shiny racing bike with gear shifts and send him down the street (well, we hope not). Instead, you put him on a small bike specifically made for his age, one that's equipped with training wheels, and start him off that way. The same type of thinking applies to teaching kids how to play football. Expecting a youngster just starting out in the sport (or even one who has a year or two under his shoulder pads) to be able to handle a regulation football makes little sense. A child's small hands can't hang onto a football that's intended for an adult.



Shoving a regulation football onto a child just learning the game can bring development to a screeching halt. To build a child's confidence in the sport, he must continually experience success and notice improvement, and that happens only if he's using the appropriate size of ball for his age.

Rules modifications for various age and experience levels

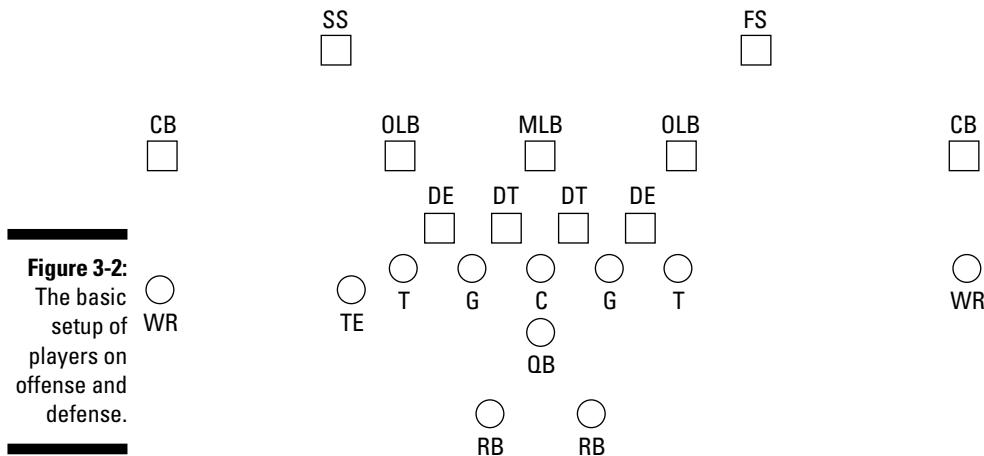
To ensure that kids enjoy playing football, programs often have special rules in place based on the age and experience of the players. Here are some ways your league may modify the rules to meet the kids' needs:

- ✓ **On-the-field coaching:** In beginner leagues, coaches are often allowed on the field so they can gather the team in the huddle, set the play, and help make sure the team gets lined up properly. They remain on the field during the actual play to monitor what's taking place. Being out there with the kids allows coaches to make sure the players use proper blocking and tackling techniques.
- ✓ **Series of plays instead of downs:** Sure, making first downs is one of the basic components of football, but beginners usually don't get four plays to move the ball 10 yards; instead of downs, they receive a set number of plays to try to reach the end zone, and then the opposing team gets the ball and receives the same number of chances. Sometimes league rules dictate that the team takes over possession of the ball where the players stopped the opponent, and others make them start where the opponent began.
- ✓ **No special teams:** Youngsters just starting out in football don't have the strength to kick or punt the football, so special teams play is usually pushed to the side for the time being. (*Special teams* handle kickoffs, kick returns, punts, and punt returns. See Chapters 10 and 17 for more on special teams.) Typically, teams do have separate offensive and defensive units, although some kids may play on both if you're short on players.
- ✓ **Basic formations only:** Coaches are sometimes tempted to introduce all sorts of fancy formations as soon as the season gets underway, which can be pretty confusing to youngsters just starting out. In order to rein in some of these coaches, leagues usually have rules in place that allow only basic formations. (For a rundown on the basic offensive and defensive formations, jump to Chapters 12 and 13, respectively.) Limiting formations helps give kids on both sides of the ball the chance to get comfortable with fundamental positions before more-complex alignments are introduced.
- ✓ **No blitzing:** Because defensive skills are often easier for kids to grasp (which puts defenses at an advantage), leagues often stipulate that coaches can't have their defensive squad *blitzing*, or sending up extra players to put additional pressure on the quarterback. To a young quarterback just learning about the position, looking up and seeing extra defenders bearing down on him as he drops back to pass is unfair. (See Chapters 15 and 16 for more on blitzing and defending against it.)

Taking Positions

Each position on the football field carries a unique set of responsibilities. The positions you're filling are as different as the kids under your care. In the following sections, we take a closer look at each position.

In a typical full-scale football game, you have 11 players on offense and 11 on defense (see Figure 3-2). A basic offense consists of an offensive line (center [C], two guards [G], and two tackles [T]), two wide receivers (WR), a tight end (TE), two running backs (RB), and a quarterback (QB). On defense, you have the defensive line (two tackles [DT] and two ends [DE]), three linebackers (MLB/OLB), two cornerbacks (CB), and two safeties (SS/FS).



As the coach, you can modify your lineup and use all sorts of different formations. For example, you may decide your team is best suited to having four wide receivers on offense instead of the standard two; or you may discover your defense is more effective with six defensive backs (cornerbacks and safeties) rather than the normal four. We serve up the smorgasbord of options available to you in Chapters 12 and 13.

Going on the offensive

An offense relies on several parts to move the ball downfield, and how much success it enjoys depends, in large part, on its blocking, running, and passing ability. This section explains the offensive roles you have to fill and what kinds of kids fill them best.

Positions and responsibilities

Each position on the field carries a distinctive set of responsibilities. Hit the line of scrimmage and take a look at who makes up your basic offense:

- ✓ **Quarterback:** Orchestras have conductors, armies have generals, and football teams have quarterbacks. The quarterback is the ringleader of your offense, and he's in charge of the unit on the field. He lines up right behind the center.

Nearly every offensive play begins with the ball in the quarterback's hands, so the position carries a lengthy list of responsibilities. The quarterback receives the play call from you on the sideline and relays it to the team in the huddle. From there, plays begin with his receiving the snap (or hike) from the center. When the ball's in his hands, he has a number of options. He can hand off or toss (*pitch*) the ball to a running back, drop back to pass to a receiver, or tuck the ball under his arms and run the ball himself.

At the more advanced levels of youth football, coaches sometimes entrust their quarterbacks with calling their own plays. Or they give a quarterback the freedom to audible at the line of scrimmage. *Audibles* occur when quarterbacks walk up to the line of scrimmage and, after surveying how the defense is set up, choose to call another play by using a special code word or number that his teammates know means the play is being switched to something else.

- ✓ **Running backs:** These players typically line up in the backfield behind the quarterback, about 5 yards behind the line of scrimmage. They're responsible for taking handoffs and pitches from the quarterback, as well as for blocking and catching passes.

- **Halfback (tailback):** This player lines up behind the quarterback and usually handles the majority of the team's running plays. The halfback also acts as a receiver — sneaking out of his place in the backfield at times — to catch short- to medium-length passes.
- **Fullback:** Players handling this position line up in the backfield with the halfback. In most offenses, the fullback's primary responsibility is blocking. On running plays, he leads the way blocking as the halfback trails behind with the ball. On passing plays, the fullback often remains in the backfield to provide extra protection for the quarterback and takes any defenders who are barreling in. Fullbacks don't typically get a lot of ball carries during the game but are often a great resource on short-yardage plays or on plays near the goal line, where the defense is bunched up and yards are difficult to earn.

- ✓ **Wide receivers:** These players line up on or near the line of scrimmage but are usually several yards away from the offensive linemen. Their primary duty is running pass patterns (plays where receivers run a specific route, such as going 15 yards downfield and cutting across the

field at a 90-degree angle) and getting open to catch passes from the quarterback. Receivers who are fast are especially difficult for defenders to cover because they can sprint downfield and catch passes for big gains. On running plays, wide receivers assist with blocking defensive players to help create holes for running backs to scamper through.

- ✓ **Tight end:** The tight end lines up next to the offensive tackle (an offensive lineman) on either the left or right side. This player serves a dual role. He's one part offensive lineman and one part receiver. On running plays, the tight end serves as another blocker. On passing plays, he runs patterns and catches passes or hangs back with the offensive linemen and provides additional pass protection so his quarterback doesn't end up on his back under a pile of defensive players.
- ✓ **Offensive linemen:** These players — center, two guards, and two tackles — take their stances at the line of scrimmage and provide both run and pass blocking.
 - **Center:** All offensive plays begin with the center's placing his hands on the ball to snap (or hike) it to the quarterback. The position is aptly named, because he's positioned in the center of the offensive line with a guard and tackle on each side of him. Regardless of whether the play is a run or pass play, the center provides blocking. At the more advanced levels of football, his responsibilities are much greater, because coaches often rely on these players to call out blocking assignments for the entire offensive line at the line of scrimmage based on how the defense is set up.
 - **Guards:** The guards line up on both sides of the center. These players provide blocking for both running and passing plays. They usually go against the defensive tackles, who are lined up across from them on most plays.
 - **Tackles:** The two tackles line up on the outside of the offensive line, next to the guards. Depending on the formation, one of the two tackles often has a tight end next to him. These players provide blocking for both running and passing plays, and they're usually matched up against defensive ends on the opposing team.

Types of kids best suited for certain positions

Some positions on the offensive side of the ball require strength, some speed, some hand-eye coordination, and others a mixture of all or some of the above. During your first few practices, you face the challenging task of choosing who plays where when your team has the ball. The following section provides an overview of what types of kids generally work best in certain offensive positions. (For more tips on assigning team positions, flip to Chapter 5.)

- ✓ **Quarterback:** Quarterbacks must be smart, have a good understanding of the game, be able to think clearly with everything going on around them, and be able to throw the ball reasonably well, of course.

Youngsters who exhibit leadership abilities and who other kids tend to look up to are good quarterback candidates. Remember, the quarterback is like the coach on the field calling plays in the huddle. Teams that have quarterbacks who other team members listen to and believe in reach the end zone more times than teams that have doubts about their quarterback.

Because of the enormous responsibilities of the position, the quarterback tends to get the majority of the blame when the offense struggles to move the ball. Players who are thick-skinned and able to quickly forget about an interception or overthrowing an open receiver and move on to the next play will enjoy plenty of success. Quarterbacks must exude positive energy and enthusiasm at all times. If your quarterback becomes easily frustrated or reveals disappointment when a teammate drops a pass or misses a block, that's likely to cause animosity with the team.

- ✓ **Running backs:** Youngsters handling these positions have to be able to deal with lots of contact, because defenders hit them from all sides every time they carry the ball.

- **Halfback:** Ideally, you want your halfback to be one of the team's fastest players and also one of its most durable, because the more he carries the ball, the more hits on him pile up. This player must be well conditioned, because he carries a heavy workload. After he receives a handoff, he must be willing to run at top speed without any hesitation or fear of getting hit. Because a halfback can function as a receiver, you want an athletic player who can catch back here.

- **Fullback:** These players must derive lots of satisfaction from blocking and creating openings for their running back partner, the halfback, to go through. Fullbacks are typically bigger and stronger than halfbacks, because they usually wind up blocking the opposing team's linebackers on running plays.

- ✓ **Wide receivers:** Youngsters who have good hand-eye coordination are excellent candidates to fill these positions. Unlike the quarterback and running backs, wide receivers usually don't have the luxury of touching the ball a lot during games. In fact, they may go entire games without ever getting their hands on the ball. Players who have good hands for catching and can accept that their role during big chunks of the game is simply to serve as decoys and confuse the defense can excel as receivers.

- ✓ **Tight end:** This position usually requires a player who's big enough to handle blocking assignments on the offensive line, as well as athletic enough to run and catch passes.

- ✓ **Offensive linemen (center, guards, and tackles):** Generally speaking, the closer to the ball, the bigger and stronger the players are.
- **Center:** Coaches often put their best lineman at center because of all his responsibilities, which may include calling blocking assignments for the other linemen.
 - **Guards:** These players, like the center, are the line's biggest and strongest. Because they go against the opposing team's defensive tackles, guards must be strong on their feet.
 - **Tackles:** Because they're usually matched up against athletic defensive ends on the opposing team, tackles must possess good footwork. Tackles tend to be smaller and more athletic than the center and guards.



Make sure the players you select for these key positions understand how valuable they are and feel appreciated for their efforts. Youngsters who handle the offensive line positions, also known as the *trenches*, usually aren't credited with a lot of accolades when the team scores a touchdown, but they're the reason for the team's success in moving the football up and down the field.

Becoming defensive

When your team's on defense, its job is to stop the opposition from moving the ball down the field. Playing on the defensive side of the football requires different types of skills compared to those needed on offense. This section gives you a rundown of defensive positions, what each player's responsible for doing, and some of the physical and mental traits make a kid well-suited for a position.

Positions and responsibilities

In this section, we tell you where defensive players take the field and what their main responsibilities are. Here you see some of the components for playing good defense:

- ✓ **Defensive linemen:** Players handling these positions line up across from the center, guards, and tackles on the offensive line. The defensive line consists of tackles and ends.
- **Defensive tackles:** These players comprise the interior of the defensive line. They face opposite the offense's guards. These players make tackles on running plays, put pressure on the quarterback on passing plays, and also occupy blockers so that linebackers have a clear path to the player carrying the ball.

- **Defensive ends:** These two players line up at both ends of the defensive line and face the opposing team's tackles. Because the area of the football field on the outside of the defensive ends is so risky, one of their top jobs consists of containing the running back on rushing plays so he can't get to the outside, as well as rushing the quarterback and applying pressure on passing plays.
 - ✓ **Linebackers:** These players are the team's second line of defense, as they line up in between the defensive line and the *secondary* (cornerbacks and safeties). Players in these positions usually make the majority of the tackles. They're also responsible for covering running backs and tight ends going out for passes.
 - ✓ **The secondary (defensive backs):** Players manning these positions are responsible for covering wide receivers, tight ends, and running backs on pass patterns, as well as providing defensive support on running players.
 - **Cornerbacks:** A cornerback's top task is covering the wide receiver he lines up across from. Depending on the type of defense that's played when a wide receiver goes in motion, a cornerback often mirrors all his movements. On running plays, cornerbacks lend additional support by contributing tackles.
 - **Safeties:** The free safety and strong safety are the last lines of defense. They usually line up in the secondary with the cornerbacks and are generally the farthest from the line of scrimmage. Typically, the free safety plays the middle of the field; the strong safety is on same side of the field as the offense's tight end.
- Safeties handle multiple roles. Along with providing support for the cornerbacks who are covering the wide receivers, they also move forward to assist with tackling on running plays. Sometimes they line up at the line of scrimmage if the coach wants to send in extra players when the offense is clearly in a passing situation or to try to put additional pressure on the quarterback in a play known as a *blitz* (see Chapter 15 for more on blitzing).



Playing on both sides of the ball

If you're coaching a team that doesn't have enough players to fill out an offensive and defensive unit and some players need to play both ways, quarterbacks generally also make good safeties because of their grasp of the

game. Other positions that are pretty interchangeable are fullbacks and linebackers, wide receivers and cornerbacks, tight ends and defensive ends, and offensive guards and defensive tackles.

Types of kids best suited for certain positions

Here's a quick guide to putting together your defensive unit (check out Chapter 5 for more on assigning positions):

- ✓ **Defensive tackles:** The kids you tab for these positions must be some of your bigger and stronger players, because they're the anchor of the defensive line. Having good size helps kids to play here, because they'll be dealing with blocks from the opposing center, guards, and even full-back at times.
- ✓ **Defensive ends:** The kids slotted at these positions are generally some of the stronger kids on the team who also possess some quickness, because the team counts on them to apply pressure to the quarterback. More-athletic tacklers are best suited for these positions, and coaches often use their second-best defensive players to fill these spots.
- ✓ **Linebackers:** A lot of defenses are designed for linebackers to make a majority of the tackles. The players filling these positions need sound tackling techniques and an aggressive mindset, because they usually have to fight off blocks from offensive linemen to get in on tackles. The team's best defensive players are usually best suited to play here.
- ✓ **Cornerbacks:** Quick kids who have good hand-eye coordination fit well here. The faster a cornerback is, the more effective he'll be at covering the receiver. Cornerbacks are often some of the team's most athletic players.
- ✓ **Safeties:** Athletic kids with a good understanding of the game are excellent candidates for these positions. Safeties have to be quick enough to keep up with wide receivers on downfield passing plays. They also need to be good tacklers for when they come up to the line of scrimmage and provide additional support to stop an opponent's running attack.

Ready, Set, Hut: Understanding the Absolute Basics of Football

Football, in its simplest terms, is the team on offense trying to move the ball down the field and score points while the team on defense does its best to stop them. The offensive team can score points in a number of ways. It can score *touchdowns*, which are worth six points, by getting the ball into the opponent's end zone. Following touchdowns, the team gets to attempt an *extra point*, which the team scores by successfully kicking the ball through the goal posts. After touchdowns, teams can alternately attempt *two-point*

conversions, where the ball is placed at the 3-yard line and they get one play to get the ball across the goal line. These plays are common at the younger levels because the kids don't yet have the leg strength to kick extra points.

The offensive team can also attempt *field goals* from anywhere on the field. Kicking the ball through the goal posts is worth three points, and if it misses, the opposing team takes over possession of the ball.

Besides touchdowns, field goals, and extra points, the only other way for a team to put points on the scoreboard is by a *safety*. A safety occurs when a team is tackled with the ball in their own end zone and the opposing team receives two points. These generally occur when a team is backed up near its own goal line and the quarterback is tackled in the end zone while attempting a pass or when the running back is stopped in the end zone before he's had a chance to get out of the backfield with the ball.

To round out your understanding a bit, read on for common terms and penalties.

Terms to know and love

The following are some basic terms that can help erase any confusion you may have about the game:

✓ **Down:** When a team has the ball, it moves down the field in 10-yard increments. A team gets four attempts to move the ball 10 yards, and each attempt is called a *down*. So when a team starts with the ball, it's called first down and 10 (unless they have fewer yards to go because they got a first down inside the opponent's 10-yard line). If the play gains 7 yards, it's then second down and 3. If that play gains 5 yards, the team has gained its minimum 10 yards and a first down.

First downs are as coveted as gold was to prospectors in the old days. After a team moves the ball 10 yards or more, it earns another *first down*. As long as the team keeps racking up first downs, it continues to move the ball down the field toward its opponent's end zone.

✓ **Fair catch:** A punt returner sometimes signals a *fair catch*, in which he agrees not to run with the ball after catching it. A player who opts to make a fair catch on a punt or kick must noticeably wave his hand above his head for the signal to be legal. When he waves his hand, the defenders have to allow the player to catch the ball without distracting him. If the ball's caught, his team begins the series from there. If the player drops the ball, anyone from either team can recover it. Fair catches are used by players who feel that too many defensive players are around to make running the ball advantageous.

- ✓ **Interception:** Quarterbacks despise these as much as early bedtimes. An *interception* occurs when a defensive player catches the quarterback's pass, which gives possession of the ball to the defensive team.
- ✓ **Kickoff:** All games begin with a *kickoff*, in which the kicking team lines up across the field and kicks the ball to the opponent, who runs it back until the player is tackled. A team that scores a touchdown or field goal follows up by kicking off to its opponent. Kickoffs also start the second half of games.
- ✓ **Punt:** When the offensive unit fails to move the ball 10 yards to make a first down and is facing fourth down, a team may choose to *punt* the ball, kicking it away. A punter receives the snap from the center and drops the ball in mid-air to kick it downfield. Teams punt the ball in order to make the opponent have to travel farther in its attempt to score a touchdown. Kids with decent leg strength, or good coordination, usually get selected to handle the punting duties. Jump to Chapter 17 to get the scoop on returning and covering punts.
- ✓ **Sack:** Sacks thrill the defensive team. A *sack* occurs when a defensive player (or players) tackles the quarterback behind the line of scrimmage while he still has the ball in his attempt to pass. If the play's a rushing play, the tackle goes down as a *tackle for a loss* (of yards).

Rules and common penalties

Football is a pretty complex game with all of its positions, and it involves all sorts of rules, too. Some are basic and easy to understand, and some may initially leave you scratching your head. Not to worry. This section helps you become well-versed in all areas of the game so you're comfortable explaining these rules and their infractions — and all the nuances attached to them — to your players.



If you don't have a football background as a player or coach, you may not be familiar with some of the rules, and the thought of digesting an entire rule book can seem a bit overwhelming. Don't panic, and don't try to memorize every single rule in one sitting. Focus on two or three rules each night and how they're applied, and build from there. You can't possibly expect your young players to know every single rule after the first week of the season, so don't put that kind of pressure on yourself, either. Go over them one at a time at a reasonable pace, build on them, and before you know it, you'll be rules savvy — and so will your team.

When the referee spots a penalty, he throws a yellow flag in the vicinity of the infraction. If a player on the offensive team committed a penalty, the team has to move back a set number of yards. On penalties against the defense, the offense moves forward and may get a first down.

Penalties are marked off in 5-, 10-, or 15-yard increments. Penalties can also be odd yardages, depending on the penalty or where on the field the penalty was committed. For example, a false start penalty moves the offensive team back 5 yards, but if the team is beginning the play from its own 3-yard line, the penalty in this case is half the distance to the goal, which makes it a 1½-yard penalty. Following are some of the basic penalties that you're likely to come across during your season on the sidelines. So turn off the TV and prop up the feet. It's time to tackle the rules of football.

Penalties against the offensive team

Offenses hate being flagged for penalties, which march them back from the end zone they're really trying to reach. The following are common offensive penalties:

- ✓ **False start:** This occurs when an offensive player moves before the ball is snapped. The false start doesn't apply to receivers, running backs, or the quarterback, who may be in motion as long as they're moving parallel to or away from the line of scrimmage. In most cases, refs call false starts on offensive linemen who move forward before the center has snapped the ball to the quarterback. This is a 5-yard penalty.
- ✓ **Illegal shift:** Offensive players can't make any movements for at least a second before the ball is snapped. Multiple players can be shifting positions at one time as long as they all get set for that second before the snap. Failure to do so results in a 5-yard penalty.
- ✓ **Illegal motion:** A player who goes in motion but isn't parallel to the line of scrimmage is guilty of this infraction, which costs his team a 5-yard penalty. It's typically called for any forward movement before the snap.
- ✓ **Illegal formation:** The offense must have seven players on the line of scrimmage; otherwise they're flagged for an illegal formation and must move back 5 yards.
- ✓ **Illegal return:** A player making a fair catch signal (waving his hand above his head) can't run with the ball. Doing so results in a 5-yard penalty. The fair catch signal tells the opposing team that he's just going to catch the ball and have his team begin on offense from the spot of the catch.

- ✓ **Forward pass thrown from behind the line of scrimmage after the ball has already crossed the line of scrimmage:** After the ball passes the line of scrimmage, players can't take the ball back behind the line and throw it forward. Doing so incurs a 5-yard penalty.
- ✓ **Second forward pass behind the line:** Teams are allowed to make only one forward pass from behind the line of scrimmage during the course of a play. Trying a second one costs the team a 5-yard penalty.
- ✓ **Intentional grounding:** Anytime a quarterback is between the offensive tackles, he can't throw the ball into the ground or out of bounds in an attempt to avoid a sack. If an eligible receiver is in the vicinity, a quarterback can get away with this type of play, but otherwise the refs call intentional grounding, and it's a costly penalty — 10 yards are marked off from where he was when he threw the ball, and it's a loss of down.
- ✓ **Offensive pass interference:** In an effort to catch the ball, offensive players can't push or interfere with a defensive player, who has an equal right to the ball. The offensive team backs up 10 yards when this is flagged.
- ✓ **Chop block:** Offensive players aren't allowed to block defenders below the waist, unless they do so along the line of scrimmage within a free area extending 4 yards on either side of where the ball was snapped and 3 yards behind the line of scrimmage. Blocking below the waist outside the free zone puts the opponent at risk of injury and also results in a 15-yard penalty. After the ball has left this zone, the free blocking area disintegrates. Within the free zone, one player can't engage in a block above waist level while his teammate delivers a chop block to the opponent's legs.
- ✓ **Clipping:** This infraction occurs when an offensive player blocks a defensive player from behind. This is a costly 15-yard penalty. A player's head must be in front of or to the side of the player he's blocking.
- ✓ **Faking a roughing:** This penalty is rarely called, but when the referee nabs a kicker for faking that he's been roughed up, he saddles the team with a 15-yard penalty.

Penalties against the defensive team

Penalties committed by the defensive team are costly because they provide the offense with free yards and often keep drives going. Some of the common defensive penalties are the following:

- ✓ **Encroachment:** Encroachment occurs when a defensive player steps across the line of scrimmage before the ball is snapped and makes contact with an offensive player. This is a 5-yard penalty. In some programs, the encroachment penalty is called if a player breaks the plane of the line of scrimmage (if any part of his body crosses over the line).

- ✓ **Defensive holding or illegal use of hands:** Defensive players can push, jam, and initiate contact with offensive receivers and backs within 5 yards of the line of scrimmage. But beyond that 5-yard zone, they can't have their hands on the offensive player. This infraction earns a 5-yard penalty and, more importantly, an automatic first down for the offensive team. Some programs allow defensive players to contact the opposition all over the field until the ball is in the air.
- ✓ **Fair catch interference:** After a player signals for a fair catch, defenders must give him a 2-yard cushion to catch the ball before they make contact. This can either be a 5- or 15-yard penalty, depending on the severity of the contact.
- ✓ **Roughing the passer:** After the quarterback has released a pass, defenders within one step of the quarterback (the passer) are allowed to make contact with him. If reaching him takes more than one step and defenders make contact, the team takes a 15-yard penalty and the opposition gets an automatic first down. Most programs at the youth level simply call unnecessary roughness when this occurs.
- ✓ **Roughing the kicker:** This is similar to running into the kicker, except it's a more flagrant version that usually results in knocking the kicker over. It's a 15-yard penalty for the defense and an automatic first down for the offensive team.
- ✓ **Spearing:** Players can't lead with the top of their helmet when tackling an opponent. Far more important than the 15-yard penalty that results, it's an extremely dangerous play that puts both the defensive player and the player he's tackling at serious risk of injury. Check out Chapter 10 for details on how to teach proper tackling techniques.



Penalties against either team

During the course of action, players on either side of the ball can get flagged for the same infraction. Here's a look at some of the common penalties that can go either way:

- ✓ **Delay of game:** This infraction is generally whistled on the offensive team. After the referee places the ball for the ensuing play, the team has a set number of seconds in which to snap the ball. If it doesn't do so within the allotted time, the team receives a 5-yard penalty.

Referees can also call this penalty on the defense if the unit is stalling getting into position and isn't allowing the offense to snap the ball as quickly as it wants to. This can occur when defensive players get up extra slowly from tackles when the offensive player underneath is trying to get up quickly to get back to the line of scrimmage.

- ✓ **Pass touched by receiver after he's gone out of bounds:** After a player steps out of bounds, whether on his own or when pushed out by an opposing player, he's not allowed to touch the ball on that play. If he does, he costs his team a 5-yard penalty.
- ✓ **Offside:** Prior to every play, both teams must line up on their line of scrimmage and cannot be in the neutral zone when the ball is snapped (except for the center, who has his hands on the ball). The *neutral zone* consists of the area between the front and back of the football. An off-side penalty costs 5 yards.
- ✓ **Excessive timeouts:** Teams are allotted three timeouts each half. Simply calling a timeout when you've already used yours up results in a 5-yard penalty (and you still don't get to use the timeout).
- ✓ **Too many men on the field:** You're allowed only 11 players on the field at a time. Any more than that and your team receives a 5-yard penalty. You can play with fewer than 11 without receiving a 5-yard penalty, though that's not recommended!
- ✓ **Player out of bounds at snap:** All 11 players must be on the field of play at the snap of the ball. Players can't come in from the sidelines when the play's underway. Doing so results in a 5-yard penalty.
- ✓ **Illegal substitution:** Players may enter the field of play only when no play is going on. Many leagues adhere to the rule that players on the field must be at least 9 yards from the sideline when the huddle breaks. Also, they have to leave only by crossing their own sideline. Failure to follow this rule results in a 5-yard penalty.
- ✓ **Holding:** This penalty is most often called on offensive linemen who hold onto the player they're trying to block. On the defensive side of the ball, cornerbacks can get called for holding onto the receivers they're trying to cover. Holding merits a 10-yard penalty.
- ✓ **Facemask:** Grabbing an opponent's face mask is a big no-no. If the referee deems the contact unintentional (such as a player's hand grazing the mask but not latching onto it) the result is a 5-yard penalty. If a player grabs onto the mask, the referee usually calls that a flagrant foul and assesses a 15-yard penalty.
- ✓ **Unnecessary roughness:** Football is a contact sport, and the play that unfolds on the field can get pretty rough at times. When officials deem that a player used an excessive amount of roughness, they throw a flag and assess a 15-yard penalty.

✓ **Unsportsmanlike conduct:** Players or coaches who argue with an official or use foul language earn their team a 15-yard penalty and risk being thrown out of the game. As a coach, you're a role model to your players and should never force a referee to call this penalty on you. We talk more about dealing with players who behave inappropriately in Chapter 20.

The striped shirt: Referee responsibilities and hand signals

Officials are an important part of every youth football game. Without them on the field monitoring the action, the game would quickly deteriorate into total chaos. Officials have the responsibility of watching the play, calling penalties when rules are broken, and making sure that players don't intentionally hurt one another. Refereeing a professional football game takes seven officials (referee, umpire, head linesman, line judge, back judge, field judge, and side judge), but youth football games typically use one official in beginner leagues and two or three at the more advanced levels.

At the start of each play, you can find the referee in the backfield, roughly 10 yards behind the quarterback. The referee watches for illegal hits on the quarterback, as well as illegal blocks. He announces penalties and explains to the coach who the penalty was on, and the ref has the final say on all decisions. He also decides whether to bring the yardage chains on the field to measure whether the team has advanced the ball far enough for a first down.

In youth games that feature a two-referee system, the second official generally positions himself about 5 to 10 yards off the line of scrimmage on the defensive side of the ball. He watches the play along the line of scrimmage for offensive and defensive holding and assists on rulings involving fumbles and possession of the ball, among other duties.

Knowing what a referee signals during the game and understanding why he made that particular call are essential for fulfilling your coaching responsibilities and helping your players learn and grow in the sport. Take a look at the most commonly used hand signals you'll see during your games this season. In some cases, the referee will strike some weird poses. You can check out these signals in Figure 3-3.



Figure 3-3:
Get to know
these
referee
signals.

Chapter 4

Meet the Parents

In This Chapter

- ▶ Making a good impression
 - ▶ Sharing your philosophy
 - ▶ Shuffling league papers
 - ▶ Explaining the equipment parents need to provide
 - ▶ Recruiting parents to help out
 - ▶ Making accommodations for players with special needs
 - ▶ Following up for additional questions and comments
-

Good football coaches know how important first-rate communication skills are for working with kids — and getting along with parents. Your ability to interact with Junior's parents and getting them to work with you rather than against you has a big impact on whether the season runs smoothly or you run into obstacles every turn.

In this chapter, we take a look at the preseason parents meeting, which is as important to you as a parachute is for a skydiver. We also run through sharing your coaching philosophy with others, negotiating your way through the piles of paperwork, and recruiting parents for all sorts of jobs that can ease your workload and keep your focus where it should be: on the kids. Time to meet those parents!

Let Me Introduce Myself: Tips for a Productive Preseason Meeting

Holding a preseason parents meeting before you step on the field opens critical lines of communication and sends that all-important message that you'll work with parents to help ensure their child has a rewarding season. The preseason parents meeting serves multiple purposes. It's the chance for parents to get to know who their child will be spending time with this season, and it's an opportunity for you to let parents know how you'll be handling the team so no one has any surprises along the way.

First impressions leave lasting imprints on the parents. Because of the significance of this meeting, approach it with the same effort and enthusiasm you'd give to an interview for a job you desperately wanted. Don't worry — no one expects you to be a professional speaker. However, being able to clearly explain your thoughts on the topics you'll cover demonstrates how deeply you care about the upcoming season and reinforces your commitment to each child on the team. Parents will appreciate your initiative and feel much more at ease turning their child over to you this season. Here are some additional points to keep in mind regarding the meeting:

- ✓ **Pick a convenient spot for the meeting.** Your best bet is to meet at the recreation department that runs the league. If you let the league director know you want to meet with your team members' parents, the director can make arrangements to reserve a room for you. If space is a problem, local libraries often have meeting rooms available.
- ✓ **Choose a convenient time.** Pick a time that matches, as closely as possible, what time your team takes the field for practice. That way, you'll know your meeting fits into most parents' schedules, because they'll bring their child to practice at that time.
- ✓ **Keep the length of the meeting in mind.** Plan on spending at least half an hour — and no more than an hour — with the meeting. Don't forget to include time for a question-and-answer session at the end.
- ✓ **Make contact with parents as soon as possible.** Most parents juggle chaotic schedules, so getting everyone together at one time can be a little tricky. As soon as you get your hands on your team roster, contact each child's parents to introduce yourself as the coach and let them know the date, time, and location you chose for your parents meeting — and stress the importance of being there. Giving parents as much notice as possible gives them time to rearrange their schedules if necessary and increases their likelihood of showing up.
- ✓ **Hitting the high points.** Jot down the main points you want to cover. Start by asking yourself what you'd want to know if you were handing your child over to a coach you didn't know for a season. You'd want to know what type of coaching experience the individual had, how often the team will practice, and how positions will be determined, among other things.
- ✓ **Practice what you're going to say.** What do you tell kids to do to get better at something? Right: practice. The same applies to you when it comes to public speaking. In the days leading up to the meeting, stand in front of a mirror and practice what you're going to say. If you sense you'll be really uncomfortable, rehearse in front of your spouse, a family member, or a friend.
- ✓ **Use notes.** Outline all your main points on a notepad and bring it to the meeting. Referring to it often throughout the meeting isn't a sign of weakness — it indicates that you want to make sure you're covering all the important points for the parents' benefit. Being properly prepared is the best antidote for conquering speaking nerves.



Although it's tempting, don't write out everything you want to say and read it word for word at the meeting. That'll bore parents and make them wonder just how much fun their child will have with you this season.

- ✓ **Include time for parent introductions.** Parents will see quite a bit of each other during the season, so at some point during the meeting, have the parents introduce themselves and who their child is, too. Although some parents will probably already know each other, introductions can be a good icebreaker.
- ✓ **Pass out the paperwork.** Distribute the paperwork at the end of your meeting to avoid creating distractions; otherwise, some parents may tune out what you have to say because they'll be too busy flipping through what you passed out. For more information on handouts to include, see the section titled "Putting Together the Paperwork."
- ✓ **Have a back-up plan.** Ideally, you'd like all the parents to show up on your designated meeting night. Despite your efforts, if any parent simply can't make it, make arrangements to go over everything on the phone some evening or meet with him or her to share what you covered during the meeting.

Explaining Your Coaching Philosophy

Let parents know how you'll be handling the kids to reduce the chances of misunderstandings throughout the season. Try to clearly define your stance on issues regarding playing time, good sportsmanship, and what role winning plays to represent the foundation of your coaching philosophy (see Chapter 2 for more on developing that philosophy). Giving parents this heads up provides ample time for them to find a more appropriate league or level of competitiveness for their child if the current one isn't a good fit.

Your views on the importance (or lack thereof) of winning

Probably one of the most important topics you'll address with parents is winning and your views on this very sensitive issue. In youth football, people define winning in a lot of different ways. For example, for young children involved in the sport for the first time, what the scoreboard says at the end of the game isn't nearly as important as whether the kids had fun with their friends, got some exercise, and enjoyed participating. That's why many leagues at the beginning levels don't turn the scoreboard on during games or keep standings. Countless studies indicate that children are far less concerned about winning — especially at the younger levels — than their parents are.

As youngsters become older, winning grabs a more prominent role: They spend more time training and practicing, and their performances in games and whether the team wins or loses becomes more important to them.

If you're coaching young kids, you want parents to understand that your goal is to introduce kids to the basic concepts of the sport — like tackling and blocking — and to make the process enjoyable enough that the kids can't wait to work on their skills at practice and are excited to pull on that colorful jersey when game day arrives.

If you're coaching a team that includes players who've been playing the sport a few years, you want parents to know that you'll encourage players to compete hard and do their best to try winning the game — but only doing so within the rules while displaying good sportsmanship toward both their opponents and the officials.

The role of good sportsmanship for kids

Well-rounded coaches teach kids not only the fundamentals of tackling, kicking, and all sorts of other skills but also the importance of displaying good sportsmanship. Parents appreciate knowing that their youngsters are learning what being a good sport means. How the team behaves after both wins and losses is often more memorable than how team members performed.

Outline to parents that you'll have the kids shake hands with the opponents following each game. Note that when your players win, you expect the kids to refrain from excessive celebrating; and when they lose, they'll congratulate the opponent for playing well. Modeling good sportsmanship isn't easy, but playing fairly, showing respect toward referees regardless of the call, and accepting the game's results graciously are so important to teach young players. Encourage parents to talk about sportsmanship with their children. Remember, the habits the kids pick up from you are the ones they'll carry with them during their future years playing football. And knowing that you instilled positive traits in them feels great.

The importance of model behavior by parents in the stands

Be very clear and straightforward on what type of behavior you expect from the parents. Emphasize the importance of being models of good sportsmanship before, during, and after games. Let them know that children are easily distracted and don't perform as well — or have as much fun — when they're being screamed at to make tackles or catch passes.



You need parents working with you — not against you — as you teach your players proper behavior. If you can get the parents to fully understand the importance of showing good sportsmanship, the youngsters will be more likely to follow in their footsteps; however, if you and the parents send mixed signals, your message will get lost. Actions, including the parents' behavior in the stands, speak much louder than any words.

Stress to parents that you never want to have to have them removed from the stands for behaving inappropriately but won't hesitate to do so if they're being a negative influence. (Many leagues have policies in place for the removal of spectators, and you should be aware of what steps are required for doing so.) Don't be condescending in your tone, but hammer home the point that this season is about making sure the kids' memories are of having fun and developing skills, not of listening to out-of-control parents make everyone miserable. (See Chapter 20 for more on dealing with disruptive parents.)

You never want parents yelling at officials or opposing coaches or players from either team. The audience's comments should be only positive and encouraging.



Officials at the younger age groups are often teenagers who, despite doing their best, will probably make occasional mistakes. Make parents aware of this fact and that yelling at these officials, no matter how bad the call seems to be, is totally unacceptable under any circumstance. Explain that having calls go against your team is simply a part of the game. Point out that over the course of the season, the calls will certainly balance out and your team will receive its share of favorable rulings. When parents don't make a big deal about calls, neither will the kids; by the time the game ends, the kids won't give that second-quarter penalty call another thought.

Also, let parents know that they need to refrain from shouting directions, because hearing multiple sets of instructions confuses kids. Remind parents that you're the coach and that all the coaching needs to come from you.

How you determine playing time and positions

Coaching football requires making all sorts of decisions. A couple of the more challenging ones you'll deal with involve doling out playing time and assigning positions for the kids.

A lot of parents sign their kids up for football with a position in mind that they think he's best suited for. This usually doesn't work out the way they envision — particularly when half a dozen dads think their son should be the

quarterback. Explaining your process for positioning kids — and deciding when each kid takes the field — well before games begin alleviates some of these potential headaches.

Playing time through the ages

Telling the parents how you decide how long each player spends on the field can prevent a lot of frustration and hurt feelings. (If parents forget your methods during the season and want to know why their child doesn't play more, flip to Chapter 20 for tips on handling the situation.)

For kids, playing football is all about getting playing time. Giving kids equal opportunities to play is crucial for their development in the sport. Kids who have to sit on the bench for long stretches or who don't receive the same amount of playing time as their friends quickly lose interest in the sport. Let parents know that you're aware of this, and explain that you or your assistant coaches will carefully monitor playing time for each player.

Tell parents that one of your top priorities during games is making sure that playing time is divvied up equally among the kids, regardless of how fast they are, how accurately they throw, or how well they catch passes — as long as the kids regularly attend practices. It's not fair to the kids who show up for every practice to have to share playing time with teammates who appear only on game day. So be sure to outline that policy to parents ahead of time to avoid conflicts during games.

At the older and more advanced stages of football (usually around the age of 14), where winning games takes on a more prominent role, playing time is distributed based on the player's ability. As kids move up through the football ranks, games take on a more competitive feel, and kids understand that. Kids begin to compare their skills to those of others their age and have a good sense where they fit in skillwise, just like they do in school when certain kids establish themselves as the smartest ones of the bunch. When letting parents know how playing time is divvied up, emphasize that everyone plays a significant role on the team, regardless of whether they start.

Lining up: Who plays where and why

Choosing playing positions for kids is like rebuilding a car engine: You've got all these parts scattered around; they somehow go together, and it's up to you to figure out the right combination to make things run smoothly.

Now, at the youngest age levels, your mission is simply to give kids a taste of as many different positions as possible. In the short amount of time you have with them, letting them experience every position probably isn't going to be possible. At the very least, you can let each kid try out playing on both the offensive and defensive sides of the ball, as well as get a taste of what playing on special teams is like. Most parents will appreciate your interest in giving the

kids a chance to experience different aspects of the game. Those parents who have their hearts set on their child's playing running back all season and — unfortunately — aren't thrilled that he'll be moved around on the field may opt to sign him up elsewhere, thanks to your advance notice of how the season will run.

Explain the benefits of letting kids experiment with different positions. Parents disappointed that their child won't get to play a specific position as much as they'd hoped may be pleasantly surprised to see him excel where they never gave much thought to his playing or didn't realize he had the talent to play so well. Who knows? Opening a child's — and parents' — eyes to a new position may spark an enthusiastic response from the youngster and end up being what keeps him actively involved in football for years to come.

At the more advanced levels, let parents know that figuring out where kids are best suited to play takes on more importance. You may have four or five kids who desperately want to play quarterback, but your job is figuring out which player has the talent and attitude to handle the position and what other positions those players who were eyeing the quarterback spot can fill to best help the team excel. In Chapter 5, we go into detail on evaluating players and assigning positions.

Putting Together the Paperwork

The majority of youth football programs around the country require parents to sign a series of forms before their child's allowed to participate. These forms are typically filled out during registration, but sometimes the responsibility of securing the proper paperwork is dropped in your lap. Although the content and style vary from league to league, the purpose is generally the same. The following section gives you a rundown of the forms you may see.

Beyond the league paperwork, you can make your job easier (and keep your sanity in the process) by distributing your own packets of information to the parents. These packets can include team rosters and contact information for everyone (including yourself), a copy of the practice and game schedule, some basic information on football for parents who aren't familiar with the sport, and a rundown of any rules that have been modified by the league.

League paperwork

The league usually requires a variety of forms before kids can put on the shoulder pads and helmets. Take a closer look.

Consent form

This form states the risk that a child may get hurt during practices or games and says that in the event of an injury, the league isn't responsible. Most programs carry insurance against possible litigation.



Be sure you ask about the league's coverage and your own status under the policy. The National Youth Sports Coaches Association, a program of the National Alliance for Youth Sports, provides coverage to coaches who complete its training program.

Medical evaluation form

This form, signed by the child's physician, basically states that the youngster is physically healthy and is able to participate in the sport. If the child has a condition such as asthma or diabetes, it's listed on this sheet.

Emergency treatment authorization form

The child's parent or guardian signs this form, which lists the names of usually three people who should be contacted if the child is injured and requires emergency medical treatment. The form usually gives the coach or other league personnel the authority to seek medical treatment for the child if no one can be reached.

Personal information packets

Not only does distributing a team packet provide parents with convenient access to all the information they'll need this season, but it also makes another great impression. Coaches who put an effort to include parents in every step of the season are rewarded with the parents' respect, admiration, and assistance along the way. Consider distributing the following handouts.

Practice and game schedules

Leagues typically set the schedule for the season well in advance, so be sure parents get a copy so they can plan accordingly. Also, if the league has assigned what days and times you get to use the field for practice, make sure that's included for the parents as well. The more information, the better, so parents know what's coming each week.

A rules primer

Although most parents will probably be pretty familiar with most of the rules and terminology of football, some individuals may not be up to speed on the game. You — and they — simply don't have enough time to go over the game itself in a lot of detail without dragging the meeting into all hours of the night. Print up a rules primer that parents can read on their own.

Be sure to include a special page noting any special rules in effect in the league. Maybe the league has instructed officials not to call offensive holding on the kids to keep the game moving. Perhaps kickoffs don't follow touchdowns at this level, and teams just automatically start with the ball at their 20-yard line. Briefly alerting parents to any special modifications in the rules during your parents meeting — and detailing the changes again in this packet — greatly reduces confusion at games and allows parents to fully understand what's taking place on the field.



Having this handy rules guide at their disposal can greatly enhance the parents' understanding and enjoyment of the game. Don't turn assembling the rules into a monster project that has you up all night, though. Just put together a couple pages on some of the basics of the game. You can include a rough sketch of the field and indicate where each player's positioned; throw in a page to define some basic terms that'll be used often during the season; and include a page of the official's hand signals and what they mean (you can copy them from Chapter 3).

Phone lists and contact information

A sheet with all the kids' names and telephone numbers (and your own) can be a pretty handy piece of information for parents. At some point during the season, they may need to contact another parent to arrange their child's ride to practice.

Covering Equipment

Youngsters are well-protected from head to toe with a wide range of equipment, but every player stepping on the field risks getting hurt — regardless of age or skill level. Completely eliminating the threat of injury is impossible; however, you can greatly reduce the number of injuries and their severity by ensuring the kids always wear all the proper equipment. Players are responsible for providing some of their own equipment, but leagues often provide some, too. This section tells you which is which.

Player equipment

Here's a look at the equipment that players are typically responsible for purchasing on their own (see Chapter 2 for more on what some of these pieces do and what types are available):

- ✓ **Mouth guards:** A good way to promote team unity is having all the kids wear the same color. Recommend a local sporting goods store that has the specific color in stock so parents aren't running all over town looking for them. Mouth guards generally run about \$5, but you can purchase fitted ones for about \$20.

- ✓ **Athletic supporter/protective cups:** These pieces are appropriate for older kids and cost about \$10.
- ✓ **Shoes/socks:** Check with the league director regarding the types of spikes that are allowed and let parents know so they can purchase the correct pair of cleats. Football cleats come in a wide variety of styles, and the cost runs the spectrum from \$20 to \$50.
- ✓ **Jersey:** Sometimes kids get their own jersey with their name on it. Other times, the league loans a jersey out for the season and parents are responsible for keeping it in good condition and turning it in at the conclusion of the season. If parents have to purchase the jersey, it's usually done through the league to ensure that each child on the team has the exact same color. Sometimes the uniform cost is simply worked into the registration fee.
- ✓ **Water bottles:** Every child should bring a water bottle to practices and games with his name clearly marked on it. Parents can purchase these for just a couple dollars.

Make sure parents understand they're responsible for purchasing these items prior to your first practice. You don't want kids showing up without mouth guards, for example — and being forced to watch from the sidelines — because their parents had the impression you were handing them out.

Team equipment

Most leagues provide the following:

- ✓ Helmets
- ✓ Shoulder pads
- ✓ Pants with the knee, hip, tailbone, and thigh pads included

Kids use the equipment and then turn it in at the end of the season. If the league requires parents to purchase any of this equipment, direct them to a reputable sporting goods store to receive assistance selecting properly-fitted equipment for their child.

Assembling Your Parent Posse

Parents play integral roles in youth football programs. They invest time and money and make personal sacrifices along the way to provide the kids with fun-filled experiences on the field. In most cases, parents are usually more

than willing to pitch in to help make the season run smoothly. Sure, some parents use practices as a babysitting service while they run errands for an hour; or some may just be more comfortable blending into the background and watching from a distance. However, encouraging your players' parents to take active interest in the season — and providing them with ways they can be real assets to the team — throws down the welcome mat for them to step forward and lend a hand.

Assistant coaches

Overseeing an entire youth football team — some of which can have a few dozen players — is a huge task. Recruiting friends you're comfortable working with, or appointing parents to assistant coaching positions, can help ease your workload. Football practices often feature a wide range of drills for all the different positions, so the more knowledgeable adults you have helping out, the more smoothly your drills will run and the more benefits your players will gain.

Assistant coaches are also valuable resources on game day. Having additional sets of eyes and ears helps you in a number of areas. For instance, assistants can help monitor your substitution rotation to ensure that the kids receive equal amounts of playing time; they can help oversee warm-ups to make sure each child stretches properly; they can orchestrate pre-game drills while you meet with the opposing coach and officials; and they can alert you to any unsportsmanlike behavior being displayed that you may not catch while fulfilling your other responsibilities during the course of the game.



Do your homework before filling these key positions. Choosing your assistant coaches is one of the most important decisions you'll make as a coach, and you probably won't know most of the parents at the start of the season. Some parents you recruit may surprise you with their overzealousness and try taking over your practices. Meanwhile, other parents may require so much mentoring that they actually detract from the children's valuable practice time. Let the parents know that you'll seek volunteers to serve as assistants once the season gets rolling and to let you know if they're interested. That way, you can keep an eye on parents who express interest to see how they behave and interact with their child and others so you can identify good candidates.

At the more advanced levels, where there's a greater emphasis on plays, systems, and formations, find out in advance who's interested in being an assistant and set aside time to interview the candidates. Questions about their experience playing and coaching the game, why they want to be involved, and how they think they can be an asset help you determine who's going to be helpful — and who's going to be a hindrance.

Supporting roles

Parents who never played football growing up or who don't have much of an athletic background aren't going to feel comfortable providing instruction, but that doesn't mean they can't help out in other areas. Most parents want to be involved in their child's experience; they just need to know how they can help. Some of the jobs that parents can tackle include the following:

- ✓ **Telephone tree coordinator:** If you decide to cancel practice, calling every parent can be extremely time consuming. The telephone tree coordinator is in charge of putting together and overseeing the phone list to ensure that messages are communicated to every parent as efficiently as possible. For example, you let your telephone tree coordinator know that practice has been cancelled and when it has been rescheduled for. The telephone tree coordinator calls two parents on the phone list, those two parents each call two parents, and so on, and in a matter of minutes, everyone has been contacted.
- ✓ **Team parent:** A great way to wrap up a practice session or game is to gather the troops for a refreshing beverage or tasty snack. Choose a team parent who can put together a schedule assigning parents which game or practice they're responsible for bringing snacks to. (For information on appropriate post-game snacks to suggest, see Chapter 19.) This role can also include organizing an end-of-season pizza party or even making arrangements to take the entire team to watch a local high school, college, or professional football game.
- ✓ **Concession stand worker:** Some leagues require each team to provide a couple parents to work the league's concession stand during the season. Check with the league director to find out what dates need filling and see which of the parents are willing to serve food or drinks or work the cash register.
- ✓ **Photo coordinator:** Team photos are great keepsakes for the children, who years from now will get — excuse the pun — a real kick out of seeing themselves and their friends all decked out in their uniforms. The league often works directly with a local photography company; other times, organizing the photo shoot is left up to the discretion of the coach. Either way, having a parent fulfill the photo coordinator position can be extremely helpful. Besides working with you to select a convenient time for the team photo, the photo coordinator can arrange for a photographer to come out for a game or two to take action shots of the kids. At the end of the season, providing each child with a personal shot is a great touch. (We go into greater detail on fun ways to end the season in Chapter 23.)

- ✓ **Team trainer (first aid):** Football is a contact sport, and that means that during the season, children will suffer bumps and bruises, scrapes and abrasions, and other minor aches and pains. Ask a parent who's been properly trained in first aid and has experience dealing with these sorts of problems to help out. Although all coaches should be trained in CPR and be familiar with basic first aid, having parents skilled in these important areas is comforting not only to you but to the other parents as well.
- ✓ **Trophy coordinator:** Some leagues present trophies to the first-place team in the league, some hand out participation trophies or certificates to every child, and some simply don't have the financial resources to provide anything extra. Depending on the type of league you're coaching in, you may want to consider assigning a trophy coordinator who can arrange to have small participation trophies or plaques to present to each child at the end of the season. (This is another idea that we explain in greater detail in Chapter 23.)
- ✓ **Game officials:** In beginner football leagues, parents are sometimes expected to help the officials by being a sideline judge, handling the first-down markers, or working the time clock, among other tasks. If this is the case in your league (see Chapter 2 on the importance of knowing the rules of your league), be sure to mention it during the parents meeting; find out which parents are willing to fill these positions, and write their names down. You don't want to be scrambling around minutes before your game looking for parent volunteers when you could be spending the time getting your team ready.
- ✓ **Travel coordinator:** This position is appropriate only with an older and more-experienced team that competes against teams in other cities. This person tracks down the most cost-effective and convenient hotels for the team to stay in and arranges a team bus or coordinates carpools for the road trip itself.
- ✓ **Fundraising coordinator:** Sometimes teams rely on fundraisers to offset the cost of uniforms or to purchase new equipment. These range from the traditional car washes, candy sales, and magazine subscriptions to other assorted activities. This position entails extensive work and may even require having a couple parents share the duties.



During your meeting, circulate a list of responsibilities that you need filled, and have parents jot down their names next to those duties they'd be comfortable helping with. If five parents express interest in being the team parent, have them work together as a committee. Or if no one signs up to be the fundraising coordinator, mention that you appreciate the parents' willingness to help out and see whether any would be willing to fill that role instead of their first preference.

Meeting Players' Special Needs

Coaching football requires working with kids of all different abilities. Some will be fast, and others, slow. You'll come across athletically gifted players who are real naturals for the game and others who have trouble running down the field without stumbling over their feet. You may also have a child on your team who has special needs, such as a hearing or vision problem or a learning disability.

During your meeting, be sure to find out whether any of the children under your care have medical conditions that you need to be aware of or if you need to make any special accommodations. Often, parents may not feel comfortable divulging this type of personal information in front of all of the other parents. That's why it's always a good idea to set aside time at the end of the parent meeting for one-on-one discussions.

Follow-Up Q&A

When parents fire questions at you during the course of your meeting, that's a good sign. You want active participation and interest throughout the meeting rather than blank stares and parents who are nodding off out of boredom. Questions indicate that the parents are deeply concerned about their child's well-being and are genuinely enthusiastic about helping the kids enjoy the season. Responsive parents are receptive to what you're saying.



Always set aside some time at the end of the meeting to address any additional questions or concerns that parents may be more comfortable asking you in private. Let parents know that you're available to chat with them after the meeting or by phone at a time that's convenient for the both of you. Also, if you're unable to answer any questions during your presentation, be sure to make a note of them and let the parents know that you'll find out that information as soon as possible and get back to them with it.

Part II

Building Your Football Coaching Skills

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant

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"I don't think I want you in the wide receiver position right now, Danny. Unless you think you're going to grow another few inches between now and the 4th quarter."

In this part . . .

Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of your team allows you to create and run fun-filled practices that players look forward to. This part shares lots of great tips for planning those all-important practices. It also covers pre-game warm-ups, motivational talks, halftime adjustments, and all sorts of other responsibilities that come with being on the sidelines on game day.

Chapter 5

Evaluating Your Team

In This Chapter

- ▶ Accurately evaluating players' skills
 - ▶ Positioning players
 - ▶ Understanding different types of kids
-

Regardless of whether someone's a CEO overseeing hundreds of employees, a police chief in charge of a precinct, or a surgeon supervising an operating room staff, leaders enjoy the most success by having the right people around them — in the right places. The same goes for coaching a youth football team. Knowing the talent level of your squad and finding the right positions for each kid determines whether your season is punctuated with fun and progress or struggles and disappointment.

How successful you are in putting all the pieces together comes down, in part, to your ability to relate to the kids — all of 'em. They're going to have remarkably different abilities, characteristics, wants, and needs. In this chapter, we examine how to evaluate your players' skills, assign positions, and get the kids to work together as a true team.

The Art of Evaluation

Being able to accurately evaluate the skills of your players will, over the course of the season, pay big dividends for your team. Knowing what aspects of the game the team needs to improve, and which areas they already have a good handle on, allows you to maximize your practice time by focusing on those skills that need some bolstering or a nudge in the right direction.

Evaluating your players' skills

Football is one of the most complex sports around, and playing it requires a wide range of skills. Coaching it requires plenty of skill, too. Properly assessing a player's strengths and weaknesses is crucial for determining where he'll

fit best in your lineup. Certain kids love lots of contact and may be best suited to handle positions like linebacker, where collisions occur on every down and they'll be fighting off blocks and making tackles. Other kids may need some time to adjust to the physical nature of the sport and may be better off starting as a kicker or punter. Some of the kids will move really well and be excellent candidates for positions where speed is a real asset, like wide receiver; while others may be slow-footed and uncoordinated and will challenge you to find spots on the field for them where they can excel. Finding positions for every player on your team — while balancing their abilities and the needs of the team — is one of your most important responsibilities. Later in this chapter, we delve more into assigning positions.



Your practices offer a peek at a player's ability in specific areas, and small-sided games or drills are ideal for gaining a real sense of a child's strengths and weaknesses. For example, when evaluating a wide receiver's skills, you're better off watching him do a one-on-one drill against a defensive back rather than seeing what he's capable of in a full-scale scrimmage. The one-on-one drill gives him lots of repetitions of running patterns, working to get open, and attempting to make catches with a defender on him.

In the following sections, we cover a few areas to pay particular attention to when evaluating your players.

On the move: Foot speed and movement

Football requires constantly moving and reacting as the play develops. Players who tend to be flat-footed and spend more time watching the action than being in the middle of it don't help the team much. The players who constantly move their feet are the ones who'll be in position to make plays.

When evaluating a player's foot speed and movement, take several factors into account to get a true sense of his ability in this area. If he's an offensive lineman, does he deliver one block and then stop moving? Or after making that initial block, does he continue forward, looking for another defender to block? Does your running back, who's carrying out a fake handoff, go into a full sprint around the corner, hoping to draw defenders toward him so the play has a better chance of succeeding, or does he take only a step or two and then stop moving?



One of the easiest and most basic ways to improve players' footwork is setting up cones that the players have to maneuver around. Have them run forward, backward, and from side to side to simulate game-type action.

Level of competitiveness

How players respond to challenges — especially at the more advanced levels of football — says a lot about them. When a defensive back gets in the receiver's face at the line of scrimmage and bumps him as soon as the ball is snapped, does the receiver fight and continue working hard to run a good pattern? Or is he more likely to allow himself to get pushed around and cut

the pattern short? Football is a game of contact and controlled aggression, and some kids take longer than others to adjust to this aspect of the game. Kids who don't assert themselves, or who allow themselves to be pushed around during the play, won't be effective players. You have to provide constant encouragement and instill in them the desire to compete. Talk about how their teammates are counting on them, or mention that you know how talented they are and that you want to see those skills come to the forefront. Find out which motivational tools work best for each child, and go with them.

Multi-dimensional

Every position on the field carries an assortment of responsibilities, and the mark of a well-rounded player is being able to fulfill all of them. For example, running backs do so much more than simply carry the ball. When they don't have the ball, they're expected to block, carry out fakes, or run pass patterns. A one-dimensional running back who's effective only when the ball is in his hands limits the offense's efficiency. Be sure that the drills you use touch on all aspects of the game so players get the chance to become well-rounded in their respective positions. And find out which aspects of a position the player excels at and which areas need more work.

Between the ears: A player's mindset

As kids grow older and mature, how much success they have on the field depends to a large extent on their mindset. Does a player give you his best effort at all times, regardless of what's happening in the game? Or do his shoulders sag when things aren't going his way or the team starts trailing in the game? Does he handle constructive criticism well, or does he withdraw and take your comments negatively?



As the coach, you can improve not only a player's physical abilities but his mental approach to the game, too. Teach players to ignore the scoreboard and to play every down like it's the first play of the game. Challenge kids not to let the opponent see them with frustrated looks on their faces when plays don't go as planned. Continually stressing 100-percent effort on every play—and applauding it when you see it—will gradually sink in with your players, giving you a team you can really be proud of.

Being a supportive teammate

Being a good teammate speaks volumes about what type of player he is. Kids who pump up teammates when things aren't going well and who offer an endless supply of supportive comments are enormously valuable. Moreover, kids who aren't in the game but who are vocal in their encouragement of their teammates can be pretty inspiring to the players on the field.

On the flip side, kids who sulk when they're taken out of the game or aren't paying attention to the action on the field can damage team chemistry. You want to make sure that players who you put in leadership type positions, such as quarterback on offense or middle linebacker on defense, are especially supportive and encouraging to their teammates.

Transferring practice skills to game day

Some kids perform great during practice but aren't able to transfer those skills to the field on game day. If that's the case, they may not derive as much enjoyment from the sport.

The problem may be more than the nervousness of performing in front of a crowd. Perhaps a child's encountering something on the game field that he doesn't see much in practice, and it's throwing him off. For example, you may have a wide receiver who possesses great hands and catches everything thrown to him during practice. Yet during games, he's plagued by dropped passes. By evaluating and watching him carefully, you may recognize that his difficulties occur as soon as a defender moves closer to the line of scrimmage to bump him after the ball is snapped. By working with him on some one-on-one drills that get him comfortable dealing with contact at the line of scrimmage, his receiving skills can come to the forefront.

Identifying your team's strengths and weaknesses

Hopefully, as you move through the season, the team will make great progress. But regardless of what a great coaching job you're doing or how talented or experienced your players are, all teams will encounter struggles along the way. These problems can include going through scoring droughts on offense, giving up big plays on defense, or having a team with sagging confidence after dropping a few games in a row.

In order to get a better perspective on your team and where its strengths and weaknesses lie, here are a few helpful hints to consider:

✓ **Videotape a game.** Consider having an assistant coach or parent videotape one of your games from one end of the field or up high in the bleachers. Because you have so many responsibilities during the game, being able to see everything that takes place on the field is virtually impossible. Plus, at the more advanced levels, when the playing area is quite large, your view from the sidelines may be obstructed by the maze of players out there. If someone tapes the game, you can have an entirely different vantage point than you're accustomed to, and that can give you a fresh perspective on the team's play.

If you videotape a game, use it only for your private viewing. Don't adopt a professional coaching mentality and use it to make your players watch footage of their games. Children involved in organized youth football need to be on the field working on skills, not in front of a screen watching video.



✓ **Ask for help.** If you know someone who has more experience coaching football than you do, or who coaches in another league, ask him to watch one of your practices. He may be able to provide some valuable feedback on areas of the game he believes your team needs to spend additional time on. Assistant coaches are a big help in this regard as well.

Lining 'Em Up

Determining which positions your players are best suited for is sort of like putting together one of those fancy model boats — without the directions. You have all these pieces sitting right in front of you — the kids — and endless combinations to consider. Your challenge is finding positions for each child — positions that he's capable of playing, that provide the most benefits for him and the team, and that he enjoys.

Assigning team positions

At the beginning levels of football, where games are usually scaled down from the basic 11-on-11 setup, your main mission is introducing kids to the game. At this level, positioning your players takes a backseat to simply getting the kids on the field so they can run around and get accustomed to the contact involved with blocking and tackling.

As players gain experience and advance to more-competitive levels of play, they become involved in regulation 11-on-11 games (see Chapter 3 for more on standard positions), and you become more concerned with finding the right position to match each player's talents and what's best for the team.



You want to expose kids to a variety of positions. Confining them each to one position for the entire season paints a blurry picture of what football is all about. Children are likely to have more fun if, at the very least, they get a chance to try out a position on both offense and defense, as well as experience being on one of the special teams units.



Don't typecast players based entirely on their physical appearance. That means youngsters who are big for their age shouldn't automatically be tabbed for the offensive or defensive lines. Maybe they have great hand-eye coordination and would make a good wide receiver, or perhaps they have a real sense of how to play the game and would be ideal for playing safety and making sure everyone is properly aligned on defense.

When assigning positions, remind each player that you chose him for that position because of the special skills he has and the ability he demonstrates in practice. As the season progresses, you may recognize that a player

you have on defense may be better suited to play on the offensive unit. We discuss making midseason adjustments for the betterment of the team in Chapter 8.

When positioning your players, keep in mind that any child can play, enjoy, and excel at any position on the field, but if you're looking for some general guidelines simply to get started, check out these tips in Table 5-1. (Chapter 3 can tell you more on how to match positions with skills and demeanor.)

Table 5-1**Matching Players' Skills with Positions**

Position	Helpful Skills
Quarterback	Decent arm strength, athletic, leadership qualities
Running back, halfback	Speed and durability to take a lot of hits
Fullback	Good size to handle blocking responsibilities; good coordination to take handoffs for occasional runs
Wide receiver	Speed and agility; good hand-eye coordination
Tight end	Decent size for blocking; able to catch passes
Offensive line	Good size and strength; moves feet well
Defensive line	Good size, strength, and quickness
Linebacker	Strength and quickness; excellent tackler
Defensive back	Speed, agility, and good tackling skills

Filling all the roles so the team can excel

You'll probably deal with a fairly large group of kids, so some probably won't be happy with the positions you assign them. Because only one quarterback can play at a time and there are only a handful of wide receiver slots to fill, keeping everyone happy is a challenge.

While assigning positions, stress the essence of teamwork. Clearly explain that in order for the team to work together as a cohesive unit and enjoy success, the players have to make sacrifices. That means that not everyone can line up at middle linebacker or start at halfback, but every position on the field is equally important.



One way to help ease kids' disappointment over not getting to play where they wanted is to take a field trip to a professional, college, or high school football game. Encourage the kids to closely monitor the players who play their positions. This team-bonding activity can give kids a better sense of each position's importance to the team's overall success and help them develop a deeper appreciation of the roles they play. They may even pick up a few pointers along the way.



Every time your team steps on the field — for both games and practice — is a chance to share your feelings about how proud of them you are. Every child adds something to the chemistry of the team, even if he doesn't score touchdowns or make tackles. Recognizing and appreciating all kids for their efforts — and not their statistics — helps make them feel a part of something special. Check out Chapter 2 for more information on establishing a coaching philosophy that makes every kid count.

Understanding and Interacting with All Kinds of Kids

One of the most interesting — and challenging — aspects of coaching youth football is that every child on your team is remarkably different in all sorts of ways. Regardless of whether you're coaching a beginning level team or an advanced team that's been making tackles for years, your creativity and patience will be tested at times, and your ability to interact with all types of personalities will be continually challenged.

Your players' athleticism, physical development, and emotional maturity may cover a broad spectrum. Some kids are charismatic and outgoing, while others tend to be shy and reserved. Some are passionate about playing football, and others want to be anywhere except on the field. You have kids who are talented and those who are clumsy and uncoordinated. How you handle all these different types of kids plays a large role in determining just how much fun they have playing for you this season. The following is a glimpse at some of the types of kids you may coach.

The average child

For the most part, the majority of your players are going to be regular kids who enjoy playing football and being with their friends. They're not going to be headed for football scholarships or send your blood pressure skyrocketing with any antics. They're simply going to be kids showing up with smiles and shoulder pads to play for you, learn from you, and grow under you. A lot of these kids may be involved because their friends are playing and they want

to be involved with them. Some of these kids — through their involvement with you this season — may develop a real love and passion for football and continue playing it for years to come. Others will be content to try a new sport next season but will have a handle on the basics of the game if they ever choose to return to the sport in the future.

The shy child

Anytime you're coaching a young team, the chances are pretty good that you're going to have some kids who are painfully shy. These kids often go to extreme lengths to blend into the background. During practices, shy kids avoid eye contact, never ask for help, and quietly move throughout the drills while trying not to draw any attention to themselves. Luckily for you, all you need is some patience — sometimes a big dose of it — and understanding, and before long you'll lure the youngster out of his protective shell.



At the start of your practices, rotate the kids who lead the warm-ups and stretching. Select the shy child, along with a couple of other players, to lead the team. This selection is a small step toward helping the shy youngster become comfortable in front of his teammates. Because other players are up there with him, he won't feel isolated or gripped with fear that all eyes are on him. Also, give him a pat on the back after he's done something well during drills. The youngster may not enjoy a verbal acknowledgement from you that draws attention from other team members, but small acts that go unnoticed by everyone else can make a big impact on him and help slowly draw him out.

Girls on the gridiron

In communities around the country, girls are strapping on helmets and shoulder pads and competing with the boys — as well they should. Football is a great game that should be enjoyed by boys and girls of all ages and abilities. If you have any girls on your team this season, embrace the opportunity. All your kids share an interest in playing the game, and it's your responsibility to make the experience rewarding for everyone.

When it comes to coaching girls, here are a few general guidelines on how they differ from boys (keep in mind, there are always exceptions):

- ✓ Boys are often more aggressive than girls.
- ✓ Girls tend to be more supportive of one another on the field.
- ✓ Girls are more likely to be perfectionists. They're often harder on themselves when they can't perform skills as well as their teammates.
- ✓ Girls tend to blame themselves for their shortcomings; boys tend to blame outside factors, like the coach, for any problems.

Always proceed slowly when working to help a child overcome shyness. Pushing too hard and too early in the season may scare him enough that he actually pulls back and further isolates himself from the team. Take small, deliberate steps, and it'll be truly rewarding when you finally coax the child out of the shadows and he opens his eyes to all the wonderful experiences he's been missing out on.



Not addressing a child's shyness during these critical early years can handcuff his ability to interact in future social settings. Shyness can compromise a child's abilities and paralyze his chances of ever enjoying or excelling in football. As the coach, you're in a great position to help shy children step out of these protective cocoons, discover an inner courage they never knew they had, and derive enormous pleasure from playing with the team.

The child with the short attention span

With kids, short attention spans are as common as the cold and flu. The younger the child, the shorter his attention span is likely to be — and the trickier your job is. Coaching an outdoor sport like football brings all sorts of distractions into the picture: birds, airplanes, ice cream trucks, you name it.

As we discuss in Chapter 6, short attention spans put a greater responsibility on you to construct practices and devise drills that continually capture the kids' attention and keep their interest and excitement level high. With younger kids, you need a really fun drill to win the kids' attention over a big frog hopping in the grass. The quickest route to losing a child's attention on the football field is spending large amounts of time talking to him instead of keeping him on the move and actively involved in a wide variety of drills.

The child who doesn't want to be there

Regardless of how entertaining your practices are, or how much fun you make game day, you may find yourself with a child who simply doesn't want to be on your team. For example, kids may not want to be involved because

- ✓ They watched an older sibling participate and felt the pressure surrounding the activity to excel. Even though they really don't want any part of football, their mom or dad signed them up anyway.
- ✓ They've played football for several years and have grown tired of it and simply need a break.

- ✓ Something that happened last season affected their interest. Perhaps they had a problem with a teammate or a coach, or perhaps they were hurt and are afraid of suffering another injury.
- ✓ The child simply doesn't like football and would rather play another sport. Sometimes kids get enrolled in sports that they discover they don't enjoy playing, and that's perfectly okay. The only way kids can figure out whether they like a sport is to try it. Problems arise when parents force their kids into playing a particular sport, especially when the youngster's enthusiasm for participating doesn't match the parents'.



Talk to the child to find out the reason for his lack of interest. You can address many of these reasons, comfort the child, and restore his interest in playing again. Emotionally connecting with the child and helping him solve his dilemma can do wonders for reestablishing his enthusiasm for playing.

The uncoordinated child

You're going to have kids on your team who aren't as coordinated or skilled as many of their teammates. These kids struggle with the most basic football skills, and no matter how hard they try, not much comes easily or goes smoothly for them.

Some children just aren't athletically inclined, or they're going through an awkward growth spurt that throws their timing and coordination all out of whack. Being unable to catch the ball as well as their friends or make tackles like a lot of their teammates can be really frustrating. A lack of coordination can interfere with their self-esteem and result in feelings of inadequacy, further compromising their ability to perform.

Helping a child work on his coordination takes lots of practice. You can help pull him through this difficult time in his life, and years from now he may surprise you in how he's turned into a solid player. Here are a few tips to help get him there:

- ✓ **Hide any frustration.** Even after you've repeatedly demonstrated a technique, uncoordinated kids often don't pick up on it as quickly as you hope. Choose your words carefully, and never allow a frustrated tone to creep into your voice or reveal negativity in your body language. Never let kids think that you're disappointed in their abilities.
- ✓ **Encourage effort.** Kids battling coordination difficulties cringe at the thought of playing in games where they're likely to struggle, fail, and ultimately disappoint teammates, coaches, and parents. Children who see their friends performing at a level they believe they'll never reach are likely to become disenchanted with football. These kids may be reluctant to continue participating and are likely to adopt a more sedentary lifestyle where their deficiencies won't be in the spotlight. Praising effort lets them know that they're capable of picking up skills if they stick to it.

- ✓ **Request parental help.** Enlist the help of the child's parents. Have them spend a few minutes a couple times a week throwing the football around with their child. Stress the importance of keeping it fun, not on how well they're performing skills. Over time, kids begin getting more comfortable with their bodies and gain coordination.

The inexperienced child

Sometimes kids get a late start in football. For example, if you're coaching a 12-and-under team, one of your players may have never played organized football before while the rest of his teammates have been involved in the sport for several years. With the relatively short amount of time you have, getting the inexperienced child caught up to the skill level of his teammates simply isn't possible. After all, you can't squeeze a few seasons' worth of practices, drills, and game experience into a month or two. But you can still help the youngster develop skills and be a contributing member of the team.

The child may already be uncomfortable knowing that he's behind in a lot of the skills, so singling him out for extra work may just make those feelings more prevalent. If you sense that it won't bother the child, spending some one-on-one time with him can help fuel his progress. Perhaps while the majority of the team is busy doing a special teams drill, you can work with him off to the side. You may also want to mention to the parents some activities they can do together to work on certain areas of his game at home.



You want to be completely sure that the inexperienced youngster fully understands the proper techniques before you include him in a drill that could pose an injury risk to him or another player.

The child with special needs

All kids have a legal right to participate in football, and that goes for those who have special needs, too. These needs may range from hearing loss and vision impairment to medical conditions such as diabetes or epilepsy. Youngsters who have physical conditions in which they don't have full use of their arms or legs also fall into this category. It's normal to have some reservations about working with a child with special needs and to question your own qualifications in this area, but there's nothing to fear. Just like you figure out ways to work with a child who has no coordination or is super shy, you can do exactly the same for a child with special needs.

In Chapter 4, we introduce the preseason parents meeting and the importance of finding out whether any players have conditions you need to be aware of. If they do, set aside some time before the first practice of the season to talk to the family about their hopes and expectations. Open the

lines of communication so you can come up with solutions that benefit everyone. Keep in mind that this season may be the parents' first foray into organized sports, and they may be apprehensive about having their child participate. They may be counting on you for all the answers. Explore the possibilities. Figure out ways that this youngster can be included and be a valued and contributing member of the team.

Regardless of the age or skill level of your team, having a child with special needs on the squad can also be enormously beneficial for other players. Youngsters get a first-hand lesson on developing understanding, compassion, and patience for their teammates while also learning to accept everyone's differences.



If you're coaching an older team, ask players for their thoughts and ideas on how players can be included. They can be great resources for you, and they may surprise you with their creative suggestions on how to ensure that everyone gets to be a part of the action.

In Chapter 7, we discuss the importance of meeting with the opposing coach prior to the game. At this time, share any information regarding children on your team who have special needs, and find out whether any players on his team have special needs as well. Quite often, the league director goes over this type of information with all the coaches at a preseason meeting so that everyone is aware, well in advance, of any accommodations that need to be made. By working together and making the necessary accommodations, you can help ensure that these youngsters are an integral part of the team chemistry.

The athletically gifted child

Most youth football teams always seem to have that one child whose talent and ability surpasses everyone else's by a big margin. He's the kid who runs faster, hits harder, and is difficult for opposing players to tackle. Thanks to his size, strength, speed, coordination, and natural talent, he gets labeled the team star. The athletically gifted player — whether he likes it or not — stands out among his teammates. His teammates know he's the best player on the team; the parents of the other kids recognize he's the best player; and you can certainly see how advanced he is compared to his teammates. So how do you handle coaching this super talent?

One of the greatest challenges that accompany coaching a youngster who's far superior in skill development is providing him with drills that enable him to enhance his skills while not compromising the rest of the team in the process. This can be tricky to pull off simply because you don't want to isolate the player from his teammates, but you also don't want to stifle his development by boring him with drills that don't challenge him. Use your creativity to concoct clever ways to help those kids just learning a skill and the talented child all excel at the same time.

When dad is forcing Junior to play football

Often, the only reason a child is on the field to begin with is that his dad wants him to play. If explaining to the father that his son really isn't interested in football and may be better suited for a different sport doesn't do any good, you have to try to find ways to make the game fun for that youngster. Perhaps if the child is competitive,

issue challenges during practice that appeal to that aspect of his personality. Or talk to him about how playing football will prepare him for playing other sports by not only getting him in better condition but also improving his coordination. Find whatever positives you can to help this child get through the season.



It's easy to fall into the habit of piling the praise on the youngsters who continually run and score touchdowns or are in on virtually every tackle. Keep your emotions in check and refrain from going overboard with the praise and adulation. Too many accolades can have adverse effects, like the following:

- ✓ **Some kids may begin feeling unnecessary pressure, which can inhibit their performance and derail their enjoyment of playing football.**
They may start feeling that they have to shoulder more of the responsibility for the team's success and failure.
- ✓ **Going overboard with the praise can also alienate other members of the team, who may begin to feel as though the talented player is the coach's favorite.** If you allow this to happen, the team may begin resenting you and the talented player, and that can cause all sorts of problems with the team spirit and chemistry you're trying to build.

Certainly, nothing's wrong with enjoying your time coaching athletically gifted youngsters. If these players possess good attitudes and aren't critical or condescending toward their teammates, they have the potential to emerge as wonderful team leaders and positive role models. Just remember to maintain a proper perspective and that these players are just one piece of the team puzzle. Your entire roster needs your help, support, and guidance.

The ball hog

In football, the only position in which a ball hog can really become a problem is at quarterback, because he's touching the ball on every snap. A quarterback with ball hog tendencies creates real problems for the entire team because he directly impacts everyone's enjoyment of the game. A quarterback who's hogging the ball often ignores open receivers when a pass play

has been called and tucks the ball under his arms to run with it. The following are some reasons a player can earn that label and how you can help him dump it:

- ✓ **Unaware:** Sometimes kids don't realize that they're hanging onto the ball too much. Using drills that force your quarterback to get rid of the ball and don't allow him to scramble with it can be instrumental in keeping the ball hog syndrome from infiltrating your team and creating dissension.
- ✓ **Receiving conflicting instructions:** One of the more challenging scenarios occurs when the child receives conflicting instructions from his dad or mom at home. The parent may be telling the child that he needs to look to run with it more often because he's the best player on the team. Conflicting instructions from dad and coach put the child in a really tough spot; you have to let him know that he must abide by what you say because you're the coach of the team. If this chat doesn't produce the desired results, meet with the parents and provide a friendly reminder that supporting what you're trying to teach the kids would be most helpful.
- ✓ **New to football:** The child may be new to football, or maybe he's never been involved on a team before, and he needs to get accustomed to the team setting and understand the importance of his teammates and utilizing them for the benefit of the team.
- ✓ **Taking a cue from you:** Closely examine your practices, because you may be fueling the problem. During drills, are you allowing him to hang onto the ball for extended periods of time without throwing it downfield to his receivers or dumping it off to his running backs? Continually stressing the importance of teamwork during practice, and pointing out to quarterbacks when they should have passed the ball to a teammate, helps eliminate this problem during games.

The disruptive child

Sometimes you coach kids who test the boundaries of what's acceptable behavior. These kids usually feel a need for attention, and misbehaving is one way of soliciting it; or their parents simply haven't bothered to instill any manners in them. At any rate, they'll test your authority, challenge your team rules, and tax your patience at times.



Coaches often find themselves walking a tightrope when dealing with disruptive players and fall too heavily on one side of the spectrum, both of which have disastrous consequences: Some coaches are so overly concerned about being well-liked that they sacrifice discipline and ignore when kids break

team rules. In an effort to keep the kids in line, other coaches are exceedingly harsh and throw around punishment far too often, quickly turning the season into a boot camp that makes everyone miserable.

You need to find an appropriate balance between the two. Keep in mind that children can enjoy playing for you — and like you — while respecting your authority and abiding by your team rules. Clearly tell players what type of behavior you expect from them during practices and games, and when a player crosses the line, address the situation immediately without embarrassing him in the process.



If you allow the best player on the team to get away with inappropriate behavior, you're sending a disturbing message that this player is more special than anyone else and is above the team rules. In fact, you're elevating this player to a position more powerful than yours. Coaches who allow this type of insubordination and avoid dealing with the problem usually do so because they're operating under a win-at-all-costs mentality, and they turn their backs on confronting any type of problem that could impact the team's win-loss record. You must have a system of consequences in place — that the kids are aware of before the season gets going — that apply equally to everyone.

Take control of the situation immediately before it leads to team dissension or, even worse, other players beginning to copy some of the disruptive player's antics. Quite simply, the only way you can maintain your team's respect and show the merits of following the rules and respecting authority is to punish the offending player and let the team know that disruptive behavior is unacceptable. Be sure to remind your players that players who don't abide by the rules are choosing to break them. Making different rules for different levels of ability sets a dangerous precedent. (We go into greater detail about disciplining children, including the disruptive sort, in Chapter 20.)



Instead of embarrassing the misbehaving player at the first sign of trouble, speak to the child privately and make it clear that you won't tolerate this type of behavior. Anytime you speak to a player regarding a behavior or discipline issue, be sure to let the parents know about it right away as well. Keeping them in the dark only creates unwanted problems for you down the road.

When a child is being punished for misbehaving and is forced to sit out part of a game or practice as punishment, let the team know what has happened and why their teammate won't be on the field as much. This method reinforces that you're serious about misbehaving players being punished and reduces the likelihood of others acting inappropriately.

The bully

One of the most unpleasant memories from your childhood may have been dealing with a bully. We've all come across them — at school, on the playground, or in our neighborhoods. Now, you may have to deal with bullies who show up on your team with their troublesome behavior. The bully thrives on attention and finds great pleasure in upsetting others. There's no room for bullies and their intimidating tactics on your team.



Kids who are picked on by a bully typically don't complain for fear of making the situation worse than it already is. That means you have to keep a close eye on the interaction of the kids — not just during practice but also before and after practice, because bullies wreak the most havoc when adults aren't around or aren't paying attention. Don't allow horseplay that often unfolds before practice, because that's a prime time when bullies strike, exert their force, and cause emotional distress.

If you're having problems with a child bullying others, speak with him away from the team and let him know he needs to change his behavior immediately. Explain that you admire his tenacity when he's playing but that he should use his aggression only within the rules of the game on the field. If he's picking on or making fun of teammates, address the fact that he should be encouraging and supporting them.

If you don't address the bullying, the season can be painfully long for the kids being harassed. Be sure to point out that you know that the bully is capable of being a better teammate. Work with him to be a more positive influence on the team. Be friendly yet firm. He may even pick up some pointers from you on how to be a better person by how you deal with him. As always, anytime you have a discussion with a child concerning behavior, make sure to keep the parents in the loop. Keep in mind that sometimes parents will react negatively to you simply because many don't enjoy hearing anything other than positive words about Junior. (You may even see firsthand where the child learned how to be a bully.) Be sure to keep a positive tone and share with the parent that you enjoy coaching his or her child and just want to keep parents updated on everything that's happening.

Chapter 6

Running a Great Practice

In This Chapter

- ▶ Starting off strong
 - ▶ Practice-planning pointers
 - ▶ Making good use of practice time
 - ▶ Sending 'em home smiling
-

One of the tricks of being a football coach who kids enjoy playing for is conducting practices they look forward to week after week. Sound practice-planning that maximizes your time with the kids is the foundation of any successful season. All you need is some creativity—mixed in with your passion for helping youngsters learn and excel—to get the job done.

Practices that constantly challenge, entertain, and motivate kids pay big dividends in the players' skill development, speed up their learning process, and enhance their overall enjoyment of the sport. In this chapter, we take a look at how you can make all of the above happen—and more. We cover everything from how to avoid stumbling out of the starting blocks with that tricky first practice to methods for doling out praise and constructive criticism during drills. Time to hit the practice field!

Coming to Practice Prepared

Remember back to your days in school when you hadn't put in enough studying the night before a test? When you were unable to answer the first question and you knew you were in a heap of trouble? Well, you won't have to relive that sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach when you arrive at the football field if you take the time to fully prepare.

In Chapter 4, we cover the preseason parents meeting and detail how you should expect your players to arrive at practice with the right equipment. The same applies to you. Your responsibilities extend beyond doing your

homework and outlining the drills you want to use and the skills you want to focus on. Besides arriving at the field with your practice plan (see “Creating a Practice Plan” later in this chapter), you also need to have all the equipment necessary for a great practice.

Packing your first aid kit

A first aid kit is like your health insurance policy — you must have one, but you hope it’s never needed. Sure, lugging a first aid kit around with all your other practice equipment may seem like more trouble than it’s worth, but when dealing with an injury, this kit has enormous value. As we point out in Chapter 18, injuries are a part of a physical sport like football, and being prepared is better than simply hoping nothing happens.



Inside your first aid kit you should tape your list of emergency contacts that the parents filled out and returned to you prior to the season. (In Chapter 4, we talk about the importance of distributing these forms to parents at your preseason meeting so you know who to notify in the event of an emergency.)

Sometimes leagues issue a first aid kit to each coach, and other times they leave getting one up to you. (Find out whether you’ll receive a first aid kit when you first get to know your league, which we mention in Chapter 2.) If the league doesn’t provide a first aid kit, explain the importance of every coach’s having one to the league administrator, who perhaps can correct the oversight. In the meantime, never conduct a practice or go to a game without your kit. You can use a toolbox or any other type of waterproof container to protect your supplies.

The essentials that should be in every football coach’s first aid kit include the following:

- ✓ **Antiseptic spray or wipes:** Use these items to clean out cuts and abrasions.
- ✓ **Assorted sized bandages:** Use waterproof bandages to cover cuts or other wounds.
- ✓ **Athletic tape:** Use athletic tape to hold ice bags in place to reduce swelling on an injury.
- ✓ **Bee sting kit:** You can pick up these kits at your local pharmacy and have them on hand in case one of your players gets stung.
- ✓ **CPR mouth barrier:** You can use one of these items in the event that a child needs mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.
- ✓ **Emergency tooth preserving system:** Use one of these kits for a tooth that gets knocked out. You can pick them up at a local pharmacy or check with your dentist to see where you can purchase one.

- ✓ **Freezer-type storage bags:** Plastic storage bags are great for holding ice packs.
- ✓ **Insect repellant:** Those annoying mosquitoes can be a real problem during evening practices or games.
- ✓ **Latex gloves:** You need to wear gloves while dealing with bloody cuts.
- ✓ **Nail clippers:** These come in handy for repairing torn nails that result from contact with another player.
- ✓ **Prescriptions:** As we cover in Chapter 4, you need to be aware of any medical conditions that youngsters on your team have. For example, if a child has asthma, make sure his parents give you a spare bronchodilator to keep in your first aid kit in case the child forgets his and the situation calls for it.
- ✓ **Scissors:** You need scissors to cut bandages and athletic tape.
- ✓ **Sterile eyewash and prepackaged sterile eye pads:** You need these items when any type of debris becomes stuck in a child's eye.
- ✓ **Tweezers:** Use tweezers to remove any type of debris that becomes lodged in a child's skin.

Bringing balls and cones

Some leagues provide coaches with a bag of footballs and cones for their practices, and others leave gathering these items up to the coach. Regardless, you should know that you can never have too many footballs at your disposal during a practice. You can encourage players to bring a football to practice (if they have one) and make sure their name is clearly marked on it. Having a large supply of footballs makes drills run more smoothly and doesn't waste valuable practice time with you or the kids chasing down balls.

Small plastic cones or pylons are perfect for marking off areas of the field that you want to conduct a drill in. If the league doesn't provide this equipment, you can purchase a cheap set at your local sporting goods retailer, or you can get creative: Old towels or t-shirts can work just as well to mark off the playing area, and so can many other items. As long as whatever items you choose don't pose any injury risk to the children, using them is perfectly okay.

Creating a Practice Plan

Building a quality practice plan — and being able to execute it — is sort of like building a model airplane. You have all these pieces sitting in front of you in the form of the skills you want to teach, and you probably have at least a general idea of some of the exercises and techniques you want to

use to teach them. Now it's just a matter of fitting them all in and determining their most useful order in the allotted time you have with the team.

Jotting down what skills you want to work on initially — and what you want to accomplish during those first couple weeks — helps jump-start your thought process and gets you started on the process of mapping out useful practice plans. After you put those skills down on paper, go ahead and break your session down even further into how much time you want to devote to offense, defense, and special teams. Devise your practice plans well in advance of getting together with the team, but don't outline every aspect and drill of every practice all at once. That's counterproductive, because as your players develop skills and learn new ones, your practices will constantly change to accommodate their improved level of play.

In this section, we give you some practice-planning tips and provide some sample plans to help you get started.

How long and how often?

Most youth football leagues have specific rules in place regarding how often and how long teams can practice. You need to be aware of this rule (an important league policy; we discuss knowing your league in Chapter 2) before you begin creating practice plans for your team. If the league doesn't have any policies in place, use your best judgment when devising the team schedule. A lot of coaches, in their zeal for wanting to teach the kids all sorts of skills, go overboard and flood the schedule with endless practices. Remember, you may want to spend more time practicing than the kids do, so rein in your enthusiasm in this area; too many practices can be overwhelming to youngsters and may actually sabotage their interest in playing.



For younger children, who generally play a game each week, we recommend one hour-long practice per week. As kids get older, you can bump up the schedule to include a couple practices a week for the single game. Only at the older and more-advanced levels should your practices go longer than an hour.

Ensuring lots of repetitions for each child

Kids love chances to get grass-stained and dirty diving for footballs and making tackles, and that doesn't happen when they're stuck in long lines waiting for a turn to perform a drill. Set your practices up so several drills are going on at one time and everyone's on the move. When players are moving, they're learning; when they're forced to stand in lines looking like statues, skill development — and fun — come to a grinding halt.

When is scrimmaging a good idea?

Holding scrimmages during your practice sessions is a great way to give kids some game-type experience. But don't fall into the trap of using them at every practice. Overusing scrimmages takes away from the individual teaching and instruction you can provide by running drills. It's fine, however, to hold scrimmages for a few minutes at the end of practice to let the youngsters try out the skills they worked on throughout the practice. Here are some other ideas to consider when planning scrimmages:

- ✓ **Run mini-scrimmages.** Instead of conducting one full-scale scrimmage, split the field in half and run two scrimmages at the same

time. Mini-scrimmages give all the kids a chance to get in on more plays and gain more game-type experience.

- ✓ **Mix up the rules.** Use your creativity to bump up the energy and excitement by changing the rules here and there. For example, if your offense is struggling to complete passes during games, award bonus points for every pass that it completes during the scrimmage; or to increase the difficulty for the defense, give the offensive unit five downs to make a first down. You can tweak the rules all sorts of ways to help your team learn and improve.

Also, avoid stoppages between your drills, which sap the energy and enthusiasm you've been building up and lull kids into complacency. Constant motion keeps your practices at a good pace for optimum skill development. (Make sure you schedule water breaks throughout the practice, and encourage each child to get a drink anytime he needs water between breaks. Water should never be withheld from a child.)

Letting kids help select practice drills

As you make your way through the season, take note of the drills that the kids really seem to enjoy and that provide the most benefits to them. For young kids, you can give each of the drills a catchy name that they'll easily remember. For example, the "Shark Drill" will carry much more meaning for them than something dubbed "a blocking drill."

As the season progresses, consider setting aside a segment of your practice each week for the players to select their favorite drill for the team to perform, or even let them introduce their own ideas. You can break the schedule up by units, so one week the defensive secondary gets to make their pick as a group, the next week the offensive line, and so on. This arrangement is a great way to include all the kids in the practice and really make them feel like a part of what's going on. It also gives you a good idea of what types of drills the kids like. Obviously, you may want to discard drills that no one picks or simply rethink ways to make some of your less popular drills more action-packed and entertaining.

When coaching older and more-experienced kids, you can even ask them if they fondly remember any drills that they did with other coaches. There's certainly nothing wrong with incorporating another coach's drills into your practices. If a drill's fun for the kids and effective in working on a particular skill, then you can make room for it in your practices.

Setting the tone

The tone you set at the first practice of the season — and carry throughout — should be built around constant praise, positive reinforcement, encouraging words, and an upbeat approach to teaching the game.

The tone your players adopt depends largely on your mood and demeanor. Think back to your football playing days, or whatever sport you may have participated in growing up. Remember those awful days when you showed up for practice and the coach was in a bad mood and you and your teammates grumbled to each other about what a miserable practice it was going to be? That certainly didn't set the stage for a lot of learning or fun to take place.

In order to have the most-effective practices, you have to arrive in a positive mood at every single one of them, regardless of what's going on in your life away from the field. That means keeping your head up on days when you've had an argument with your spouse, moving with a spring in your step despite being yelled at earlier in the day by your boss, and keeping a smile on your face even though your car decided to stall out on the way to work. Your players will recognize that you're in a good mood — and that puts them in the right frame of mind, too.



You're the team leader and the one everyone looks up to. You're at the controls in determining whether kids look forward to your practices or dread stepping on the field with you. Good attitudes are contagious. Spread yours around for the kids to soak up, and everyone benefits.

Six-practice outline for beginners

Here's a look at a sample six-practice outline for a beginning level football team, with each practice being an hour long (check out Chapter 11 for tips on warming up). As you move along from practice to practice, tweak your outline to fit the needs of your team. Following a practice, while the session is still fresh in your mind, jot down notes of areas that you feel need additional work so you can devote some extra time to them at the next practice. Also write down areas that need extra practice after games.



Always have a couple spare drills in reserve just in case one of your drills falls flat and doesn't produce the desired results. Also, be sure to give the kids plenty of water breaks, and encourage them to jog to the sideline to grab water at any point during the practice.

Beginning practice #1

10 minutes: Warm-up

15 minutes: Set up a series of cones at different stations around the field. Break the team up into small groups and have them take turns running around the cones while carrying a football.

15 minutes: Explain the offensive and defensive positions and the skills required to play them (see Chapter 3 for a review).

15 minutes: Run a relay drill: Break the team into groups of three, and give each group a ball. The first player in each group runs 10 yards downfield with the ball then backpedals 10 yards back to where he began. He hands the ball off to the next youngster in his group and runs out 10 yards to receive a pass from that child. He then runs the ball back and hands it off. That youngster follows the same process, beginning with running with the ball. This drill and the cone drill can give you a sense of some of the kids' skills as you begin positioning them on offense and defense. (Check out Chapter 9 for basic passing and catching techniques.)

5 minutes: Cool-down

Beginning practice #2

10 minutes: Warm-up

10 minutes: Set kids up in the offensive and defensive positions they'll play. You want to introduce the kids to as many different positions as possible during the season to give them a good glimpse at what the game is all about.

15 minutes: Explain the basics of each individual position. Work with the defensive line, the linebackers, and the defensive backs on the proper stance to begin a play (see Chapter 10). On the offensive side of the ball, teach the linemen, running backs, tight end, and wide receivers their proper stances at the line of scrimmage (Chapter 9).

20 minutes: When all the players are properly positioned and in their appropriate stances, walk through what happens when the ball is snapped. Show the offensive and defensive linemen the basics of how to engage in blocks and fend them off; demonstrate how the quarterback hands the ball off to the running back; illustrate to the linebackers how to pursue the ball carrier; show the fullback how to hit the line of scrimmage and deliver a block; demonstrate to the wide receivers how to block a defensive back;

and show how the youngsters in the secondary should react to a running play. Remember, a lot of these kids have probably never played organized football before. (For info on basic offensive and defensive techniques, see Chapters 9 and 10, respectively.)

5 minutes: Cool-down

Beginning practice #3

10 minutes: Warm-up

10 minutes: Set the kids up in their offensive and defensive positions and give a recap of their responsibilities. Demonstrate the proper form when making a tackle (see Chapter 10) so the kids begin to get a sense of how important it is not to lead with the head when tackling. Remember, safety is always your top priority.

20 minutes: Break the kids up by position to work on basic skills. Assemble the wide receivers and defensive backs together, and you or an assistant coach can work with them on running and defending pass patterns. The offensive and defensive linemen can be grouped together to work on basic blocking techniques and fending off blocks at the line of scrimmage. The quarterback can work with the center on receiving the snap, and then he can turn and work on handoffs to the running backs. The linebackers can be grouped with the running backs to work on following proper form when executing tackles.

15 minutes: Introduce the basic *sweep play* (where the running back receives the handoff or pitch and runs around the corner, between the sideline and the offensive tackle or tight end). Go through each player's responsibilities on the play by walking through the play several times, and then run it a few times with full contact.

5 minutes: Cool-down

Beginning practice #4

10 minutes: Warm-up

15 minutes: Break kids up into positions and have the offensive and defensive lines work together; the center, quarterback, running backs, and linebackers together; and the wide receivers and defensive backs together.

5 minutes: Recap the sweep play and go over each player's responsibilities on the play.

10 minutes: Have the offense run the sweep against the defense to both the left and right at full contact.

5 minutes: Introduce an inside running play (commonly referred to as the *off-tackle play*, because the running back hits the line of scrimmage and runs between his left and right tackle) and go over each youngster's responsibilities.

10 minutes: Have the offense run the off-tackle play against the defense at full contact.

5 minutes: Cool-down

Beginning practice #5

10 minutes: Warm-up

15 minutes: Introduce a new series of drills to the kids for their respective positions. (Flip to Chapter 11 for a rundown on — dare we say so ourselves — a great collection of drills to help kids get a grasp on the basics of the game.)

15 minutes: Have the offense work against the defense, mixing up running the sweep play to the left and right and the off-tackle play to the left and right.

15 minutes: Get the wide receivers and defensive backs more heavily involved in the play-calling. Introduce a couple of basic short-yardage pass patterns (check out Chapter 12 for a glimpse of all the different types of patterns at your disposal) to your players. One option is to move the receivers and defensive backs to one end of the field to work on the patterns and defending them; at the other end, you can put the ball at the 10-yard line and give the offense four plays to see whether it can score a touchdown. This activity gives the kids a game-like drill to compete in.

5 minutes: Cool-down

Beginning practice # 6

10 minutes: Warm-up

15 minutes: Work with the kids using the same individual drills we mention in the preceding practice session. When you run out of the new drills in Chapter 11, don't worry — plenty more good ones await you in Chapter 14.

10 minutes: Have the offense work against the defense using only running plays.

10 minutes: Have the offense work against the defense using only passing plays.

10 minutes: Put the ball 20 yards from the end zone and see whether the offense can score a touchdown or whether the defense can stop them. You call the plays for the offense so it gets plenty of practice running a variety of plays, just like it'll be doing on game day. At the same time, the defense gets valuable work trying to stop different types of plays, just like it'll have to do to be successful in games. During this drill, if the offense gets the ball to the 10-yard line in four plays or less, it receives a first down.

5 minutes: Cool-down

Practice plans for intermediate and advanced players

With the more advanced players, a refresher on some of the basics never hurts the first time you gather them together. You can follow that up by jumping right into running specific drills for offense, defense, and special teams. At this level, you'll usually have the chance to hold many practices before that first game, so you'll have ample time to condition the kids and teach them plays and different formations to run during games. These kids have been around the game awhile and have a pretty good handle on the basics of each position, so you can focus on fine-tuning specific areas of their game, such as the art of reading defenses for quarterbacks and wide receivers, or using different types of blitzes for defenses.

Intermediate practice (1 hour)

10 minutes: Warm-up

15 minutes: Individual positions work: For example, wide receivers practice running specific pass patterns, and defensive linemen work on their stunts.

5 minutes: Introduce new plays that the offensive unit should work on to use in the upcoming game; introduce new blitzes for the defensive unit to work on for the next game.

10 minutes: Hold a scrimmage with the defense working on its blitzes and the offense learning to adjust its passing game to deal with the blitz.

15 minutes: Work on special teams play (devote half the segment to kickoff coverage and returns and half to punt coverage and returns).

5 minutes: Cool-down

Advanced practice (1 hour and 30 minutes)

10 minutes: Warm-up

5 minutes: Practice individual positions work.

15 minutes: Offensive unit versus defensive unit in goal-line situations: Place the ball at the 2-yard line and see whether the offense can score or the defense can stop them.

15 minutes: Offensive unit versus defensive unit in no-huddle situation: Put the ball at the offensive unit's 20-yard line, give them one minute on the clock, and see whether they can drive the length of the field for a score.

10 minutes: Putting the offensive unit versus the defensive unit, run the first ten plays that you'll use in the upcoming game.

5 minutes: Set the offensive unit versus the defensive unit to practice a couple trick plays.

10 minutes: Practice kickoff coverage and returns.

10 minutes: Practice punt coverage and returns.

5 minutes: Hold field goal and extra point practice.

5 minutes: Cool-down

First Practice: Kicking Off the Season

Chances are that if you've never coached a youth football team before, the task may seem a little daunting. And yes, a lot's at stake when you take the field for the first time, because it sets the tone for the season and provides kids with a pretty good indication of what's in store for them. The first practice is no different from the first day of school, when kids judge their teachers and decide right away whether it's going to be a good year.

If you don't come armed with a carefully crafted practice plan, you're going to have big problems when you arrive at the field for the first time and you find 15 sets of eyes suddenly staring up at you for guidance, instruction, and motivation — even if you do have your clipboard, whistle, and plenty of footballs.

Greeting your players the first time

First impressions are oh-so-important for establishing the proper frame of mind for all the youngsters involved. A smile and a friendly pat on the back from you as your young players arrive for the first practice creates a relaxing atmosphere and helps establish those special bonds that make the season so rewarding for both you and them.



Here are some tips to keep in mind to make sure everyone's arrival goes smoothly:

- ✓ **Arrive early.** Make sure you're the first one at the field. Arriving about 30 minutes before the start of your practice should be sufficient. Being there ahead of time to greet everyone sends a clear signal to the players and their parents that you're truly committed to coaching this season. Arriving later than some of the kids gives the impression that you're disorganized and perhaps not quite up to the task.

- ✓ **Don't allow lingering.** Reflect back on your own childhood sports experiences. If you recall showing up at a field for the first time and being forced to stand around until the start of practice, you should make sure your players don't suffer the same way. You don't want to leave them standing off to the side, wondering whether they're at the right field or if anyone is going to come over and introduce himself. As soon as the kids climb out of the car and begin making their way toward the field, be there to welcome them with a friendly smile.
- ✓ **Use icebreakers.** Greet older players with a friendly handshake. If time allows, talk with them briefly about how long they've played football. Ask them which team or coach they played for last year or how their season went. Giving them a sense of your genuine enthusiasm — and how sincerely you're interested in them — can plant the seeds of a relationship based on mutual respect that grows stronger as the season progresses.

Introducing your team to the coaches

Much like the first day of the school year, a youngster's first football practice can be a stressful time, particularly if he's new to the sport. Remember, he's walking into a setting with all sorts of new kids and coaches to meet, instructions to follow, and skills to learn. He's in unfamiliar surroundings, so anything you can do to alleviate his anxiety and increase his comfort level goes a long way toward getting the season off to a tension-free start.

The first step in that direction is to formally introduce yourself and any assistant coaches, if you've already selected them, to the entire team. (In Chapter 4, we discuss the importance of proceeding cautiously before selecting parents to fill these important roles.) When meeting with your team, keep the following in mind:

- ✓ **Gather the team in an area of the field with the fewest distractions.** If you're standing with your back to another practice or any other type of commotion, some of your players may be more interested in what's taking place behind you than in what you have to say.
- ✓ **Watch the sun.** You don't want the team squinting to see you because they're staring directly into the sun. Whenever possible, you should be the one facing the sun. Paying close attention to the smallest details can make a huge difference in the impact you have on your team.
- ✓ **Get down to their level.** Standing up while the team is sitting isn't conducive to listening and learning, especially if the players have to strain to keep their heads up to focus on you. Your talk is more beneficial when you're speaking to them at eye level. Your best bet may be talking to them while bent down on a knee so you can make eye contact with each and every one of them.

✓ **Give a brief bio.** The kids will naturally be curious about you. So let them know if you prefer being called “Coach” or “Coach Jeff” or whatever other moniker you’re comfortable with. Also, toss out a few quick tidbits about yourself, and if you have a son on the team, introduce him so it doesn’t come as a surprise to anyone a couple weeks into the season.

The older the kids, the more details you should share. You may want to give older kids a little more-detailed information about your coaching background, such as how long you’ve been coaching football.

✓ **Keep it short.** Anytime you’re addressing the team, the shorter the talk, the better. With kids, short attention spans are as common as runny noses and skinned knees. So keep your points brief and stay focused on what you want to get across. The less time the players spend listening to you, the more time they get to spend running around on the field.



More than likely, you’re probably going to have a large group of kids under your direction, and that makes remembering names a little tricky. Giving everyone a name tag for the first few practices (put them on yourself and any assistant coaches, too) speeds up the name-learning process for both the kids and you. You can also put name tags on the front of their helmets.

Starting off slowly

A lot of kids under your care may never have played an organized sport before, and their only football experience may be throwing the ball around with their pals in the backyard. The sport of football is truly unique because of the multitude of positions on the field and the wide range of skills needed to play each of them.

Because of the complexity of the sport — from the techniques and basic fundamentals to the rules and penalties associated with infractions — you need to ease youngsters into practice. Those first couple weeks of the season should be devoted to some of the most basic skills to give them a good sense of what football is really all about. (Check out the “Six-practice outline for beginners,” earlier in this chapter.)

Meanwhile, if you’re coaching a team with a little more experience, you can use that first week as a quick refresher on some of the basics. In subsequent practices, you can introduce more-advanced skills and techniques to help the players develop. (See the previous “Practice plans for intermediate and advanced players” section.)

Putting Smiles on Their Faces

Your practices are defined by the drills you choose and how effective they are at helping youngsters develop skills while having lots of fun. With youngsters who don't have much experience playing team sports, keep the drills at the early part of the season simple, straightforward, and of course, entertaining. If you throw out complex drills that require long-winded explanations, you'll confuse and overwhelm the kids and may leave them wondering whether they want to come back.

Opening and closing practice with some fun drills

All you need to get your practices off to a fun start, and end them on a positive note, too, is a touch of creative thinking. Warming the kids up before putting them through your drills is crucial for preparing their bodies for the activity and reducing the chances of injuries sabotaging their participation. Making the warm-up fun ensures that the kids look forward to this aspect of practice, and it also instills the importance of stretching properly before practices and games begin. If you have a group of young players new to the sport, a simple little game of "Get the Coach" is a great way to get things going. You simply carry a ball and try to avoid the players' tagging you. (Be sure to do a little stretching beforehand, though. You don't want to pull a hamstring before you get into the heart of your practice!)

Or you can recruit some assistant coaches or parents to join you and play Keepaway with the ball. Besides entertaining the kids, this game also lets them run around and gets them used to pursuing the person with the ball, which is a great defensive trait to ingrain in all players at an early age. Check out Chapter 11 for a bunch of fun-filled drills to use with a beginning squad, or simply for some ideas on how to jazz up your own drills.

For the older kids, try pairing them up and giving each twosome a football. Start with one player on the goal line and his partner facing him 5 yards away. The players have to work their way down the field throwing the ball back and forth while one player walks forward and the other backward. At every 5-yard increment, the ball must be thrown, and if it's dropped at any point, the pair returns to the goal line and begins again. After the pair reaches the other end zone, they go back the length of the field again so the player walking backward gets to move forward this time. On the return trip, to start getting their hearts pumping a little more, have them jog while tossing the ball back and forth. Get your coaching staff involved, too. The players will enjoy trying to beat you.

You can close practice by getting the parents more deeply involved in some drills, which we cover in detail in the following section.

Getting Mom and Dad involved in practice

Sure, football is a contact sport that requires equipment, but that doesn't mean that Mom and Dad can't participate, too. Many parents drop their kids off at practice and run errands or grab a seat on the sidelines to pay bills, read mail, and watch the proceedings from a distance. Why? Because coaches typically don't ask them to get involved. If you're coaching a relatively young team with kids age 10 and under, getting creative and finding ways for parents to take part in your practices can ratchet up the fun to new levels for your players. You can incorporate as many parents who are interested in being a part of the practice. It's easy and exciting, and everyone benefits. Here are some tips to make it all happen:



- ✓ **Let parents know your plans.** Give parents plenty of warning about which practices you'd like to have them involved with. Otherwise, you probably won't have much luck convincing a dad in his business suit or a mom in her heels to join the action on the field.
- ✓ **Build excitement.** During your post-practice chat, let the kids know that they'll be going against the parents in a variety of different drills at the next practice. This little advertisement gets the kids anxiously looking ahead to the next practice, so don't be surprised if you see lots of early arrivals.
- ✓ **Plan a kids-versus-parents scrimmage.** With younger kids, you can run a scrimmage with the kids against the parents. Of course, tackling doesn't have to be involved. You can simply go with a two-handed touch, but it'll still be great fun for the youngsters on offense to run plays against the parents and for those on defense to defend running and passing plays against Mom and Dad.
- ✓ **Pair kids and parents in one-on-one drills.** If you're doing a drill with quarterbacks and receivers, have the parents take the role of defensive back. The kids can have great fun running patterns against their parents or a teammate's parent. Instead of having younger kids run a boring drill around a bunch of cones, why not recruit some parents to stand on the field to serve as the markers? The youngsters will gain greater enjoyment from making a cut move around a mom than they would a cone.

Making Practice Time Beneficial

A lot of time and effort goes into planning quality football practices, and you certainly don't want those efforts going to waste after you step on the field. Every practice plays a valuable role in your team's development, so after you have your plan in place, it's up to you to execute it so your players reap all the benefits.

Making your practice time beneficial for all the kids in a sport like football poses its own set of challenges. With a large number of kids to deal with and so many different positions and techniques to teach, the task can seem overwhelming at times. Rest assured, you're qualified to make it happen for your team, and you'll get a real sense of satisfaction when everything comes together. The following section touches on areas you need to be aware of and tools you can use to help make every practice a productive and fun one.



You can maximize your practice time by using drills that minimize the standing-around time — and that pays big dividends for conditioning your players, too. They'll have much more fun than they'd have running laps, which does nothing for skill development. When conditioning is woven into your practices — and the kids don't even realize it's going on — they're reaping double benefits by becoming more proficient at skills and better conditioned, too (see Chapter 19 for more on conditioning and other aspects of keeping players healthy).

Building skills

Try to approach each practice as a building block in your team's development. Every time you get together, you want to be adding on to the previous skills they've learned. This takes a concentrated effort on your part, as well as the ability to refrain from jumping too far ahead without making sure that the kids have a good handle on the basics.

For example, when working with your wide receivers, you first want to make sure they know how to catch the ball with their palms facing out and their hands away from their body before moving on to more-advanced techniques. Although you may be anxious to teach them how to make over-the-shoulder catches, delving into this area doesn't make much sense until they have making the routine catches down pretty well. The ability to evaluate your team and make the proper adjustments to fit their needs helps ensure that they pick up fundamentals in the proper order and can build on them from there. (We cover the art of evaluating your team in Chapter 5.)

Helping players who need it

Even with all your great coaching, some kids will struggle with learning how to catch the ball or have difficulty getting their shoulders positioned the right way to make tackles. Despite the youngster's struggles, acknowledging his efforts is important. Gradually, if he sticks with it and you stick by him, he'll make strides.

Rewarding effort as much as outcome is a great habit to get into as a coach. Kids' giving their best effort at all times, especially in the face of failure and adversity, is an important ingredient for long-term and future success — and you should never let it go unnoticed. Most kids desperately want to succeed and please you with their performance, so alter your instructions or find a different drill to help him get the troublesome skill down.



While working with a youngster who's encountering some difficulty with a particular technique, show him how it's done rather than telling him what he's doing wrong. Demonstrations are a great visual blueprint that a youngster may relate to better. Taking the time to show the child exactly what you mean, and acknowledging even the slightest improvement the next time he performs the skill, can help keep him headed on the right track.



If you're not making a whole lot of progress teaching a child a certain skill and you're looking for solutions, you may be tempted to tell him to watch how one of his teammates performs the skill — and that's a big no-no. This can backfire, because it immediately sends the message that that player is better than he is. So instead of helping him learn the skill, you've shaken his confidence and sent the unwanted message that his skills aren't on par with his teammates'.

Also, be sure to steer clear of the ol' paralysis by analysis that you may have heard before. Basically, that just means you should avoid giving kids so much information that they're overwhelmed by the process and can't perform even the most basic skills because they're deep in thought about every little move they make.



When a youngster makes a mistake, stay positive when reminding him of the right way to do it. You'll get much further, and the child will enjoy playing for you more, if you say something like "Remember to follow through with your arm toward the target" rather than "You didn't follow through" or "I told you to follow through last time — how'd you forget again?"

Pointing out the highs

We all have egos, and we love being recognized for doing something well. Whether we're acing a test or receiving praise from the boss on a big project, acknowledgement means a lot. And when that recognition comes in front of our peers, it packs an even more powerful punch. During your practices, you have countless chances to praise youngsters on everything from performance to effort, and you should take full advantage of those opportunities. Praise that everyone hears yelled out to a child can have quite an impact on the player. That type of praise is so powerful in the minds of developing children, many of whom are unsure of their skills and harbor countless fears and doubts about whether they're as good as their teammates.



Providing some type of verbal accolade to each and every one of your players during practice can be a little tricky to pull off if you're coaching a large squad of players, but make that one of your goals. You don't want kids leaving the field without hearing a single word of praise or recognition for their efforts. Simply keep a roster on your clipboard and mark an *X* next to a child's name whenever you give him some positive feedback. This allows you to easily monitor how your praise is being distributed.



Start piling on the praise before the drills get underway at your practices. While the kids are stretching, you can tell a youngster that you were really impressed with how he picked up a certain skill in your last practice and that you can't wait to watch him put it to use today. As the coach, your words of praise are like gold — so be sure to sprinkle it among all your players.

Creating an atmosphere that young football players embrace, rather than shy away from, depends on your ability to interact with each child. You can be demanding and gain their respect while being positive, and you can provide constructive criticism in an encouraging manner. Sure, doing so isn't easy, but good coaches are able to find the proper balance to help their players reach their potential — and have plenty of fun along the way. Here are a few more ideas on feedback:

- ✓ **Contact works.** High-fives are great ways to acknowledge special plays or improvement of a particular skill. Be creative and use low-fives, where you and the player slap hands while they're low to the ground. You'll be amazed at the increased focus and intensity level the kids will practice at when they know you're waiting to slap hands with them for a job well done.
- ✓ **Refrain from making negative comments.** Keep the negativity out of your voice when a child makes a mistake or fails to execute a skill properly unless that tone is really needed, like when you encounter a discipline issue. (We discuss handling discipline problems in greater detail in Chapter 20.) Negative tones make children afraid of making future mistakes, which really handcuffs their ability to play the game. After all, mistakes are a part of football, but if children get the sense from your yelling that they have no room for errors, they'll be less likely to get involved in the play.
- ✓ **Be specific.** Hand out specific feedback to your players rather than general comments that tend to go unnoticed. Comments such as "that's a good boy" and "way to go" usually don't mean a whole lot to kids, so zero in on exactly what you're applauding the player for. Saying something along the lines of "Great job on that tackle, Evan; that's the way to wrap him up with your arms" packs more of a punch and is more likely to stick in the child's head every time he pursues a tackle.

- ✓ **Use the sandwich method.** Making corrections in a youngster's technique when he isn't performing a skill the right way is a big part of coaching, but be sure to surround your comments with some positive remarks. For example, you can say, "Cameron, your three-point stance was perfect before the snap of the ball, but when you're pass blocking remember to keep both hands up at chest height to fight off the defender. And I really liked how you kept your feet moving." With this approach, the child picks up the tip about being aware of where his hands are while pass blocking, and he also gets a nice boost about his excellent footwork.
- ✓ **Stop practice when things are done the right way.** A lot of coaches bring practice to a halt when they notice something being done the wrong way, but a much better approach is stopping practice momentarily when a play or skill is performed the right way; it's how you create that positive atmosphere that kids really tune in to and makes them work that much harder to hear that praise again.
- ✓ **Don't go praise crazy.** Yes, you want to praise kids and make them feel good when they do something well or put all their effort into the drill. Yet you don't want to hit them with such an avalanche of praise that you begin losing credibility with the team. Don't overlook errors and improper technique simply because you don't want to bring up the issue. A big part of your job is to spot errors and, rather than dwell on them, work to help the child make the necessary corrections. Children begin tuning you out if they're showered with excessive praise for performances that they know border on mediocre or know aren't their best. Also, with older kids, their respect for you and your knowledge of the sport will drop down a couple notches, and that'll be tough for you to get back during the rest of the season.



Ending on a Positive Note

Before you turn your players loose to their parents, gather the team for a quick chat — and we do mean quick. You can ride the wave of good feelings that enveloped the team from the fun drill or scrimmage they just went through and give their confidence and spirits another boost during this time.

Talk to the kids about how you appreciate the hard work and effort they put in today and that you're happy to see the improvements they're making each time you get together. Keep your talk in general terms about the entire team; after practice usually isn't the time to recognize individual efforts, because you run the risk of alienating those kids who think they've had their best practice of the season yet are headed home disappointed that their efforts went unnoticed.



Your post-practice chat isn't the time to critique players or go over a drill that didn't go quite as well as you had hoped. You never want to send kids home feeling that they disappointed you. Even those practices where nothing seems to go right — and you will most definitely have them during the course of the season — you have to find some nugget to praise that the kids can take home with them. It can be anything from their work ethic to their nonstop hustle on every play, but find something they can latch on to. Sadly, for some kids, you may be the only positive role model in their lives, so any connection you can make that sends them home feeling good about themselves is well worth the effort.

Wrap things up with a quick review of the upcoming schedule, particularly if any practice dates have been altered. If the next time you'll see them is at a game, double-check to see whether any players will be unavailable. Thank the team members for their hard work and attention, conclude with a team cheer if you have one, and call it a day.

Chapter 7

Game Day

In This Chapter

- ▶ Fulfilling pre-game tasks
 - ▶ Delivering pre-game talks
 - ▶ Making decisions during the game
 - ▶ Giving a good halftime chat
 - ▶ Winning and losing with class
 - ▶ Conducting the post-game talk
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Hopefully, your players enjoy attending your practices, receiving instruction, and learning new skills; however, we all know that no matter how entertaining your sessions are, football's really about game day for the kids. It's the chance to wear colorful uniforms, savor the fun and thrill of competing, and hear family and friends cheering in the stands when the kids make tackles and touchdowns.

Game day provides your players with plenty of exciting new challenges — and some for you, too. You have opposing coaches and referees to meet with before kickoff, a playing field to look over, and warm-ups to oversee. You also have to give that pre-game motivational talk, call offensive and defensive plays during the game, communicate instructions, and monitor substitutions. Toss in those halftime adjustments, the second-half strategy, and the post-game chat with the team, and you have a full day. Yes, lots of responsibilities accompany coaching on game day, but this chapter helps you prepare for a fun-filled and virtually stress-free day on the sidelines.

Pre-Game Responsibilities

Before you can call plays for your offensive unit or set up your defense in different formations, you have to tend to all sorts of pre-game responsibilities. Here's a helpful checklist to guide you through that maze.

Arrive early to inspect the field

Before your players take the field, inspect the playing area for hazards like broken glass, rocks, raised sprinkler heads, loose pieces of sod, or anything else that poses an injury risk. Ask your assistant coaches or recruit some parents to help so the inspection doesn't monopolize all your time. Don't rely on the opposing coach or the grounds crew to do this: Every player participating in the game is your responsibility, and every step you can take to help ensure the kids' safety is crucial.



In a lot of programs, games are played in rapid succession, but don't shirk the pre-game field check just because another game was just played there — that doesn't mean everything's okay. Even if someone has already checked the playing area, having another set of eyes look it over never hurts. Plus, all the traffic on the field often tears up chunks of grass that could trip young players if not properly replaced.

Meet with the opposing coach and officials

Before the game starts, head over and shake hands with the opposing coach. This trip to the other side of the field is a wonderful demonstration of good sportsmanship. It also sets a good example for the players on both teams, as well as the parents and other spectators. While you're over there, take the time to find out whether any players on the opposing team have special needs that you and your players should be aware of.

Meeting with the referees who'll officiate your game provides another example of good sportsmanship. When introducing yourself to the officials, let them know that you want to be informed if any of your players say or do anything unsportsmanlike. The same goes for any inappropriate comments parents make on your sideline. You want to work with the officials — not against them. Even though they're wearing a striped shirt and you're donning a coach's cap, you're both involved because you care about kids.

During your meeting with the ref, alert him if any child on your team has special needs, such as a hearing or vision problem. Officials can make the proper adjustments when they know this information beforehand. For example, if one of your players has a hearing problem and won't be able to hear a whistle, the official knows to use a hand signal for this child.

Pre-Game Team Meeting and Warm-Up

A pre-game team meeting puts everyone in the right frame of mind prior to kickoff. Here are some tips to keep in mind when gathering everyone together:

- ✓ **Meet with the team away from the parents.** Gather the team in a spot with the fewest distractions. The younger the players, the shorter their attention spans. Your players won't listen to what you're saying if they can see their parents or other family members. Also, keep your distance from the other team. Kids naturally want to check out the opposition, which is another distraction you don't want to contend with.
- ✓ **Be brief.** Save the long-winded speeches for the big presentation to the boss. Keep your talk with younger kids under 5 minutes; otherwise, you risk defusing their energy and enthusiasm for the game.
- ✓ **Relax.** Speak to the team in a calm and relaxed manner. If you're nervous or uptight, your players will be, too, which infringes on their performance. If you're smiling and laughing, the players can feed off that and approach the game in a much more relaxed way.
- ✓ **Remind the kids to have fun.** Be clear that you want the kids to have a good time playing — regardless of whether they're up by three touchdowns or trailing by that many. When kids genuinely believe that having fun is important, they feel free to play more loosely — and usually more effectively — because they're not afraid of making mistakes or losing games.
- ✓ **Briefly recap the warm-up.** Verbally run through the pre-game warm-up to refresh the kids' memories on the order of the drills. (For more on the pre-game warm-up, see the "Warming up" section later in this chapter.)
- ✓ **Be a good sport.** You want the team you put on the field to model good sportsmanship. That means a team that respects officials — regardless of what calls are made. Remind players of the importance of being good sports and being a team that others in the league will strive to emulate.
- ✓ **Wrap up with your team cheer.** Conclude with a team cheer, such as "One . . . two . . . three . . . team!" The cheer's a symbolic gesture reminding all players that everyone needs to work together.

Checking for equipment

Amid all the excitement surrounding game day, kids sometimes forget a piece of equipment. During your talk with the team, do a quick equipment check to

make sure that everyone has what he needs. Beyond the basics — helmet and shoulder pads — check that everyone has a mouth guard, too. At the more advanced levels of play, make sure the kids have cleats that meet the league regulations. As we discuss in Chapter 4, children should never be allowed on the field without all the proper safety equipment. Finally, make sure everyone has a water bottle. Enforce the team rule that every child bring a water bottle to all practices and games.

Warming up

The older the players on your team are, the more susceptible they are to pulling or straining muscles. A well-designed pre-game warm-up stretches the kids' muscles, loosens up their bodies, and gradually elevates their heart rates. The goal of any pre-game warm-up is to prepare kids for competition, reduce the chance of injury, and prep the kids to play their best. Warm-ups conducted in a positive environment can give players confidence and have them looking forward to performing similar skills during the game. Keep the following tips in mind when putting together your pre-game warm-up:

- ✓ **Practice the warm-ups.** During your practice sessions leading up to game day, spend a few minutes going over your pre-game warm-up. You don't want to waste valuable time prior to kickoff organizing players, introducing drills, and going over lengthy instructions.
- ✓ **Cover all the muscle groups.** The stretching that takes place prior to the game needs to cover all the major muscle groups: Include the hamstrings, calves, neck, arms, and back. See Chapter 11 for some specific stretches you can use. Before beginning those stretches, be sure to have your players perform some light running in place or some basic jumping jacks to get their bodies warmed up for stretching.
- ✓ **Boost the kids' confidence during this time.** While the kids are stretching is a good time to work your way around to each of them and provide a little extra encouragement. A pat on the back, a wink of the eye, or a general comment about how you're looking forward to watching them play gives them a little shot of confidence — and that can make a big difference in their play and how much they enjoy the game.
- ✓ **Use light drills.** After the kids are stretched out, you want them to gradually work into the drills. For example, when receivers are running pass patterns, you want them starting out at half their normal speed for several repetitions and working their way up to top speed. If kids go full speed throughout the entire warm-up, they'll be gasping for breath by the time the game arrives.

- ✓ **Cover all the skills.** Besides getting your team loosened up, you want to get players comfortable performing all the skills they'll need during the game. For example, you don't want to send your punt returner into a game without having caught any punts during the pre-game warm-up. In order to be most effective, he needs to get a feel for catching the ball, as well as for where the sun is and what effect the wind is having on the ball.
- ✓ **Allow time for rest and relaxation.** Don't conduct your pre-game warm-ups right up until the start of the game. Give the kids a couple minutes to get a drink of water and compose themselves before the game begins, and take this time to deliver a brief pre-game speech.

Giving the inspirational talk

Getting the best efforts out of your players every time they take the field can be pretty challenging. That's where the motivational talk comes in. Motivational talks dripping with inspiration and enthusiasm are great tools for getting everyone excited about doing his best.

The excitement surrounding game day magnifies the emotions and personalities of the kids on your team. Some kids have that inner drive and show up anxious to make tackles and deliver blocks; others just want to throw on the colorful uniform and run onto the field to hear the applause; and of course, some youngsters freeze up when they get a glimpse of all the people in the stands. Your motivational talk needs to pull everyone together as a team. If you handle the talk the right way, you may find your players clinging to every word and embracing what you're saying. Accomplish that, and the focus and positive energy can spill over onto the field, where it really pays off. Here are some tips to ensure that your pre-game words pack some punch:

- ✓ **Learn from the past.** Reflect on your playing days and those pre-game talks that really made an impression on you. Steal from the good ones and don't use material from the bad ones.
- ✓ **Remember your audience.** This isn't the time to repeat a speech you heard from your high school coach during your senior season of football. Target your message to your audience; otherwise, you're wasting your players' time.
- ✓ **Avoid clichés.** Overused clichés like "no pain, no gain" will probably produce more than a few blank stares from your players. Speaking from the heart with genuine passion serves you and your team far better.
- ✓ **Avoid pressure phrases.** Stay away from saying things like, "Let's score five touchdowns today." These phrases may seem motivational, but keep in mind that children can give you no more than their best effort; they can't control the outcome of games.





- ✓ **Focus on your team.** Center your talk on your team, your players, and your confidence in them. Giving positive reinforcement has more impact than covering the strengths and weaknesses of an opponent that they may know very little about.
- ✓ **Be positive.** This isn't the time to allow doubt or insecurities to creep into the players' minds, so everything that tumbles out of your mouth should be positive and uplifting. Talk about areas of the game that the team has really excelled in and how you can't wait to see them put those skills into action.
- ✓ **Deliver the talk after the pre-game warm-up.** You don't want to pump the kids up just for stretching. They should head into the game riding a wave of positive energy from your words.

Going over who's on special teams units

The kicking game is full of specialty teams — everything from setting up for those extra points to running back kickoffs and punts and defending them, too. A lot of responsibilities have to be filled, and not being organized can cause all sorts of chaos on your sideline. You don't want to waste a timeout because you have only nine players on your punt return unit, and you certainly don't want a costly 5-yard penalty when the referee whistles you for having 12 players on the field while you're attempting a field goal.



Organization is critical with the special teams, so giving a quick recap of who's doing what on each unit can eliminate the chances of problems occurring after the game begins. Have the kids stand up as you announce each unit to double-check that you and your players are on the same page.

Instructions: Keeping them simple

Children will have a lot on their minds when they reach the field — everything from trying to remember plays to hoping they can catch a touchdown pass while Dad's filming with the camcorder. With older teams, kids tend to concentrate on their assignments and responsibilities and to think about turning in impressive performances. So the simpler you can keep your instructions, the better off you and your players will be.

Your instructions should zero in on just a couple main points that the kids easily understand. For instance, you can remind an inexperienced squad never to lead with their helmets while tackling, or you can repeat a basic piece of strategy, like being alert for a lot of long passes from the opposition, to an advanced team. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- ✓ **Don't strategize now.** Prior to kickoff isn't the time to discuss complex strategies, because you run the risk of overloading players' minds with too much information. Also, stay away from anything that you haven't covered in detail during your practices.
- ✓ **Avoid confusing phrases.** Football has a unique language all its own, and if you're using terms that players are unfamiliar with, you may as well be speaking French. Stick to terms that players have heard during practices and understand.
- ✓ **Be specific.** Youngsters respond best to specific feedback and instructions. General instructions like "tackle him" are generally unproductive. Specific remarks like "take a step back so you have a better angle to make the tackle" are much more beneficial.
- ✓ **Sidestep repetitiveness.** Avoid repeating the same instructions every game; otherwise, your players may begin tuning you out. If you find yourself repeating the same instructions, perhaps the team needs additional work in that area in practice.
- ✓ **Give a field report.** During your pre-game field check, you may have noticed an area of the field where footing could be a problem. Inform your players of these spots so they can adjust their play. For example, being aware of trouble spots can help your wide receivers and defensive backs with running and defending pass patterns. The pre-game warm-up, which we discuss later in this chapter, can also help players get accustomed to field conditions.

In the more advanced levels of football, the field conditions have a greater impact on the game. A wet field poses additional challenges for defensive units, who have more difficulty keeping their footing while reacting to what the offense does. Taking just a moment to relay this information to your team can help them get into the proper mindset as they take the field.



A great way to keep things simple for your offensive unit is to highlight the first five plays you're going to run in the game ahead of time. Besides helping your players relax, letting your players know what to expect also gets them into the flow of the game more easily.

Game Time! Opening Kickoff and First Half

Hopefully, your pre-game talk sinks in with all the kids, the warm-up goes smoothly, and everyone's ready for the opening kickoff. After the game is underway, you have all sorts of new challenges to handle. Motivating players, orchestrating substitutions, and using timeouts are just some of the areas you need to take care of in the heat of the action. Here's a look at what awaits.

Motivating your players during the game

Even though you may give great pre-game speeches that fire the kids up and have them excited to play, they may forget everything you said when the game is underway. Following up your pre-game talk with lots of motivation during the game is the ticket to keeping kids' heads high and in every play.



Games often don't go as expected. Missed assignments, unfavorable calls, and unlucky bounces of the pigskin can all frustrate kids. No matter the circumstances, convince players that continuing to work will eventually turn things in their favor. Granted, that can be rather tricky when your team is trailing by four touchdowns and the players across the line of scrimmage are stronger and faster than your team. But that's where being a master motivator comes in. The confidence to keep plugging away — regardless of the score or the circumstances in the game — is a great team trait to have.

When you're motivating players during the game, keep the following in mind:

- ✓ **Give 'em room.** Allow players some space and the chance to make mistakes. That's right, mistakes! Constantly yelling out instructions on where to line up and what they should do puts the brakes on their development. Of course they'll make mistakes, but the kids will learn from their slip-ups. Giving youngsters that coveted freedom to play and to make some decisions of their own fuels their growth and deepens their love for the game.
- ✓ **Tone down the yelling.** It's not a good sign if you're grabbing for the throat lozenges after games. Of course, your team is excited on game day, and chances are, you are, too. Part of being a good coach entails keeping your emotions in check and refraining from spending the entire game shouting instructions to every player on the field.

Constantly hearing your voice before, during, and after every play is not only disconcerting to players but tiresome as well. Sure, sometimes you need to get a player's attention and have to increase the volume. Just be sure to convey the instruction in a positive manner, because sometimes the louder the voice, the less effective the message to a young player. Also, players usually don't readily accept instructions you deliver in a negative fashion or with a frustrated tone.

- ✓ **No running allowed.** Use your gym membership to get in your aerobic workout, not the sidelines during a game. Coaches who charge up and down the sidelines all game long — whether calling out plays, shouting instructions, or cheering on the team — are major distractions to players trying to focus on the game. If you find yourself covering as much ground during the game as your players, give yourself a breather.

- ✓ **Correct errors in a positive way.** Children often react much differently to your feedback in games than they do during the week in practice. Being singled out in front of family, strangers, and the opposing team is very different from getting attention during a practice, where usually only a handful of people are milling around. So choose your words carefully. For example, if your quarterback isn't following through on his passes, say something along the lines of "Jason, remember to follow through toward your receiver just like you did so well in practice this week."
- ✓ **Reward hustle and don't allow slacking.** You never want your players to be out-hustled by the opposition, because that's one area of the game that isn't determined by talent or athleticism. Your least-talented players can have the biggest impact on the game by hustling and giving it their all on every down. So encourage your players to work hard when attempting to recover a fumble on the ground or chasing down a player to make a tackle. Reward their hustle with applause and praise.

Whether the kids are successful doesn't matter, because after you instill this attitude in your entire team, they'll reward you with their best effort on every down. You can always correct improper techniques or missed assignments, but only the players control how much effort they put into each play. Let kids know that they'll make mistakes, but you want those mistakes made going full speed and with 100-percent effort.

Communicating plays

One of the many unique aspects of coaching football is that when your team has possession of the ball, you have time in between plays to let the kids know which play you want to run next. You can send a player from the sideline into the game to relay the next play or, at the more advanced levels, you can signal the play to your quarterback.



Whatever method you use to communicate plays, be sure to use it during your practice sessions. Just like kids need practice blocking and tackling, they also need practice relaying plays and deciphering your hand signals.

Also, when your team is using the no-huddle offense, communication becomes even more vital. (The *no-huddle offense*, also called the hurry-up offense or two-minute drill, entails going without a huddle and using a pre-planned set of plays to save valuable time on the clock. Jump to Chapter 12 to find out more about this offensive approach.) Because you need to call plays more quickly and players have to set up faster, the more proficient your communication, the greater the chances of your plays succeeding. Many coaches assign code words, usually colors and numbers, to specific plays.

Taking a timeout

Timeouts are extremely valuable, so use them wisely. Some leagues, in order to keep games moving along, may allow only one timeout per half. If that's the case, exercise great care when choosing when to use it. You can call timeouts to give your players a short breather if they've been on the field for a long period, to reinforce an aspect of the game that you spent a lot of time on in practice, to make adjustments in your offensive or defensive strategy, or for any number of other reasons.

Whatever the reason for the timeout, be sure to use the time to pump up your squad, not put them down. Applaud the kids' effort, point out the positives that are happening on the field, and encourage them to keep giving it their best. Players should return to the field reenergized and uplifted from your talk, not dejected and sensing that they've disappointed you.

Substituting players

Most football programs allow coaches to make unlimited substitutions during games, which helps ensure that the kids receive an equal amount of playing time and doesn't leave some kids stranded on the bench for uncomfortable amounts of time. After a play has been run, you can send in extra receivers and have your running backs come out, for example. Being familiar with your league's rules, which we discuss in Chapter 2, is crucial so you know whether any special rule modifications regarding substitutions are in place.



While making substitutions, try to bring kids out after they've done something well rather than when they've made a mistake. If you take a youngster out after he drops a pass, he'll relate making mistakes to losing playing time, which can make him less assertive on the field. Also, when bringing a player to the sideline, give him a pat on the back or a high-five recognizing all the effort he's putting forth. Kids love those kinds of receptions, and those gestures keep the enthusiasm running high when the kids re-enter the game.

The Halftime Speech

While watching your team for a half, you see all sorts of things: players' scoring touchdowns, dropping passes, making diving tackles, and fumbling the ball, among others. If you're coaching beginning level football, you may even witness players watching a bird in the sky rather than the ball in the air headed their way. So as your players trot off the field for halftime, you'll have a lot of information in your head and not much time — probably 10 minutes tops — to relay it.

Suggestions for all levels

What are your responsibilities during halftime, and how can you make the most out of the little time you have? Foremost, adjust your message to fit the needs and mood of the team. What you say during your halftime chat should be clear, concise, and uplifting. You don't have to verbally replay the entire half of the game for the team. After all, your players were out on the field, and they know what happened. But you do want this time with your team to be productive. The following are a few tips to keep in mind when gathering your troops at halftime:

- ✓ **Use some time for rest and rehydration.** Allow players a chance to drink some fluids before you begin your halftime talk. Having a chance to catch their breath makes them more receptive to your comments.
- ✓ **Improvise.** Every game your team plays requires a different halftime talk from you. You can't rely on the same halftime speech all season long. On your way to the locker room or the big tree behind the end zone where teams gather for the break, think about what you want to get across.
- ✓ **Stick to key points.** By limiting how much information you throw at your team, you make your words more likely to sink in. The last thing you want to do is send your team back on the field overwhelmed.
- ✓ **Keep a straight face.** Even if you're frustrated or upset, never let the team know it. Losing a grip on your emotions detracts from your ability to coach and interact effectively with your players. Regardless of whether your team is way ahead or way behind, maintain a positive attitude and demeanor.



Kids respond not only to what you're saying but to your body language as well. If your shoulders are slumped and your head's bowed, that negativity can smother your team's energy. Approach halftime with the same positive energy you brought to your pre-game talk, and your team will respond accordingly.

- ✓ **Highlight the positives as team plays.** Stick to highlighting the great play of specific units rather than individual players. For example, point out the great way the secondary played right before the half in knocking down passes while going against the opponent's no-huddle offense. Or mention how your offensive line really did an outstanding job blocking on that fourth-and-goal touchdown run in the first quarter.
- ✓ **Make necessary adjustments.** One of your biggest challenges is making halftime adjustments based on what went right — and not-so-right — during the opening two quarters. Keep the focus on finding solutions and fixing problems rather than making speeches. Every game you coach is drastically different from the previous, from the playing conditions to the types of plays your opponent runs. Furthermore, your team sometimes has games when everything you've worked on in practice

comes together perfectly and other times when every play you call fails. Recognize what types of adjustments need to be made, and share them with your team.

- ✓ **Focus on your team.** It's pretty easy to get wrapped up in what the other team is doing and lose focus on what you worked on in practice. Don't completely deviate from your team's strengths and suddenly expect players to perform at higher or different levels. Try to play to your team's strengths. For example, if you're a great running team but find yourself down by a couple touchdowns at halftime, start the third quarter running the ball. Sure, you may be tempted to start throwing the ball all over the field in an attempt to score quickly, but there's no need to panic about the score just yet. Sticking to your style of play maintains a certain comfort level among the players.

For advanced teams

When coaching experienced teams, you can take advantage of the halftime break in a number of other ways, such as the following:

- ✓ **Get player feedback.** Because of all your responsibilities during the game, you can't possibly monitor everything that takes place on the field. That's where your players can help. Asking your players whether they have any suggestions for the second half reinforces your respect for them and their knowledge of the game; furthermore, you may gain some valuable feedback that benefits the team. For example, maybe one of your safeties noticed that the quarterback looks to his left before the snap every time the team runs the ball. Picking up on these types of tendencies, which sometimes tip you off to what type of play is being run, enhances the team's effectiveness during the game.
- ✓ **Watch the wind and sun.** Sometimes you have to tweak your strategy to fit the weather. For example, if strong winds will be at your team's back for the upcoming quarter, you may want to take a more aggressive approach throwing the ball downfield; when the teams change ends at the end of the quarter, your passing opportunities will be more limited because of Mother Nature.
- ✓ **Adjust to the striped shirts.** Different referees officiate games different ways, and your players have to adjust accordingly. Some refs throw lots of penalty flags, while others hardly ever reach for a flag. Make note of how the game is being called, and make any necessary adjustments in your team's approach. For example, if the referee is allowing a little more contact covering receivers than your team is accustomed to, you may want to have your players take a slightly more aggressive approach while defending passes.

Winning and Losing Graciously

Although no one wants to lose, there'll a winner and a loser every time your team takes the field. Teaching your team how to win and lose with class and dignity transcends your instructions on the proper way to throw a screen pass or deliver a block. Being able to hold your head up high in defeat, or on days when things simply don't work in your favor, are wonderful qualities that your players can forge on the field and use in all areas of life.

Spend time talking to your players about playing fairly, abiding by the rules, and behaving with class in both victory and defeat. Review the right ways to congratulate a winning team and how to behave when they're celebrating a victory themselves. Ask them how they feel when they win and lose, how they want to be treated when they've lost, and how they should treat their opponent when they're the winning team. Opening the door to these types of discussions lays the foundation for behavior that makes you proud.

Winning with class

People remember teams not only for how well they play in the game but for how they behave in it, too. Youth football has no place for showboating, celebrating big plays in the other team's face, or behaving like you've just won the lottery when your team scores touchdowns or wins games. Considering all the examples of poor sportsmanship from professional players, teaching children the art of winning with grace may be one of the more challenging tasks you have as a coach.

Football is an emotional game, and the line between celebrating and taunting is often a very fine one. Your players need to know that celebrating a touchdown or an interception is okay. After all, kids are naturally excited about performing well in a game, and you don't want to curb their enthusiasm for doing well. The key is making sure that excitement and energy are funneled toward your team and not directed at the opposition. For example, when one of your players makes an interception, he can get up and high-five his teammates. The celebration crosses into the territory of poor sportsmanship only if he stares at the opposing team's quarterback while celebrating the pickoff or if he makes a derogatory comment to the wide receiver.

In most football programs, there's a pretty big discrepancy in the skills of the players. Chances are pretty good that mismatches will occur during the season. If you find your team dominating an opponent that simply doesn't have the talent or skills to compete with your players, do everything you can not to pile on the points and embarrass them. That reflects terribly on you and your team and serves no purpose in the development of your players. Remember, next week your team could go up against a vastly superior opponent, and you wouldn't want your kids demoralized.

If you find yourself in a lopsided game, consider some of the following approaches to keep your team's interest level high, work on a broad range of skills, and avoid humiliating the opponent in the process:



- ✓ **Shift players around.** When teams are mismatched in your favor, give kids the chance to play the different positions that they had their hearts set on at the start of the season. This allows players to work on different aspects of their game and provides new challenges. If you're coaching an advanced team, give the kids on the second and third string (the non-starters) plenty of action.
- ✓ **Remain grounded.** To cut down on big plays and quick points, refrain from passing when your team has the ball. Instead, take this opportunity to work on your running game. If your team has struggled to get some plays down in practice, this is a good time to get in some additional work. For example, if your offensive linemen have had problems pulling to the left, you can call a bunch of running plays in that direction to give them extra practice.
- ✓ **Call off the blitz.** If your team is easily getting to the opponent's quarterback, don't have players in the backfield charge the line of scrimmage to put extra pressure on the quarterback. Instead, work on your zone pass coverage to provide your defensive players with valuable practice with that aspect of the game. Also, after you've removed your starters from the game, never put them back in just because you don't want to surrender a touchdown.

Losing with grace

Sure, you and your team would love to win every time you take the field, but that simply won't happen. The best coaches and the best teams — regardless of the level of play — suffer losses. Nothing's wrong with losing a game, but there's plenty wrong with behaving like it's the worst thing in the world. Players' crying, throwing equipment, blaming the outcome of the game on the officials, swearing, and refusing to shake hands with the opposing team are all examples of behavior that you simply can't tolerate. (Jump to Chapter 20 to find out more about dealing with some of these types of behaviors.)

Regardless of what transpires on the field, have your players line up and shake hands with the opposing team. Sure, this display of good sportsmanship can be difficult for players who just gave their best effort and came up short. Yet teaching your team respect for their opponents is important for their overall development. Encourage your players to acknowledge a well-played game from the opposition. Remind them to keep everything in perspective and that next time they could be on the winning end.

No matter how cocky the opposing team may be, your team should always rise above that type of behavior. As difficult as this is at times — and that goes for you as the coach shaking the other coach's hand, too — always offer a congratulatory handshake or high-five. Being sincere in the face of adversity or a loss is a great attribute. That also goes for shaking the referee's hand after the game.

Giving the Post-Game Talk

What you say to your team following a game — and how you say it — has a big impact on the kids, because that message resonates until the next time they take the field. So regardless of how the game turns out, one of your most important tasks is sending them on their way feeling good about themselves. Pats on the back, lots of encouraging words, and a genuine smile are always well-received by kids in any post-game chat: When they feel appreciated for their efforts, playing for you gives kids a real sense of satisfaction.

Checking whether the kids had fun

One of your top priorities is ensuring that every child has fun every time he straps on his helmet. Randomly asking the kids directly whether they had fun is one of the most obvious — and effective — ways to gauge the fun factor. Hopefully, you get a chorus of enthusiastic responses, and if so, poll the kids to see what they enjoyed most about the game. If you have some kids who don't answer quite as enthusiastically, immediately find out why they didn't have fun. Make any necessary adjustments to ensure that they'll have a smile on their faces following next week's game.

Their reasons for not enjoying the game may range from getting tackled hard to not getting a chance to catch a pass with Grandma in the stands watching. Keep those communication lines open with your squad. Always take the time to solicit feedback, gauge feelings, and probe for answers. Sometimes, part of being a good football coach is being a detective. Find out whatever information you can to make sure that their experience continues to be fun — or returns to being fun — prior to your next game.

Accentuating what went right

Don't allow the scoreboard to dictate your tone of voice or body language while interacting with the team. Remember, wins and losses don't define your team's effort, how they're improving, or how much fun they have playing.

Following losses, fight the urge to dwell on the negative and everything the kids did wrong. Instead, forget about that miscue that resulted in giving up that game-winning touchdown. Your players are well aware of what happened and don't need a recap of the play after the game.

Part of your job, regardless of whether the team played its best game of the season or got clobbered, is pointing out some of the good things that happened that the team can build on. Perhaps your special teams unit did a great job of blocking, which produced some decent punt or kickoff returns. Or maybe the secondary demonstrated some improvement in its pass coverage. By keeping your comments positive, your body language buoyant, and your tone of voice upbeat, you can send kids home feeling good about themselves. They'll also be anxious to return to practice in the coming days to continue working on their game.

Recognizing good sportsmanship

How your team behaves on the field is a direct reflection on you as a coach, so don't neglect touching on sportsmanship in your post-game chat.

Applauding touchdown passes, sacks, and interceptions is easy to do, because those kinds of plays stand out in your mind after the game. What's a little more difficult, but equally important, is recognizing displays of good sportsmanship that occurred during the game.

Be on the lookout for instances of good sportsmanship and make mental notes when they occur during the course of play. The act could be the way one of your players tells an opponent "nice catch" after a receiver makes a difficult catch; or it could be the way he checks on a player he just tackled who's a little slow getting up. You can even bring up the opposing team's displays of good sportsmanship to let your team know how impressive that was. Use a comment like, "That was a classy move when they said 'nice play' after we scored that second-quarter touchdown." Making your players aware of good sportsmanship sends those all-important messages that conduct is as important as blocking, tackling, and catching.

Chapter 8

Refining Your Coaching Strategies

In This Chapter

- ▶ Conducting midseason reviews
 - ▶ Adjusting to your evolving team
 - ▶ Gaining parental insight
-

As a youth football coach, nothing puts a smile on your face more quickly than seeing your players learning, developing, and progressing in all areas of the sport. After all, if that's all happening — amid a safe and fun atmosphere — your drills are effective; the practice plans you create are challenging and fulfilling and are meeting the needs of your squad; and the instruction and feedback you provide are really sinking in.

That's great news — and you can give yourself a pat on the back for a job well done to this point. But don't allow yourself to be overly satisfied. When the season reaches the halfway point, take a look at where the team is, where you want them to go from here, and how you can help to get them there.

How you adjust to the ever-changing dynamics of your team, from the drills you choose to run to the practices you craft, determines whether the fun, learning, and skill development continue or grind to a halt. Revising coaching strategies, adjusting practice plans, setting goals, and reviewing players' progress are all key midseason responsibilities. In this chapter, we look at proven ways to meet the new needs of your players to help ensure that the second half of your season is even more rewarding than the first.

The Midseason Review

The football team that you welcomed to your first practice of the season is dramatically different from the one you're working with as you reach the season's halfway point. While going through several practices with you and participating in games, your players evolve right before your eyes, and the team — hopefully — emerges as a cohesive unit.

Reviewing the team's progress at the midpoint of the season serves a number of purposes. It helps keep a season that's been going smoothly on track and helps rescue one that's showing signs of drifting off course. Look at the process of the midseason review as a road map to help you avoid making wrong turns.

People love to get progress reports — especially when they're performing something really well. After you start most new jobs, your boss reviews your work after a 30- or 90-day period and gives you feedback on areas you're excelling in and areas you need to work on and (hopefully) gives suggestions on how to improve. Sharing similar types of information with your players really drives home that you have their best interests at heart.

Setting individual goals

If you're looking for motivational tools, don't overlook goal-setting. When you do it correctly, setting goals is one of the most effective ways to get the most out of your players. Determining the right goals for your players keeps their attention, gives them something to strive for, and allows them that all-important feeling of satisfaction when they achieve a goal. As you hit the middle of the season, take full advantage of the knowledge you've gained about your players — their skills, interests, and personalities — to set specific goals for them to shoot for during the remainder of the season. To make your goal-setting successful, keep these points in mind:

- ✓ **Encourage practice.** Encourage more advanced players to practice skills with their parents or friends. Just a few minutes in the backyard or park a couple times a week can pay big dividends. Never force it — you don't want to make it feel like homework — but gentle reminders about spending time on certain skills can nudge kids in the right direction.
- ✓ **Strike a balance.** Choose goals that are in between being too easy and too difficult so you keep the child's interest but minimize frustration.
- ✓ **Be realistic.** Set goals that fit within the framework of the team setting. Setting a goal of scoring five touchdowns for a running back is unrealistic for many reasons: The child has no control over how to achieve that, and when your team gets near the end zone and another running back scores for your team, the child may feel that prevents him from his reaching his goal, which destroys team chemistry.
- ✓ **Use short-term goals.** The younger the child, the shorter the attention span, so you're better off setting a series of short-term goals so the child sees lots of progress right away.
- ✓ **Set goals at varying levels.** Set some different levels so that if the player doesn't reach the top goal but still makes strides, he still gains that sense of accomplishment.

- ✓ **Get player feedback.** You can make goal-setting more effective — and more enjoyable for the kids — if all of you have a short discussion on which areas of the game they want to improve. Maybe one of your linebackers wants to improve his pass coverage technique, but if you never talk to him and instead choose to focus on pass rushing, his effort may not be quite as enthusiastic.
- ✓ **Factor in injuries.** Anytime a youngster has been injured during the season and misses some playing time, be sure to take that into account when setting goals. The youngster often takes some time to get back up to the level he was at prior to the injury, so you may have to adjust the goals accordingly. After you sense he's back at his normal level of play, you can readjust the goals to coincide with his improved health.

After half a season of practices and games, you should be ready to sit down with each of the players and map out a plan for the remainder of the season. While making your plans, establish goals for the players to work toward that tie into the team concept you're promoting. Setting individual goals that kids can reach through hard work gives them control over their efforts and success. Winning games doesn't always correlate to improved play. Teaching your young athletes how to compare current performances with those from earlier in the season — instead of evaluating their performance based on which team won the game — gives them a true sense of their progress.

Establishing team goals

If you're coaching a beginning team, you can go with some basic goals for the entire team. Of course, your primary goal is having fun, but beyond that you can set some simple yet attainable goals. For example, getting four first downs each half and completing five passes are team-oriented goals that foster the importance of working together as a unit.

With older and more advanced players, monitor progress with team goal boards for your offensive, defensive, and special teams units. When the goals are realistic, your share of wins will come and — more importantly — your players will reap the rewards of playing together and achieving together. Here are some samples of goals you can use for each unit:

- ✓ **Offense:** No turnovers or penalties in the red zone (within 20 yards of the opposition's goal line); more than 100 yards rushing; successfully executing a trick play; 50 percent conversion rate on third-down plays (half the third-down plays result in a first down).
- ✓ **Defense:** Forcing three turnovers; committing no penalties; holding the opponent to less than 80 yards passing; sacking the quarterback five times.
- ✓ **Special teams:** No penalties; pinning the opponent inside its 20-yard line more than it does to our team; not allowing any punts to be blocked.



Team goals that revolve around winning can lead to all sorts of problems. For example, if one of your team goals is to win four of your last five games of the season and the team drops two games in a row, the goal is suddenly unreachable. Maybe the team played two of its best games of the season. Setting team victory goals represents the proverbially double-edged sword. When the team is winning, confidence soars, and everyone's pleased with the outcome; but when games don't end in victories, the team becomes blanketed in disappointment and self-doubt. Instead, steer the team goals away from the win-loss record. Focus on weekly improvement and playing hard on every down.

Pointing out progress and improvement

Constantly applauding kids' progress can be the springboard to continued skill development. Let kids know that you notice the improvements in their play, even if the results don't show up on the scoreboard. Regardless of the outcomes of your games, find time to acknowledge units or players who are making great headway toward their goals.

For example, if one of the goals for your kicker is to become more proficient at making field goals inside of 20 yards and he goes two-for-two on kicks in a game your team loses by three touchdowns, make sure he gets a high-five from you for converting those kicks. Failing to acknowledge his progress, which can be easy to overlook on a day when the game doesn't go your team's way, sends the message that setting goals, working hard, and improving really isn't that important to you after all.

Dealing with Shifting Team Dynamics

After a few weeks of watching your team in action — in both practices and games — it's pretty clear which players are catching on to the skills you're teaching. Kids who didn't appear to have much coordination the first time you saw them in action may now be running and tackling as well as most of their teammates.

At this point, the kids on the team have improved to varying degrees in different aspects of the game. For example, some of your offensive linemen may have become really proficient at run blocking, while others have developed the most in the area of pass blocking. You may even have kids who started the season on the defensive side of the ball but have demonstrated a really keen sense for playing on the offensive line instead.

These changing skills and abilities impact the makeup of your team and present new challenges for you. You'll shuffle kids into different positions after they've demonstrated that their skills are best suited to help the team elsewhere on the field; you'll adjust practice drills to meet the team's changing needs; and you'll tweak your offensive and defensive approaches to best match the team's evolving strengths.

Changing positions

Regardless of how good you are at evaluating talent at the start of the season, some kids will really surprise you with certain areas of their game. A child who you had pegged to play in the secondary could emerge as the team's best running back, for example. Perhaps during a game he intercepted a pass, and you noticed his elusive footwork and how opponents really had a difficult time tackling him. As the season rolls along, you need to constantly reassess talent. During practices, pay attention to details, such as how offensive players handle tackling a defensive player who has scooped up a fumble, because one play can give you great insight.

Having a youngster on defense, for example, emerge as a gifted running back provides a nice boost to the offense and enhances the team's effectiveness in moving the ball; however, it also gives you the sometimes unpleasant task of moving the child who's been handling that position for much of the season to a different slot or bumping him to back-up status on an advanced squad.

If you're lucky, the child will look forward to trying out a new position, but that's not always the case. Quite often, the youngster's feelings will be hurt when he's asked to move elsewhere. Explain to the youngster that accepting this new role benefits the team. Talk about his skills that impress you the most and how he can be a strong factor in this new position. Make it less a conversation about how another teammate is better than he is and more one about how you think he's best-suited to handle the challenges and responsibilities of playing elsewhere.



Whenever you switch kids' positions, be sure to alert the parents. It's the courteous thing to do, it keeps vital communication lines open, and it reduces the chances of an unpleasant conversation unfolding if the parents are caught by surprise on game day. Let the parents know that their child is a valuable member of the team, and explain what skills he contributes and how you think he'll help the squad in his new position.

Revising your practice plan

One of the few coaching problems you can actually look forward to is having to make revisions in how you approach practices and games as your youngsters improve. In order for youngsters to gain the most out of their participation with you, you have to continually challenge yourself to devise drills that bring out the best in your players and challenge them to continue their development in the sport. You can't simply rely on using the same core of drills all season long, because that brings learning and development to a halt and buries the fun in the process.



As positions and team dynamics change, adjust your coaching strategies accordingly. For example, if your offensive approach has centered predominantly on running the football, but you now have a youngster at quarterback who excels at passing and some kids have really emerged at receiver, you'll want to use more passing plays. Developing a pass-oriented attack requires a focus on additional passing drills in practice.

Tweaking your practice plans while maneuvering through the season isn't as difficult as you may think. If you want to increase the difficulty level and provide new challenges for your players, you can jump to Chapters 14 and 18 for a description of some advanced drills. You can also tweak an existing drill you're using — such as a basic one-on-one drill where a wide receiver runs patterns against a defensive back — to make it more challenging. For example, you can add a safety to the mix so the receiver has to contend with double coverage to get open. Or add a pass rusher to make delivering passes more difficult for the quarterback. Remember, new challenges keep the kids' interest.

Chatting with the Parents

Chances are pretty good that when your season crosses the halfway mark, your life may become somewhat hectic as your responsibilities continue mounting. Now, maintaining contact with the parents of your players is as important as ever. In Chapter 4, we discuss the importance of a preseason parents meeting to open up those lines of communication. You don't want that foundation crumbling after the first few practices and games.

Setting aside some time to talk to parents one-on-one about how their children are enjoying the season demonstrates how much you truly care. It's a comforting gesture to parents, many of whom may be involved with their children in an organized sport for the first time. Most importantly, by speaking with them, you can gain some valuable insight into what their children think and feel about playing for you. Limit each chat to less than 10 minutes, especially if you're coaching a large number of kids.



As your season approaches the halfway point, let parents know that you want to set aside a few moments in the upcoming week to speak to them regarding their children and their thoughts on how the season has gone so far. A good time to make this announcement is following a game when most parents are likely to be on hand. Find out a good time to call them during the week for a brief conversation, or if it's convenient, set aside some time after practice to chat in person.

Consider asking parents the questions in the following sections.

"Is Junior having fun?"

One of the best ways to gauge whether the youngsters are enjoying the season is to solicit feedback from their parents. After all, they can tell you whether their son is excited for games and is wearing his uniform around the house two hours before kickoff or whether he basically has to be coaxed to the car when it's time to leave for the field.



Use this opportunity to get each child's parents actively involved in setting goals for their child's skill development. Encourage the parents to be creative in working with their child. For example, parents and children can make colorful charts for the refrigerator or the child's bedroom so they can monitor the child's progress toward whatever objectives you come up with. Goal-setting should be a fun activity that allows parent and child to bond. (See the "Setting individual goals" section, earlier in this chapter, for more information.)

"What else can we do?"

Sometimes what you hear from the parents isn't really encouraging. That's okay, because you want an honest and open conversation. What's not okay is failing to do anything to resolve the situation. If something isn't working as well as you'd hoped with a youngster and he's rapidly losing interest in playing, you owe it to the child to explore ways to reignite his interest and restore his fun in the game.



It's never too late to rescue a child's season. After speaking with the parents and uncovering even the slightest problem or concern, don't allow it to linger. Act quickly and determine the best course of action to address the issue and meet the child's needs. His parents may be able to provide a solution for you, or perhaps you can simply speak with the child. All problems are correctible. The following are solutions to a couple of the more common problems:

- ✓ **Finding a different position for him:** The solution may be as simple as penciling in the youngster at a different position. Maybe this particular child hasn't gotten the opportunity to play a position he's had his eye on all season. You can easily correct that problem by giving him a taste of the position during practice. You may discover that the child really excels at that position and that moving him there helps the team, too. Or the child may find that the position isn't what he envisioned after all and that he's quite happy to return to his regular spot.
- ✓ **Helping him conquer his fears:** Some memories sting and take up residence in a child's mind, where they impact his enjoyment of the game. This could be anything from a wide receiver's getting walloped by a defender to a running back's fumbling the ball in the final minutes of a close game. Kids may get embarrassed by these types of things. Sometimes you just have to explain that taking hits and making mistakes are simply aspects of the game and that the child needs to push them to the side and focus on the next play.



Use your best discretion when an embarrassing incident occurs. Sometimes you're better off not saying anything about it to a child, and the less attention you give it, the less likely he may be to worry about it. If you do feel the need to soothe a child's bruised feelings, try sharing a similar incident that happened to you during the course of your youth football career. When children get a sense that everyone endures humorous moments and that mistakes are just a part of participating in sports, kids feel freer to put an event in the past and move forward.

The following are a couple of other fairly common situations and some possible fixes:

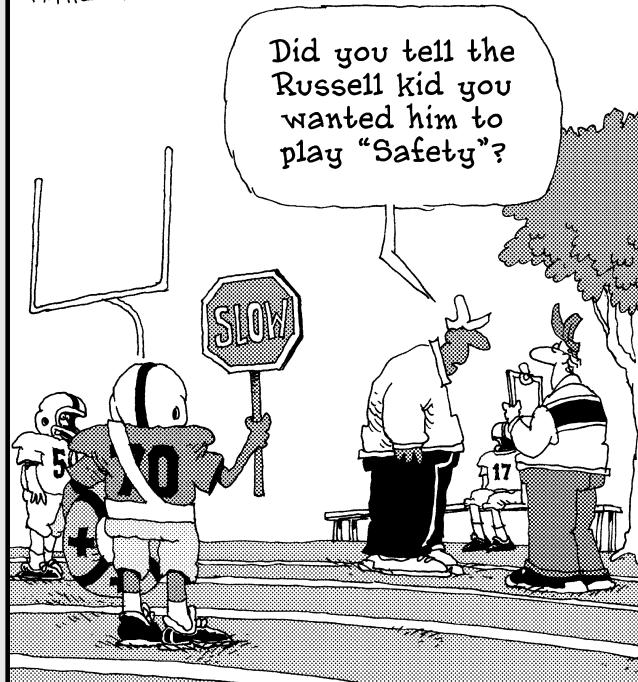
- ✓ **Feelings of isolation:** Maybe the youngster got separated from all his buddies when the league created the teams and hasn't been able to forge any friendships. If that's the case, consider having the kids do their pre-practice stretches with a partner so they have chances to bond with different players.
- ✓ **Too much contact:** Football is a rough sport, and chances are pretty good that some youngsters will get tired of getting knocked around week after week. Contact is obviously a big part of the game, and if that's the reason for a child's growing disinterest in the sport, you can't do much. But you can check to see whether the child is interested in punting or kicking, which involves little contact with other players, or you can suggest to the parents some other sports that may better suit the child.

Part III

Working with Beginning and Intermediate Players

The 5th Wave By Rich Tennant

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In this part . . .

A football coach heading into the season without an assortment of well-designed drills is about as effective as a car mechanic without any tools. In this part, we offer a collection of drills that you can use to help teach the fundamentals of the game on both sides of the ball, and we follow it up with some more-challenging drills to help your players take their skills to the next level.

Chapter 9

Offensive Fundamentals

In This Chapter

- ▶ Teaching your offense basic skills
- ▶ Helping the struggling kids

Being a good offensive football coach requires more than a basic understanding of the fundamentals of running, passing, receiving, and blocking. It takes the ability to teach youngsters these skills so they can have a safe, fun, and rewarding season. Sure, you may have been a star quarterback on your high school football team or even played at the collegiate level, but that won't do you, or your team, any good if you can't pass techniques along to your players.

In this chapter, we cover the fundamentals of offense and the best ways to teach them to your young squad. We also provide a peek at some of the struggles youngsters typically have while learning these skills and what to be on the lookout for so you can diagnose problems and make corrections.

Focusing Your Approach for the First-Timers

When children are learning how to add, we don't throw complicated equations at them and expect them to come up with the answers. Instead, we start them out with the basics of one plus one and two plus two before introducing double and triple digits. The same approach applies to coaching football, too: You want to start with the basics (not what's taught at the high school or college level) and slowly work up from there.

You're probably with your team for only a few hours each week, so be realistic with your expectations. Coaches typically have younger children for only one practice each week, as well as a game. That doesn't leave much time to cram a lot of information into their young heads. Certainly, all the players can't learn all the positions, but the more skills and positions you introduce the players to, the more enjoyable and well-rounded their experience will be. If you can provide players with a solid foundation on some of the most basic

skills — think running, catching, and blocking — and put smiles on the kids' faces while doing so, then you deserve a pat on the back.



As you know, football has a unique language all its own, and using terms and phrases that confuse kids is counterproductive. Stick to terms that you've taken the time to clearly explain and that you confidently can say all the kids on the team clearly understand. (And for more on the football basics and rules, check out Chapter 3.)

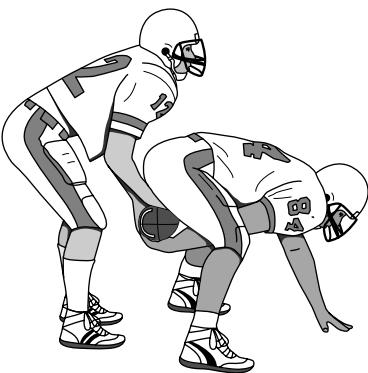
Quarterback

Quarterbacking a football team requires a wide range of skills, and how successful plays are depends, in large part, on the quarterback's ability to execute handoffs and pitches and deliver accurate passes.

Taking the center snap

A smooth exchange between your quarterback and center is crucial for the play to have any chance of success. To teach taking the snap, or hike, (which you can see in Figure 9-1), do the following:

Figure 9-1:
The center
snaps the
ball to the
quarterback
to begin
most
offensive
plays.



1. Position the quarterback behind the center.

The quarterback stands close to the center, bending forward. His legs should be shoulder width apart and his knees, flexed. The taller the center is, the more upright the quarterback needs to stand; the shorter the center, the more the quarterback must bend his knees.

2. Correctly place the quarterback's hands under the center (see Figure 9-2).

The quarterback's passing hand is tight into the crotch of the center, palm down, and the back of the hand provides upward pressure. This helps the center get a good feel for where to place the ball. (It also makes the quarterback "ride" the center. The quarterback's hands must move with the center or there won't be a good exchange.) His other hand faces forward, with the fingers pointing toward the ground and the wrists touching. The angle between his hands should be at least 90 degrees.

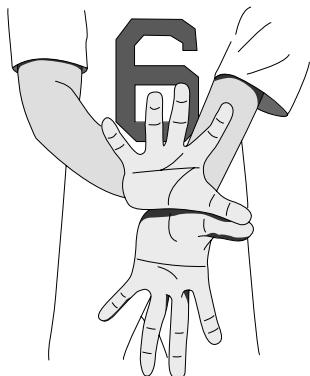


Figure 9-2:
Proper hand
placement
to receive
the snap.

Another option is to have the non-throwing hand to the side (see Figure 9-3), with the thumbs touching instead of the wrists.



Figure 9-3:
Quarterbacks can
also put
the non-
throwing
hand (here,
the left)
to the side
to receive
the snap.

3. Remind the quarterback to protect the football.

The quarterback takes the ball and brings it toward his stomach to protect it before executing a handoff or dropping back to pass.

Handing the ball off

If a running play is called, the quarterback, after taking the snap from center, must turn and get the ball in the hands of the running back. To deliver a basic handoff, the quarterback takes care of the following:

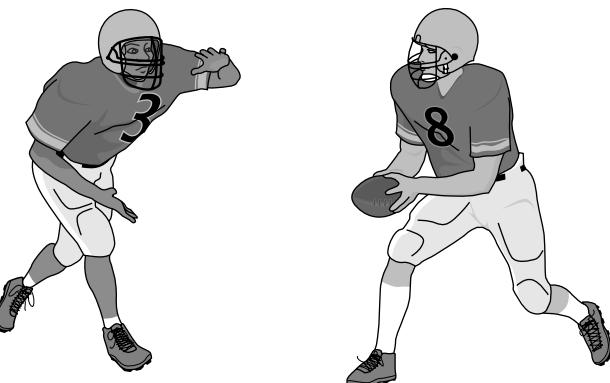
1. The quarterback moves in the direction of the play.

If it's a running play to the right, for example, his first move is a step backward and to the right. The exchange will occur in the backfield to give the running back time to look for the opening along the line of scrimmage.

2. He holds the ball with both hands and extends his arms out so that he's not crowding the running back (see Figure 9-4).

He gives the running back enough room so the running back can see the blocking in front of him and make his cuts to the right or left.

Figure 9-4:
Quarterbacks extend their arms on handoffs so the running back has room to maneuver.



3. The quarterback holds the ball above the running back's belt and places it firmly in his stomach (see Figure 9-5), watching to make sure the ball is secured.

Running backs come in all shapes and sizes, and they hit the line of scrimmage at a lot of different speeds. That's why it's crucial that quarterbacks watch the ball go into the running back's hands and make sure the ball has been properly exchanged so a turnover doesn't result.



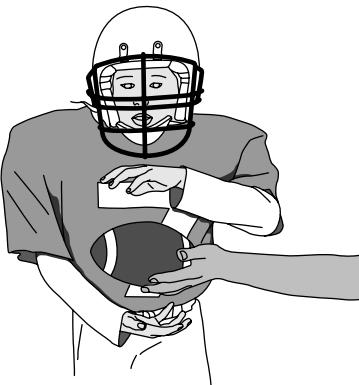


Figure 9-5:
The target
for handoffs
is slightly
above the
running
back's belt.

Pitching the ball

The *pitch*, also called the *toss*, is used when teams want to get their running backs running quickly to the outside. The quarterback takes the ball from the center and tosses it to a running back who's on the move. Here's how he pitches the ball after taking the snap:

1. **The quarterback turns, steps toward the running back with the foot closest to his teammate, and using both hands, pitches the ball underhand to the running back (Figure 9-6).**



Figure 9-6:
The pitch
requires
good timing
between the
quarterback
and running
back.

2. **The toss is aimed to the front of the running back and around chest high so he can catch it without breaking stride (see Figure 9-7).**

If the running back has to reach backward, slow down, or extend too far, the play has a greater chance of failing.

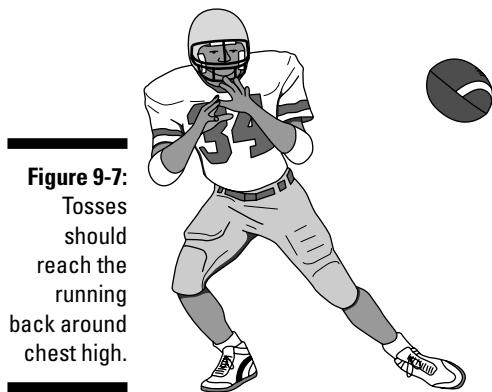


Figure 9-7:
Tosses
should
reach the
running
back around
chest high.

Passing

Besides getting the ball in the hands of running backs via handoffs and pitches, one of the quarterback's primary responsibilities is delivering passes. To throw an accurate pass, quarterbacks need to master a series of basic techniques.

Drops: Getting into the throwing stance

After receiving the snap, the quarterback needs to get in his throwing stance as quickly as possible. He uses either the crossover step or the backpedal. Teach your players both types of drops (the basic pass-drop depths are three, five, and seven steps, though youth quarterbacks typically use the three- and five-step drops):

✓ **Crossover step:** This technique (see Figure 9-8) is usually easier for youngsters to learn, and it allows them to set up to throw more quickly. The drawback is that because the quarterback turns to the side, he can't see defenders coming from the side behind his back.

As the quarterback turns to his right (if he's right-handed), he takes a step back with his right foot; his left foot crosses over it moving backward; with his last step back with his right foot, he plants that foot and throws.

✓ **Backpedal:** This drop is often a little trickier for young players, because their coordination is still in the early developmental stages. However, this step has the advantage of allowing quarterbacks to see all the defensive players. It simply involves moving backward as quickly as possible while taking several short, quick steps.

In order for the backpedal to be most effective, the quarterback needs quick feet. The more time spent backpedaling, the less time he has to set up and throw.

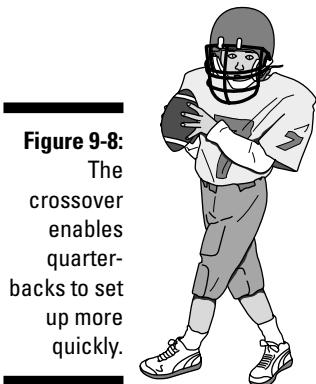


Figure 9-8:
The crossover enables quarterbacks to set up more quickly.

Gripping the ball for a successful pass

Successful passing requires gripping the ball the right way so that it comes out of the quarterback's hand the same way every time. The quarterback adjusts his grip as he drops back to pass.



The size of a youngster's hands makes a difference in how the ball is held. The bigger the child's hands, the closer to the center of the ball he may choose to hold it. Players with smaller hands must grip it a bit farther back to gain the most control.

To teach a good grip, make sure the player follows these steps:

- 1. The youngster spreads his fingers, with as many fingers as possible on the laces of the football.**

The most common grip involves placing the little finger, ring finger, and middle finger on the laces. Generally, as long as the youngster has two fingers on the laces, he'll be okay.

- 2. He places the index finger 1 to 2 inches from the end of the ball, on the same seam as the laces, while the thumb is 2 to 3 inches away from the tip of the ball on the other side.**

The ball is held by the fingers and never rests in the palm of the hand (see Figure 9-9).

- 3. While the quarterback drops back to pass, he carries the ball in both hands at chest height, with the non-passing hand securing the opposite side of the ball.**

Using the non-passing hand to help hold onto the ball reduces the likelihood of fumbles, because the ball's less likely to pop out of the passing hand if the quarterback gets hit from behind.



Figure 9-9:
The
fingertips
are key for
gripping the
football.

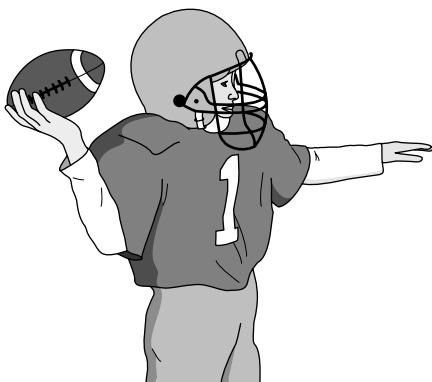


Throwing the ball

To deliver accurate passes, a quarterback should adhere to the following throwing techniques:

1. He holds the ball chest high with both hands while dropping back to pass. Feet are shoulder width apart.
2. He takes the ball into throwing position while he transfers his weight to his back foot (the right foot for right-handed quarterbacks).
3. The player draws his arm back (see Figure 9-10), and the ball goes close to his ear; his elbow is at shoulder height or higher.

Figure 9-10:
Keeping the
ball close to
his head,
instead of
drawing it
far behind
his
shoulders,
lets a
quarterback
release the
ball more
quickly.



4. The quarterback's front leg steps toward the intended target, and his weight shifts forward. His non-throwing arm moves diagonally across his body and down, and his hips open up.

This weight transfer provides the power for the throw (see Figure 9-11). The stride forward depends on the height of the passer and the distance of the pass. Long passes generally require a longer stride.

The toes of the leading foot point directly at the receiver, and the front shoulder and hip should point at the target as well.

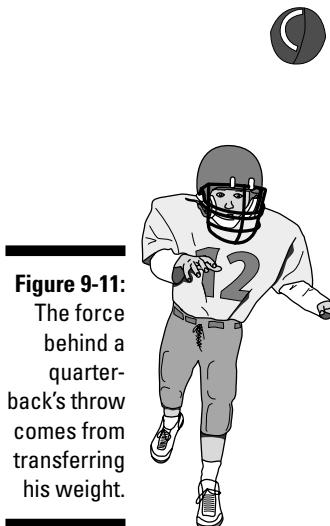


Figure 9-11:
The force
behind a
quarter-
back's throw
comes from
transferring
his weight.

5. **The elbow of the player's throwing arm leads the way, and the shoulder of the throwing arm rotates forward; the wrist is locked, and the arm comes forward and releases the ball just past his head.**
The quarterback aims for the numbers on the receiver's jersey.
6. **After the ball is released, the palm of the throwing hand should turn down and his fingers should be pointing at the target; the thumb is thrown slightly down, the pinky up, which helps ensure a good release off the fingers.**

Quarterback troubleshooting

Becoming comfortable with all the skills needed to play quarterback takes time and lots of practice. Here are some common problems quarterbacks encounter while learning the position:

- | ✓ **Doesn't hand off the ball smoothly:** Young quarterbacks tend to turn around and slam the ball into the running back's stomach. Teach them to pretend they're handing off an egg, and they'll execute the handoffs much more effectively. Young quarterbacks should use two hands whenever possible.

- ✓ **Crowds the running back:** Sometimes quarterbacks, in their eagerness to hand the ball off, get too close to the running back during the exchange. You want the quarterback to leave space so the running back doesn't waste precious time avoiding a collision when he should be focused on avoiding defenders. Teach your quarterback not to step directly in front of the running back but to approach more from the side.
- ✓ **Lacks power on his throws:** If the majority of the child's weight is on his back foot while he makes the throwing motion, his passes will lack velocity. Work with the youngster on transferring his weight from his back foot forward during the throw to increase the strength of his throws. Also, youngsters stepping forward with the wrong foot don't have much speed on their throws, or any accuracy, because that position forces an unnatural throwing motion. Make sure players step forward with the foot opposite the throwing arm.
- ✓ **Passes nosedive into the ground:** This problem occurs when the child hangs onto the ball too long during the throwing motion. Releasing the ball sooner in the throwing motion keeps the ball in the air longer.
- ✓ **Unable to get passes off against the rush:** A quick release is essential. A quarterback wastes valuable time if he draws his arm back behind his shoulders; bringing the ball back near the ear generates a quick release. Holding the ball up around his chest while dropping back to pass also allows for a quicker release, because he's not wasting valuable time bringing the ball up from his waist.
- ✓ **Passes miss the target:** When quarterbacks don't step toward their intended targets, passes generally miss their mark. Passes can also stray because the youngster bends his wrist inward, which doesn't allow the ball to release properly. Another culprit could be that his elbow is dropping too low, which forces him to throw in more of a sidearm motion. Getting the elbow up higher eliminates the sidearm throw.

Running Back

Being successful at the running back position requires more than just the ability to break tackles. Youngsters also must know how to carry the ball to eliminate the chances of fumbling, as well as how to receive handoffs and pitches. We cover all these fundamentals here.

The stances

The two most widely used stances for running backs are the three- and two-point stances.

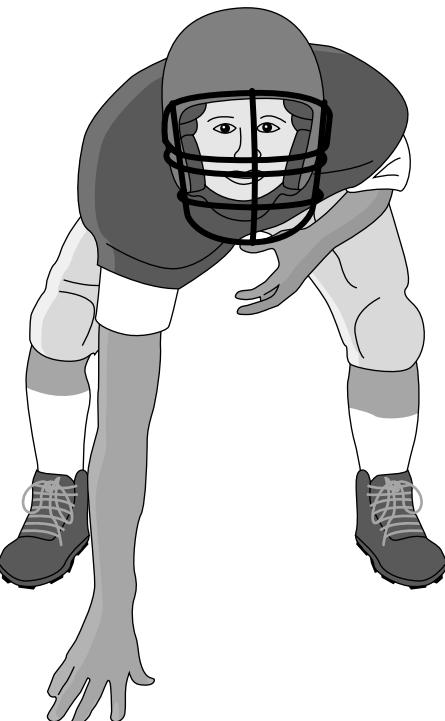
Three-point stance

Make sure the player follows these guidelines:

1. The player puts his feet slightly more than shoulder width apart.
2. His feet are flat on the ground, with his weight equally distributed so he can step in any direction with proper balance.
3. He bends forward at the waist. His back is flat and his knees, flexed.
4. The fingertips of the player's outside hand (farthest from the ball) are on the ground (see Figure 9-12).

The majority of the player's weight is distributed equally to both legs, with little weight on the hand.

Figure 9-12:
The legs carry most of the weight in the three-point stance.



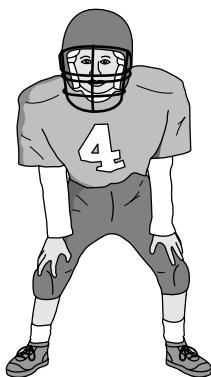
5. He keeps his head upright and looks straight ahead.

Two-point stance

The two-point stance is easier to teach youngsters just learning the position and provides them with a better visual of what the defense is doing. Players should take this position:

1. The running back puts his feet parallel and shoulder width apart.
2. He equally distributes his weight on his feet, which are flat for maximum balance.
3. His knees are slightly flexed.
4. He keeps his head up, and his eyes look straight ahead.
5. His palms rest lightly on the top of his thigh pads (see Figure 9-13).

Figure 9-13:
The two-point stance
is a common starting point for running backs.



Receiving handoffs

Here are the techniques running backs need to know to receive handoffs:

1. The running back lifts his inside arm (the one closest to the quarterback) to shoulder level and keeps it inside of his shoulder (see Figure 9-14); the elbow is bent, and the forearm points to the side.

Figure 9-14:
Keeping the elbow in tight helps avoid bumping into the quarterback during the exchange.

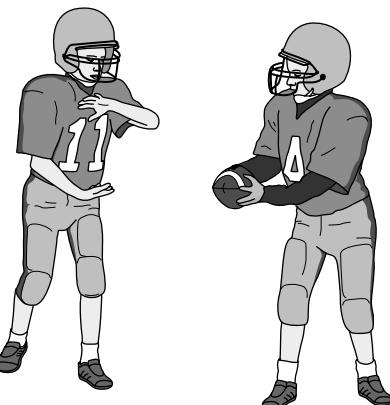




Figure 9-15:
The running
back's lower
hand faces
up to help
ensure a
smooth
handoff.

Taking pitches

Playing the running back position also requires the ability to take pitches from the quarterback while on the move in the backfield (the general area approximately 5 yards behind the line of scrimmage). Here's how to do it:

1. **The running back's hands are out and slightly above waist level, his elbows are bent, and his palms are facing up.**
2. **He watches the ball into his hands, catching the toss with both hands (see Figure 9-16) and properly securing it before making any moves.**

If the player's running to his right, he should tuck the ball away in his right arm; running to his left, and he should secure the ball in his left arm. This method makes it harder for defenders to get at the ball and gives the running back an arm to use to fend off tacklers.



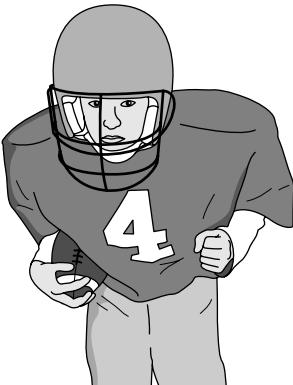
Figure 9-16:
Running
backs catch
a toss with
both hands
away from
the body.

Carrying the ball

Running backs must be able to hang onto the ball while running and being tackled. Here's the proper technique for carrying the ball:

1. **The running back controls the front end of the ball by placing his index finger over the end or by having the point of the ball between the middle and index fingers (see Figure 9-17).**

Figure 9-17:
The index finger plays a big role in keeping the ball in proper position.



2. **The bottom of the ball should be covered by the player's forearm, and the ball should be held tightly against his body to reduce its chances of being jarred loose during contact.**
3. **The back part of the ball rests on the inside of the player's elbow and against his upper rib cage.**

Avoiding tackles

The better running backs are at avoiding tackles, the more effective they'll be in moving the ball. Here are a few moves to have in the repertoire:

- ✓ **Quick cuts:** The ability to quickly change directions drives defenders crazy. The quick cut is simple yet highly effective. When the running back is headed in one direction and encounters a defender, he plants his right foot if he wants to cut back to his left (and vice versa if he wants to go to his right). Planting his foot and shifting his weight to one side of his body gets the defender leaning in that direction and opens the way to push off and move in the other direction.
- ✓ **Changing speeds:** A back who varies his running speeds keeps defenders off balance, because they never know if he's going to hit them with a burst of speed or slow down; that unpredictability makes taking the

angle for the tackle more difficult. Choosing the right spots to use this tactic is important, because anytime a back slows down, defenders away from the play have the chance to get a couple steps closer.

- ✓ **Stiff-arm (straight-arm):** The stiff-arm's a great weapon for fending off defenders, and it may be a running back's only option when defenders are closing in from the side.

The running back places the fingers up and the palm out — like a police officer does to stop traffic. Using the palm of his hand, the back hits the defender in the chest or shoulder, as if he's pushing the player away, so the defender can't get his arms around the running back (see Figure 9-18). The move works best when a defensive player is closing in to make a tackle and not expecting it; if the back holds his arm out too long, the defender can use that arm to pull the running back down.

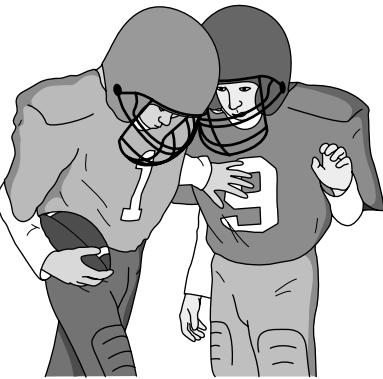


Figure 9-18:
The stiff-arm is a great weapon for avoiding tackles.

Running back troubleshooting

Common problems that arise for youngsters learning the running back position usually involve handoffs and hitting the line of scrimmage. See whether these situations look familiar:

- ✓ **Problems receiving handoffs:** When the running back's elbow is outside the line of his shoulder, the elbow can contact the quarterback and affect the transfer of the ball. This position also makes clamping down on the ball more difficult. The running back may also not be creating a big enough pocket between his hands for the quarterback to place the ball into.
- ✓ **Getting tackled behind the line of scrimmage a lot:** Young backs have a tendency to take a lot of wasted steps before they even get to the line of scrimmage, which gives the defense plenty of time to converge on him. Work with the back to hit the line of scrimmage as quickly as possible and save the cutting for avoiding tackles after he gets there.

Wide Receivers

Playing the wide receiver position involves running pass patterns, adjusting to throws from the quarterback, making catches, and running for additional yardage after the catch. Here are the techniques to teach players so they can excel in all these areas.

Stance

The first step for running pass patterns is not moving at all — it's the stance.

1. **The wide receiver starts in a two-point stance (see Figure 9-19) with his knees bent and his weight slightly forward. His inside foot (closest to the ball) should be forward, with his nose over his toes.**

The heel of the back foot is raised, and the front foot is flat on the ground so the receiver can sprint off the line of scrimmage. His arms should be up at chest level so he's ready to drive off the line of scrimmage when the ball is snapped.

Figure 9-19:
Receivers
typically
begin the
play in the
two-point
stance.



2. **The receiver's head is slightly angled toward the ball so he can see when it's snapped.**
3. **At the snap of the ball, the receiver bursts forward and begins his pass pattern.**

Faking out defenders

Being able to fake out defenders can really help receivers get open so they can catch the ball. Here are some techniques:

- ✓ **Head bob:** Sometimes a defensive back lines up right on top of the wide receiver so he can bump the receiver at the line of scrimmage as soon as the ball is snapped. Receivers can't allow this bump-and-run tactic to disrupt the timing of the play or their pattern.

The head bob is a simple movement of the receiver's head and shoulders in one direction when the ball is snapped to get the defender leaning in that direction, followed by a quick step in the opposite direction to quickly get off the line of scrimmage without much contact.

- ✓ **Single fake:** The receiver steps in one direction to lure the defender to step that way and then cuts quickly in the other direction to get past the defender.

A variation on this is the *double fake*, where the receiver can take a step to his left, do a head bob to the right or even take a quick step to the right, and then step left again to get past the defender and run his pattern. (He can also reverse the directions, starting with a step to the right.)

Blocking

Part of a receiver's job is to block (see Figure 9-20). Here's how it's done:

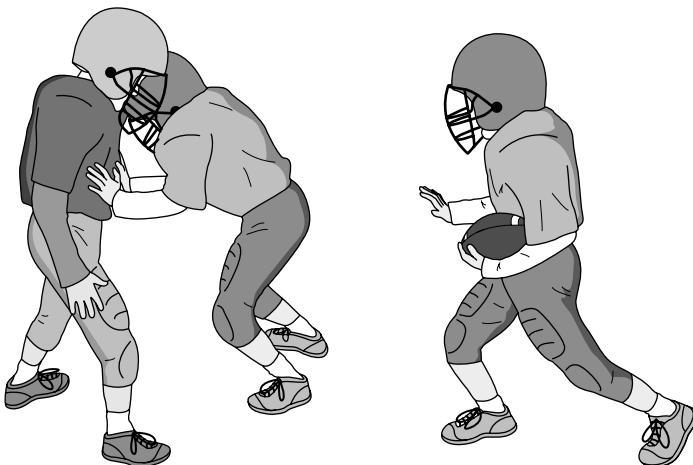
1. **The receiver gets in the way of the defender by taking away the side that the ball is coming to.**

For example, if the receiver is lined up on the left and it's a running play around the left side, the receiver should block the defensive back to the left. Blocking him to the right would push him toward the player with the ball.

2. **He uses his hands to apply force to the chest of the defender and keeps his feet moving to keep the defender out of the play.**

His feet should be shoulder width apart, and he should be slightly bent at the waist so he can maintain proper balance. The receiver should maintain contact and keep himself between the defender and the play.

Figure 9-20:
Blocking
defenders to
prevent
tackles is
one of a
wide
receiver's
most
important
responsi-
bilities.



Catching passes

Playing the wide receiver position means being able to haul in not just the passes that are right on target but also those that are high, low, or off to the side. Here's the proper technique for catching all types of passes:

1. **The receiver locates the ball and watches it (he'll keep his eye on the ball all the way into his hands), getting his body in position.**

When passes aren't on target, a receiver must do everything he can to keep his body between the ball and the defender so that the pass can't be knocked down or, worse yet, intercepted. Getting to the ball sometimes requires extending the arms out or, when a pass is thrown, taking several steps toward the incoming ball before the defender has a chance to step forward and react.

2. **He brings his arms and hands out away from his body.**

The arms are slightly bent, and the hands are slightly separated, with the palms facing outward, the fingers up, and the thumbs almost touching (see Figure 9-21). You want the receiver to create a web with his thumbs and forefingers.

3. **As the ball hits the player's hands, he grabs it, brings it into his body, and tucks it away.**

For passes around waist level or below, receivers rotate their hands so the palms are up (see Figure 9-22). When defenders are right behind receivers, the receiver should take several steps toward the pass to reduce the chances that a defender can make a play on the ball.



Figure 9-21:
Hands
should face
out to catch
passes.

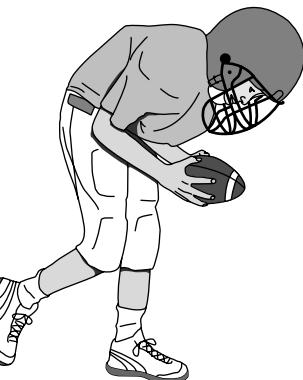


Figure 9-22:
To catch
low passes,
receivers
turn their
hands
inward.

For high passes, the receiver turns his hands outward, stretches his arms up over his head with his thumbs touching or almost touching, and catches the ball (see Figure 9-23).



Figure 9-23:
For high
passes,
receivers
turn their
hands
outward
with their
thumbs
touching.

Wide receiver troubleshooting

Learning the wide receiver position poses several challenges for youngsters, particularly because passes come at them at a variety of angles and speeds. Here are some problems coaches usually have to address at some point:

- ✓ **Ball bouncing off the shoulder pads:** This happens when players keep their hands too close to their bodies, which allows the ball to make contact with their shoulder pads. Encourage players to extend their arms and meet the ball with their hands.
- ✓ **Dropping passes:** If the player's hands are in proper position, then the youngster is probably taking his eye off the ball. This happens when kids are too anxious to begin running with the ball before they have it in their grasp. It also happens when they know a defender is close by and they're peeking to see where the hit will come from.

Tight Ends

The tight end's job requires the ability to block defensive linemen and linebackers, as well as to run patterns and catch passes.

Stance

Tight ends use a three-point stance (refer to Figure 9-12), because they often have to block offensive linemen.

1. **The tight end puts his outside hand (farthest from the ball) forward, with the weight on his fingertips; the feet are staggered and shoulder-width apart, with the toes and knees pointing forward.**
2. **His other elbow rests just above his knee.**
3. **His back is arched slightly upward, with his head looking straight ahead.**

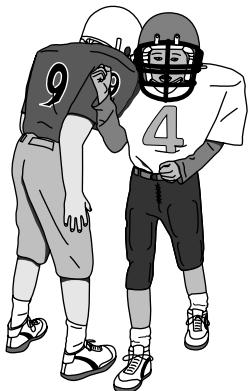
Running pass patterns to the outside

Tight ends typically run short- to medium-length pass patterns. Here are some tips for running a pattern to the outside (see Chapter 12 for some specific pass patterns):

1. The tight end takes a quick step to the outside as soon as the ball is snapped.
2. If he's forced to deal with a defender at the line of scrimmage, he can use a power move to the inside (see Figure 9-24), in which he keeps his arms moving and explodes through the defender.

The tight end pumps his arms in short bursts. You want him running "through" the defender, as though he were running through a large piece of paper held out in front of him.

Figure 9-24:
Tight ends
can use
power
moves to
get off the
line of
scrimmage.



3. As he explodes through the defender, he keeps his arms tight to his body, runs his pattern, and turns to locate the ball.

Tight end trouble shooting

Being a tight end requires a broad mixture of blocking and catching skills, which makes the position challenging to learn. The following are some of the more common problems young tight ends struggle with:

- ✓ **Not getting separation from the defender:** Because tight ends usually work in pretty tight quarters running short- to medium-length pass patterns, they don't have a lot of time or space to get open before the ball arrives. Often, they run their pattern and turn and wait for the ball to get there, which enables the defender to get a jump on the pass and knock it down or pick it off. When they're running patterns, particularly those like the hook (see Chapter 12), make sure tight ends take several steps back toward the quarterback when the ball's in the air. These steps enable tight ends to get their hands on the ball before the defender can react to make a play.

✓ **Being overwhelmed by defender at the line of scrimmage:** Sometimes, as soon as the ball's snapped, the defender knocks the tight end over or easily maneuvers past him to make a tackle. Keep a close eye on the position of the tight end's hands at the snap of the ball. If the player doesn't get his hands up at chest level as soon as the ball is snapped, the defender can more easily knock him off balance.

Offensive Linemen

Offensive linemen usually don't get a lot of recognition, but running and passing plays are successful only when the offensive linemen are performing well. Here are some techniques for helping the linemen get those jobs done.

Stance

The three-point stance (see Figure 9-25) is mostly used along the offensive line. Here's how the linemen should set up:

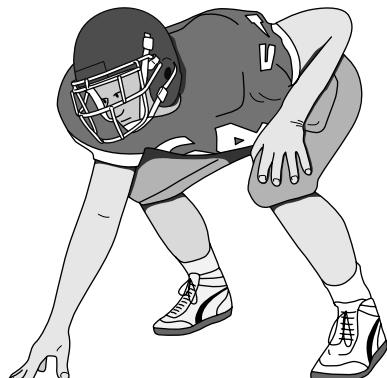
1. **The feet are slightly wider than shoulder width apart, and the outside foot is positioned slightly behind the inside foot.**

The toes of the back foot are even with the inside foot's instep. The heels of both feet are slightly raised off the ground.

2. **The lineman bends his knees and leans forward.**
3. **The player's outside hand is down, with the fingertips on the ground.**

The hand is about 18 inches ahead of the inner edge of the toes for a bigger player and is slightly closer for smaller players. The fingers are slightly extended, with the weight on the pads of the fingers. A helpful indicator for kids is that a player's hand should be underneath his nose.

Figure 9-25:
The three-point stance
is most commonly used on the offensive line.



4. His other hand rests on the outer edge of his thigh (left hand on left thigh or right on right), just above the knee.
5. His back is slightly beyond horizontal, with his butt down and his head up.

Center stance and snapping the ball

The center's stance is slightly different from the other linemen's because he has the added responsibility of snapping the ball to the quarterback. Here's a look at this three-point stance (reverse right and left in these directions if your center is left-handed) and the snap itself:

1. The center's feet are shoulder width apart or slightly wider, and his knees are bent.
2. He's bent at the waist so his back is nearly horizontal, and his head is raised (it shouldn't dip down while he's snapping the ball).
3. His left hand rests on the outer edge of his left leg, ready to punch.
4. His right hand grips the ball with his index finger slightly to the right of the point of the ball, and his thumb rests across the seam of the ball, above the laces.
5. He positions the ball out in front of him and just off his right eye, as well as slightly off the center of his body (see Figure 9-26).

Figure 9-26:
The center's snap is crucial for any successful offensive play.



6. The center makes sure the laces are up and tips the ball so the end of the ball closest to him points down and the far end angles up.

He should align the ball so that when he snaps it, the quarterback will have the laces.

7. To snap the ball, he lifts it back directly into the quarterback's hands and steps to his block.

The natural motion of the center's arm causes the ball to turn slightly.

8. He releases the ball as soon as it contacts the quarterback's hands.

Run blocking (drive block or base block)

The *drive* or *base block* is the most basic block in football and is usually used by offensive linemen on running plays. The purpose of the block is to move the defender off the line of scrimmage or knock him off his feet so the running back has a clear path. It's one of the hardest things in football to teach. Here's the proper technique:

1. When defenders are in their stance, the offensive lineman aims for the defending player's chin strap; if the defender is standing up, the offensive lineman aims for the belt buckle.
2. The offensive lineman takes a 6-inch power step forward while bringing his hands into the defender, keeping the feet moving forward with short, choppy steps (see Figure 9-27).

Young kids can use the shoulder instead of the hands to make initial contact.

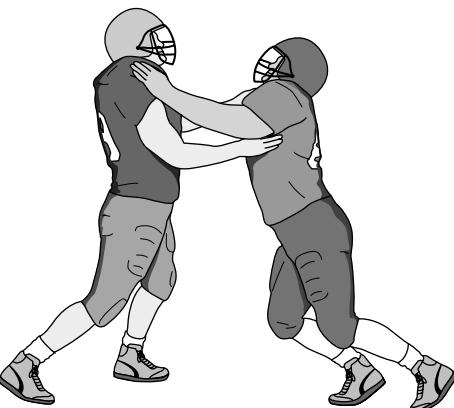


Figure 9-27:

The drive block is typically used by offensive linemen on running plays.

3. Pointing his elbows toward the ground and inside the shoulders, the offensive lineman hits the defender with the heels of his hands, driving his hands up and through the defender's chest.

This punch into the defender's chest should be made with his thumbs up, which keeps the elbows in the proper position.

4. Upon contact, the offensive lineman thrusts his hips up and under and drives the defender.
5. A lineman's power source is his legs — he explodes his legs and arms and knocks the defender backward.

Be sure he keeps a good, powerful angle in his legs and doesn't try driving from his toes. His feet need to remain wide; otherwise, he'll lose power and balance. He should also keep the feet moving at all times, taking small steps as he maintains contact with the defender. Leverage is key. His helmet must stay lower than the defender's facemask.

Pass blocking

Offensive linemen love run blocking because they get to fire off the ball and move the defender backward. Pass blocking requires an entirely different skill. It means being more passive and fending off defenders' attacks toward the quarterback. The goal of pass blocking is to stay between the defensive lineman and the quarterback. The following are the keys to effective pass blocking:

1. The lineman begins in his regular stance, with his feet shoulder-width apart, knees bent, back straight, and head up so the defender can't tell if it's going to be a running or passing play. (See the "Stance" section under "Offensive Linemen," earlier in this chapter.)
2. When the ball is snapped, the offensive lineman rises with his hands up and slightly away from his body. His hands are open, and they form a window between the thumb and forefinger of each hand (see Figure 9-28).



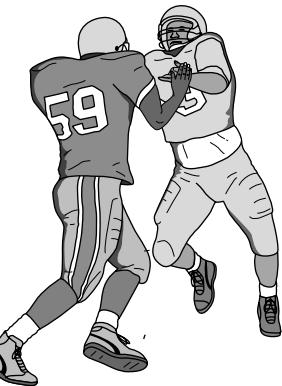
Figure 9-28:
Linemen open their hands after the ball is snapped to begin pass blocking.

3. If he's a center or guard, his shoulders are square to the line of scrimmage; offensive tackles are slightly angled toward the sideline, because defensive ends try to rush past them on their outside shoulder.

4. Keeping his feet moving and never crossing them, he shoves his arms up and into the numbers of the defender (see Figure 9-29).

He punches with the heel of his hands, with his thumbs up, to stop the defender's charge.

Figure 9-29:
Punching
the hands
into the
defensive
player's
jersey is a
good pass-
blocking
technique.



5. He keeps his head up and eyes focused at the top of the numbers.

Offensive line troubleshooting

Sound footwork is essential for playing on the offensive line. Many of the problems that youngsters encounter can be traced to the positioning of their feet. Here are a couple of those problems:

- ✓ **Gets knocked off balance easily:** Make sure the lineman is continually moving his feet. Whenever a player stops moving his feet or crosses them, he's more susceptible to losing his balance. Also, ensure that he takes only short steps. Anytime a lineman takes a big stride, he's extending himself too much, which reduces the power of his block. His feet should remain wide, with his outside foot back.
- ✓ **Defenders get by him easily:** A couple factors can cause this. One, make sure the lineman's shoulders are square at the line of scrimmage. If they're angled, the defender can exploit that weakness to get by the offensive lineman. Two, check his stance. If his weight isn't distributed properly, the defender can overpower him more easily. Finally, on pass protection, stress protecting the inside first so defenders can't charge through the middle and sack the quarterback.

Helping Kids Who Just Don't Get It

As you move through the season, your players will hopefully have fun, learn skills, and embrace your teachings. But what can you do about those kids who haven't quite grasped how to catch a football or block an opponent? Every team you ever coach will have players who struggle to learn specific skills, and how you handle those kids is the true barometer of your coaching ability.

Analyzing problems

When the season is going well and the team is really coming together, overlooking the kids who are struggling with different aspects of the game is easy. You never want to lose sight that your job entails making sure that every child is developing and having fun; if a youngster struggles to catch the ball or make tackles, you have to figure out a way to help him improve that area of his game.

Take a close look at how you interact with the kids who aren't picking up a particular skill as quickly as their teammates and see how you can resolve the problem. Are you spending too much time talking and not giving them lots of opportunities to practice the skill? Are you filling their heads with too many thoughts about what to do instead of keeping the instructions simple? If the kids are giving maximum effort, the problem is probably with the teaching.

Here are some tips on helping youngsters get back on the learning path:



- ✓ **Switch up positions:** For example, maybe the youngster who's struggling had his heart set on playing in the secondary, and when he was assigned to a wide receiver position, his interest in learning and playing fizzled. So mix things up for the youngster and see whether a new position rejuvenates his enthusiasm. If you have time at the start of the season, teach all the kids all the different skills so you have more well-rounded players.
- ✓ **Don't embarrass the child:** Never make a spectacle out of a child who's struggling with some aspect of the game. Most children are well aware of how their skills stack up to the other kids' on the team. The last thing they need is for you to make their deficiencies stand out even more by singling them out for extra work on the sidelines. Try demonstrating the skill again yourself, which may help the youngster who's struggling and serves as a good refresher for the other players.
- ✓ **Keep an even tone:** Never allow the tone of your voice to reveal frustration or disappointment in the child's progress. The same goes for your body language, too. Be calm, patient, and understanding as you help this youngster work through his difficulties. Don't neglect him or give up on him just because he hasn't been able to contribute as much during games as some of your other players.

Stick by these struggling kids and applaud their efforts every step of the way. They need you now more than ever. Who knows? Years from now, when they're still actively involved in the sport, they may look back and realize you're the reason they're still putting on a helmet every fall.

- ✓ **Find out whether they like the game:** Football is a great game, but some children simply don't enjoy contact sports, and there's nothing wrong with that. A child could be struggling with the game simply because he's tired of being knocked to the ground. If the child's parents seek out your advice about whether he should continue with football, be honest and helpful. Maybe suggest other sports that can better provide their child with opportunities for fun and rewarding athletic experiences.

Recognizing physical problems

A child's progress could be hampered by an existing physical condition. If you're aware of some of the warning signs, you may be able to make a difference. Be on the lookout for the following:

- ✓ **Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD):** A child's lack of focus may be the result of ADHD. Some of the most common characteristics of ADHD are distractibility and poorly sustained attention to tasks, impaired impulse control, and excessive activity and physical restlessness. If you think someone on your team may be displaying signs of ADHD, talk to the player's parents about your concerns.
- ✓ **Vision problem:** A child's struggles with catching passes or spotting open receivers may be due to an easily correctable vision problem. Talk to the child's parents. Perhaps a trip to the eye doctor can pull everything in focus for the youngster and turn his season around.



As we mention in Chapter 3, one of the most important reasons to hold a preseason parents meeting is so you can find out about any children on your team who have special needs. If a youngster has a hearing problem, for example, and needs to read lips, you need to alter your teaching methods. Anytime you explain a technique, make sure you speak directly to that child. A child's physical limitation or past injury can also hamper how he performs a certain skill. Everything from asthma to diabetes can impact a child's performance and progress, and you need to adjust accordingly.

Chapter 10

Defensive and Special Teams Fundamentals

In This Chapter

- ▶ Making blocks and tackles
 - ▶ Kicking field goals
 - ▶ Kicking and receiving punts
-

In football, like all team sports, playing defense is a major element of the game. Because roughly half of each game you play will involve your players on the defensive side of the ball, the more they know and understand the techniques involved with the various positions, the more enjoyment and success they can have.

This chapter zeroes in on the fundamentals of good defense, and it tackles (hey, it's a chapter on defense, so we had to say it) the basics of pass rushing, fighting off blocks, covering receivers and, of course, the all-important essentials of tackling safely, among many other areas. We also introduce the basics of special teams play — covering everything from kickoffs and punts to field goals and fair catches. For those kids encountering any difficulties learning any of these skills, we provide handy troubleshooting tips for diagnosing what went wrong and what to do to get them back on track. (For general tips on helping kids who aren't catching on, check out Chapter 9.)

Defensive Linemen

Players on the defensive line must be able to recognize running and passing plays and react accordingly. Here are the techniques they need to know to be successful.

Proper stance

Defensive linemen usually use the three-point or four-point stance.

Three-point stance

This stance (see Figure 10-1) is most often used by defensive ends.

1. **The player puts his feet about shoulder width apart, with his outside leg (farthest from the ball) slightly back.**
His heels are raised off the ground, and his knees are bent.
2. **He places the outside hand down on the ground, with his fingers flexed and the weight on the pads of the fingers. The inside arm rests on the opposite leg and is ready to punch.**
3. **His back has a slight upward angle, with his shoulders slightly higher than his hips, and his weight rests primarily on his forward hand and leg.**
4. **His head is up, and he keeps his eyes focused on the blocker.**

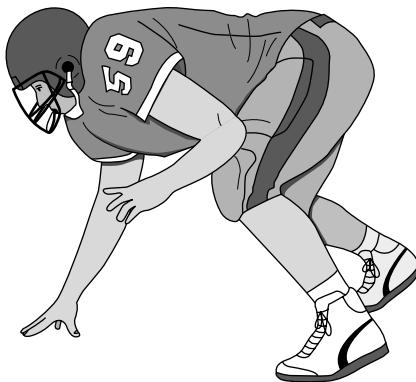


Figure 10-1:
This lineman
is set and
ready to
react.

Four-point stance

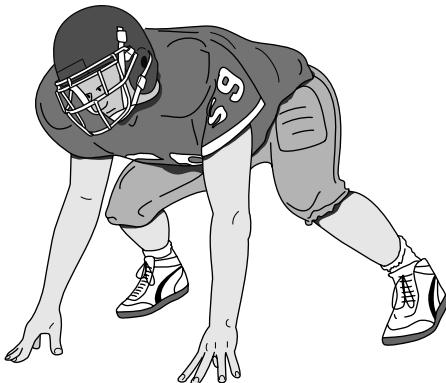
This stance (see Figure 10-2) is most often used by defensive tackles, as well as by all linemen during short-yardage and goal-line situations.

1. **The offensive lineman places his feet parallel to each other and shoulder width apart, and his knees are bent.**
The heels are raised slightly off the ground, and his outside leg is slightly farther back.
2. **He extends both arms outward and places his hands on the ground, with the fingers extended and the weight equally applied to each hand.**

The hands should be just slightly in front of the shoulders.

3. His shoulders are parallel to the line of scrimmage and slightly above his hips so his back angles slightly upward.
4. The player keeps his head up so he can see the player in front of him and react when the ball is snapped.

Figure 10-2:
The four-point stance is usually used in short-yardage situations.



Fighting off blocks

Defensive players must use their hands — and good footwork — to fend off blocks. The defensive lineman's hands are one of his greatest assets, because he can use them to push and shove an offensive lineman out of the way or to knock the opposing player's arms off him. The following are several techniques defensive linemen can use to shed blockers and make tackles on running plays:

- ✓ **Hand shiver:** The defender extends his arms (see Figure 10-3) and drives his hands into the offensive lineman's chest or shoulder pads. The arms lock to keep the blocker at arm's length so the defender can get free and make a tackle. He keeps his elbows under his shoulders; if his elbows are wide, the blocker can push into the defender's body and the strength of the blocker's legs can overpower the defender.
- ✓ **Forearm shiver:** Players can use this tactic to get the blocker's hands off the defender's body. The defender charges into the blocker with his shoulder, aiming at chest level at the numbers on the player's jersey. As he makes contact with his shoulder, he lifts his arm up and through the blocker (see Figure 10-4). His arm should be at a 90-degree angle at the shoulder and elbow, and the forearm should be flat against the blocker's body, parallel to the ground. After the offensive player's momentum has slowed, the defensive player uses his other hand to push the player away.

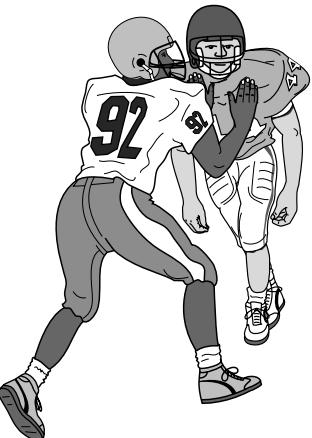


Figure 10-3:
The hand shiver helps players break free from an offensive lineman's block.

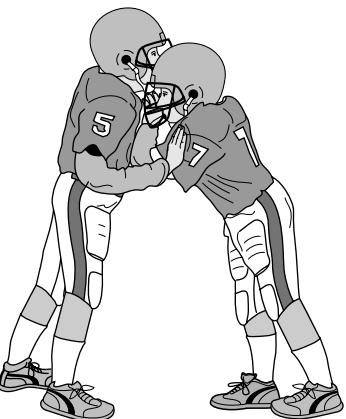


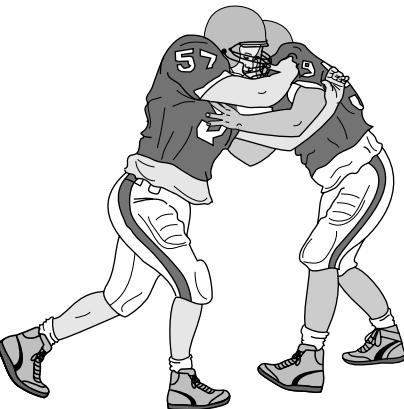
Figure 10-4:
The forearm shiver uses a forceful attack with the shoulder.

✓ **Blast and control:** A defender uses this technique against blockers who aim high on the defender's body. The defender drives into the blocker's chest, and his hands hit near the low part of the blocker's numbers (see Figure 10-5). From there, the defender uses the hand shiver at the player's upper chest and shoulder pads to control the offensive lineman's charge, fight off the block, and pursue making a tackle.



Leverage and pressure are the keys to strong play along the defensive line. Defensive linemen must stay as low as possible, maintaining leverage against the offensive linemen so they don't allow themselves to be pushed around. To keep a low center of gravity, players must keep their knees slightly bent and their feet wide. Their head must be up at all times so they can see what's going on in front of them, and they should keep their feet moving. They also need to apply constant pressure and vary the types of techniques they use to keep the opposing linemen off guard.

Figure 10-5:
Defenders
use the
blast-and-
control
technique
against
blockers
aiming high.



Rushing the passer

Being a successful pass rusher requires a combination of speed, strength, and the ability to use a variety of moves to keep the offensive linemen guessing. In order to reach the quarterback, a defensive player has to get around the offensive lineman with speed and quickness or overpower him. Here's a look at some basic pass rush techniques:

✓ **Bull rush:** This technique (see Figure 10-6) is typically the base of all types of pass-rushing moves. The bull rush, which works well for heavier players who can use their momentum to their advantage, is an aggressive move aimed at knocking the offensive lineman down. It's especially effective against an offensive lineman who retreats quickly at the snap of the ball and is leaning back on his heels.

To execute this play, the offensive lineman rushes hard at the blocker, slamming the heels of his hands into the outer edges of the offensive lineman's chest or under his arms, and drives hard with the legs. When using this move, the defensive linemen looks to either knock the offensive player onto his back so he has a clear path to the quarterback or to use a series of pushes to keep the lineman moving backward until he can reach the passer.

✓ **Swim move:** This move is most often used when the offensive lineman is lower than the defender. With his hands on the chest of the blocker, the defender begins his rush to either the inside or outside of the field. The blocker reacts by turning slightly in the direction the defender is headed, which brings one of the blocker's shoulders forward. The defender reaches straight across (behind the blocker's forward shoulder) and pulls that shoulder toward him. As this movement knocks the blocker off balance, the defender uses a swimming stroke to punch his hand over the blocker's forward shoulder (see Figure 10-7). As the shoulder is pulled down, the

defender's opposite knee drives behind the blocker's nearest leg. After the defender's foot is past the offensive lineman, the move is complete and the blocker has little chance of recovering.

- ✓ **Rip move:** This technique, also known as a speed rush, is used most often by defensive linemen who are lower than the blocker. The defensive lineman dips his shoulder nearest the blocker, which gives the blocker less of the lineman's body to block. The defensive lineman then uses his leverage arm, which is the arm closest to the blocker, to deliver an uppercut to the blocker's armpit. The uppercut forces the blocker's arm upward and makes him turn slightly, which opens the way for the pass rusher to get past him.

Figure 10-6:
The bull
rush takes
advantage
of offensive
linemen
who retreat
on their
heels.

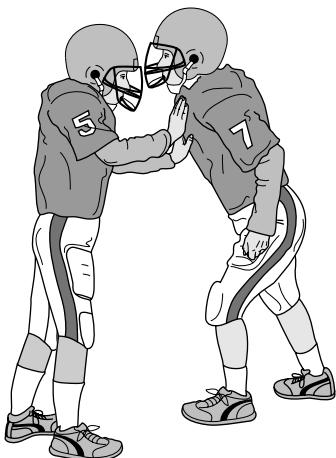


Figure 10-7:
Defenders
use the
swim move
to get by
blockers.





Even if the defensive player isn't able to get to the quarterback or make a big play, an effective pass rush can produce other benefits. If the blocker has to resort to holding the defensive player, that's a 10-yard penalty against the offense, which is almost as good as a sack. So be sure to applaud your players when they're able to force penalties from the opposition.

A good pass rusher keeps the following tips in mind:

- ✓ **Be fast off the ball.** The instant there's movement on the offensive line, the defensive player should move forward. Of course, moving immediately is ideal for running plays too, but it's vital for getting to the quarterback or at least disrupting his throw. You want the defensive lineman to get his hands on the opponent first as soon as the ball is snapped.
- ✓ **Aim for the quarterback's back shoulder to force the quarterback to step forward in the pocket, where there are other defenders.** Otherwise, if the rusher takes an inside route, the quarterback can sidestep him and move to the outside, where he may have additional time to roam around and look for an open receiver or scramble downfield for big yardage.
- ✓ **Wrap him up.** A pass rusher's job isn't done when he gets by his blocker and reaches the quarterback. Now he's got to finish the job. That means wrapping his arms around the quarterback so he can't get off the pass. If the rusher goes for the quarterback's legs, he may still be able to get off a throw before going down. (See the later section titled "Proper tackling technique" for the methods defenders should use when sacking the quarterback.) The pass rusher can alternately put his hands in the air to obstruct the quarterback's vision and make getting the pass off more difficult.

Troubleshooting the d-line

Keep an eye out for some of these problems, which players along the defensive line encounter:

- ✓ **Reacts to the play slowly:** When the player takes his stance, make sure his head is up and that he's looking straight ahead. Sometimes players on the defensive line tend to let their heads drop, which slows their reaction time. A defensive lineman's eyes should be on the player across from him so he can move as soon as the offensive lineman moves. The defender should also steal glances toward the center to check where the ball is. Use drills that force defenders to react to the snap. As soon as the center makes the slightest movement with the ball, the defenders should get their hands up into the offensive linemen across from them.
- ✓ **Isn't beating the offensive lineman:** Often when players use the bull rush or swim move, they play too high or don't get their hands inside to the proper position. In addition to making sure the kids use proper form,

watch to make sure defenders use plenty of force. Sometimes youngsters are reluctant to strike the opponent with their hands while executing these techniques.

Linebackers

To excel at the linebacker position, youngsters must learn the art of fighting off blocks and making tackles. Here are some key techniques to share with kids in these areas.

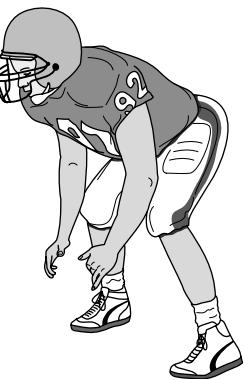
Proper stance

Here's the proper stance that enables linebackers to move quickly in any direction:

1. **Linebackers begin in a semi-crouched position (see Figure 10-8).**
2. **The player's feet are parallel and even, with his weight forward on the balls of his feet so he can react as soon as the ball is snapped.**
3. **His head is up, and his eyes are focused on the quarterback.**
4. **His arms hang loosely in front over his knees.**

Figure 10-8:

A linebacker's weight is on the balls of his feet so he can react quickly to the play.



Fighting off blocks

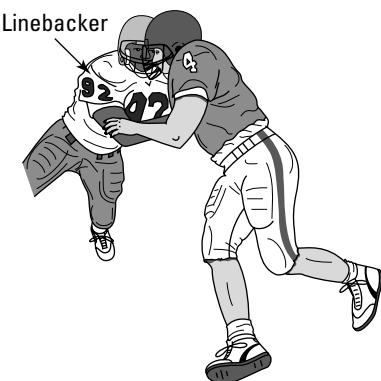
Many defenses heavily count on linebackers to make a lot of tackles, but linebackers have to be able to fight off blocks in order to do so. Linebackers go against offensive linemen who are generally bigger and stronger than they

are, and they contend with blocks from running backs who are often smaller and quicker. In most cases, linebackers deal with drive blocks (see Chapter 9). Here's how linebackers can succeed against them:

1. **The linebacker stays low to the blocker by flexing the knees and bending forward at the waist; if the linebacker can't avoid the block, he attacks it.**
2. **He steps with his inside foot and uses his inside hand or forearm to strike under the opponent's shoulders (see Figure 10-9) while keeping the outside arm and leg free.**
3. **He drives his inside shoulder and hand into the outside half of the blocker and extends his arms to get separation so he can shed the blocker and make the tackle using both arms.**

The linebacker should keep his shoulders square to the line of scrimmage as much as possible while pursuing the tackle.

Figure 10-9:
Linebackers
must be
adept at
shedding
blockers in
order to
make
tackles.



Proper tackling technique

Teaching youngsters proper tackling techniques is crucial for their safety, as well as the well-being of the players being tackled.



Never allow a youngster to lead with his head while making a tackle, which often happens because kids drop their heads when tackling instead of looking at what they're doing. Tackling incorrectly is extremely dangerous and can cause serious injuries to the neck and spine. Continually stress that a tackler must see what he's hitting every time — no exceptions. If one of your players ever leads with his head during a practice drill or game, bring him over to the sidelines immediately and address the situation.

Here's how a player can safely tackle another youngster:

1. **The linebacker keeps his head up and his eyes focused on the numbers of the player he's attempting to tackle.**
2. **He aims one shoulder just above the offensive player's belt buckle (see Figure 10-10) and uses his shoulder to make initial contact.**
3. **During contact, the tackler drives his hips and torso up through the numbers on the offensive player's jersey while wrapping his arms around the player and grabbing onto his jersey (see Figure 10-11).**

His feet should be constantly moving and accelerating on contact, and sometimes the tackler actually lifts the player off the ground before taking him down. Depending on how the play unfolds, he may make tackles by wrapping his arms around the ball carrier's legs.

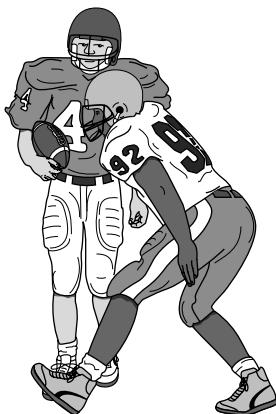


Figure 10-10:
Linebackers zero in on the area just above the belt buckle.



Figure 10-11:
Linebackers make tackles by driving through the opposing player.



When teaching kids how to tackle for the first time, walk them through the proper techniques several times. A great way to help them become comfortable with running and making tackles involves an old pillow. Hold the pillow out at the height of your players and have the youngster run toward it, lower his shoulder, wrap his arms around it, and take it to the ground. This method helps kids get comfortable with all phases of tackling before taking on a player.

Linebacker troubleshooting

If your linebackers aren't making many tackles, that usually spells trouble for your defense. Here are a few problems many young linebackers encounter and how you can help solve them:

- ✓ **Players breaking free from tackles:** Sometimes linebackers become more concerned with making good hits and forget to use their arms when attempting tackles. Watch to see whether the linebacker wraps up the player with his arms as soon as he makes contact.
- ✓ **Not making many tackles:** This problem usually means the player isn't having much success fighting off opposing blocks. Usually, the linebacker doesn't get low enough at the point of contact, which results in being overpowered by the block and taken out of the play.
- ✓ **Not hitting hard enough:** As long as a player uses proper technique, the tackles will come, so he's on the right track. Applaud him when he makes a tackle and remind him in a positive manner to really keep his legs moving and accelerate on contact. Gradually, his hits will become harder and he'll grow more comfortable with the contact.

Sometimes players use the proper tackling technique and the ball carrier still manages to stay on his feet. Remind the defensive player to hang onto the player tightly — around his legs if possible — and wait for help from teammates to bring the player down.

Defensive Backs

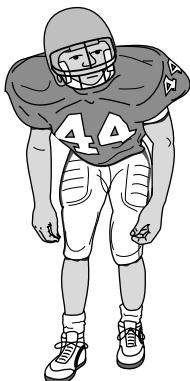
The defensive back's job requires quite a bit of athletic ability, simply because much of the time these players have to run backward during pass coverage so they can watch the ball.

Covering receivers

Covering wide receivers requires the ability to change direction quickly while sprinting or backpedaling. Here's a look at effective pass coverage techniques for cornerbacks:

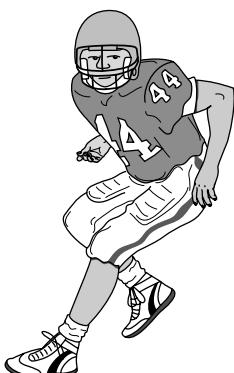
1. A cornerback begins plays with his inside foot (the one closest to the ball) back several inches from his other foot (see Figure 10-12).

Figure 10-12:
Proper
positioning
of the feet is
key for
cornerbacks
prior to the
snap of
the ball.



2. His hips are parallel to the line of scrimmage, and his arms hang loosely at his side.
3. His body is in a semi-crouched position, with his nose over his toes, and his head is angled so he can watch the quarterback.
4. When the ball is snapped, he begins running backward by pushing off his front foot, keeping his feet close to the ground and taking short steps.
5. His body is bent slightly forward (see Figure 10-13), and he moves his arms back and forth while keeping them close to his side.

Figure 10-13:
Cornerbacks
must be able
to backpedal
quickly to
cover wide
receivers.

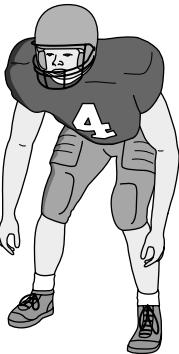


Stance of safety

Safeties are the last line of defense. Here's what a safety's stance should look like (see Figure 10-14) before the ball is snapped:

1. **He stands at roughly a 45-degree angle toward the line of scrimmage, with his body angled toward the quarterback.**
2. **His body is in a semi-crouch, his arms hanging loosely at his sides and his eyes focused on the quarterback.**

Figure 10-14:
Safeties
keep a close
eye on the
quarterback
in their
pre-snap
stance.



Breaking up passes and stripping the ball

Receivers want to catch the ball, and defenders want to prevent that from happening. Sometimes receivers get their hands on the ball, but if the defensive back is quick enough to knock the ball away, or *strip the ball*, the pass is usually ruled incomplete. (Other times, the receiver tucks the ball away and takes a step, but if the defensive back still manages to strip the ball, he forces a fumble, giving the defense a great opportunity to recover the ball.) Here are the techniques for stripping the ball:

1. **To knock the ball away from the receiver before he has a chance to put it away, the defender approaches from behind and brings his arms over the top of the receiver (see Figure 10-15).**
2. **The defender's hands come down and hook on the inside of the receiver's forearms (see Figure 10-16a).**
If the defensive back isn't able to get his hands inside the receiver's arms, he usually won't be able to create enough force to pull the defender's arms apart.
3. **Palms facing out, the defender pushes the receiver's hands down and apart so he can't hold the ball (see Figure 10-16b).**

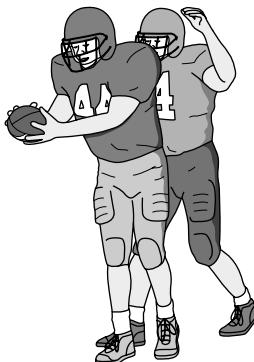


Figure 10-15:
Defensive backs strip the ball from behind the receiver.

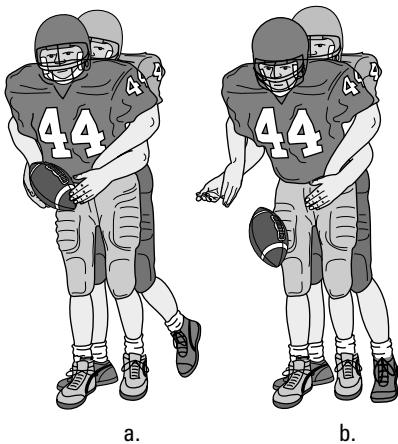


Figure 10-16:
The defender's hands come down to push the receiver's arms apart.



If the defensive back sees the pass coming and has time to step in front of the receiver for an interception attempt, he should try that first. Defensive backs should use stripping the ball only when no other option is available, because they never want the receiver to get his hands on the ball. Check out Chapter 9 for the proper way to teach players how to catch passes.

Diagnosing what went wrong

Playing in the secondary is challenging, and young defensive backs face some difficulties learning all the aspects of the position. Here are some problem areas you may come across while teaching the position and how you can remedy them:

- ✓ **Gets beat at the line of scrimmage:** Check the player's backpedal. He's probably taking too big of a stride, which gives the receiver the chance to run right by him. Get him to shorten those steps, and he'll be able to do them quickly and keep pace with the receiver. If he's covering a fast receiver, move him a few yards farther back from the line of scrimmage. This added distance gives him a little extra cushion to react to the receiver's pattern.
- ✓ **Is called for pass interference a lot:** This usually happens when the defender's a little too eager to make a play and contacts the receiver before the ball arrives. Work with the youngster to get his timing down, and remind him that it's better to get there a second late instead of a second early, because then he can still use the strip method to make sure the pass isn't completed or to force a fumble.

Special Teams

Sometimes special teams don't get quite as much attention from coaches as the offensive and defensive units, though the skills needed to play here are just as important. Read on for details on technique. After your team has these basics down, you can flip to Chapter 17 for more info on coaching special teams.

Field goals

Field goal attempts represent valuable opportunities for your team to put points on the scoreboard. The two types of kicks used for field goal attempts are straight ahead and soccer style (which are the same ones used for extra point attempts, too, following touchdowns). Here are the basic techniques for snapping, holding, and kicking the ball for a field goal.

Long snapping

The center's long snap begins plays for field goals, punts, and extra points. Snapping the ball to a player who's positioned 10 to 15 yards behind the line of scrimmage requires a different technique than standard snaps to a quarterback:

1. **The center assumes his stance (see Chapter 9) and looks between his legs to establish his target, which is the hands of the ball holder (or punter).**
2. **The center places both hands on the ball, with the laces facing toward him, so that the far point of the football rests in between his hands; the football is angled slightly downward.**

His dominant hand grips the ball as though he were throwing a pass, while his other hand rests lightly on top of the ball and serves to guide the ball during the snap.

3. The center looks in between his legs at the ball holder.
4. When making the snap, the center follows through with both hands so that his hands follow the path of the ball and his palms rotate out.
5. The center then raises up to block the opposing player across from him, or if no player is directly in front of him, he can slide to his left or right to provide blocking support to a teammate.

Holding the ball

The kicker can't have much success if the holder doesn't catch the snap cleanly and hold the ball properly. Here are the steps for holding the ball:

1. The holder kneels with his back knee on the ground and his front foot flat on the ground, pointing at the center of the goalpost.
2. He reaches down with his back hand (the one closest to the kicker) to ensure that the spot where he needs to place the ball is within reach.
3. Before calling for the snap, he checks to make sure the kicker is ready.
4. He holds his hands up, receives the snap, and uses both hands to guide the ball to the proper spot for the kicker.
5. He places the index finger of his back hand on the top point to balance the ball while his other hand rotates the ball (if needed) so that the laces face away from the kicker.

Soccer style kick

This is the preferred kicking method for most youngsters:

1. The kicker lines up at about a 30-degree angle to the side of the ball.
Youngsters have to experiment to find what distance behind the ball works best for them, though a general guideline is to have them walk three steps straight back from the ball and then take two small steps to the side.
2. His head should be slightly down, with his eyes focused on the target — where the ball will be placed for the kick.
3. As the holder catches the ball, the kicker steps forward with his non-kicking foot.
4. The kicker's next step is a long step with the kicking leg, followed by a step with the non-kicking foot (see Figure 10-17a).

The kicker plants the non-kicking foot with the heel about even with the ball and about 6 to 8 inches away from it, pointing at the target (see Figure 10-17b).

5. **The kicking foot sweeps through and makes contact with the ball at the top of the instep (see Figure 10-17c).**
6. **The kicker keeps his head down and follows through with his kicking leg toward the target (see Figure 10-17d).**

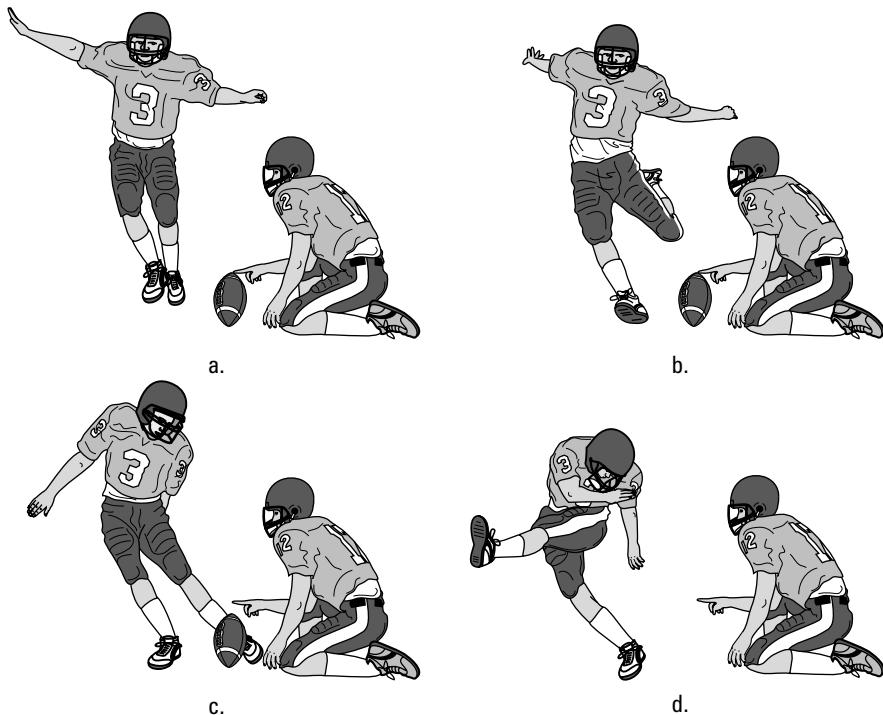


Figure 10-17:
The proper
approach,
kick, and
follow-
through of a
soccer-style
kick.

Straight ahead kick

This type of kick isn't used much at the more advanced levels of youth football, but it's a good way to help teach youngsters the art of kicking:

1. **The kicker begins two steps behind where the ball will be placed.**
2. **As the ball is snapped, the kicker takes a short step with his kicking foot while focusing on where the ball will be placed.**
3. **The next step is a regular stride with the non-kicking foot, which the player plants about 4 to 6 inches from the ball.**

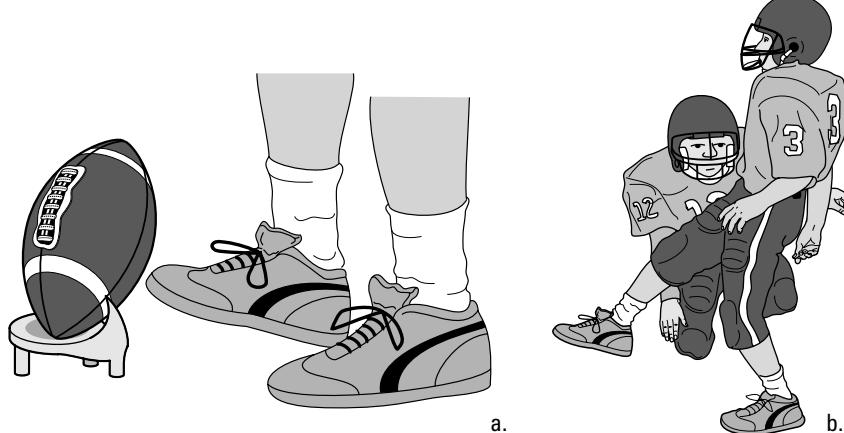
4. The toes of the kicking foot make contact with the ball just below the center of it (see Figure 10-18a), and the leg follows through straight toward the target (see Figure 10-18b).

Field goal–kick troubleshooting

Executing a field goal involves several steps. Here's a list of common problem areas all kickers deal with and what causes them:

- ✓ **Ball hooks left (or right for a left-footed player):** When the kicker's plant foot is too close to the ball, it forces his kicking leg to come across the ball after impact, which causes the ball to drift.
- ✓ **Ball goes right (or left for a left-footed player):** This usually happens because the kicker's plant foot is too far away from the ball. Or his plant foot is angled to the outside, which causes the ball to be pushed to the side of the target.
- ✓ **Field goals blocked:** Low kicks are easy for defenders to block. The kicker is probably peeking up too early to see whether he's made the field goal and isn't making solid contact with the ball. Another cause of low kicks is making contact too high up on the ball, again a result of the kicker's not keeping his head down and watching the ball.
- ✓ **Lack of distance on kicks:** Sometimes kickers aim where they want the ball to go rather than kicking right through it, which drastically cuts down on their distance. The lack of distance may also be due to the kicker's plant foot being too far ahead of the ball. Or maybe he makes contact too low on the ball, which pops it into the air.

Figure 10-18:
The toes make contact with the football, and the leg follows straight through toward the target.



Punting

A good punter is a valuable weapon to have on your side when he pins opponents deep in their end of the field. Here's a look at the techniques of punting:

1. **The punter stands leaning slightly forward with his feet parallel and his kicking foot slightly forward.**
2. **The punter holds his hands inside his kicking knee and chest high (see Figure 10-19) to give the center a target to snap the ball to (see "Long snapping" under "Field goals," earlier in this chapter, for info on snapping technique).**
3. **He catches the ball with both hands with his arms outstretched.**

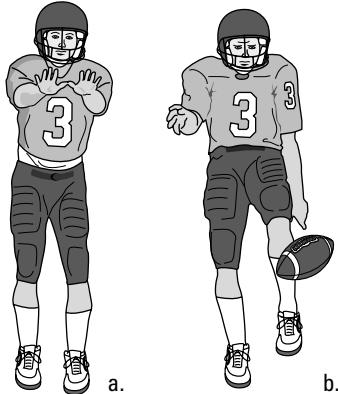


Figure 10-19:
The punter
catches the
snap and
kicks the
ball away.

4. **He adjusts the ball so the laces are on top and holds it out so that his arms are almost completely extended.**
He won't be able to kick the ball as far if he strikes the laces.
5. **He takes a short step with the kicking leg.**
6. **Taking a normal length step with the other leg, the punter drops the ball over the kicking foot from chest to waist level so that the ball falls straight down, with the tip of the ball closest to the punter turned in and slightly up (see Figure 10-19b).**
The front of the ball is angled inward a few inches toward the non-kicking foot.
7. **As this step finishes, the kicking leg starts forward, bent at the knee, and swings straight out from the body.**
8. **The punter contacts the ball just below knee level.**



Teach punters to drop the ball from as short a distance as possible. The longer the ball is in the air between their hands and their kicking foot, the greater the chance for a miscue.

Receiving kickoffs and punts

Successful kickoff and punt returners have good hands — and good concentration. Here are the proper techniques for fielding punts and kicks:

1. **The returner watches the ball and gets into position to catch it.**
2. **He opens his hands at chest level with his palms facing his body and his elbows close together (see Figure 10-20).**
3. **He catches the ball with both hands, tucks it away, and begins running.**



Figure 10-20:
A returner's
hands
should be at
chest level
to help
ensure a
clean catch.

On punts, if the returner decides to fair catch the ball, he signals by waving his arm above his head while getting his body into position to catch it. After a *fair catch*, the offense begins its series of plays from the yard line at which the returner catches the ball; players use fair catches when they've chosen not to run with the ball because opposing players are nearby, ready to make a tackle as soon as it's caught. If the player doesn't use the fair catch and the punt hits the ground, the ball could roll several yards downfield and put the offense in worse field position.

Punting and receiving troubleshooting

It's common for youngsters to struggle while learning the art of kicking and receiving punts. Here are a couple areas you may address this season and how you can make the necessary corrections:

- ✓ **Punts fluttering to the left or right:** This problem occurs when the punter's foot makes contact with a ball that isn't level enough when it's released from his hands. Check the punter's grip and make sure he's releasing the ball at the same time with both hands.
- ✓ **Punts going high and not very far:** Punts pop up in the air when the punter makes contact with the ball too soon after releasing it from his hands; the ball is still too high when the punter's foot contacts the ball. The ball doesn't travel very far, because the amount of time the player's foot is on the ball is reduced, eliminating a lot of the power. Work with the punter to slightly delay the kick or to drop the ball so it starts out closer to his foot.
- ✓ **Peeking at the players coming at them instead of watching the ball into their arms.** For punt returners especially, it can be nerve racking standing back there waiting to catch the ball with defenders running full speed toward you and knowing that as soon as you touch the ball, you'll probably get hit. Continually stress to players that they must watch the ball completely into their arms before they worry about being tackled or make any moves.

To help young kids get comfortable receiving punts, allow them to use the fair catch signal whenever they're catching a punt during a game. That way, they won't be concerned about getting hit and will gradually gain the confidence to catch punts and return them.



Chapter 11

Fundamental Warm-Ups and Drills for Beginners

In This Chapter

- ▶ Warming up and stretching out
 - ▶ Offensive drills: Moving the ball
 - ▶ Defending drills
 - ▶ Checking out a practice plan
-

It's no secret that youngsters love game days, but the real trick of coaching is getting them equally enthusiastic about your practices. How much fun the team has playing for you this season — and how well the kids develop skills — is directly related to the drills you use in practice. Interesting, challenging, and fun-filled drills boost productivity, increase excitement, and enhance team morale, but boring and unimaginative drills deflate interest and bring learning to a standstill.

In this chapter, we share some drills you can use to give youngsters a solid start in mastering the basics of the game. You can easily modify many of them to gradually increase the difficulty level and match the kids' progress from week to week.



Before you begin running your team through these drills, be sure to allow time for a proper warm-up and some stretching. This preparation helps protect against injuries and improves performance. You can find valuable information on the basics of stretching here, as well.

Warming Up Right

For many kids, spending time stretching isn't very appealing. After all, youngsters arrive for practices and games eager to catch passes, make tackles, and get that uniform dirty — not stretch hamstrings and loosen up neck muscles. Yet your practices should always begin with a segment devoted to warming

up and stretching before diving into the drills. Warming up is the springboard to developing healthy young bodies and can help players to perform at optimal levels throughout the season.

Running practices without having the kids warm up first is like driving a car without oil. You may not notice any problems for a while, but eventually your car breaks down. The same goes for your players, particularly older ones, whose muscles are more susceptible to injuries. Exercises that develop muscle flexibility also reduce injury risks by preventing those muscles from tiring easily. Completing warm-ups and stretching exercises prior to intense physical activity boosts muscle temperatures and increases flexibility — catalysts for building skills and advancing development.

The two primary types of stretches are

- ✓ **Static:** These are basic stretches in which the body is placed in a specific position that's held for several seconds. This approach stresses slowly moving to the desired position, just slightly beyond discomfort, briefly holding that position, and then relaxing. For example, players want to slowly bend down and touch their toes, count to five, and then relax and return to an upright position. Remind kids that mild tension — not pain — is what they should strive for on any type of stretch.
- ✓ **Dynamic:** These stretches are smooth and controlled motions that feature the movements that players are likely to use during the practice or game.

With youngsters who may be relatively new to football, or any type of organized sports activity, start the kids out with static stretches. As they get older and are around the game more, you can incorporate the dynamic approach to prep them for competition (see the section “Active stretches for older kids,” later in the chapter).



Players should have designated spots for the stretching exercises at the start of each practice. If you're coaching a team that has many players, having assigned positions for everyone on the field lets you easily spot a player's absence. You can even group together the offensive and defensive units so you can quickly recognize whether players are missing. This system gives you more time to adjust your practice drills to fit the number of players present.



Keep the stretching exercises consistent. You don't want to waste valuable practice time introducing new stretches each week of the season. Design a basic warm-up and stretching routine that the kids can stick to all season long.

In addition to the warm-up, each practice should wind down with a 5-minute period of light exercise. The cool-down helps players' bodies return to their normal resting states. Run a specific play at half speed or work on your field goal blocking or punt coverage, and then conclude with a couple minutes of

stretching the large muscles. The cool-down doesn't have to be nearly as focused as the warm-up session, because the purpose is to wind down from the activity rather than build up to it.

Warm-up and stretching fundamentals

Your practices should always begin with players' warming up with a light exercise, such as a moderate-paced jog, before stretching their muscles. A basic lap around the field, or a jog back and forth between the end zones, gets the job done and clears the way for some stretching.



Using your imagination, you can turn any basic exercise into a fun-filled activity for the kids. For instance, you can spice up the jogging activity by having the players dive on the ground when you yell "fumble." Or you can have players toss footballs back and forth to one another. Use your imagination to come up with all sorts of ways to liven up running, which can get monotonous.

Keep the following points in mind when leading your team in stretching:

- ✓ **Be consistent.** Always start practice with a warm-up and stretching. When youngsters know they'll be stretching at every practice, they learn that preparation is an important aspect of being a good football player.
- ✓ **The younger the kids, the simpler the stretches.** For young kids, the stretching period can be brief. You just want to introduce them to the concept of stretching and get them in the habit of doing so before any activity. Some basic sit-ups, push-ups, and toe touches are all you need.
- ✓ **Cover all the muscle groups.** You want the stretches to involve all the major muscle groups that the kids use. That means stretches for the hamstrings, calves, neck, arms, and back.
- ✓ **Keep the stretches comfortable.** You want the kids' muscles to loosen up gradually.
- ✓ **Emphasize moving slowly and smoothly.** Bouncing and straining to reach a desired position can result in injury. Regardless of whether you use static stretching (holding positions for several seconds) or dynamic stretching (using smooth movements), the motions should be controlled. Youngsters should ease into the stretches while breathing in through the nose and exhaling through the mouth. Sharp, sudden movements can injure the muscles and sideline the child.
- ✓ **Be hands-on.** During any stretching exercises, make sure you have one-on-one contact with each child. This contact is particularly important for youngsters who are new to football or to the whole concept of stretching before physical activity. For example, when a child is stretching out his



hamstrings, place his hand on the back of his leg so he can feel the exact area of his body that he's stretching and preparing for competition. This technique also helps ensure that the kids follow proper form.

- ✓ **Don't allow horsing around.** The stretching period isn't a time for goofing off. It's a valuable part of your practice time, and kids need to treat it that way. So keep their attention focused on the stretches.
- ✓ **Join in.** As the coach, you'll run all over the field as you teach skills, demonstrate techniques, and provide feedback, so joining the kids (and your assistants) for stretching serves a couple useful purposes. One, it helps protect you from being sidelined with a strained or pulled muscle, which would affect your ability to work with the kids; two, it's a good opportunity to bond with your team by getting on the field with them.

Basic stretches and exercises

Maintaining and improving children's flexibility is essential not only for preventing injuries but also for giving kids a solid foundation of strength, balance, and coordination. Incorporating a variety of stretches and strength-building exercises is a key component for preparing youngsters for the physical demands of football. Take a look at several different stretches you can use during your warm-ups to help prepare a youngster's body for practices and games.



Players who increase their flexibility can see dramatic improvements in their technique, which translates into more effective performances on the football field. For example, a youngster who has tight hamstrings is limited in how fast he can run, or if he's the team's punter or kicker, how far he can kick the ball. If you help that child stretch out those hamstrings and gain increased flexibility, he can enjoy a fuller range of motion, which leads to more forceful kicks, more success, and more fun.



With youngsters just starting out, do sets of ten repetitions, and have the kids hold each stretch for a two-second count. You can slowly build from this base during the season, bumping up the repetitions and how long they hold the stretches.

Standing squats

The child stands with his feet shoulder width apart (see Figure 11-1) and his hands on his hips. He squats down into a deep knee bend, keeping his body upright and steady and his body weight centered over his heels. In a slow and controlled motion, he pushes up into his starting position.

Make sure the child's weight isn't distributed over the toes, which places excessive stress on the knees. Also make sure the child maintains good posture and doesn't relax his upper body, which places too much stress on the lower back.

Figure 11-1:
Standing squats are excellent for stretching and strengthening the quadriceps and other leg muscles.



Calf raises

The child begins with his feet shoulder width apart and his hands on his waist. He rises onto his toes on both feet (see Figure 11-2) and slowly lowers himself down toward the ground. He stops just before his heels touch the ground and repeats the upward phase of the stretch.

Make sure he distributes his weight evenly across his toes; if he isn't doing so, he's working only part of the calf muscle. Don't let the child lock his knees, which reduces the effectiveness of the stretch.

Figure 11-2:
Players get on their tippy toes for this calf stretch.



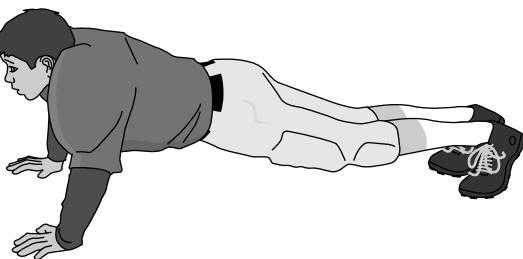
Push-ups

The child starts on the ground, face down, with his back straight and his hands on the ground; his thumbs should be under his shoulders and facing toward his armpits (see Figure 11-3). He extends his arms to lift his body off the ground and then lowers his body approximately 1 to 4 inches off the ground. He then extends his arms again and repeats.

Make sure the child's hands are positioned properly, or he may place excessive stress on the shoulders. If the child doesn't keep his body straight — raising his chest from the ground and allowing his lower body to follow — he negates using his chest muscles and places additional stress on the lower back.

Figure 11-3:

The traditional push-up is great for strengthening the arms and chest.



Sit-ups

The child begins on the ground, lying on his back with his knees slightly bent, his heels on the ground, and his hands behind his head with the tips of his fingers barely touching each other. Contracting his stomach muscles, he slowly lifts his upper body off the ground toward his knees, keeping his butt in contact with the ground (see Figure 11-4). Make sure he doesn't pull on his head to complete this exercise, which places tremendous stress on the neck. As he rises off the ground 6 to 8 inches, he holds that position for a count of two and then slowly returns to the starting position.

Figure 11-4:

Sit-ups strengthen that important midsection area.



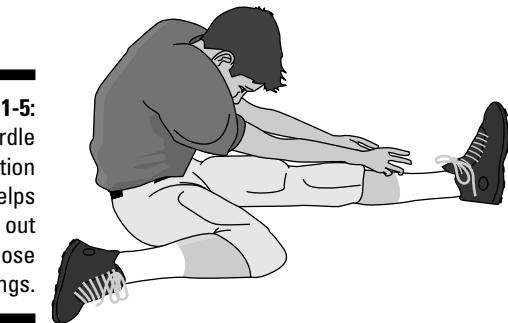
Hamstring stretch

While sitting, the child assumes the hurdle position (see Figure 11-5) by extending his right leg fully and bending his left leg back in the opposite direction. While keeping his back straight, he slowly leans forward, bringing his chest toward his right knee and reaching with both hands toward his toes.

Depending on how much flexibility the child has, he either places his hands on the floor alongside his right leg or holds his toes. He holds the stretch for a couple seconds and then releases. Have him repeat with the left leg.

Make sure he isn't lunging for his toes. He shouldn't feel any pain, just a slight tension in his muscles.

Figure 11-5:
The hurdle position helps stretch out those hamstrings.



Quadriceps stretch

The child stands and grabs his right foot or ankle and lifts it behind his body (see Figure 11-6). He presses the top of his foot into his hand while pressing his hips slightly forward. His lower leg and foot should be directly behind his upper leg, and there shouldn't be any twisting in or out. Make sure the child doesn't rest his foot against his buttocks.



If any kids have trouble balancing on one leg for the quadriceps stretch, have each kid put his free hand on the shoulder of a stretching partner to balance himself.

Figure 11-6:
Kids have fun balancing on one leg for this quadriceps stretch.



Groin stretch

The child sits on the ground (see Figure 11-7) and places the soles of his feet together with his knees off to the sides. Leaning forward, the child slowly presses forward until he feels a mild tension in the groin.

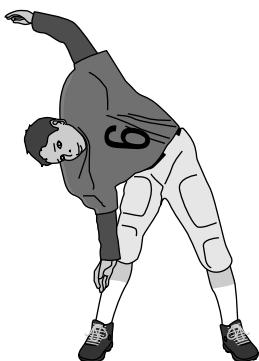
Figure 11-7:
With older
kids, the
groin
stretch is
a vital
component
of any
stretching
session.



Waist/lower back stretch

The child stands with his feet beyond shoulder width apart, arcs his left arm over his head and points to the right while his right arm rests against his right knee (see Figure 11-8). Then he reverses to the other side, arcing his right arm over his head and pointing to the left. Perform several repetitions in each direction.

Figure 11-8:
Stretching
the lower
back
enables kids
to move
more freely
during drills.



Upper back stretch

The youngster stands and stretches both arms behind his back, clasping them together (see Figure 11-9), while puffing his chest out. He holds for a few seconds and then releases.

**Figure 11-9:**

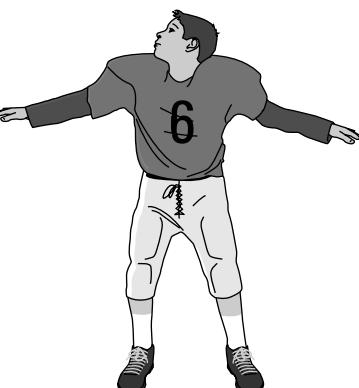
This is a quick and effective approach to stretching out the upper back.



Neck stretch

The child stands and slowly turns his head all the way to the right (see Figure 11-10) and then slowly turns it all the way to the left. He then tucks his chin to his chest to stretch out the back of his neck.

Always caution the kids to perform the neck stretch slowly. You don't want them straining or pulling something by being too forceful.

**Figure 11-10:**

Players must take great care to loosen the neck muscles before physical contact.

Hip stretch

The child sits with his left leg on the ground and extended straight out with his toes pointing up (see Figure 11-11). He crosses his right leg over his left knee so that that foot is flat on the ground. He places his right hand flat on the ground behind him and extends his left arm out. He slowly turns to the right, so that his left elbow crosses over his right knee.

Figure 11-11:

Properly stretching the hip area is vital for being able to run at top speed.



Knee bends

While the child is seated on the ground, he bends his left knee and places his left foot flat on the floor (see Figure 11-12). He follows by placing his right foot and ankle on his left thigh just above his knee. He places his hands on the ground behind his hips and presses his chest toward his knee and foot — he'll feel a stretch in his groin. Have him repeat with the other leg. His upper torso, neck, and shoulders should remain open and straight; don't let him round his upper back.

Figure 11-12:

Knee bends are a popular choice of stretches on many youth football teams.



Arm stretch

The youngster stands with his feet shoulder-width apart, interlocks his fingers and stretches his arms straight up over his head. His palms are face up.

Active stretches for older kids

Here are some dynamic (motion-based) stretches you can use to help older kids get ready.

High knees

The child takes an exaggerated high step forward, lifting the knee as high as possible while simultaneously pushing up on the toes of the opposite foot (see Figure 11-13). The arm opposite the leg being lifted swings up to chin level. This stretch works the hips and shoulders and stretches the quadriceps, glutes, shoulders, and lower back. Have the kids go 25 yards down the field performing these movements and turn around and repeat on the way back.

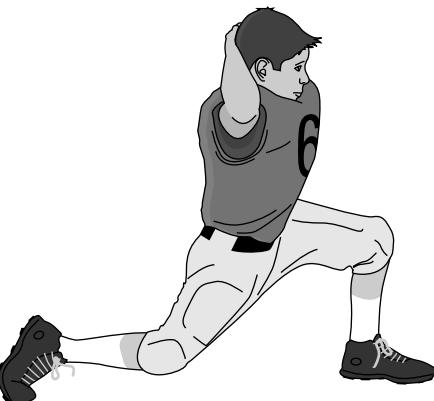
Figure 11-13:
The high knees stretch out both the upper and lower parts of the body.



Lunges

The youngster begins by placing his hands behind his head with his fingers interlocked. He takes a long stride forward, striking the ground with his heel first and then placing his foot flat on the ground while coming up on the toes of his back foot (see Figure 11-14). The knee of his back foot is barely off the ground. The front knee should be at a 90-degree angle, and it shouldn't come over the toes. He brings his back leg up and stands upright before repeating by beginning with the opposite leg. Lunges stretch the glutes, hamstrings, hip flexors, and calves. Have the players do 10 to 15 reps with each leg.

Figure 11-14:
Performing lunges works the hamstrings, hip flexors, calves, and glutes.



Straight leg kicks

The youngster begins by swinging his right leg up as high as it'll go (see Figure 11-15) and using his left hand to reach out and touch his toes. The player's extended arm should remain parallel to the ground. He then repeats with the opposite leg and arm. Doing ten kicks with each leg is sufficient.

Figure 11-15:
Straight leg kicks stretch the hamstrings, calves, and lower back.



Running butt taps

Youngsters get a good stretch of their quadriceps and hip flexors with this one. The player begins running by flexing the knee so that each time he lifts his foot off the ground during the run, his heel comes all the way back and kicks his butt (see Figure 11-16). While performing this move, the youngster should be leaning slightly forward, and his arms should swing close to his body. Have the kids complete 20 kicks total within 10 to 15 yards; you can alternately have them do this exercise while basically running in place.

Figure 11-16:
The key to
this stretch
is the
player's
touching
his heel to
his butt.



Running carioca

This drill focuses on stretching the abs, glutes, ankles, and hips. The youngster begins on the balls of his feet and twists his hips while crossing one leg in front of the other (see Figure 11-17). He brings his back leg through and crosses his lead leg behind the back leg. His shoulders remain square through the entire drill. You can have the players begin on any yard line and have them go across the width of the field, staying on the line and then returning across the field to where they began.

Figure 11-17:
There's
plenty of
twisting of
the hips
involved
during the
running
carioca.



Offensive Exercises

Moving the ball downfield requires everyone on the offensive unit to fulfill his responsibilities. Each player needs to be comfortable with the basics of blocking, running, catching, and passing; to be able to deal with defensive players; and to understand what it takes to get the ball into the end zone.

Your goal during every practice, while working with this group, is to instill in them the skills they need to successfully play their positions. As players gain skills and the confidence to execute them during games, kids can reap the rewards with more trips to the end zone. That surely increases the kids' enjoyment of the game, too.



Tweaking your exercises to fit the needs of a player can help a youngster who's struggling with a certain aspect of his game. For example, if your quarterback has had a lot of his passes intercepted, you can restore his confidence by running drills that let him complete passes. Drills that don't include defenders — but that challenge him with how many passes he can complete in a row — can get him to positively visualize completing passes. Then you can introduce defensive players into the mix. The beauty of your practice sessions is that you can select any drill and fine tune it to specifically meet your team's needs.

For info on proper stances, blocking techniques, footwork, and ball-handling, check out Chapter 9.

For the quarterback

A quarterback's ability to spot open receivers and deliver accurate passes is paramount to running a well-balanced offense. The drills in this section help quarterbacks hone their throwing technique while becoming more comfortable delivering passes to receivers.

Find the Receiver

This drill develops a quarterback's footwork and proficiency at delivering passes to the intended target.

What you need: 4 wide receivers, 1 center, 1 quarterback. Several balls.

How it works: Perform this drill in 1- or 2-minute segments and see how many passes your quarterbacks can complete.

1. **Position four players (wide receivers) at varying distances across the field, and assign each a number (see Figure 11-18).**
2. **The quarterback takes the snap from the center, and as he drops back to pass, you call out the number of the player you want him to deliver the pass to.**
3. **After hearing the number of the receiver, the quarterback has to quickly set his feet in the direction of the designated player and deliver the pass.**

Have several footballs near the center to keep this drill moving and provide the quarterback with lots of repetitions.

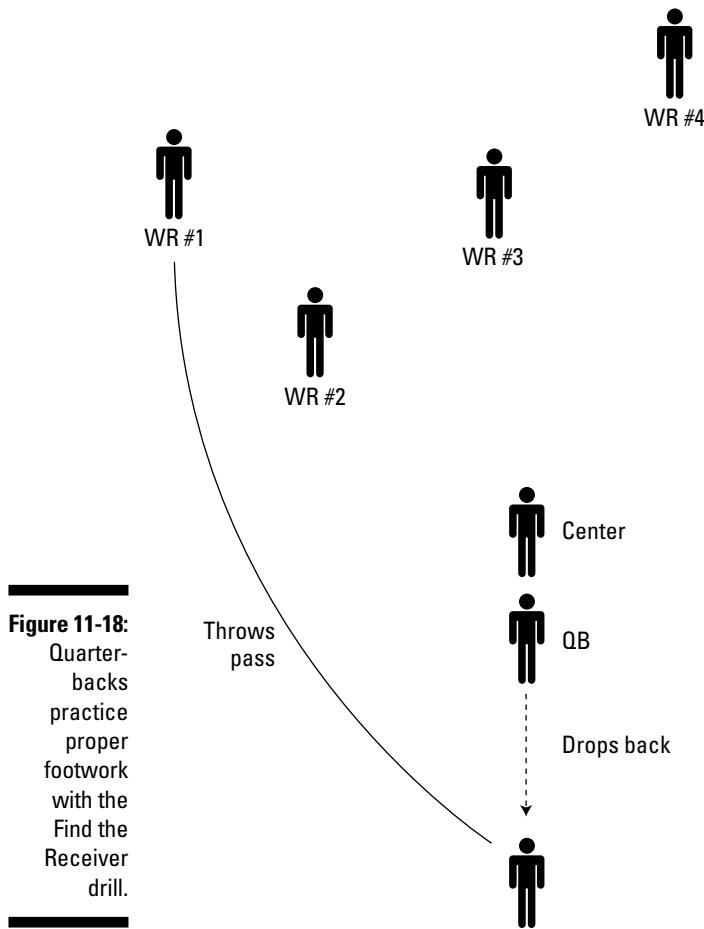


Figure 11-18:
Quarterbacks practice proper footwork with the Find the Receiver drill.

Coaching pointers: Focus on the footwork. If the quarterback's feet aren't properly aligned, his throws will probably miss their mark. (See Chapter 9 for more info on passing technique.)

To increase the difficulty level, you can have a defender rush the passer, which makes completing passes more challenging; or you can add a safety to cover the receivers.

Drop Back

This drill reinforces proper throwing technique, particularly following through toward the intended target.

What you need: 1 quarterback, 1 receiver, 1 ball.

How it works: A quarterback and a receiver face each other, standing 5 yards apart. The quarterback takes a three-step drop and delivers a pass. If the receiver doesn't have to take a step in any direction to catch the ball, the quarterback moves back 3 yards and repeats the steps. Every time the quarterback delivers an accurate pass, he moves farther away for the next pass.

Coaching pointers: As the target gets farther away, your quarterback may no longer follow proper technique in an effort to throw the ball greater distances; make sure his feet are pointed toward the target and that he's following through toward the receiver.

Turn this drill into a fun competition between your quarterbacks to see who can end up the farthest away before his pass is off target.

For the running back

The most successful running backs are those who keep their feet moving at all times and are able to spot holes in the defense and hit those gaps before they shrink.

Head Up

This drill teaches youngsters to keep their heads up and their eyes downfield to avoid defenders.

What you need: 1 running back, 1 quarterback. 5 adults. 1 ball.

How it works: Position five assistant coaches or parents in a line with roughly 10 yards between each of them. On your command, a running back takes a handoff from the quarterback and runs full speed toward the first adult. As the player approaches, each coach or parent points left or right, and the player must react quickly, weave around that adult, and head toward the next adult.

Coaching pointers: Youngsters running at full speed have a tendency to get sloppy with their technique, so besides making sure their heads are up and their eyes are looking straight ahead, monitor that they're holding the ball properly as they're shifting to the left and right.

Knee It Up

This drill helps running backs develop quick feet and the habit of running with their knees up so they're more difficult to bring down.

What you need: 1 quarterback, 1 running back. 5 square bags. 1 ball.

How it works: Line up a series of square bags (check with your recreation agency to see whether it provides these for your practices) with a couple yards between each of them. The drill begins as the quarterback hands the ball off to the running back, who runs over the bags as fast as he can, using a high-knee step so that he clears the bags with both feet.

Coaching pointers: Make sure the running back is looking downfield and not at his feet, because defenders can easily tackle him during a game if he's not looking at what's straight ahead of him.

You can increase the difficulty of the drill by staggering the bags so youngsters are forced to cut and run at different angles rather than in a straight line.



Square bags are usually 3 to 4 feet long and are made of durable material; they sort of resemble the heavy bags you may have seen boxers punching during their training sessions. If you don't have access to this type of equipment, simply stuff a bunch of old towels into several garbage bags.

For wide receivers and tight ends

A lot of the time, keeping a drive alive depends on receivers' making difficult catches with defenders all around them. Receivers who quarterbacks can count on in the clutch, especially on those crucial third-down plays, make the offense extremely difficult to stop. The following drills help wide receivers and tight ends pick up skills and gain confidence at catching passes at a variety of angles.

Obstructed Vision

This drill helps youngsters focus on catching the ball when they don't have a clear view down the field.

What you need: 1 quarterback, 1 wide receiver, 1 defensive back. 1 ball.

How it works: Use the following steps for this drill:

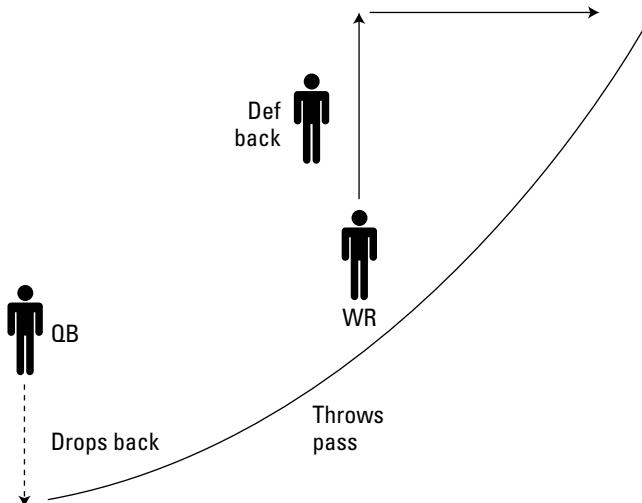
1. **The wide receiver lines up to the right of the quarterback and opposite a defensive back (see Figure 11-19).**
2. **The wide receiver runs downfield 15 yards and then cuts hard to his right to receive the quarterback's pass (he runs a 15-yard *square out* pass pattern).**

The defensive back shadows the receiver, giving him the chance to work on his pass coverage techniques, too.

3. The quarterback delivers the pass as the receiver makes his cut toward the sideline; meanwhile, the defender waves his arms to obstruct the receiver's vision and disrupt his concentration.

Instruct the defender not to knock the ball away so the receiver gets practice catching passes while his vision is obscured.

Figure 11-19:
The
Obstructed
Vision drill
puts the
receiver's
concen-
tration to
the test.



Coaching pointers: Remind the receivers to keep their eyes on the incoming ball instead of concentrating on where the defender is. Sure, this concept is basic, but it's one that players can easily forget when hands and arms are waving in front of them.

The Gauntlet

The team counts on receivers not only to catch the ball but also hang onto it when it's in their possession. This drill helps them learn to protect the ball after they get their hands on it.

What you need: 1 quarterback, 1 wide receiver, 1 defensive back. 1 ball.

How it works: Position a wide receiver about 10 yards away from a quarterback, facing him, and put a defensive back right behind the receiver. The quarterback delivers a pass to the receiver, and as soon as the ball is in the receiver's hands, the defensive back tries knocking it loose. The receiver tries to keep the ball secure.

Coaching pointers: The receiver must first focus on making the catch and then immediately tuck the ball away safely. The more proficient he becomes at securing the ball, the less likely turnovers or dropped passes will be.

For offensive linemen

Sure, it's an overused saying, but it's so true: An offense is only as good as its offensive line. Running backs don't get very far without good blocking, and receivers don't have many chances to catch passes when the quarterback is scrambling after the pass protection breaks down. The drills here focus on balance and positioning, two prerequisites for being successful in the trenches.

Body Positioning

This drill teaches offensive linemen how to maintain proper balance so defenders can't gain an advantage on them.

What you need: 5 offensive linemen, 5 defensive linemen.

How it works: The offensive players line up across the field with 5 yards between each of them, and the defensive players line up across from them just as they would before a play at the line of scrimmage. On your whistle, the defensive players try to get the offensive players off balance by pushing and shoving, while the offensive linemen try to maintain their starting positions.

Coaching pointers: Keep an eye out to make sure that the offensive players get low to the ground and keep their feet moving; otherwise, they won't be very successful in this drill.

Staying Alive

This drill teaches offensive linemen the art of maintaining blocks.

What you need: 1 offensive lineman, 1 defensive lineman. 1 coach. 2 cones or other markers.

How it works: Use the following steps for this drill:

1. Set up two cones about 8 feet apart to mark the playing area.
2. An offensive and defensive player line up across from each other and take their normal stances; you stand behind the defensive player and point in the direction you want the offensive player to take the defensive player.

3. When the offensive player is ready, he tries to drive block the defender in the direction you indicated and knock him outside the area marked by the cones.

Coaching pointers: Watch technique. The defensive player is trying to drive through the block, so the offensive player can be effective only if his feet are properly positioned and he maintains proper leverage.

Defensive Exercises

Playing defense requires a variety of skills that are much different from those needed on the offensive side of the ball. Sound defensive play requires the ability to adapt and react to what the offense is doing. Controlling the line of scrimmage, reading plays and making tackles, and shadowing receivers all over the field are just some of the skills your defense needs to derail an opposing offense.

The following drills are designed to help your defenders (regardless of the positions they play) enhance their skills, frustrate opponents, and get the ball back for their offense. (For info on stance, blocking and tackling techniques, and so on, see Chapter 10.)

For defensive linemen

Successful play along the defensive line requires the ability to quickly recognize rushing and passing plays and react to them. These drills help youngsters get comfortable in their stances and learn to react to basic plays that they'll see frequently during games.

Pursuit and Finish

This drill teaches linemen to read which direction the rushing play is going and to react accordingly to make the tackle. (For information on reading plays at the line of scrimmage before the snap, see Chapter 16.)

What you need: 5 offensive linemen (including the center), 4 defensive linemen, 1 quarterback, 1 halfback, 1 ball.

How it works: The defensive linemen take their positions opposite the offensive linemen and get in their proper stance; the quarterback is behind the center, and there's a halfback in the backfield (see Figure 11-20).

1. Before each play, let the offensive unit know whether you want the quarterback to toss the ball to the halfback, who then goes left or right, or whether you want him to hand the ball off and have the halfback run straight up the middle.
2. On your whistle, the play begins. The defensive linemen must decipher which direction the play is going, shed the offensive linemen's blocks, and attempt to make the tackle.

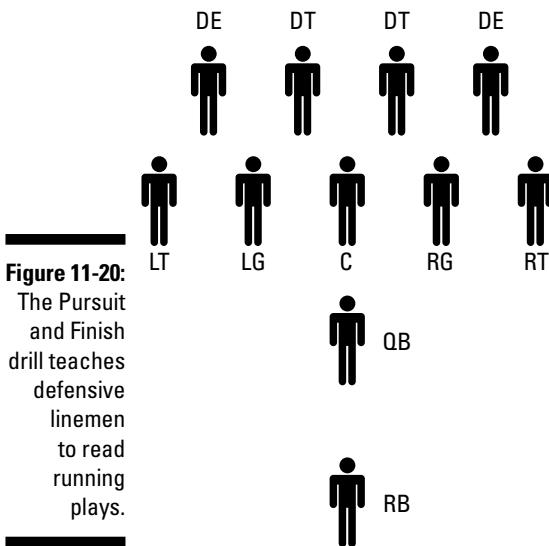


Figure 11-20:
The Pursuit
and Finish
drill teaches
defensive
linemen
to read
running
plays.

Coaching pointers: You want the defensive linemen to react as soon as the ball is snapped and not be knocked off the line of scrimmage. If the halfback is able to burst through the line without being tackled, the defensive players weren't able to shed their blocks and the offensive linemen won the battle along the line of scrimmage.

Ready, Rush, React

This drill works on pass-rushing techniques and putting pressure on the quarterback.

What you need: 5 offensive linemen, 4 defensive linemen, 1 coach, 1 ball.

How it works: Use the following steps for this drill:

1. The defensive line takes its position against the offensive line, with everyone in the proper starting stance.
2. You assume the quarterback position about 7 yards from the line of scrimmage.
3. The center snaps the ball to you, and you remain still while the defenders, who react to the movement of the ball, work on their pass rushing techniques and attempt to get by the offensive linemen and touch you.

Coaching pointers: Check to make sure everyone is in the proper stances at the line of scrimmage before the snap and that players are beginning their rush at the snap of the ball, not jumping offside in their eagerness to get to you (Chapter 3 explains more about being offside and other penalties).

You can turn this drill into a fun contest by seeing which defender can get to you first. You can also increase the difficulty level by moving around in the pocket to simulate game action. (The *pocket* is that area formed by the blockers that the quarterback stands in while attempting a pass.) Run a series of ten snaps and see which defender is the most proficient at getting to you. You can also run the exercise with just your two defensive ends going up against the offensive tackles for a two-on-two version of the drill and then have the defensive tackles go against the offensive guards.

For linebackers

The foundation of good linebacking play is being able to tackle, because many defenses are set up to funnel plays to the linebackers. The following drills focus on proper footwork and sound tackling techniques.

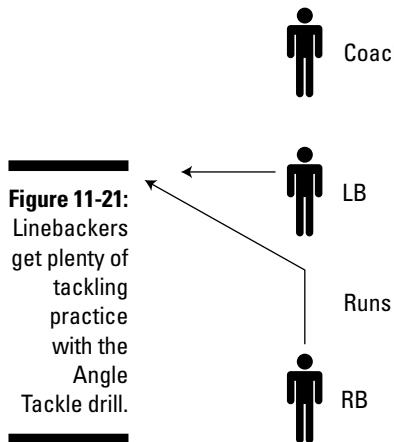
Angle Tackle

This drill teaches linebackers to react to a running back's change of direction and make tackles.

What you need: 1 linebacker, 1 running back, 1 coach, 1 ball.

How it works: Position a linebacker facing a running back, about 5 yards away (see Figure 11-21), and get behind the linebacker so only the running back can see you. On your whistle:

1. The running back begins running toward the linebacker. When he gets a couple yards away, you motion for him to cut either left or right.
2. The linebacker is forced to react to the quick change in direction and take the proper angle to make the tackle on the running back.



Coaching pointers: Make sure the linebacker's head is up and that he drives through the running back and securely wraps him up with both arms.

Read and React

This drill develops sound footwork and the ability to react quickly to rushing and passing plays among your linebacking corps.

What you need: 3 linebackers. 1 coach. 1 ball.

How it works: Position your linebackers in a line facing you, with about 3 yards between each of them. They assume the normal stance they take before the snap of the ball. Position yourself about 10 yards away, holding a football in your hand. The drill begins with your motioning the direction you want the linebackers to move in:

- ✓ When you move the ball to your left or right, the players respond accordingly and shuffle in that direction.
- ✓ When you hold the ball above your head, that corresponds to a pass, and they backpedal into coverage.
- ✓ Holding the ball low to the ground indicates a rushing play, and the linebackers charge forward.

Coaching pointers: Youngsters learning the position have a tendency not to keep their body square to the target while moving in different directions, so keep an eye on their body positioning and footwork throughout the drill.

You can easily add to the excitement of the exercise by occasionally tossing a ball on the ground so the linebackers have to react quickly and try to recover it. Or you can lob a ball in the air and see who can come up with the interception.

For defensive backs

Playing in the secondary presents all sorts of challenges, from trying to shadow receivers all over the field to reacting to passes. These drills help young defensive backs get a handle on some of these difficult responsibilities.

Shuffle It Up

This drill helps defensive backs get comfortable backpedaling and reacting to passes.

What you need: 1 defensive back. 1 coach. 1 ball.

How it works: The defensive back begins facing you about 5 yards away. On your command, he begins his backpedal, and as soon as he gets 10 yards away, you lob the ball to his left or right. The defensive back reacts to the direction of the lob and makes the grab.

Coaching pointers: Make sure he uses proper form on his backpedal and that he doesn't get his feet tangled up when he's making a move on the ball.

Toss the ball just a yard or two away to begin with so the player gains confidence making catches; as he becomes more comfortable backpedaling and reacting to throws, you can make the drill more challenging by forcing him to lunge or dive to make catches.

Turn and React

This drill helps defensive backs react to the ball while their backs are turned when covering a receiver.

What you need: 1 defensive back. 1 coach. 1 ball.

How it works: The defensive back starts out next to you, and on your whistle, he begins running downfield with his back to you. This simulates those plays in a game when he's required to keep up with a receiver at full speed. While he's running, you yell "pass" and lob the ball at an angle to his left or right. He must look over his shoulder to spot the ball and make a play on it.

Coaching pointers: Make sure he continues running in full stride when the ball's in the air. Sometimes players slow down to turn around and look for the ball, which allows the receiver to gain an advantage.

Special Teams Drills

The play of your special teams has a direct impact on the effectiveness of your offense and defense. Strong kickoff and punt returns can set your offense up with prime field position, and conversely, good coverage on kickoffs and punts can pin the opponent deep in its own end of the field. The drills in this section target all sorts of skills that are needed for successful special teams play.

Surrender

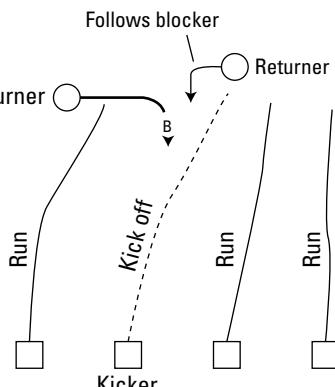
This drill works on both kick-returning and kick coverage skills.

What you need: 1 kicker, 3 players on the kickoff coverage team, 2 kick returners. 1 ball.

How it works: Use the following steps for this drill:

1. **The drill begins with a kicker and three players on the kickoff coverage team on one end of the field; two kick returners are at the other end of the field (see Figure 11-22).**
2. **The kicker kicks the ball up the field, and the three players on the kickoff coverage team run downfield.**
3. **One of the two kick returners catches the ball, and the other player provides blocking.**
4. **The returner with the ball follows his blocker and tries to make the tacklers (from the kickoff coverage team) miss as he moves down the field.**

Figure 11-22:
Kickoff
coverage
and
returning
are covered
in the
Surrender
drill.



Coaching pointers: You want the blocker on the kick return to take the first defender coming upfield to help create an opening for the return man. You also want the returner to get downfield as quickly as possible and not waste too much time running side to side, which allows more defenders to get up the field and get in on tackles.

As players gain confidence and skills in running and returning kicks, you can gradually add more players to the mix. You can also turn this drill into a fun contest between the kickoff coverage players and the returners. Reward points for how far they're able to return the ball. For example, anytime the coverage team tackles the players inside the 20-yard line, award them two points, and for every 10 yards past the 20-yard line that the returners get the ball, award them one point.

Escape

In order to have a successful punt return, the player returning the punt must be able to get by the first defender. This drill helps develop that skill.

What you need: 1 punt returner, 1 defender, 1 coach, 1 ball.

How it works: Position a punt returner at the 10-yard line and a defender facing him about 5 yards away. You stand around the 20-yard line and throw balls up in the air to simulate a punt. The returner catches the ball and then tries to maneuver past the defensive player.

Coaching pointers: The first rule for any punt returner is to catch the ball, so make sure the youngster watches the ball all the way into his hands. Players are often guilty of peeking to see where the defender is, which usually results in a bobbled or fumbled ball.

You can bump up the difficulty level for the returner by adding a second defender to the mix.

Putting It All Together: A Sample Practice Session

You can have a notebook crammed with all sorts of cool drills to run with your team, but if you don't have a specific plan in place when you arrive at the field, your practices are likely to dissolve into total chaos and leave you reaching for the antacid tablets.

Because you probably have the kids for only an hour or two each week, every minute of your practice is valuable. Planning what drills you want to use, and the order in which you want to use them, clears the way for a smoothly running practice that maximizes learning. See Table 11-1 for a sample 1-hour practice session using some of the drills covered in this chapter. (For more-general practice outlines, flip to Chapter 6.)

Table 11-1 A Productive Practice Filled with Fundamental Drills

Duration	Activity	Comments
10 min.	Warm-up	A simple light jog around the field will do it. Follow up with some basic stretches from earlier in this chapter.
15 min.	Find the Receiver drill	Split the field in half, and place the offensive unit at one end of the field. Your quarterbacks and receivers can get some work in with this drill.
	Head Up drill	Running backs can work on this drill on the offense's end of the field.
	Read and React drill	Challenge your linebackers with this drill at the defense's end of the field.
	Shuffle It Up drill	Have the defensive backs go through this drill at the defense's end of the field.
	Pursuit and Finish drill	Use the middle of the field so your offensive and defensive lines can go against one another in this drill.
10 min.	Ready, Rush, React drill	This drill gives offensive linemen the chance to hone their pass-blocking skills and gives defensive linemen the opportunity to work on their pass rushing. You can modify this drill by adding a receiver and defensive back.
	Angle Tackle drill	This drill gives your running backs practice fending off tackles and your linebackers practice making tackles. You can rotate your defensive backs over from the Ready, Rush, React drill to this area so they gain tackling experience, too (for those times when opposing running backs break free into the secondary).

(continued)

Table 11-1 (*continued*)

Duration	Activity	Comments
10 min.	Surrender and Escape drills	Special teams play often doesn't get as much attention as offense or defense, yet it's a significant part of the game. Use these drills to help develop those valuable punt and kick-off returns and coverages.
10 min.	Scrimmage	Scrimmaging provides the kids with a chance to put their skills to use in a setting that mirrors a game and allows you to see how they're progressing. You can turn this segment of your practice into a fun competition by placing the ball at the 10-yard line and see whether the offense can get the ball in the end zone or whether the defense can stop them.
5 min.	Cool-down	Because you always want to end practice on a high note, the cool-down is a good time to go over a trick play that you and the kids can work on at half speed. After running the play a few times, spend the final minutes having the kids stretch their larger muscles. During this stretching period, you can go over any details regarding the next practice or game. Finally, gather the team in a circle for a team cheer — something like "one . . . two . . . three . . . team!" works — and then send them on their way.



The drills that we present here can be tweaked or modified to fit your team's needs. For example, with the Ready, Rush, React drill, you can easily incorporate more players into the mix if you choose. You can add a receiver and defensive back so you have more than just blocking and rushing involved: Your quarterback can work on delivering passes to his receivers while facing defensive pressure.

Chapter 12

Coaching Football Offense 101

In This Chapter

- ▶ Moving the ball downfield
- ▶ Understanding different offenses

First downs, big pass plays, and touchdowns are the highlights of playing on offense. Helping your players become a solid offensive unit — one that's able to keep the scoreboard operator busy punching up points on game day — requires a sound understanding of the dos and don'ts of moving the ball down the field.

In this chapter, we examine how to help your team get the football to that coveted destination known as the end zone on a regular basis. We run down some of the available formations so you can choose ones that best suit your team. And we explain how to orchestrate successful no-huddle offenses and attacks on the defense in the red zone (the space within 20 yards of your opponent's end zone). This chapter also features plenty of information on pass patterns to rev up your team's passing game. (For info on more-advanced strategies for the offense, check out Chapter 15.)

Putting Offensive Skills to Use

One of the more fascinating aspects of coaching football is that when youngsters have a pretty good grasp of the basics of the game, you can begin introducing different formations, strategies, and plays.



While introducing new plays, you can increase your team's chances of success if you cater the play-calling to your team's strengths. For example, if your quarterback has a somewhat accurate arm and some of the kids are pretty good at catching the ball, then your unit will probably be better off if the play-calling is more pass-oriented. Conversely, if you have some kids who excel at the running back position and the offensive line is pretty good at blocking, the unit may find most of its success moving the ball in a run-dominant attack.

Here are some basic tips for picking up those valuable yards and coveted first downs:

✓ **It's a big field — so use it.** Successful offenses force defenses to cover the entire field. Rushing plays that go up the middle and to the outside, as well as passing plays to the sidelines and over the middle, give defenses lots to worry about. These plays also give your offense a better chance of reaching the end zone.

✓ **Vary your play-calling.** If you don't keep the defense guessing, the other team will know your next move before hitting the line of scrimmage. For example, if you love having your team run the football and you shun passing, your opponents may pick up on that tendency and begin crowding more players near the line of scrimmage. Consequently, you'll risk frustrating your unit if you continue to rely on the run.

✓ **Script plays.** Kids understandably get nervous on game day, and it often takes a couple *series*, or groups of plays, for everyone to get comfortable. You can speed up the process and get kids in their comfort zone quickly by scripting the first five or ten plays you'll be running that day.

Scripting plays is like a dress rehearsal; you simply list the plays in the order you'll run them on game day and then practice them in that order during the week so the kids know exactly what comes next during the game. When the kids know which plays they'll run first as they step on the field, their confidence soars and their nerves subside.

You can also script plays based on the number of yards needed for a first down. For example, whenever the team faces a third down and 15 yards or more to go, you players know which play to run, because they practiced a specific play for this situation during the week.

✓ **Protect the football.** Continually emphasize the importance of hanging on to the football at all times. Fumbles and interceptions squash an offense's effectiveness and often result in advantageous field position for the opposition. Turnovers also quickly shift the game's momentum to the other sideline.

✓ **Eliminate penalties.** Yes, penalties are as much a part of the game as blocking and tackling, and kids at all levels commit them. But if you see yellow flags in your sleep, that's probably a sign that your team is committing far too many of them. Take a closer look at your practice drills, and make sure you're not allowing holding or any other infractions to go on without offering corrections. If you don't fix poor technique during practice, you can't expect penalties to magically disappear during games. Penalties can be drive-killers for your offense.

✓ **Take some chances.** Let the kids enjoy themselves. Throw the ball deep downfield now and again, looking to hit the big play. Doing so stirs up some excitement with your players, and regardless of whether they complete

the pass, just attempting it lets the defense know that they have to be prepared for anything.

✓ **Try a little trickery:** Hey, it doesn't have to be Halloween for you to reach into your bag of tricks. Once in a while, call a trick play. The kids can have fun practicing the play during the week and look forward to trying it out on game day. Kids love a little razzle dazzle, and successful trick plays inject the entire team with a shot of adrenaline.



If you coach a beginning-level team, you and your players are better off if you start with the basics of the running game and then slowly work up to the passing game. Beginning players usually adapt more quickly to learning how to give and take handoffs. The passing game is a lot more difficult because players have to learn not only the proper mechanics of throwing and catching but also the timing between quarterbacks and receivers.

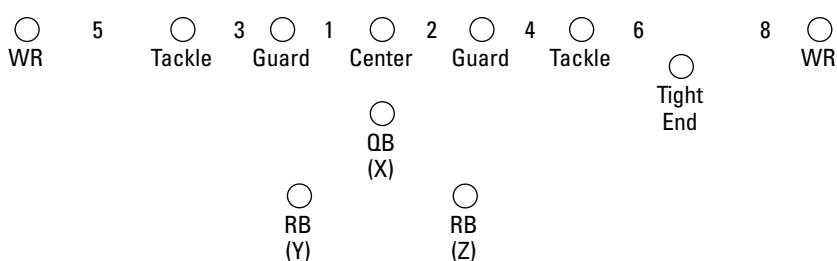
The younger your players are, the simpler your offense should be.

Developing your team's running game

When developing your running game, make sure you use plays that the offensive unit easily understands. One of the simplest ways to communicate running plays is to assign numbers to each gap between the offensive line (see Figure 12-1), as well as letters to the players in the backfield. For example, calling out play Y4 has the running back (Y) going through the number four hole, which is between the guard and tackle on the right-hand side. When designing or implementing plays, be sure to hit all the different holes, because you don't want to be predictable to the defense.

A couple of the most basic types of rushing plays are sweeps and off-tackle runs. *Sweeps* are plays designed for the running back to get outside by running between the offensive tackle (or tight end if he's lined up on that side) and the sideline. *Off-tackle plays* are inside running plays where the running back hits the line of scrimmage between the right and left tackles.

Figure 12-1:
Using a basic numbering system simplifies plays for the offensive unit.





Have one of your assistant coaches write down each play and how it worked. For example, if you ran a sweep to the right four times during the game and it never produced a gain of more than a yard, perhaps you should devote a little extra practice time on that play. You may want to have someone videotape your games so you can review them to see which areas you need to focus on during your practices. (At the younger age levels, never subject the kids to watching tape, because they need to be on the field playing, having fun, and learning through repetition. At the advanced levels, game tapes can sometimes be a useful tool to teach kids as they see skills they're performing both correctly and incorrectly.)

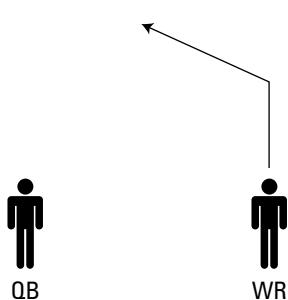
Putting the ball in the air

As your players develop, you can take a more aggressive approach and put the ball in the air more often. When developing aerial attacks, there are plenty of different pass patterns you can teach your youngsters. Some patterns are better suited to work against specific defenses or coverages than others. As players begin recognizing how defenses are set up and how defensive backs are defending them (you can jump to Chapter 15 for information on reading defenses), they can adjust their patterns accordingly and increase their chances of getting open. Following are some of the more common pass patterns.

Slant

The receiver runs straight down the field and cuts into the middle at a 45-degree angle to receive the pass (see Figure 12-2). On a *modified quick slant*, the receiver takes three steps upfield and then angles to the middle. This pattern works well against defensive backs who focus on keeping the receiver away from the sidelines. Receivers who are good at breaking free from contact at the line of scrimmage can take advantage of these types of patterns when the defensive back is playing in tight on them.

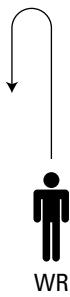
Figure 12-2:
Wide receivers cut at a 45-degree angle while executing a slant pattern.



Hook

The receiver runs straight downfield, usually between 10 to 15 yards, and then curls back a few steps (see Figure 12-3) to receive the pass. Defensive backs who tend to play several steps off the receiver are vulnerable to this type of play. This pattern also works well against zone defenses, in which defensive players are responsible for covering a specific area of the field rather than an offensive player.

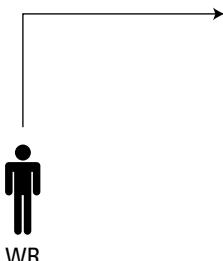
Figure 12-3:
Wide
receivers
can use the
hook pattern
against
defenders
playing
several
steps away.
QB



Out

The receiver runs straight downfield and then cuts at a 90-degree angle toward the sideline (see Figure 12-4). This pattern works well against defensive backs who guard against passes over the middle of the field. It also works well against defensive backs who don't react quickly to plays, because these players have a hard time staying with a receiver making sharp cuts.

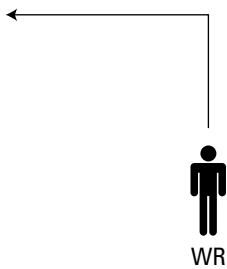
Figure 12-4:
Running an
out pattern
requires
making a
90-degree
cut toward
the sideline.
QB



In

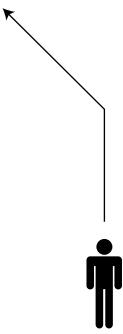
This pattern is the exact opposite of the out: The receiver runs straight down the field and then cuts sharply at a 90-degree angle across the center of the field (see Figure 12-5). This type of pattern can be effective against teams using a zone defense, because the receiver can find the weak spot. (For more on zone defense, see Chapter 13.)

Figure 12-5:
Receivers
cut toward
the center
of the
field at a
90-degree
angle for the
in pattern.

***Post***

This pattern is one of the longer pass patterns. The receiver starts straight down the field, and after going roughly 15 yards, he begins angling toward the center of the field (see Figure 12-6) to receive the pass. When a defense blitzes by, sending the free or strong safety forward, it opens up that area of the field for an effective post pattern. (In a *blitz*, the defense rushes extra players at the quarterback, leaving different areas of the field vulnerable.)

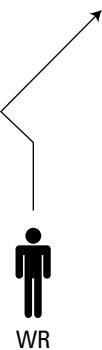
Figure 12-6:
The post
pattern is a
popular
route for
receivers
looking for
big gains
downfield.



Corner

This pattern resembles the post: The receiver runs downfield about 15 yards and begins angling toward the center of the field, but after just three or four steps, he cuts back toward the outside of the field (see Figure 12-7). When defenses have safeties who don't react to plays quickly, this type of pattern can exploit that weakness.

Figure 12-7:
A well-run corner pattern can really challenge the footwork of the defensive backs.



Up

The receiver runs straight up the field, cuts to the outside for two steps, and then sprints up the field (see Figure 12-8). A speedy receiver can use this pattern to get by a defensive back who's playing tight coverage. This pattern is another one that's effective against a blitzing team, because as soon as the receiver gets by the defensive back, the receiver is past the last line of defense, and an accurate pass from the quarterback can produce a big gain.

Figure 12-8:
Fast wide receivers can use the up pattern to their advantage.



Comeback

The receiver runs downfield about 15 yards, cuts to the outside, and angles back toward the line of scrimmage several steps to catch the pass (see Figure 12-9). This pass pattern is one of the more difficult ones to complete. It's most effective against defensive backs who are playing well away from the receiver so the receiver doesn't run past them to make a catch for a big gain.

Figure 12-9:
The
comeback
pattern
requires
angling
back toward
the line of
scrimmage
for the pass.
QB



No-huddle offense

Being able to run an effective no-huddle offense, also known as a two-minute drill and hurry-up offense, can be pretty valuable for a lot of reasons, most notably because it's the most powerful weapon for pulling out close games in the final minutes. The no-huddle offense is typically used by teams trailing in a game who can't afford to waste valuable time using a huddle after every play. Sometimes teams use this approach as part of their offensive strategy because it doesn't allow the defense much time to get into position or huddle to make its defensive-play call. Here are a couple pointers to keep in mind when your unit turns to the no-huddle offense:

✓ **Keep plays simple.** Because the game will move at a much quicker pace, the simpler you can keep the plays, the easier they'll be on your squad. That means going with plays that the kids are comfortable running and clearly communicating them so the youngsters don't waste crucial seconds trying to figure out what you want them to do.

During your practices, consider focusing on a handful of plays that the offense knows it'll use during a no-huddle situation. Make sure you have a little variety so you have some options based on what the opponent does. At the advanced levels, if you have a pretty experienced quarterback, you may want to give him the freedom to call some plays as the team lines up at the line of scrimmage.

✓ **Keep it speedy.** Avoid using slowly developing plays, such as reverses, that can eat up a lot of valuable clock time — unless, of course, you think you can use one for a big gain. (A *reverse* is a trick play in which a

player carries the ball in one direction behind the line of scrimmage and then gives it to a teammate going in the opposite direction to get the defense out of position. Jump to Chapter 18 for details on trick plays.)

- ✓ **Move the ball to the sidelines.** Passes to the outside that allow your wide receivers to get out of bounds and stop the clock are vital for running an effective no-huddle offense, particularly during those times when your team is out of timeouts.

Red zone offense

The good news when your offense enters the *red zone* — the area of the field from your opponent's 20-yard line to the end zone — is that your team is in prime position to score. The bad news is that the closer you get to the end zone, the playing area that your team has to work with shrinks as the number of players obviously stays the same. Here's some advice for when you're approaching the end zone:

- ✓ **Use quick-hitting plays.** The plays that you typically call when your team is at the opponent's 20-yard line are generally different than those you call from the 5-yard line. Because the playing area is condensed and crammed with defensive players, plays that strike quickly, like slants (see the previous "Putting the ball in the air" section), usually work best down here.
- ✓ **Protect the football.** After getting so close to scoring, turning the ball over in the red zone can be demoralizing. Reinforce the importance of running backs' keeping two hands on the ball, and when you talk to wide receivers, emphasize safely tucking the ball away after making a grab.

Don't go overboard talking about protecting the football, because some kids may worry too much about fumbling, limiting their effectiveness running with the ball.



Working the clock late in the game when your team has the lead

When your team has the lead in the closing minutes of a game, the offense's job is to protect that margin by maintaining possession of the ball and running the clock down the best it can. Here are a few key points to keep in mind when managing the clock:

- ✓ **Know the status of your opponent's timeouts.** In order to effectively call plays for your offense, you need to know the timeout situation across the field. If the opponent doesn't have any timeouts remaining, you can keep running the ball — and keep that game clock winding down — because they won't be able to stop it.

Conversely, if the other team has all three timeouts left, you have to decide whether to risk passing the ball to secure a first down or to run the ball to force them to use their timeouts.

- ✓ **Keep the ball in the field of play.** One of the keys to protecting a lead late in the game is not going out of bounds and stopping the clock. Anytime a defense can force the offensive player out of bounds, they don't have to waste a timeout.

Even if you've called a sweep (or other play to the outside), make sure your running back knows that he needs to cut back inside to stay on the field and keep the clock running. Or if he does cut to the outside, tell him to make sure he goes down before the defense has a chance to knock him out of bounds.

- ✓ **Make smart passes.** When you have the lead and are trying to run down the clock, defenses focus on stopping the run, so your quarterback may have opportunities to hit a big pass play.

If you choose to go the passing route, you want to stick to plays downfield — such as the corner, post, or up patterns (see the previous "Putting the ball in the air" section) — so that even if the other team intercepts the ball, the interception happens down near their goal line. Pass patterns like the hook or comeback are much riskier, because if a defender intercepts the football, he's already moving in the right direction and your players have less time to react and make a tackle.

- ✓ **Look at coverages.** Base your pass patterns on what types of coverages the defense has been playing. If the defensive backs are playing well back from the line of scrimmage, you're better off using a lot of short- and medium-length passes; and if the defense is being aggressive and plays up close at the line of scrimmage, resort to longer passes, because the defense is most vulnerable farther downfield.

Different Types of Offenses You Can Run

When choosing the type of offense you want to use, consider a number of factors, most notably the skill and experience level of your players. Choosing a complicated formation for an inexperienced team is a recipe for problems — and lots of frustration among the players. So take your time in getting a handle on your team and figuring out what best suits your players.

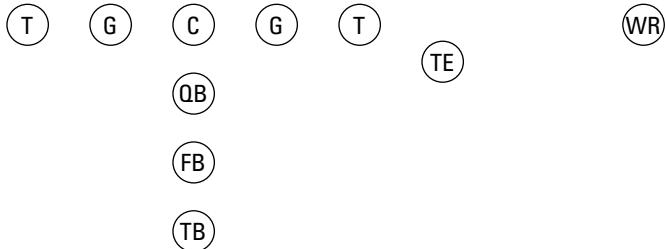
As you may recall from Chapter 3, a basic offense consists of an offensive line (center, two guards, and two tackles), two wide receivers, a tight end, two running backs, and a quarterback. The following is a description of some of the common offensive formation variations you can teach your squad.

I-formation

This is a run-oriented formation (see Figure 12-10) that relies on a lot of lead-blocking from the fullback and strong running from the tailback (halfback). The *lead blocker* is the back who paves the way, and the ball carrier follows behind him. Two wide receivers are split wide to the left and right, and the tight end always lines up on the right side of the ball. Besides running rushing plays out of this formation, you can keep the tight end on the line of scrimmage to provide extra blocking support while the quarterback throws a medium-length or deep pass to a wide receiver.

Figure 12-10: (WR)

The tailback (halfback) gets the bulk of the carries in the I-formation.

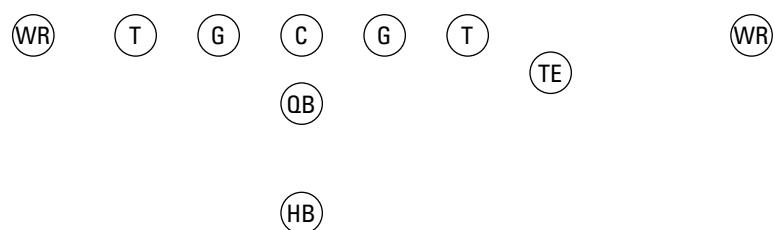


Pro set formation

If you're an NFL fan, you've seen this setup often. This formation (see Figure 12-11) features one halfback in the backfield. Because you have only one running back, you can add a wide receiver or another tight end. It's a popular formation because you can run just about anything from it. You can hand off to the halfback up the middle, pitch the ball to him on a sweep, or incorporate all sorts of passes, because you have an additional receiver.

Figure 12-11: (WR)

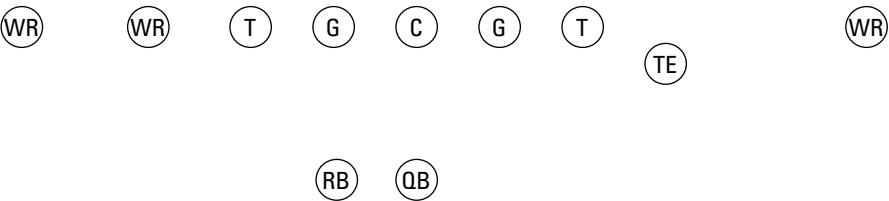
The pro set formation allows for a lot of versatility with play-calling.



Shotgun

Because the quarterback is positioned 5 yards behind the center in the shotgun formation (see Figure 12-12), he's able to survey the defense more effectively than if he were under the center. If a blitz is coming, he has a little extra time to read the defense and deliver a pass. This formation is usually used in obvious passing downs or when the offensive unit is struggling to get off passes because of a heavy rush from the defense. The shotgun formation can be used with any personnel: You can use four wide receivers and no running backs, two running backs and two receivers, or any other combination.

Figure 12-12:
The shotgun formation gives the quarterback more time to react to the defense.

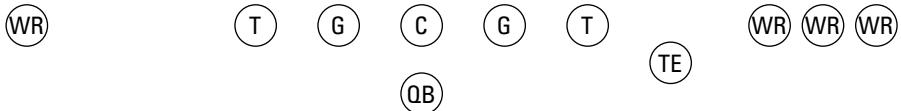


Trips formation

The trips formation (see Figure 12-13) features three wide receivers lined up together on one side of the field. The three receivers can run any number of pass patterns from this formation. There's usually a tight end or fourth receiver on the other side of the ball on the line of scrimmage. Because of the extra receivers in the game, there usually aren't any running backs.

Coaches often turn to this formation at the end of a half or game when there's time for only one or two plays. Late in games, when time is running out and the team needs a quick touchdown, the receivers often line up in this formation and the quarterback throws a Hail Mary pass, hoping for a catch or a lucky deflection that results in a touchdown. Trips is also used during the game to pose different types of coverage problems for opposing defenses, who have to contend with the three grouped receivers.

Figure 12-13:
Three wide
receivers
line up
bunched
together in
the trips
formation.

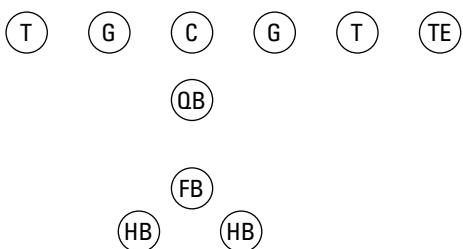


Wishbone formation

This formation (see Figure 12-14) is all about the run. The wishbone requires three running backs. With the additional players in the backfield, you can go with two wide receivers and no tight ends or one wide receiver and one tight end.

The more versatile these backs are in their running, blocking, and catching, the more potent this formation will be. Thanks to the balanced backfield, the team can run left, right, or up the middle and can use a lot of fake handoffs to keep the defense off-balance. The wishbone's a great formation for running the *option*, which involves the having the quarterback take the snap and run along the line of scrimmage: If there's an opening for him to run through, he keeps the ball; otherwise, he pitches the ball to one of the running backs. This formation also works well for setting up screen passes and quick passes to the tight end, because the defense has to focus a lot of attention on stopping the run. (A *screen pass* is a short pass thrown behind the line of scrimmage to a running back. The quarterback allows the defense to rush in and get close, and then he delivers the pass.)

Figure 12-14:
The
wishbone
formation
features
three
running
backs.



Chapter 13

Coaching Football Defense 101

In This Chapter

- ▶ Dissecting defense
- ▶ Determining formations
- ▶ Defending the last 20 yards
- ▶ Shutting down the no-huddle offense

Sure, to a lot of kids starting out in football, scoring touchdowns may be more appealing than making tackles. But just like discovering that some vegetables actually taste pretty good, some kids find that making defensive stands on key third-down plays and preventing teams from putting points on the scoreboard are more fun and satisfying than they ever imagined.

In order for the youngsters on your team to excel on the defensive side of the ball, they need a good handle on the fundamentals of tackling, fending off blocks, and covering receivers — just to name a few areas — and to be able to use those proper techniques during games. Players also need to be lined up in the right spots to make plays, and that's where the art of coaching defense comes in. If you do your part and set the kids up in the appropriate formations (and your players respond), you have the makings of a defensive unit that can create all sorts of problems for opposing offenses — and be lots of fun.

When selecting defensive formations, you have plenty of options. Some are designed to stop running attacks, some zero in on passing, and some target a little of both. We, excuse the pun, tackle all the different defensive formations available in this chapter. We also get into some basic defensive philosophies regarding defending against the no-huddle offense and protecting your goal line when the opponent advances inside the 20-yard line. (When your defense has mastered the plays in this chapter, check out Chapter 16 for more-advanced defensive strategies.)

Getting Defensive

Playing defense is an integral part of football. During games, your team spends roughly half its time trying to stop the opposing team from moving the ball

downfield and scoring. So the more you're able to teach your players about the philosophies and techniques involved in playing on this side of the ball, the more they can enjoy the game.

Sure, playing defense may not be as glamorous as lining up on offense and celebrating touchdowns, but through your enthusiasm — and emphasis on the importance of defense to the team's overall success — your players may savor their ability to disrupt an opponent's offense, create chaos with its plays, and get the ball back. The mark of a well-coached team is one that does more than put points on the scoreboard; it also makes moving the ball difficult for the opponent, contesting every yard.

Basic defensive styles

There are several defensive styles to choose from, and even more ways to implement them. You can go with the containment defense, which is a fairly conservative approach, or you can opt for the more aggressive techniques of either the pressure or attacking defense. Read on for more:

- ✓ **Containment defense:** This method focuses on simply holding the offense back. That means keeping all your players in front of the opposition and not giving up big plays. This style works extremely well when giving up some yards and first downs wouldn't be too costly, such as in long-yardage situations or at the end of the first half when your team is protecting a lead.
- ✓ **Pressure defense:** This approach is the exact opposite of the containment defense. It focuses on getting the opposing team out of sync and forcing costly mistakes through constant harassment. Although the rewards of this approach are great — think turnovers and stalled drives — the risks, in terms of surrendering big gains and quick touchdowns, are equally great. Playing this style relies on lots of blitzing and forcing the quarterback to make quick decisions. If you're coaching a skilled or experienced team (particularly experienced in the secondary, because the defensive backs will often have to defend large areas of the field on their own as most of their teammates attack the line of scrimmage), this style may suit you well.
- ✓ **Attacking defense:** This style relies on players' reading how the offense is set up and reacting to it. The obvious advantage is that players who are successful at reading the setup can anticipate the play and have a head-start on stopping it. Reading plays at the line of scrimmage is an advanced approach that we discuss in greater detail in Chapter 16.

If you're coaching young and inexperienced kids, first introduce them to the containment defense to give them a sense of the fundamentals of good team defense. When they have a pretty good grasp of containment, you can begin working on more-aggressive styles of play that are better suited to certain

game situations. Older and advanced kids should be familiar with all these approaches, so you can interchange them throughout the game based on the situation.

Besides choosing what style best fits your team, you also have to determine whether to go with a man-to-man or zone defense to defend passing plays. *Man-to-man* means just what it implies: A defensive player is responsible for covering a specific offensive player, wherever he goes on the field. It means that a cornerback covers a certain wide receiver, a linebacker covers a specific fullback if he leaves the backfield to go on a pass pattern, and so forth. This approach is generally the best for beginning players, because the concept is pretty straightforward: Shadow the player.

Zone defense is a more-complex scheme that you should save for older kids. Instead of covering a specific offensive player, the defenders are responsible for defending a specific area of the field. This technique is more challenging to teach, simply because kids have a natural tendency to run to a player rather than a spot on the field. Being well-versed in both these techniques — and having the comfort level and confidence to use them at different junctures throughout games — keeps offenses guessing as they call plays in the huddle.

General advice to follow

The following are some basic tips to keep in mind when playing any style of defense:

- ✓ **Keep players involved.** Challenge the kids to make plays, and then give them plenty of opportunities to do so. For example, if you predominately use a 4-3 defense (discussed later in this chapter) that has your safeties play well behind the line of scrimmage to protect against big pass plays, the downtime can lull these players into letting their guard down. To keep the players alert, pick out junctures in the game when you can send the safeties in on blitzes. Doing so keeps them focused and gives them chances to make momentum-changing plays and, of course, make big tackles that generate applause from Mom and Dad.
- ✓ **Pursue all over the field.** Instill in your players the mindset to pursue the play all over the field until the whistle blows. If your players continually hustle to the ball, regardless of their positions, chances are good that your defense will perform consistently well all season long. Help players forge these habits during your practices so the skills carry over when your players step on the field on game day.
- ✓ **Different downs and yardages call for different formations.** For instance, the basic 4-3, which consists of four linemen, three linebackers, and four defensive backs, is a good formation on first down, thanks to its versatility in dealing with both running and passing plays. But if

the opponent has a fourth down and inches to go, you're better off having more players crowded at the line of scrimmage, because the odds are in favor of a running play. You'd want something like a 6-2 or 7-2 formation, which we cover later in this chapter.

- ✓ **Watch the clock.** How much time remains in the game also dictates the defensive coverages you choose. For example, if your team is leading by a couple touchdowns and the fourth quarter is half over, you can probably expect the opposing team to begin throwing more, which means you'd be wise to use formations that emphasize defending the pass. If a lot of time is left in the game, the offense won't feel as much pressure to score quickly with a big pass play and will be more likely to stick to its current game plan.
- ✓ **Play percentages.** On second or third down and with a lot of ground to cover, chances are pretty good that the opposing team will attempt a pass. So go with those odds and use formations that are better suited to defend the pass. Sure, the offense may try to surprise you with a running play, but more often than not, your players will still react quickly enough to make tackles before the other team gains enough yards needed to secure a first down.
- ✓ **Don't overcommit.** If the offense is on its third or fourth down and has a yard or so to go, you want your defense to crowd the line of scrimmage to stuff what's usually a running play or quarterback sneak. But be careful not to overcommit: If too many players hover at the line of scrimmage, your opponent can exploit that with a pass that can rack up big yards.
- ✓ **Match up with the offense.** In terms of the number of players on each side of the ball, your players should roughly mirror the offensive setup. For example, if the offense has five players to its right of center (a guard, tackle, tight end, and two wide receivers) and you have only three players on your left facing them, that's an open invitation for the opposition to run in that direction and probably pick up a big chunk of yards — all because you were outnumbered and gave them a huge advantage before they even snapped the ball.
- ✓ **Eliminate penalties.** Committing penalties that allow the offense to keep drives alive are as painful as a call from the IRS at tax time. The result — an extra 5 or 15 yards and a new set of downs — demoralizes your squad, which now has to regroup and start all over again on trying to force a punt. Many penalties are avoidable, and you can trim down how many your team commits during a game through sound practice techniques.
- ✓ **Make adjustments to counteract offensive plays.** For instance, if you're using a 3-4 defense and most of the opposing team's yards come on running plays up the middle, try a formation like the 5-2, which adds a nose tackle. (The *nose tackle* is a defensive lineman who lines up across from the center.) Teach your team a handful of different formations so that as the game dictates, you can employ other strategies.
- ✓ **Don't go formation crazy.** Naturally, you want to teach your players as much about the game as possible. Unfortunately, you probably won't

have as much time as you'd like, so pick and choose formations carefully. If you're coaching a relatively inexperienced team, you and your players will be better off if you focus on one formation at first — like the basic 4-3 — and then slowly introduce others. At the more advanced levels, your players will perform better if you concentrate on running a handful of defenses well rather than many defenses only so-so.

- ✓ **Be aggressive.** If your team fails to match the determination of the offense, your players will probably get pushed all over the field and surrender a pile of points. The tone for aggressiveness is set at the line of scrimmage. If the defensive line allows the opponent to control that area, the defense is at an immediate disadvantage. Conversely, the defense's dominating the line of scrimmage really makes play more difficult for the offense. A good defensive philosophy is that the closer the opponent gets to your end zone, the more aggressive your defense should become.

Defensive Formations You Can Run

When choosing which defensive formations to teach your team, you have a smorgasbord of options. Some formations better prepare your defense for certain types of plays. For instance, some formations are designed to keep a rushing attack under wraps, and some are meant to cause havoc with a team's passing. Furthermore, certain formations depend more heavily on specific skills, such as the linebackers' ability to tackle or strong play along the defensive line. Table 13-1 provides a quick overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the various formations to help you decide quickly which you want to use. For details on what each formation entails, read on.

Table 13-1 Defensive Formation Strengths and Weaknesses

Formation	Strengths	Weaknesses
4-3	Versatile enough to hold up against a variety of offensive sets	Difficult to stop the run against teams with big, strong offensive lines
3-4	With four linebackers patrolling the middle of the field, has more speed and quickness	Not effective in short-yardage situations, in which teams usually run the football
4-4	Ideal for stopping the run and limiting an opponent's effectiveness running outside with sweeps	Not a good option to use against pass-oriented teams or in long-yardage situations

(continued)

Table 13-1 (continued)

Formation	Strengths	Weaknesses
5-2	Great to use in short-yardage situations to stop the run	Not effective against teams that use three or four wide receivers
5-3	Good choice against running teams, especially if your middle linebacker is a solid tackler	Doesn't work well against passing teams
6-2	Effective in short-yardage situations when the opponent is likely to run the football	Vulnerable against deep passes, because there's only one safety
5-4	Good against the run and defending short- and medium-length passes	Not effective when defending an experienced quarterback who has good wide receivers
6-3	Suitable for stopping both inside and outside running plays	Can be exploited with long passes, because there are only two defensive backs
7-2	Effective in short-yardage and goal-line situations	Susceptible against the pass
3-3	Versatile in defending against option-running teams and passing teams	Lets power running teams flourish



Be sure to mix up the defensive formations you use throughout the game to force the offensive unit out of its comfort zone. If your opponents don't know what type of defensive formation they'll see when they approach the line of scrimmage, the play they just called in the huddle probably won't go quite as smoothly. After all, their blocking schemes will be altered and the quarterback will face a formation he may not have expected. With young players, stick to teaching a basic formation and the different types of plays you can use within it. As players become more skilled and advanced, you can introduce other formations.



Most formations are described by a pair of numbers, like 4-3 or 5-2. The first digit refers to the number of linemen, and the second indicates the number of linebackers. The number of defensive backs typically isn't mentioned. Remember, these formations pertain to 11-on-11 football, so all the remaining players are in the secondary.

4-3

This defense is the most widely used formation in the professional and collegiate ranks, and it can work well for you, too. This formation (see Figure 13-1) features four players on the defensive line (two ends and two tackles), three linebackers (left, middle, and right), and four defensive backs (two cornerbacks and two safeties). It's the choice of many coaches because it holds up well against a wide variety of offensive sets. Because of its flexibility, offenses generally have difficulty targeting a specific area to attack or a defensive player to isolate. This formation stacks up pretty well against running plays because so many players line up near the line of scrimmage. The 4-3 is also a good formation to use when you want to pressure the quarterback with safety and cornerback blitzes.

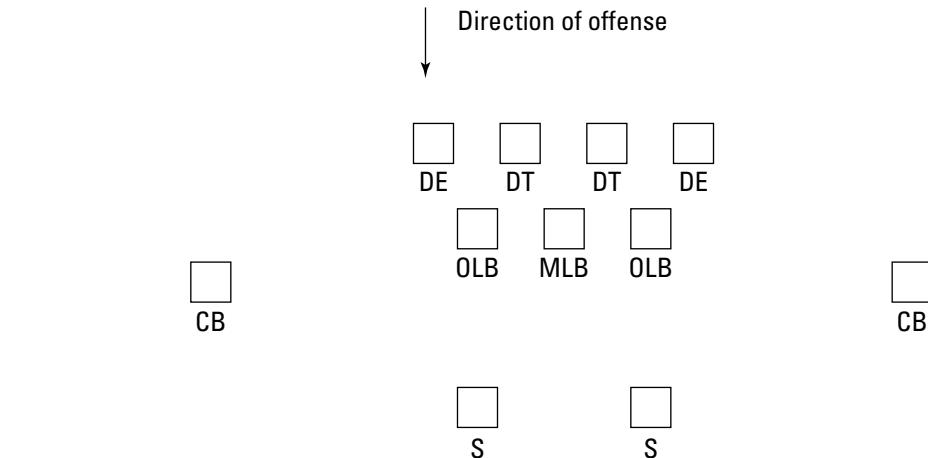


Figure 13-1: DE—Defensive end
The 4-3 defense provides a lot of flexibility for coaches.
DT—Defensive tackle
MLB—Middle linebacker
OLB—Outside linebacker
CB—Cornerback
S—Safety
DL—Defensive lineman
NT—Nose tackle
DB—Defensive back

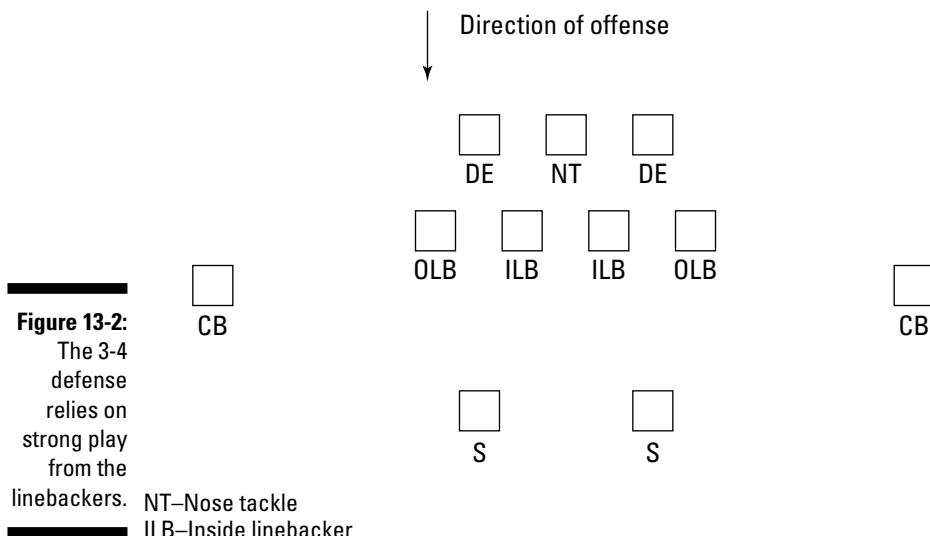
If you have linebackers on your team who are strong tacklers, the 4-3 formation could be perfect for you. The defensive line clogs up the holes on rushing plays, opening the way for your linebackers to move forward and fill any holes that the offensive line creates for the running back. The strong side

linebacker (the one lined up on the side of the opposing team's tight end) covers the tight end on pass patterns. He also drops back into pass coverage and covers any receiver who steps into his zone of responsibility, or he blitzes the quarterback. The secondary (defensive backs) focuses on covering the wide receivers, though they also provide run support, particularly on plays to the outside, and step up to cover tight ends and running backs circling out of the backfield.

One of the weaknesses of the 4-3 defense is that if it's going up against an opponent with a dominating offensive line, the defense can have quite a challenge stopping the run. If the opponent controls the line of scrimmage, by the time the linebackers can make a tackle, the running back is through the hole and has a 4- or 5-yard gain.

3-4

This formation (see Figure 13-2) is just the opposite of the 4-3, because it has three linemen and four linebackers. In the middle of the defensive line, you find the nose tackle, flanked by defensive ends or tackles (whichever the coach opts to put there). Behind the defensive line are four linebackers: right and left inside linebackers, along with two outside. There are also two cornerbacks and two safeties.



The 3-4 formation is ideal when you play against teams that like to hold onto the ball and methodically move it downfield with a mixture of short passing

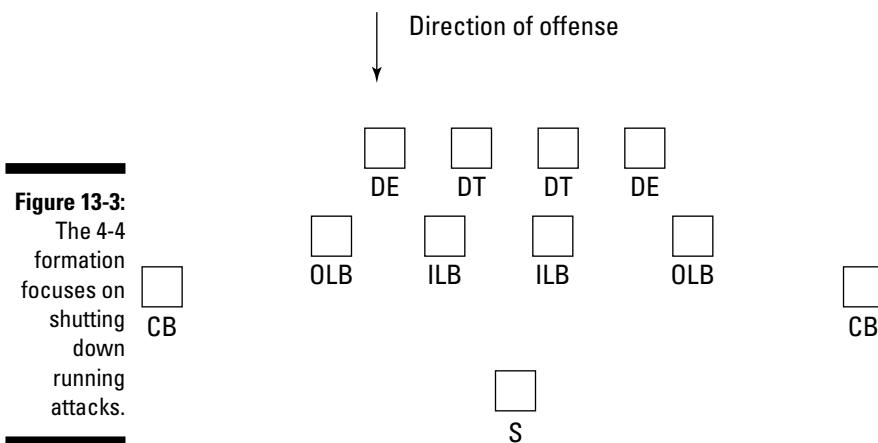
and running plays. Choosing this formation over the 4-3 usually enhances the overall speed of the defensive unit, because you're basically trading a lineman for a linebacker, and linebackers tend to be quicker. This substitution also translates into improved pass coverage, because four linebackers work the middle of the field with support from the secondary.

Because there are just three linemen, offensive linemen must adjust to the different blocking assignments. This situation often creates different blitzing lanes for your linebackers or safeties. If, on the snap of the ball, your nose tackle gets a good push forward that forces two offensive linemen to deal with him, a linebacker or defensive back can shoot through the spot vacated by the offensive linemen who's helping block the nose tackle. Or using the speed of one of your outside linebackers, you can take advantage of a slower-footed offensive lineman and beat him around the corner.

As you can probably see, this formation isn't the best to use against a strong running team or against a team facing an obvious rushing down in a short yardage situation. Because you're giving up size along the line of scrimmage, an offensive unit with a good running game, especially inside, can exploit that.

4-4

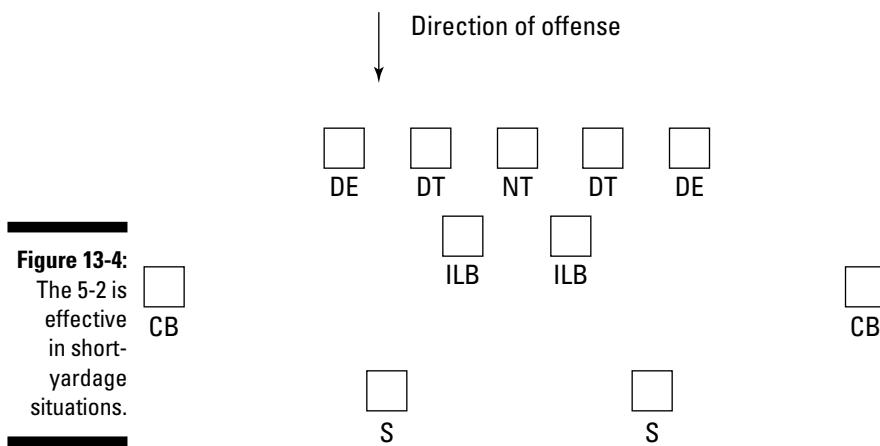
This formation (see Figure 13-3) is the cousin of the 4-3 and 5-2 alignments. It's designed to prevent opposing teams from running outside with speedy and hard-to-bring-down running backs, as well as to shut down short, ball-control passing attacks. The formation uses four linemen — two tackles and two ends — as well as a pair of outside linebackers (left and right) and two inside linebackers. With so many defenders near the line of scrimmage, you have a treasure chest of options. You can run all sorts of stunts with your linemen moving left and right and your linebackers going in the opposite direction.



With just two cornerbacks and a safety, you guessed it: You'd rather not use this formation against a passing team or during the game when your opponent faces third down and a lot of yards to go. You're better off relying on this formation on the first or second down or against teams who stick to basic offensive sets that employ the standard two wide receivers and one tight end.

5-2

If you spend a lot of time on the couch on Saturday afternoons, you may see this defense used by some college coaches. As you can probably guess, with five players along the defensive line (see Figure 13-4), it's used primarily to stop the run on obvious short-yardage plays. Along the defensive line is a nose tackle sandwiched between two tackles, with two defensive ends on the outside. Two linebackers line up behind, and two cornerbacks and two safeties fill up the secondary.



The linemen's first responsibility in this alignment is filling a specific gap to disrupt and stop the running back's path. The defensive ends are responsible for containment, meaning they can't allow running backs to get outside of them, which would create the potential for big gains because only two linebackers form the next line of defense. Instead, even if the defensive ends can't make the tackle, they have to force the running back to cut inside, where all the defensive support awaits. The top priority of the two linebackers is to make tackles. With five defensive linemen occupying the opposing team's blockers, the linebackers are usually left free to make plays.

If you plan to use the 5-2 and your linebackers aren't your team's leading tacklers, you probably want to spend more time in practice on building their tackling skills. The 5-2 includes two cornerbacks and two safeties, but you don't want to use this formation in an obvious passing situation or if the

opposing team lines up three or four receivers. Having your linebackers cover wide receivers benefits the offense and may result in a pile of yards, first downs, and touchdowns. Stick to this formation against teams that love running the ball and seem allergic to putting it in the air.

5-3

This setup is another run-stopping defensive formation (see Figure 13-5). It resembles the 5-2 because it uses the same alignment along the defensive line with the nose tackles, two tackles, and two ends. The difference is that it features a middle linebacker, along with two outside linebackers.

A solid tackling middle linebacker can flourish in this type of system, because when the rest of the players properly execute their responsibilities, the bulk of the plays are funneled directly to him.

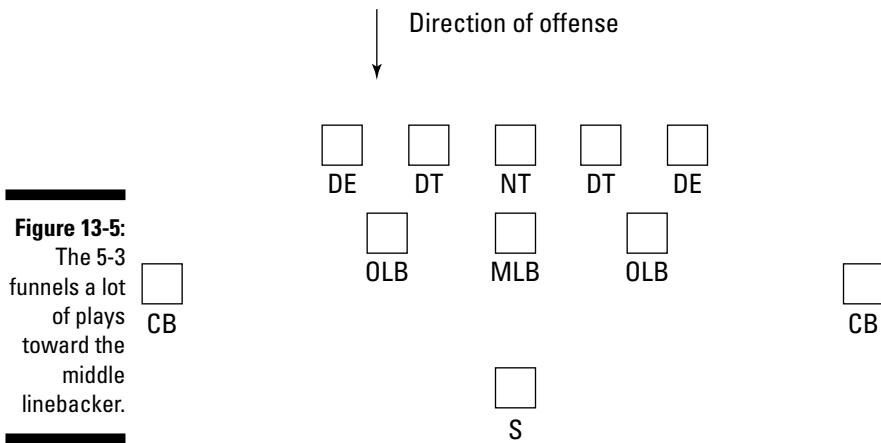


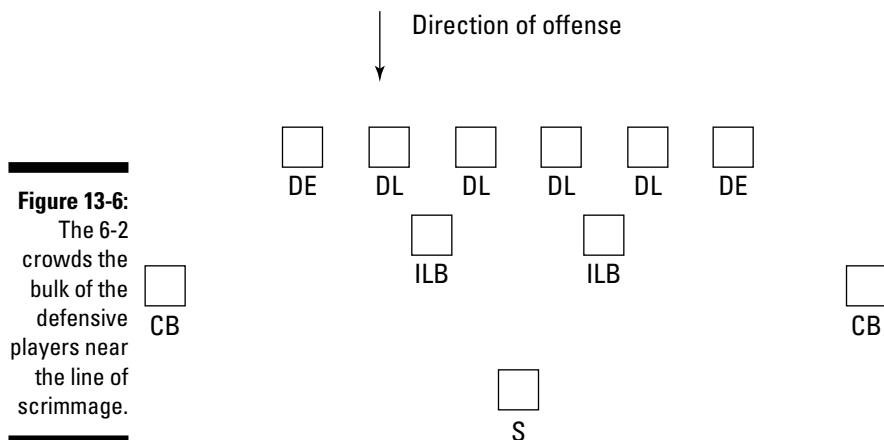
Figure 13-5:
The 5-3
funnels a lot
of plays
toward the
middle
linebacker.

The defensive ends have containment responsibilities on both the quarterback and running backs; meanwhile, the tackles plug the gaps and occupy the offensive linemen to keep them off the linebackers, which frees up the linebackers to make plays. With two cornerbacks and a safety, this type of defensive approach doesn't work well on passing plays in which the opponent uses sets of three and four wide receivers.

6-2

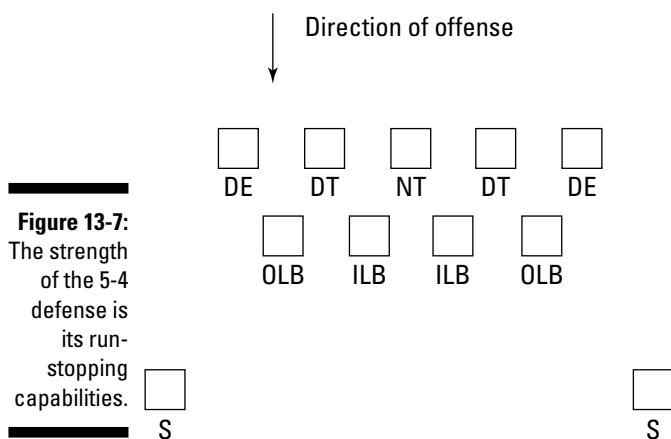
This is another formation (see Figure 13-6) that's used to clamp down on an opponent during a short-yardage situation. This formation features six linemen, two linebackers, two cornerbacks, and a safety. The linemen are positioned in

the gaps opposite the offensive linemen, while the linebackers are in tight behind them. The linebackers' top priority is to play — and stop — the run, while the secondary (cornerbacks and safeties) focuses on pass coverage.



5-4

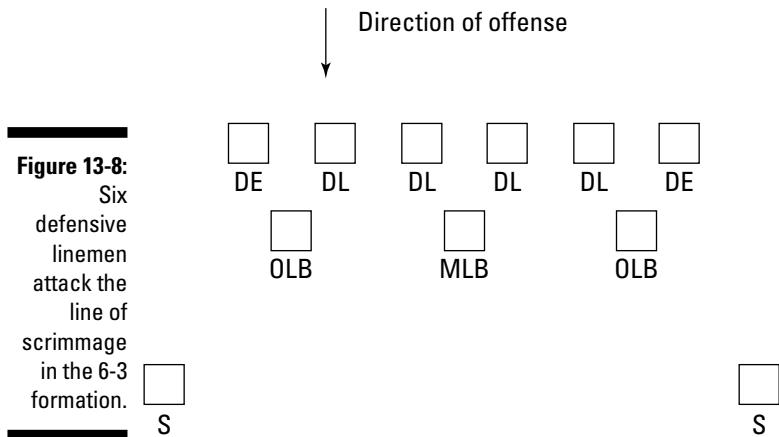
This formation (see Figure 13-7) is strong against the run and somewhat weak against the pass. With a nose tackle, two tackles, and two ends along the line, plus four linebackers stretched across the field, this setup poses lots of headaches for running teams.



Because of the large number of players near the line of scrimmage, this alignment also presents all sorts of problems for quarterbacks looking to throw short- to medium-length passes or dump the ball to running backs over the middle. If the linemen are unable to generate strong pass rushes, a quarterback with some time to look for receivers can exploit this formation, because only two safeties are typically left to provide man-to-man coverage.

6-3

This defense is another run-stopping formation that provides some unique challenges for the opposition. With six defensive linemen stretched across the line of scrimmage, this formation can cause a lot of problems for offensive linemen in their blocking responsibilities. With the defensive ends on the far outside of the offense's tackle and tight end (see Figure 13-8), running plays to the sideline generally don't appeal to the offense because of the difficulty creating any type of running space. Running plays in the middle of the field are just as difficult, with three linebackers lurking past the line of scrimmage.



The biggest chink in the 6-3's armor is in defending long passes. With just two safeties as the last line of defense, this formation is vulnerable to big passing plays.

7-2

If you're looking for another short yardage defense, the 7-2 is for you (see Figure 13-9). With a nose tackle in the center of the defensive line, along with three linemen on each side of him, this formation can create a pretty imposing wall of defenders against running plays and can be overwhelming when it comes to pass rushing. With the two linebackers anchoring the middle of the formation, it's strong up the middle and limits what types of plays opponents can run in that area of the field.

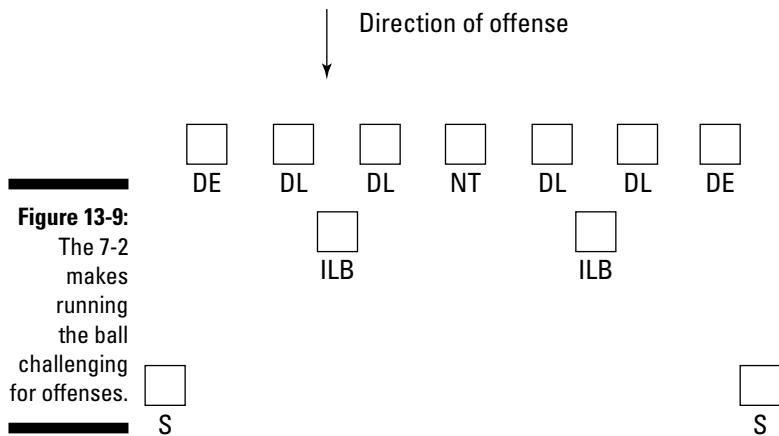
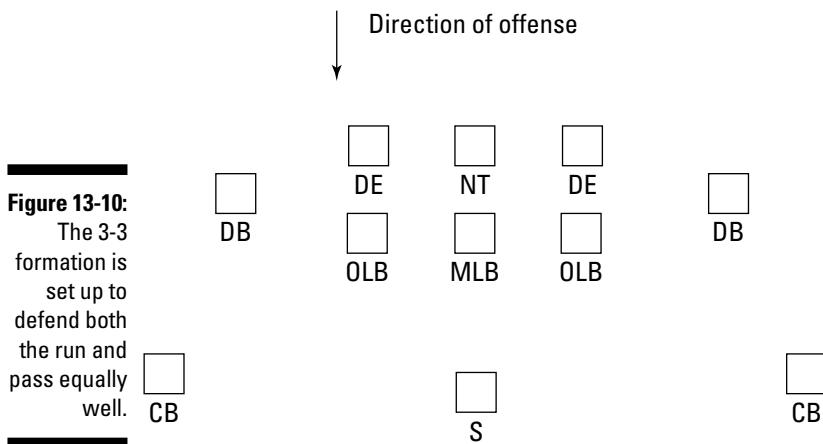


Figure 13-9:
The 7-2
makes
running
the ball
challenging
for offenses.

Like the 6-3 formation, the glaring weakness of the 7-2 is having only two defensive backs, which invites the occasional big passing play. Also, running backs who are able to break a tackle at the line of scrimmage can tear off big runs against this formation, because as soon as they get by the line of scrimmage, they don't have nearly as many defenders to deal with as normal.

3-3

The 3-3 formation (see Figure 13-10) provides your unit with tremendous flexibility defending both the run and pass, though it's not very good against power running teams. The formation, which features three defensive linemen and three linebackers, along with five defensive backs, works well in a number of situations. Having five defensive backs provides you with the luxury of a number of different options. The defensive backs can creep in close to the line of scrimmage to blitz, or they can simply fake the blitz. You can move the defensive backs all over the field, and if you have an experienced squad, your players can really disrupt the opponent's offense.

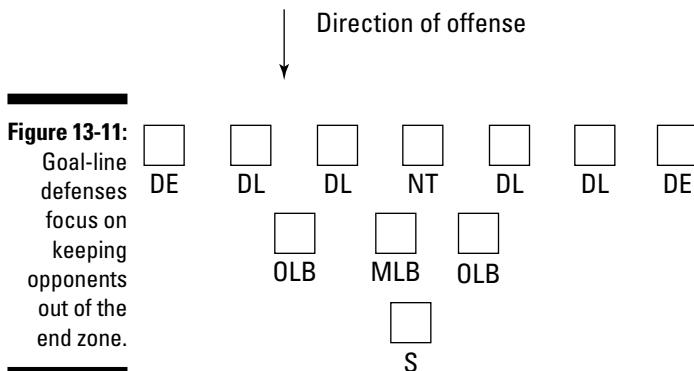


This setup is also ideal for going against teams who like running a no-huddle offense or that employ three and four wide receiver formations (see Chapter 12). Because of its versatility, it often fares pretty well against option-running teams, as well as spread offenses. Also, with five defensive backs, you have the option of playing man-to-man or zone coverage with this formation.

Goal-line defense

Let's face it: Having to call on your goal-line defense is about as pleasant as having a root canal. Okay, it isn't quite that bleak, but it's obviously not the best of situations, because it means the opponent is threatening to score a touchdown. But the situation isn't hopeless. Sure, the opponent has to move the ball only a short distance, but the challenge for your team can sometimes work in your favor. Keeping the opponent out of the end zone and forcing them to attempt a field goal can be a big momentum changer for your team. Forcing a turnover or shutting them down on fourth-and-goal can energize the entire team.

A *goal-line defense* (see Figure 13-11) is designed to stop the run. The linebackers position themselves in tight behind the defensive line, and the secondary (cornerbacks and safeties) creeps up tight as well. By positioning everyone in close, the defense's goal is to win the battle at the line of scrimmage, not allow any penetration by the offensive line, and reduce the chances that the running back can find a gap to power through into the end zone. If the opponent opts to pass down here, any safeties are responsible for coverage.



Nickel defense

The nickel defense is appropriately named because it uses five defensive backs (cornerbacks and safeties), and it's designed to protect against the pass. Coaches usually employ this alignment on obvious passing downs or late in games when they have the lead, time is running out, and the opponent needs to pass on virtually every down. For more in-depth information on this alignment, jump to Chapter 16.

Dime defense

Don't worry — this is the last reference to loose change in this chapter. A dime defensive package simply means that you use six defensive backs. This formation is often your best bet against pass-happy teams who rarely run the ball, as well as when you have your opponent in long passing downs. You can also use this formation to provide extra security against getting beat deep, and to double cover the opponent's top receiver. Again, we provide more comprehensive coverage of this alignment in Chapter 16.

Playing Strong Red Zone Defense

Anytime an offense reaches your 20-yard line, your opponent's considered to be in the *red zone*. How successful your defense is in this area of the field is often one of the largest determining factors in whether you win the game.

The key to playing defense in the red zone is teaching your players to understand that as the field of play shrinks, the options available to the offense

begin shriveling up as well. For example, safeties no longer have to worry about defending a large amount of the field behind them or having the receiver outrun them for a big gain: Receivers can't go any farther than the back of the end zone. The short field also dictates that a lot of the offense's plays will be quick-hitting pass plays in which the quarterback takes an abbreviated drop and gets rid of the ball quickly.

Because plays are run in tighter quarters, the defensive emphasis shifts to more-aggressive play. Your defensive backs can no longer give receivers a cushion (playing several yards back from the line of scrimmage.) Defenders need to take their stance directly in front of the receivers and make solid contact with them within the legal 5-yard range as soon as the ball is snapped; defenders need to move immediately to try to bump the offensive players off their pattern and disrupt the short-timing passes.



A good way to help your defense learn to be more aggressive in this area of the field is to set up the offense at the 20-yard line and run plays against the defense. If the offense gets a first down, award it a point; if the defense stops them from gaining 10 yards after four plays, it receives two points. Touchdowns are still worth six points, because you certainly don't want your defense surrendering those! This drill focuses the defense on playing tight coverage and reinforces how valuable every yard is when a team is closing in on the end zone.

Defending the No-Huddle Offense

As we mention in Chapter 12, opponents turn to the two-minute drill or *no-huddle offense* for a variety of reasons. The no-huddle offense refers to teams that don't take any time using a huddle between plays. As soon as a play ends, the unit rushes back to the line of scrimmage to run another. Teams often use it late in the half when time's running out and they need to get in some plays to take advantage of their field position. It's also used in the closing minutes of games when teams are trailing and desperately need to score. And just to make things really difficult on you and your players, offenses sometimes use it as a surprise right in the middle of the game to try to catch your defensive unit off guard.

Two basic approaches

The two basic methods for defending the no-huddle offense are to attack it or fade back into a bend-but-don't-break style, also known as the *prevent*. Take a closer look at the two:

- ✓ **Attack:** This style favors not allowing the quarterback to stand in the pocket searching out open receivers. It relies on putting lots of pressure on the quarterback with a strong rush at the line of scrimmage and blitzes with the linebackers and safeties. The risk with this approach is that cornerbacks are often left to defend wide receivers with no support from the safeties, giving the offense opportunities to make big plays.
- ✓ **Prevent:** This approach is the exact opposite of the attacking, high-pressure style. The prevent usually utilizes only three or four players to rush the quarterback while the remainder of the unit drops back into pass coverage. The defense's focus is to never get beat for a long pass and to keep all the receivers in front of them. In this style, you're okay with surrendering yards in exchange for keeping the game clock running. The prevent forces quarterbacks to deliver a lot of short-range and intermediate-type passes and relies on defensive players to make tackles and attempt to create turnovers.

Choosing the approach you want to use will probably be one of the more challenging decisions you'll make when coaching defense. After all, if you coach football long enough, there'll be times you use the prevent defense only to watch the opposing team march right down the field and score the winning touchdown. Or you'll have your team attack the no-huddle with plenty of blitzes and pressure, only to watch the opponent strike for a big play, and you'll be muttering to yourself on the drive home why you didn't play it safer with the prevent style.



Regardless of what unfolded during the game, don't beat yourself up over it. Instead, use the experience as a learning tool to enhance your coaching skills. Ask yourself how the opponent was able to hit that big play. Maybe you'll discover that you were too predictable with your defensive calls and blitzed your safety on every third down, and the opposing coach recognized that and used it to his team's advantage. These types of learning experiences can make you — and your team — better in the long run.

Understanding the situation

Choosing how your team defends a no-huddle attack depends greatly on the situation in the game. Does the opponent need a field goal or a touchdown? How much time is left in the game, and how many timeouts do they have? These are all critical bits of information. For example, if the team needs only a field goal to win, you probably can't afford to play too soft of a prevent style, because the opponents are only interested in getting into field goal range rather than going all the way downfield for a touchdown.

When your team is trailing in the fourth quarter and the opponent has possession of the ball, that team's going to do what it can to keep the clock moving. Your defensive players must understand these situations and recognize that anytime there's an opportunity to force a player to the sidelines and out of bounds, they need to do so to stop the clock. The unit also needs to be aware of how many timeouts it has and when you want to use them. You want to communicate this information to your players before the offense runs the play so that as soon as a tackle is made, your team can signal to the official for a timeout.



At the more-advanced levels of football, watching the opponent's field-goal kicker during pre-game warm-ups gives you a pretty good idea of the strength of his leg. So during close games that may be decided by a field goal, it's valuable to know how close the opponent needs to get for a reasonable attempt.

Shutting down the Hail Mary

Teams that are a long way from the end zone and out of timeouts — or that are staring at a game clock with only a few seconds left — have the Hail Mary pass as their final option. This play of desperation usually occurs while a team runs its no-huddle offense and is looking to make a big play and score quickly. With the *Hail Mary pass*, the offense sends a bunch of receivers together into the end zone, and the quarterback throws the ball high up into the air, hoping for one of three things to happen: 1) that one of his receivers jumps higher than the defenders and pulls down the catch; 2) that the ball gets deflected with so many players vying for it and it lands in one of his teammates' hands; or 3) that the referee calls pass interference on the defense and the offense gets to run another play closer to the end zone.



Defending against the Hail Mary pass requires your defensive backs to knock the ball down to the ground as strongly as possible. When players go for interceptions on these passes, deflections occur, which is what the offense is hoping for. Teaching your players to swat the ball to the ground makes coming up with the catch difficult for receivers. Not trying to intercept is one of the most difficult things for defensive backs to learn, because their natural instinct is to try to make an interception and create a turnover.

Reacting quickly to a surprise no-huddle

Offenses throw a surprise no-huddle at you from time to time to gain an edge. For example, if you're using formations that feature a lot of defensive linemen, the opposing team may go no-huddle on you so you can't substitute players to match up with the offensive plays they're running.



Drilling it in: Preparing for the no-huddle

Here's a good drill so your defense can practice reading and reacting to the no-huddle's series of offensive formations: Set up cones to indicate the five offensive linemen and quarterback. The other five players in the unit will be filled by you and your assistant coaches. (You can even recruit some parents to fill in with this one.) Have the defense huddle up with their backs

to you. The five coaches choose a formation and line up. On your whistle, the defense turns around and gets only a few seconds to line up to defend the formation. Continue repeating the drill, choosing all sorts of different formations that your defense must react to. If you practice this enough, your defense will seldom be caught off guard or out of position during games.

At the beginning levels of youth football, you don't encounter a lot of no-huddle offenses simply because the players are still learning their positions and responsibilities, and this style puts a premium on reading defenses and executing plays.

For a team with some playing experience, a major aspect of defending against the no-huddle is the ability to react to any type of offensive formation thrown at the defense at any time during the game. (For a rundown on offensive formations, jump to Chapter 12.) Check out Chapter 16 for info on reading offensive sets.

Chapter 14

Taking Your Drills to the Next Level

In This Chapter

- ▶ Upgrading the offensive skills
- ▶ Tuning up the defense
- ▶ Kicking special teams skills up a notch
- ▶ Planning productive practices

As your season rolls along, your players will progress in all areas of the game. You'll hit the point where the offense consistently executes basic rushing and passing plays, the defense makes more tackles than it misses, and your special teams units fare pretty well whenever they take the field for kicks and punts.

For learning and fun to continue full force, you need to continually unveil drills that challenge, motivate, and excite your players. The drills you used during the first week of the season won't be as effective — or as much fun for the players — a month after they get a good grasp of that particular aspect of the game. In this chapter, you can dig into all sorts of new drills that match your players' progress and help them enhance existing skills, as well as learn plenty of new ones. (You can also modify the basic drills to make them more challenging; see Chapter 11.)

Offensive Drills

An offense that can run and pass with confidence creates all sorts of problems for defenses. In the following section, we present a smorgasbord of drills that you can incorporate into your practices to help take offensive skills up a level. These drills are fun, productive, and easy to implement, and they'll really make a difference in your players' development.

For the quarterback

Ideally, you'd like your quarterback to be able to stand in the pocket undisturbed every time he drops back to pass — and he'd certainly like that, too. But chances are pretty good that he'll be forced to scramble to avoid defensive pressure from time to time. Being able to deliver accurate throws while defenders are closing in on him is a key component of being a quality quarterback. Here are a couple drills that focus on that aspect.

Dodge and Throw

This drill helps quarterbacks develop the ability to evade a pass rusher and get off an accurate throw to a receiver while on the run.

What you need: 1 quarterback, 1 wide receiver, 1 defensive back, 1 defensive lineman, 1 center, 1 ball.

How it works: The quarterback takes a position in the shotgun formation (discussed in Chapter 12). A receiver, with a defensive back covering him, starts to his right. The pass rusher lines up in front of the center.

1. **On your whistle, the center snaps the ball to the quarterback, and the pass rusher rushes in on him.**
2. **The quarterback must avoid the pressure, scramble (move around the backfield, avoiding tackles), and deliver a pass to the receiver.**

To increase the difficulty, add another receiver and defender so the quarterback has more players to keep an eye on while he's scrambling.

Coaching pointers: When the quarterback is eluding a rusher, the receivers should help out by breaking off their patterns and coming back closer to the quarterback to provide an easier target for him. Watch to make sure that happens. Don't let the quarterback continually have to make really difficult throws because he has to do everything himself.

Roll Out and Release

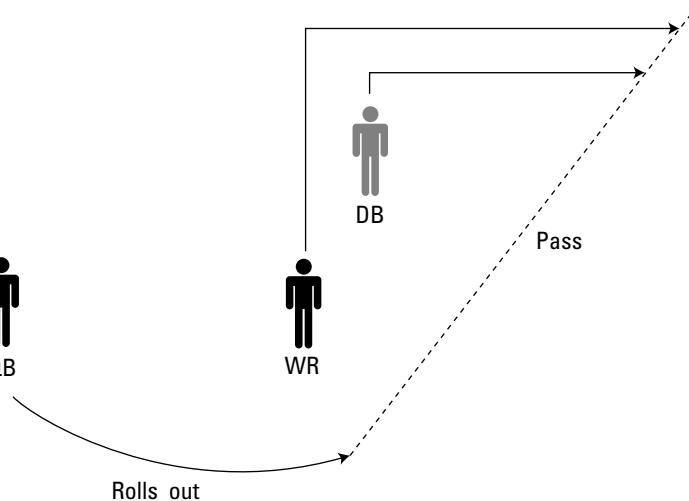
This drill helps quarterbacks learn to throw passes with an accurate touch while scrambling to their left or right.

What you need: 1 center, 1 quarterback, 1 wide receiver, 1 defensive back, 1 ball.

1. **On your whistle, the quarterback takes the snap and begins rolling out (moving parallel to the line of scrimmage) to his right.**
2. **The receiver runs downfield, and after he gets 5 yards past the defender, he cuts to the right (see Figure 14-1).**

- The defensive back stays 5 yards in front of the receiver (between the receiver and the quarterback) and shadows his pass pattern. The quarterback must loft the ball over the defender into the wide receiver's hands.

Figure 14-1:
The Roll Out and Release drill helps quarterbacks learn to throw effectively on the move.



Coaching pointers: Make sure your quarterback squares his body to the target and follows through with enough loft to get the ball over the defender's hands.

For running backs

Sometimes, because of defensive penetration or the opponent's lineup, the only place a running back can go is straight ahead. That means the better he is at running through tackles at the line of scrimmage, the more successful the offensive unit will be. Here are a couple drills to fine tune those running skills for those times when the running back doesn't have much room to maneuver and defenders are swarming all around.

Goal Line Charge

This drill helps running backs get accustomed to taking hits from linebackers and continue moving forward for first downs or those coveted touchdowns.

What you need: 1 quarterback, 1 center, 1 running back, 1 defensive lineman, 1 linebacker, 1 ball.

How it works: Set the ball at the 2-yard line. The quarterback and center take their positions, with the running back in the backfield. Position a defensive lineman over the ball and a linebacker behind him.

1. **On your whistle, the center snaps the ball to the quarterback, who hands it off to the running back.**
2. **The running back lowers his shoulder to take on the linebacker's tackle, as well as the defensive lineman's tackle if the center's block isn't very strong, and tries to get across the goal line.**

Because you always want the running back to fall forward to maximize how many yards he gains when tackled, the running back should lower his shoulder when colliding with a defensive player. The lower the running back is to the ground, with his shoulder angled at the defender, the less of a target he provides.

Coaching pointers: Make sure the running back tucks the ball away properly. Doing so is especially important near the goal line, where lots of defenders play in a confined space, some of them attempting to strip the ball and cause turnovers.

Inside Assault

This drill helps running backs learn to run hard and strong inside and continually hit the line of scrimmage with a burst of power while taking on opposing tacklers.

What you need: 5 offensive linemen, 5 defensive linemen, 1 quarterback, 1 running back. 1 ball.

How it works: Position five offensive linemen at the 5-yard line with a quarterback and running back in the backfield. Line up five defensive linemen across from the offensive linemen. On your whistle, the quarterback takes the snap and hands the ball off to the running back, who runs inside and tries to score.

Coaching pointers: Watch to make sure the handoff goes smoothly and the running back lowers his shoulder when he makes initial contact with the defensive player. To increase the difficulty level for the offense, add a linebacker.

For wide receivers

Of course, wide receivers love it when passes hit 'em right in the numbers and they don't have to contort their bodies to make catches. But sometimes during games, they're challenged to make those really difficult catches. The following drills cover hauling in those tricky over-the-shoulder passes and making catches in the back of the end zone while staying in-bounds.

Over-the-Shoulder Grabs

This drill helps get receivers comfortable with making those difficult over-the-shoulder grabs.

What you need: 1 wide receiver. 1 coach. 1 ball.

How it works: The receiver begins to the right of you. On your whistle, he runs downfield and looks inside to his left to receive a pass. As he looks left, you lob the ball over his right shoulder, forcing him to adjust to the different ball flight in order to make the catch. (You can also reverse directions, having the receiver start on your left and catch the ball over his left shoulder.)

Coaching pointers: As the youngster turns his head and shoulders to the other side, make sure he keeps his body in control and keeps his arms up and in position to make the catch. You can increase the difficulty of the drill by having a defensive back shadow the receiver so he gets used to making catches as an opposing player defends him or puts a hand up around his eyes.

Back of the End Zone

This drill teaches youngsters the art of making catches in the back of the end zone and being aware of where the back line is at all times.

What you need: Wide receivers, 1 quarterback or coach. 1 ball.

How it works: Begin inside the 5-yard line, and have receivers run into the end zone and then cut toward the goal posts along the back of the end zone. You or the quarterback lob the ball up high so the receivers have to jump up and make catches with their arms outstretched and have their feet land in-bounds.

Coaching pointers: Initially make sure the players stay in-bounds as they run their pass patterns along the back of the end zone. From there, be sure that they watch the passes into their hands and keep their bodies under control.

You can turn this drill into a competition among the receivers by seeing who can come down with a catch closest to the back line without stepping out of bounds.

For offensive linemen

Having a group of kids on your offensive line who are comfortable with both run and pass blocking opens the door to all sorts of fun for the entire offense. When kids have a sound understanding of the techniques required for both skills, the opponent will never know what's coming — and that means the offense can really consistently move the ball downfield with a wide variety of plays.

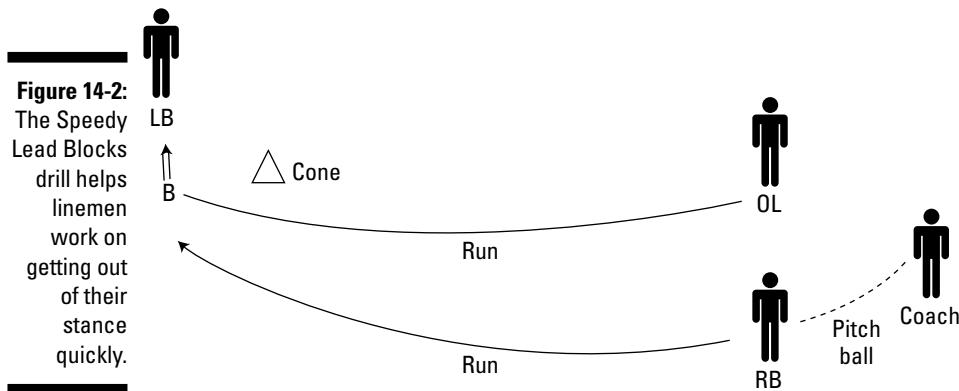
Speedy Lead Blocks

This drill helps linemen get out of their three-point stance quickly and execute a strong block.

What you need: 1 offensive lineman, 1 running back, 1 linebacker, 1 coach, 1 ball, 1 cone.

How it works: The offensive lineman takes his normal three-point stance. Position a cone a few yards away on the line of scrimmage and a running back in the backfield. A linebacker stands near the cone. You assume the quarterback position.

1. On your whistle, you pitch the ball to the running back while the lineman runs around the cone (see Figure 14-2) and delivers the lead block (a block that paves the way for the ball carrier) on the linebacker.
2. The running back follows the block.
3. The linebacker tries to fend off the block and make the tackle.



Coaching pointers: Make sure the offensive lineman is in the proper three-point stance and doesn't lean in one direction, which could tell defenders that a running play is coming up.

One-on-One Pass Rush

This drill allows offensive linemen a chance to hone their blocking skills and gives defenders the chance to work on their pass-rushing moves, too.

What you need: 1 offensive lineman, 1 defensive lineman, 1 cone.

How it works: Position a defensive lineman in front of an offensive lineman, with a cone or other type of safe target about 5 to 7 yards behind the offensive player. Have the offensive player go anytime he's ready after you yell "set" (this eliminates the defensive player's advantage and teaches the offensive lineman to rise up quickly and engage in his block). The defensive player tries to get to the cone while being blocked.

Coaching pointers: Footwork is the key for offensive linemen during this drill. Keep an eye out to make sure they keep moving and don't get their feet tangled up.

You can run this drill in 5-second intervals with players broken up into pairs all over the field. Award points to the defensive players who reach their cones and to the offensive linemen who keep them away from it. Rotate players around so they face new players and new moves throughout the drill.

Defensive Drills

As your offense progresses throughout the season, you have to ensure that your defense keeps pace. That means drilling these players on all the aspects of causing havoc with both running and passing plays. The drills in this section can help you help your players take their skills to the next level.

For defensive linemen

Playing along the defensive line poses quite a few challenges, and it's easy to see why: Not only must defenders react quickly as soon as the ball is snapped and identify whether the play's a run or a pass play, but they then have to move and make a tackle or at least help disrupt the play. Here are a couple approaches to help them enhance those areas of their game.

Against the Odds

This drill helps defensive linemen deal with pass rushing against two offensive linemen.

What you need: 2 offensive linemen, 1 defensive lineman, 1 cone.

How it works: The defensive lineman takes his stance against the two offensive linemen, and a cone is placed 7 to 10 yards behind them. On your whistle, the defensive lineman uses his pass-rushing moves to try to get to the cone.

Coaching pointers: Watch the defensive lineman to make sure he uses a variety of moves. The more types of techniques he can use, the more success he'll enjoy in getting by the blockers. See Chapter 10 for some options.

You can make this drill into a fun competition by seeing which defensive lineman can get to the cone in the shortest amount of time.

High-Speed Chase

This drill helps defensive linemen become comfortable dealing with a variety of plays in a short time, much as they do when the opponent goes into its no-huddle offense during a game.

What you need: 5 offensive linemen, 4 defensive linemen, 1 quarterback, 1 running back. 1 ball.

How it works: The linemen take their proper stances lined up against each other, and the quarterback and running back are in the backfield.

1. **On the quarterback's command, he takes the snap and hands the ball off to the running back, who must run inside.**

For this step, he can't run outside of the offensive tackles. The defensive linemen must react to the inside running play and make the tackle.

2. **After the tackle is made, the linemen quickly get back into position for the next play, which is a sweep that tests the defensive linemen's ability to get outside and make a tackle.**

In a *sweep*, blockers lead the running back between the offensive tackle (or tight end) and the sideline to get outside.

3. **The series concludes as the linemen set up for a pass rush: The quarterback drops back and tries to deliver a pass to the running back — who circles out of the backfield — before the linemen are able to sack him.**

Coaching pointers: Make sure the defensive linemen, in their rush to get back into position for each play, set up in the proper stance. To increase the drill's difficulty, don't tell the defensive linemen what type of play has been called.

For linebackers

Handling all the responsibilities of the linebacking position takes a broad range of skills. Fending off blocks, making tackles, and covering receivers are some of the key areas we cover in the following drills.

Read and Respond

The drill helps linebackers identify plays and move in to make the tackle.

What you need: 1 quarterback, 1 center, 1 running back, 1 linebacker. 1 ball.

How it works: The drill begins with a quarterback in position behind the center to receive the snap, a running back in the backfield, and a linebacker playing about 5 yards away from the center.

- 1. On your whistle, the quarterback takes the snap and drops back to pass, where he either slips the ball to the running back for a rushing play or delivers a little pass as the running back comes out of the backfield.**
- 2. The linebacker must read the play and respond accordingly.**

If the play's a handoff, he needs to attack the line of scrimmage, and if it's a pass, he has to rely on his pass-coverage techniques (see Chapter 10).

Coaching pointers: If the linebacker is too eager to make a play, he may charge forward too quickly and put himself out of position to cover a pass. Work with him on reading the play as it unfolds and then responding.

Linebacker Challenge

This drill works on all aspects of linebacking in a short period of time.

What you need: 1 quarterback, 1 center, 2 running backs, 1 linebacker. 1 ball.

How it works: The quarterback begins behind the center, with one running back in the backfield. The linebacker is about 5 yards away from the center. The second running back stays out of the way.

- 1. On your whistle, the quarterback takes the snap and hands the ball off to the running back, who runs either right or left of the center (the center doesn't block in this drill).**
- 2. The linebacker must make the tackle and quickly get back into his starting position for the next play, in which another running back lines up on the line of scrimmage, and the linebacker covers him in a pass pattern.**
- 3. The linebacker gets back into position after that play is finished, and the quarterback takes the snap and rolls the ball on the ground behind him; the linebacker must fight through the center's block and pounce on the loose ball for a fumble recovery.**

Coaching pointers: Because you're running these plays in quick succession, make sure the linebacker gets in his proper stance at the start of each play and maintains good footwork throughout each aspect of the drill.

For defensive backs

Defensive linemen have linebackers backing them up; linebackers have defensive backs backing them up; and defensive backs have only themselves to rely on. That's what makes playing in the secondary so challenging: There's simply little margin for error. The following are a couple drills to help youngsters defend those long passes when it's just one-on-one against the receiver, as well as make those open-field tackles to prevent a big gain.

Bombs Away

This is a good drill to use to help safeties read the quarterback and react to long passes downfield.

What you need: 1 quarterback, 2 wide receivers, 1 safety. 1 ball.

How it works: The drill begins with a wide receiver on each side of the quarterback. The safety lines up about 15 yards away from the quarterback.

1. **On your whistle, the receivers run downfield, and each breaks toward his nearest sideline.**
2. **The quarterback sets and delivers a pass to one of them.**
3. **The safety has to read the quarterback's eyes and footwork, make a break on the pass, and attempt to knock the ball down, intercept it, or make the tackle if the receiver makes the catch.**

Coaching pointers: To make the safety's job more difficult, work with the quarterback to make sure he doesn't give away where he's throwing the ball. For instance, teach him to stare at one receiver and at the last moment turn and throw to the other receiver on the opposite side of the field.

Open-Field Tackling

This drill helps defensive backs become proficient at making the switch from covering a wide receiver to stepping up and making a tackle.

What you need: 2 wide receivers, 1 defensive back, 1 quarterback. 1 ball.

How it works: The quarterback begins with a wide receiver on each side of him and a defensive back lined up across from one of the wide receivers.

1. **On your whistle, the two receivers begin their patterns.**

The receiver whom the defender's covering runs a pattern about 15 yards downfield; the uncovered receiver runs a pattern about half that distance.

2. **The quarterback delivers a pass to the uncovered receiver, and the defensive back breaks off his coverage and moves to make a one-on-one tackle.**

Coaching pointers: Make sure the defensive back focuses on covering the receiver, because that's his top priority. You can increase the difficulty of the drill by having the quarterback deliver the pass to the downfield receiver if he's open. This change forces the defensive back to really focus on providing good coverage before he attempts to make the tackle.

Special Teams Drills

Where your team begins with the ball on offense, and where your defense takes the field to try and stop the opposition, is dictated by the play of your special teams units. This section provides drills for your kickers and punters, as well as for your punt coverage and return units.

Around the Horn

An older or more advanced team often has youngsters who've shown an interest in the kicking game. Here's a good drill to help them work on those kicking skills. This drill gives kickers valuable practice in making kicks from a variety of angles and distances.

What you need: Entire kicking unit and defensive unit. 1 or more balls.

How it works: Pick out ten spots on the field for the kicker to attempt field goals from. Be sure to have a mix of distances that you know he's comfortable with, as well as a few that are challenging. Award a point to the offensive unit for every field goal made and a point to the defensive unit for every one missed. You can even throw in bonus points if a kick is made from a specific distance or when the defenders are able to block one.

Coaching pointers: Closely monitor how your kicker fares from the different angles. Kicks from the right hash mark may be routine for him, but if you notice that he's having problems from the left side, you want to devote more practice time to that area of his game.

Pressure the Punter

A reliable punter, combined with good tackling by the coverage unit, can really help out the defense by consistently pinning teams deep in their own end of the field. This drill helps your punter learn to get the ball off quickly under a heavy rush.

What you need: Punt coverage team, punt return team. 1 ball.

How it works: Position your punter at the back of the end zone. Your punt coverage team lines up opposite the punt return team. Have the punt coverage team run the play whenever it's ready. Award a set number of points for a blocked punt, as well as points that vary depending on where the coverage unit tackles the returner.

Coaching pointers: Keep a close eye on the center's snap. If it's not on target, the punter has to waste valuable time reaching for the ball, which will affect his punting. (Check out Chapter 10 for info on long snaps.)

To make the drill more challenging, put an extra player on the punt return team. This addition gives the punter a chance to work on getting rid of the ball quickly and tests the skills of your coverage unit. If they're able to defend 12 players and get downfield to make tackles, they'll probably fare pretty well during games.

Punting Frenzy

This drill gives the punt coverage and return teams lots of practice in a short period of time.

What you need: Punt coverage team, punt return team. 1 ball.

How it works: Use only half the field to ensure that the drill is game-like in nature. Divide your coverage and return teams in half.

1. **On the center's snap, everyone to the left of the center begins the punting play.**
2. **After the returner is tackled, he gets back into position to receive the next punt.**

You can also rotate punt returners to give a couple kids practice with this drill.

3. **The center again snaps the ball to the punter; this time, all the players to the right of the center are involved in the play.**

While this play is going on, the other players are jogging back so they'll be ready to go again.

Coaching pointers: This drill challenges players' stamina. As youngsters tire, they tend to get sloppy with their fundamentals, so make sure they use only proper blocking techniques.

Putting It All Together: A Sample Practice Session

Now that you're armed with new drills, it's time to put them together. A well-designed practice lays the groundwork for lots of learning and fun. Using these new drills can help keep players' enthusiasm high and upgrade their skills. See Table 14-1 for a 1-hour sample practice plan that you can implement using the drills covered in this chapter.

Table 14-1 A Productive Practice with Intermediate Drills

Duration	Activity	Comments
10 min.	Warm-up	Have the kids perform stretching and calisthenics to get loosened up. Check out Chapter 11 for a rundown of stretches.
15 min.	Inside Assault drill	This drill gives the offensive and defensive lines lots of practice for those key goal-line plays and helps improve the inside running of your running backs.
	Bombs Away drill	In the middle of the field, run this drill to help safeties adjust to reading and reacting to passes.
	Back of the End Zone drill	Challenge your wide receivers at the end of the field opposite the Inside Assault drill.
15 min.	Around the Horn	Don't overlook special teams during your practices. This mid-practice drill can give your kicker some valuable work at one end of the field with the field goal unit.
	Dodge and Throw drill	Devote the other half of the field to this drill to give your quarterback, wide receivers, and the defensive players not on special teams a chance to work on their skills in passing and defending the pass.

(continued)

Table 14-1 (*continued*)

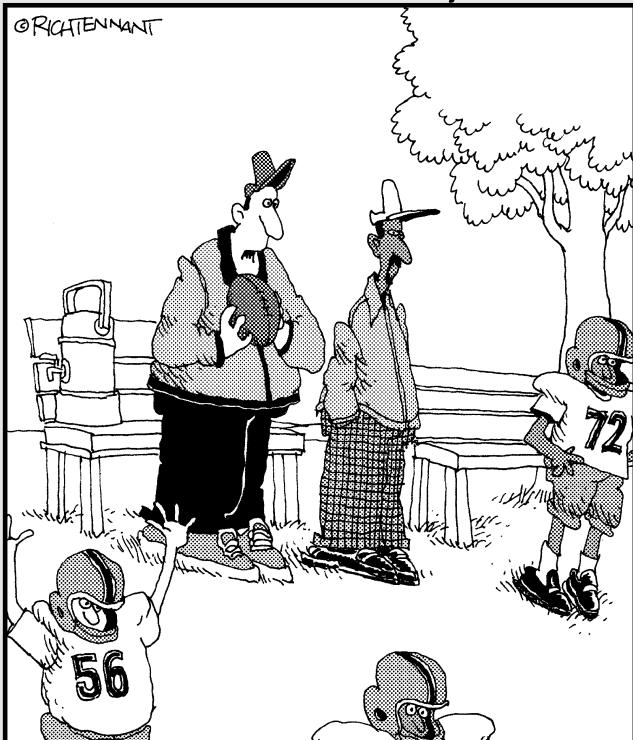
Duration	Activity	Comments
15 min.	Linebacker Challenge drill	Test your linebackers at one end of the field.
	High-Speed Chase drill	Run this drill in the middle of the field for the offensive and defensive linemen.
	Open-Field Tackling drill	At the final end of the field, use this drill to challenge both wide receivers and defensive backs.
5 min.	Cool-down	Have the kids perform some light stretching to cool down. Afterward, gather them for a quick chat. Use these final minutes to thank them for their hard work and compliment them on their improvement, and send 'em home smiling.

Part IV

Advanced Football Strategies

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"I told my players to go home and learn some plays for next week's game. One kid showed up and wanted to know when we were going to run the 'Death of a Salesman' play."

In this part . . .

As the kids learn and progress, you need to keep pace by teaching them advanced offensive and defensive strategies. This part covers those areas, digs into the finer points of coaching special teams, and provides some advanced drills to help players hone these new skills.

Chapter 15

Coaching Offense 201

In This Chapter

- ▶ Utilizing offensive strategies
 - ▶ Making good plays at the line of scrimmage
-

Your offense practices hard and plays hard, but how often your players get to celebrate touchdowns on game day depends, to a great extent, on how they handle what the defense throws at them. Being well-versed in all aspects of playing offense enables your unit to react confidently and effectively.

In this chapter, we open up the playbook and introduce an array of techniques that your team can use to move the ball down the field. You can discover the secret to finding match-ups that work in your favor and how to exploit them, along with information for dealing with the defense's troublesome blitzes. We also show you how to help your quarterback decipher what type of defense the opposition is playing and the best approaches for attacking it, as well as when and how to change plays at the line of scrimmage.

Effective Offensive Strategies

Your offense has many approaches available for trying to move the ball downfield and put points on the scoreboard. Sometimes, the methods you choose are dictated by what the defense is doing and what works best to counter those moves. As your unit learns and develops, you can rely on a number of techniques to successfully attack defenses. Here are a few points to keep in mind regarding offensive execution:

✓ Use the first down wisely. Usually, the offense has the advantage at the start of every series because the defense doesn't know what's coming (unless, of course, your team is pinned near its own goal line and everyone on the field — even Grandma in the stands — knows a running play is coming next!). But you'll typically find that most defenses tend to play the run on the first down. So this is a good time to run pass patterns

behind the linebackers or perhaps get by a defensive back with a long pass if he's peeking in at the line of scrimmage, ready to support stopping the run.

You can also use *play-action passes* on the first down. In these plays, the quarterback fakes a handoff to the running back while dropping back to pass. A good fake forces the defense to focus on stopping the run, which takes away some of the effectiveness of their pass rush. A play that picks up at least 4 yards on first down is a good start for that series.

- ✓ **Recognize that small plays count, too.** A lot of times, young quarterbacks fall into the trap of trying to make only the big play — even when it's not available. Sometimes, the 5-yard completion is all that's open, and nothing's wrong with that, because your offense is still moving the ball downfield. Problems occur when quarterbacks ignore an open receiver running a short-yardage pattern in hopes of connecting with a receiver who's running a deep pattern but is pretty well covered. Not only does this situation frustrate the open receivers, but it also isn't a very successful approach for moving the ball.
- ✓ **Start with simple plays and gradually build up.** You can design plays and formulate game plans in so many different ways, but going overboard and trying to do too much give the kids too much to digest. You don't want your team's playbook resembling something an NFL player carries around. The kids can soak up only so much, so when in doubt, the simpler the better.



Young and inexperienced quarterbacks often can't process plays in which they have three or four options every time they drop back to pass. Simplify passing plays by giving the quarterback a primary and secondary receiver. As youngsters gain experience at the position and learn to scan the field to spot open receivers, you can incorporate additional options.

Exploiting match-ups

One of the most effective ways of moving the ball downfield is finding advantageous match-ups — and then calling the right plays so your youngsters can take full advantage of them. Here are a handful of ways to help your team exploit how they compare to the opposition:

- ✓ **Pay attention during warm-ups.** Sure, during the pre-game warm-ups your main concern is your team and getting them ready to play. But it never hurts to keep an eye on the opponents and what they're doing, too. For example, if you notice the defensive backs aren't quite as fast as your players, you may want to call some long pass patterns early in the game to see whether you can raise your offensive unit's confidence with a quick score.
- ✓ **Pay attention to size.** During the first couple series of the game, you can start to get a sense of what types of plays have better chances of

succeeding. For example, if your offensive line is bigger and stronger than the opponent but the other team is quicker than your players, then plays such as the sweep (an outside-running play) probably won't fare well simply because you're playing into the strength of their defense. Instead, run plays up the middle that utilize your size advantage and neutralize their speed. As the defense adjusts to your running plays up the middle by shifting more players into that area of the field, a sweep has a better chance of succeeding, because you've forced the defense to bunch up more around the line of scrimmage.

- ✓ **Pay attention away from the play.** Keeping a close eye on what's happening away from the ball can provide a treasure chest of information that you and your team can use later in the game. For instance, say you've called a sweep to the left. While that play is unfolding, watch how the secondary reacts to your wide receiver way over on the right side. As soon as the ball is handed off, do these players move forward to tackle the running back, or do they maintain their coverage of the receiver? If they tend to want to get in on the tackle, your team can exploit that opening with a trick play in which the running back throws the ball downfield to the receiver.

Dealing with the blitz

An opponent's blitz can be as troublesome as a bad toothache — if your offense hasn't been prepped on how to handle it. When defenses are disrupting your offense and making it difficult for your quarterback to run plays, you have to be able to counter the blitz (for more on the blitz, see Chapter 16). Otherwise, your players on the offensive unit will be in for a very long and frustrating day. Here are a few ways to handle a blitz:

- ✓ **Extra blocking:** Keep a running back in the backfield on passing plays to help block a linebacker or defensive back so your quarterback has that much-needed extra second or two to complete the pass. You can also keep a tight end in to provide extra blocking support instead of having him run a pass pattern.
- ✓ **Screen plays:** When the defense is constantly on the attack, one of the best ways to slow them down is to use a screen pass. With a *screen pass*, the offense tries to fool the defense by actually luring defensive players to rush the quarterback. After the ball is snapped, the offensive linemen set up to provide pass protection, and then after a 2-second count, they let the defensive players by. Usually two or three linemen move in the direction of the play, and the quarterback delivers a short pass to a running back, wide receiver, or tight end, who catches the ball behind the offensive linemen.

As the defense commits to the blitz and sends in players, a well-designed screen pass can go for big yards, because fewer defensive players will be in the vicinity to make the tackle. Plus, the screen pass sends the message

that the defense needs to look out for that play in the future when it blitzes, which makes the blitz a little less effective. (Screen passes work well with the wishbone formation, which you can read about in Chapter 12.)

- ✓ **Draw plays:** These plays work well against aggressive defenses that apply heavy pass rushes. The *draw play* is basically the opposite of the play-action pass (see the main section, “Effective Offensive Strategies”), as it tries to lure the defense in to create more running room. The quarterback, who can take the snap directly behind the center or from the shotgun formation (see Chapter 12), drops back to pass to allow the defenders to rush toward him. The running back fakes as though he’s remaining in the backfield to provide extra pass protection, and after a couple seconds, he takes the handoff. The play can also be run as a *quarterback draw*, in which the quarterback takes the snap and drops back to pass, and after giving the defense a couple seconds to rush forward, begins running upfield.
- ✓ **Shorter drops:** If your quarterback is using a five- or seven-step drop, shorten it to three steps. The less time he’s spending backpedaling, the more time he’ll have to get set, spot his receivers, and throw the pass.
- ✓ **Shorter pass patterns:** Long pass patterns don’t fare very well against a blitzing team because the quarterback usually ends up on his back before the receivers even finish their patterns. Instead, stick to patterns, like the quick slant, that allow the quarterback to get rid of the ball quickly because the wide receivers’ patterns are much shorter. A rundown of the different types of pass patterns is in Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Roll out passes:** A quarterback can usually gain some extra time to deliver a pass by *rolling out*. This term means that after he receives the snap, he runs to his left or right — remaining behind the line of scrimmage — and either delivers the pass while on the move or pauses to set his feet and throw. Throwing while on the move is extremely difficult, especially if a right-hander is running toward his left, or vice versa.
- ✓ **The shotgun formation:** This formation (covered in Chapter 12) gives the quarterback a better view of where the blitz is coming from and helps him make adjustments so the called play can be successful. For example, if he sees the safety creeping toward the line of scrimmage to his right, he can conclude that he’ll buy himself some extra time if he moves a little to his left after he receives the snap. If he were under the center, he wouldn’t have quite as much time to roll to his left and get the pass off.

At the Line of Scrimmage

A lot more happens at the line of scrimmage than blocking and tackling. Being able to read defenses and change plays quickly and efficiently at the line is a really potent weapon for countering what the defense plans to do.

Reading defenses

The chances of certain plays succeeding are greatly enhanced by the quarterback's ability to accurately *read defenses*. This term means coming to the line of scrimmage, looking at how the defense is set up on that particular play, and making any necessary adjustments.



The quarterback isn't the only player who needs to read defenses. The wide receivers share in that responsibility, too. If the quarterback reads man-to-man but the wide receiver sees zone, the chances that the pass play will succeed are greatly diminished.

The following are a couple tips to help quarterbacks (or receivers) recognize whether a defense is in man-to-man or zone coverage (for more on these types of coverage, see Chapter 13):

- ✓ **Focus on the safeties.** How the safeties are positioned is a strong indicator of what the defense plans to do. If the safeties are near the line of scrimmage, they're usually either blitzing or providing run support, which means the cornerbacks are likely have man-to-man coverage on the receivers. When the safeties are back away from the line of scrimmage, the defense is likely playing a zone defense, and the safeties are each responsible for receivers who come into their half of the field. In this case, the cornerbacks are responsible for receivers who run patterns in their zone, which is roughly the area from the line of scrimmage extending about 10 yards out. The safeties are responsible for the coverage of any patterns beyond that.
- ✓ **Check out the cornerbacks.** The quarterback should also watch the cornerbacks as he settles in behind the center to call out signals and take the snap. If the cornerbacks are playing the receivers pretty tight and are up near the line of scrimmage, that's usually a pretty good indication that they're playing man-to-man defense. Their being close to the receiver is the quarterback's cue that they're responsible for covering that receiver all over the field.
- ✓ **Use motion.** Sending running backs and wide receivers in motion can help quarterbacks unlock what type of defense is being played. For example, if a running back who's in the backfield goes in motion and one of the linebackers begins shadowing him as he moves along the line of scrimmage, that's usually an indication that the defense is playing man-to-man and that linebacker is responsible for covering the running back wherever he goes. If the linebackers adjust their stance, or maybe even take a step or two back from the line of scrimmage as soon as the motion begins, that usually means they're playing zone defense and they're looking to ensure they have a good angle to defend against the running back if he enters the area of the field — or zone — that they're responsible for.



- ✓ **Watch players after the snap of the ball.** The quarterback can utilize another clue (though he has to do so quickly, because a bunch of players across the line of scrimmage will be coming after him at full speed): He should watch what the linebackers and safeties do as soon as the ball is snapped. If the safeties remain in the middle of the field, the defense is playing man-to-man, and they're going to provide support wherever it's needed. If the defense is playing zone, the safeties will move to an area of the field, and the linebackers will usually drop back as well, to cover their respective areas.

Going up against man-to-man defenses

Here are a couple tips to help quarterbacks and receivers beat man-to-man defenses:

- ✓ **Single coverage:** Ideally, you want to get your best wide receiver in a one-on-one situation with one of the opponent's defensive backs. Of course, the defense devotes more attention to the better players, so getting him free will be a little more challenging. Usually, the free safety provides the extra help on the best receiver, so even when the receiver gets free from the defensive back, the quarterback still has to watch for the coverage from the safety.

Quarterbacks who locate the receiver who has single coverage on him usually have more success throwing the ball in this player's direction. Of course, this receiver has the responsibility of running a good pattern and getting open before that can happen.

- ✓ **Scanning the field:** A quarterback never wants to tip off the defense to where he's throwing the ball by staring down one receiver. The chances of the play's success are enhanced when the quarterback takes the snap and then scans the entire field so that the safeties can't lock in on where he's looking.

Getting quarterbacks into this habit has another huge benefit: It helps him spot open receivers right away. Also, if a defensive back slips, the quarterback can take advantage of the opening, which he wouldn't have seen if he were locked onto one receiver on the other side of the field.

In the zone: Defeating zone defenses

Here are some ways quarterbacks and receivers can be productive going up against a zone defense:

- ✓ **Having patience:** Playing against a zone defense can sometimes be frustrating for offensive players, because big plays aren't as readily available. The zone defense focuses on keeping everything in front of the defense, so offenses have to be patient and take what's available. Remind your

players that a few short- to medium-length passes are just as good as one big completion.

- ✓ **Finding seams:** The receivers' responsibility is to find seams in the zone. The *seams* represent the areas between the zones, which usually provide some of the best openings for passes to be completed.
- ✓ **Stretching the defense:** Even though completing long passes against a zone defense is difficult, you shouldn't disregard those plays altogether. Your offense can stretch out those zones by having your running backs, tight end, and receivers running short, medium, and long pass patterns. The quarterback then works to deliver the ball to the player who's open.

Calling audibles

Here's a scenario that happens all the time in youth football games: The coach sends in a play to the quarterback, the kids break the huddle and get set at the line of scrimmage and — uh-oh — it's as if the defense heard the coach's play call because they're set up perfectly to stop it. Now what? The coach can stick with the play, which probably won't produce much of a gain; he can throw away a timeout to set up another play; or if he's worked on teaching kids the art of the audible in practice — a real lifesaver for quarterbacks — the quarterback can call an audible to save the down and perhaps the series, too.

Audibles allow quarterbacks to call a different play after everyone gets in his stance. For example, if you've called a running play for the fullback up the middle, but when the quarterback gets to the line of scrimmage the defense has an eight-man front to stop the run, the quarterback can use an audible to call a pass play to the wide receiver lined up on the outside.

Although it's up to the quarterback to call the audible, executing the play requires that everyone understands and fulfills his responsibilities. When teaching audibles, the best way is to have a code word the quarterback can use that alerts everyone that a new play will be used instead of the one just called in the huddle. For example, if the quarterback yells "blue," his teammates know to listen up, because what he calls out next will be the new play.



When you're introducing the audible concept to your players, designate one running play and one passing play to be used when the audible is called. You can label each play with a fun word or basic number. So, for instance, when the quarterback yells "blue ten," the unit knows to disregard the play in the huddle and run a particular running play that they've spent plenty of time working on in practice. As kids get more comfortable with audibles and play-calling, you can incorporate many more plays. With experienced players and teams, you can have audibles for the entire playbook.

Another option for teaching youngsters just learning about audibles is to let the quarterbacks change only the direction of the play, not the play itself. So whenever the quarterback shouts “red” at the line of scrimmage, for example, his teammates know to run the play in the opposite direction of what was called in the huddle. If a sweep to the right was the play called in the huddle but when the unit gets to the line of scrimmage, the quarterback sees a safety up close on the right and doesn’t think the play has much chance of succeeding, he can call out “red” to have the team run the sweep to the left instead. (A sweep is a running play to the outside.)

Using motion to your advantage

Your team can come to the line of scrimmage in one formation, and then by sending players in motion before the ball is snapped, present the defense with a different formation to defend. You can also use motion to gain valuable information and determine what type of defense is being played.



Motion is legal only when the player is not moving toward the line of scrimmage at the snap. For example, a wide receiver on the right hand side of the formation can run along the line of scrimmage, moving parallel to it at the snap of the ball, but he can't move forward.

Chapter 16

Coaching Defense 201

In This Chapter

- Revving up the defense
- Making changes before the snap

playing good defense requires sound tackling and pass-coverage techniques. Playing really good defense — the kind that suffocates offenses and drives quarterbacks crazy — takes knowing a broad range of techniques and the best times to use them.

In this chapter, you can find everything you need to take your defense to the next level. We detail how to use different types of blitzes to wreak havoc on offenses; employ extra defensive backs in the nickel and dime packages to disrupt passing plays; and call audibles and shift players around at the line of scrimmage to make moving the ball really difficult for the opposition.

Daunting Defensive Approaches

You have multiple options at your disposal when determining the type of defense to play on any down. Sometimes those choices are dictated by the situation, and other times they depend on what you're trying to accomplish. For example, you can turn to the blitz if you're looking to put some extra pressure on the quarterback and disrupt the timing of the offense; or if you have the opponent in a difficult third-and-long situation, you may bring in extra defensive backs and employ a zone defense to ensure that the opposition doesn't get the necessary yards for a first down. The key is not only knowing how to use these different techniques but choosing the right game situations to break them out.



Sure, you never want to give up points to the opposition, but touchdowns will happen. What you don't want to give up are easy touchdowns — the plays where a running back breaks off a huge run or the quarterback connects with a wide open receiver and he strolls into the end zone. Those types of easy touchdowns demoralize defenses. When your defense gives up a

touchdown, you want your players to have made the offense earn it by contesting every yard. That type of commitment lets the offense know that all game long, every down will be a battle and that reaching the end zone again will take a lot of work.

Puttin' on the blitz

Defenses that pressure their opponents force them to rush plays, disrupt their rhythm, and push them out of their comfort zone and into all sorts of mistakes. One of the best ways to accomplish this is by blitzing, a technique that's typically used on passing plays to put extra pressure on the quarterback and force him to throw the ball before he's ready. The *blitz* involves sending linebackers or defensive backs in on the quarterback. The risk is that it leaves a player or area of the field uncovered, but the payoff, when it works, is that the quarterback is forced to hurry his throw or is unable to get the pass off and is sacked.

Blitzing can also function as a run-stopping technique. In this case, the linebackers usually hit the line of scrimmage as the ball is snapped. When your players are blitzing on a running play, make sure that the linebackers are disciplined so that they confront any running back coming through their gap instead of going after the quarterback. Naturally, your players will be anxious to get into the backfield and make a sack, but work with them to recognize that their first responsibility is to stop any running play.

Here are some tips to keep in mind when calling for your defense to blitz:

- ✓ **Disguise blitz packages.** If the opponent knows that the free safety is usually the player who comes on the blitz, your unit loses a lot of its advantage. That's because the quarterback can plan how to react before he even takes the snap. Instead, mix things up and send different players. If you sent the free safety the last couple times your team blitzed, go with a cornerback blitz the next time so the offense never gets into a rhythm in dealing with the blitz.
- ✓ **Use different downs.** Limiting your blitzes to third down, or long yardage situations, dilutes the effectiveness of your defense; blitzing when the opponent is on the lookout for it isn't nearly as successful as catching the offense off guard with one on first down, for example.
- ✓ **Be aggressive inside the 20-yard line.** The closer the other team gets to your end zone, the more aggressive you want to be with your blitzes — you want to force a turnover or get a sack that pushes the opponent farther from your goal line. When the opposition has the ball at its own 20 and has the entire field to negotiate, you generally want to take a more conservative approach and limit how much blitzing you do. (Of course, if your defense really works well together and blitzing is one of its strengths, you want to continue using that aggressive approach everywhere on the field.)

Stuntmen in the red zone

Instead of a blitz in the red zone, you can sometimes use a line stunt to disrupt an offense's blocking schemes. A *stunt* is a pass-rushing technique in which two defensive players alter their regular paths to the quarterback to create confusion among the offensive linemen. For example, a stunt involving the right defensive end and right tackle works this way: At the snap of the ball, the defensive end loops around the

tackle and rushes to the inside while the defensive tackle circles around and rushes to the outside. Mixing in these types of stunts challenges the offensive linemen to adjust their blocking assignments to account for the different defenders in the different locations. Stunts can involve any combination of defensive linemen and linebackers.

Using prevent defense on third-and-long

Anytime your defense manages to get the opponent in a third-and-long yardage situation, the last thing it wants to do is surrender a big play that produces a first down and keeps the drive moving. Your defense has played two good downs to force the third-and-long, and now it's time to close the deal and force a punt.

As long as your squad has worked on the zone defense in practice, long-yardage situations on the third down are good times to go with the zone. Because the zone defense is designed to keep the play in front of the defensive players, the chances of the offense's connecting on a big pass play for a first down are less likely against this defense than against man-to-man. Coach players to understand the importance of keeping the opponent in front of them at all times so they can make tackles and prevent big plays. (See Chapter 13 for more on man-to-man versus zone defense.)

One of the weaknesses of using the zone defense is that the opponent can overload a zone by putting more receivers into that area than there are defensive players. In this situation, the defensive player responsible for that zone must cover the deepest offensive player, because he represents the biggest threat.



Nothing stings a defense more than committing a silly penalty that gives the offense an automatic first down and a free pass out of the trouble they were in. Pass-interference penalties and roughing-the-passer penalties are costly and unnecessary. Remind your players to use sound techniques and play really smart on these downs. They've played solid defense on the first two downs of the series to get the advantage, so you don't want them to throw it all away on a penalty. (For info on penalties, check out Chapter 3.)

Nickel and dime defensive packages

Some teams love to pass the ball all game long. Opponents who put the ball in the air a lot force you to alter your defensive strategy and alignments. Often, teams will remove a fullback and go with just one running back so they can have an extra wide receiver on the field. To effectively counter this type of attack, bring in an extra defensive back. Your best bet is to remove a linebacker, because linebackers usually aren't as skilled at covering a wide receiver as a defensive back is.

Using five defensive backs — three cornerbacks and two safeties — is referred to as a *nickel package*. There are all sorts of variations of the nickel defense. When you're going against a pass-oriented team that lines up three wide receivers on pretty much every down, the nickel will be your base defense for the day. (Offenses use this type of attack to try to create mismatches with the extra receiver, and if your unit isn't properly prepared, that third receiver can get open all game long.)

Going with six defensive backs — four cornerbacks and two safeties — is known as the *dime package*. In obvious passing downs and long-yardage situations, it's beneficial to have extra players on the field who are good at defending the pass. Sure, the biggest weakness of the dime package is that it's vulnerable to running plays, but you're playing the odds when you go to this package. If it's third-and-17, you can bring in your dime package, which usually features only one linebacker. If the opponent wants to run the ball against this formation, it'll likely pick up a few yards, but it probably won't pick up a first down, and your defense will have done its job in forcing a punt.



Be sure to spend time working on these nickel and dime packages during practice so your defense becomes comfortable using them. Your safeties have some of the biggest adjustments to make, because they have extra receivers running patterns all over the field that they have to monitor and provide coverage support to.

At the Line of Scrimmage

Playing defense is all about reading the offense's play and reacting to it. Defenses that force the offense to react to what the defense is doing instead gain huge advantages. Whenever an offense focuses its attention on what's occurring across the line of scrimmage, the chances of the play's success diminish, and that's great news for your unit!

Calling audibles based on offensive sets

One of the keys to playing good defense is anticipating the play before it unfolds and reacting accordingly. Defensive players who read what the opponent is doing will make lots of plays during the course of the game. Making the proper adjustments after the opponent has taken its position at the line of scrimmage impacts, to a large degree, how effective your unit will be at stopping the play.

Usually, the middle linebacker reads what the offense is doing and calls out the defensive signals to help make sure his teammates are in the proper position. For example, say you've called for the outside linebacker on the left to blitz. After the offense gets set at the line of scrimmage, your middle linebacker may read that the bulk of the formation is lined up on the right and that the offense will probably attempt a running play in that direction. Using a hand signal or code word — whatever form of communication for switching plays you've found works the best during practice — he makes the right adjustments for the unit so they're in a better position to stop the play.

Each defensive player, regardless of his position, can also learn how to read offensive players, enabling him to better fulfill his responsibilities. Here are some pairings in the art of reading the offense:

- ✓ **Linemen read the stances of offensive linemen.** The biggest cue for a defensive lineman is in the offensive lineman directly across from him, because offensive linemen often inadvertently tip off the upcoming play. If an offensive lineman doesn't have his weight leaning forward in his three-point stance, for instance, the play will probably be a pass — he's already thinking about getting set to pass protect.
- ✓ **Linebackers watch running backs.** Linebackers should focus on the running backs while they're in their stances. Sometimes a running back, as he awaits the snap of the ball, will already be looking in the direction he'll run. If the running back is staring to his left, that's a pretty good indication that he'll head in that direction.
- ✓ **Defensive backs focus on the quarterback's eyes.** Whenever a quarterback drops back to pass and follows his primary receiver down the field, he's giving defensive backs valuable information. On any pass pattern, the safety's job is to follow the eyes of the quarterback, because they'll often lead to his primary target.

Moving players around before the snap

Offenses that come to the line of scrimmage and always run the football aren't very successful, because the defense always knows what's coming. The same

situation applies to playing defense: If your unit sets up in the same formation every time, you're too predictable. Opponents can exploit that for big gains, because they know what they'll face every time they set up at the line of scrimmage.

Shifting players around at the line of scrimmage before the snap can cause chaos with blocking schemes and have the offense second-guessing the play that's been called. Causing these types of disruptions can really enhance the effectiveness of your defensive unit. Here are a few ways to create some real headaches for the opponent before the ball is snapped:

- ✓ **Move defensive linemen around.** Shifting your defensive linemen around before the snap presents a lot of challenges for the offensive linemen. When they're unprepared for these types of shifts, or don't have time to communicate with each other prior to the snap, your unit has a huge advantage. If you've been using the basic 4-3 formation all game long (covered in Chapter 13), you've had four down lineman taking their normal positions. To mix things up, have one of the defensive tackles slide a couple steps to the inside so that he's lined up directly over the center. Or have both tackles move a step to the inside, so now the center has two defensive players lined up near him. This forces the entire offensive line to make adjustments with their blocking.
- ✓ **Put linebackers on the move.** On many rushing plays, the fullback has the responsibility of blocking a linebacker to help create an opening for the halfback. As the fullback awaits the snap of the ball, he eyes the linebacker that he'll be blocking. By moving your linebackers around, you remove the fullback's advantage, because who he thought was going to be there to block has shifted out of his range.

You have lots of options here. You can bring one or both of your outside linebackers to the line of scrimmage, taking positions on the outside next to the defensive ends. You can also slide an outside linebacker between a defensive tackle and defensive end. This move may force the offensive tackle to commit to blocking the linebacker, which can spring your defensive end free to get into the backfield quickly.
- ✓ **Creep up the safeties.** Yes, your safeties are your last line of defense, but that doesn't mean you can't move them around to confuse the offense once in a while. If you think the offense is going with a running play, call a defensive play that brings one of your safeties up near the line of scrimmage to help smother the play. If the safety reads a cue that it's going to be a passing play, he can quickly backpedal several steps to provide the necessary coverage support.

Chapter 17

Coaching Special Teams

In This Chapter

- ▶ Covering and returning kicks
- ▶ Kicking and defending field goals
- ▶ Teaching punt returns and coverages

For a lot of youngsters, playing on special teams doesn't seem as glamorous as catching a pass over the middle for a big gain or as thrilling as sacking the quarterback. Yet special teams are as important as the offensive and defensive units. Your job is making kids aware of that — and getting them to embrace the wide range of responsibilities that accompany playing on these units.

Whether you're returning a kickoff or covering a punt, these plays are the ones that typically affect the game's momentum the most. Special teams also have a big impact on field position and often play a decisive role in how much success your team has in the game.

Special teams are usually used only at the more advanced levels of football, after youngsters develop the strength needed to kick and punt the ball. If you're coaching an older team or simply want to give your young squad a peek at this area of the game, this chapter's for you.

Defending and Returning Kickoffs

Because kickoffs begin games, a big return from your team or stopping the opponent deep in its end can boost confidence, grab momentum, and serve as the springboard to a fun and productive day of football. Kickoffs also follow any score, so a big return or well-covered kick can keep that momentum rolling along if play is going well for your team. It can also help reclaim a slice of momentum if the squad is struggling or trailing in the game.

Having a unit that's successful at the kicking game requires that you teach kids basic return and cover schemes, the dos and don'ts of blocking on these plays, and the important role kicking has on the team's overall success.



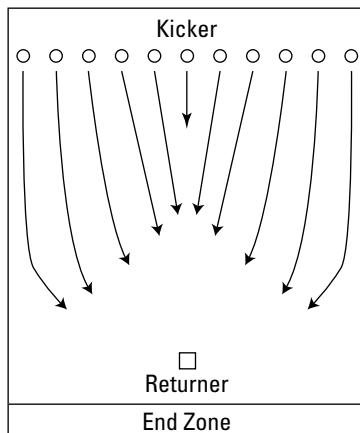
Issue challenges to your kickoff return and coverage teams to help keep the group focused on performing to the best of their abilities. For example, heading into a game, see how many times the coverage unit can keep its opponent inside the 30-yard line on kickoffs or how many times your return team can move the ball past its 40-yard line. Providing challenges helps kids understand the importance you place on the kicking game and helps them really focus on doing their best. You can even designate a special teams player of the week — the kids will play hard to earn that extra recognition.

Kicking off

It's a good sign if your team kicks off a lot, because that means you're putting points on the scoreboard. Kickoffs follow touchdowns or field goals. They also start the game and the second half. In regulation football games, a team kicks off from its own 35-yard line. Kickers use a tee, but they enlist one of their teammates on the field to hold the ball on windy days, when Mother Nature blows the ball off the tee.

The basic type of coverage is the *lane* coverage. You basically divide the field into ten equal rows running the length of the field, with each player staying in his "lane" as they run downfield (see Figure 17-1). As they approach the returner, they begin angling toward him and converge to make the tackle. The kicker stays back as a safety, just in case the returner breaks free. The players on each end have the added responsibility of ensuring that the returner doesn't get to the sideline for a big gain.

Figure 17-1:
Proper lane
coverage is
essential for
an effective
kickoff.



Here are a few points to stress to your players:

- ✓ **Maintain proper spacing.** Having two or three players in the same lane creates openings for the opposition. Good kickoff returners can exploit these gaps and turn them into big gains. Players who get blocked out of their lanes must work to regain proper positioning.
- ✓ **Run under control.** You want your players to run downfield as quickly as possible, but you don't want them to overrun plays. Teach the kids to shorten their strides as they near the ball carrier to keep their bodies under control. Using shorter strides puts your players in position to react to any moves or cuts the returner makes, so the kids will be able to respond accordingly to make tackles.
- ✓ **Don't surrender position.** Defenders give up their position when they take the wrong angle toward the returner. For example, a defender running down the right sideline and heading toward the ball carrier needs to aim for the player's leg that's closest to the sideline. By doing so, he gives the returner less opportunity to maneuver past him. If he targets the inside leg, the returner has a little more working margin to cut to the outside and avoid the tackle.
- ✓ **Remember the unit's importance.** Covering kicks isn't that appealing to some kids, so a pep talk may be in order to get them enthusiastic about playing on this unit. Let them know that you've chosen them to fill specific roles because of their skills — whether it's their ability to fight off blocks or their speed in getting down the field.

Delivering onside kicks

The *onside kick* is a technique in which players kick the ball a short distance so they can try to regain possession of the ball. The kicking team must kick the ball 10 yards before they're allowed to recover it (unless the opponent touches the ball before it goes 10 yards; then it's up for grabs). Teams typically use this kick when they're trailing late in the game and they need the ball back right away. Teams also use it at any time during the game to catch the opponent off guard. Some kickers are more effective with onside kicks when they have a holder instead of using a kicking tee. Of course, if the onside kick is being used to surprise the opponent, the kicker sticks with the kicking tee so he doesn't let on that it's coming.

Teams can use all types of different kicks to execute an onside kick. Work with your kicker to find what works best for him and the kicking team. The following are some of the more popular approaches to get you started:

- ✓ **High hopper:** The kicker makes contact with the top half of the ball and drives it into the ground. By doing so, the ball bounces high in the air, giving the kicking team time to make a play on the ball. (See Chapter 18 for the High Hopper drill.)
- ✓ **Squibber:** The kicker sends the ball low on the ground — the move's referred to as a *squib* kick — causing it to bounce in weird directions and making it difficult for the receiving team to handle.
- ✓ **Pooch:** The kicker makes contact on the bottom half of the ball and uses an abbreviated follow through so the ball pops over the heads of the first line of defenders and lands in an open area of the field. This creates a simple race for the ball that you can use to your advantage, because your players can run at full speed to the area of the field they know the ball will land in, while the receiving team has to react to the kick.

Returning kickoffs

A good kickoff return can benefit your team enormously by shortening the field for the offensive unit. Conversely, a poor return can pin your team deep in its own end and make players have to negotiate a greater distance down-field. When introducing the kickoff return to your squad, make sure they understand that they have to defend slightly over half the field, because as soon as the ball travels 10 yards, it's up for grabs.

When setting up your alignment, spread players across the field to help ensure that your team has all areas properly covered. A basic setup includes five blockers spread across the field as the front line, approximately 10 yards away from where the ball is placed to be kicked. The setup you choose for the remainder of your players is based on personal preference and what you think works best for your team. The following sections explain a couple basic returns you may want to teach your players to start off.



To help eliminate the costly penalties that can wipe out a big return from your team, continually stress to players that they're allowed to deliver blocks only above the waist on kickoffs.

Wall (wedge) return

This system requires the players along the front line to run downfield as soon as the ball is kicked to help form a wall in front of the returner (see Figure 17-2). The players on the outside positioned midway down the field provide protection at the corners of the wall. The other players who are positioned deep downfield also provide blocking support. The returner's job is to follow the wall and be on the lookout for any opening that develops that he can run through.

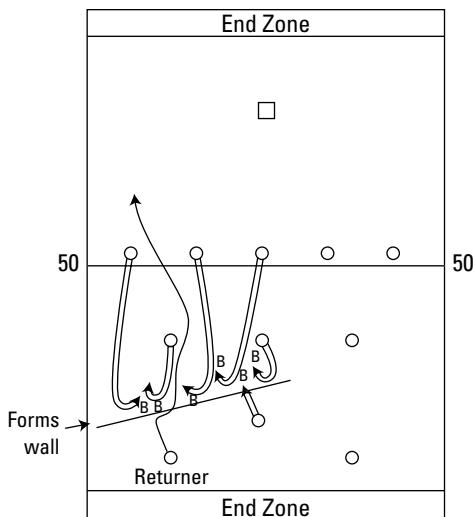


Figure 17-2:
The returner gets behind the wall of players and looks for an opening to develop.

Sweep return

As soon as the ball is kicked off in this system (see Figure 17-3), the five front-line players positioned near the 50-yard line retreat and seal off the opposition so that the returner can get around the corner and turn upfield. The three players lined up in the middle of the field, and those near the goal line, provide blocking against opposing players who get through the first wave of blocks around the midfield area. With this return, your blockers try to create a lane around the end that the returner can sprint through.

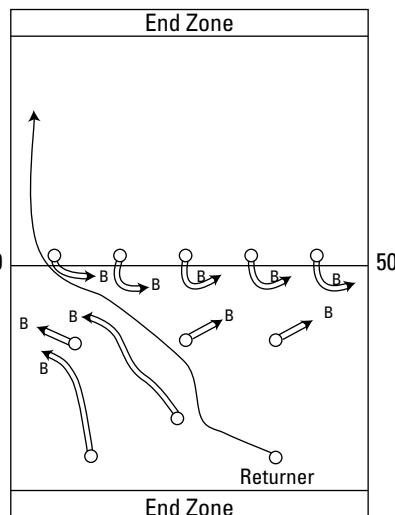


Figure 17-3:
On the sweep return, the returner heads for the corner and then turns upfield.

Extra Points and Field Goals

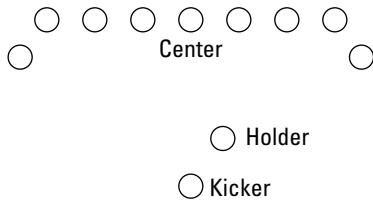
At the beginning levels of football, field goals are rare simply because kids don't yet have the leg strength to get balls in the air and through the cross-bars. At the more advanced levels, field goals take on a more prominent role and often impact the outcome of games. Being able to put points on the scoreboard through the kicking game is a real advantage, as is putting lots of pressure on the opponent's kicker when he's attempting a field goal. And don't overlook the extra points teams can shoot for after each touchdown — they can determine the winner of the game.

Kicking and defending extra points

Even though the play is worth only a point, many games are decided by a point or two. The extra point is just as important as any other play that occurs during the game. You always want your players playing hard on every down, regardless of the score or the situation in the game.

The same alignment that your team uses for field goals can be used for kicking the extra point, too (see Figure 17-4). You want good blockers along the line of scrimmage to prevent players from getting penetration, and your ball holder should have good hands to catch the snap from the center and get the football placed properly for the kicker.

Figure 17-4:
You can rely
on the same
alignment
for an extra
point or
field goal
attempt.



Keep your defensive players on the field when defending the extra point attempt, because there's always the chance the opponent will try a trick play and go for the two-point conversion instead (see the next section). Your unit will be disappointed that they just gave up a touchdown, so you'll have to work with the kids to keep them upbeat and positive and make sure they fully concentrate on stopping the extra point. Blocking an extra point, or getting enough pressure on the kicker so that the kick misses, can do wonders for soothing some of the disappointment that often accompanies surrendering a touchdown.

Two-point conversions

Instead of kicking extra points following touchdowns, teams have the option of attempting *two-point conversions*. The ball is placed on the 3-yard line, and if the offense is able to get the ball across the goal line, it receives two points. This play is similar to a short-yardage play near the goal line, because there's not a lot of room for the offense to operate. Check out Chapters 12 and 13 for offensive and defensive tips for these short-yardage plays.

Setting up to kick a field goal

Converting a field goal attempt requires the successful execution of several steps: The players must be aligned properly to start (see Figure 17-4), the center snap must be on target to the ball holder, the blockers must keep the defenders away from the kicker, the holder must place the ball down properly, and the kicker must make the kick. Here are some field goal tips:

- ✓ **The snap:** The center's target is the holder's hands (see Chapter 10 for information on snapping technique for long snaps). As soon as the center snaps the ball, he brings his arms up to block to stop the opposition from putting pressure up the middle.
- ✓ **The holder's catch:** The ball holder positions himself about 7 yards from the line of scrimmage. He kneels with his back knee on the ground pointing toward the sideline and his front leg up with the foot pointing toward the goal post. He catches the ball with his thumbs together and palms facing forward.
- ✓ **Placing the ball:** The holder places the ball on the ground or kicking tee, with the index finger of his back hand on the top point of the ball to balance it. He uses his other hand to rotate the ball — if necessary — so the laces of the ball face away from the kicker.
- ✓ **The block:** The priority for players on the line of scrimmage is to block defenders on their inside so there's no penetration up the middle, which can be catastrophic for a kicker. If a player on the other team gets free on the outside, the kicker still has a good chance of getting off the kick.
- ✓ **The kick:** The kicker should keep his head down as he makes contact with the ball and follow through with his kicking leg toward the target. See Chapter 10 for troubleshooting on kicking.

Setting up to block a field goal

When attempting to block a field goal, one of your best bets is to go with your short-yardage or goal-line defense, which we cover in Chapter 13.

Make sure your players watch the ball when trying to block field goals. You don't want players to jump offside in their enthusiasm to block the kick. It can be pretty deflating to your defense to get called for offside on a long field goal attempt that suddenly turns into a first down for the opposition.

Coaches naturally focus on providing solid protection up the middle so defenders can't charge through and have a straight path to the kicker. In response, try lining up one of your faster players at the outside shoulder of the offensive player at the end of the line of scrimmage, and see whether your player can beat the offensive man around the corner and get to the kicker.

Running a fake field goal

Kids love trickery, and you'll see the enthusiasm climb dramatically when practicing these plays. Being able to successfully use tricky plays during a game can stir up lots of excitement, shift momentum, and recharge energy levels. A couple options to consider for executing fake field goals:

- ✓ **Direct snap to the kicker:** When the ball is snapped directly to the "kicker," he can run with it, or you can design a play in which he passes the ball. For example, you can have the "holder" sneak out of the backfield, and with the opponent caught off guard by the fake, he may be able to slip free and get open for a pass.
- ✓ **Holder runs the ball:** The "holder" places the ball down just as he would for an actual kick, but as soon as the kicker's leg nears the ball, he pulls it away and takes off running with it.

Punting

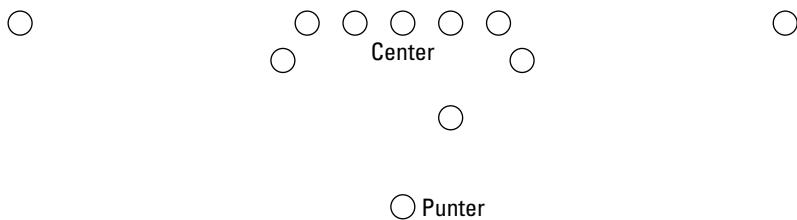
Of all the special teams skills, covering and returning punts are the most common over the course of a game. Punts occur frequently because anytime the offense fails to get a first down, the squad will usually punt on fourth down rather than risk going for another first down. This is especially true when the offense has the ball on its half of the field, where a failed fourth-down play gives the ball over to the opposition closer to the goal line. An effective punter, as well as dependable punt return and coverage units, can help your team win the battle for good field position.

Basic punt coverage

The spread punt formation (see Figure 17-5) is a basic coverage. Teach your players to make contact by blocking the defender in front of them and, as the

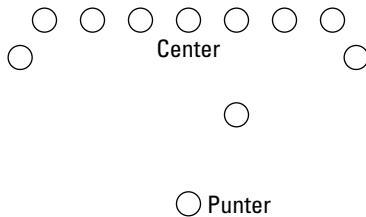
ball is being kicked, to sprint downfield to tackle the punt returner. The responsibilities of the two players on the outside are to race down the field as soon as the ball is snapped.

Figure 17-5:
The spread
formation
works well
for covering
punts.



Whenever your team has to punt near its own goal line, you want to employ a tighter formation (see Figure 17-6). The primary goal in these situations is to get the punt off more quickly than normal, because your players will have less room to work with than on a standard punt in the middle of the field.

Figure 17-6:
Being
backed up
near your
end zone
requires a
tighter punt
formation.



Having a punt blocked really changes the momentum of the game. It usually results from a bad snap from the center, the punter's being slow in getting the punt off, the punter's mishandling the snap, or a breakdown in protection in which a defender gets past a blocker.

Punt returns

Consider the following tips for a successful punt return:

- ✓ **Watch for fakes.** You don't want the opposition to gain a first down on a fake punt after your defense has just done a great job forcing them into a punting situation.
- ✓ **Understand field position, down, and distance.** Most teams won't risk trying a fake punt deep in their own end of the field, though as soon as

they get near the midfield area, the chances of a fake occurring increase greatly. Also, when it's fourth down and 5 yards or less to go, there's a pretty good chance the punt team will try to draw your players offside to get a first down. Helping your players understand game situations can prepare the kids to act accordingly.

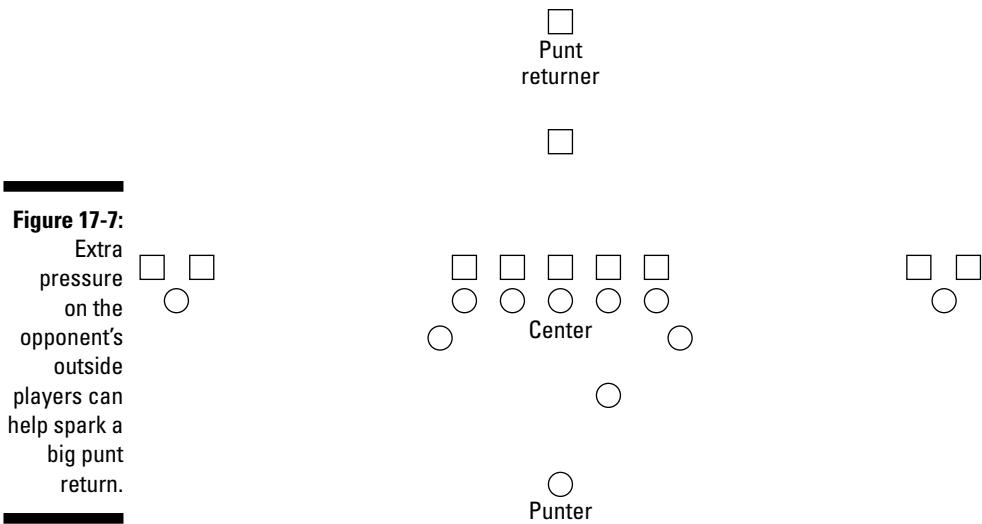
- ✓ **Don't rough the kicker.** Getting flagged for a roughing-the-kicker penalty is costly because you give the ball back to the opposition, plus they get a free 15 yards. Help your players become disciplined and teach them to take the proper angles so that they don't run the risk of running into the kicker when they go for the block.
- ✓ **Avoid blocking penalties.** Blocking penalties often nullify a great return and crush the excitement that accompanies a big return. Teach players to deliver blocks only on players whose front jersey numbers they can see, as this method helps eliminate costly clipping penalties.
- ✓ **Catch the football.** Turning the ball over by failing to catch the punt is no different from giving up a big pass play. Work with your punt returners to concentrate on catching the ball and securing it before beginning any moves downfield.
- ✓ **Get upfield.** You want your returner to get upfield as quickly as possible. The more time he spends moving to his left or right, the more time defenders have to get downfield and make a play.
- ✓ **Make sure the returner knows where he is.** The returner should never catch the ball if he has to stand inside his own 10-yard-line to do so. He's better off letting the ball bounce, because the ball will usually roll into the end zone for a touchback, and the team will get possession of it at the 20-yard line.



Work with your returner to get him to use the fair catch signal (waving his arm above his head) and pretend that he's preparing to catch the ball. This action can get defenders to slow down and therefore not be in position to down the ball inside the 10-yard line when it hits the ground.

- ✓ **Encourage catches.** If the returner has a reasonable opportunity to catch the ball, you want him to do so. Any time the ball hits the ground, it can roll 10 or 20 yards down the field. The farther it rolls, the more first downs your offensive unit has to make just to get the ball back to where it hit.
- ✓ **Help teammates know where the ball is.** One of the responsibilities of the returner is to let his teammates know where the ball is at all times. A short punt that he's unable to field poses some potential problems, because the blockers in front of him won't know the ball's position, as they'll be engaged in their blocks. The return man needs to let his teammates know to get out of the way so the ball doesn't accidentally touch them and give the opposition a chance to recover it. Simply yelling out "short left" lets his blockers to the left know that they need to locate the ball and get away from it.

- ✓ **Issue challenges.** Challenge your blockers not to be the one who allows the player they're blocking to make the tackle on the punt returner.
- ✓ **Use outside containment.** The job of the players on the outside is to make it as difficult as possible for the opposition to get down the field. The longer they can keep the opposition pinned near the line of scrimmage, the better chance your returner has of making a nice run. Sometimes coaches elect to put two players on each of the opponent's outside players (see Figure 17-7) to make it doubly difficult for them to get downfield and pressure the returner.



Rushing the punter

Your unit doesn't have to block a punt in order to be successful. Simply getting even a little extra pressure on the punter can force the punter to rush more than he's accustomed to, which often produces a less effective kick. Here are some tips your players should keep in mind when rushing the punter:

- ✓ **Pressure the punt team.** If the snapper feels the pressure of having to deliver an accurate snap and the punter feels a heavy rush coming his way and rushes his punt, the chances of a successful return for your squad increase.
- ✓ **Watch the ball.** In order to get a good jump, players must have the football in their peripheral vision and move as soon as the center moves the ball.
- ✓ **Aim for the punter's foot.** Teach players to aim for taking the ball off the punter's foot, which increases the chances of blocking the punt and

decreases the chances of running into the punter and getting flagged for a penalty.

- ✓ **Extend arms together.** As players get near the punter, they need to keep their hands together as they extend their arms to block the ball; otherwise, they risk having the kick go right through the gap between their hands. Also, you want players to keep their eyes open; younger kids sometimes tend to close them, which detracts from their ability to successfully block the kick.



When teaching kids how to block a punt, use a beach ball or one of those soft, foamy footballs that children play with. This modification helps kids get comfortable reaching their hands out to block the ball, and they won't get banged up learning this skill or be afraid of learning it.

Chapter 18

Implementing Advanced Drills

In This Chapter

- ▶ Honing offensive skills
- ▶ Enhancing defensive skills
- ▶ Getting players in shape

One of the things kids love about playing football — besides all the cool equipment — is learning all sorts of new skills and seeing them pay off during games. You're at the controls of this wonderful season-long journey, and the real trick of keeping the learning and skill development cruising along is constantly introducing challenging new drills to keep pace with the kids' progress from week to week.

In this chapter, you find a bunch of advanced drills to help propel your players to higher levels of play. These drills are more challenging to meet the needs of advanced players and touch on areas of the game that really come into play more often at the more competitive levels. This chapter also dips into conditioning, which impacts how successful the kids are on the field, as well as how much fun they have playing the game.

Offensive Drills

Some days things just don't go according to plan, and that means you have to resort to other measures to get the team going and the ball moving down the field. Here are some drills to help your players become more proficient at executing the no-huddle offense and pulling off trick plays, among others.

Developing the no-huddle offense

The no-huddle offense, or two-minute drill, aims to move the ball down the field quickly and doesn't waste valuable time in a huddle. Here are a couple drills that can help your team become more proficient at this technique when they're trailing late in the game and they need to go to it. (If your defense

needs to brush up on its skills, check out the upcoming section titled “Defending the no-huddle offense: Seven-Up.”)

Name That Play

This drill forces players to think quickly and digest what play has been called while they’re getting set at the line of scrimmage.

What you need: Entire offensive and defensive units. 1 ball.

How it works: The offensive unit starts with the ball at their 10-yard line. Their challenge is to get the ball downfield in less than 2 minutes, or whatever amount of time you want to set. As the players come to the line of scrimmage, you call out the code word or number for the play you want to run, and the players have only a second or two to get set at the line of scrimmage and execute the play.



Use colors or numbers to identify a series of plays for your no-huddle offense. With this system, for example, the quarterback simply has to shout “Red,” and players know what type of pass pattern they need to run.

Coaching pointers: Simply watch to see whether the players know their responsibilities on each play. If your team struggles with its no-huddle offense, perhaps the kids have too much to remember. Try scaling back your plays to just a couple passing plays and a couple running plays and see whether that helps get the unit back on track. If cutting back turns out to be the answer, then allow the kids to run those plays and build their confidence, and then slowly add plays from there. (For more information on offensive plays and pass patterns, see Chapter 12.)

Speed Throws

If you’re looking to challenge your quarterback to make quick decisions and get the ball downfield quickly, which is the essence of the no-huddle offense, this is the drill to use.

What you need: 1 quarterback, 1 center, 2 wide receivers, 2 defensive backs. 1 football.

How it works: Use half the field. The purpose of the drill is for the offensive group to move the ball downfield, but here’s the catch: As soon as the quarterback receives the snap from the shotgun formation (see Chapter 12), he only has 5 seconds to get rid of the ball. As soon as he receives the snap from the center, begin counting to five. The defensive backs play aggressive man-to-man coverage and really have the advantage in this drill, because they know that the quarterback only has a few seconds to get rid of the ball.

Coaching pointers: If the defensive backs play tight at the line of scrimmage, the receivers really have to work on getting free quickly. If receivers can't break free, they won't be able to get into their patterns, which greatly reduces the offense's chances of success when the quarterback faces a heavy rush during the game. You can begin the drill by having the defensive backs play several steps away from the line of scrimmage to allow the quarterback and receivers a chance to get comfortable with their timing. Then, to increase the difficulty level, move the defensive backs up tight so the receivers are bumped and challenged to get free at the line of scrimmage in order to run their patterns.

If the offensive group can move the ball pretty effectively, you can also increase the difficulty by adding a safety, a defensive lineman, or a linebacker to rush the passer.

Trick play: Receiver Relay

Here's an effective drill to help your receivers if you want to include some type of reverse in your trick play arsenal. A *reverse* is one of the most commonly used trick plays. It involves giving the ball to a player behind the line of scrimmage, who runs close to parallel to the line of scrimmage in one direction; he then hands the ball to a player going the opposite way. The goal of a reverse is to get the defensive players moving in the direction of the player who initially has the ball, so as soon as the ball is handed off to his teammate, the defense is out of position. The second ball carrier then has an opening to exploit.

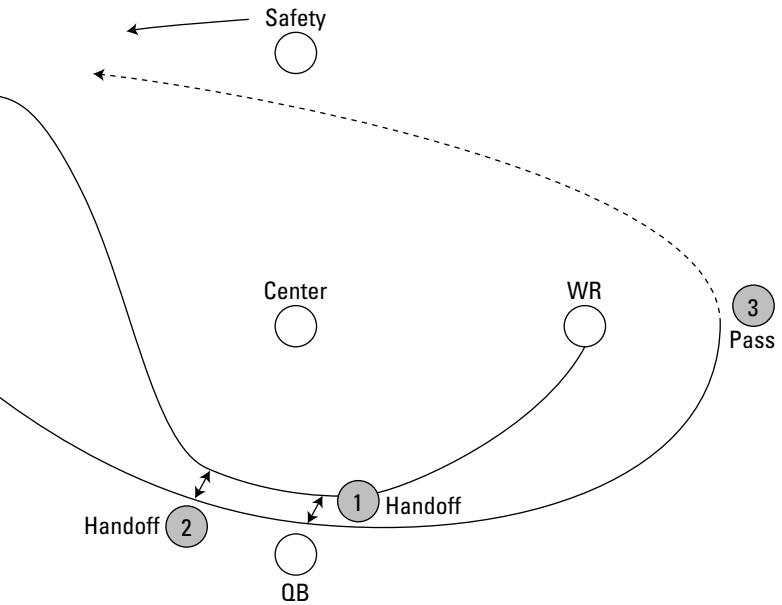
In order for any type of reverse to be effective, your wide receivers have to be able to handle and throw the ball. Here's a drill to help them hone those skills.

What you need: 2 wide receivers, 1 quarterback, 1 center, 1 safety. 1 football.

How it works: The quarterback takes his position in the shotgun formation (see Chapter 12), with a wide receiver lined up on each side of him. The receiver on the right lines up a few yards closer to the center than the receiver on the left. The safety lines up about 10 yards away from the center. On the snap:

1. **The quarterback turns and hands off the ball to the wide receiver on his right, who is running toward him (see Figure 18-1).**
2. **This first receiver takes the ball and runs toward the other receiver, who is headed toward him, too.**
3. **The first receiver hands the ball off to the second receiver and then cuts upfield to run a pass pattern, while the receiver with the ball tries to complete a pass to the first receiver.**

Figure 18-1:
The Receiver Relay drill helps prepare wide receivers for executing trick plays.



Coaching pointers: Smooth exchanges of the ball between players who don't normally deal with handoffs is the key to executing a trick play, so keep a close watch to make sure the receivers are using proper form when taking the ball. (See Chapter 9 for more information on giving and receiving handoffs.)

Practicing onside kicks

Some games, your team may find itself behind with time running out, and your only hope may be getting possession of the ball back quickly with an onside kick. An *onside kick* occurs when the kicking team attempts to recover the ball by kicking it just a short distance. The ball must go 10 yards before any player on the kicking team is allowed to touch it, unless a player from the opposing team touches it first. Although recovering an onside kick is difficult for the kicking team, the following drills can help your unit enjoy a little more success. (For more information on onside kicks, flip to Chapter 17.)

High Hopper

One of the most effective techniques for executing a successful onside kick is getting the ball to bounce high in the air so the players on the kicking team have time to cover the necessary 10 yards and make a play on it.

What you need: 1 kicker, 3 other players. 1 ball.

How it works: Position the three players close together so they form a sort of mini wall about 7 yards away from the kicker with their hands straight up in the air. The kicker's challenge is to drive the ball into the ground so that it bounces high enough to clear the players in front of him.

When kickers can consistently get the ball to bounce high and go the required 10 yards before one of their teammates can touch it, the chances of a successful onside kick greatly increase.

Coaching pointers: Watch where the kicker's foot makes contact with the ball. He has to contact the top half of the ball and kick with a downward motion to successfully drive the ball into the ground and get that desired high bounce. Players who use a straight-ahead approach (see Chapter 10) on regular kickoffs usually enjoy more success by sticking to that motion with their onside kicks, too, because the kids are comfortable with that technique. If players are having difficulty making contact with the top half of the ball, have them move their plant foot back a few inches.

Attack

The Attack is an excellent drill that gives the kickoff unit practice recovering onside kicks and gives the return unit practice fielding them.

What you need: 1 kicker, 2 players on the kickoff coverage unit, 2 players on the return unit. 1 ball.

How it works: Follow these steps:

1. **The kickoff return players take their position 10 yards away from the ball.**
2. **The kicker delivers the onside kick, which can be the High Hopper described in the preceding drill or another type of onside kick you want him to work on.**
3. **The players on the coverage unit sprint toward the return players and attempt to recover the ball.**

Coaching pointers: You want the coverage players to use a strong burst of speed the moment the kicker makes contact with the ball, because the more quickly they cover those 10 yards, the greater chance they have of recovering it. For the players on the return unit, you want them tucking the ball away and protecting it on the ground as soon as their hands touch it.

To increase the difficulty level for the coverage team, add an extra player to the return unit; to make the drill more challenging for the return unit, put another player on the coverage unit.

Fake punt: Follow the Leader

Catching a defense off balance with a fake punt can provide a real spark to your team and put your offense in good field position. Here's a drill to help your punt-coverage team's fake punts pay big dividends.

What you need: Punt coverage unit, punt return unit. 1 ball.

How it works: The two units line up against each other. After the punter receives the snap, he holds the ball out in front of him like he does on a regular punt, takes a step forward like he's about to deliver the kick, and then takes off; he follows the blocking, looks for an opening to run through, and rushes downfield. The return unit knows the punter plans to run in this drill, so he'll be challenged to make good decisions.

When a punter experiences some success going up against a unit that already knows he's running, he's likely to have lots of success on game day against an opponent that's not expecting a fake.

Coaching pointers: In order for fake punts to be successful, your punter must have the confidence to run with the ball and hit the opening. You want your punter to develop the habit of running with his head up after he's taken a step forward as though he's going through with the punt. Being able to catch an opponent off guard requires moving quickly before the defense has a chance to react to the fake. You'll also increase your chances by setting up in the same punt formation every time so that you don't tip the opposition off that a fake is coming. (If you need to help your punter brush up on his ball-carrying skills, check out Chapter 9.)

Defensive Drills

A good defensive unit is one that's prepared to handle anything the opponent throws its way — at any time. Here are a couple drills to help your unit respond to no-huddle offenses and Hail Mary passes.

Defending the no-huddle offense: Seven-Up

From time to time during the season, your defense will have to try to stop an opponent's no-huddle offense. This type of attack poses all sorts of challenges

for defensive units, but the Seven-Up drill can help them prepare. (If your offensive players need to work on their skills, see “Developing the no-huddle offense,” earlier in this chapter, and Chapter 12; Chapter 13 gives you additional info on defending the no-huddle.)

What you need: 9 offensive players, 3 defensive linemen, 4 defensive backs. 1 ball.

How it works: The offensive unit begins at its own 20-yard line against just seven defensive players. Give the offensive unit a minute on the clock with no timeouts and see whether they can get the ball down the field.

Coaching pointers: The defense is outnumbered, so tell your defenders to make sure they keep the play in front of them and don’t allow any receiver to get by them for a big gain, just as they would during a game. Also, encourage the defense to make the offense throw the ball in the middle area of the field, where the offense can’t get to the sidelines to stop the clock.

Stopping the Hail Mary pass: Jump Ball

Giving up a Hail Mary pass to the opposition can be pretty deflating to a defense. This drill helps your defensive backs get in the habit of knocking the ball down when defending Hail Mary passes.

What you need: 2 wide receivers, 1 defensive back. 1 coach. 1 ball.

How it works: Position a defensive back and two wide receivers about 20 yards away from you. You throw a ball high up in the air, and the defensive back tries to knock the ball to the ground while the receivers try to catch it.

Coaching pointers: Defensive players are often tempted to try to intercept the ball, which can lead to deflections and more opportunities for the offense to make the grab. So make sure the defender swats the ball to the ground. If a receiver can’t get his hands on the ball cleanly, make sure he at least tries to tip the ball into the air so a teammate can make a play on it.

Conditioning Your Players

On your lengthy list of responsibilities, conditioning players ranks right up there with teaching skills and promoting safety. The better shape players are in, the more effective they are during games, the less likely they are to become injured, and the more fun they can have.

Youngsters don't enjoy playing as much — and aren't great assets to the team — if they're gasping for breath before halftime and are unable to make plays they know they could make if they weren't so tired. Unconditioned players are also more susceptible to injuries than players operating on a full tank of energy: Tired players often get sloppy with their technique, sometimes using improper form when making a tackle.



Sometimes at the more competitive levels, you'll know who's going to be on your team a month or so in advance of the season. If that's the case, consider having a brief meeting with the players to discuss conditioning. Encourage them to begin running to help build up their cardiovascular endurance. If they have access to weights, encourage them to do some lifting — always under adult supervision. If not, the old standbys of push-ups, sit-ups, and squats are great for building muscle and strengthening bodies. (Flip to Chapter 11 for the basics on these.) You can even ask an expert — a professional from a local gym or a strength and conditioning coach from a nearby collegiate team — to share insight with your players on this aspect of the game.



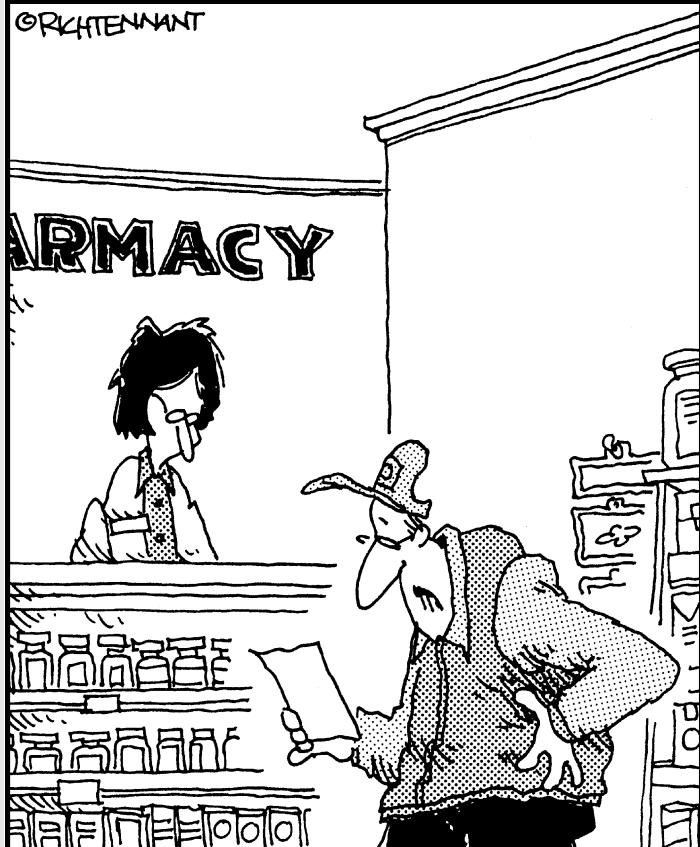
The most effective conditioning takes place when you incorporate it right into your practices so the kids don't even know it's going on. Using active drills, like the Pressure the Punter drill covered in Chapter 14, develops skills while conditioning players. Sure, you can set aside 15 minutes of your practice to have kids run laps around the field, but that kind of conditioning also makes kids dread coming to practice. To pack your practices with skill development and physical conditioning, all you need is a little ingenuity. You can raise the conditioning benefits of any of your drills by simply repeating them several times in succession with no rest in between. During practice, don't allow youngsters to stand around unless they're consuming water.

Part V

The Extra Points

The 5th Wave By Rich Tennant

©RICH TENNANT



"Let's see - I'll need some children's aspirin for my players and some sedatives for their parents."

In this part . . .

What your team members do before they take the field impacts their performance on it. In this part, we serve up some pre- and post-game nutritional tips to fuel your players, and we examine how you can best protect them from those annoying injuries. And if you're forced to deal with a problem parent or child, you can find some solutions for those issues as well.

Chapter 19

Keeping Your Players Healthy

In This Chapter

- ▶ Choosing the right foods
- ▶ Getting players in shape
- ▶ Preventing and treating injuries
- ▶ Watching Mother Nature

You know that being in charge of a youth football team involves teaching kids basic skills, techniques, and strategies of the game. You may not be aware of a lot of other responsibilities, such as preventing, recognizing, and treating injuries; dealing with emergencies; stepping up to the plate (so to speak) to provide pre- and post-game eating tips; and keeping an eye on what Mother Nature is up to.

Although you certainly don't need a degree in sports medicine or to be an expert in nutrition, being at least familiar with these aspects and how they influence kids' performances on the field can make a big difference in how much they enjoy playing — and how successful you are in helping them reach their potential. This chapter gives you the scoop on these often overlooked areas of coaching football.

Following a Healthy Diet

When players put the wrong foods in their mouths before arriving at the field, they compromise their performance and slow their bodies' rate of recovery. Although you can't control what your team eats before practices and games, you can, to some extent, impact whether players reach for potato chips and soda or fruits and water. So spend some time discussing the importance of good nutritional habits with your players and how their diet affects what they're able to do on the field.

Discussing nutrition with your players (and even their parents) can make a big difference in their lives and produce sound eating habits — particularly if your message sinks in that fueling the body with the right foods can provide extra energy and strength. Good nutrition is found in the basic food groups.

What to eat pre-game

When your players show up at games with an empty stomach, or worse, after devouring a burger, fries, and soda on the drive over, their energy levels will be down and they'll have trouble performing and concentrating. Nutritious pre-game meals clear the way for youngsters to play at their best. Youngsters who consume healthy meals — or at least some healthy snacks — comprised of plenty of carbohydrates have the muscle energy to play and play well.



Carbs are converted into energy more quickly and efficiently than other nutrients. For the most nutritional punch, youngsters should opt for pastas, breads, cereals, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. Good pre-game snacks include bagels, yogurt, dried fruit, fresh fruit, energy bars, fruit granola bars, and whole grain crackers with peanut butter or cheese. Stay away from candy, cookies, donuts, and regular and diet sodas, which can handcuff a player's performance.

Encourage players to consume their pre-game meal 2 to 3 hours prior to kickoff. They should avoid eating within an hour of game time, because their bodies will spend the first half of the game digesting their food, which detracts from their performance. Pre-game meals shouldn't be especially heavy: Sandwiches and some fruits and vegetables work fine.

A lot of football programs schedule games in the morning hours. If your team has an early kickoff and the kids aren't able to get up early enough to have a proper pre-game meal, make sure they focus on eating a nutritionally sound meal the night before, which helps prepare their bodies when they step on the field the following morning. This meal should be a big serving of pasta with some vegetables, chicken, or fish. Even the night before a game, kids should steer clear of candy, ice cream, and soda, which can rob them of much-needed energy on game day.

What to eat after the game

What the players eat following a contest impacts their bodies. Rewarding kids for a game well-played with a tasty snack is fun, but giving them junk food sends the wrong message about the importance of sticking to sound nutritional habits. The following are some post-game tips:

- | ➔ **Think carbohydrates.** Foods rich in carbohydrates that also have some protein value are the most beneficial for youngsters. Ideally, the post-game meal or snack should look a lot like the pre-game meal but with smaller portions. Turkey sandwiches, fresh fruit, and crackers with cheese are great post-game foods to let your team chow down on.

- ✓ **Remember that the sooner your team digs into its post-game food, the better.** Research indicates that foods packed with carbohydrates that are consumed within 30 minutes of a game or practice provide the most benefits for youngsters.
- ✓ **Ask parents to bring snacks for the entire team.** At the preseason parents meeting, ask someone to put together a schedule so parents know when they're responsible for bringing post-game snacks. Make sure everyone knows what kinds of food are appropriate. You can flip to Chapter 4 for more info on getting parents to help out.

Staying hydrated

The importance of consuming lots of fluids — and the right kinds — simply can't be overstated. When kids are playing and exerting energy, their body temperature rises. The younger the children, the less they sweat, because their sweat glands aren't completely developed at this stage. That's one of the reasons their bodies soak up more heat when they play games in high temperatures. Children who don't consume adequate amounts of water during games, especially those contested in hot and humid conditions, are at increased risk of becoming dehydrated and suffering muscle cramps, heat exhaustion or, even worse, heatstroke. For more on the dangers of dehydration and overheating, see "Sun and fair skies: Heat and sun risks," later in this chapter.

So how much water should kids consume? Well, the amount varies, because the game conditions dictate whether players need to increase water consumption to remain sufficiently hydrated. Also, with so many different body types, kids sweat at different rates and need different levels of fluids.



Post-game snacks for everyone

Gathering the team around for a tasty post-game snack is a great way to conclude a fun day of football — as long as the snacks are appropriate for everyone. But a child who's lactose intolerant, for example, won't have any fun watching his teammates devour cheese and crackers, and (excuse the pun) that'll leave a pretty sour taste in his mouth about his game day experience.

During your preseason parents meeting (covered in Chapter 4), find out whether any of the kids have food allergies or intolerances that you should be aware of. Knowing this type of information before the season gets rolling will allow those parents in charge of bringing snacks to plan accordingly so there's something tasty for everyone.



Generally speaking, you want kids to drink water whenever possible. This rule means drinking a glass of water with their pre-game meal; consuming water during the pre-game warm-ups; and taking sips of water whenever they come out of the game. Concerning fluids, here are some additional tips to quench your knowledge:

- ✓ **Be specific.** Even though younger children hear you tell them to drink water, they probably don't consume enough. During a break in practice or a timeout in a game, tell the players to take ten sips of water, for example. This specific instruction helps ensure that kids are getting enough fluids into their bodies.
- ✓ **Emphasize that fluids help the body recover.** After exerting themselves, kids need to consume lots of fluids to help replenish what they lost throughout the game. Giving the body water after a game helps the liver and kidneys push out all the waste, which is key to recovery.
- ✓ **Encourage drinking even if kids aren't thirsty.** Kids are often so into the game that they don't think about drinking water, and you may have to encourage them to do so. During timeouts and at halftime, make sure you stress drinking water. Kids should sip water while you talk.
- ✓ **Encourage parents to help you keep their kids hydrated.** A great way to help ensure that kids are properly hydrated is to work with their parents. On the car ride over to the game, the parents can have their child drink some water. Spreading the water intake out helps ensure that the body remains hydrated.
- ✓ **Bring extra water.** Always have extra water on hand to refill any child's water bottle. Designate a couple different parents each week to be responsible for bringing extra water to practices and games, because water's simply something you should never have a shortage of.

Building Strength and Endurance

The stronger youngsters are, and the better shape they're in, the greater their chances of enjoying success during games. They'll be able to run faster, tackle better, and hit harder, and they won't tire as easily as the players on the opposing sideline. Conditioning players is especially important at the more advanced levels of football.

Make sure you build up slowly. Don't run your players ragged at your first practice of the season. Remember, you don't know what kind of condition they're in or whether they've been physically active leading up to the season. Stressing their bodies so severely during your first session simply isn't safe. Gradually incorporate more running and strenuous activity each time you get together with your players to give their young bodies a chance to acclimate to the physical exertion.

Try to incorporate conditioning into your drills. Sending the kids on endless laps around the field has conditioning benefits, but it's a terrible waste of practice time. Instead, make conditioning part of your entire practice. Use drills that don't allow for a lot of standing around and that keep players on the move. When you switch drills, make sure the players jog to the next drill instead of walking.

You can also encourage supervised home workouts for kids who are interested. Some kids will develop a true love of the game and will put in extra work at home training and conditioning their bodies. As long as any weightlifting is supervised by an adult, it can provide marvelous benefits for the youngster. If you recognize kids who are truly interested in enhancing their ability, encourage them to train at home. Running to improve their cardiovascular fitness and lifting weights to boost their physical strength are great ways to enhance their level of play.

An Ounce of Prevention: Avoiding Injuries

Any youngster who steps onto the football field — regardless of his age, level of ability, or experience playing the sport — is vulnerable to suffering an injury. Although eliminating the threat of injuries during practices and games is impossible, you can take steps to help reduce the chances of their disrupting a child's season. A sound stretching regimen — both before and after games and practices — goes a long way in not only enhancing flexibility but also providing added protection against those unwanted aches and pains.



Ensuring that equipment fits correctly and that players use proper blocking and tackling techniques are some of the best ways to keep players safe. (Check out Chapter 2 for the lowdown on fitting equipment; Chapters 9 and 10 tell you more about teaching football fundamentals.)

Increasing heart rates and stretching out

Setting aside a period of time to get the heart rate up and the muscles loosened before practices and games clears the way for a productive session.

Also, maintaining and improving a child's flexibility is essential for not only preventing injuries but also creating a solid foundation of strength, balance, and coordination. Incorporating a variety of stretches and exercises is a key component for preparing youngsters for the demands of football.

For younger kids, your warm-ups don't need to be elaborate. Simply have the kids perform some jumping jacks and light running. With older children, you

want to ensure that they do some light running, followed by a wide range of stretches, to properly loosen up all their muscles because they'll be using all of them during the practice or game. In Chapter 11, we run down a variety of stretches that you can use to help prepare your players' bodies for action.

Breaking a sweat

Playing football requires lots of short bursts of speed and power, so after stretching, kids should continue their warm-up period to get their hearts pumping to prepare them for all the running, stopping, and starting they'll do on the field. Incorporating skills that players will use in the game is doubly effective, because it also lets them practice their playing technique.



During your warm-up drills, whether they're one-on-one or team oriented, stress to players to refrain from fully exerting themselves. Players should work at about 50 percent of their normal speed during this phase so they have a full tank of energy to call on throughout the game.



After players are warmed up, make sure their bodies don't have a chance to cool down before they step on the field. Sometimes the game preceding theirs runs long, and a team's warm-up can lose a lot of its effectiveness if kids wind up standing on the sidelines, waiting to take the field. The same goes for youngsters who won't be starting the game: You don't want them to plant themselves on the bench as soon as the game begins. So encourage players to keep moving around, lightly jogging in place and doing light stretches to keep loose.

Make sure you pay attention to weather conditions. If the weather is extremely hot or humid, you may want to shorten the warm-up. Check out "Sun and fair skies: Heat and sun risks," later in this chapter, for more information on playing in warm weather.

Cooling down after practice and games

Although the warm-up usually gets all the attention, post-practice and post-game cool-downs are equally important for the long-term health of your team. Doing light stretches that you used for the pre-game warm-up helps prevent the tightening of muscles that accompanies vigorous exercise. The cool-down also helps reduce soreness, aids circulation, and helps clear waste products from the muscles.

Youngsters should get in the habit of going through the cool-down process every time they participate in a practice or game. The cool-down doesn't have to be quite as focused as the warm-up session, because the purpose is to wind down from the activity rather than build up.



Keeping records of kids' injuries and treatment

Whenever you provide treatment for any type of injury a child suffers, write down exactly what you do, and regardless of how minor the injury is, always inform the child's parents. In your practice planner, or in a separate logbook, document the nature of the injury, how it happened, and what treatment you provided. Do so the same day, while the event is still fresh in your mind. And don't discard these records after the season is over: Keep them, along with your dated practice plans and notes, for several years.

Unfortunately, we live in a lawsuit-happy society; having an accurate account of everything that transpired on the day of a child's injury helps protect you in a court of law. In addition, detailed practice plans, with dates, show that you safely and properly taught your players specific skills, and these plans can protect you against unfounded lawsuits.

A Pound of Cure: Treating Injuries

Eliminating the threat of injuries — during both practices and games — is impossible. But how you handle them when they do occur impacts how the kids view their future football participation. First things first: Be sure you have a well-stocked first aid kit, as we describe in Chapter 6. Then read on.

Addressing common sports injuries

The overwhelming majority of injuries you're likely to encounter during your football coaching career involve minor bumps, bruises, cuts, and twisted ankles. Although they may seem minor to you, these injuries can be pretty traumatic to a child who sees blood on his leg or feels unfamiliar pain in his ankle when he tries walking. By acting quickly and administering the proper treatment for routine injuries while comforting the youngster, you can help him bounce back and return to action fairly quickly.



You're in charge of first aid for your team, but make sure you assign an experienced parent to help you treat injuries. Doing so takes some of the pressure off you and can reassure other parents. (See Chapter 4 for more info on recruiting parents to help out during the season.)



Proceed cautiously with any type of injury, particularly when dealing with an injury that involves the head, neck, or spine. Never attempt to move a player who's lying on the ground with such an injury, because doing so is likely to cause further damage. Call for medical assistance immediately.

The following sections outline some of the injuries you may encounter.

Cuts and scrapes

Cuts and scrapes can produce major tears with young players but luckily are minor in nature, so you can treat them quickly and effectively with the materials in your first aid kit. Follow these steps:

1. Wear latex gloves.

Whenever one of your players suffers a cut or has an open wound, the first thing you should do is grab a pair of latex gloves or use some other type of blood barrier.

2. Apply direct pressure.

You can stop the bleeding by applying direct pressure to the wound with a clean dressing. If you have trouble stopping the bleeding, elevate the child's injured area above his heart while maintaining the pressure.

3. Clean it.

After you stop the bleeding, clean the wound. Pre-moistened towelettes work for cleaning minor cuts and scrapes, or you can use over-the-counter alcohol swabs or antibiotic creams.

4. Cover it.

Cover the cut with a bandage or piece of sterile gauze, and be sure to secure it tightly in place, particularly if the child wants to continue playing.

5. Discard trash.

Place your gloves and any other materials that may have blood on them in a sealed bag, and place it in the trash so that no one else is at risk of coming into contact with the materials.



Although being fearful of HIV/AIDS is certainly understandable, it should never be a factor in whether you help an injured player on your team. You're at risk only if you allow the blood of an HIV-positive person to come into contact with an open wound that you have. If one of your players has AIDS or is HIV-positive, the parents certainly should tell you so during your preseason parents meeting, which we discuss in Chapter 4. However, regardless of whether you're aware of the player's HIV-status, the fact that you're wearing latex gloves provides the protection you need to treat the injured child.

Wounds that are an inch long or longer generally require stitches, as do those where the edges of the skin fail to touch each other. If either of these is the case, get the child to a doctor right away.

Twists, sprains, and strains

Football is a physically demanding sport that requires running, sudden stops and starts, and collisions with other players. These movements — and the

contact that accompanies them — can result in muscle strains and sprains. Many football injuries involve the ankle and knee, so here's some information for dealing with them.



When a player strains a muscle or twists an ankle, remember the *RICE* method for treatment:

- ✓ **Rest:** Immediately get the child to the sideline so he can rest the injury. If the child has twisted his ankle, for example, have an assistant coach or a parent from the stands help you carry the child off the field so he doesn't put any additional pressure on the injured area.
- ✓ **Ice:** Apply ice to the injured area to reduce swelling and pain. Don't apply the ice directly to the skin. Wrap the bag of ice in a towel and then place it on the injured area for 20 minutes. After the player goes home, have the player apply ice four to eight times a day.
- ✓ **Compress:** Compress the injured area by using athletic tape or any other type of material to hold the ice in place. After you remove the ice, the injured area can be rewrapped with a bandage to help further reduce the swelling.
- ✓ **Elevate:** Have the child elevate the injury above his heart level to prevent blood from pooling in the injured area.

After the swelling, discoloration, and pain subsides, you can allow the youngster to return to competition. If any of these symptoms are present for more than a couple days, the player should be examined by a physician before you allow him back on the field. You never want a child to return to the field when his injury hasn't completely healed, because he risks reinjuring the area and missing even more action.

Other injuries

As players become bigger, stronger, and faster, tackles are delivered with more force, and the hitting intensifies, opening the door for other types of injuries. Take a quick look at some of these injuries and how to respond:

- ✓ **Concussion:** A concussion is a jarring injury to the head that results in a disturbance of the brain. Concussions are classified as mild or severe. Possible symptoms are a brief loss of consciousness, headache, grogginess, confusion, glassy-eyed look, memory loss, disturbed balance, and slight dizziness. Immediate care includes rest on the sidelines with an adult in attendance to provide careful observation. Parents should carefully monitor their child at home for several days and be on the lookout for persistent headaches, dizziness, irritability, and memory or vision changes that can suddenly appear following a head injury.



If you see any evidence of something more serious, such as prolonged unconsciousness, the pupils' changing in size, or convulsions, take an immediate trip by ambulance to a hospital for further observation.

Mild concussions may require up to a week for recovery, and the decision to return must be made by a physician. Severe concussions require at least 4 weeks of recovery, and permission to return should be given only by a specialist of head injuries.

- ✓ **Foreign object in the eye:** Any foreign body lodged in the eye, such as a fleck of dirt, needs attention. Symptoms are tearing, pain, and redness. Most objects can be easily removed with a cotton swab and saline wash.

If the surface of the eye isn't seriously injured and vision isn't impaired, the youngster can return to competition as soon as the object is removed. Usually, the object is merely a nuisance, but if the irritation doesn't go away, an eye specialist needs to evaluate the injury.

- ✓ **Poked in eye:** When a youngster is poked in the eye, examine the eye. If the youngster isn't in significant pain and you see minimal redness and no discharge or bleeding, simply clean the area with cool water and allow the athlete to rest for a while before returning to play. If any type of discharge or blood is coming from the eye, get the child to a doctor immediately.



- ✓ **Injury to the eyeball:** A direct injury to the eyeball is an immediate medical emergency. Symptoms are extreme pain, loss of vision, hazy vision, double vision, change in vision colors, or obvious lacerations or abrasions of the eye. If the loss of vision is the result of a direct eye injury rather than a blow to the head, place a dry, sterile eye patch or piece of gauze to the eye; then gently apply a bag of soft, crushed ice over the patch. Have the youngster immediately taken to an emergency facility.



- ✓ **Orbital fracture (a fracture of the bony frame around the eye):** All orbital fractures are serious and require expert medical treatment. Symptoms are severe pain with possible double vision or other vision problems. This fracture may be accompanied by cuts, abrasions, bleeding, and black-and-blue marks. Any youngster who suffers significant injury to the area around the eye should be transported to a facility where he can be x-rayed to determine whether a fracture has occurred.

- ✓ **Nosebleed:** Gently squeeze the nostrils together to stop the bleeding while tilting the head slightly forward. If the bleeding doesn't stop after a couple minutes, get the child to a doctor, because the youngster could have a more serious injury, such as a nasal fracture.

- ✓ **Tooth knocked out:** If a child has a tooth knocked out, retrieve the tooth and use the tooth preserving system in your first aid kit that was mentioned in Chapter 6. If you don't have one, place the tooth in a sterile gauze pad with some saline. Have the child immediately taken to a dentist.

- ✓ **Wind knocked out:** A youngster who has the wind knocked out of him for the first time is likely going to panic when he has trouble breathing. Comfort the youngster, and have him take short, quick breaths and pant like a puppy until he's able to resume breathing normally again.



- ✓ **Shin splints:** This injury is caused by weight pounding down on the shin. Other factors that can contribute to the injury are muscle weakness, poor flexibility, improper warm-up and cool-down exercises, and improper footwear. Symptoms are typically easy to identify, because the athlete has pain in the shin. If the injury isn't properly managed, the child may develop a stress fracture. When a player develops shin splints, use ice to reduce pain and swelling and eliminate any weight-bearing activities to allow the affected area time to heal. A week of rest is usually enough to cure a mild case of shin splints.
- ✓ **Broken bones or dislocations:** When a child suffers a broken bone or a dislocation, he's likely to be in a lot of pain. Immobilize the area using a splint. The child should then be taken to a doctor. If the broken bone protrudes from the skin, do not try pushing it back in. Call for medical personnel and cover it with a dry, sterile dressing until trained help arrives.

Acting in an emergency/first aid situation

Just like you spend time practicing goal-line plays and blitzing, going over how to take action in an emergency situation is important, too. How you respond — and how quickly — can make the difference in saving a youngster's life. The following are some pointers to keep in mind:

- ✓ **Know where you're playing.** Be aware of the name of the facility where you're playing, as well as the address. If you have to call 911, providing as much accurate information as possible helps ensure that emergency medical personnel can arrive quickly at the proper location.
- ✓ **Have each child's emergency information on hand.** The medical forms we discuss in Chapter 4 are crucial in the event that medical personnel need to know whether a child is allergic to any type of medication, for example. Always carry those forms in your first aid kit and have them easily accessible.
- ✓ **Provide the appropriate first aid.** While awaiting the arrival of medical personnel, provide only the first aid care that you're trained to perform.
- ✓ **Comfort the child.** If the child is conscious, comfort him by talking in a calm and relaxed voice. Let him know that he's going to be okay and that medical help is on the way.
- ✓ **Have someone call the parents.** If the child's parents aren't in attendance, one of your assistant coaches should have the responsibility to call and let them know what's going on. Your foremost responsibility at a time like this is to the child, so if you've already designated someone else to make that initial call to the parents, you can focus all your attention on the youngster.



Being able to assess sports injuries is an integral part of coaching football. You must be prepared for any type of injury, including when a child goes down and loses consciousness. The acronym *COACH* is a handy reminder of how to respond in any type of emergency:

- ✓ **C:** Determine whether the child is *conscious*.
- ✓ **O:** Is the child breathing and getting *oxygen*? (If the answer to these two questions is *yes*, move on.)
- ✓ **A:** *Ask* the youngster where he's hurt.
- ✓ **C:** *Control* the area that's painful.
- ✓ **H:** What type of *help* is required? Decide whether you need to call for immediate medical assistance and have the child taken to the hospital.

When you're approaching an injured child, be sure to keep this COACH sequence in mind. Look at his lip color, feel his chest, or put your cheek next to his nose to see whether he's breathing. Feel for a pulse in his neck or wrist. If he has a pulse but isn't breathing, begin mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. If he isn't breathing and you can't find a palpable pulse, initiate CPR. With children, be especially careful not to press down on the lowest portion of the breastbone, which could injure the internal organs. Have someone call for immediate medical assistance.



We strongly recommend that anyone working with children in sports be certified in CPR. Coaches should receive CPR and first aid training from the American Red Cross or another nationally recognized organization. At every practice and game, you're responsible for the safety and well-being of every single player. So do your team and yourself a huge favor and take the time to go through the class. You'll be glad you did.

What to do with the kids during an injury stoppage in play

Kids are obviously very curious about what happens to an injured teammate, but they should be kept away from the injured child. You don't want the entire team crowding around the child and hovering over him with concerned looks, which can make him more panicked than he already is. Let your assistants console the other players.

If there's a serious injury to a player on the opposing team during a game, have your team return to its sideline. You need to immediately check on the injured child with the other coaches and provide any needed assistance. You don't want your players to be a distraction or unnecessarily get in the way of treatment.

Watching the Weather

Mother Nature and her tremendous power should never be taken lightly. Severe weather poses a great risk to youngsters, and your responsibility is to get them off the field before trouble arrives.

During a game, don't rely on the league administrator or the official to stop the game when bad weather approaches. Never try to squeeze in another minute or try to get the game in so you don't have to deal with the hassle of rescheduling. Endangering the safety of your players simply to finish a game is never worth the risk.

Sun and fair skies: Heat and sun risks

When the weather's warm and the sun is shining, you still need to pay attention to weather conditions. Children don't acclimate to heat as well as adults do, and certain temperatures present an extreme stress to kids. As a general rule, when the humidity rises above 70 percent and the temperature is above 80 degrees, you need to exercise extra caution with your team. Encourage the kids to drink extra water.

When the temperature climbs above 90 degrees with the humidity between 70 and 80 percent, heat illnesses may occur. When these types of conditions are present, practices or games should be suspended or at the very least significantly curtailed. The kids should wear only cool, porous clothing, and you should never withhold water as a form of discipline, no matter how serious the infraction or broken team rule.

Participating in hot and humid conditions can result in heat exhaustion or heatstroke. *Heat exhaustion* is caused by dehydration, and symptoms include profuse sweating, nausea, headache, chills, dizziness, and extreme thirst. Immediately have the child moved to a cool, shaded area, and make him consume cool fluids. You should also apply ice to his neck and back to help cool his body. Seek medical attention.



Heatstroke is much more severe: The child's life is in danger because he stops sweating, which pushes his body temperature to dangerously high levels. Call emergency medical personnel immediately. Warning signs are red or flushed skin, rapid pulse, rapid breathing, vomiting, seizures, unconsciousness, and cardiac arrest. While waiting for medical personnel to arrive, cool the player's body with wet towels or pour cool water over him. Ice packs should be applied to the neck, back, abdomen, armpits, and between the legs. Provide cool fluids if the player is conscious. If he's unconscious and vomiting, roll him onto his side to keep his throat clear.



Exposure to the sun is an often overlooked health risk. Every moment you spend in the sun adds up — even under overcast skies — which can cause skin damage and skin cancer. The best defense to protect your athletes from the sun is to encourage them to use a sunscreen with an SPF of 30. Make sun safety a priority with your team.

Taking shelter in stormy weather

Lightning is a big concern simply because it can show up so quickly. If a storm moves in on you unexpectedly and lightning is in the area, safe places to retreat to with the kids include enclosed buildings, fully enclosed vehicles with the windows up, and low ground. Be sure to stay away from trees, water, wide open areas, metal bleachers, light poles, fences, or any other metallic objects.

If for some reason your team is caught in severe weather that involves a tornado, move your players inside a building immediately if one is available. If not, get the kids into a ditch to lie down, or move to some other low-lying area, and have your players use their arms to protect their heads and necks.

Chapter 20

Challenges Every Coach Faces

In This Chapter

- ▶ Problematic parents
 - ▶ Issues with opposing coaches and your assistants
 - ▶ Dealing with team troubles
-

Taking on a youth football coaching job involves more than teaching youngsters offense, defense, and special teams. Unfortunately, it also involves handling all sorts of behavioral problems. Remember, you're bringing together a group of parents with different backgrounds, motivations, and expectations — and they're all looking for something different out of their child's participation. That means problems flare up from time to time.

You may also have to deal with unpleasant situations involving opposing coaches, disagreements with your own assistants, and discipline issues with your players. Hopefully you'll have few, if any, times in which you need to discipline a youngster or deal with inappropriate comments or actions from parents or coaches. Just in case, though, this chapter is here to lend a hand.

Coping with Problem Parents

Coaching youth football presents many challenges, including some that pop up away from the playing field. Sometimes parents pose some unexpected problems for you. Taking the time to conduct a preseason parents meeting (which we cover in Chapter 4) helps lay the ground rules for preventing parental problems, but sometimes even that's not enough.

Outlining your expectations for parents' behavior before the kids even put on their shoulder pads doesn't guarantee that every parent will be a model of good behavior all season long. So be prepared to step forward at the first hint

of trouble. Whenever you allow a problem to linger, it has the potential to cast an ominous shadow over the team and its season.

The following sections take a look at some of the more common parent problems that you may deal with and what approaches work best for smoothing things over.

Why-doesn't-he-play-more? parents

Parents want the best for their kids, and with football, parents want to see their kids on the field catching passes and making tackles, not observing from the sidelines. That's why some parents track their child's playing time more closely than their own retirement funds. A lot of parents have ridiculously unrealistic expectations of their child's football ability, and as soon as they see their child sitting on the bench, they begin worrying that his athletic future is being compromised and that his college football scholarship is in jeopardy. Disappointment with the amount of playing time someone's child receives is one of the most common complaints you'll hear.

Some parents view their child's status on the team as a true reflection of their parenting skills, as distorted as that thought is. The more skilled their child is — and the more playing time he receives because of those skills — then the better parenting job they assume they must be doing. In their eyes, their child's playing time becomes a status symbol as they sit among the other parents in the stands.

If your league has a policy on equal playing time for all the kids and you explained that policy during your preseason parents meeting, then you have more than enough ammunition to explain why you're rotating the kids in and out of the lineup. Let upset parents know that you enjoy coaching their child and you would love to be able to provide more playing time for him, but in fairness to the entire team and adhering to the league rules, your job is to look out for the best interests of every youngster. If the child has missed some practices, remind the parents of your stated preseason policy that playing time is also out based on regularly attending practices and not on how fast a child is or how hard he is to tackle.



Chart playing time throughout the season. If the parents question whether you're distributing playing time equally, hopefully you can refer to your lineup to show them that you (or an assistant coach) very carefully monitor each child's playing time. Written documentation of the great lengths you go to make the season fair for everyone is usually enough to make your point and quiet your critics.

Sometimes players have less playing time because they aren't interested in going into the game when you call on them. Perhaps a child had the wind knocked out of him after making a catch and after adequate rest still isn't up

to returning to the action. Or maybe the opposing team has covered him tightly all game long and he hasn't caught a pass yet and is totally frustrated by his lack of success. Whatever the reason for his reluctance to step back on the field, never embarrass the youngster or force him back out there against his will. If the child isn't comfortable explaining why he's hesitant to return, speak with him privately after the game to find out what happened and what you can do to ease those fears before the next practice or game.

How playing time is distributed becomes even trickier — yes, that's hard to imagine — at the more advanced levels of play. Remember, at these levels, you base playing time on ability. Some parents have a hard time accepting the message that their child isn't good enough to be on the field as much as his friend who lives down the street. If the parents are intent on helping their child improve, have a private conversation with them. Let them know which areas of the game their child could use some extra work in, and offer some suggestions for drills they can perform together at home. During these conversations, always keep the tone upbeat and your words positive. Praise the child for his hard work, and even if he isn't starting or receiving as much playing time as some of the other kids, be sure the parents know that you value his contributions and that he's an integral part of the team.

Win-at-all-cost parents

Parents of young football players invest a lot of time and money and naturally want to see their kids excel. Unfortunately, some parents place unrealistic expectations on their child — and you — to perform at exceedingly high levels and win an unreasonable number of games. This type of behavior forces the child to deal with skyrocketing expectations and the pressure to win, which is out of his control. It also causes friction between you and the parents.

Win-at-all-cost parents, blinded by visions of championships, do whatever they can to ensure that their child's team wins and that their youngster looks good in the process. They shout remarks at referees in attempts to intimidate and get favorable calls, and they criticize opposing coaches when their child's team is losing. And yes, they even criticize your coaching.

As a coach, you have to make sure that the kids on your team don't lose sight of what's really important (having fun and displaying good sportsmanship) and that any overly competitive parents don't get out of control and ruin the experience for everyone.

Recognizing your authority to teach sportsmanship

Win-at-all-costs is an unhealthy outlook, and what overly competitive parents tell a child about winning undermines your message of doing one's best and having fun. Although you don't have control over what the parents say to their child at home, you do have a say in what's said while you're coaching a game.



Look at the football field as a classroom, where you teach the kids not only the sport's skills but also teamwork, good sportsmanship, and doing the best they can at all times. Don't allow outside influences to disrupt the messages that you're trying to get across, much like a teacher would never allow parents to interject comments while class is in session.

Reminding parents of the rules with a friendly chat

Some parents may begin adopting a rather intense interest in the outcome of games over the course of the season. You may notice that the parents' comments and reactions during the game, or what they say to their kids afterward, are counterproductive to what you're trying to teach. Groans when your defense gives up a big play for a touchdown, or feet stomping on the bleachers in disgust when the offense fails to convert a big third-down play, are clear signals that the parents' behavior is taking on the tone of something more fitting for a professional or college game — not a youth game.



To help stem the competitive tide and prevent it from enveloping the other parents, give the parents a brief and friendly talk before your next game. Reminding the entire group that their children play in a recreational league — and repeating that winning isn't the most important factor — may put parents in the proper frame of mind. If the league has staff members who monitor the behavior of fans, let parents know that their actions are being observed. Explain that you'd hate to see a child embarrassed because his parents couldn't control themselves during the game and were asked to leave.

If the win-at-all-cost attitude continues to prevail, arrange to speak with the disruptive parents privately and share your concerns that their comments are a real detriment to both their child's development and that of the rest of the team. Reiterate that you're trying to help all the kids learn skills and that winning games at this level is not the primary objective.



When you deal with win-at-all-costs parents, recognize that you're their biggest target for criticism. They critique your coaching style whenever the team loses. They question your lineup, analyze your substitution patterns, and offer unsolicited advice regarding everything from your play-calling on third downs to how often you should be blitzing on defense. And regardless of the youngsters' age level, they're likely to confront you about the importance of playing the more athletic kids more often and benching the lesser-skilled players, all to help ensure that the team wins more games and their child receives more playing time. Whatever happens to come your way, simply take a deep breath, remain calm, and stay focused on resolving the matter.

Let parents know that if they're not happy with your philosophy on coaching kids, perhaps they should consider coaching next season or look into signing their child up for a more competitive team. In the meantime, you need their cooperation. Share with them that you don't want them to be absent from this exciting time in their child's life, but if the improper behavior continues to detract from the values you're teaching, then the only other recourse you

have is to speak to the league director. Don't be confrontational in this discussion, but be firm in your stance, because you have the welfare of an entire group of kids in mind. You may also want the recreation supervisor or league director present for the discussion to lend additional support.

Disruptive parents

The majority of parents with kids involved in football do a wonderful job of providing positive support and encouragement. Unfortunately, over-involved parents who display unacceptable behaviors have become increasingly common. Loud-mouth insults, cursing, ranting, raving, and frightening violence appears in youth football programs far too often. Why some parents behave irresponsibly and irrationally and infringe on a child's experiences is perplexing and probably involves a bunch of factors that are completely out of your control. But what is in your control is your ability to keep that type of negative behavior from embarrassing the children and disrupting the game.



If a parent behaves inappropriately, address his or her actions as soon as possible. Turning your back on the situation sends a message that this type of behavior is acceptable and everything that you talked about during your preseason parents meeting was meaningless. Dealing with problems swiftly also lets the other team parents know that if they step out of line, you'll deal with them accordingly. The entire team of parents will appreciate your commitment to ensuring that the kids' experience won't be marred by unruly adult behavior.

How do you approach a parent who has just shouted an unnecessary comment? What do you do when parents yell across the field at the coach who appears to be running up the score on your team? What are your options when tensions are rising among parents who are suddenly not very happy with how the game is unfolding? In the following sections, we provide you with some strategies to deal with such situations. And because you're only human, and such disruptions and confrontations are bound to get you steamed at times, we also advise you on what not to do.

What to do

The following are some approaches you can use to help keep everyone's tempers in check and the game moving along without any unnecessary disruptions for the kids:

- ✓ **Understand your league's parent policy.** As we discuss in Chapter 2, thoroughly knowing your league's rules is extremely important. An increasing number of football leagues around the country are instituting parent sportsmanship programs — both voluntary and mandatory — to help give parents a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. You may want to recommend adopting a program for parents to your league director.

- ✓ **Set a civil example.** You can quickly defuse a tense situation between you and an upset parent by maintaining a calm and friendly demeanor at all times. Being civil right from the start is critical. Granted, this civility may be difficult to maintain at times, particularly when the parent unleashes a verbal assault accusing you of being an inept football coach with no sense of what's right for the kids. Regardless, never surrender to your frustration and raise your voice or lose control of your emotions, because as soon as you allow that to happen, you lose the respect of the other parents.
- ✓ **Use the right tone and expressions.** Just as your tone and body language influence your interactions with the kids, these aspects of communication impact your dealings with parents. For example, if a parent asks you why her child played in only half the game and you put your hands on your hips before responding, she perceives you as being upset before you even open your mouth. Collect yourself, and pay attention to how you're standing and the sound of your voice.
- ✓ **Provide a friendly reminder.** A lot of times, parents may not even realize that they're behaving inappropriately, and a firm but friendly reminder to keep their emotions in check may be all that's required.
- ✓ **Be prepared to listen.** If you're not willing to listen to what the parents have to say, how can you realistically expect them to listen to you? Focus on listening as much as making your case, and the parent will be more likely to work with you.
- ✓ **Remove abusive parents from the field only as a last resort.** Having a parent removed from the playing area is an extreme step to take, but sometimes it's the only option left to ensure the well-being of the young participants on the field, as well as the other spectators in the stands. Being thrown out is certainly an embarrassment for the parent, as well as for the child whose game is being interrupted by Mom or Dad's being escorted out.



What not to do

Sometimes, as frustration levels mount regarding specific issues, you may be tempted to try all sorts of tactics to rid yourself of the problem. We advise steering clear of the following:

- ✓ **Don't fire back.** Sometimes parents may agree to meet with you about their behavior and then use the meeting as an opportunity to bombard you with accusations, complaints, and other negative comments. No matter how frustrated or upset you are, resist the urge to fire back at the parent in defense of your coaching abilities, because doing so only inflames an already tense situation.
- ✓ **Don't embarrass the parent.** Being the parent of a young football player isn't easy. Parents want the best for their young players, and if they see their child roughed up by an opposing player and the referee doesn't throw a penalty flag, keeping their displeasure to themselves can be

extremely difficult. When you hear a comment shouted from the stands, sometimes you can just look over your shoulder at the offending parent rather than saying something that everyone hears. That brief eye contact lets them know that what they just said is unacceptable and that they need to tone it down.

Follow up and meet with the parent after the game — if you have an opportunity to speak with her alone — and remind her that negative comments detract from everyone's enjoyment of the game. Try something along the lines of, "I know that holding call the referee made against your son in the third quarter was questionable, but not all the calls will go our way this season. Remember that I need you and the other parents to set an example of good sportsmanship and that negative comments take away from the kids' enjoyment. I know it's difficult, but please don't let it happen again."

- ✓ **Never punish the child.** No matter how poorly behaved a mom or dad is, never take out your frustration on the child. Remember, the youngsters on your team have no control over how their parents behave on game day, so don't trim down their playing time, shift their position, or take any other drastic measures in an effort to rein in the emotional outbursts of their parents. Continue coaching the children, working with them, and applauding their efforts, and hopefully your chats with the parents will help them control themselves.
- ✓ **Don't tolerate surprise attacks in the parking lot following the game.** Situations in which parents are visibly upset and tensions are running high aren't conducive to mature discussions. Explain to the parents that you'd be happy to meet with them to discuss any concerns they may have at a time that's convenient for both of you, but that time isn't right now in front of their child and the rest of the team.
- ✓ **Don't physically confront a parent who refuses to abide by your request to behave.** Sometimes the league policies stipulate that the coach contacts a league director when problems arise, and he deals with them accordingly. Some programs have even resorted to hiring police officers who patrol the fields in case a verbal or physical altercation or threat occurs. The bottom line is to never allow a situation to escalate into violence.

Dealing with Problem Coaches

Unfortunately, chances are pretty good that at some point during your coaching career, you'll come across a coach who just doesn't get it when it comes to kids and football. It can happen on the opposing sideline or — strangely enough — even on your side of the field with an assistant coach. Although you're more likely to see rude, out-of-control, and offensive behavior in the older and more advanced levels of football when the competition becomes more intense, it occurs at the beginning levels, too.

The best way to combat this type of behavior from an opposing coach is to maintain a level head and a calm demeanor while he's losing his. These situations test how well you can adhere to that coaching philosophy of yours (which we discuss in Chapter 2).



Your top priority at all times is protecting the kids' best interest. The players on your team take their cues from you and how you act when tension rises and the blood pressure escalates. Following are some of the different types of coaches you may run into.

Opposing coaches who encourage unsafe play during the game

Ensuring the safety of your players should always be one of your top priorities. Sure, in a full contact sport like football, you can't always avoid the bumps and bruises that come with playing the game. However, if you find your team going against an opponent who uses unsafe methods that put your team's safety and well-being in jeopardy, you have to take immediate action.

Address your concerns to the referee in a respectable manner, and explain that your players are being put at unnecessary risk. Be clear that you're concerned about the kids' welfare and not about how the referee is calling the game. Never hesitate to address a safety issue, which could involve spearing (leading with the top of the helmet when tackling), making late hits, or tackling by grabbing the facemask. One of the referee's most important responsibilities is to ensure the safety of all the players, so work with him — not against him.

Don't confront the opposing coach; instead, use the referee as your intermediary. Heading over to the other sideline typically just creates the potential for more conflict to develop. It can also antagonize the coach, who may feel threatened that you've come over and questioned his coaching techniques in front of all the fans. He may react negatively and view it as a ploy to affect his team's play, particularly if he's winning the game.

After speaking with the referee, if you feel the tone and nature of the game hasn't changed and that unsafe play continues, your only recourse is to remove your team from the field. Certainly, you hope that the play never gets bad enough that you have to resort to this action, but completing a football game simply to get it in the books — at the risk of injury to any of your players — is never worth it.



If the league director is monitoring games at the facility where your team plays, speak with him about your safety concerns before pulling your players off the field. If he's not available, meet with him as soon as possible to explain your worries about the game and why you felt that terminating the game was best for the kids.

Opposing coaches who are models of poor sportsmanship

In a perfect youth sports world, every football coach would be a smiling, easygoing model of good behavior. Nonetheless, some football coaches — hopefully not in your league — roam the sidelines like they're coaching in the Super Bowl. These are the guys who wear out their lungs by screaming at players and arguing with officials. What's the best approach for dealing with opposing coaches who turn games into miserable experiences for everyone? Here's what to do when the opposing coach's vocal cords heat up:

- ✓ **Keep a level head.** Opposing coaches exhibiting unsportsmanlike behavior challenge your patience, test your poise, and send your blood pressure skyrocketing. No matter what it takes, avoid retaliating and remain a model of good behavior for your team.
- ✓ **Use the situation to teach your players.** Pretending the behavior's not going on accomplishes little, because your players can hear and see the antics on full display on the other sideline. So use the situation as a teaching moment. Point out to your players that they have to rise above that behavior and demonstrate that they can play hard and be good sports while doing so.
- ✓ **Tune out distractions.** Tell players to ignore the coach's shouting and to play their own game. Keep talking to them in a positive manner and keep their attention focused on the game. Don't allow them to be distracted by the opposing coach's loud-mouthed behavior.
- ✓ **Meet with the league director.** Make the director aware that a coach is really setting a poor example for the kids on his team and that he's not the type of individual who should be coaching in this league.

Dissenting assistants

Your assistant coaches are valuable assets to your team and fulfill a number of roles and responsibilities. But anytime you bring in another parent to help out, you face the risk that he may stray from what's best for the players. (As we discuss in Chapter 4, it's extremely important that you exercise great caution before enlisting help.) What are some of the problems that you can run into with your assistant coaches? Take a look at some of the more common issues:

- ✓ **He wants his child to play more.** Perhaps this person had ulterior motives from the start and grabbed an assistant's role to ensure that his child would play a specific position or get extra playing time.
- ✓ **He's a distraction during games.** Even the most laid back, mild mannered parents can turn into raving, screaming lunatics when the game

begins. As soon as the scoreboard turns on, you'd think a switch was flipped in their heads as they go into a mode of screaming and running up and down the sidelines.

- ✓ **He's a poor teacher.** You don't want to teach youngsters the wrong way to perform a skill or, worst of all, an unsafe technique that can put them and their opponents at unnecessary risk. You may have some great, well-meaning parents who raised their hands and volunteered to help out, but if their knowledge of football is limited or nonexistent, you've left the door open for all sorts of problems.
- ✓ **He has a different philosophy.** During your preseason meeting with the parents, you (hopefully) stressed that winning was going to take a back-seat to skill development and fun. Although all the parents may have nodded their heads in agreement with those statements back then, you may discover that once the ball has been kicked off on game day, they don't exactly share those views anymore.



Your assistant coaches are an extension of you — which makes everything they say and do on your behalf extremely important to the overall success of the season. Keep an eye out, especially during your first few practices, to closely monitor how your assistants interact and teach the kids skills. If they're not getting the job done or adhering to the philosophies you want to instill in your team, have a one-on-one talk with your assistants right away to reinforce your goals for this season. Usually, this chat — always done away from the kids — is enough to get them back on the right track. However, if problems continue, let your assistants know that you think they should step down from their assistant duties. Be sure to thank them for their time and effort. Although asking assistants to resign is an uncomfortable step to take, the position is simply too important to let problems linger.

Addressing Discipline Problems on Your Own Team

Teaching kids how to return punts and execute onside kicks are just some of the areas of the game that can challenge your coaching skills. Making sure that youngsters listen intently to your instructions, respect your authority, and abide by the team rules you set forth can pose a whole new set of challenges that you may not have been aware of — or been prepared for — when you volunteered.

Chances are pretty good that at some point during the season, you'll have to discipline a child who steps over the line. A lot of times, children act out

because they're frustrated at their lack of progress, they feel like the coach doesn't value their contributions, or they get a sense that their teammates don't appreciate them or even like their being a part of the team.



When dealing with problems with your players, you always hold the trump card: playing time. It's usually a great equalizer, attitude adjuster, personality changer, and attention getter all rolled up into one. Kids don't enjoy having their fanny stuck on the bench while their friends and teammates are out on the field. Taking away playing time from a child who misbehaves is no different from a parent's taking away TV, computer games, or treats from a child at home who misbehaves. Use it as needed to get the results you want.

For further advice on dealing with kids who give you discipline problems, read on. (Chapter 5 tells you how to best coach kids with certain skill levels and personality types.)

Some general advice for disciplining players

When dealing with behavior problems among your players, keep the following in mind:

✓ **Avoid laps.** If a child mouths off to you, sending him on a lap or two around the field as punishment may be really tempting, but refrain from doing so. When children relate conditioning and running with punishment, they're more likely to develop a negative outlook on this aspect of the sport, which can disrupt their development.

Conditioning plays a very important role in sports, particularly at the more advanced levels of football; it impacts the play most notably in the third and fourth quarters of games. Instead of sending kids on a lap for misbehavior, send them to the sidelines. Being stuck on the sidelines watching their teammates play is a pretty effective form of punishment. Another option is to have them pick up all the equipment (footballs, cones, and so on) at the end of practice.

✓ **Stick to your word.** When you outline to players the discipline that will accompany a specific type of misbehavior, follow through with the punishment — no matter how much you hate doing so — to maintain your authority and respect with the team.

✓ **Apply team rules evenly.** One of the most disastrous moves you can make when disciplining children is to play favorites and allow some kids to get away with certain behaviors while punishing others for the same

infraction. A youngster's ability to throw a football more accurately than his teammates can doesn't mean that a separate set of rules applies specially to him. Elevating players above others sabotages team chemistry and creates friction.

- ✓ **Make sure the punishment is fair.** Don't go overboard ruling and enforcing team policies, and make sure any punishment you hand out fits the transgression. For example, a child's forgetting a water bottle at practice isn't the same as swearing at an opponent during a game. When determining punishment, allow yourself flexibility based on the severity of the problem. If you're handing out punishment, let the team know why that youngster won't be available for the first half of practice or the first quarter of the game. This communication reinforces that bad behavior is not tolerated and reduces the chances that others will misbehave.
- ✓ **Avoid the doghouse syndrome.** As soon as the discipline with the child is complete, sweep that incident to the side and move on. Don't hold a grudge for the remainder of the season or treat the child differently than you did before the problem occurred. Forgive, forget, and focus on making sure the youngster feels like a valued member of the team again. This means recognizing when he's done something well, which helps reassure him that the past problems have been forgotten.
- ✓ **Always be level-headed.** Let's face it: Youngsters will test your patience at times, and you have to be ready to react in an adult manner. That means never shouting at athletes or losing your temper, because doing so distorts the discipline you're enforcing and sets a poor example for the team.
- ✓ **Never discipline for playing mistakes.** Don't discipline kids who make mistakes during games, even if they drop a game-winning touchdown pass in the end zone or miss the tackle that would've prevented the opposing team from scoring a touchdown and winning the game. Mistakes and poorly executed plays are a part of playing football and never merit discipline.



On the other hand, if a player intentionally tries to injure another player by spearing him with his helmet or delivering a late hit (making contact with a player after the whistle has blown, signaling the end of the play), immediately remove him from the game. This type of behavior may warrant further disciplinary action on your part, depending on the severity of the action, the intent, and other factors that led up to the incident.

Employing the three-strikes technique

Addressing discipline problems at the first sign of trouble and resolving conflicts before they escalate is vital for maintaining team order — as well as

your sanity. The three-strikes technique works well for disciplining players. Using this approach gives the youngsters a little room to maneuver without ruining their season the first time they cross the line. Of course, inform the parents of the procedures you'll follow throughout the season before any problems materialize so everyone fully understands how you'll hand out punishment. Here's how the three-strikes technique works.

Strike one! Issue a verbal warning

The first time a child displays behavior that you deem unacceptable, give him a verbal warning. This warning lets him know that you're not pleased with what he said or did and that if it happens again, he'll have to deal with punishment. In most cases, when a child is fully aware that a stricter measure will be enforced if he repeats the same behavior, he isn't likely to do it again.

Of course, kids are kids, and some aren't able to break their bad habits or simply may put you to the test to see whether you're really serious about punishing them if they misbehave again. Some kids, who've received a warning for swearing, may refuse to shake hands with the opponent following the game. What should you do? Well, such actions usually warrant moving on to strike two, because it's pretty clear the child is challenging your authority, and these types of problems need to be halted right away. So be prepared, and never allow a child to trample over your authority. Follow through with the next level of discipline when you have to.



Anytime you issue a warning to a child, be sure to let the parents know what happened so they can discuss the matter with him and help ensure that you won't face similar problems in the future.

Strike two! Discipline the player

If the youngster continues to disobey your instructions, you have to bump up the severity of the punishment in order to derail the behavior before it totally distracts the team. Taking away a portion of his playing time in the next game sends a strong message that if he doesn't stop this behavior immediately, he won't get back on the field. Let the player know in clear and specific terms that if he misbehaves any more, he'll jeopardize his future with the team.



After a strike-two warning, meet with the parents and let them know what took place with their child. Tell the parents that you want their child to be a part of this team and that he won't have to face repercussions the rest of the season if he behaves appropriately. Relay exactly what you said to the child so that the parents can reinforce what you said at home. This step makes the child aware of the seriousness of his behavior and conveys that he must take immediate action to continue playing on the team. Let the parents know that their child will be sitting on the bench for a majority of the upcoming game as

punishment for his behavior. Use your best judgment when determining the appropriate amount of time a player should sit out of the game.

If you happen to be coaching in a more competitive league and the offending child is a starter, not allowing him to start is usually all you need to generate a turnaround in his behavior.

Strike three! Remove the player from the team (at least for now)

Rarely do youngsters venture into strike-three territory. With this three-tiered approach to passing out punishment, and with coveted playing time at stake, most youngsters' behavior takes a turn for the better. In the rare event when a child simply refuses to adhere to your instructions and his behavior continues to be unacceptable, you may have to remove the child from the team. You have a responsibility to all the kids on your team, and you can't allow the behavior of one child to disrupt the experiences of everyone else.

Ideally, you never want to have to force a child away from the game, and before resorting to this measure, it's a good idea to meet with the league director to detail what's happened so far.



In order to give the child every opportunity to make amends, you can allow the child to return to the team if he's willing to apologize to you and the team and to promise to model good behavior. Kids can turn over a new leaf, and maybe a few days away from the team will make him realize how much he truly misses playing football and being with his teammates at practice. If he knows the door is still cracked open for his return, and if he offers an apology for his previous indiscretions, everything may still work out in the end.

Working with a child who refuses to listen to instructions

Some kids arrive at the football field with a cocky attitude, behaving as if they know everything about the game and don't need to listen to you. These kids tune you out and do their own thing. This inattentiveness can be especially troublesome if they employ techniques that, despite your continued instruction on how to perform them the right way, pose injury risks for other players. What can you do?

If the child isn't performing a skill correctly and you suspect that the reason was because he wasn't paying attention, ask the child why he isn't executing the skill like you just demonstrated a moment ago. Maybe he didn't understand your instructions and out of frustration tried doing it the way he thought it was done. Perhaps the reason he's having difficulty is because your explanation

wasn't that clear. Try repeating your instructions again while taking the youngster through the process step-by-step. If he continues to have difficulty, choose a different drill or find a new approach. You need to do whatever it takes to help him.

However, if you actually see a child turning a deaf ear to your instructions, sit him down in practice and have him watch how the rest of the team follows what you've told them. After a few minutes, ask him whether he's ready to return to play and is willing to listen. The non-listener is likely to be much more receptive to your instruction after spending time by your side while his teammates were on the field playing and having fun.

Getting a talkative child to calm down

You may have some kids on your team who are more talkative than an auctioneer. Kids who are more interested in talking than listening to what you have to say can cause many distractions. If the team hears only bits and pieces of your instructions because of a non-stop talker, your effectiveness as a coach is compromised. How do you curb the vocal cords of those kids whose mouths seem to be constantly moving?

At the first indication of a problem, don't embarrass the child but simply remind the team that when you're speaking, everyone needs to remain quiet and pay attention. If that fails, you may have to call the player out. For example, say something like, "Tony, please be quiet while I'm addressing the team. It's important that everyone hears what I'm going over. If you have a comment or question, please wait until I'm done."

If the player's talking continues to cause problems, pull him aside and be firm in your stance that he must abide by your rules or face the consequences — and then spell them out clearly so he knows the penalties for any future disobedience. If you have to reprimand him again to be quiet, let him know that he's going to lose significant amounts of playing time. Usually this threat is enough to get his attention — and close his mouth. Follow the three-strikes technique that we cover earlier in this chapter.

Getting a perpetually late child to be on time

One of the biggest headaches you're likely to deal with is the child who continually strolls in late for practice and misses the critical warm-up period and your pre-practice instructions; or the kid who hops out of the car midway

through the second quarter on game day, throwing your line-up into disarray and creating chaos with your substitution patterns. Late-arriving players are a nuisance and are totally disruptive to the flow of your practice or game.

Encouraging punctuality

If you don't resolve the problem right away and it drags on for weeks, the consequences can be more than just a big headache. At some point in the season, the child's late arrival may force you to forfeit the game because you don't have enough players available. You never want one child's lateness to affect the playing experience of the entire team. The following are a few tips that you can incorporate to help lure the kids to your practices and games on time:

- ✓ **Team talk:** As soon as you get a sense that late arrivals are beginning to create problems, talk to the entire team to reinforce your expectations on attendance. Stress that being part of a team is a commitment — one that the players need to keep, whether it's a routine midweek practice or playoff game. Make it clear that you're at the field — on time — for all practices and games and that you expect and deserve the same consideration from every one of them. If you don't address the issue at the first hint of trouble, you may slowly lose control of the season (as well as the respect of the players who show up on time).
- ✓ **Roll call:** Make a really big production out of attendance by taking roll call during the team's warm-up at your practices. With younger kids, turn it into an entertaining exercise by calling out a funny nickname for a player or using an amusing voice. Even if you only have a handful of kids on your team and a roll call isn't necessary from the standpoint of knowing who's there and who hasn't arrived yet, it can still be a fun moment that the kids enjoy.
- ✓ **Fun games:** Although you can't force players to arrive on time for practice, you can incorporate a few different techniques to help entice them to begin showing up on time more often. Try throwing in a fun little game before practice begins. You may be pleasantly surprised by the number of kids who suddenly are arriving at practice well ahead of time. Hopefully, they pester Mom or Dad to get them to practice so they don't miss out on the fun game with their friends.
- ✓ **Individual exercises to warm up:** When a player arrives late, don't immediately send him into the drill that you're running. Instead, have him work on some individual skills, such as running around cones on the sidelines to work on his footwork before allowing him to step onto the field for practice.



If you're coaching a team of older players who are more susceptible to muscle strains and pulls, make sure the late player goes through proper stretching before you allow him on the field.

- ✓ **Reduced playing time:** A youngster who's constantly late for practice should have his playing time in games reduced. Getting to play when you don't show up on time simply isn't fair to the players who are there on time week after week.

Speaking with the parents

Punishing a youngster for the irresponsible behavior of his parents is an extremely sensitive area. As we discuss in Chapter 4, hopefully you address the importance of showing up on time for practices and games at your pre-season parents meeting.

Anytime you address a lateness issue with a child, be sure to follow up with the parents. Many parents simply may not realize what a big disruption their child's late arrival causes for the rest of the team. Hopefully, a brief conversation reminding them of the importance of being on time is all you need to keep the problem from happening again.

The following are a few things you may want to mention to the parents to ensure that the discussion goes smoothly and all parties are on the same page:

- ✓ **Team inconvenience:** Let the parents know that the late arrival is a disruption that detracts from the time you have to teach the entire team. Stress that you really need the child on time at every practice for the team's development.
- ✓ **Individual skills:** Because many of the skills you try to teach follow a natural progression, a child's lateness puts you and the child in a tough spot. Many of the skills you're teaching build upon skills learned earlier. When a child misses valuable instruction time, this situation compromises his development and limits his practice with that particular skill.
- ✓ **Possible solutions:** Be willing to offer up solutions that are convenient for all parties. The answer could be as simple as having a teammate's parent pick up the youngster and bring him to practice.
- ✓ **Playing time reminder:** Remind the parents that playing time in games is distributed based on practice attendance and you'd hate to see their child penalized, but you have to be fair to the kids who are on time.

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Part V: The Extra Points _____

Chapter 21

Coaching an All-Star Team

In This Chapter

- ▶ Defining All-Star teams
 - ▶ Selecting your players
 - ▶ Packing the suitcases and keeping the kids on track
-

All-Star teams open the door to a whole new set of challenges for youngsters who are passionate about football and are looking to take their skills to more competitive levels. Grabbing the coaching reins of an All-Star team plops all sorts of challenges in your lap, too. You get to deal with more-skilled players, more-talented teams, and more-intense competition. You have tryouts to organize, players to evaluate, and rosters to put together.

If you're interested in coaching an All-Star team, this chapter provides some information to help make your transition to this higher level of coaching a smooth one.

What Is an All-Star Team?

All-Star teams provide opportunities for youngsters with more advanced skills to compete against other kids of similar ability in a competitive environment; in order to play on these teams, kids must go through a tryout process and be chosen by the coaching staff.

All-Star teams play against other teams from other leagues in their own community, a neighboring town, or other cities throughout the state. They usually require a greater time commitment from both the child and parent, because you typically hold more practices than what's customary in a recreational program. Parents usually have a larger financial commitment to cover the additional costs associated with any traveling that's involved.

Are you ready for All-Star coaching?

Before you volunteer to coach an All-Star team, you should have several seasons of recreational league coaching under your belt. If you're trying to determine whether making the jump to the All-Star sidelines is right for you, check out the following six questions to gauge your readiness:

- ✓ **Why do you want to coach an All-Star team?** If your answer has anything to do with your interest in helping kids who are passionate about the game have fun and take their skills to exciting new levels, you're on the right track. If your response involves wanting to win championships, take a step back. Sure, the competition is more intense and All-Star teams place a greater emphasis on winning, but your number-one priority should never stray from what's best for the kids.
- ✓ **Do you know advanced coaching techniques?** A lot of kids who compete at this level are fanatical about football. They train year-round and attend summer camps, so they're extremely knowledgeable about the game. To be an effective coach, you need to be well-versed in all aspects of football. If you can't correct techniques and spot errors, your players will fall into bad habits and skill development will come to a standstill.
- ✓ **Have you ever conducted a tryout or assisted with one?** The tryout process is a big piece of the All-Star coaching puzzle, and if you lack experience in this area, your season could be off to a rocky start. Before you grab the All-Star coaching reins, contact a coach of an All-Star team in your area and ask whether you can watch how he runs his tryouts. Being an observer gives you valuable insight on the right way to do things and what not to do.
- ✓ **Do you have reliable assistants?** You need experienced coaches to help you in all areas of the game. The assistants you choose must be knowledgeable about football, teach only safe techniques, and have unwavering support of your coaching philosophy (see Chapter 2 for more on developing that philosophy). Never jump into coaching an All-Star team without having a strong supporting cast by your side.
- ✓ **Are you a good strategist?** Any football coach can go into a game with a plan for his team—that's the easy part. The really good coaches are those who can make adjustments in their game plans at halftime or on the fly based on what the opponent's doing. Here's a good test: Attend a high school football game, watch the first half of play, and then determine what adjustments each team should make both offensively and defensively for the second half. If these observations come pretty easily, you have a good handle on football strategy. If you struggle for answers, you probably need to devote more time studying strategy before taking over an All-Star team.
- ✓ **Have you ever scouted an opponent?** To *scout* an opponent means to attend a game and watch what the players tend to do on offense, defense, and special teams. Effective scouting takes excellent observation skills. You can discover tidbits of information that can help your players in the upcoming game. For example, perhaps this team tends to run the ball to the right on first downs; or maybe the defense usually blitzes the free safety on third downs; or perhaps they use a formation on offense that your team hasn't played against. Scouting lets you tailor your practices to better prepare to face your opponents.

Generally speaking, these types of teams are best suited for kids ages 12 and older who have a deep interest in football and want the challenge of testing their skills against others of similar ability. However, kids mature at vastly different rates both emotionally and physically. Certainly, some 11-year-olds may be better equipped to handle the All-Star team experience than some 13-year-olds.



Each decision about a child's readiness must be made on an individual basis. The best football experiences are the ones that match the motivation and skill levels of the individual athletes. It's not enough for parents to want their child to play on an All-Star football team; the child must want it, too. If the child's interest is suspect, then he's probably better off sticking with a recreational program. The parents and child can revisit the All-Star team idea next season to see whether he's emotionally and physically ready to take that step up.

All-Star and rec league programs run at the same time in most communities. Because of the physical demands of football, kids must choose between the leagues. Taking on a double load of practices and games simply isn't safe or healthy for a young body. Although the number of games that All-Star teams play usually pretty closely matches the recreation league schedule, the practice load is typically much heavier, a factor parents and their child should take into account when weighing the decision of where to play.

Assembling Your All-Star Team

Choosing players for an All-Star team is a challenging process. You analyze the skills and abilities of the players as you would for any team, but the task becomes much less pleasant, because you'll have to break the bad news to some players that they didn't make the cut. Here's a look at the selection process and what goes into conducting efficient tryouts.

Holding a tryout

Conducting a tryout that runs smoothly says a lot about your coaching abilities and makes it easier to choose the players who are best suited to play at this level.

You can approach the tryout the same way you would a regular first practice. At the start of the tryout, briefly introduce yourself and run down the structure of the session. Doing so helps ease stress, allows kids to focus on performing their best, and eliminates any surprises. Be friendly as the kids arrive, greet them with a smile, and exude a positive attitude. Even though kids feel pressure because coveted spots are at stake, you want to keep the tryout a positive experience.

As in a regular practice, start with active warm-ups and dynamic stretching. (*Dynamic stretching* means using movements in your warm-up that match those the kids will use during the practice or game — see Chapter 11.) If you count on kids to stretch on their own, some may do an inadequate job and increase their risk of injury.



Avoid choosing players to lead the stretches. Even if you're familiar with some of the kids and know they'd do a great job, singling out players sends the message that you already have these kids tabbed for positions on the team.

Here are some tips on choosing, running, and watching the drills at your tryouts:

✓ **Put players in situations that closely mirror game conditions.**

Evaluating a single skill in isolation, such as how fast a player can run, lets you overlook how a player's talents work together. For example, if one wide receiver runs the 40-yard dash in 5 seconds and another covers it in 6 seconds, you still know nothing about how quickly each player can break free from a defensive back at the line of scrimmage and actually get open. Seeing how players respond in game-like conditions gives you a better idea of how kids really perform on the field.

✓ **Sprinkle in some coaching pointers.** You don't want to get too caught up in coaching, simply because that takes away from the purpose of the tryout, which is to evaluate the kids' skills. But giving some coaching pointers isn't a bad idea. After all, doing so gives you a chance to observe how the kids react to instruction and constructive criticism.

✓ **Use small-sided drills.** Observing players in drills involving only three or four players can give you a better read on their skills than watching a full-scale drill where so much happens all at once. Drills also help you determine which positions the players you choose are best suited for.

✓ **Break tryouts down by position.** Most of the kids trying out have probably played football for years and have a good idea of what positions they can play. Breaking down your tryout by position gives you and your coaching staff the best chance to evaluate players.

Allow each kid to try out for several different positions so you can fill all the roles. This setup also gives you a chance to look over players who've demonstrated a certain skill level and would fit in nicely as back-ups if injuries force you to shuffle your lineup at some point during the season. Remember, besides selecting players to play on offense and defense and filling second-string roles, you have to determine special teams units.

✓ **Stagger the stations.** Run your position stations in different blocks of time. Having the running back station from 6 to 6:30 and the wide receiver station from 6:30 to 7, for example, allows you to see everyone and accommodate however many kids are trying out for that position. You won't have a good sense of your players if every station runs at once and you see only bits and pieces.



As you determine how many stations you need to run at a time, remember to limit the total tryout to 1 hour for kids ages 12 and under. For older kids, you can bump it up to 1½ to 2 hours. If you need to hold a couple tryout sessions in order to effectively evaluate all the kids, that's fine. You're much better off holding a pair of 1-hour sessions than one 2-hour session.

- ✓ **Delegate to assistants.** Have your assistants run the drills so you can focus all your attention on watching and evaluating each player. Although you count on your assistants to provide valuable input, the final decision on every player comes down to you.



If you have a large turnout, ask your assistants to take notes on the players' abilities during the drills. Make sure you go over how you want the kids evaluated so you get balanced feedback. Distribute sheets with a list of the skills you want evaluated to make the process run smoothly.

- ✓ **Have clearly designated areas for kids who aren't performing a drill.** Players who aren't involved in a drill, or who are waiting their turn, need to be kept a safe distance from the action. You don't want to waste time constantly telling kids to step back or, worse, deal with injuries caused by kids standing too close to the action.

Selecting players: Skills, attitude, and mental muscle



A well-structured tryout is the first step toward putting together an All-Star team. Next, you have to keep a close watch on the kids to determine which ones deserve the chance to play for you this season. It's not fair to the kids to drag out the selection process and call them back for another round of tryouts because you're undecided, so get it right the first time.

Physical ability certainly plays an important role in your decision. But don't overlook a player's demeanor. You want players who are supportive, rather than negative, toward their teammates. So watch to see how players interact when things don't go smoothly.

Also pay attention to mental muscle. Find out what type of competitors the players are and whether they give their all on every play. Also, note whether they're good sports who play within the rules or whether they sometimes resort to unfavorable tactics.

Inconsistent effort or sportsmanship isn't an automatic disqualifier, as you have to evaluate each child individually. However, if you do choose a child who tends to show inappropriate behavior, you have the responsibility to work with him and teach him the importance of behaving appropriately.

Breaking the news

When you tell players whether they've made the team, their emotions will cover a broad spectrum, from happiness to heartbreak. Here are some pointers to keep in mind when you inform kids whether they'll be suiting up for you:

✓ **Notify everyone individually.** Ideally, you'd like to speak to each youngster and his parents one-on-one. If you're working with a small group of kids, you can use a meeting room at your local recreation agency. Reserve a block of time and let parents know they can drop by with their child during this time to find out whether he made the team. You'll meet with the parents and child on a first-come, first-served basis.

If having one-on-one talks in person isn't feasible, devote one evening to making calls and delivering the news over the phone; or send letters to everyone and leave your contact information, letting parents know you'd be happy to discuss the reasons behind your decision in greater detail.

✓ **Be timely.** Think about when you've interviewed for a job and how nerve-racking it is to wait to hear whether you got it. The same goes for kids trying out for your team, so don't delay the process.

✓ **Give bad news gently.** Hearing that he didn't make the team can crush a child's confidence, so soften the blow. You don't want to squash a player's enthusiasm for football or derail his interest in playing. In phrasing your words, be clear that not making the team isn't a reflection of the child as a person. Let the youngster and his parents know what areas of his game you were impressed with.

Offer recommendations on how a player can improve the weaker areas of his game, and make sure you encourage him to try out again next season. Maybe he just needs one more season of recreation play to hone his skills before he makes the jump to this more competitive level of play.

✓ **If the kids made the cut, remind parents about playing time and other rules.** Clearly explain to your players and their parents that playing time is determined by ability. Some parents may be under the impression that if their child makes the team, he'll start every game. Be sure they're aware that All-Star teams are much different from recreational programs and that the more-skilled players receive the bulk of the playing time. Also, mention that you'll be holding a preseason parents meeting (flip to Chapter 4 for a review) to share important info on the season and gain information on the kids, too.

✓ **Say thanks.** Thank the players for following your instructions and giving their best effort, and thank the parents for their willingness to get the kids to the tryout on time.



Surviving the Season: How to Keep Kids Safe and Motivated

Coaching an All-Star team involves more than designing plays and deciding defensive alignments. Sometimes you have to hit the road for games, and you need to be careful not to create a practice-heavy schedule that burns kids out midway through the season. Read on for information on making your way through an intense season. (See Chapter 19 for info on preventing injuries, getting your players in shape, and encouraging healthy eating habits.)

Hitting the road

When your team travels out of town for a game and stays overnight, you're in charge of ensuring the safety of all the kids — both to and from events and at the location where the team is staying. You need to closely monitor the whereabouts of every player at all times. Be aware of

- ✓ **Curfews:** Children naturally enjoy staying in motels and swimming in the pool, for example, but in order for them to perform at their best during games, you have to make sure kids get enough rest.
- ✓ **First aid info:** Keep easily accessible emergency cards for each player in your first aid kit. Cards should include the players' emergency contact information and any medicines they're allergic to or conditions that a treating physician should be aware of.
- ✓ **Extracurricular activities:** Competing out of town provides opportunities for sightseeing and extracurricular activities. You don't want your players so worn out from sightseeing, however, that they're unable to give you their best effort. Before departing, go over the schedule with the players and their parents and let them know whether they'll have time for extracurricular activities.
- ✓ **Problems with partying parents:** Prior to any overnight stays, lay down the ground rules for the parents. You want them to enjoy themselves, but not by partying excessively, consuming alcohol, or making too much noise.



Ideally, you want each child to have a parent come along to be responsible for his or her youngster. If that's not possible, parents need to make arrangements so every child is accounted for by a designated adult. You may want to assign a parent to help you arrange bus trips and carpools and find hotel accommodations. See Chapter 4 for tips on enlisting parental help.

Avoiding burnout

Often, youngsters take some time to adjust to what All-Star teams are all about. After all, there are more practices during the week; new locales to play in for out-of-town games; and the increased competition for playing time with teammates who are faster and stronger than they're used to.

Players burn out when they've grown tired of playing, and burnout typically involves a combination of physical and emotional exhaustion. Here are some ways to keep your team energized:

- ✓ **Keep practices fresh.** With the extra practice load, providing kids with a wide range of drills is more important than ever. Spicing up your practices with a variety of drills makes players less likely to become drained. Check out Chapter 18 for some advanced drills you can use; Chapters 11 and 14 provide basic and intermediate drills you can modify.
- ✓ **Don't beat them up.** You don't need to run full contact drills every practice. You can run effective practices with the kids wearing just t-shirts, shorts, and their helmets.
- ✓ **Preach effort.** The game's still youth football, so keep it fun. Don't let your team feel burdened by pressures to win games, which can cripple enthusiasm. Keep the focus on effort and applaud it at all times.



Some parents may behave inappropriately at games because of the increased level of competition, undermining your focus on effort. Jump to Chapter 20 for a briefing on some of the common challenges coaches face when dealing with parents who tend to get a little out of control.

Keeping everyone in the game

Even though your players are on an All-Star team, don't lose sight of the fact that every child — whether he's the team's best player or the least talented of the group — has an important role. It's your responsibility to make sure the kids are fully aware of that, too.

Encourage players to take an active role in all areas of the game, even when off the field. When players are on the bench, you want them cheering their teammates on and supporting them. Also, encourage players to monitor the action closely from the sideline. This keeps the kids' attention, and they may even spot a pattern in the opposing team's plays that your team could exploit.

Part VI

The Part of Tens

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Just how much do you think you can embarrass me?
If you think I'm going to Joey's game with you
wearing those ridiculous socks, you are sadly mistaken."

In this part . . .

If you're looking for clever approaches for making the season memorable or want to know how to end the season on a high note, this is the part for you. You can incorporate these suggestions into your coaching or read through them to spark some ideas of your own.

Chapter 22

(Almost) Ten Ways to Make the Season Memorable

In This Chapter

- ▶ Challenges, contests, and captains
 - ▶ Playing the name game
-

Youngsters will look back on their experiences playing football with you for years to come. Whether those memories put smiles or frowns on their faces is largely up to you. These kids probably won't remember what the team's record was, but they'll easily recall whether the time they spent with you was a positive or negative experience. Check out some methods you can use throughout the season to ensure that your players will be begging to play for you again next season and — more importantly — will reflect back on their experience with you with happiness and a real sense of fulfillment.

Challenge-the-Coach Day

Youngsters love scoring touchdowns, intercepting passes, and recording tackles. They also love putting their skills to the test against their teammates during practices and against others their age during games. You can take things a step further and give them chances to play — and beat — you in a variety of skill challenges. Following are a couple examples:

- ✓ **Long ball throw:** Give kids five throws and let their longest one count. You only get one toss to try to beat their best effort.
- ✓ **Target throw:** Place some type of target (a cone works well) on the field at a reasonable distance away and see who can hit the target first, or out of five throws, who can come closest to it.

Guest Speakers

No matter how great a coach you are or how much fun you are to be around, every once in a while, your players may enjoy a break from you, particularly if the season is long and they're with you for several months. Bringing in a new face to talk to the kids about some aspect of football provides a new perspective that can refresh and reenergize them. You have lots of possibilities within your community. A local high school football coach, a well-known high school football player, or coaches or players from a nearby college team are all excellent resources. These folks can even help out during practice and give the kids fresh insight on how to perform specific skills.

Contest Day

One of the most effective ways to promote team camaraderie is devoting a practice session to a series of special contests. But instead of having the players compete among themselves, pair up a talented child with a youngster who isn't quite as skilled so that the two of them are forced to work together, which not only improves their skills but also allows them the chance to get to know one another better.

You can pair your offensive players together and your defensive players together; or you can mix things up, putting, for example, a defensive lineman with a running back and a wide receiver with a linebacker. Set up stations that require the kids to perform all different skills so the contest is fair and fun for everyone. Here are some options for those stations:

- ✓ **Run and catch:** The player and his partner have to run the length of the football field, throwing a ball back and forth to each other as they run. Require the players to complete ten passes before they reach the other end of the field. Or to make the activity even more challenging, have them complete a throw and catch every 5 or 10 yards. Time all the pairs to see who can do it the fastest.
- ✓ **Obstacle course:** Each player runs through the obstacle course, and their times are combined for a team score.

Team Votes

You probably remember that being a kid isn't that easy at times. So once in a while, why not give kids a break — especially if they've been working really hard for you in practice lately? A great reward for their dedication is letting

them have a voice in making some decisions during the season. Giving them chances to voice their opinions shows that you respect them as both football players and people and that you value their thoughts. Even something as basic as letting them decide on the color of the team mouth guard builds camaraderie and sends the message that what they think matters. You can also let the youngsters work together to come up with a team cheer to use before taking the field for their games.

Team Captain for the Day

Anytime you come across the chance to build a child's confidence, you should pounce on it as quickly as you'd snatch up a \$20 dollar bill lying on the sidewalk. Something as easy and simple as assigning team captains at each practice is a wonderful way to give each child a little extra attention and build up his confidence. (Just make sure every kid on the team gets a chance!)

Make this honor something that carries some weight. Besides the basics, like letting the designated captains lead the team warm-ups, maybe allow them the authority to choose the first team drill of the day or decide how they want practice to conclude. You can even go so far as to have specially colored jerseys made that you hand out to them at the start of practice.

The Name Game

If you're coaching a smaller squad of youngsters, let the players come up with nicknames for themselves. Kids love the attention that a cool nickname generates, and using a nickname can put smiles on their faces when you're telling them about the nice block they made or providing feedback on how they performed during the special teams drill. (With larger groups of kids, giving nicknames is a little more difficult to pull off, because you have your work cut out just learning all their real names to begin with!) You can also share a nickname for yourself that the kids can call you during practice.

Midseason Grades

Issuing midseason cards is a great way to let your players know that you notice their effort. Everyone loves being recognized for his skills and hard work, and a simple, handwritten note — which players can look back at and read all season long — often carries more weight than a verbal accolade. You

don't have to write an essay, just a few sentences extolling a player's talents and recognizing what areas of the game he has really excelled in so far this season.

With older players, these handwritten notes can be just as effective. You can even touch on an area of the game where you challenge kids to make some improvements. Besides applauding those areas that players excel in, give them a goal to strive for so they have something extra to concentrate on during practice. Setting a goal can help carry kids through the remainder of the season.

Coach Review

How good a job are you doing with the kids? Well, the best way to find out is to come right out and ask. At the midpoint of your season, distribute forms to the kids with some basic questions for them to answer. Let them take them home and return them the next practice — without their names on it. You'll get honest answers only when kids and parents don't have to fear any repercussions.

Ask kids what they like best and least about the season. Probe them to find out what they'd do to improve practices or whether you could do anything to make game day more fun. Find out what practice drills they like and which ones they'd be happy not to ever see again. Encourage parents to provide feedback as well.

Trick Plays

Nothing sabotages fun and learning more quickly than subjecting youngsters to the same boring practice drills week after week. Taking the time to introduce the occasional trick play every once in a while during your practices infuses your sessions with some added excitement and ensures that the kids are continually challenged.

If you devote practice time to a trick play, though, make sure to find a spot during the game to use it. Otherwise, players won't be quite as enthusiastic practicing them in the future.

Chapter 23

Ten Fun Ways to End the Season on a High Note

In This Chapter

- ▶ Recognizing players' contributions to the team
 - ▶ Handing out keepsakes to remember the season
 - ▶ Ending the season with a smile
-

Sure, kids enjoy the traditional team pizza parties that many coaches hold at the end of the season, but you — with a little extra planning — can put an exclamation point on your season and the time you've spent with your players by doing something really special. After all, you've used your creativity all season long in designing practices, implementing game plans, and teaching the kids all sorts of new skills. Applying that same enthusiasm now can help ensure a wonderful finish to your season. Here are ten clever (if we do say so ourselves) season-ending ideas to dazzle the kids, impress the parents, and put a smile on everyone's face.

Team Awards

Handing out creative awards to each kid is a great way to recognize the players' contributions. After the season concludes, you want to send the message to each and every one of them that they were valued and contributing members of the team. Create special awards that recognize children for their skills or the characteristics that stood out to you during the season.



Singling out only a select few players is unproductive and unfair, and it leaves the others hurt, disappointed, and rejected. There's really no need to hand out the traditional Most Valuable Player award. After all, everyone — from the players on the team to the parents in the stands — is already well aware of who the strongest players are. Plus, presenting this type of award gives the impression that an individual was more important than any of the other team members, and that goes against the whole teamwork philosophy that you've (hopefully) stressed all season long.

You're likely to have dozens of players on your team, but a simple certificate naming the award and the player (printed from your home computer) is all you need. With a little imagination, you can easily come up with ways to highlight each child's efforts during the season. Here are a few ideas to get those creative juices flowing:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Most Dedicated✓ Best Sportsmanship✓ Most Improved✓ Hardest Worker✓ Best Practice Player✓ Most Enthusiastic | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Model Teammate✓ Most Likely to Block a Punt✓ Best Special Teams Blocker✓ Hardest Player for Opponents to Block✓ Most Likely to Force a Fumble |
|---|---|

Team Videos

Videos are great for capturing the excitement of the season. You can then give youngsters a special keepsake they can watch for years to come. Videos make great gifts for Grandma and Grandpa, too! If you have a parent who has a pretty steady hand when it comes to filming the action, see whether she'd be interested in shooting video of the kids at different practices and games and putting together a montage of the season. (Alternately, you can put together digital slide shows that include music and creative graphics on a DVD or CD.) You just want to make sure that the final piece has every child included. If you're going to put one of these together, bring it up at your pre-season parents meeting so there's plenty of time to get shots of all the kids.

Individual Highlight Videos

Individual videos for each child highlighting his play during the season are neat gifts. Check with a local videographer about the cost of doing a brief video on each player, because this project would likely be too time consuming for a parent to handle on his or her own. If you have these videos done, plan a special night for the team so everyone can watch all the videos together.

Team Trading Cards

Kids love collecting and trading cards of their favorite sports heroes with their friends, so working with a local photographer to design football cards with the kids' photo on the front and maybe an interesting fact about them on the back will go over big. You can include basic information, such as date

of birth, height, and weight, as well as fun information, such as the nickname you call them at practice or a quote from you about what you admire most about them. Have a few dozen printed out for each kid so he can swap them with teammates and send some to grandparents.



Discuss this idea with the parents prior to the season to see whether making trading cards is financially feasible.

Team Photo Album

Team photo albums will be cherished by parents — and enjoyed by youngsters — for years to come. Before the season starts, designate an interested parent who's proficient with a camera to take photos during practices and games. Or choose a couple different parents each game to snap a roll of film of all the kids. This ensures that you have a wide variety of shots to choose from when putting together the albums. Make copies of the prints you want, and make each album identical for all the players. If you or another parent has time, you can get really creative and make an album for each player that features a team photo and a variety of shots of that particular child in practices or games.

Football Photo

A football emblazoned with the team photo is a cool keepsake that kids will love having on their bedroom shelves. It's also more appealing than the traditional team photo stuck in a frame. Contact a local photography outlet to set it up. A plaque with the team photo and perhaps the team name or team saying displayed on it is another inexpensive keepsake.

Team Memento

You can hand out a participation memento, such as a small medal shaped like a football, because most kids love receiving cool medals that they can proudly display in their bedrooms. Or present miniature footballs that you purchased at a sporting goods retail store. You can jazz up the balls by having the team name or each player's name and number printed on them.

Team Newsletter

Producing a team newsletter is a unique way to recap the season. You can feature different action photos; capsule summaries of each game (make sure

that each child is mentioned at some point if you recap the entire season); and brief bios of each player listing favorite TV shows or school subjects or what kind of pets they have. You can personalize the newsletter with a comment about each player, like “Jeff is one of the team’s hardest workers,” or “Brad displayed amazing sportsmanship during the season.”

Design it in a newspaper format, and include a column about how much fun you had coaching the kids and how enjoyable it was to watch them learn and progress in the sport.

One-on-One Meeting

Private meetings with players are a great way to wrap up the season on a positive note, motivate kids to continue working hard, and leave them looking forward to returning next season.

This meeting is especially beneficial for older kids. Talk to them about skills they made the most improvement in and how proud you are of their efforts. Using a positive tone, also go over skills that could use a little extra work and, if they’re interested, offer suggestions on how they can improve skills on their own before next season.

Crazy Practice

Kids love candy and games, so combining the two makes for a fun-filled end-of-season practice. Set up fun stations around the field to challenge the kids, and give out prizes. For example, get a parent to hold up a hula hoop, and have the kids try throwing the ball through the hoop — without hitting the parent in the process! You also can have a punting station where the kids have to hit a target, which could be anything from several old towels laid together to a bunch of cones. Place a bucket of candy at each station so the kids can grab a piece each time they go through one.

Kids at the more advanced levels love competing against each other, so turn the practice into a fun contest for older kids. Instead of candy, award points to the top finishers of each event and tally up who’s the overall winner. Or go through each station yourself and award points to those kids who are able to beat you.

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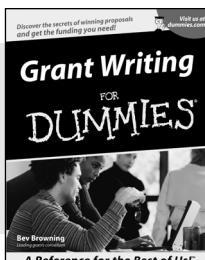
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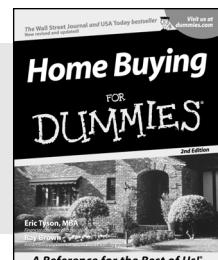
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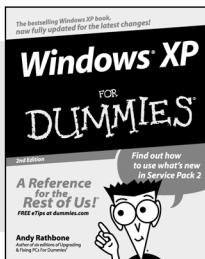
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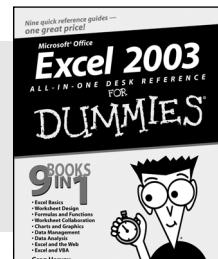
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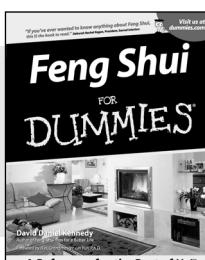
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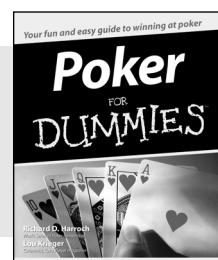
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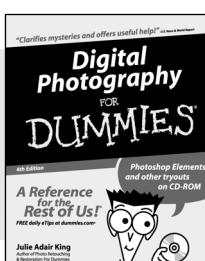
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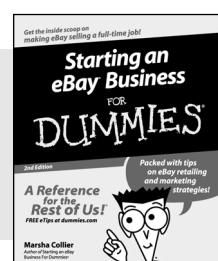
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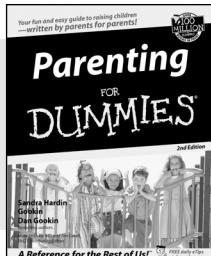
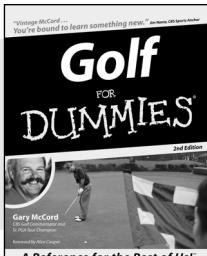
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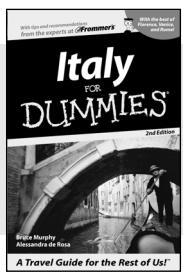
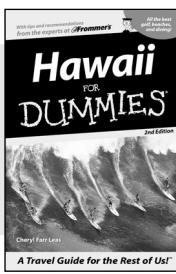
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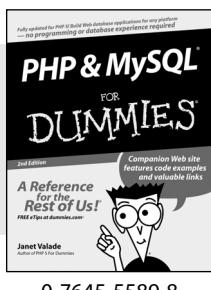
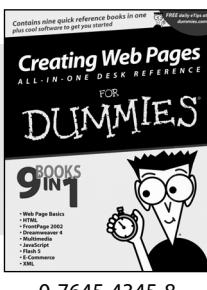
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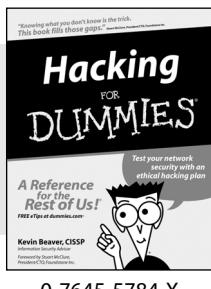
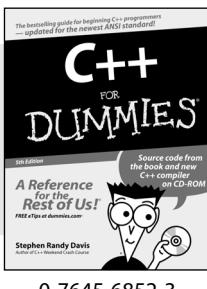
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