Nebraska’s 3 R’s: One-Play-at-a-Time Preperformance Routine for Collegiate Football

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Described is a preperformance cognitive-behavioral routine that was developed for the University of Nebraska football team. The routine is based on the premise that to perform effectively, football players must focus on one play at a time by exhibiting self-control and taking responsibility for optimal performance. The resulting 3-step “ready, respond, and refocus” routine emphasized that the play begins with the “ready” signal in the huddle, is followed by the play or “respond” component, and ends with a whistle. The time period from the end of one play to the beginning of the next is the athlete’s time to “refocus,” process, and mentally let go of the previous play. Examples of the “ready, respond, and refocus” routine are given and ways of implementing and teaching it are discussed.

I was in total control. I could do anything I wanted. I was so focused on the blocking that I didn’t think about anything. I was just doing it. . . . I got my mind hooked up with his [the man blocked] and then it was automatic. I was just hitting him and nothing else. (Ravizza, 1977, p. 38)

This description of a football player’s peak performance demonstrates the feelings of harmony, total involvement, relaxed concentration, and the total confidence associated with the peak experience in sport. Yet the nature of the peak experience phenomenon is that it is nonvoluntary. You cannot make it happen; you can only set the conditions that make it more likely to occur (Ravizza, 1977).

The first author’s research on the peak experience in sport, which began over 15 years ago, has shifted toward incorporating concepts such as present focus, total involvement, relaxed concentration, self-control, and self-trust—learned from observing athletes who are successful during intense competition—into psychological skills training programs for current athletes. In particular, we as well as the entire coaching staff of the University of Nebraska football program had the opportunity to collaborate and develop such a program, labeled “one play at a time.”

To play football one play at a time sounds easy, but the distractions of Division I football make it extremely difficult when the pressure is on. Athletes live under the microscope and are subject to intense pressure and high expectations from the media, coaches, teammates, family, and friends. Furthermore, they must learn to manage their time so they can balance athletic participation, academics, career goals, social life, and personal concerns (Cook & Tricker, 1990).

The purpose of this paper is to describe the method we developed for the University of Nebraska football program to help the players take one play at a time. This method is based on the premise that the player needs to develop a preperformance routine to enhance performance. It is one thing to say “take one play at a time,” but we provided a framework of specific things to focus on so that by doing those things the player is taking one play at a time. This program, then, sets the conditions for a peak experience to occur. When it does not occur, which is most of the time, it nevertheless helps the player perform at a more consistent and elevated level.

Mental Skills Training at the University of Nebraska

Before we can introduce football players to a useful routine for each play, a few words need to be said about the educationally based mental skills training that is the foundation for this specific technique: For the athlete to have consistent control over his football performance, he must first have control over his physical, mental, and emotional self. On the physical level, this means the athlete must do all of the usual strength and conditioning, developing the essential physical skills and executing the countless repetitions of the skill.

The mental training program at Nebraska emphasizes and educates athletes in two key concepts: (a) individual responsibility for performance, and (b) recognition of appropriate physical and mental activation levels necessary for optimal performance. The goal of the mental training program is to ensure that every player has an experiential understanding of these concepts and is able to apply the specific skills related to them. This approach gives each athlete a greater sense of control over his performance.

Individual Responsibility for Performance

The concept of responsibility for performance requires that each athlete accepts whatever task or function is assigned to him. The athlete who consistently complains that officials, coaches, or field conditions are what determine the outcome of a play or a game has failed to take responsibility for his assignment. This athlete is just a short step away from feeling hopeless and helpless. The ideal situation is one in which the player maintains focused concentration, play after play, throughout the game.

The role of the coaching staff and sport psychology consultant in achieving this objective is to implement a methodology that reinforces the link between responsibility and concentration. They help the athlete understand that his primary mental goal is to establish an internal state of focused concentration by the time...
the ball is snapped. Specifically, the athlete must (a) control his response to the game situation and (b) accept responsibility for his actions and his level of concentration, commitment, and intensity. No matter what happened on the last play, he must approach each subsequent play from a centered, balanced perspective.

The athlete may not have control over the outcome of each play, but he does have control of his mental and emotional state at the beginning of each play. Even if there are problems with how a specific play is executed, each player can still be in control of himself and concentrate appropriately.

**Appropriate Physical and Mental Activation**

The idea of asking athletes to accept responsibility for their performance, as we have defined it, is not new (Ravizza & Rotella, 1982). What is new is that the concept of responsibility is tied into a systematic mental skills training program that teaches athletes, from the outset, to recognize the physical, behavioral, and cognitive manifestations of stress that can inhibit even the most motivated and talented of them from achieving their optimal level of activation for best performance. We teach athletes and coaches to recognize their individual stressors. We provide each athlete with a variety of practical techniques he can use—on the field in front of 76,000 fans—to reinstate his sense of control over his physical, mental, and emotional self and achieve optimal activation. Again, the football player must be in control of himself before he can begin to consistently control his game performance.

Most players recognize when they are either "over-amped" (overaroused) or lethargic (underaroused), and they frequently express it as "something feels out of place." We teach players to become more aware of their arousal state so they can recognize the early warning signs of when they are beginning to lose control and can intervene with the appropriate relaxation and/or activation techniques to achieve optimal performance.

More specifically, it is important for each athlete to maintain his optimal arousal state by using structured breathing, self-talk, and various stress management techniques that are appropriate for him. For example, a quarterback who found himself trying too hard, as evidenced by his perception narrowing, focused on taking a breath as he moved to the line of scrimmage. And a defensive back who learned to recognize his negative self-talk as a signal that he was losing control learned to change this self-talk and focus on his task-relevant responsibility. Finally, a running back who learned to recognize his perception of everything speeding up as a cue to tighten a fist and release it, and then give it a 95% effort, was most effective because he was more fluid and spontaneous in his execution.

Once the player is able to get control of himself and reach a centered and balanced consistent starting point, he can immerse himself into the performance (Orlick, 1990; Ravizza, 1986).

In order to make the connection between self-control and personal responsibility for optimum performance, we have established a cognitive-behavioral routine as part of the coaching strategy to aid the players in promoting team consistency (Ravizza, 1988). This routine is described in detail below.

**The 3 R’s: Ready, Respond, Refocus**

This 3-step one-play-at-a-time simply outlines a basic process which emphasizes that the play begins with the "ready" signal in the huddle and ends with a whistle, and the time between the end of one play and the beginning of the next is the athlete’s time to reflect, process, and let go of the last play. This technique or strategy is depicted in Figure 1 and is described below.

**Ready**

The moment the quarterback or defensive signal caller is ready to call the play or set the defensive scheme, he gives a verbal cue (typically at Nebraska the cue is "ready"). This cue alerts each player to direct his attention to the signal caller immediately and intensively. The players are instructed to look at the signal caller’s lips and to be in the present moment. Essentially this means the player is to be attentive to the verbal message without any distractions (e.g., thinking about the last play, the coach’s evaluation, or the crowd reaction).

The signal caller is instructed to yell loudly or to tap the helmet of any player who appears to be inattentive. It is critical for the signal caller to get all the players focused before a play is wasted, such as through a missed assignment or blown coverage. That is, if one player is not in the present moment but instead is dwelling on the last play while critical information about the next play is being communicated, it can result in a mistake or penalty.

The ready signal is also a cue to all the players that whatever occurred on the last play is over and the next play has mentally begun. As the play is called,

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\[ \text{Responsibility} \]
\[ \text{Recognition (self-Control)} \]
\[ \text{READY (Present Focus)} \]
\[ \text{Refocus (Commit To Task)} \]
\[ \text{Respond (Trust It, Do It)} \]
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*Figure 1 — The 3 R’s to One-Play-at-a-Time.*
each athlete is responsible for quickly reviewing his assignment for that play and repeating the snap count to himself. As the player breaks from the huddle and takes his position on the field, he needs to read his keys and communicate with teammates.

As soon as the players finish check or audible calls (changes in assignments during the snap count), they must shift from conscious thought to "automatic pilot." The repetition of plays in practice makes the performance automatic for the players. This automatic execution at the snap of the ball will be referred to hereafter as "respond."

**Respond**

As the snap count is being given by the quarterback on the offense or the line-backer on the defense, the athletes are taught to quickly shift into a pure reaction mode, or automatic pilot. The play has been rehearsed many times in practice, the responsibilities for each position are clearly outlined, and now it is time for the athlete to trust his training (preparation) and just respond.

Trust and confidence are critical factors in executing the play effectively; a typical statement made by athletes when they refer to playing at peak levels is that they were just "doing it" (Ravizza, 1977). Even the slightest hesitation due to momentary confusion can disrupt the timing for the entire team. For the offensive team, timing is the essence of a successful play.

This ability to trust is encouraged during certain segments of practice when the players are given time to practice without a lot of feedback from the coaches. In this way, the player does not have to worry about the coaches' comments and can practice immersing himself in the performance. The idea of performing on automatic pilot is constantly reinforced in group meetings and on the field. Following each completed play at the line of scrimmage, the next essential step is to review the outcome of the play and then to refocus attention as soon as possible.

**Refocus**

After a play, the athlete has time before the huddle to reflect on that play and process whatever he learned in battling his opponent and to plan any adjustments he can make personally or in conjunction with teammates. If there is time, the player may also anticipate what he needs to do in order to more effectively carry out his assignment on future plays.

This is also the time for each athlete to mentally release the last play, especially if a mistake was made, and focus on the next play. Players can use a variety of individual techniques to reinforce the fact that the play is over. That is, it is okay to rejoice briefly or to have momentary feelings of anger about their previous performance. We encourage athletes to acknowledge these feelings and then move on to the next play. When athletes try to ignore or deny these feelings, they often have a subconscious level of distraction that is even more difficult to overcome.

**Teaching the One-Play-at-a-Time Technique**

The model or technique of taking one play at a time helps keep the game manageable for the players and helps keep them from getting caught up in the distractions of the crowd noise or comments of opposing players. In reality, the player does not have control over everything going on around him, but he does have control over how he chooses to respond to it (Orlick, 1986). However, it is very difficult for the players to avoid getting wrapped up in the heat of the game, worrying about the score, or feeling the pressure of the time ticking away on the game clock.

It is because of the intensity of distractions like these that the method used to take one play at a time must be kept simple so that it can be easily integrated into existing procedures (Ravizza, 1986). The old saying, "Keep it simple, stupid" could be replaced with a more appropriate one: "Keep it simple, smart" (Wayne Halliwell, personal communication, June 1990). If techniques like one play at a time are totally separated from the usual procedures, it becomes more difficult for the player to use them when he confronts adversity (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1991). Instead, this method requires the player to become more aware of the many things he already does to help gain control. For example, the huddle is where the players regroup and refocus on the next play.

With this approach we really want the athletes to take advantage of these existing procedures as tools to trigger their intensity and concentration. When a player is playing well, he does not need to do much to get control of himself since he is already in that optimal performance state. However, he does need to refocus on the next play because if he does not pay proper attention to his performance, he can make a basic mistake because he took it for granted.

In addition, the coaching staff must thoroughly understand the concept behind the technique and the use of the method. At Nebraska the concept was presented to the coaching staff, then a lengthy discussion followed in which coaches provided input and feedback to make it more appropriate to meet their players' specific needs. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of integrating the concept into the established procedures used by the team.

Once we gained the support of the coaching staff, the next step was to present the concept to the team. We introduced the method in a meeting before the first practice. Practice was halted when the first huddle was formed so that Coach Osborne and I could reinforce the systematic use of the "R's" to take one play at a time. In addition, all of the coaches reinforced the concept each time a huddle was formed. For example, if a quarterback started calling a play without first saying "ready," he would be reminded and the play would be called again. At first the major point was to get the players to see that the play begins with the "ready" command.

When valuable practice time is set aside to reinforce the concept and reminders are given in practice, the players see that the coaches value the concept. Practicing the method during practice time also helps the players become comfortable with it. This will enhance the chances of its success during the game when distractions are high.

Before each game, the coaches provide all of the technical and strategic information and conclude each pregame session with reminders to take "one play at a time" and to use the "R's" to do that. No matter how much pressure there is, the athlete is expected to take one play at a time, let go of the last play, and listen for the word "ready," thus clicking into a higher level of concentration. This reinforcement by the coaches before the game further demonstrates the high priority they place on the model. Most important, it gives the player a specific method for turning things around.
Applications of the One-Play-at-a-Time Technique

At Nebraska the pregame coaching strategy is not focused on emotional pep talks to fire up all the players. Rather, the predominant philosophy and the emphasis is on consistency in an emotional state (i.e., not to get too excited when the team is ahead and not to lose composure when the team is behind). This strategy is in effect both in the game and on the practice field. The coaches remind the players, "you have trained hard, you are prepared, now trust your talents and play the game."

The practices are made similar to games in that the offense runs a similar number of plays in practice as they do in a game. Very little corrective feedback is given during practice because the goal is the constant repetition which helps the player adapt both physically and mentally to the game-like condition. The players are given more detailed feedback the next day when they review videos of the previous day's practice under the scrutiny of each position coach.

Keeping one's intensity up throughout practice is not easy, but this is where the player gets to practice and build up his confidence in the one-play-at-a-time method. In order to be effective in practice, the coaches must reinforce one play at a time when a player is struggling or is easily distracted.

The one-play-at-a-time model was implemented in practice to give the players a procedure to let go of the last play, regroup, focus on the next play, and become immersed with controlled intensity on the task at hand. Then, on game day, it seems much more natural to just respond or do it so the game is viewed one play at a time and not as a whole. The player is encouraged to focus on the process and play the game play-by-play and not to focus on the end result or outcome.

This orientation helps the player keep things simple and provides more of a feeling of control. Thus, if the opposition scores or is leading, the player does not have to turn the whole game around. That would be overwhelming and could result in intensity and subsequent errors. Just dealing with the next play is a more productive strategy. As the players begin battling back play by play, it is easier to regain the confidence, control, and commitment. And once the player gets back in control, it is easier to let go of unreasonable expectations and trust one's ability.

There are several situations that occur frequently in football when we have found the one-play-at-a-time technique to be especially effective. These include situations in which players dwell on mistakes, do not pay attention in the huddle, try to cope with distractions, and try not to make mistakes. This technique helps them to keep things simple and can even be transferred to non-football situations. Each of these is discussed below.

Dwelling on Mistakes

When players make a mistake on the field, there is an overwhelming tendency to dwell on it. We used the analogy "you have a monkey on your back." The player needs to recognize this and then release it so he can regroup and focus on the next play. In order to release it, each player had developed specific techniques that worked for him. Some of the stress management techniques included self-talk monitoring, quick relaxation/activation procedures, symbolically releasing the last play (pick up some grass and throw it away, hit self on leg, etc.) and breathing techniques. These techniques can be tailored individually to help the player let go of the emotions associated with the previous play and begin to focus on the next play.

Not Paying Attention in the Huddle

Another coaching concern is when players leave the huddle and suddenly realize that they do not know or remember the snap count. Unfortunately, when this happens they usually turn and ask the quarterback or another player for the snap count. This interruption distracts the quarterback or other player who is at that moment attempting to recognize the defense and plan his strategy accordingly. The player who did not hear the signal was probably dwelling on the last play. For this problem we once again encourage the athletes to focus on the cue word "ready" when the quarterback steps into the huddle.

The "ready" functions as a cue to get the player's attention. His sole responsibility at that moment is to focus on hearing the play, recall immediately his play responsibilities and get the snap count accurately. Some players may be able to quickly imagine themselves executing their assignment, but this requires a higher level of self-discipline. As the player moves toward the line of scrimmage, he is expected to gradually shift his attention from the information about the play to reading his keys and immersing himself in the task at hand so he can execute his performance automatically.

Coping With Distractions

There are a multitude of distractions that interfere with a player's ability to concentrate during a high-profile football contest. These include such things as the crowd noise, weather conditions, the antics of the opponents, the television cameras, personal vendettas with an opponent player, the officials, or previous mistakes. By using the three R's we've described, the athletes have something specific to focus on to minimize the influence of various distractions. Instead of telling the player to "just concentrate," or "block out the distractions," the coach or consultant can provide a very meaningful specific process to ensure that the player will focus attention on the appropriate performance cues.

Trying Not to Make a Mistake

A common concern among players at this level of competition, with high public visibility, is the overriding feeling that they cannot afford to make a mistake. This negative orientation only serves to create unnecessary tension and an inappropriate focus of attention. For example, as you are reading this article do not listen to the noises around you. Do not listen to them! For most people this instruction serves only to direct their attention specifically to the noise around them. The same phenomenon occurs even more dramatically on the field. If the player is focusing on not dropping the ball, the contextual focus is still on "dropping the ball." Thus the outcome is likely to be paradoxical and he is more likely to drop the ball.

To avert this problem, the three R's give the players some positive focus of attention. Once the athlete recognizes that he is in the negative self-talk mode, he has a responsibility to refocus on positive task related assignments and get things back in focus.
Keep it Simple

We have used the one-play-at-a-time model so the players would have a very basic procedure to refer to in the most intense competition. We have also integrated it in a systematic way into strategic coaching protocol. For example, during the huddle when the team regroups before the next play, some players are often angry or frustrated by something that happened during the last play. The "ready" signal prompts the athlete to let go of the past and become a part of the regroup concept in the huddle. After all, he is not in it alone; he has teammates who can provide support and silent solidarity to help him be prepared for the next play.

Thus the player uses routine football strategy procedures (e.g., huddle, snap count) but now he is totally aware of his potential distractibility, either internally or externally. He is instructed to use the physical cues to help refocus his level of concentration for the next play. It is critical to have the player go to performance related cues so the mental game is not viewed as a separate thing but as an integrated part of the program. Often the player just needs to become more conscious of the things he takes for granted and use those cues to trigger his focus of attention.

Carry-over Value of the Concept

Today's college athletes have significant demands on their time and they must learn to manage their time and responsibilities effectively. The players have athletic, academic, social, family, and personal concerns that they must address and learn to balance to maintain eligibility. The concept of one play at a time can be carried out in academic situations as well, which may require the athlete to focus intensively on one academic assignment at a time. It also helps the athletes to systematically segment various responsibilities so that when studying, they can have a clear and undisturbed focus of attention, and when socializing, they can let go of previous mistakes or responsibilities and simply have a good time.

When with their family, the athletes are also encouraged to be focused on those relationships. This ability to balance all these activities is a skill they will need throughout life, and the ready, respond, and refocus model they learned on the field can also help in these other circumstances. For example, we had a lot of success carrying the one-play-at-a-time approach to studying, whereby the student-athlete is encouraged to take one assignment at a time and do something to release it before the next assignment is begun. We also heard that some players had success using the method on exams, in that they took one question at a time and this helped make the exam more manageable.

Conclusion

We encourage the players to take responsibility for their performance (whether athletic, academic, or social) and to recognize when their attention, arousal, and commitment levels are not where they need to be. In this circumstance they are instructed to carry out a "ready" orientation to reach that centered, balanced perspective for optimal focus of attention. At this point they have optimal opportunity to carry out intensive execution of their play responsibilities while maintaining control and composure on the field. Once the play is completed, they are instructed to review the play outcome and refocus their attention to the task as quickly as possible, thus readying themselves to connect with the next pass and the next task at hand.

As each player learns to use and modify this 3 R's model, he is encouraged to extend it to all other aspects of life. The major goal is to equip each player with the mental skills necessary to be in control of himself on every play or every aspect of life so that his ability to perform is not inhibited by emotional or mental lapses.

Although this paper has focused on the unique mental demands of football, the concept of the 3 R's can be modified to meet the unique mental demands imposed on athletes in any sport. Notwithstanding the dramatic differences between sports, the emphasis is on keeping the approach simple and integrating the mental skills into existing performance procedures. Once the approach has been developed, the sport psychology consultant and coach must constantly reinforce the procedure if it is to be effective.

References


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