

Learning to Punt and Kick

Second or third chances do not come often for punters or kickers who fail to execute their skill. Offensive and defensive players can fumble, throw interceptions, miss blocks, get knocked down, miss tackles, drop passes, fall down and jump off-sides, yet, will only be considered to have “had a bad day”. Their abilities and position on the team will not be questioned.

This scrutiny and “perform or get cut” mentality from the coaches and fans demands a higher level of skill performance for punters and kickers. Successfully combating this condition depends on the degree of technical knowledge the punter or kicker possesses and how quickly adjustments can be made after poorly hit punts or kicks.

The epitome of mastering this mental training is Tiger Woods. Rick Martino, director of instruction for the PGA of America, caught a comment Tiger made after shooting 40 on the front nine of his record setting 12 shot Masters victory in 1997.

“I remember him saying that day that when he finished the front side, he figured out his swing was too long.” Martino said. “No one had to tell him that, he knew it instinctively, and he managed to figure it out on the fly and make the adjustment. The rest of the week, you could see the difference.”

Just a glance at most professional punters and kickers biography will produce a litany of teams they have performed for and been cut from. The ones that reduce this experience are the ones who have learned to correct mistakes immediately like Tiger Woods.

To start this learning process you must begin to believe two things:

- 1) the ball only goes where you cause it to go, and
- 2) a knowledge base of how to punt or kick a football allows me to coach myself to correct my mistakes

Without an understanding of the essential techniques that make the ball fly where and how you make it, fixing technique errors, whether “on the fly” or over a long term is impossible.

I have witnessed many talented punters and kickers over the past 24 years as a player, coach, and operating punting and kicking camps. The ones that could perform under pressure and on command were the ones with the greatest understanding and control of the mental aspect of the skill.

How do you gain this knowledge?

1. Learn from experienced coaches and players.

You must have discerning questions when learning that allow you to focus on the essentials that make the ball travel where you want it to. For punting and kicking, as you learn the skill from others always filter the information through the following questions:

Punters: “How will it make the ball go farther or higher?”

Kickers: “How will it make the ball go farther, higher or straighter?”

If the technique you are being told to do does not contribute to these results then it does not matter if you do it that way or not. PERIOD!

There are only certain essentials that must be executed to be successful at these skills and all the rest do not matter. In fact, those “essentials” are similar for both skills. There are not a lot of techniques to learn to punt or kick well. But focusing your attention on the wrong ones will prevent your maximizing your ability. These questions will help you discern what those are.

2. Watch the ball fly and learn from what it does.

The flight of the ball is the best indicator of technique errors. An experienced instructor does not need to see you physically punt or kick the football. He can watch the ball flight and tell you what you did at the collision to cause the football to fly the way it did.

With an understanding that the essential techniques are limited and what their cause and effect are correcting technique errors from ball flight is not a difficult process.

3. Develop a strong desire to master the skill.

Anyone can be taught to punt or kick a football adequately. Few can be taught to do it on command. The desire to “BE THE BEST” is one factor that permits players to continue to advance to higher levels. The desire must translate to a strong work ethic.

“Woods loves to practice...If he wants to hit a shot that cuts 10 feet and only cuts six, he’s not happy with it,” (Peter) Kostis, widely regarded CBS analyst and teacher, said. “His tolerance is so small, it drives him to work even harder...”

My organization, 4th Down Sports, focuses our instruction on these three points. Our goal is to develop independent thinkers who can make adjustments from punt-to-punt or kick-to-kick to prevent the next one from being poor. The dependence comes from needing coaching and encouragement during training to raise and refine the level of performance that can be obtained.

Punters and kickers get cut so often in professional football because there is a vacuum of coaches with the knowledge on how to coach them to be successful after they have failed. This same attribute is what makes the best coaches, the best coaches, fixing what is broken quicker and better than others.

For punters and kickers, YOU must be that “fix-it” man for yourself. You can bemoan that fact that there is insufficient coaching or you can learn for yourself. The reality is telling you to learn for yourself.

In fact, this is really a liberating situation. For, once you obtain a level of skill competence you will have total control over your training schedule, unlike the other positions. Coaches will leave you alone and allow you to do “your own thing”. Then you will be able to tailor your practice to your specific needs!

So, let’s review....if I LEARN how to punt or kick a football I can control the ball flight...the ball flight goes the way I make or want it to go.....and I can control my destiny by what I know and practice to do right.

Then I can rise to the level where I can exist and thrive in a football position where second and third chances for failure with the same team are remote.

I urge all aspiring punters and kickers to make it their primary goal for every off-season to LEARN how to punt or kick the football for better command of the skill. Expand your knowledge of what you did to make the ball fly the way it did and you will be on your way to mastering the skill and controlling your football career.

A good place to start learning the techniques is with my book, *Kicking the Football*. It can be purchased through most bookstores or at www.amazon.com. I also encourage you to attend a kicking camp or seek individual instruction and begin learning your strengths and weaknesses as a punter or kicker.

Make this off-season your best ever by LEARNING to punt and kick rather than just punting and kicking. The off-season is where champions are made.