

It's not the X's and O's, it's the Jimmys and Joes

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Abstract

Building a successful team can be demanding and we all face a similar challenge; Do we build our team based on a set structure and place team members into set roles, or do we fit the roles around our team members already in place?

Leading a project team through this can be a tough balancing act. However, we can draw inspiration from the world of sport where such decisions are commonplace, none more obvious than American Football, where Head Coaches bring in their own scheme and players. We all want the best players on our team, and we all know the way we want to play the game, however truly great Head Coaches find the marriage between both the game plan and their players' skill sets.

Find the inner NFL Coach within you and begin to lead your "Star Players" and remember, your role doesn't end when the final whistle blows.

Introduction

The idea of "It's not the X's and O's, it's the Jimmys and Joes" is cited a lot in college football. This is the idea that it doesn't matter how good your game plan is, if you are unable to utilise the full potential of your team. In the college football landscape, schools' recruitment, budget and history differ vastly, but why doesn't this disparity stop smaller schools producing huge upsets? It is because they structure their approach around their "Jimmys and Joes" and maximizing their strengths. They don't have talented individuals working in unfavourable positions. In short, they adjust their scheme to their players. For instance, if you have a quarterback that can't throw the ball very far but is accurate, we need to work to their strength so they can succeed, not make them work in a way that is detrimental to them.

When we are building a team for a new client, or even building a team for a long-term project we are usually picking from a pool of people. This allows us to pick and choose people we expect to perform best in the long term and bring the most to the team overall. They may fulfil a specific need that we have, we may see them as someone that can develop with the support of other more experienced members within the team, or a hard worker that will do a job to the best of their ability. This is essentially drafting. The NFL has an annual draft where teams pick and choose the highest rated college players that they believe will have the biggest positive impact for their team. Drafting is the perfect way to get the skeleton of a brilliant team, but those players need coaching for the challenges that come ahead. Over the season each NFL team will play a minimum of 17 games, with no two games being the same. Yes, they will play three teams twice, but this likely occurs three plus months apart at a different venue and with different players available due to injuries. So how can we as coaches prepare for something like this? This is where we game plan!

If we take each deliverable for a study as an individual game that we need to plan for: IDMC (Independent Data Monitoring Committee), Early Dry Run, DSUR (Development Safety Update Report), IA (Interim Analysis), SAC (Study Analysis Complete). Not one of these packages are ever going to be the same as each one is going to require a slightly different approach and length of time to complete to the others. So, this is where we adjust our idea for how our Biostats team is going to work, our "scheme" to fit the challenge ahead of us for the "players" we have.

Game plan

Every NFL team has an identity in the way they play or approach the game. It could have been engrained in them for example, the Pittsburgh Steelers are tied to the industrial history of the city, which was once a hub of steel production. The famous "Steel Curtain" defence of the 1970s epitomized the tough, hard-nosed attitude of the city's working-class roots. However, more likely it is what a Head Coach instils in them. They might want to be a high-powered offensive team and hope they can score more than they concede. They might choose to be a defensive, control the game sort of team, so their opponent doesn't have the chance to score. In turn, we all have an identity as study leads, project leads and managers to those that report to us.

That identity for me is to dive straight into a problem and highlight the downstream impacts that may come with this. You might be someone that sits back, takes in all the information, and proposes solutions before any further work continues. This identity can be our core, but if we are not willing to adjust to the challenge and adapt for our team and their strengths, then we will not find success during our delivery.

We may need to move between a more 'hands on' approach of having daily stand-up calls during deliverable periods, if we find our team respond better to seeing continual progress. However, the team and deliverable might

be one that requires a more 'hands off' approach, allowing the team members to expand their knowledge and show they can achieve deadlines with minimal oversight.

For an NFL team, after the draft there is little to no opportunity to get new, more experienced players on board, so it falls to the coaches to put into place a structure where they can optimise their players' understanding of the tasks that will be required for them to achieve the desired team goal, the win! Within our teams we are not too dissimilar, we have a single goal we are all working towards within agreed timelines, and we need to give ourselves the best opportunity to succeed.

This cyclical nature of a game each week means that an NFL team needs to maximise their time and efficiency for how they are going to overcome their opponent next week. Below we have a typical NFL game week schedule and how we can apply these steps and adapt these concepts to something that benefits our team within Biostats. A "Game Week" within Biostats however does not have a predetermined deliverable length. We are going to look in more detail at some of these NFL tasks that we can potentially learn from within our Biostats teams: walk throughs, game day, and film review.

Typical game week

NFL Tasks	Matching Biostats Tasks
- Walk throughs - Team Meetings, focus on what the team want to achieve from the game - Full speed practice	- Discussion of the next deliverable - Determine what tasks need to be done for successful delivery (new datasets, new populations) from a Biostats point - Pre-programming
- Team Meetings, focus on what they think the opponent difficulties might throw up - Full speed practice	- Discuss difficulties that this delivery will bring -i.e. new data, new processes, new systems - Continue Pre-programming
- Walk throughs - Fine tuning	- Any new processes that are in place for this delivery, understand how it works and what steps are needed to be followed. - Finishing off Pre-programming - Ensuring code follows GPP and are readable, reuseable and most importantly right
<u>Game Day!</u> - The ball is kicked - You have 60 minutes to win no matter what is thrown at you	<u>Your Data is in!</u> - You've received your final transfer - You have until the agreed deadline to get all the ADaMs, Output and Analysis ready and final, no matter what is thrown at you
- Film Review of last week's game - What went well, what didn't	- After Action Review - Wins, Walls and Wisdoms

Walk throughs

For any American football team, at any level not just the NFL, walk throughs are essential. They allow you to work through your approach to the next game, in a controlled and measured environment. It allows you to focus in on opposing players or assignments that are going to cause you the greatest challenge and determine how best to tackle these so you can stay on track to the ultimate goal of the team, winning.

We can apply this concept to our Biostats team, during our walk-through period we can discuss with the team what tasks they think will create the largest obstacles, and how best we can mitigate their concerns. We can also focus in on where the strengths lie within the team in order to meet the deadline. Now just like in any team sport, or job, we can't all just do what we want. Sometimes we must do the tasks we don't like, "the Dirty Work". However, that doesn't mean that we can't try to minimise certain tasks for people that don't like a particular aspect of it.

Finally, the most underrated part of this walk-through period is to understand what is required for the delivery. In terms of American Football, you couldn't just have your starting quarterback knowing the new plays, what if he were to go out injured? No one else would have been prepared to step up and run the game plan. In Biostats a good example would be implementing a new system, by having these walk throughs would ensure that the team are competent in using this prior to the delivery. This means that when the deadline does hit, we are ready to follow all necessary steps, and we know how long the delivery will take.

Often, we take this on in the Early Dry Run stage, but this can still be a drop-dead date for review purposes, so it's best to get your walk throughs in early and often in the "Game Week", so that everyone knows how to achieve the deliverable.

Building confidence on the way to the game

When we think of the NFL, you might think of giant gladiators in their match day armour walking out as if they are about to go into battle. The one thing everyone sees is the confidence that they believe they are the best player on the field. No overthrown pass, missed tackle, or touchdown allowed will dent that seemingly indestructible hubris that these players have in the most part. Confidence is a necessity for success in everything we do, from presenting in front of a group of people, raising issues in meetings, developing relationships with others, and self-reflective growth.

So how do coaches ensure this continued confidence, even when things don't go right? Well, they celebrate the process not just the outcome. For instance, if we have a programmer that gets through 50 programs in a week but can't tell you how they have done them or what the code is trying to do, the 'outcome' likely isn't great. Also, for the programmer that has rushed through work but doesn't have the understanding, how are you going to build confidence in that team member? This is where we need to start to detach from the idea that the volume of work completed is more important than the pride and satisfaction we have when our work is done well.

However, let's say a second programmer gets through half as many in the same amount of time, but understands what is trying to be achieved, has raised concerns about potential issues, and is confident that their code is correct. Now the quantity isn't at the same level as our first programmer, but the process far outweighs this. When there is a small amount of data, all outcomes might be the same, but as the amount of data increases and the study goes on, our second programmer's process now shines through.

Celebrating the process rather than the outcome has been described another way, by Carolina's Defensive Back Coach Jonathan Cooley: "Attach praise to the verb not the adjective". He goes on to use the example of if coaches refer to players as the "fastest", or teachers refer to students as the "smartest", when they step up to college or the NFL where they might no longer be "top of the class", people lose their identity, and their confidence is taken away from them. Instead, we need to focus on praising our team for being detailed in the work they have done, or when they go over and above to understand a process and subsequently share that knowledge.

For me, this was the "A-ha" moment, that moment where a simple rephrasing of a topic I have heard 100 times just clicks into place when it is phrased in that slightly different way. We all have these moments, be this in a studying environment, a personal hobby, but more notably in our jobs.

To achieve these "A-ha" moments, we need to build a team where everyone is confident to share their understandings, their learnings and their reasonings for specific decisions they have made. One way to ensure that we do hear everyone's voice is that prior to meetings on a predetermined topic, i.e. an after-action review or a general team progress meeting, is to ask everyone to send on, or fill out their findings or progress prior to the meeting. During the meeting, each person can then individually talk through what they think or are working on. This stops people who are less confident choosing to hide behind those who are more confident and upfront.

This difference in verbiage should spark discussion. If everyone agrees what is being done is correct and the result is correct, then these differences in working can be other team members "A-ha" moments. If there is then a misalignment on peoples understanding or gaps in knowledge, we are aware of where additional focus is needed to ensure everyone is pulling towards the same goal. We need to allow everyone room to fail. When we are afraid to fail, we can't improve and grow within that field. We then don't question standard processes that could be made more efficient, moreover we can become so scared of failure we don't question issues we believe to be incorrect in the fear of being wrong ourselves.

While not an American Footballer, Michael Jordan said:

"I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over again in my life, and that is why I succeed"

Interpersonal skills

For many players across all levels, their Coach is seen as a hugely influential part of their career and their personal development, not always positively. Fortunately, the former far outweighs the latter. There are hundreds of stories about how college coaches have been father figures while these young men are away from home for the first time, trying to drive them forward to their goal. When these coaches transfer from dealing with players that see them as father figures (college), to players that are much older and are peers (NFL), they must be able to transfer their ability too. The way a graduate or intern may see us is very different to those we have known for years or have more life experience than we do, we therefore need to transition our interpersonal skills.

A recent infamous example of this surrounds the former college and NFL coach Urban Meyer. Urban was a College Head Coach at two of the biggest football programs historically, from 2005-2018 winning 3 national titles, 148 games and only losing 24. He was seen as one of the best coaches in college football. Urban's record speaks for itself; however it was known that he pushed his players hard. Those players that did well under this pressure were rewarded, those that struggled were mocked and criticised.

In 2021, Urban was appointed the Head Coach of the Jacksonville Jaguars, a team that had struggled for most of the last two decades for any major success. This quickly became one of the worst coaching hires in NFL history.

Urban lost more games in his first and only season in the NFL than his entire time at Ohio State (2012-2018). He was found to be treating players the same as he did in college nearly 20 years earlier. These players were no longer young adults away from home for the first time, but men with partners, children, homes, multimillion dollar contracts and their own outreach programs within the community. Urban's way of coaching was unadaptable to his audience and essentially drove him out of football entirely.

Let us not forget that this is about the "Jimmys and Joes", so we all need to ensure we take the time to put them first where possible.

Now we know everyone has a life outside of the workplace, they have their own personal successes and stresses. There may be financial difficulties, worries around relationships or health concerns. We cannot expect our colleagues' heads to always be 100% focusing on the task at hand all the time.

So how can we ensure those in our team feel valued beyond the point of just being cogs in the machine?

We all work hard for a multitude of reasons but most of us work hard due to having pride in our work, knowing that when a task is finished it was done to the best of our ability. When these external distractions occur, we often can't afford the mental capacity it requires. This then impacts us on two fronts, the initial stress and now our work productivity.

When we are invested in the team's success rather than the completion of a job this gives us an even greater sense of belonging. When we feel invested in or feel we bring more to the team other than just our physical output, we will often repay this back to those that stood by us. Take the time to make someone on your team's day better, a small act of kindness can go a long way. I frequently ask my team if they want to grab a coffee, and we try to discuss anything but work for 15 minutes. This personal approach is also used for new members that join the team to make them feel embedded quicker.

There is an adage used frequently about "losing the locker room" if we put our pride and self ahead of the team. This can happen remarkably quickly. Bill Belichick of the New England Patriots built his ethos around "Put the team first and the goal will follow".

Game Day – Kick off

Preparation for a game is like the build-up to any delivery, the amount of time spent preparing, pre-programming and planning, strips the amount of time that we spend during the delivery of the study. We can spend years on the build-up to a delivery, especially for Final Statistical Analysis packages, going through tweaks, review and amendments. When that final transfer comes in from either our SDTM or data management team, we know that our time is minimal. Like a match at kick off after a week of prep, we only have 3 hours to come away with the wins, so as you can see preparing is key.

However, sport isn't played on paper or predetermined, it's one of the reasons why it's so loved and enjoyed by so many. Studies are very similar in their unpredictability during "crunch time". We don't have to deal with injuries, suspensions, adverse weather or poor refereeing decisions, but you might need to deal with people being unexpectedly out of office, conflicting deadlines, structural changes to data you weren't aware of, and sometimes we just have that period where everything goes wrong.

We need to consider game time choices for example if your lead receiver leaves the game with an injury, you either need to put in a backup and continue with the same or adjusted game plan to spread the responsibility and workload. Now this isn't too dissimilar to a production programmer who has worked on certain safety domains throughout the whole study, being out of office for a pre-planned holiday. Do we take the scheme and idea we had and try and bring someone new in to fill the required resource, or do we get our existing team to take up the mantle and spread the responsibility?

To come away with the win, your match might require overtime. That final push, playing longer than you expected in a sudden death, next point wins situation. If you get over the line, you have a tick in the win column.

In these times we can see that work is going to get tough. LA Rams offensive coordinator Mike LaFleur said, "If we are trying to be successful, we need to be prepared that at times nights might get a little long and mornings can get pretty early". Now we all agree that a work life balance is incredibly important, but if we look at this like a financial balance sheet, sometimes we might be in the red and you need to correct this to get into the black, not remain at a constant.

Use your Timeouts!!

Sometimes we need to stop, take a break, and not let the situation build and overwhelm us. We see Head Coaches at critical moments call these, get their players together, realign everyone's expectations and the process moves forward. We have this in our arsenal as well. We can extend huddle calls once a week to have a more in-depth chat ensuring we know what we want to do and how best to proceed and iron out any problems we can see coming up.

Film review

The final whistle blows, and hopefully we have come out at the correct side of the result. We might have had to go to overtime, we won't have had it all our own way, but hopefully all the work we put in on the build-up left us in a position where we could succeed. As the dust settles, we should encourage self-reflection and peer review on how the game went, or for us, our study. In the league, as soon as the game finishes, it's on the coaching staff to break down the game film and highlight what worked and what didn't. Where weaknesses were found, and where untapped strength may lie. Collaboration through this process is crucial, the coach needs to "leave his ego at the door" just as much as they require the players to do the same. Nobody will have had a perfect game, or a perfect week in the lead up and that is fine, as discussed, we need that room to fail, both as coaches and for the players we coach.

So, when we come to these film review sessions or After-Action Review meetings, we need to ensure that there is a 'no blame' culture. Yes, we can all do better, and we should focus on the actions of the team that would improve this.

One of the ways to potentially get the most out of this is to break this down into 3 categories, which is very standard within Biostats but the names of these may be slightly different to what you are used to:

First, we have "**Our Wins**" – this is what went well for us as a team, what we are proud of that we achieved as a team and what we want to carry on into our next game.

Then we have "**Our Walls**" – These are the things that stopped us and tried to divert us off the track we set for ourselves. The challenges that we needed to overcome and that we will need to be prepared for next time.

Finally, we have "**Our Wisdoms**" – This is arguably the category which determines if we are going to be a truly great team or one that makes the same mistakes over and over. We should highlight here the ways that we are going to avoid the walls that came up that we didn't anticipate and the process enhancements we will apply to ensure the continued improvement of our wins.

During these reviews we should take the time to understand what we would do better and make sure that that is shared with the team openly. If we are expecting people that have worked on the study to share openly, we must set the example and do it ourselves.

We should focus on the collaborative approach of the team and not single out an individual. If there are concerns about performance, they should be handled privately not in a group setting. We should also consider this when delivering praise, singling out one person in these groups not only reduces morale for the rest of the team but also can isolate the person we are praising.

For individual concerns we can deploy an IDP (Individual Developmental Plan) where we highlight a certain area of where their work isn't as strong and come up with ways to build the confidence on the subject matter for the next deliverable. This also works where we see a potential strength in the team member, and we think that they would provide a better job for the team working on a different aspect to better utilize a skill set that we and they didn't notice previously. We are all continuously learning about our teams and ourselves so it's perfectly fine that we weren't aware of these strengths. Now we are aware though we should actively game plan to make the most of them.

Conclusion

There is a role for everyone in American football regardless of size, as long as the individual is willing to work hard, and that is the same for coaches. What allows players to reach their potential is hard work and a coach that believes in them and gives them the tools and environment they need to succeed. Likewise, within Biostats teams, we should strive to ensure that we build a culture that doesn't fear failure but rewards following the process, ensuring that the environment and scheme that we deploy for our teams is the best for the people in it.

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RECOMMENDED READING/LISTENING

J. Rodrigue (2024) *The Playcallers* [Podcast]. Available from: Spotify.

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