

# Evaluating and Reshaping a Program

**Head Coach Dan Essler**

## **New London – Spicer HS**

Football playing career: Fergus Falls Community College 1981, 1982.

Graduate of Moorhead State University 1986 in with a degree in Physical Education and Coaching License.

Taught and coached at New London - Spicer since 1989. Spent 11 seasons as defensive coordinator under Head Coach Lou Pirrotta. Essler has been Head Football Coach / Defensive Coordinator for the last 9 seasons. Also, Head Girl's Track Coach for the last 17 seasons and combined with the boy's head coach the last 11 seasons.

Family consists of wifer Margaret Essler and sons Jacob(17) and Adam (13).

I began coaching at New London – Spicer in 1989 under an excellent head coach / mentor, Lou Pirrotta. The main coaching concepts Lou taught myself and the others on the present coaching staff were the strategies of the game, how to treat players with respect, and the importance of the weight room. We had some very good teams in the 90's that earned two conference titles and 1 section final appearance. But, we also had a two season stretch when we won only 1 game. The highs and lows of 'talent pool' at NLS was the main reason for the fluctuations in our seasonal success, or lack of success.

After Coach Pirrotta retired, the football team struggled to win, as did most of the boy's sports at New London – Spicer. After five seasons of limited success, we as a football coaching staff and whole coaching department needed to make significant changes in the way our athletes trained in the off-season



and how we ran our football program and practices. The following parts of this article are not really anything new, but, hopefully they are ideas that can help in evaluating your programs whether it is football or any sport.

The #1 reason for our recent success at New London – Spicer is, we have a very good influx of talented athletes, in which their main sport is football. However, many of the players are 2 or even 3 sport athletes. We, as football coaches, strongly encourage our players to participate in as many activities as possible to maintain a competitive edge. This has helped in NLS' success in Football (2006 Conference Champs, 2006 and 2008 Section 6AAA Finals appearances, 2008 State Semi - Finals) Basketball (3 state appearances in 4 years, 2008 State Championship), Wrestling (2 Section final appearances the last 2 seasons), Track (2007 Conference Champs, 2008 Sub-Section Champs).

The #2 reason ties directly into the talent pool we presently have. THE WEIGHT ROOM! From 2000 – 2003 our janitor staff named it, "The Waiting

Room" because even the few athletes that went in pretty much just sat around and talked.

The first thing we did was to upgrade the room. The athletes took all the equipment out. The coaches and parent volunteers painted it. Some new equipment was purchased by the Booster Club and Lettermen's Club. We threw out the old, unsafe equipment to give it a brand new look.

Next, we purchased Bigger/Faster/Stronger computer software. It is easy to use and the program is easy for the athletes to follow. BFS is a great way to get the younger athletes started, but, it can really push and improve even the best athletes we have. You can make up your own lifting programs ranging from a 2 day in-season workout to very difficult 5 day programs for the athletes to follow.

We then went to our Booster Club to fund a weight program for all athletes in the summer. It is free for the athletes, 5 days / week; coaches get paid to staff the weight room for as long as 3 hours a day starting at 6:30 am. The year before

## "THE KEEPERS OF THE GAME"

we started this program we averaged 6 athletes / day on our sign in sheets. Last summer we averaged over 50 kids / day. New athletes to the summer program are taught proper form, work ethic and etiquette for using the weight room. Squats, bench, cleans and sprinting as part of the workout are critical. We start with kids going into 7th grade and have most of the better athletes in grades 7 – 12 participating. As a coaching staff, we feel this program will enable us to have more successful seasons and fewer 'down years'.

The weight room can only take football teams so far. We felt that our players were lacking certain skills to be highly successful. Gratefully, our Offensive Coordinator, Chad Gustafson decided to start QB/RB/Receiver skill sessions every Tuesday from 7:00 – 8:00 am in the summer before those players would hit the weight room. Long Snapping, punting, kicking, are also worked during these sessions. Coach Gustafson keeps it organized, short and to the point so the players get as many reps as possible during each session. We have had 2 QB's over the last 3 seasons throw for over 1000 yards as well as a 1900 yard rusher and a 1200 yard rusher the last 2 seasons. We now throw, catch and run the football better than we ever have in my 20 years. Most of our other skills are taught during the season.

Next, we looked at our style of play and what type of offense and defense to run. As with most things in coaching we looked at what successful programs were doing. However, as you look at different successful programs they might run totally different schemes. So, we looked for an offense and a defense that maximizes speed. We do have very many big guys so we have attempted to use what is our biggest asset, which is speed.

Coach Gustafson settled on the Wing – T and transformed it into a Wing – I, since our backs liked to run out of the "I" position. We also use a lot of motion to see how teams line up and adjust to the motion. We use the Wing – I as a base but we can run many formations and still run basically the same play out of each

formation.

We settled on the 4-3 defense because of its versatility and the need for speed and quickness. It is simple to go to a 5 man front, 6 man front or even a 3 – man front depending on the offense and the down / distance situation.

Basically, we looked at what perennially great teams do to be successful and tried to adapt it to our types of players we felt we had coming up in our program.

Next up, was changing the attitude and the atmosphere surrounding the program. Winning is contagious. As a staff we felt it became very important to develop a winning attitude starting in the 9th grade and hopefully that success would carry over as the kids developed in the program. Parents and kids want to be part of a winning group.

Three years ago, a group of parents wanted to become more involved with the football program in as many positive ways as possible. Each Wednesday during the season a group of fathers get together to mow, bag, paint and line the field. There are around 30 that show up weekly. We had a very ordinary field before they started. During one of these early sessions, it was decided to add some speakers and music during breaks in the game. Then, someone got a cannon to shoot when we scored. Another parent found someone to donate new goalposts, which everyone pitched in to install for free. Attendance started to increase greatly due to two things: winning and the game atmosphere. Once our stands are full, the fans can now walk along the track and stand back from the end zones. It has become an exciting place to watch a game and enjoy the atmosphere.

Chad Gustafson – Offensive Coordinator, Jeff Boonstra – Offensive Line, Jair Toedter – Defensive Line, Jeff Gabrielson – LB Rick McLain – QB/Rec. and Chad Powers – Offensive and Defensive Line all play a significant part in skill development, game night preparation, and special teams /offensive / defensive schemes.

In conclusion, since we started

evaluating our program on yearly basis we have been fortunate to have successful seasons. One example of evaluating and reshaping an aspect of our program was our 'punt return'. In 2007 we averaged less than 6 yds./punt return. We felt that was a weak link in our game. Coach Toedter implemented some new ideas and put more emphasis on it during special teams sessions. In 2008 our average was 17 yds./punt return, 2 for touchdowns. Annual evaluations of how we operate as a staff and program has really helped aid in our success the last few years. Hopefully, it limits the number of 'down years' we may have in future years.