

Airborne! Applying Lessons Learned from the Landing Zone to the Gridiron

By Jason Sedlock, Assistant Football Coach, St. Thomas Academy

I was fortunate to attend the US Army Airborne School at Ft. Benning, Georgia in 1999. The primary purpose of airborne school is to teach military personnel to jump out of an airplane and land on the ground without hurting themselves, or the jumpers around them. At the beginning of the third week of the course, which is known as “jump week,” I found myself 1200 feet above the earth’s surface standing in a C-130 with my main parachute on my back, reserve parachute on my front, and my ripcord attached to a static line as I awaited the go signal. The green light went off, and I started shuffling towards the open door of the plane with the rest of the airborne candidates in my chalk. Before I knew it, I was out the door with my knees in the breeze, my chute opened, I drifted down to the landing zone, and performed a parachute landing fall, also known as a “PLF” in military jargon. While I was elated to complete my five training jumps and earn my jump wings, I had no idea at the time that my experience in the course would have such a profound impact on the way I would someday coach football.

Clear Objectives, Well Defined Process, Constant Feedback

Airborne instructors must take a class of approximately 500 students, who collectively have a very diverse mental and physical skill set, and get them ready to jump from a plane and land on the ground safely in just three weeks. There are three primary reasons they are able to accomplish this. First, they clearly define the objective of every training exercise that a student performs while in the school. Second, they adhere to a teaching methodology and progression that builds upon the most basic skills, and a systematic belief that no airborne student can advance to the next skill until they master the one before it. Third, the instructors give students continuous feedback, correcting mistakes if required, or commending performance when a skill or technique is performed correctly.

Every football coach in the game wants his players to “play fast” on game day. As a defensive staff at Saint Thomas Academy, we feel that by applying a type of airborne school teaching process puts our players in a great position to play fast on Friday nights because they are confident in their individual

assignments, and can execute the individual skills that make them successful on the field without hesitation and with great ferocity.

What is the desired outcome? How is it communicated?

We try to define very specific desired outcomes when communicating techniques to our players on both the macro and micro level. You can never assume that a player knows what you are talking about even when using common football terminology. Terms like inside out, primary force, and downhill are second nature to a coach, but not necessarily a 15 year old. We spend time defining these terms for our players and reinforce their meaning by using them constantly in practice. Position coaches also clearly define and standardize their terminology when communicating and teaching position specific skills and techniques. They use this terminology when teaching during individual periods, and reinforce the meaning when communicating with players during unit and team sessions of practice. We do the exact same thing when teaching general defensive skills like pursuit, tackling, and take-aways. When a coach tells any player on the defense to “shimmy your feet,” the player understands that he needs to take short controlled steps in order to gather himself to make a play on the ball carrier. Using standardized terminology not only helps us give clear guidance, and well defined outcomes, but also allows us to coach on the fly during up-tempo practice sessions or in the heat of a game. If the outside linebacker coach needs to remind a player to play with better pad level when taking on a kickoff block, all he has to say to the player is “pad under pad” and the player knows exactly what he needs to do. We also believe that the more a player hears a specific coaching point using our terminology during a practice session, the more we are reinforcing their understanding of the technique and desired outcome.

Progression and Repetition

As I mentioned before, Airborne school is three weeks long and includes “ground week,” “tower week,” and “jump week.” No airborne candidate can progress to the next week without

mastering the skills of the prior week. We try to teach in a similar progression style during game weeks at STA. Coaches focus on teaching the individual skills that each position needs to perform on Friday nights during individual periods. We typically have a very up-tempo practice, but the defensive position coaches are allowed to slow down individual periods to make sure that their players understand what they need to be doing in order to be successful. It is our belief as a staff, that the only way to master a skill is to get as many quality repetitions as possible. By teaching and repeating the skills during individual periods, and then reinforcing these skills by putting players in situations where they need to use them repeatedly during combination and full team periods allows us to maximize the number of repetitions each player gets during practice. We want to build muscle memory and a conditioned response into our players so it requires virtually no thought to execute their assignment in a game situation. We feel that by having a logical progression that starts with clear instruction and execution in a controlled situation like indy, and culminates in combination and team periods, gives our players the best chance to succeed. We take a similar approach to non-position specific defensive skills like tackling, pursuit, and take-aways, and utilize circuit stations to build on basic skills, reiterate and reinforce coaching points, and maximize repetitions.

Feedback

Airborne instructors are constantly giving students feedback during every section of the course. Even during jump week as you approach the ground, the instructors are shouting out landing instructions through megaphones to ensure that candidates properly perform PLFs and land safely. Feedback is vitally important for players. They must know when they need to fix something. However, it is equally, if not more important, that they know when they have done something correctly. This builds confidence in players and leads to better execution in games. As our players are working through various drills, we like to ask them if they “feel the difference” when they do something correctly versus when they do something incorrectly. We feel it is important that our players know what it feels like when a skill is done correctly as it helps with muscle memory, and further helps them build confidence in their abilities and assignments.

Monitor and Adjust

Some would argue this type of teaching approach makes players mechanical and unable to adjust to the things that they will see on a Friday night. “Monitor and adjust” is a phrase that has been used at STA for a long time and is something we talk about frequently during a practice week. One of the benefits of focusing on a teaching progression, and getting as many repetitions of basic skills during practice as possible, is as the season progresses we can spend slightly less time on the most basic football skills and more time on opponent specific items and in game checks. By the middle of the season we are usually pretty confident in our ability to accomplish this. While we do stick to a pretty repetitive type practice plan and schedule

during game weeks, we talk about situational awareness quite a bit and are constantly working on our in game checks and adjustments. Because our players don't have to think about the correct steps or technique that are so drilled into them throughout the week and season, their minds are completely free to read and react to the offense. Their focus is on what the other team is doing, not on them and what they are doing.

Conclusion

We believe game day success is directly linked to how efficiently we practice and prepare Monday through Thursday. There never seems to be enough practice time, so we try to maximize our time on the field by consistently executing a thorough process focused towards a very specific set of objectives. We feel if we can teach our players what they need to do in game situations to be successful and then put them in game like situations so they can practice what we have taught them, then they are in great shape. We would like to thank the MFCA for the opportunity to share some ideas about the game. We are always looking to improve as a staff and welcome the opportunity to dialogue with other programs so do not hesitate to contact our staff if you would like to share some ideas. ■