

Establishing The Importance of Special Teams in Your Team Culture

By Jay Sawvell, University of Minnesota

I would like to thank the Minnesota Coaches Association for giving me an opportunity to talk about football, one of my true passions in life. On behalf of the University of Minnesota, I am going to talk about a vital, and often overlooked, part of football – special teams. Special teams can and will greatly affect two key components of winning football games: field position and momentum. It has been shown numerous times how a less talented team can steal a game if they dominate special teams play.

As a coach, your biggest challenge is establishing the importance of special teams in your team culture. We have used numerous rewards for special teams play while at Minnesota, but with players today, you must show them how their role in executing effective special teams play will directly benefit them. We make sure our players know that virtually everyone on an NFL roster will contribute to special teams. We constantly reinforce to our players that if they want a shot to play in the NFL, they better be able to contribute on several special teams. Once the importance of special teams is embedded in your team culture, kids will naturally buy in – as that is all they know.

Scheme is Secondary to Technique

This is very important to remember when installing schemes and evaluating your players. At the beginning of Fall and Spring Camps, we strictly work position specific fundamentals for the first three to four days. While doing this, we take a lot of the running out of the drills, which allows us to focus on the technical aspects of what we are teaching. This approach ensures our players have a great understanding of the fundamental aspect of their individual assignments.

After working fundamentals, we will progress into whole unit install and live reps. Coaches still focus on individual position technique. If a unit is struggling once we begin working the entire scheme, we look at how we are executing our technique. Usually, this is where the problem lies, and we simply reinforce the correct technique. If the correct technique is being used,

and we are still struggling, we will look at coaching a different technique to execute the desired scheme. As a coach, it is often times easy to fall into the mindset that we are not successful in an area, so we must scrap what we are doing. No matter the scheme, your special teams' units will not be successful without proper fundamentals/technique.

GAME PLANNING TO WIN THE SPECIAL TEAMS BATTLE

Kick-Off Return:

When game planning for Kick-Off Return, we first look at the kicker. What types of balls does he hit and where does he place them? Secondly, we look at their personnel. Who are their players and who do we need to double? Typically, we want to double their most disruptive coverage man. Finally, we look at their coverage scheme. Is there anything to exploit?

Kick-Off:

When game planning for Kick-Off, we first look at their returner. Is he explosive and fast? Is he a wild card that will take the return wherever he feels, or does he trust the scheme? When playing dangerous returners, we will kick away from them (with kicks directional, squibs, or pooches). Secondly, we look at their top return schemes. How can we beat it and are there any keys for our guys? We will be prepared for their top two schemes.

Punt:

When game planning for Punt, we first look at their rush tendencies. How many people do they bring? Are there rush schemes that will give us problems? Secondly, we look at the returner. Again, is he a wild card? Does he catch the ball and go vertical or is he a side to side returner? Finally, we look for anything they do fundamentally, that we can take advantage of with a fake (alignment, schematics, or a certain player we can beat).

Punt Block:

When game planning for Punt Block, we first look at the punter. Does he hit low line drives? Does he always kick a certain direction (for example, always into the boundary)? If there are strong tendencies, we will adjust our return scheme to take advantage of them. Secondly, we look at the operation time of the snap and kick. If the operation time is slow enough, we will put a lot of pressure on the punter. Finally, we look at the personnel. Is there a person we can take advantage of in protection? Who is their best cover man (we typically double him)? Who is a nonfactor (we will let these people go)?

PAT:

When game planning for PAT/Field Goal, we look for holes in their rush scheme. If they are vulnerable in any way, we will design a fake to take advantage of this weakness.

PAT/Field Goal Block:

When game planning for PAT/Field Goal Block we look at two different things: can we block the kick with edge pressure (the opposing team has a slow operation), and we check for a weak link in the interior we can take advantage of.

Special Teams is an equal aspect of the game. It can give an average team a chance to win and it can give a good team a chance to bury their opponents and win championships. The few tips we have discussed will assist in preparation and teaching. However, in order for your players to buy-in, they must see the coaching staff (especially the Head Coach) buy-in as well! ■

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