

Playing on the Offensive Line

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In this article we will cover the characteristics and fundamentals demanded of the Northern Michigan University offensive lineman.

I. Characteristics Demanded Of an Offensive Lineman

With the exception of playing quarterback, offensive linemen need to be the most aware players on the field.

Not only must they be aware of game situations, the overall offensive game plan and defensive tendencies, but we also want each lineman able to play the tackle, guard and center position.

No other player in football will be put into a more un-athletic position.

I don't mean offensive linemen aren't athletes, but we are asking them to put their bodies in un-athletic stances and in un-athletic positions.

Because it is an awkward position we must rep the different positions until they become natural. That means we must practice through boredom. We must perform drills that are competitive and that emphasize FINISH.

You must develop lineman skills through every day drills. Through this consistency in practice you will develop consistency in games.

To be an effective offensive lineman we want the following characteristics for our players:

1. Attitude

A good attitude in an offensive lineman can't be over-emphasized.

Give us a player with a good attitude and we can teach him what he needs to be successful. Give us a player with a bad attitude and it will have a negative impact on the entire offense.

A player has to be selfless to before we can develop unity on the offensive line.

Once we develop a feeling of unity we can create an identity (such as the Hogs, Trench Pigs, etc.). Then we can establish a tradition on the offensive line.

This all starts with attitude. A good attitude is the foundation of everything we can do with a lineman.

2. Effort

No one should ever question your effort -NEVER!

We determine effort by players who go to the whistle and finish blocks and games. A player giving effort always gets the last shove in on a block. He also has excellent awareness.

We are looking for enthusiasm also. An enthusiastic player will give you great effort. We want a group of players who are enthusiastic about football.

3. Loyalty

Playing on the offensive line is about trust and honesty. If a player can't be honest with me or his teammates then we can't trust him. If trust is ever broken, failure is inevitable.

Loyalty is the key to the togetherness we need on the offensive linemen and the team.

Loyalty is demonstrated by showing respect for your coaches, yourself, and each other and being coachable.

Loyalty is the key to our goal of having "one heart beat" on the offensive line.

4. Hitter

This is why you play! We want players who love contact. It's the player who hits first, the hardest, most often and the longest, that wins Championships.

When it comes to being a hitter actions speak louder than words. We want an aggressive player who plays with his head, heart and pads.

5. Quickness and Leverage

This is key is to controlling the line of scrimmage. This includes quick hands and feet out of your stance and during your block, and upper and lower body leverage.

You want to concentrate on balance, staying low and keeping your hands inside. You want to be a knee bender, not a hip bender. Stay on your feet, unless you are executing a cut block.

6. Strength

The key to strength is how it translates onto the field, not just in the weight room.

When we talk about strength we are referring to explosive, overall and core strength necessary to be a dominating blocker.

Explosive strength is the key because we work in such a small area. Olympic lifts and plyometrics are great ways to improve this aspect.

Overall strength is obviously important. As linemen we need to develop both upper and lower body strength.

Core strength is important for sustaining blocks but unfortunately lower back and abs are often neglected. However, core strength development helps with speed and coordination which are important to sustaining blocks.

Finally, strength training helps eliminates injuries. It keeps you on the field and increases your playing time opportunities.

7. Conditioning

If you can't breathe, you can't play. It doesn't get any simpler than that. Fatigue will eventually defeat your opponent. Unfortunately it can also defeat you.

Conditioning is important part of mental toughness. Your bodies and minds must endure the physical and mental pounding of a game and a season. The harder you work the harder it is to surrender.

8. Knowledge

There is no excuse for not knowing assignments and how to block them (technique). This prevents mistakes and thereby eliminates bad or unsuccessful plays.

Players should also know what all linemen are doing on each play and where the quarterback and running back are going so they know point of attack.

Furthermore, they should understand formations and how defenses will react to them.

Film study is an important part of developing knowledge. Film study and scouting reports will help lineman know what defensive players have what gap responsibilities, or that defensive line movement means someone will replace, or how linebacker and defensive back alignment will show different blitzes.

Knowledge through preparation helps you to think and make a decision under pressure, and to know the assignments of your teammates in order to execute the offense.

Here are some additional points regarding knowledge:

- Play smart, get your eyes up and see the defense. Be aware of what's going on in the trenches (anticipation).
- Listen and concentrate.
- Repetition is the Mother of Learning.
- Listen with not only your ears, but with your eyes.
- Doing things right all the time breeds confidence.

II. Fundamentals For Offensive Line

Before getting into an overview on specific technique, each offensive lineman must understand and execute the following fundamentals.

They are critical in developing a championship offensive line:

1. **Down and Distance:** Understanding game situations is key to understanding the goal of the called play (need two yards for a first down, quarterback needs extra time on this pass play, etc.). It also helps anticipating defensive schemes and adjustments as well.
2. **Stance:** We have to be fundamentally sound playing out of two and three-point stances. In addition, our stances have to be consistent so not to give any keys to the defense.
3. **Splits and Alignment:** Linemen must know and line up correctly on each play. Inconsistent splits and alignment can destroy the timing of the play or make reacting to defensive movement more difficult.
4. **Recognition of fronts and coverage's:** We must understand defensive line/linebacker shade alignments to anticipate blocking combinations and assignments in both the run and pass game. Understanding coverage's can help us anticipate pressure. The center is responsible for making front calls.
5. **Know your assignment and technique for run or pass.**
6. **Use and understand playside and backside calls.**
7. **Aiming Points:** Properly execute the first, second and third steps as they relate to aiming points.
8. **Contact Surface:** Use the correct shoulder and/or hand placement (snap punch) on all blocks.
9. **Leverage (Fit), Control and Finish block (Pancake).** When we use the correct aiming points and correct contact surface, it improve our leverage, control and finish. We want the proper blocking and power angles for leverage, correct balance and footwork for control, and great leg drive to finish the block.
10. **Give a relentless EFFORT and PLAY SMART.** Be aggressive, be physical, and finish the play.

III. Offensive Line Run Blocking Thoughts

The key to being a great run blocker is exploding off the ball into the defender quickly, forcefully and keeping your balance.

Here are 15 key coaching points to being a successful run blocker:

1. Know the play and where ball is crossing the line of scrimmage (**point of attack**).
2. Understand if you are blocking a man on or off the line of scrimmage, if he is to the inside or outside, to the left or right, to the opposite side of center or same side.
3. Are we using a man, zone or gap scheme?
4. Take the proper course/angle to the defender. Block the man on the angle you find him. Stay square to the man - **not the line of scrimmage**. Cover up - eclipse - the defender. Make him disappear.
5. Anticipate slanting or angling defenders.
6. As you make contact cock your arms, deliver a blow with your hands inside, control the defender and keep your feet moving.
7. On contact, keep your wide base with a stagger and drive off your **insteps**.
8. Bring your knees and feet into your block - **don't lunge**.
9. Get your **second step down** on the ground - have fast feet.
10. Keep the "fat on the thighs", stay low for leverage. Don't get tall and don't overextend your legs.
11. You must stay on your feet - keep your **BALANCE** - unless you are executing a cut block.
12. You must maintain contact and battle the defender any way possible -fork lift, bear crawl, scramble. Never get "flattened out" on your block.
13. Get your hands and head fitted properly on the defender.
14. Fit and Finish: Sustain your block to the **echo of the whistle**.
15. When the defender goes for the ball carrier - **PANCAKE HIM!**

IV. Anatomy of a Block

Key coaching points of good block are aiming points, the first step, the second step, movement out of the stance, contact surface, and leverage.

1. Aiming Points

Attacking the correct aiming puts you on the proper course.

Aiming points can be:

- Sternum
- Numbers/Pec's
- Armpit
- Near point (shoulder or hip)
- Rear end of adjacent offensive lineman

2. First Step

Understand the direction and length of the first step. You must also take into account the proper WIDTH ADJUSTMENT for each type of first step.

Types of first steps are:

- Upfield
- Lead
- Lateral
- Bucket
- Drop
- Replace

3. Second Step

An important key to being a good blocker is to get your second step down and underneath your hip on every single play - especially on contact versus defensive linemen.

The faster your feet make contact with the ground, the better chance you will have balance on contact.

4. Movement Out Of Stance and Into Block

The body demeanor "waddling" is how an offensive lineman or tight end moves. We stress staggering your feet on contact. This allows you to maintain your power base.

Linemen must train their bodies to be in the perfect striking/blocking position (run/pass) at all times.

5. Contact Surface

This is connection into your "FIT".

You must coach the appropriate contact surface regarding each of the following:

- Hands
- Shoulder/Forearm
- Head

6. Leverage

This includes proper level and use of the body and hands. You must keep your shoulder pad level and arms below your opponents. To do this we teach the "squatter's arch." This means we bend at the knees (not at waist), and keep the hands inside. These are the keys to having great leverage against your opponent.

A "pancake" is a result of finishing your blocks while maintain your leverage (balance) during an athletic move. Your hands must be inside the frame of the defender. We call this "grabbing the steering wheel." We are going to control the steering wheel which means we are going to ultimately "control" the defender.

V. Offensive Line Pass Protection Thoughts

The key to a defender's pass rush is if he can get the offensive lineman off balance. If you can do that, he will have a great chance of getting to the quarterback.

Pass blocking may be the single most difficult assignment of any player in the game of football.

Here are 16 key coaching points to being a successful pass blocker:

1. Set quickly and set properly. The body position should be in such a way that if you had a whistle on a chain it would rest on your chest.
2. Use the Post and Stagger/Kick foot correctly.
 - a. The post foot is the inside foot. Keep it pointed upfield
 - b. The stagger foot is the outside foot.
3. Aiming points: Your eyes never look at the defender's head. Different sets have different aiming points, depending on protection.
4. Hitting a moving target: Your timing of the punch (jam) is critical. On contact lockout to control the defender. Don't recoil, unless you lose your control. No "huggie bear" - arms must be extended. Use firmness and sink your butt. Don't over react to head fakes.
5. Your hand placement must be inside for CONTROL. Centers and guards want hand placement on the chest (handle bars). The tackle and tight ends want hand placement

on the deltoids/chest.

6. Keep your head out of contact.

7. Track the defender with your hips and mirror him.

8. Stay light on your feet. They may give a little on your punch to get you off balance.

9. Keep perfect balance at all times. Keep your upper body inside your base (a steel rod concept).

10. Know your opponent and his favorite moves. Study film, study film, study film.

11. Make your defender rush twice. Stop his initial move, be ready for his counter and finish the block (walk into the man).

12. Anticipate and defeat moves: bull, bull jerk, rip (arm under), swim (arm over), club rip, club swim, speed, hand slap.

13. Anticipate and defeat line stunts. Blow up the penetrator.

14. If linebackers or defensive backs are stunting or blitzing - make them pay the price.

15. Do your battles on the line of scrimmage. Only give up the ground you have to.

16. Have offensive line awareness. No one stands around - we all work together.