

Bonus: The Lazy Genius Guide to Understanding Football

Hello! You're listening to the Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra Adachi, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. Today we're doing something a little different. This is a bonus episode; we might start playing around with some of these that are deeply specific in the future, or it might be just this one. But I have had enough of you ask me to explain football that I'm going to do a little bonus episode on understanding football.

Let me be clear, I am not an expert. I am not an athlete. I have never been able to successfully throw a spiral, and I cannot adequately explain what a nickel and dime offense is without asking for clarification. I don't know everything, mostly because no one does. Football is really complex. There are so many variations and plays and nuances, but you don't know all of those in order to enjoy or understand the basics. So that's what we're going to do today.

I'm going to explain the basics of football, mostly what the downs mean. That's what gets you. It's so many numbers, and they're very inconsistent. But I do like making football more palatable for people who like to sit on the couch on a Sunday afternoon or on a Thanksgiving Day afternoon and not feel completely lost. Football becomes way more fun as a viewer once you understand the basics. So let's talk about the basics.

Number one, the objective is to score more points than the other team. This is the foundation of most sports endeavors. You want to score points, and you want to score more than the other guys. There is one broad way you score points in football, and that is you move the football as a team from your end of the field, your territory, into the other guys' territory, like enemy territory, and when you cross the line, when you cross a specific boundary, you get points. Now, how you cross that boundary determines how many points you get.

The two main ways you score in football are a touchdown and field goal. A touchdown is when your team moves the football across the actual goal line. The goal line is when the field moves from green to very colorful. Every field has two goal lines, one at each end, one for each team, and if the ball crosses that goal line in an appropriate football way, the team scores a touchdown. A touchdown is worth six points. Now you might be like "no wait I thought a touchdown was seven points!" Because scoring a touchdown is the hardest way to score in football, you get a prize after. When a team scores a touchdown, they get a bonus turn. It's like bowling a strike. You get a strike, you get another chance. You get a bonus turn. The same is true when you score a touchdown in football. You score a six point touchdown, and then you get the choice to kick an extra point which is exactly what it sounds like - you kick the ball through the goal posts at the field, and if the ball goes through those goal posts, you get an extra point. You kick an extra point. Now you can score two extra points if you choose what is called a two-point conversion. That is when the ball starts a specific part of the field very close to the goal line, and the team has one chance to get the ball over the goal line. It's kind of like the team has one chance to score another touchdown, but you only get two points for it. So the

main way you score in football is a touchdown usually followed by an extra point. That's why most touchdowns are thought of as being worth seven points.

The other main way you can score is if you kick a field goal. A field is when you kick the ball from wherever you are on the field, and if that ball goes through those big yellow goal posts at the end of the field, you get three points. The closer you are to the goal posts, the more likely you are to score. Again, three points.

Now there is one other way to score in football, and that is a safety which is worth two points, but we're not going to get into that yet. What we need to understand now is how you move the ball down the field.

Okay, so imagine you have the offense of one team versus the defense of the other. The offense has the ball, and they are in charge of the ball. That is called possession. They have possession of the football. That is unless they become very careless and lose that possession which is called a turnover. They lost their turn. The other team gets a turn now.

Now if you think about movement of a ball in other sports, most sports have rules about how you do that. In basketball, you have to dribble or pass. You can't just walk with the ball in your arms. There are rules of how you move it. In golf, you move the ball by hitting it with a club. You cannot pick it up and throw it. In soccer, you move the ball by kicking it with your feet or bumping it with your head or chest. But you cannot pick it up with your hands or even let it touch your arms. There are rules for how you move the ball.

Similarly, there are specific rules in football of how you are allowed to move the ball. The two primary ways originate from the quarterback position. The quarterback is like ball triage. The quarterback is the captain, the guy in charge, the one whose hands must direct the ball. So the football is placed on the field, an offensive player called the center puts his hand on the ball. He's bent over, he's angry, he's protective of that ball. He is also in the center of a line of equally bent over angry protective men. These men make up what is called the offensive line. It's a line of giant dudes. The center who is in the center listens carefully for those funny sounds you hear from the field - 3 double 3 17 what HIKE. The quarterback is the one making those sounds, and those sounds are him using code words to basically call a play or tell his teammates what they're doing. So he says hut or hike or grunts or something, and the center whose hand is on the ball hikes the ball or tosses it very specifically through his legs to the waiting quarterback. The quarterback catches the ball, and here's where the two movement choices come in. The ball can either be passed from the quarterback to another player. Not just any player. The quarterback can't pass the ball to someone on the offensive line, or the referee will call a penalty of "an ineligible receiver." So that's one of the rules. You can only pass to specific teammates, usually a wide receiver or a tight end. Those are the two positions you would hear. That player must catch the ball in the air, and they are allowed to run towards the other team's goal line or end zone until a defensive player takes them down. Tackles them. For a tackle to count, the offensive player's knee must hit the ground or progress on the ball must stop. Like there are six guys in black jerseys around one guy in a blue jersey and the guy in the blue jersey might not

be on the ground but he's not going anywhere. That's when you'll hear a whistle and the ref is like "okay good job guys that's as far as you're gonna go." And that's a pass. The quarterback throws the ball through the air to a receiver, and that receiver might run, might get tackled immediately, might not catch the ball at all.

The second way a quarterback can triage the ball and move it down the field is with a run play. A run is when the quarterback literally hands the ball to a runningback - that's the position - and the runningback takes that ball and starts running with it. And then the same rules apply. He runs until he's tackled or the ball's progress stops.

We'll be right back...

So to recap, those are the two ways you can move the ball down the field. Now let's talk about downs. Downs are the logistical guardrails that determine how long a team can keep a ball, how long do they get to have their turn. When an offense gets the ball at the start of their turn (and an offense will have many turns in a game), they get four tries to move the ball ten yards. A football is one hundred yards. So a team gets four tries to move ten yards. If they move ten yards in either one try, two tries, three tries, four tries, then they get a new set of four tries to move ten yards. These tries are called downs. So the most common down language you will hear is 1st and ten. The first number in that is the down their on, the try they're on. The second number is how many yards they have left to go to get a new set of turns or a new set of downs. So if you see 2nd and 6, that means the offense is on their second turn (remember they have four turns before they have to give the ball to the other team) and they need to move the ball six more yards. So a team might start at 1st and 10. Both teams line up around the football, the quarterback makes his noises, and let's say he passes to a receiver but the receiver doesn't catch it. Okay, that's one of their turns. They lost one. They're on their second turn now, their second down. And because the pass was not caught - they call that an incomplete pass - that means they didn't chip away at that ten yards they're trying to move. So now the numbers will say 2nd and ten. It's their second turn, and they still have ten yards to get. Let's say the next play is a run and the runningback moves the ball three yards. That means it's now 3rd and 7. They didn't get ten yards, so they're still in those four turns. It's their third turn, and they have seven yards to get. Again, that's 3rd and 7.

Now here's an important thing to know about four downs. If it's a team's fourth down which means this is their last try and they don't get the yards they need, they have to give the ball to the other team wherever they are on the field. Wherever they are. So if an offense is close to their own end zone which is actually not the end zone they score. You score in the other team's end zone. You invade their territory. So if a team is backed up - you'll hear that from commentators - if a team is backed up in their own territory, they don't want to spend their fourth down trying to move the ball a little bit because if they miss it, the other team is gonna get the ball super close to where they can score. This is where we introduce the punt.

A punt is when a team who is on their last turn, they're on fourth down, and they want to move the ball as far away from the other team as they can, it's when they kick the ball as far as they

can from where they are. It's kind of like playing keepaway. They kick the ball far on their last turn so that when the opposing team gets their turn, they have a longer way to go. Now you might say "wouldn't they kick a field goal? If a team can't score a touchdown and they're too far away, can they kick a field goal on their fourth turn?" Yes, they can. And many of them do when they're close enough to the goal posts to make it. But if they're just too far away, they'll punt. Most of the time, when it's 4th down, a team will punt. They'll punt the ball away. Maybe kick a field goal. However, if it's towards the end of a game and let's say the offensive team is down a touchdown, they're behind the other team by seven points, and let's say there's only a minute or two left in the game? That team will be in what commentators call "four down territory." That means that a team will use all four of their turns, all four of their chances to move the ball because what's the point of punting? The game is almost over, and they need to score. So they risk turning the ball over because they want to score points. And there's not enough time to let the other team have their chances, have their four downs to go ten yards, and still get the ball back in time to score.

So to recap, a team gets four tries to move ten yards. They can move way more than ten. They can run the length of the field in one play. Ten is not a limit. It's a minimum requirement. Now one thing that's important to know is what is called the line of scrimmage. The ball is placed in a very specific position on the field. It's where a knee went down. It's where a player caught the ball after a punt and said "you know this is good, I'm gonna call a fair catch and not run with this. This field position is good." Field position is where the ball is, and the referees are in charge of placing that ball in the most accurate position they can based on wherever a player's body was when that player was holding the ball. Now at the start of a play or in other words at the start of a turn, one of those turns, one of those downs, at the start of that, the ball is placed on the line of scrimmage. Then the offense and defense line up on either side of that line of scrimmage or on either side of the ball. The defense is like "no you can't come this way with your ball" and the offense is like "watch me" and then they all crash into each other. The funny thing about football that I find fascinating is that if a team is at 3rd and 1, it's their third turn and they have to go one yard, they don't need a huge play. They don't need a touchdown. They literally just need to carry the ball one yard from the line of scrimmage. One yard, that's it! That's why football is so complex from a coaching and playing perspective. There are so many variables, so many kinds of plays you can run. We didn't talk about quarterback sneaks or play action or if the quarterback is in a shotgun position; you don't need that right now. But all of those variables make the game super interesting. However, the place you start is right here.

You just need to understand that there are rules of how a team can move the ball - pass or run - and that they can't just keep the ball forever. There have to be some guidelines on how long you get to have a turn. If you can't move the ball ten yards in four tries, sorry. You lost your turn. The other team gets a shot now. As long as you understand that, you can keep up. You can learn the other stuff slowly as you loosely know what's happening in the game. You don't have to know nickel and dime defenses. You don't have to know what it means when somebody says the quarterback is in the pocket or strong side versus weak side. You don't have to know that stuff. You can enjoy the game without those things.

Okay, two more glossary terms real quick. The first is a sack. A sack is when the quarterback is holding the ball, he's looking around trying to figure who he's gonna pass to, and a defensive player gets to him and tackles him behind the line of scrimmage. Which means the team lost yards. Oh no. Now they're in the red! Now they have to go more than ten yards! Because the ten yards begins from wherever the line of scrimmage is on the 1st down. If the ball starts on the 47 yard line and a quarterback gets sacked at the 35 yard line, twelve yards back from where he started? That means the new line of scrimmage is at the 35 yard line where the quarterback was sacked but that team has to now go 22 yards. They have to go the ten from where they started plus the twelve they lost from the sack. You'll know how the refs are measuring the ten yards because there are two giant orange sticks connected by a chain that is - you guessed it - ten yards long. So when they say bring out the chains, that means the football's location is so close to that ten yard mark that they have to bring the chains onto the field and measure super close so they can really tell. But a sack is when a quarterback is tackled and loses yards.

One other term that I mentioned earlier is the safety. A safety is when a defensive player tackles an offensive player who is holding the football in the offense's end zone, that painted part of the field on either end. It's like a reverse touchdown. If you can keep an offensive team backed up into their own end zone where they have literally the entire football field to go in order to score and you tackle the quarterback or a runningback who's holding the ball but is in his own team's end zone, if you tackle him, you earn two points for your team. That's a safety. And that's the only other way other than a touchdown or a field goal that you can score.

One final thing. Penalties. There are rules in football, and if you break one of those rules, it's called a penalty. You'll know there's a penalty because one of the refs will throw a flag. Each ref has a yellow flag in his or her belt - yes, there are some female nfl referees which I am a huge fan of - and that ref will throw their yellow flag onto the field when they see another player breaking a rule. When an offensive player starts moving before the ball is hiked - that's a false start, when a defensive player pulls on the jersey of an offensive player who's trying to catch a pass - that's called pass interference, when a player has a beef with another player and taunts or pushes or something - that's called unsportsman-like conduct. So you'll see penalties happen, too. Usually, the consequence for a penalty is a loss of yards, a five or ten yard penalty, which means the team has to add another five or ten yards to the length they're trying to go in their four turns, or sometimes a penalty results in giving the offensive team an automatic first down. That means that if they're on 3rd down and 26 yards, they're on the third turn, 26 yards is a super long way to go in one turn because they'll punt on the 4th down, but there is a pass interference or something, the offense gets an automatic first down. They automatically get to start over at 1st and 10. So penalties can be a big deal.

Okay, that was a lot. How are you feeling? Here's what I want you to do. I want you to watch a football game and just pay attention. Watch the way the teams move. See what those numbers mean and practice understanding them. Start small with football. Just get used to understanding the downs. Start there. Then start adding some other stuff. But that is the Lazy Genius guide to understanding football.

Thanks for listening to this bonus episode, I hope you had as much fun as I did. Until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'm Kendra, and I'll see you Monday!