

Playing Football Made Me A Better Lawyer

By **Bert McBride** (April 25, 2025)

In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

On Dec. 31, 2009, I played my last football game. We lost.

I had been playing organized football for over 10 years, from Pop Warner youth football to high school to Stanford University. It culminated in a showdown between my Stanford Cardinal and the University of Oklahoma Sooners in the Sun Bowl.

You may recognize some of the names of those who coached and lined the rosters of those teams that year. For Stanford, we had the great Jim Harbaugh coaching the likes of Andrew Luck, Toby Gerhart, Richard Sherman, David DeCastro and Zach Ertz. For Oklahoma, the legendary Bob Stoops fielded a team including Sam Bradford, Gerald McCoy and Trent Williams.



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They were some truly great players and coaches who would go on to make their mark in the NFL, and a few of them will probably end up enshrined in Canton, Ohio, at the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Despite the football greats present for that game, the 2009 Sun Bowl will not go down in history. That game will be relegated to nothing more than a footnote on the lengthy resumes of some of the players and coaches mentioned above.

No one today cares who won or lost. It wasn't an instant classic. It didn't make or break anyone's career. But, for many of us lesser players, it will be remembered. Because it meant something special. It was the end of something that had dominated our childhood and adult lives up to that point, and it was the beginning of what came next.

Suddenly, at the turn of one year to the next, I wasn't a football player anymore. I knew I wasn't good enough for the NFL, so my playing days were done. Like many ex-athletes I was left floundering, without any true answer to an important question: "What's next?"

I could try the startup thing like many of my friends and classmates (the guys down the hall from me founded Snapchat). I could try putting my economics degree to use (I did briefly). Or, I could try to find a profession where I could still scratch that competitive itch — a profession where my years of grinding away in the trenches and learning from my mistakes on the field the hard way could be of some use.

That search led me to law school and, ultimately, to the muddy trenches of litigation — right where I belonged.

Getting Coached Hard

I remember vividly getting recruited out of high school by a crusty old collegiate offensive line coach with two bad knees, a dip under his lip and a voice like a cement mixer that asked me, "Can you be coached hard?" The intensity of his stare as he asked me that question made me immediately realize how important it was.

A cocky high school star with two state championships, confidently replied, "Of course!" But I didn't truly appreciate what the coach meant until he was screaming at me on the first day of training camp as I agonized through a few hundred yards of punitive bear crawls for screwing up a snap at my suddenly new position of center.

There would be no sugar-coating, no coddling, no platitudes about anyone "trying their best." Failure on the offensive line meant that someone behind you was getting hit. It meant that your teammate would be the one suffering for your mistakes. And, when you made those mistakes, either in practice or on game day, the coach was going to let you know about it, and you had to be able to take that criticism, internalize it and use it to improve.

The same is true in litigation. If I make a mistake, my client suffers the consequences. They're the ones taking the hit for my failures. The stakes are high, just like on the football field, and that means that you have to be able to take, internalize and implement criticism, no matter what form, so that you can improve and not fail the same way twice.

The thick skin and ability to take hard coaching developed while playing football has made me a better lawyer. As an associate, I didn't get offended when a senior partner was direct with me about something that I missed, or ways that my writing and oral arguments could improve.

I realized that the reason for that hard coaching was because they genuinely cared about my improvement as an attorney. The ability to listen and take that coaching is an important part of being able to grow and improve as an attorney.

Skip The Excuses

Football is controlled chaos, especially on the offensive and defensive lines. When you're packing nine 300-plus-pound men into an area the size of a short office hallway, getting to where you need to go, or making your intended block, isn't easy. The second the ball is snapped, the offensive line is in a battle to impose their will on the defensive line, which is actively trying to disrupt and thwart the play.

Anything and everything can happen during those few seconds as the play unfolds. And, for the team to succeed in that chaos, you need to be able to get your individual job done, no matter the circumstances.

I can't count the number of times when I failed to make a block because I was tripped, or someone stepped on my foot, or someone took me out from behind. I'd fail in my assignment, and the play would be stopped. The next day, in film review, we'd be going through the play in question, and the coach, sitting in the back of the dark room with his laser pointer, would run that play back over and over, circling my ample backside as I unceremoniously tripped, fell, or otherwise ended up on my ass.

"What the hell was that?" he'd ask. "You didn't make the damn block, and our running back got blown up!" I'd shamefully be sitting in the front of the room with a whole list of excuses:

I tripped, the guard next to me stepped on my foot and I couldn't get to my block, etc. At first, I'd make those excuses. I'd try to explain why I'd failed my assignment and how it wasn't my fault. That's when my coach would shout, "Don't tell me about the pain, just show me the baby!"

Why I failed to execute my assignment didn't matter. The excuses I'd make, no matter how valid, didn't change the outcome of the play. The coach wasn't interested in the obstacles that I wasn't able to overcome to make my block. Great players didn't let obstacles hold them back from doing their jobs. Coach was only interested in the result: I made my block or I didn't. He didn't want to hear about why I couldn't succeed; he just wanted the job to be done.

Carrying that mindset into my career has made me a better attorney. Clients, the court and senior partners don't care about why you couldn't get something done. They have their own problems to deal with. They don't want to hear excuses, they want the final product. What matters is that the task gets accomplished, and, just like great football players, great lawyers accomplish their task no matter the obstacle.

Flush It

Bad plays happen. Bad games happen. The frustration of defeat is agonizing. I did a lot of losing during my football career. My first year at Stanford, we only won a single game. For someone who had done nothing but win in high school, it was brutal and depressing. Our coach was fired and in came coach Harbaugh with an entirely new staff, including a new offensive line coach: Chris Dalman.

Coach Dalman was a former Stanford lineman with significant NFL experience, having won a Super Bowl with the 49ers in 1995. Needless to say, he had all the credibility in the world. The first thing that he told us when he took over the offensive line room was to take that last season and flush it.

This became a mantra for us. Bad play? Bad game? Bad season? Flush it and move on to the next one. Good play? Good game? Good season? Flush it and get ready for the next one. Learn from your mistakes, but don't let them dominate your mindset. There is always another play or another challenge to face, and you can't get caught up in your failures or heady with your successes if you want to be a successful football player.

This forward-thinking mindset has made me a better lawyer. I've lost motions that I should have won. I've won motions that I should have lost. In either instance, I flush it and move on to the next thing. There is nothing to be gained from brooding on a motion or case that didn't go your way, or becoming conceited because of some past success.

This profession is a grind. Cases will come and go from year to year, and the only undefeated attorney is the one who doesn't practice. Being able to flush past failures and successes, keep a forward-facing mindset and continually look for ways to improve are all essential skills to improving as a lawyer.

My time as a football player may have come to an end on Dec. 31, 2009, but the lessons that I learned over my football career have stayed with me and will continue to help me succeed as an attorney. Hopefully, some of the lessons will help you too.

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