

## The Tri-Seasonal Player-Driven Culture Calendar

### **Introduction:**

Creating a player driven culture is a twelve month process. It can be laborious and it can be exhausting and it needs to be continually reassessed season after season. It may not be entirely necessary to engage in all of the activities presented in this course, but like anything else in coaching you get what you emphasize. Part of a coach's off-season evaluation process is to re-assess what areas of the programs culture needs improvement, then go about devise strategies to develop those areas. It's important to remember that building culture is no different than building your offensive or defensive system. There needs to be a base menu (such as core values), a progression to implement these concepts (action plans that meet the standards) and finally models that teach the behaviors to defend those standards. This includes built in mechanisms to continually re-evaluate, re-assess and re-align these standards.

So, I wanted to take some of our resources and provide a functional template for coaches to utilize during the entire calendar year. Since a football season is usually segmented in thirds, we took the same framework and built our culture calendar around the following trimesters:

- **In-Season Trimester (August- November)**
- **Off-Season Trimester (December-April)**
- **Pre-Season Trimester (May- July)**

We separated these methods into the seven competencies that we've found that develop player driven culture. While these behaviors are better defined in the course, an outline of them are below:

**Competency 1: Messaging**

**Competency 2: Collaboration**

**Competency 3: Connectivity**

**Competency 4: Self-Advocacy**

**Competency 5: Emotional Awareness**

**Competency 6: Responsibility**

**Competency 7: Resiliency**

### **In-Season Trimester Model**

Clearly, this is the busiest time of the year for coaches. It becomes a significant challenge for coaches, particularly at the high school level, to juggle game planning, practice planning,

teaching classes and *developing culture*. However, this may also be one the most pivotal time frames for perpetuating your programs culture simply because it is the only time of year where a coach can interact with his players on a daily basis. This time of year, provides plenty of opportunities for continual check-ins for coaches to reaffirm and reinforce their culture.

### **In-Season Collaborative Competency Methods:**

During the season, the collaborative competency is usually manifested by reinforcing the core culture and standards that reinforce that culture. One of the ways in which this is done is by highlighting how your players are exemplifying the core values of the program. An example is what head coach Neil Weiner is doing at the Dunham School (LA). He'll use HUDL to pull clips of his players that have shown his program's core values (Heart, Effort, Attitude and Toughness) and share with the rest of the players. There are other coaches like Randy Jackson at North Forney High School (TX) that will use social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter and What's App for players reflect upon on what one of the core values in the program means to them. The group messaging cultivates a free flow stream of consciousness ideas. [In this course, I show various examples of how coaches are messaging their core values in-season.](#)

Collaboration using on-field efforts can also be organized during this trimester. At Greenwood High School (NE) players are actually expected to be part of the evaluation process in grading each practice, measuring if the activity met the core values of the program. Of course, all of this is quantified, tracked and measured and posted daily. At Ridgefield High School (CT), the offensive staff will have its players work through impromptu game-like scenarios each week where they will be given the freedom to call their own plays. The staff says it's helped in teaching awareness of situations and what plays work best in these scenarios. It also helps in acclimating players to adjust to the ebbs and flows that are presented in a normal drive sequence. [In this course, I give examples of which scenarios are being rehearsed each week.](#)

Finally, collaborative goal setting continues to be a major component of the in-season trimester. Coaches in the player-driven culture are segmenting their goals platforms on a daily basis. At Florida State University, the entire defensive staff has players illustrate one aspect of improvement each player must make at practice. Examples could be lower pad level, or strike on the rise in tackling, etc. These are evaluated each day in practice and advanced on a daily basis. In-season weekly goal models are used at Washington High School (SD), where head coach Chad Stadem will have his players identify what they did well and what they didn't do well immediately after the game while it's still fresh on their minds. Also, mid-season goal development occurs during this trimester, which usually done during bye weeks. Coaches will meet with each player to measure how their pre-season objectives match up with their mid-season performance. After these discussions, a objectives are set forth to complete the season. [In this course, I provide the distinction between using daily, weekly and seasonal goal setting platforms.](#)

### **In-Season Connectivity Competency Methods:**

During the season we found our contributors use the connectivity competency to promote different voices carrying the same message. This takes shape of bringing outsiders in to talk about the core values of the program. In the player driven culture, these assignments are not delegated arbitrarily. Coaches vet potential speakers to ensure that a similar message is conveyed and that there is alignment. For example, Justin Taylor, the head coach at Weaver High School (AL) will only bring in speakers that show representation of his programs core values of positive energy, respect, intentional decision, discipline and effort. This is also a time for programs to recognize those people in the building that have a positive effect on players. At Ballard High School (WA) there is a game day ritual where anywhere from 3-5 people in the building- a custodian, teacher or another coach- gets recognized in front of the entire team at on Friday nights.

There is also a place for player to player and player to coach vulnerability component methods that can take place during this time frame. We've researched these "two minute" check-ins where coaches will at random inquire about player's day before practice or in stretch lines. It leads to creating the transparency conducive for developing trust. I provide examples of those specific questions in the course. Connectivity with parents is developed in-season by allowing them an all-access look into the operations of the program. Steve Monninger, the head coach at Norfolk Academy (VA) opens up an entire week during the season for parents to attend meetings, lifting sessions and practice just to get a feel of how the program operates.

#### **In-Season Self-Advocacy Competency Methods:**

Of the four main areas of player self-advocacy that we uncovered (leadership, nutrition, academics and time management), the two that is most apropos during this time of year is promoting time management and academics. Allocating the necessary time to juggle all the responsibilities of a student-athlete is difficult enough, but players get overwhelmed during the season by putting too much of an emphasis on football. Rather than leave any of that to chance, head coach Ralph Isernia at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (NY) encourages his student-athletes to document how their time is being allocated during the season. He calls it the "168 Sheet," which essentially accounts for every hour during the course of a week. [A template of that sheet is included in this course.](#)

From an academic standpoint, most programs at the high school level have implemented study halls to assist with struggling students. But in the player-driven culture system, all students (not just the at-risk ones) should be held accountable for attending these sessions. There are programs such as Warren Central High School (IN) where nothing is left to chance and preaching academics isn't just lip service. Freshmen are required to attend three days per week of study hall while juniors and seniors have two mandatory days. These sessions are monitored by coaches who are able to help in the academic domain. And by the way, practice doesn't start until these sessions are completed. Warren Central has found the balance of both academics and athletics- their program just finished a state championship run.

#### **In-Season Emotional Awareness Competency Methods:**

Emotional awareness is on high alert during the season. The temperament of a young adult can change rapidly and repeatedly and if coaches are not educated on the triggers that cause this change, they could become catalysts for poor performance on Friday nights. and the circumstances that be a catalyst in producing these changes are frequent. A personal setback on Tuesday, if not diagnosed and alleviated, can perpetuate into a tactical error on Friday nights. So, it becomes an essential task in-season to monitor the mindfulness or emotional awareness of players. One of the more thorough examples I found of this comes in the form of Wellness Assessments, conducted at St. Xavier High School (OH). Every Wednesday and Sunday during the season, head coach Steve Specht sends players a survey measuring their social anxiety in several categories- academic, personal, social, familial, etc. Players are given the freedom to express any of their concerns and feelings in a less obtrusive digital form. It gets read privately by the staff and trainers and has proven to be proactive in curtailing potential anxiety hot spots. [This survey and the criteria that the staff is using to evaluate it is available in this course.](#)

Stimulate and assessing players emotion in-season can be done in more discreet forms. At Garden City High School (KS) head coach Brian Hill sends out individual text message using an automatic text generating service to solicit what feelings players may be experiencing during the course of the week. If there are commonalities shown in responses, he'll organize small group discussion sessions with select players to vent these issues. It helps provide his players with an outlet to vent their feelings. Jep Irwin, the head coach at Whitley County High School (IN) actually will have voluntary players sit in front of a large or small group talk about any topic they choose. He calls it the "Safety Seat" and says that with just a little prompting, players will provide their opinion on anything. It often helps in encouraging other players to speak up. When he first started it, he had to hand select one or two he knew would be stimulants, but eventually most of the team felt empowered enough to be involved.

Lastly, I've found that the dynamic of pre-game meetings has shifted in the player-driven culture. Coaches are spending less time talking about their opponents and more time talking about the mindset of their team. For example, the Friday night meetings at the hotel for the United States Naval Academy football team resembled more like a boy scout meeting this season than a pre-game pep talk. Players sat on the hotel ballroom floor sharing two things: slices of pizza and their experiences growing up. It helped Coach Niumatalo and his staff uncover another layer of their players feelings which in turn brought the unit closer together, even for a military academy. [In this course, I provide the topics that were discussed during these meetings.](#)

### **In-Season Responsibility Competency Methods:**

While most of the responsibility competency methods I researched occur during the off-season- such as leadership and competition teams- there were several other initiatives coaches were using to teach player to player responsibility. For example, at Kansas State University, cornerbacks' coach Van Malone uses peer to peer instruction to generate ownership in position meetings. After splitting up his unit into random thirds, he'll have them research and present on a game planning topic such as first and third down tendencies, red zone tendencies and release

breakdowns from wide receivers they will match up with on Saturday. He made it into a competition where there are point values associated to groups that use a Prezi presentation with video or supply handouts to the rest of the unit. For Coach Malone these methods have helped with retention rates particularly for younger players. [In this course, I detail the criteria Coach Malone uses to grade each of these groups.](#)

I've even spoke with coaches at the high school level like assistant coach Adam O'Neil at Manhattan High School (KS) who will use his unit leaders in each position to do on-field work with select teammates during practice. They take them through select individual drill work that emphasizes a certain skill set such as defensive linemen working on reach blocks or linebackers working on key reads. Defensive backs can work through catch man technique progression. Coach O'Neil provides the guidelines for the one to one instruction while he works with the rest of the team. It's helped players understand how to work with and teach different personality types, a vital life skill.

Finally, I found that during the season is an opportune time to enact player to player mentorships. There were several different kinds of mentorship dynamics I researched during this course: senior to freshmen mentorships, junior to freshmen mentorships and academic based mentorships. While the off-season trimester is used for coaches to create these mentorships, the in-season trimester serves as the perfect time for coaches in the player driven culture to "check in" on these mentorships to make sure both ends are holding their bargain to each other. During the season, Lake Fenton High School (MI) head coach Marty Borski would meet with the mentorship pairs every Sunday during the season to monitor them. [In this course, I go through the process coaches are using to keep players accountable in these mentorships.](#)

### **In-Season Resiliency Competency Methods:**

There is no off-season to teaching response and riding the ebbs and flows of a traditional football season provides enough fodder for coaches to teach players the right way to handle adversity. One of the methods in which this can get done in-season is by working through several response based scenarios cognitively to teach players to be proactive when that adversity strikes. At Muskego High School (WI), this is done the day *of* the game, where the staff will present players with a list of circumstances that could go wrong during the course of the game. Players are asked to break into groups and talk through each of them, providing what the staff calls "Level 5 Response," to each. There are several interesting scenarios they talk through, all of which are included in the course.

At Virginia Tech University, head coach Justin Fuente teaches response by video illustration in-season, showing his unit examples of poor behaviors via video clips of other programs committing penalties like unsportsmanlike conducts, targeting, poor decision making, etc. It's done on Friday nights before heading to the hotel or the plane. He'll educate his players by talking through the right way to handle those instances should they occur. It's another proactive approach in educating players how to respond to adversity before it happens.

Some of these same resiliency competency methods can be orchestrated in practice during the season. For example, at Kent State University head coach Sean Lewis makes sure that every positional drill includes some element of adversity. Rather than his quarterbacks working basic bag drills for agility, he'll throw wrenches into their progressions forcing them to deliver the ball during inopportune moments. In doing so, he provides response through discomfort. At Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, head coach Ralph Isernia will stop practice periodically to run what he calls the "A, B, C's" of response. A firm believer of "sinking to the level of training" during adversity, Coach Isernia has every position group on the field assemble and walk through the three cores mechanisms of the position. [These mechanisms are all included in this course.](#)

### **Off-Season Trimester Model**

As soon as the season ends, it's imperative that coaches immediately re-evaluate every aspect of the culture. Clemson head football coach Dabo Swinney calls it "protecting" the culture by evaluating the core values, the standards that drive those core values as well as the behaviors that produce those standards. He says, quite simply, if the culture plateaus than it stops growing. There are several methods coaches are using during the off-season that develop all these six competencies.

### **Off-Season Collaborative Competency Methods:**

While I found that the core values will traditionally not change from year to year, coaches will continue to work with players and staff in defining them. This is a collaborative effort to alter the definitions and behaviors that correspond with these values. For example, if discipline is a core value of the program, players have an important role in defining what "discipline" looks like in several areas of the program: the classroom, the weight room, the field, the community, etc. Than once those values are defined, coaches are selecting leaders to attach the behaviors and the language that correspond with those standards. [There are several examples of how collaborative this core value process is in the course.](#)

Collaboration in the off-season trimester also is developed through various goal setting models. In the player-driven culture system, in order for players to have ownership of performance, they must be involved in the goal setting process. The first component of this is the process is the post-season goal check in, where the previous season's goals are measured. For returning players, this process begins in restating or redesigning these goals. This is the time where coaches bring in each individual players to express their goals in all areas of their lives. These goals are structured in the following ways: lifelong models, seasonal models, weekly models and daily models. Even the B.F.A. (Big, Fat Audacious) goals need to be documented. [In this course, I go through this entire goal setting process and answer questions like; How many goals should be set? How often should we set these goals? In what areas should we set these goals? Most importantly, how do we hold players accountability for these goals?](#)

### **Off-Season Connectivity Competency Methods:**

Time is an ally in the off-season and provides plenty of opportunities for coaches to continually develop connectivity with their staff and players. This is providing, they create the time to do so. Here is where coaches will use small group instruction to develop monthly culture on core values and pertinent topics to the program. It's a way in which to have open, roundtable discussions. One of the more popular collaborative methods coaches are using is creating off-season book studies. Players are assigned chapters to read and discuss in small group interactions. Even assistant coaches are given responsibilities to read and present to several small groups. Book studies are essential in the player-driven culture because it provides for another vehicle, such as literature, to carry the message of the core values. [And while book studies are common, in this course I present the process of how coaches are selecting the right book based on the needs and values of the program.](#)

At the college level, the off-season serves as the opportune time to develop player to coach connectivity. Because of the natural two-platoon format, many times players may not be familiar with coaches on the other side of the ball. Therefore, it's important for position coaches to develop relationships with these players or those not recruited by them. I've talked with many programs that are finding ways to do this. Some programs, like the University of Buffalo, allow their offensive position coaches to rotate through each unit to give a culture talk on components like "grit" and "discipline." Other programs, like Central Michigan University actually separates the entire program into thirds and cycles each grouping through an hour each day of interaction with pairings of coaches in several activities. It helps connect players with every coach on the staff. [In this course, I take readers through the activities that integrate players and coaches.](#)

One of the more interesting methods of parental connectivity in the off-season is what the staff at Hoover High School (AL) engages in and it's called "Research Projects." Each coach is asked to research 10-15 topics that need to be at the forefront of the off-season development program. This gets whittled down to around six, one for each coach. Head coach Josh Niblett has each one on his staff spend some time researching what that topic means and then devises a specific plan for players to address these needs. This program then is communicated to parents through home visits all throughout the month of January in the off-season. [In this course, I explain what these topics are and how the staff goes about presenting them to parents.](#)

### **Off-Season Self-Advocacy Competency Methods:**

One of the strongest tools to teach the behavior of self-advocacy in the off-season relates to the evaluation of leadership. At the end of every season, coaches in the player driven model are allowing *players* to advocate for leadership by empowered them to not only assess their current leaders (coaches and players) but also select who they wish to lead them in the subsequent season. Now, that's not to say that those temporary selections become permanent, coaches still may have a final say, but the intent is to give players a *voice* on the people and aspects that affect them.

One of the more comprehensive models in teaching players self-advocacy during the off-season is what head coach Mike DeFazio at Kipp High School (NY) does with his players and coaches. It begins with a post-season leadership survey distributed to every player and coach in the program that assesses leadership styles and ends with a closed door, face to face interaction with players and coaches discussing the results of the findings in which there are three rules: what is said here stays here, personal scores cannot be settled and in order to enhance the most important quality of listening you are not allowed to reply to any feedback until the conversation is completed. According to Coach DeFazio this method has not only provided valuable feedback from coaches and players alike but also has empowered players to feel comfortable in communicating their needs in what can be a dying dynamic...person to person conversations. [In this course, I uncover the ground work of these meetings and the criteria they use to assess leadership.](#)

### **Off-Season Emotional Awareness Competency Methods:**

In the off-season, coaches in the player-driven culture spend the majority of their time creating profiles for each player on their roster. Done collaboratively as a staff or with the assistance of a school psychologist, the purpose is to evaluate the “whole” player in the following realms: tactical, technical, emotional and physical. At University High School (OH) head coach Ben Malbasa along with a mental development coach put together this framework for each varsity player in the program. He’s said that pinpointing areas of weakness help generate future projections on how to develop players in each of those above mentioned areas. In this course, I provide blank examples of a what this Ideal Person profile looks like as well as a completed one anonymously.

### **Off-Season Responsibility Competency Methods:**

Naturally, the off-season is where the leadership council concept is established and maintained. At this point, most programs have these groups already implemented. Coaches often pick their best leaders and have those leaders draft their teams and delegate certain points for things like attending class, making a workout and attaining high grades. The end results consist of earning tangible possessions like tee-shirts, steak dinners, etc. But in the player-driven culture system, I found that leadership groups are designed specifically to enforce a key element in the program’s core values. And because coaches are able to manipulate point values to accentuate a particular off-season focus, some programs will quantify their point values to target academics, community involvement or competition. Finally, the end game is not a new tee-shirt. Instead, public praise and recognition- using social media- is the prize for winners. There are even coaches like Matt Rickards at Kearns High School (UT) who every year takes the top two performers in these groups and assign them captain roles for the upcoming season. After all, peer recognition is always better motivation than a tee shirt. [In this course, I provide the data on how coaches are quantifying these values based on all of those components above.](#)

And the biggest challenge in implementing these leadership groups is making sure players are holding *each other* accountable, without drawing the influence of the coaching staff. There is no better way to learn responsibility, than to have players act on it. That happens with trust, with



players believing each other wants the best for them. I didn't find a better example of peer to peer leadership than the mechanisms that are put in place at the University of Iowa where the leader of each of these competition groups is involved in actually developing an "action plan" to correct any behaviors (socially, academically or athletically) their understudies are having. [In this course I show you what one of those action plans look like and how they are devised.](#)

### **Off-Season Resiliency Competency Methods:**

Clearly, there is no better time to teach response than during off-season mat drill workouts. These indoor workouts have been a staple for most football programs for generations; a barometer for testing desire, effort and stamina. But, in the player driven culture system, I found there is more of an emphasis for players to *respond* to making simple errors during instruction. And in order to measure intangibles such as like listening skills, interaction with teammates and body language, Florida State University head coach Mike Norvell actually developed a criteria to *grade* these behaviors on a 1-5 scale. After each off-season workout, the offensive and defensive staff will sit down and compile points for each player. This manifests into a hierarchy where those with the highest point values are recognized by given separate color jerseys so that even the casual observer is able to notice distinctions in these trained behaviors. [In this course, I provide the criteria Coach Norvell and his staff uses to grade his players on all of these behaviors.](#)

### **Pre-Season Trimester Model**

Summer contact with players is usually at a minimum. At the high school level, players times are torn between vacation and travel sports while at the major collegiate level coaches are only allowed to spend eight hours a week with their players. However, there are still various methods we've found coaching staffs are using to teach these culture competencies, both physically and digitally.

### **Pre-Season Collaborative Competency Methods:**

It was back in the summer of 2018 when the coaching staff at South Dakota University realized they needed to develop leadership and do so quickly. With the season drawing near, large group instruction was going nowhere; younger players who possessed some leadership skills were often being inhibited by the elder classmen. So, head coach Bob Nielson decided to separate his program by class and assign 2-3 coaches for each class to teach life lessons. Skills like how to pick a major, how to behave in the weight room and even how to tie a tie were all part of the curriculum. What started as a pilot program in teaching life skills translated into the ideal platform for leaders to emerge. Players who previously felt oppressed to speak up felt comfortable enough in their class to express themselves. Coaches took note by empowering these players to be part of the leadership council that fall. [In this course, I provide a breakdown of the life skills the staff at South Dakota taught and how it manifested itself into the identification of leaders.](#)

### **Pre-Season Connectivity Competency Methods:**

Although the pre-season can be a pivotal time in a football program's seasonal journey, it's a race against time to get all players and coaches integrated and aligned. Aside from all of the administrative duties that fill up a head coaches schedule during this time, I found in my research that the pre-season an ideal time for coaches to express vulnerability in other ways. If coaches and players can take the time to express themselves to each other in an informal but efficient manner, barriers can be broken quickly. From a player to player standpoint, this takes shape in the form of connectivity where players are paired up with each other to ask a series of vulnerable questions. These are the kind that cannot be answered by generic, one word responses. Instead, questions like "tell me the story of your life" or "what was your greatest accomplishment" are common queries during this exercise. Coaches have said it's helped in expediting relationships from player to player during the pre-season. [In this course, I provide examples of the sets of questions coaches are having players use to express these vulnerabilities.](#)

This vulnerability exercise has a more formal approach at Weber State University, where every player and coach are asked to get up in front of the unit and provide their "testimony and commitment" to the program. Modeled after his protégé Urban Meyer, head coach Jay Hill implements this every pre-season camp when he takes the entire team to an off-site location, where the Utah mountainside serves as the backdrop for these sessions. Weber State's roster is more diverse than most college football programs containing Polynesians, married couples and missionaries' returnees. The staff has mentioned that exercise has developed tangible results on the field, as between series some offensive players will stand on the sideline, rather than sitting on the bench, just to watch the defense. [In this course, I provide the format coaches are using for these public speaking sessions.](#)

#### **Pre-Season Self-Advocacy Competency Methods:**

While most football programs go about selecting captains in the conventional way of players voting usually is their best friends or the most talented players on the squad, in the player-driven culture captainship is seen as an occupation that players must *apply* for. At Logan High School (OH) head coach Mike Eddy grew tired of having players select leaders arbitrarily before even consulting players to inquire if this was a responsibility they desired. So, he shifted the selection process paradigm to have only players that were *interested* in becoming captains apply for the position. This method's thoroughness tests the perseverance of candidates who must pervade through an application process, an interview with the coaching staff then finally a mentorship if they become selected. It's a teachable moment in self-advocacy and quickly solidifies the persistence of those that truly wish to become leaders. [In this course, I detail the entire application process including the interview questions posed by staff and the consequential mentorship.](#)

#### **Pre-Season Responsibility Competency Methods:**

With high school programs starting earlier in the summer, the concept of "captains' practice" has completely shifted. What used to consist of a few wind sprints has transformed into a progressive player to player workout system. In then player driven culture system, coaches are

empowering players to not only run the workouts but design them as well. At the high school level, coaches like Troy Schlueter at West-Point Beemer High School (NE) allowed his quarterback to design these player driven workouts all summer, which consisted of individual drills and team drills. At the collegiate level despite coaches being given eight hours in the summer, hardly any of them are using them. Instead, they are opting for individual unit leaders to run these workouts. After lifting sessions at programs like Central Michigan University and the Naval Academy, position leaders are given a practice plan and are expected to enact it. And we're not just talking about some 7 on 7 work and fade routes. These sessions are complete with individual position work, 9 on 7 sessions and a team period. [In this course, I give examples of the abridged practice plans coaches are trusting their unit leaders to run during these summer workouts.](#)

### **Pre-Season Resiliency Competency Methods:**

In an effort to keep player level fatigue low in the summer and pre-season months, most of the response training I researched came in the form of cognitive response modeling. And at the forefront of this method is performance coach Tim Kight, who worked with former Ohio State University head coach Urban Meyer. During the summer and pre-season time period, Kight implements full unit response lessons using his famous formula "E (Event) + R (Response)= O (Outcome). He'll every core value of the programs that he works with and provides scenarios (on field and off) where those values are tested. Players are asked to differentiate between default behavior and elite behavior as it pertains to these values. This eventually transitions into role playing activities with the intent of proactively addressing as many possible negative behaviors before they occur. [In this course, I detail how Kight's six elements of response can be applied to various created on and off-field scenarios.](#)

### **Conclusion:**

This is just an outline of how the 40+ sources we spoke with during this course are using each of those behaviors above to create and sustain a player driven culture operating system. As I learned early in this study, culture is unique to each individual program based on several circumstances. So, once you're done taking the Player Driven Culture course you'll be able to take all the resources we provided and implement them to fit the core values and standards that you've established in your program.