Football contains lessons for the business world

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Football was one of my favorite parts of college life. I’m not talking about the kind of football with pads and helmets in a big stadium — I went to Stetson when we didn’t have a football team — but I loved playing intramural flag football with my sorority’s team.

I grew up cheering for the Miami Dolphins, and when my son entered the University of Florida during the Tim Tebow era, I got hooked on college football.

Last month when I was asked to write this column, my mind was filled with football, and so I starting thinking about ways my work — managing software development projects — is like college football.

No. 1 Shared objective: A college football team is united in a common purpose: to win the game. Players don’t stand around saying, “Should we try to win today, or is it the other team’s turn?” There’s no debate about the objective of every play: offense works together to cross the goal line, and defense works just as hard to keep that from happening.
Work teams should also share a common goal: to create solutions that achieve bottom line business goals on time and in budget. Like football players, the members of the team must work together to achieve that shared goal.

No. 2 Every player has a purpose: College football depends on each person doing his job to the best of his ability. A great quarterback fails if the offensive line allows sack after sack. The fastest running back in the world goes nowhere if teammates fail to block. The most beautiful spirals are never caught if receivers fail to run the correct route or take their eye off the ball.

Business teams are successful only when each person performs well, too. In my industry, if stakeholders don’t define the project’s objectives, the team won’t understand its goals. If the project manager collects requirements from stakeholders but doesn’t communicate them to the developers, the system won’t meet stakeholder needs. If the testers identify deficiencies but don’t report them to the programmers, the system will be buggy.

In football and software development, each person has an important purpose, and the team succeeds only when every team member performs his job well. The same holds true for any business group.

No. 3 Quarters and sprints: A football game has four quarters, and at the end of each quarter, experts project the game’s outcome. However, using the score after each quarter to predict the game winner isn’t as simple as assuming the team that’s ahead will win the game. Some teams play well in the first two quarters but lose momentum in the second half, while other teams start slow and end strong.

If a team finishes strong, they don’t worry about being down by a touchdown at half time, but if a team loses steam late in the game, they aren’t likely to win a game that is tied at halftime.

In software development, projects are divided into sprints instead of quarters, and you predict the project’s probability of success based on the performance in each sprint. Like in football, some software development teams have a history of getting faster and more accurate as a project proceeds, while other teams may jump with enthusiasm into new projects but lose momentum as a project becomes predictable.

Understanding how a team works allows more accurate prediction of a project’s outcome, regardless of your industry. So next time you’re watching your favorite football team play, consider incorporating those successful sports concepts into your next work-related project.

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