

Geoffrey James

The Tao Of (Programming) Football

1.0 - The Silent Void

Thus spake the master Coach:

“When you have learned to snatch the blocking error from the triple option, it will be time for you to leave.”

1.1 - Something mysterious is formed, born in the silent void. Waiting alone and unmoving, it is at once still and yet in constant motion. It is the source of all football. I do not know its name, so I will call it the Tao of Football.

If the Tao is great, then the offensive line is great. If the offensive line is great, then the option is great. If the option is great, then the offense is great. The coach is pleased and there exists harmony in the world.

The Tao of Football flows far away and returns on the wind of morning.

1.2 - The Tao gave birth to the Single Wing. Single Wing gave birth to the Wing-T.

The Wing-T gave birth to the Jet Sweep. Now there are ten thousand schemes.

Each scheme has its purpose, however humble. Each scheme expresses the Yin and Yang of football. Each scheme has its place within the Tao.

But do not run the Double Wing if you can avoid it.

1.3 - In the beginning was the Tao. The Tao gave birth to Down and Distance. Therefore Down and Distance are Yin and Yang of Football.

Coaches that do not comprehend the Tao are always running out of Down and Distance for their teams. Coaches that comprehend the Tao always have enough Down and Distance to accomplish their goals.

How could it be otherwise?

1.4 - The wise Coach is told about Tao and follows it. The average Coach is told about Tao and searches for it. The foolish Coach is told about Tao and laughs at it.

If it were not for laughter, there would be no Tao.

The highest sounds are hardest to hear.

Going forward is a way to retreat.

Great talent shows itself late in life.

Even a perfect offensive scheme still has bugs.

2.0 - The Ancient Masters

Thus spake the master Coach:

“After three days without Football, life becomes meaningless.”

2.1 - The Coaches of old were mysterious and profound. We cannot fathom their thoughts, so all we do is describe their appearance.

Aware, like a fox crossing the water. Alert, like a general on the battlefield. Kind, like a hostess greeting her guests. Simple, like uncarved blocks of wood. Opaque, like black pools in darkened caves.

Who can tell the secrets of their hearts and minds?

The answer exists only in Tao.

2.2 - Master Coach Lombardi once dreamed that he was a football. When he awoke he exclaimed:

“I don't know whether I am Lombardi dreaming that I am a football, or a football dreaming that I am Lombardi!”

2.3 - A Coach from a very large school went to a coach's conference and then returned to report to his Athletic Director, saying: “What sort of Coaches work for other schools? They behaved badly and were unconcerned with appearances. Their hair was long and unkempt and their clothes were wrinkled and old. They crashed the vendor hospitality suite and they made rude noises during the presentation.”

The AD said: “I should have never sent you to the conference. Those Coaches live beyond the physical world. They consider life absurd, an accidental coincidence. They come and go without knowing limitations. Without a care, they live only for football. Why should they bother with social conventions?”

“They are alive within the Tao.”

2.4 - A novice asked the Master: “Here is a Coach that never designs, documents or tests his plays. Yet all who know him consider him one of the best Coaches in the world. Why is this?”

The Master replies: “That Coach has mastered the Tao. He has gone beyond the need for playbooks; he does not become angry when the play fails, but accepts the universe without concern. He has gone beyond the need for documentation; he no longer cares if anyone else sees his playbook. He has gone beyond the need for testing; each of his plays are perfect within themselves, serene and elegant, their purpose self-evident. Truly, he has entered the mystery of Tao.”

3.0 – Game Planning Thus spake the master Coach:

“When the team is taking the field, it is too late to make game plan changes.”

3.1 - There once was a man who went to a coaches trade show. Each day as he entered, the man told the guard at the door:

“I am a great thief, renowned for my feats of shoplifting. Be forewarned, for this clinic shall not escape un plundered.”

This speech disturbed the guard greatly, because there were millions of dollars of football equipment inside, so he watched the man carefully. But the man merely wandered from booth to booth, humming quietly to himself.

When the man left, the guard took him aside and searched his clothes, but nothing was to be found.

On the next day of the clinic, the man returned and chided the guard saying: “I escaped with a vast booty yesterday, but today will be even better.” So the guard watched him ever more closely, but to no avail.

On the final day of the clinic, the guard could restrain his curiosity no longer. “Sir Thief,” he said, “I am so perplexed, I cannot live in peace. Please enlighten me. What is it that you are stealing?”

The man smiled. “I am stealing ideas,” he said.

3.2 - There once was a master Coach who used unstructured offensive schemes. A novice Coach, seeking to imitate him, also began to implement unstructured schemes. When the novice asked the master to evaluate his progress, the master criticized him for using unstructured schemes, saying, “What is appropriate for the master is not appropriate for the novice. You must understand the Tao before transcending structure.”

3.3 - There was once a Coach who was attached to the court of the warlord of Lombardi. The warlord asked the Coach: “Which is easier to design: a Power I or a spread offense?”

“A spread offense,” replied the Coach.

The warlord uttered an exclamation of disbelief. “Surely a Power-I is trivial next to the complexity of an spread system,” he said.

“Not so,” said the Coach, “when designing a Power-I package, the Coach operates as a mediator between people having different ideas: how it must operate, how its plays must appear, and how it must conform to the power game. By contrast, a spread is not limited by outside appearances. When designing a spread system, the Coach seeks the simplest harmony between quarterback and receiver. This is why a spread system is easier to design.”

The warlord of Lombardi nodded and smiled. “That is all good and well, but which is easier to implement?”

The Coach made no reply.

3.4 - A new head coach went to the master Coach and showed him the requirements for a new defense. The new head coach asked the master: “How long will it take to design this scheme if I assign two Coaches to it?”

“It will take one year,” said the master promptly.

“But we need this scheme immediately or even sooner! How long will it take if I assign ten Coaches to it?”

The master Coach frowned. “In that case, it will take two years.”

“And what if I assign a hundred Coach’s to it?”

The master Coach shrugged. “Then the scheme will never be completed,” he said.

4.0 - Schemes

Thus spake the master Coach:

“A well-designed defense is its own heaven; a poorly-designed defense is its own hell.”

4.1 - An offense should be light and agile, its series connected like a string of pearls. The spirit and intent of the scheme should be retained throughout. There should be neither too little running or too much running, neither needless plays nor useless motions, neither lack of structure nor overwhelming rigidity.

An offense should follow the “Law of Least Astonishment”. What is this law? It is simply that the scheme should always respond to the defense in the way that astonishes the quarterback least.

A scheme, no matter how complex, should act as a single unit. The scheme should be directed by the logic within rather than by outward appearances.

If the scheme fails in these requirements, it will be in a state of disorder and confusion. The only way to correct this is to re-design the scheme.

4.2 - A novice asked the master: “I have a play that sometime gains and sometimes loses. I have followed the rules of Football, yet I am totally baffled. What is the reason for this?”

The master replied: “You are confused because you do not understand Tao. Only a fool expects rational behavior from his fellow coaches. Why do you expect it from a play that humans have designed? Playbooks simulate determinism; only Tao is perfect.

“The rules of Football are transitory; only Tao is eternal. Therefore you must contemplate Tao before you receive enlightenment.”

“But how will I know when I have received enlightenment?” asked the novice.

“Your offensive play will then run correctly,” replied the master.

4.3 - A master was explaining the nature of Tao of to one of his novices. “The Tao is embodied in all schemes - regardless of how insignificant,” said the master.

“Is the Tao in a fullback dive play?” asked the novice.

“It is,” came the reply.

“Is the Tao in a wedge?” continued the novice.

“It is even in a wedge,” said the master.

“And is the Tao in the Double Wing?”

The master coughed and shifted his position slightly. “The lesson is over for today,” he said.

4.4 - Prince Gruden’s Coach was entering play data from the game. His fingers danced upon the keyboard. The data entered without an error message, and the scouting reports ran like a gentle wind.

“Excellent!” the Prince exclaimed, “Your technique is flawless!”

“Technique?” said the Coach turning from his computer, “What I follow is Tao - beyond all techniques! When I first began to coach I would see before me the whole problem in one mass. After three years I no longer saw this mass. Instead, I used schemes. But now I see nothing. My whole being exists in a formless void. My senses are idle. My spirit, free to work without plan,

follows its own instinct. True, sometimes there are difficult problems. I see them coming, I slow down, I watch silently. Then I change a single player assignment and the difficulties vanish like puffs of idle smoke. I sit still and let the joy of the work fill my being. I close my eyes for a moment and then choose the next play.”

Prince Wang said, “Would that all of my Coaches were as wise!”

5.0 – The Playbook

Thus spake the master Coach:

“Though a playbook be but three pages long, someday it will have to be maintained.”

5.1 - A well-used door needs no oil on its hinges.

A swift-flowing stream does not grow stagnant.

Neither sound nor thoughts can travel through a vacuum.

Plays rot if not used.

These are great mysteries.

5.2 - An athletic director asked a Coach how long it would take him to finish the defensive scheme on which he was working. “It will be finished tomorrow,” the Coach promptly replied.

“I think you are being unrealistic,” said the AD, “Truthfully, how long will it take?”

The Coach thought for a moment. “I have some blitzes and pass coverages that I wish to add.

This will take at least two weeks,” he finally said.

“Even that is too much to expect,” insisted the AD, “I will be satisfied if you simply tell me when the scheme is complete.”

The Coach agreed to this.

Several years later, the AD retired. On the way to his retirement luncheon, he discovered the Coach asleep at his desk. He had been drawing plays all night.

5.3 - A novice Coach was once assigned to design a simple dive play.

The novice worked furiously for many days, but when his master reviewed his playbook, he discovered that it contained a set of formations, a set of generalized motion calls, an audible system, but not the slightest mention of anything about the dive.

When the master asked about this, the novice became indignant. “Don’t be so impatient,” he said, “I’ll put in the dive stuff eventually.”

5.4 - Does a good farmer neglect a crop he has planted?

Does a good teacher overlook even the most humble student?

Does a good father allow a single child to starve?

Does a good Coach refuse to maintain his playbook?

6.0 - Coaching

Thus spake the master Coach:

“Let the players be many and the Coaches few - then all will be productive.”

6.1 - When Coaches holds endless meetings, the players play video games. When Athletic Directors talk of quarterly budgets, the athletic budget is about to be cut. When senior Coaches talk blue sky, the clouds are about to roll in.

Truly, this is not the Tao of Football.

When Coaches make commitments, video games are ignored. When AD's make long-range plans, harmony and order are about to be restored. When senior Coaches address the problems at hand, the problems will soon be solved.

Truly, this is the Tao of Football.

6.2 - Why are Coaches non-productive?

Because their time is wasted in meetings.

Why are Coaches rebellious?

Because the administration interferes too much.

Why are the Coaches resigning one by one?

Because they are burnt out.

Having worked for poor management, they no longer value their jobs.

6.3 - A head coach was about to be fired, but a Coach who worked for him developed a new scheme that became popular and won many games. As a result, the head coach retained his job.

The head coach tried to give the Coach a bonus, but the Coach refused it, saying, “I came up with the scheme because I thought it was an interesting concept, and thus I expect no reward.”

The head coach upon hearing this remarked, “This Coach, though he holds a position of small esteem, understands well the proper duty of an assistant coach. Let us promote him to the exalted position of offensive consultant!”

But when told this, the Coach once more refused, saying, “I exist so that I can coach. If I were promoted, I would do nothing but waste everyone's time. Can I go now? I have a scheme that I'm working on.”

6.4 - An athletic director went to his Coaches and told them: “As regards to your work hours: you are going to have to come in at nine in the morning and leave at five in the afternoon.” At this, all of them became angry and several resigned on the spot.

So the AD said: “All right, in that case you may set your own working hours, as long as you finish your schemes and practice schedules before practice.” The Coaches, now satisfied, began to come in at noon and work to the wee hours of the morning.

7.0 - Academic Wisdom

Thus spake the master Coach:

"You can demonstrate a play for an academic administrator, but you can't make him football literate."

7.1 - A novice asked the master: "In the east there is a great tree-structure that men call "District Headquarters". It is bloated out of shape with vice-principals and administrators. It issues a multitude of memos, each saying "Go, Hence!" or "Go, Hither!" and nobody knows what is meant. Every year new names are put onto the branches, but all to no avail. How can such an unnatural entity be?"

The master replied: "You perceive this immense structure and are disturbed that it has no rational purpose. Can you not take amusement from its endless gyrations? Do you not enjoy the untroubled ease of Football beneath its sheltering branches? Why are you bothered by its uselessness?"

7.2 - In the east there is a shark which is larger than all other fish. It changes into a bird whose wings are like clouds filling the sky. When this bird moves across the land, it brings a message from District Headquarters. This message it drops into the midst of the Coaches, like a seagull making its mark upon the beach. Then the bird mounts on the wind and, with the blue sky at its back, returns home.

The novice Coach stares in wonder at the bird, for he understands it not. The average Coach dreads the coming of the bird, for he fears its message. The master Coach continues to work at his desk, for he does not know that the bird has come and gone.

7.3 - The Magician of the Ivory Tower brought his latest invention for the master Coach to examine. The magician wheeled a large black box into the master's office while the master waited in silence.

"This is an integrated, distributed, general-purpose scouting workstation," began the magician, "ergonomically designed with a proprietary operating system, sixth generation languages, and multiple state of the art user interfaces. It took my assistants several hundred man years to construct. Is it not amazing?"

The master raised his eyebrows slightly. "It is indeed amazing," he said.

"District Headquarters has commanded," continued the magician, "that everyone use this workstation as a platform for developing new offensive and defensive schemes, playbooks, and scouting. Do you agree to this?"

"Certainly," replied the master, "I will have it transported to the football offices immediately!" And the magician returned to his tower, well pleased.

Several days later, a novice wandered into the office of the master Coach and said, "I cannot find the playbook for my new scheme. Do you know where it might be?"

"Yes," replied the master, "the playbooks are stacked on the platform in the coach's office."

7.4 - The master Coach moves from team to team without fear. No change in administration can harm him. He will not be fired, even if the record is dismal. Why is this? He is filled with Tao.

8.0 - Defense and Offense

Thus spake the master Coach:

“Without the wind, the grass does not move. Without offense, defense is useless.”

8.1 - A novice asked the master: “I perceive that one football program is much larger than all others. It towers above its competition like a giant among dwarfs. Any one of its units could comprise an entire team. Why is this so?”

The master replied, “Why do you ask such foolish questions? That program is large because it is large. If it only had offense, everyone would defend it. If it only had defense, everyone would attack it. If it only had special teams, people would treat it like a servant. But because it combines all of these things, people think it one of the gods! By not seeking to strive, it conquers without effort.”

8.2 - A master Coach passed a novice player one day. The master noted the novice's preoccupation with a hand-held football game. “Excuse me,” he said, “may I examine it?” The novice bolted to attention and handed the device to the master. “I see that the device claims to have three levels of play: Easy, Medium, and Hard,” said the Coach. “Yet every such device has another level of play, where the device seeks not to conquer the human, nor to be conquered by the human.”

“Pray, great master,” implored the player, “how does one find this mysterious setting?”

The master dropped the device to the ground and crushed it underfoot. And suddenly the novice was enlightened.

8.3 - There was once a Coach who worked at the high school. “Look at how well off I am here,” he said to a college Coach who came to visit, “I have my own offensive and defensive systems. I do not have to share my field with anyone. The offense is self-consistent and easy-to-use. Why do you not quit your present job and join me here?”

The college Coach then began to describe his team to his friend, saying “The head coach sits like an ancient sage meditating in the midst of the coach's office. The offensive and defensive playbooks stand end-to-end like a great ocean of knowledge. The offense is as multifaceted as a diamond, and as convoluted as a primeval jungle. The players, each unique, move through the scheme like a swift-flowing river. That is why I am happy where I am.”

The high school Coach, upon hearing this, fell silent. But the two Coaches remained friends until the end of their days.

8.4 - Run Game met Pass Game on the road to Carson. Run Game said: “You are Yin and I am Yang. If we travel together we will become famous and earn vast sums of money.” And so the set forth together, thinking to conquer the world.

Presently they met Single Wing, who was dressed in tattered rags and hobbled along propped on a thorny stick. Single Wing said to them: “The Tao lies beyond Yin and Yang. It is silent and still as a pool of water. It does not seek fame, therefore nobody knows its presence. It does not seek fortune, for it is complete within itself. It exists beyond space and time.”

Run Game and Pass Game, ashamed, returned to their homes.

9.0 - Epilogue

Thus spake the master Coach:

“It is time for you to leave.”