

Gotta do it by the book

Academic Gameplan keeps Fresno State football players on course in class.

By David White / The Fresno Bee

(Sunday, May 8, 2005, 6:06 AM)

Stick 20 football players in a dining hall at sunrise.

Hand them a daily planner and an 81-page workbook full of catch phrases.

Place a self-described flunky in charge of the 30-minute operation.

Label it Academic Gameplan, and this is what the Fresno State football team gets: an Academic Progress Rate of 939 out of 1,000 possible points in the NCAA's new academic scoring system.

That's No. 3 in the Western Athletic Conference, tops if you remove the four teams leaving the WAC on July 1.

It's better than USC, Cal and seven other Pac-10 schools, and higher than seven of nine Mountain West Conference schools.

Among teams in the final Top 25 coaches' poll last season, the Bulldogs' score is No. 12 - ahead of Oklahoma, Texas and Louisiana State.

All because of a yearlong crash course in organizational skills and study techniques with twice-a-week group meetings, Fresno State coaches say.

Sound too simple?

Well, it pretty much is.

"This is not like I got some great idea and I'm going to write a book," says AGP mastermind John Baxter, an eighth-year Bulldogs assistant coach.

"This is about coaches putting their arms around the kids and keeping the communication going. This is Fresno State football's version of No Child Left Behind."

This is what Fresno State football has used to monitor and influence academic progress since 1997, when Pat Hill was named coach and immediately hired Baxter as an assistant.

At the time, the Bulldogs' football program had the worst graduation rate in the country and a grade-point average of 2.2.

Now, the Bulldogs have a team GPA of about 2.7. Their APR is 18 points better than the national average for Division I-A football teams and 328 points better than the Fresno State men's basketball team, which posted one of the worst scores in the nation.

The APR awards two points per athlete in each program: one for being academically eligible, another if the athlete returns to the same school. The NCAA used to grade schools only on their graduation rate.

"Nobody thought when we got here we'd be in the top 10 in the West," Hill says. "Look at UCLA's score [862]. If we had that score, I'd be raked through the coals."

"Our players understand this is a priority and not lip service."

To better understand what AGP is, start by debunking a few assumptions.

Myth No. 1

AGP is a magic bullet for athletes.

Academic Gameplan doesn't do homework for anyone and can't write a single term paper.

Instead, it reminds a student-athlete what he must do every day, offers efficient ways to work and demands accountability.

"You have to make an effort," linebacker Quadir Brown says. "School is hard, I'm not going to say it isn't. But this definitely makes it doable."

Brown is a 17-year-old freshman who graduated one semester early from Lake Elsinore High. He attended his first class at Fresno State on Jan. 21.

It took him one month to get a handle on AGP.

"This is not just a good tool for school," says Brown, sounding eerily like Baxter. "It's a good tool for life."

It starts with a black binder, which is an in-depth daily planner. Each page lists a day's worth of homework assignments, test dates, practice schedules, weightlifting times, even dental appointments.

Finish a task and Brown puts a check in the box. Show up at an AGP with blank boxes and there's no excuse good enough.

"They know they have to be more organized or they will answer to us," Hill says. "You can check a kid's notebook and pretty much know where he's at. Some kids try to hide it, but it's really a waste of time."

That's because players can't evade two 7 a.m. meetings a week with their position coach - for Brown, it's linebackers coach Tom Mason.

Mason inspects Brown's daily planner and grade checks.

Got a paper to write? Mason wants to see a rough draft by Monday.

Got a C in math? Mason assigns 2 hours of tutorial time.

"Everybody thinks the magic of AGP [is] the binder and the planner," Baxter says. "They're just the medium. AGP is the interaction between the coach and student. That's what puts them on track."

All freshmen and transfers spend their first year in AGP. Returners with a GPA of 2.0 or lower the previous semester, or with a cumulative GPA lower than 2.4, go back in the program.

They attend classes that emphasize note-taking skills, study methods and information retrieval.

Baxter refers to principles such as the magic of why, power of how, paradigm effects and the price of limiting belief.

In essence, Baxter teaches skills, not subjects.

"Coming from high school, I wasn't the most organized person," Brown says. "This thing works; it just makes it a lot easier to stay on top of things. I'm still not the best student, but I'd hate to see where I'd be without it."

Myth No. 2

Everyone loves AGP.

Bobby Lepori quit the Nevada football team during preseason camp last summer and transferred to Fresno State as a nonscholarship walk-on.

AGP isn't what drew him to the Bulldogs.

"I laughed when I saw it," says Lepori, a freshman offensive lineman.

"I thought, 'This is ridiculous, this is so stupid. I made it this far without structuring my day.' "

That attitude is typical of incoming freshmen, Baxter says. In most cases, so is the change of heart Lepori experienced in a few weeks.

Lepori posted a 3.0 GPA in his first semester. Today, his workbook is complete and his binder is filled with checked boxes.

"This changed how I value school," Lepori says. "By the end of the workbook, I really believed what Baxter was preaching."

Others take longer to come around.

"At first, not every kid buys into it," Hill says. "There's kids who sleepwalk through their freshman year. We've had kids fake notes, sign fake grade checks, go through the motions. It takes time, but they come around."

"They have to if they want to be here."

Myth No. 3

AGP is a study hall program.

Whatever you do, don't say that around the Fresno State football offices.

"Ooooh, Baxter hates that," Brown says.

"It has nothing to do with study hall," Hill says.

Baxter intensely wags his head.

"We never have study hall," Baxter says. "I can't think of anything more disgusting or a bigger waste of time than me sitting there watching you sit there and look at a book. I don't have any idea what you're doing."

"We put them in academic prison and do nothing to rehabilitate the prisoner."

Baxter was raised by a single mom in a poor Chicago neighborhood. He flunked out of the Loyola Academy, a private Jesuit prep school, in two years before returning to get his diploma.

At Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, Baxter promptly posted a 1.9 GPA. To re-enroll, he was required to present an academic plan to a school committee.

Three days after, a bare-bones version of the Academic Gameplan was birthed. A patent, publishing deal and Web site would come later.

"I took a binder and a little program and did fine the rest of college," says Baxter, who graduated from Loras in 1985 and earned his master's in higher education at Iowa State in 1987.

"This has been researched, developed and honed every day of my life."

By no means is AGP strictly for dummies.

Freshman kicker Clint Stitser completed the program last year but still uses the planning binder. He has a 4.0 GPA with enough credits to be classified as a junior after three semesters.

"All A's, no A's, everyone procrastinates," Stitser says. "With this, it stares you in the freaking face every day. You have to use your time efficiently. It's better than cramming the night before on coffee with a headache."

The AGP course taught Stitser how to study a textbook and identify probable test material. Read the teacher's body language during lectures. Pay attention to what's said after a pause.

Rocket science? In some ways, yes, Baxter says.

"For the underperforming students, it puts some fire on their gas," Baxter says. "For the achiever just sitting there with a full gas tank waiting for a match, it ignites the engine and just explodes.

"That's what Academic Gameplan is all about."

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