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## **Personality traits matter in NFL, but how much?**

**By Lori Nickel**

There are tests for speed, strength and endurance. Measurements for height, weight and body fat. Film to judge talent and ability. A Wonderlic exam for intelligence.

But what about personality?

Psychologists have studied athletes' personalities for decades and have settled on a few accepted summations: Athletes are confident, assertive, extroverted and tough-minded.

But are National Football League players a breed all their own?

Taking it one step further, is there a personality best-suited to play quarterback? Defensive lineman? Safety? Running back?

Green Bay Packers general manager Ted Thompson charts everything on his scout sheet from the 40-yard-dash times to the bench presses. He also includes a little personality evaluation on the player's family and upbringing, hobbies and character.

Thompson doesn't get Freudian, but he does consider mental makeup before signing a player.

"We certainly like to know the personality of the player," Thompson said. "You'd kind of like to know what makes that person tick."

And NFL coaches, players, personnel people and psychologists do see distinguishing traits among the offensive and defensive positions on a football team. They help decode for Thompson who will make the best teammate, who will be there when the going gets rough, who will lead and who will fight.

### **Personality by position**

**Defensive linemen:** You can count on the defensive lineman to lead the fight.

Cullen Jenkins' low, easy chuckle, the sack dance he does for his kids - it belies the mentality the Packers defensive lineman said is best for his position on the football field.

"Good D-linemen are a little crazy and a little rebellious," Jenkins said. "It's like a pit bull. They look cool, but you always know you have to be careful with them because they have that aggression."

Jenkins said defensive linemen were the toughest group to coach because they also are stubborn and short-fused.

"That attitude is the same thing that sometimes gets you in trouble off the field," Jenkins said. "You don't want to be challenged. People challenge you, and you're going to fight right back. It's the attitude. But that's the stuff you've got to have on the field to take on O-linemen and double-teams and get after the quarterback. You have to have that attitude that you can't be denied."

**Linebackers:** The linebacker often will share those traits of extreme aggression - but with discipline.

"You cannot play linebacker without an aggressive temperament about you," said Jim Lippincott, director of football operations for the Cincinnati Bengals. "Even though linebackers have a tendency to want to play with their hair on fire, there are gap responsibilities, so they have to take the aggression that they have to play downhill - but still end up in the right spot."

**Defensive backs:** With the front seven positions defined by their aggression, the defensive back seems to have a different mentality.

"You're the last line of defense," Packers safety Nick Collins said. "If everything breaks down, you have to help save everybody else. You're a big brother."

A defensive back's confidence usually is internal. Maybe that's because they've all been beat. Collins said he was a fan of former Denver safety Steve Atwater because he "was all about the team. It wasn't about him, even though he was the one making big hits. And Rod Woodson, when everything was breaking down out there, he was there to pick them up."

The defensive backs are best served with failing memories because when they get beat for a touchdown, they can count on being targeted again. They are often one of the closest position groups.

"You talk about corners having to have thick skin," Thompson said. "They also have to be - just like the offensive linemen in a lot of ways - a good teammate. They have to care about each other; they have to have each other's backs."

**Offensive linemen:** Good offensive linemen believe they are a team within the team. They are the anonymous men who do the dirty work. Yet ask any quarterback or coach who really makes the offense go, and they'll tell you it's the reliable big men. So linemen are humble in public, kingly in the huddle.

It often makes the offensive lineman a complex individual. Ominous and intimidating on the field, he's so often loyal, funny and well-meaning off it.

"Russ Grimm, I don't know if there's ever been anyone meaner. Down and dirty. Works hard," said Arizona Cardinals offensive coordinator Mike Miller. "But you can't find a better human being. Incredibly intelligent, a teacher, compassionate. He puts up that tough guy exterior, but he's got a big heart. Extremely generous. Looks out for people.

"Linemen have got to be real smart because of all the adjustments they make," Miller added. "But they've still got to be big, tough and mean."

The reason is simple. The guy behind them is the most important player on the team: the quarterback.

**Quarterbacks:** The first character trait coaches, GMs and teammates look for in a quarterback is leadership.

"You have to have the ability to take command, and that's more than yelling at people," Thompson said.

After that, Miller said the greatest non-physical attribute for a quarterback is poise - in the pocket, at the podium, in public.

"You have one of the best examples in the entire league right there with Aaron Rodgers," Miller said of the Packers' leader. "Came in behind a legend and I've never heard him not be appropriate, how he handles himself, how he carries himself. That tells me he's a smart guy, and he has a tremendous amount of poise."

The quarterback has to walk and talk like a CEO, said Lippincott. He's the face of the team.

"You want to see if he can dominate a room," said Lippincott. "Boomer Esiason could go in to a room of kindergartners, and he'd be comfortable. And you could take him in to a room full of United States senators, and he'd be comfortable.

"We have never had another leader like Boomer. When you talk about teaching leadership, I think the good Lord has to make his contribution, yes, I do. But I think that you can teach leadership skills. And we've had players here that we tried to make leaders - and they just did not want to be leaders."

Thompson said leaders can be born and made, but all quarterbacks have to lead.

"It's hard to quantify because being Peyton Manning is different than being Tom Brady," Thompson said. "They're both marvelous players. Joe Montana was a certain way. Drew Brees is a certain way. But I bet if you got to the core, if you cut through all the other stuff, you'd see some of the same qualities."

**Running backs:** Running backs feel the same obligations to the team, but their careers are so short-lived - they take a pounding - that the focus is to attack or be attacked. The late great Walter Payton was the hammer, not the nail.

So behind the subdued, off-the-field personality is someone else on game day.

"Then you turn the switch on because you have a bull's-eye on your back," said former Packers running back Edgar Bennett, who is now the team's receivers coach. "They're survivor skills.

"When you're driving down Lombardi Avenue, the leaves are changing, it's Sunday and you turn in to that gate, you know you're heading into a situation where you're going to face 11 guys trying to rip your head off."

**Receivers:** The receiver can relate to the running back's confrontational nature. But there's something else that gives a 195-pound man the nerve to run into the middle of the freeway, leap skyward, stretch out and leave himself totally vulnerable.

"My wife" Packers veteran Donald Driver says, 'You're not scared of anything,' said. He shrugs his shoulders, which look small without pads.

"What if somebody came up to me with a gun? That happened before. I wasn't scared then, I'm not scared now. And that's how you have to play receiver. Fearless."

Receivers are the motley crew. Supremely confident. The best trash-talkers. Some are anxious. Some are tougher than others.

When Arnold Mandell conducted personality profiling of the San Diego Chargers in the 1970s, he said: "The wide receiver is a very special human being. He shares many features with actors and movie stars. He's narcissistic, vain and basically a loner."

All are dependent on the quarterback to make them look good. But Driver believes in that singular required trait of the best of them.

"They all have something that makes them not be afraid," Driver said. "Or, they'll have a grudge. Anquan Boldin tries to run people over. He's not running from you. He's running at you. It's something he's been through. Maybe when he was growing up people always messed with him."

**Kickers:** Gary Zauner, 60, coached in the NFL for years and now works independently with kickers in Arizona. He said some the best kickers he's known - Ryan Longwell, Adam Vinatieri, Kevin Butler, Jan Stenerud - were mentally tough.

"You know the doctor who maybe doesn't have the best bedside manner? And you still don't care, as long as the guy can operate?" Zauner said. "I want a kicker who doesn't get too excited, who doesn't ride too many highs or lows, who makes the kick. And it helps to have a little amnesia. If you're worried about the last kick, you're not going to make the next.

"Ryan Longwell once said all these young kickers were so much better than him now, physically. The difference, he said, was that he knew he was going to make the kick."

## The studies

These anecdotes suggest personality traits must have something to do with success on the field. But the science isn't there yet to back it up clinically, at least not in absolute terms.

But there is one study credited with providing the best start at identifying the pro football player personality.

The CPP Inc. study titled "Personality Profiles of North American Professional Football Players" and conducted by Nancy A. Schaubhut, David A.C. Donnay and Richard C. Thompson surveyed 812 football players drafted between 2002 and 2005. The questions probed their feelings and behaviors in an attempt to determine traits such as neuroticism, anxiety, extroversion, dominance, assertiveness, sensitivity, conscientiousness and agreeableness.

All the players scored high in leadership and positive self concepts and low in sensitivity and flexibility or the ability to adapt, said Greg Chertok, director of sport psychology at the Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation Center in New Jersey.

Quarterbacks scored higher than any other position in traits such as dominance.

"They're going to be more outgoing, they're going to be really confident and they're going to want to influence other people to help achieve goals," Chertok said. "They're captains. They score high on leadership; that's someone who is ambitious, sets lofty goals, someone who is energetic. But I think most importantly it's someone who is poised, who has control of that energy."

Chertok works with football players who are training for the scouting combine and pro timing days. They come to him to work on their mental focus and energy as much as their weight training. Chertok said the study reflected a lot of the same traits he saw in the field.

"Running backs, who tended to be low on a lot of the qualities, scored the highest on sensitivity," Chertok said. "Kickers and punters are going to conform the easiest. They score the highest on empathy. They're very understanding of people's feelings. And amicability. They're the friendliest and probably most similar to the layperson."

Defensive linemen had some of the lower scores.

"Like on self-control, which, a defensive tackle doesn't really need a whole lot of self-control," Chertok said. "And defensive tackles are going to score lower on things like independent thinking. I'm not insinuating anything. A defensive tackle doesn't need the level of independent thinking that a quarterback does."

Chertok warned, however, that these statistical differences were minuscule.

Psychologist David Coppel, a Madison native who handles head-related injuries for the Seattle Seahawks, also cautioned that the study did not correlate the football player's

personality with his performance. There's also no accounting for cultural influences, ethnic diversities or the player who gives the answer he thinks the coach wants to hear.

"I've heard enough about interviews before the draft," Coppel said. "They're going to do socially desirable responding. Are they being forthright? Are they being defensive? Is confidence a personality trait? You've given me permission to use stereotypes, but I'm hesitant to do that."

Everyone agrees with that point. Still, studying character traits helps the Packers work with their employees, and they have been testing their players on personality traits since at least 1992. Packers director of college scouting John Dorsey is active in this role by using tests and interviewing players.

The tests are helpful, but he said there are a great number of student-athletes coming out of college who can't read. That affects their Wonderlic score, but it might not accurately depict the player's intelligence, method of learning or work ethic. So Dorsey has his own test equivalent.

But tests aren't enough. Dorsey also said he strongly considers things such as societal factors in figuring out a player.

"Alcoholism, bipolar depression, learning disabilities, ADHD. Each one of those specific types of disabilities will carry over to a person," Dorsey said. "I'm sure there's a certain percentage of players that have varying degrees of these types of things. We've probably found one of the best tests in terms of helping us not to specifically label somebody but at least to throw up a flag to do deeper study in case it does come up.

"We turn rocks over. But tests alone are not the sole determining factor of a person, now, because I can sit down with a person for 10 minutes and kind of walk away and tell you exactly what he's all about."

### **Gut feelings**

Sometimes when it comes to personality, Thompson's gut tells him more than any tests or studies ever will.

The Packers GM evaluates players when he watches practice. Thompson said he's not only looking at how players are working and whether they're playing well, but also at their body language and how they're interacting.

"I like to watch to see if people integrate themselves with each other and are involved with each other. I think those are qualities about being a teammate that's very important in a professional league especially.

"I'm looking to see if they're enjoying themselves. Some people, the minute they step on a practice field they're talking and yelling and telling jokes and having a good time. That doesn't necessarily mean they're a good player, but you can tell that the guy loves to play. And loves to practice. And some people are quiet, but they're intense and competitive and they want to do good. I think being a good teammate is an important thing for me. There are a lot of different ways you can do that.

"We bring guys in here to work them out, and we try to project: Does the guy act like a quarterback? So much of what we do is sort of a gut call. You evaluate talent, and at some point, you begin to look at the person and what you envision his role and impact in the locker room would be. And how he would be on the sideline during a game.

"I do what I do, but I can't prove it, you know? I can't say there's A and then there's B and then C. And then D. And if you don't have them all in order, it doesn't work. I don't do it like that.

"But when you see it, you see."