

Dominate with eight: A concept that will build a championship caliber defense

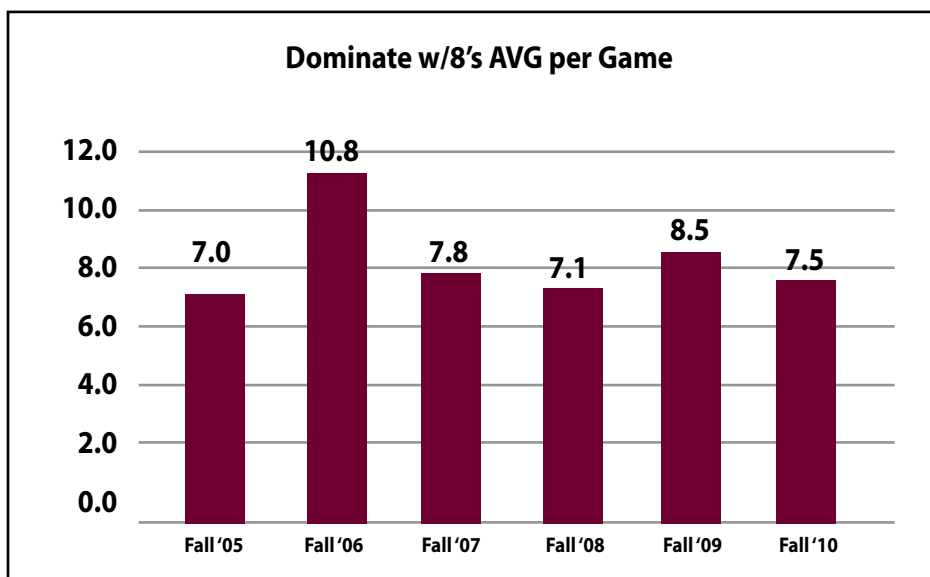
By Doug Stanton and Shane Minske

All of us have heard the adage that defense wins championships. Every defensive coach emphasizes the importance of creating a team identity associated with playing tough and smart. Winning championships at the conference, section, and state levels are goals written on the whiteboard of every locker room in high school sports. When setting goals, we know the importance of beginning with the end in mind and striving to achieve goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely. The lip service paid to the pursuit of winning championships is well intentioned, but ultimately the path to success requires getting our athletes to be students of the game and to clearly understand the key points to success on defense.

Although winning a state title has eluded the Lakeville South football program, we are very proud of earning a share of one conference title, winning four section titles, and earning one advancement to a state championship final since our program began in the fall of 2005. There are many factors that have contributed to our program's success, but we believe none have been more important to our defense than the concept we call "Dominate with Eight."

This philosophy is based on how many times a defense can accomplish eight instances of any of the following during a game:

- 3 and out
- Interception/Fumble recovery
- Block punt/kick
- Punt return of 20+ yards
- Kickoff stop inside the 20



- Defensive score
- Defensive stop on 4th down/2-point conversion
- Surrender less than 14 points

The Dominate with Eight concept simply promotes the idea that if a defense can force eight key defensive situations, the opportunity of winning a football game is greatly increased. As we have analyzed our program at Lakeville South, it came as no surprise to our staff when the statistics revealed that the year our program earned the most "Eights" was in state-runner up season in 2006 (see graph). While the other seasons do not match the level of 2006, statistically they show an average of forcing at least seven instances each game. The games we won in each of those seasons were games we achieved at least eight instances from the Dominate with Eight list. The games we lost, were the games we didn't accomplish the eight defensive

situations. Is this coincidence – we don't believe so.

Since the inception of the Dominate with Eight philosophy, we have determined our players have been able to more clearly understand and appreciate the key points that make a successful defense. Articulation of the Dominate with Eight strategy has allowed our coaching staff to educate our players in situational defense and turn them into believers. We have seen a transformation in their focus from the pursuit of personal achievement to a more collective, "band of brothers" mentality. Players have become more motivated to achieve defensive situational success.

Take the three-and-out situation as an example. This should be the most frequently achieved situation from game to game. Having your players understand just how important it is to force three-

and-outs (hopefully four or more a game) you also incorporate other aspects of the game like 3rd down conversion rates and situational awareness - expectations on what teams might run and when. Additionally, defensive stops on fourth down are not only emotionally uplifting, but they are also statically significant. Defenses that hold an offense on fourth down simply win more games. What it comes down to is that you are creating smarter football players who are thinking more than just tackle the ball carrier. To mention one more example, one very emotionally difficult situation is getting defensive players to maintain focus and tenacity after surrendering a touchdown. The Dominate with Eight mentality can help players appreciate the value of blocking an extra point or stopping a two-point conversion. The coaching point of emphasis is simple math, if our team scores two touchdowns and converts each extra point and our opponent scores two touchdowns and converts only one of their extra point opportunities, we win. This can reduce the burden on the players to be perfect and motivates them to appreciate the little things that often get taken for granted.

Dominate with Eight also places a tangible importance on special teams. One example can be found on the punt return team. Striving to get a 20-plus yard return is an expectation of our defense every time out. We have found that members of the unit challenge themselves – and each other - to initiate the pressure, release to their alignment on the return, and hold their blocks just long enough to allow the returner to pick up twenty yards. Granted, not every kicked ball is returnable, however we have seen time and again on film that had the ball been returnable, the players were in position to get a 20-plus return.

Yes, it's true that every team places a certain amount of emphasis on special teams, but you know you've got it when players will come up to you after a kickoff that's been stuffed at the 15 yard line yelling "Another eight! Another eight!" This gets us thinking, are those players running down the field on that kickoff



The 2010 Cougars celebrating their Section 1AAAAA Championship

team with a little more motivation and determination? It might make the difference. As commonly found with the special teams, these are typically your non-starters so what a way for them to contribute to the "Eights" and feel more like a contributor.

The Dominate with Eight has transformed our defensive emphasis and communication with our players. It has helped us convince the players of the emphasis on team statistics rather than individual performance. It has made our players more situationally aware and motivated to pay closer attention to details that ultimately lead to more consistent execution and performance. Goal setting has become more specific, measurable, and realistic. The Dominate with Eight system has helped make our defense championship caliber – it could very well do the same for yours.