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This Coach Helps the Best to Hit Their Stride

Doug Blevins has taught some of the best kickers in the NFL how to achieve and maintain peak performance -- even though he's never kicked a football (or even walked). Sometimes those who can't really do teach.

From: [Issue 38](#) | August 2000 | Page 48 | **By:** Todd Shapera

Doug Blevins rolls onto the Miami Dolphins' practice field near Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He is an odd sight amid the grunting, 300-pound linemen and the jackrabbit receivers. Sunburned and seated in a wheelchair done up in Dolphin orange and teal, a stopwatch hanging from his neck, Blevins is no football player. Clearly, though, he belongs.

This fall, Blevins, 37, is entering his fourth season as the Dolphins' kicking coach. This is remarkable enough, since only one other team in the National Football League (the Dallas Cowboys) retains such a specialist. But here's the real kicker: Blevins himself has never attempted a field goal. He's never punted for any team, on any level, let alone in the NFL. Born with cerebral palsy, he has, in fact, never even walked.

Those who can't, teach, the saying goes. But Blevins has built a career on turning that disdainful aphorism on its head, and in the unlikeliest of trades. The coach in the wheelchair takes raw athletes -- kids with mule-strong legs -- and turns them into NFL stars. Top kickers Leo Araguz of the Oakland Raiders and Adam Vinatieri of the New England Patriots have both hit their stride with the help of Doug Blevins. And last year, under Blevins's tutelage, Dolphins kicker Olindo Mare became one of the league's best, booting a record 39 field goals and converting 85% of his attempts.

In the competitive world of professional sports, the challenge for any coach is to get the best to do better. But trainers in every business can learn from Blevins's teaching techniques. He breaks each motion down to its component parts, then squeezes out incremental but critical improvements. And he knows just how much he can change in a player -- and when he should leave well enough alone. "Olindo knows he can come to me to pinpoint the small things, and he knows I won't just try to change him for the sake of changing him," Blevins says.

But what works for the 5-foot-10-inch Mare, who has terrific speed, may be slightly different from what works for someone like the Oakland Raiders' powerful Joe Nedney, the 6-foot-5-inch former Dolphin

who led Miami in scoring in 1996. That's why Blevins tailors his lesson plan to suit the individual student. "He looks into every person and takes every person in their own way," says Danish soccer player Johnny Pedersen, who has moved to Florida to train with Blevins in hopes of kicking in the NFL.

Once the plan is in place, Blevins drills unforgivingly on technique and works to give players what he calls the "positive arrogance" they need to excel. "Doug can make you feel invincible," says the Baltimore Ravens' Kyle Richardson, another Blevins disciple, who made his NFL debut with Miami in 1997. "He can help you feel so mentally dominant that you go out there and do things that you didn't feel you could."

Obsessed with football since childhood ("The only thing I wanted to do was coach in the National Football League," he says), Blevins knows something about mental strength. In 1986, when he was a student at East Tennessee State University, he wheeled himself into the head coach's office and landed a student-assistant position. The next year, he won an athletic scholarship. To break into the NFL, he blitzed then -- New York Jets general manager Dick Steinberg with faxes detailing the flaws of Cary Blanchard, the Jets' placekicker at the time. Steinberg, who was a tough football man by any standard, hired Blevins as a consultant in 1994.

Now Blevins's grateful pupils are scattered throughout the league, and each one marvels at the passion and dedication of a man who will never play the game. "He is so precise on the fundamental part of it, so sound," says Adam Vinatieri. "But every time he goes out on the field, he is the most excited, slap-you-in-the-head, fired-up coach."

Olindo Mare, a quiet sort, doesn't talk much about his coach's influence. He does say that on the sidelines, when the game is on the line, Blevins feeds him analysis that helps him adjust his mechanics from kick to kick. But there's something more. Mare pauses, considering his mentor's journey. "I haven't told him this," Mare says. "But his life provides a whole different level of motivation for me on the field."

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Sidebar: Field Goals

When it comes to being a great coach, the game may change, but the rules are still the same. Here's a page from the playbook of Doug Blevins.

1. Understand the game in obsessive detail. "A kicker can miss for a thousand different reasons -- the position of his head, shoulder, or arms, or the number and length of his strides to the ball," Blevins says.
2. Understand, analyze, and develop all of your players' individual strengths.

3. Don't try to change people. Instead, work to improve them.
4. When there's no margin for error, be a perfectionist. Demand continued improvement from your players.
5. Inject game-on-the-line pressure into every practice. Every kick counts.
6. Pace your players. Don't have them kick so many balls early in the season that their legs wear out.
7. Technical and mental competencies build on each other.
8. Develop chemistry with each of your players.
9. Believing that you can be the best, and sacrificing to be the best, will motivate your players by example.
10. Losers always allow for excuses; winners always perform. Says Blevins: "Great players and great teams walk with a swagger."



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