

DIRECTIONS: Write notes to the right margin (10), Underline important points (10), Circle things that you need clarification on (10), Write a summary, 2 to 3 sentences (10), Question for discussion (10).

Shrink on the Seahawks' Sideline

The Super Bowl Champs Swear by a Sports Psychologist

By **MATTHEW FUTTERMAN**, Jan. 27, 2015

For most of the last two seasons, the Seattle Seahawks have been the most physically prepared team in the NFL, a collection of perfectly honed athletes that can outrun and outmuscle opponents at will.

The Seahawks' secret weapon, though, just might be the team's willingness to give a sports psychologist the freedom to roam the training facility, locker room and even the sidelines every game, to make sure their heads are as sound as their bodies.

For nearly three seasons, Michael Gervais has spent three days a week with the team, instilling what he and coach Pete Carroll refer to as "relationship-based coaching." In the simplest terms, this means making sure coaches and players all understand each other on the deepest possible level, so that everyone feels valued and can communicate effectively.

"We are an incredibly mindful team," said Tom Cable, the Seahawks' offensive line and assistant head coach, using an adjective that rarely comes across the lips of an NFL coach. "If I can understand someone like (guard) James Carpenter at a higher and deeper level, then I reach him further in terms of getting him to be the best he can be."

This sort of pursuit isn't new to the sports world. Sports figures have long aspired to what is commonly referred to as "mindfulness"—an ability to perform without worrying about what has just happened or what might happen next. The Seahawks also are hardly the first team to give players access to a shrink. But Cable and defensive line coach Travis Jones, who have more than four decades of college and pro coaching between them, say they have never seen a team listen so intently to someone like Gervais, a former competitive surfer based in Marina del Ray, Calif.

What has made Gervais the sports psychologist of the moment, working with clients as varied as the Seahawks, beach volleyball star Kerri Walsh Jennings and space-diver Felix Baumgartner, is an approach that emphasizes the root causes of an athlete's anxiety, whether it is domestic troubles or a bad relationship with a parent.

"We want to invite the lion into the room and learn how to pet him," Gervais said in an interview last week. "Our mind is easily distracted by thoughts and sounds and smells, and when our mind is distracted, we decrease our ability to perform. We need to get better at being present, and you can be present by understanding and deepening the insight about who we are and how our mind works."

Through her sessions with Gervais, Walsh learned how conflicted she was about trying to balance volleyball with motherhood. When she was training she felt like she was neglecting her young children. When she was with her children, she felt like she should have been training. Gervais taught her to understand and embrace the challenges of being a working mother.

Baumgartner, who broke the sound barrier when he jumped out of capsule 25 miles above the earth in 2012, suffered from such intense claustrophobia while preparing for the jump that even the sight of his space suit and helmet caused him to hyperventilate. Gervais helped him understand that relying on the team of



scientists and trainers helping to plan the jump was a struggle for someone who usually performed stunts on his own.

“We are a relationship-based club,” Carroll said Tuesday. “In Mike I found a guy I could see eye-to-eye with.”

Gervais and Carroll met through a mutual friend in 2011, and Gervais began spending substantial time with the Seahawks the following season. During a typical week, he arrives Saturday, and is with the team throughout dinner and the pre-game meetings. He is there when players arrive at the stadium, with them on the sidelines throughout the game, and again all day Monday when they are reviewing what happened. He doesn’t have an office at the end of some hallway, or make therapy appointments. He floats around and talks to coaches and players about their lives and their endeavors.

“It’s the most fascinating culture I have ever been able to witness,” Gervais said of the Seahawks. “There is a relentless approach to the idea that relationships matter.”

Matter more, in fact, than results, at least to him and the coaching staff, which has come to view outcomes as a byproduct of their approach rather than an end.

Gervais said he tries to de-emphasize results when he speaks to athletes, who live in the ultimate outcome-oriented world. The danger, he says, is when athletes allow those results to define them. Let that go, he tells them, because there is no outcome that can possibly define who a person is. “It’s one blip on the 20,000 days you are alive,” he says. “Life is a collection of moments. It’s not possible for one moment to define a person.”

Jones, the defensive line coach, said he didn’t know exactly what to think of Gervais when he arrived at the Seahawks last season, because he had never encountered a psychologist so deeply involved with a team’s activities. Soon though, Gervais was talking him through all of the thoughts that were going through the minds of Jones’s players in the seconds before the ball was snapped—the previous play, the play call, the cadence of the snap count and so on.

“We talked about how I react and communicate in critical situations, how do I relate to my players, how I can slow my heartbeat down,” Jones said. “That’s stuff that is going to help you in any profession.”

To that end, Gervais and Carroll have formed a consulting venture to bring their relationship-based coaching philosophy to the corporate world. Boeing, which has its commercial airplane manufacturing base in the Seattle area, and San Francisco-based tech company Zynga have already hired them.

“There is the overt objective and need to have the organization achieve,” Gervais said. “Some organizations sell widgets and some, like the Seahawks, sell outcomes, and the foundation of a great outcome is a relationship.”

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The Gervais & Carroll consulting venture is called WinForever. <http://winforever.com>

SUMMARY:

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION: