

Huffines Institute of Sports Medicine and Human Performance

145 – Mark Hagen, Texas A&M Football

- S1 00:08 From the beautiful campus of Texas A&M University. The Sydney and J.L. Huffines Institute for Sports Medicine and Human Performance in the Department of Health and Kinesiology, brings you the Sports Medicine Podcast. Our mission is to make sense of and connect the science practice and application of the latest finding in sports medicine and human performance to the real world. Here's our host, the director of the Huffines Institute, Doctor Tim Lightfoot.
- S2 00:33 Hello and welcome to the weekly edition of the Huffines Institute for Sports Medicine and Human Performance Podcast. I'm your host, Tim Lightfoot. And we're so grateful that you took the time to download us, and you're joining us today. Every week we bring you an interesting person from the world of sports medicine, human performance, and sometimes general health as well. And today's no exception. We have coach Mark Hagen with us today. Welcome to the podcast Mark.
- S3 00:54 Great to be here Tim. Appreciate the opportunity to come online and a chat with you a little bit.
- S2 01:00 Well, we're glad to have you and let me tell the audience a little bit about you, so they know why you're here. So, far it's still a mystery. Mark has a Bachelor's in Marketing, and a Master's in Sports Marketing Management from Indiana University. He is currently the Texas A&M linebackers coach for the football team. He was one of-- named as one of the nations top recruiters twice by rivals.com. Nice award, congratulations.
- S3 01:27 It's always good publicity but as I've come to find out, recruiting is often times a group effort and Texas A&M, the staff here with coach someone is no different.
- S2 01:37 Super. So, Mark was a four year football letter winner when he played for Indiana and was named the second team all big ten linebacker in 1990 and '91. He was team captain as a senior and was a Copper Bowl defensive MVP that season. And so we're just-- we're gonna talk about football and linebackers.
- S3 01:54 Sounds great.
- S2 01:55 About time for spring training.
- S3 01:57 Oh yeah. Right around the corner.
- S2 01:58 Right around the corner. Yeah. So, let's start off, why did you become a coach?
- S3 02:02 Tim, I love football. I've been around football most of my life. I started playing in third grade. I actually lived in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. That's kind of where the seed was planted. I started playing at young age. Loved it. Obviously, felt like football was really good to me through the years. Grew up and made it through high school, won a State Championship. Was fortunate to go onto college and play for a wonderful individual by the name of Bill Mallory in Indiana. Taught me about as much about the game of football as he did about the game of life.

S3 02:35 Like a lot of young guys, I wanted to continue playing and maybe take that next step to the professional level. What I soon found out, it's a business once you get to the upper echelon of college ball, you get into pro ball, it's a business. I was a bad investment. I had three back operations when I played. I had a shoulder that really need a re-constructive surgery after my senior year, so there weren't many people that looked at me as a very good investment even though I had a pretty good career my estimation in Indiana.

S3 03:09 So, I had make some decisions again I was a marketing major in Indiana so I had a strong degree, but I wasn't ready to walk away from the sport football. And I know a lot of guys talk about that growing up. I know I've always wanted to coach. I wasn't that guy, and I loved playing but when the playing days came to an end I wasn't ready to walk away. And felt like I could give something back through my years of playing as a coach and I could put those people skills to use as a coach going out recruiting. People said, How are you going to use your business degree in coaching? Well, selling, selling whatever school I was working for.

S2 03:52 It's marketing.

S3 03:52 It is marketing. It's people skills, it's going out selling your school, your university, your brand, your football program. And so I jumped into it. What I found out early on, it's a tough business to get into. Back in the early 90s after I graduated, GA positions, which is the typical way a lot of young guys get into college coaching, those GA positions were cut down from five to two. They were trying to save some money.

S2 04:19 Was that by NCAA rule?

S3 04:20 It was an NCAA rule. So, right when I was coming out again there was J spots across the country that were being slashed, so I actually started off in Indiana in our weight room for a semester as a GA. And then in the early days of football operations positions, director football operations positions, we had an administrative assistant role or job there at Indiana. Which again in the early days of the football ops jobs that came open, so I had to make a choice then. Do I go on the staff, or try to go on the staff full time and get paid as a recent grad? Or go the GA route? So, I decided to become the Director of Football Operations in Indiana, which was Bill Mallard's Administrative Assistant.

S2 05:07 Now, what does that person do? We're hearing more and more about that kind of position now and people are kind of unfamiliar with what that position does.

S3 05:15 That role typically is kind of the nuts and bolts of the program. A lot of times that individual kind of handles the business end of things with the football program. Oftentimes, he might be the head coaches right-hand man. You're really involved with the budget, the team travel, things of that nature, the inner workings of the program. What a lot of bigger schools have gone to, is really two people in that role. In fact, Justin Moore and Gary Reynolds were both football ops guys with the Texas A&M football program. Justin's more of the big picture, the budget, the travel, things of that nature. Gary's more of the player personnel, all the inner workings, the day to day inner workings with our players.

S3 06:03 So, that's kind of how that job has grown through the years - very, very important position - and it's something that I did for three years. But at the

same time I knew I still wanted to take that next step as a coach, and being heavily involved like I was with the Indiana staff I knew-- I was hopeful that it was just a matter of time before I got that opportunity. And the first coaching job came about when Joe Novak who was my position coach in Indiana - also the defensive coordinator in Indiana - got the head job at Northern Illinois back in December of '95. And so, Joe was grateful enough to give me an opportunity as a young coach to go with him to Dekalb, Illinois, and I've been doing it ever since.

S2 06:47 And I think that's what people don't recognize. You see the coaches walking on the sideline, and they hear about the salaries that the top head coaches-- and they miss at least my observation of the tough road it is to get there.

S3 06:59 Oh, it is. That first job, I mean, I was maybe making thirty thousand dollars as an assistant coach, so salaries have certainly come a long way. But you've got to pay your dues. I mean, it's like anything else, you don't just-- there are some guys that are a fast track, you know, to a head coach position but a lot of people, you know, you start at the bottom--

S2 07:21 As a GA [laughter].

S3 07:22 As a GA, sometimes even sooner than that as a student assistant. And so you work your way up. You develop relationships, it's like most jobs out there, it's who you know, get your foot in the door and then try to work your way up as best you can. I've been fortunate to work for some great individuals, from Joe Novak in Northern Illinois. Four years later, Joe Tiller offered me a job to come on his staff at Purdue. And it's kind of funny, being an Indiana grad, I don't know how many of your listeners are familiar with the Big Ten but Indiana and Purdue feel the same way about each other, kind of like Texas A&M and Texas, they don't like each other a whole lot. As an IU grad when I took that job at Purdue, there were people on both sides at Purdue and Indiana that were kind of looking at me like what are you doing.

S2 08:12 You did not get any harassment at all.

S3 08:14 No, no, none at all. I think I got some harassment from the IU folks and then the Purdue people were probably looking at Joe Tiller like what are doing hiring a IU guy, but again these positions are so tough to get into that was an opportunity for me to move up in the coaching ranks. To go from an assistant in the Mid American conference to an assistant position in the Big Ten. You're not going--

S2 08:43 You can't turn that down.

S3 08:44 I'm not going to turn that down. Absolutely not. We moved to West Lafayette. At the time it was my wife, Denise, and I and our four-year-old, Abby. Not once did I think that we would be in West Lafayette, Indiana for eleven years, but they were eleven wonderful years. That first year in 2000 that's when Coach Sumner had an opportunity to work together for the first time. We were on an unbelievable team. Purdue won the Big Ten championship. They were led by a great quarterback much like A&M has been led the last couple of years by Johnny Manziel. Drew Brees was our quarterback and we were fortunate enough to win a Big Ten championship, go play in the Rose Bowl and that's something I'll never forget.

S2 09:25 Another quarterback that defied stereotypes.

S3 09:27 Absolutely.

S2 09:28 And continues to.

S3 09:29 Absolutely. He and Johnny are very similar just because of how competitive they are. They certainly are different types of guys and different types of quarterbacks. We don't need to debate the inner workings of both those guys but both outstanding, competitive quarterbacks. Obviously, Drew is a lot further in his career than Johnny is, but I say they are both two of the most unbelievable guys I have ever been around in terms of the game of football.

S2 10:00 You mentioned something a few minutes ago that is consistent no matter who sits in that chair and we talk to, about how they got to where they are, and it is the network that they developed. Very few people walk in the door and no one knows them, and they get the job. So, it's whether it's coaching or science or any other person we've talked to, is been about the network.

S3 10:20 Absolutely.

S2 10:20 That's one of the things that we continue to talk to our students about, it's who you know, you've got to meet people.

S3 10:25 You do, and sometimes that's uncomfortable for people. I know I'm the type of person that likes to keep to myself sometimes, do my job, worry about myself, and my wife gets on me all the time, 'Hey, you got to get out there and go say hello, or whatever.' That's something that always hasn't come natural for me, but you're absolutely right, it's who you know in this business. Because I think when head coaches are looking to fill a spot on their staff, they're going to go with somebody that they know, that they trust, that they're comfortable with and you might, you know, there might be some great candidates out there that come highly recommended, but I've seen it too much and too often where head coaches are hesitant because they don't know somebody. They pass on them.

S2 11:14 Yeah. So, you want people to know you?

S3 11:16 Absolutely. Very, very important.

S2 11:18 Let's talk a little bit about your specialty and that's the linebacker's coach. It's interesting to me that-- it seems to me, and again I'm just an observer, that some of the changes in the game, especially the college game over the last five years really are changing the role of the linebacker.

S3 11:33 You got that right, Tim. I think the game has changed a lot through the years. It's different, you know, when I was in school and especially in the Big Ten, it was 3 yards and a cloud of dust, a lot of 2 back tied in, two wide receivers, I mean, not very exotic in terms of formation as it is now. Just look at what we do here at Texas A&M, we spread people out from sideline to sideline. A quarterback now is much more involved, or can be, in the offense in terms of running the football, depends on who that guy is, but certainly that's a big part of the game. Traditional roles of linebackers kind of being in the core of the formation - it's different. Sometimes you're spread out, and so it's a different game and it's a different mindset. It's a much more difficult position I think to play nowadays than it was certainly 15, 20 years ago.

S3 12:31 Number one, you've got to have great athletes out there that can run sideline to sideline, but yet they still have to be big enough, and strong enough, and physical enough to step up and do what linebackers do, and that's tackle and make plays out there. So you're looking for very unique individuals that can do

all those things and at the same time be smart enough to pick up what you're teaching on defense. And that's the other thing that I've seen is offenses have become more complex and spread out and the defensive packages are things that we asked them to do, are much larger more expensive than they've ever been. So, it's not just throw this great athlete out there and let him run around and make plays. I mean there's a lot that goes into it and it's a much more difficult position to play today than it was like I said 15, 20 years ago.

S2 13:23 You know and I think one of the unfortunate stereotypes is that athletes are not really bright and when I hear that I challenge people. It's like well okay look at the modern college football playbook, that's incredibly complex. Whether you're on the offensive side of defensive side of the ball. That you can't be a not bright individual and still play football successfully.

S3 13:46 Absolutely. Absolutely. I know our playbook isn't shrinking. That's a fine line as a coach. You want to go into a game with enough ammunition you know, to stack up against these high powered offenses, but you also don't want to overload your players so much that they're out there thinking because when the ball's snapped they need to be reacting to what they're seeing, not thinking. It's going to slow you down, so you might have a linebacker out there that runs a 40 in a 4:5 or 4:6, but if he's thinking when the ball's snapped now he's really operating like a guy that runs maybe a 4:8 or a 4:9 and people sit up there and wonder, 'Well, how can that happen? This guy's this great athlete and yet he looks a step slow. Well, he's confused.' That's our role as coaches, to navigate that fine line - how much is too much? How much can these guys handle? It's our job to coach them up during the week and get them to go out there and play fast.

S2 14:45 Yeah, it seems like so much of the offensive strategy I hear now is centered around trying to make the linebackers commit, one way or the other. How do you coach against that? I'm amazed when I watch-- I say kids. When I'm watch these young men play. The reaction that they have to just whether it's going to be a run or a pass, and it's a lot of the stuff that's coming over the middle. I mean, how do you coach that?

S3 15:11 Well, again, it takes reps, it takes film study and that's one area I think, our guys, because we're such a young position, we can get a lot better at it, it's just the video study throughout the week. Looking at things that you're opponent does, from the games that they've already played. And, try and give yourself an edge, try to give yourself a pre-snap edge, as I call it. Things that you know, you know what their personnel grouping is on the field. Do they have two backs or one back? Is there four wide receivers or is there a tight end with three wides?

S3 15:46 There's certain things you know from a personnel standpoint that down a distance, but then it's out-- how they line up, the formations that they line up in. Was there a tendency that we've been able to come up with during the week that tells us, hey they like maybe these couple of things out of the formation, then before the ball snapped, it's reading those linemen that we have our eyes-- we're not just totally fixated on those linemen, we want to see the backfield, the quarterback in the back. We've got to have vision through those linemen, because a lot of times when those guys are pulling, when they're pass setting, their stance is a lot different than when they're run blocking.

S2 16:24 So, just look at the feet when they line up.

- S3 16:25 Well you look at their feet, you look at their-- where they-- how much pressure they put on their hand, if they're in a three point stance, how big the split is, is it wide, is it narrow? Is that lineman deep? Is he crowding the line of scrimmage? I mean there are so many things and the guys that are more experienced, I mean they can process all that information a lot faster than maybe a young player. That's where some of the-- I think the issues for us came into play last year was playing some of the young guys. We didn't have a lot of older guys, a lot of senior leadership for those guys to lean on, so those guys were constantly swimming, you know, upstream a little bit and that's going to change. Like I said, that's going to change because we're more experienced, we're bigger, we're stronger, we're faster, and our guys will continue to grow.
- S2 17:17 Have you seen some of-- I've seen some of the chatter about maybe the linebacker position is becoming more of an almost a nickleback position. I think I've seen some defenses where they're running a couple linebackers and they're running the nickle package a whole lot, a bunch of defensive backs. Do you think that's going to be a trend that continues or do you think that-- and I guess that along with that I guess is the play-- the changing physical dimension of some of these linebackers because it seems that their characteristics are changing a bit.
- S3 17:46 I think so. You know, we played a lot of nickel last year. Part of that was because of the teams that we were playing, you know, they're not giving us maybe a lot of two backs, it was more one back with a tight end? and multiple wide receivers. We just feel the match ups are better by having an extra defense to back out there versus a third linebacker. Put that nickle out there, gives you five DB's, and take a linebacker off the field
- S3 18:10 But a lot of times it depends who that guy is, and sometimes if you get a hybrid-- and I'll throw out a name, a guy that we've talked about, for us Tommy Saunders. Tommy Saunders probably runs well enough to play safety for us. He's not the biggest linebacker in the world, in fact he's really not big at all compared to our other guys, but he's in that 215 to 220 range. We've talked about trying to maybe find a more defined role for him, because he is a bigger body guy that can play out in space, very athletic, like I said runs as well if not better than some of our safeties, but maybe trying to expand his role for us.
- S3 18:53 At the same time he's not what I would call an in the box linebacker, because he's not a real big guy. So, maybe he is that hybrid nickle slash outside linebacker guy that again you can play out in space more if you're playing some of these spread teams, gives you a little bit more of a punch out there in the perimeter versus a smaller nickleback, yet can run and do some things that our DBs do. But it's an interesting question, I say a lot of depends on the people you're going to come up and face week to week.
- S3 19:27 If you're playing an LSU that's going to be more traditional with the two backs and sometimes two tight ends, we're going to be in more of a base defense though. We're going to want that third line back there, that same linebacker out there. But the next week when you're playing Auburn, and they're giving you some 11 personnel groups and some four wide receiver looks, we're more apt to go to more of a nickle package and even our penny package for us, which has a fifth DB out there, but then takes a D lineman out and puts another linebacker. It's more of a 3:4 defensive look and coach Schneider's used that a bunch the last couple of years.

- S3 20:06 It allows us to disguise some of our books defensively, and be a little bit more unpredictable at times. Certainly, a chess match. Doesn't matter if you're here at Texas A&M or wherever-- Alabama-- wherever. You going to try to gain the upper hand by disguising things. Not letting the offense get a beat on what you're doing, and it's just becoming harder and harder. It seems like through the years the offense always comes up with a niche. And recently, it's been more of the uptempo stuff. It's where the game you got into a while ago, about the game evolving, quarterbacks, formation to spread out. It's a much more difficult and complex game than it used to be.
- S2 20:55 Speaking of the game evolving, there's been some recent-- these rules changes. They're proposing those rules changes about giving the defense ten seconds to substitute at the beginning of the play clock. What do you think about that? Do you think that's needed? I know one coach who has recently come out, and he's said his players safety because he's said he's concerned about his athletes that have sickle cell trait. We've written some blogs about how that doesn't hold up if you actually look at the numbers. What do you think about it? Do you think that's going to happen? Do you think that's a place we need to go or not go?
- S3 21:30 I don't think so. I think it's a great game. It'd be easy for me to say on defense, yeah give us that time.
- S2 21:36 Give you the extra time [chuckles].
- S3 21:37 Because that is difficult when you're playing teams, that go fast. I just look at it, the offense has always dictated the pace and that's part of your job on defense, is to be able to line up, and if they're going fast you teach your defensive guys to make a call, and get lined up. I'm for keeping the game the way it is. Certainly, I think most places have an element where they are going to go fast. And it just doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me if they are saying, well, we are going to have this ten second, but then at the end of the half, at the end of the game you can go into-- [laughter] well, those when-- at the end of the game is when people are going to be the most tired and the most fatigued, so that argument doesn't stand up a whole lot to me. But again, I'm not the one who is going to decide it, so--
- I just feel like it's a great game the way it is, and that's your job on defense. Whatever the offense is doing you've got the opportunity to line up and play when the ball snapped and do your job get off the field.
- S2 22:46 And if you are in good shape, good condition you should have no problem?
- S3 22:50 You shouldn't and again that's one area where I think we're ahead of curve is Larry Jackson does a great job with our program. That doesn't mean if we're out there 100 plays defensively our guys aren't going to be tired and fatigued. But I say, I think our guys, with the way that they're trained with Larry and his staff, our guys can get out there and play a full game and not run into some of the roadblocks that some of the proponents of the ten second rule are throwing out there.
- S2 23:23 Yeah. Frankly any defense that plays 100 plays in a game, they're gonna be tired.
- S3 23:27 They're gonna be tired. But again, people have talked about the fast paced offense, "Maybe it doesn't do you guys-- it doesn't help you guys out because they score so fast," or, "If they go three and out, you're right back out there."

But again, you've got the opportunity to go out and get off the field in three downs sometimes even faster if you can go out and force a turnover, so I don't buy into all the-- some of the numbers, some of the arguments out there that a fast paced, spread offense isn't conducive in terms of playing a good solid defense. I just I don't buy into it.

S2 24:06 Let's talk about the recruiting trail and let's I guess morph from that conversation into talking about recruiting. One of the things I've heard and I don't-- I'm going to ask you since you're one of the experts on this. Is that more attractive for the kids - the high school kids - to play in uptempo offense? That's what I've heard. The kids want to score and they want to have the opportunity to play.

S3 24:26 I think it's certainly something that they enjoy doing, especially if you're the skilled position - you're a wide receiver. They're getting the ball thrown to a bunch. But you can also sell it to your running backs, too, that it all bases on what your numbers look like and if you're still rushing the ball at a pretty good clip than you can get your top running backs to buy into that, too. But I think the success that we've had here with all of our positions on offense-- because the argument out there sometimes is, well, in that fast paced offense, they're not really developing you maybe as an offensive lineman, to the pro game. And again, I don't buy that. Again, you still, at the end of the day, you've got to run, block, you've got to pass, protect, you've got to do it all. But, I do, I think the wide open, the fast pace offenses, is something players like. Certainly, fans like it, because there's the opportunity to put a lot of points on the scoreboard.

S2 25:26 Nowadays, you see a game that's 7 to 3 and everybody goes, God, must have been a boring game. It might not have been.

S3 25:31 It might not have been, it might not have been. You know, I don't know what the final score was, but I know the Rose Bowl with Stanford and Michigan State was more of a defensive battle, more traditional football. And, I enjoy that too. I mean, I enjoy watching some teams maybe play some more of a traditional style. Something that I was accustomed to playing back in the day. There's still room for that, for me to enjoy. But, I think today's generation, the young guys coming up, really enjoy the faster pace, the more wide open offenses, and I think we're seeing that in recruiting as well.

S2 26:08 So, I don't want to ask any trade secrets, but I think there's this mystery around recruiting. And, when you go out as a recruiter, are you recruiting specifically for linebackers, or are you recruiting for all positions, or-- how do they make that up? Do they say, "Mark your part of the country is the Midwest, go enjoy yourself?"

S3 26:27 No, we have a primary area, and we're lucky here in Texas that we don't have to go far because, number one, Texas is so large, but football is very important down here in the state. Especially in the-- as kids grow up and get older, but then get into high school, they've got spring practice. So, they're really playing football year-round.

S2 26:47 Especially now with seven on seven.

S3 26:48 Absolutely. So, I mean it's a year-round deal down here in Texas so we all have, for the most part, most of our staff has a piece of Texas. We get over into Louisiana, we consider that our backyard as well. And so everybody on our staff



will have a primary area that you go into and evaluate and you're responsible for all the positions there and making sure the other guys on the staff - whether it's offensive line, quarterback, whatever - if there's a young man at that respective position that has a chance, you want to make sure that position coach gets the video, watches that young man, evaluates him. But then on the flip side, I'm going to go outside those boundaries and look nationally for linebackers, and so it's really those two areas-- I've got my area up in the Dallas, Fort Worth area with David Batie. I've got more Fort Worth and the surrounding suburban areas. David handles more Dallas, Arlington, just because of his ties. He was a high school coach up in that area, but that's my primary area, handle all the recruits in that area, but then nationally for linebackers.

S2 27:59 Interesting, interesting, so we're running out of time here and as we do with all of our guests we give them an opportunity for take home message. So, what do you want people to remember from this podcast?

S3 28:10 Well, number one, I appreciate the opportunity to come online with you and like I said, talk a little bit about myself and Texas A&M football. I would just tell the fans out there that just because we've got some great individual talent that's leaving the program, I think Texas A&M football has never been in stronger or in a brighter position than it is today. I think there's a lot to be excited about moving forward. We do start spring practice here in a couple days and I know our guys are anxious to get back out there. We're not gonna fall off the map just because of a few talented guys that are leaving the program. We've got a very young talent base within the program, a lot of young kids that are working hard and anxious to make their mark on Texas A&M football.

S3 28:58 So, that's one thing I love about Aggie land, about being here at Texas A&M here in College Station. This is a very, very unique place. Number one, it's a great University, and I think the people that are associated with it - whether you're a former student, or just a resident down in here, maybe that just has decided to come down to this area and live and retire, whatever it might be. The people down here are passionate about Texas A&M, about their Aggies. And that's fun from my perspective, from our perspective being on staff, because Kyle Field on a Saturday afternoon or Saturday night is a very, very unique place. And it's going to be even stronger here moving forward with the renovation that's going on. I appreciate everybody's support, and all that they've done to keep the Aggies on top, continue to support us. The future is bright and gig 'em.

S2 29:53 Mark, thank you so much for being with us today. Appreciate it.

S3 29:56 Tim, thank you.

S2 29:57 And I want to thank all of you that are listening for taking the time to download us and listen. And regular listeners of the podcast will know that this is the time when we have the podcast question of the week. And here with the podcast question of the week is Danielle.

S4 30:11 During Coach Hagen's time as a coach at Purdue University, who was the quarterback that helped lead the team to a Big Ten Championship?

S2 30:19 Excellent podcast question. Be the first one to email us that response to [huffinespodcast@hlkn.tamu.edu](mailto:huffinespodcast@hlkn.tamu.edu) and you'll win one of those what we call our nifty podcast tee shirts. Feel free. Send it. Sometimes we give more than one away in a week, so send on in those answers. Again, thank you all for being with

us. Again, Mark, thank you for being with us again. By the way, you have an open invitation. Anytime you want to come back, we'll be glad to have you back.

S3 30:47 Thanks again. Appreciate it.

S2 30:48 You're welcome. Again, we hope all of you join us next week when we have another interesting person in the world of sports medicine and human performance. Until then, we want you to have an active and healthy week.

[music]

S1 31:00 Thanks for listening to the Huffines Institute weekly sports medicine podcast. This podcast was produced by Sheril Marek and Kelli Selman, and made possible by generous support from the Omar Smith family and the Sydney and J.L. Huffines family. This podcast is published under a Creative Commons 3.0 license. That means you can't sell it or change it, but feel free to give it to everyone you know and to talk and blog about us.

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