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**"OTA's" – What They Mean And What They Can Mean**

**By Jay Nault**

In recent years in the NFL, the term "OTA" (Organized Team Activity) has come to the forefront this time of year. There are a few reasons for that. One is that the calendar reads May and June, and this is the time of year when activity is at its lowest. The draft is over, free agency, for all intents and purposes, is finished and coaches and staff members are going to cycle into their much-needed vacations.

Another, and perhaps more important reason, is that these OTA's have come to mean much more to not only the team involved, but to individual players. There are several teams around the league this year that are holding OTA's that could bear a direct correlation to on-the-field results in 2006. We'll take a look at a few of them here.

**Houston Texans**

The Texans have officially cleaned house since the end of the 2005 season. The coach and GM have both moved on, and the team is attempting to implement an entirely new approach both on the field and off as it continues to search for a new general manager. There is a lot to be done in Houston, and the more work the team can get, the better.

**Oakland Raiders**

The Raiders have a new coach who's trying to instill discipline and toughness on a team that has lacked both in recent years. They also have a new QB to acclimate to their offense, and Aaron Brooks needs that same dose of discipline that the rest of the team does, as he's been error prone in recent years.

**New Orleans Saints**

For the Saints, everything starts anew this year. There is a new coach, a new QB coming off a serious injury and a new potential superstar whose complete role has yet to be defined. Sean Payton needs to make sure Drew Brees' shoulder will hold up before he can fashion his offense, and Reggie Bush's

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talents are so unique that they really don't fit a template.

### Green Bay Packers

The Packers have a new coach and a slew of young players attempting to earn starting spots all over the roster. Although Brett Favre has always operated in some form of the West Coast offense, he still needs to learn the nuances of Coach Mike McCarthy's scheme. Their defense will feature several new starters and there's a new defensive coordinator running the system.

### Miami Dolphins

Although the Dolphins don't have a new coach, they're in a different situation than the teams above because they're right on the cusp of the playoffs. In order to reach that potential, though, Coach Nick Saban will have to break in a new QB in Daunte Culpepper, assuming he's healthy, and fine tune his

overall system to ensure that the team takes that next step.

### Dallas Cowboys

The Cowboys are the choice by many to represent the NFC in the Super Bowl. Bill Parcells has been building the team his way for two years, and he and Jerry Jones added a player who's explosive in more ways than one in WR Terrell Owens. Parcells needs to integrate Owens into his offense and instill air-tight team chemistry to keep all the personalities in check. Every detail matters for a team that could go all the way, and Parcells is taking no chances.

Teams have different reasons for their OTA's, but they are important. Even though they're considered "voluntary" under the existing CBA, players' chances to earn starting spots can be damaged if they're absent, and teams with bigger dreams can have them dashed if they don't hit the ground running in training camp in July. The teams we see playing into January will most likely be able to look back at a successful OTA season.

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### **NFL Training Camp – Is It Too Long?**

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The demands on NFL teams have grown exponentially over the past couple of decades. It wasn't too long ago that many NFL players, even starters, felt the need to get or hold a "regular" job during the offseason, and used the time spent in training camp to get into playing shape for the regular season. It also used to be that teams played up to six preseason games as opposed to the current four or maybe five exhibitions.

Boy, how times have changed. The NFL has transformed into what is now nearly a year-round, full-time job for players, coaches, staff members and management. The degree of specialization and detail accounted for is simply stunning. For instance, relatively new developments include:

### Minicamps

The "minicamp" is much more than a few players on a team gathering during the offseason to jog around in shorts and play a few games of flag football. Teams with returning head coaches have two minicamps per offseason, usually held just after the draft and in May or June in order to build a foundation for training camp in July. Teams with new head coaches have three minicamps, and for many teams, these gatherings are spent installing the new offensive, defensive and/or special teams' schemes.

Practices are run like many in the regular season, in that the pace is fast, the schedule is meticulous and the standards are high. Even though it's technically against league rules to either have too many offseason sessions or to have contact present in any drills, coaches are constantly pushing the envelope, and it seems that every year there are complaints made both internally and to the NFLPA regarding some of these tactics. Regardless of one's perspective, all would agree that these minicamps are far more demanding than a game of flag football.

### OTA's

OTA's, or Organized Team Activities, are also held by every team, usually between minicamps. These are generally seen as less structured, more relaxed training sessions, although once again, many players would disagree. They are also technically voluntary, although that may be nothing more than a term of art either, as players around the league can and have lost their starting jobs for failing to attend these "voluntary" sessions.

### Personal Offseason Training

At this point, the few players who don't spend any time in the offseason training are generally out of work by the time the regular season starts. Every training camp starts with team fitness tests, and fines and being waived are potential consequences if those tests aren't passed.

As a result, nearly every player has a regiment that can include weight training, running, plyometrics, yoga, system cleansing, or any combination of these disciplines. This doesn't even take into account all the players who need to spend hours per day rehabbing from injuries.

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What all this means is that (a) you need to train and stay focused all year long to keep your place on the team and (b) players and coaches are busy all year long. Therefore, why does training camp need to last at least six weeks?

Training camp is useful for team chemistry and to get players battle tested for the long season. However, four or five preseason games make almost everyone associated with the game unhappy. Players despise the long preseason because every practice and ultimately meaningless preseason game only exposes them to injury. The list of star players lost for the year during training camp is too long to detail here. Fans don't like having to spend money on preseason tickets or watch games that will be forgotten in a matter of weeks.

With all the offseason work put in by teams, perhaps a wiser decision would be to shorten training camp to one month and two exhibition games. Players would be fresher to start the season and would generally finish stronger. Fans wouldn't be forced to buy as many preseason games as part of their season ticket package, and television networks wouldn't have to tease the public with exciting game promotions for contests that are completely uninteresting by halftime.

Overall, the product on the field would be better, as there would be fewer injuries and a higher degree of anticipation for the "real" games to start. It's time the NFL recognized the year-round obligation of its members and protected their biggest assets.

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