

## NFL: Seahawks' new practice techniques

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"IT'S DIFFERENT HERE," Pete Carroll says. "Have you noticed?" It's hard not to. At 9 a.m. on the first Sunday of training camp in Renton, Wash., high-performance sports psychologist Mike Gervais, dressed in a navy Seahawks hoodie and white baseball cap and flashing more enthusiasm than is rational at this hour, welcomes players into a meeting room at the Virginia Mason Athletic Center. This place used to be the site of a coal tar refinery; now it's the happiest, greenest campsite in the history of the NFL. Gervais is about to lead a meditation session and, as he always does, instructs the players to hit record on their phone voice-recorder apps and to close their eyes. Then he starts guiding them: "Quiet your minds," "Focus your attention inwardly" and "Visualize success."

This is the Pete Carroll experience we always hear about. After flaming out as an NFL head coach, Carroll rebuilt his rep as an ultracompetitive buddy coach at USC. But beneath the perpetual smile was a guy who thought, more than anything, there was a better way to win. Meditation is only part of it. After Carroll was fired by the Patriots following the 1999 season, he agonized over what he'd do differently if he landed another NFL head-coaching job. Almost every day for the better part of a decade, while leading Southern Cal to seven top-10 finishes and one BCS title, he jotted down do-over notes. His dream was to fundamentally change the way players are coached. The timeworn strategy is, of course, to be a hard-ass -- think Bear Bryant banning water breaks, Vince Lombardi screaming and yelling, Mike Rice throwing basketballs at players' heads, Nick Saban berating his team on the sideline. Carroll craved a chance to reimagine the coaching role in the NFL. "I wanted to find out if we went to the NFL and really took care of guys, really cared about each and every individual, what would happen?"

Now, three and a half years into his tenure with the Seahawks -- with a 91-man

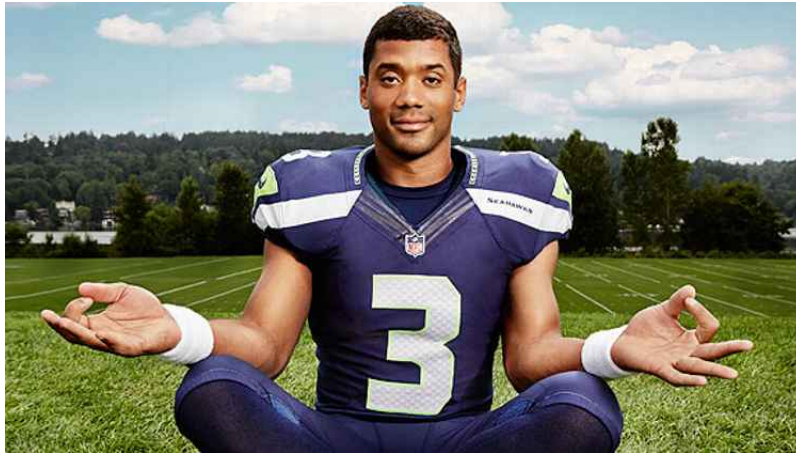
roster that includes only four players who have been with the team longer -- he can truly start to answer that question.

On this Sunday morning, it starts with meditation with Gervais, whom Carroll began to integrate into the program in 2011, at first working on the fringes as a consultant, then becoming a sideline regular last year. For the newcomers to his sessions, Gervais keeps them short, about six minutes. For those with some experience, he prepares longer, more individualized meditations. No one is required to be here, yet about 20 players show up at various times every week to breathe in, breathe out and open their minds. The entire roster also participates in yoga class, which players enjoyed so much last year as an optional activity that the staff decided to make it a mandated part of player workouts this year.

The big idea is that happy players make for better players. Everyone in the facility, from coaches and players to personal assistants and valets, is expected to follow Carroll's mantras regarding positivity of thought, words and actions. "Do your job better than it has ever been done before," he tells them. Yelling and swearing are frowned upon, and every media interview with a player or coach ends with a thank-you to the reporter. And in a trial program entering its second year, a group of 15 to 20 players is undergoing Neurotopia brain-performance testing and has worked with Gervais to create status profiles -- updated every week on an iPad app -- of what's going on in their lives, how much sleep they're getting, their goals and how they're dealing with stressors.

Even as we re-examine the mental health of players in this kinder, gentler era of the sport, this is a bizarro football world. It certainly helps that Carroll has found a kindred spirit and advocate in second-year star QB [Russell Wilson](#), who schedules individual weekly sessions with Gervais. "We do imagery work and talk about having that innovative mindset of being special," Wilson says. "We talk about being in the moment and increasing chaos throughout practice, so when I go into the game, everything is relaxed."

Then he repeats what Carroll says all the time, what everyone around here says: "I talk to guys on other teams, and other teams aren't like this. We do stuff different here."



*Peter Yang for ESPN*

**AT THE NFL** Rookie Symposium in June, Chris Ballard steps to the podium. Ballard, the director of player personnel for the Chiefs, has a harsh message for the recent draft picks. "Most of you will not be in this league three years from now," he begins. Later, he adds, "Nobody cares about your problems. The fans don't care. The media doesn't care. And ownership doesn't care. They care about results."

These words are spoken seven months after a Kansas City player, [Jovan Belcher](#), shot his girlfriend nine times, then drove to the team facility and killed himself in the parking lot. But in what remains a suck-it-up NFL culture, that speech could have been delivered by almost anybody in the league.

"He was treating them exactly how they feel, like objects," says Jimmy Stewart, a licensed family therapist who works with athletes and military personnel dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder. Stewart is a former defensive back with the Saints and Lions, and when he left the league in 1980 he was an emotional wreck and an alcoholic. "The four years I played pro football were some of the most horrendous of my life," he says. "I cried alone. I was frightened. I badly needed somebody to talk to, and I know so many guys today who feel the same way."

After retiring, Stewart earned a master's degree in counseling and went on a crusade to improve the mental health of athletes. In the past few years, he has lobbied the NFL and several teams, including the Chiefs and Saints, to embed psychologists within their coaching staffs, similar to what the military does. He says that his calls largely go unreturned and that even when teams do call him back, he

is often met with arrogance and a "we're doing enough" attitude. So when Stewart hears details of what's happening in Seattle, he begins to cry.

"Talking about concussions is important, but players are not committing suicide just because they have CTE," he says. "They are committing suicide because they refuse to be vulnerable. CTE can cause symptoms of depression, but it's isolation and invulnerability that causes you to commit suicide. With Belcher, the only way you have a chance with him is if every day you have a coach and a psychologist asking, 'How are you feeling today?'"

In Seattle, there's an entire staff expressly designed to look out for players. It's headed by Sam Ramsden, the team's longtime trainer who's now the Seahawks' director of player health and performance. The staff also includes Maurice "Mo" Kelly, the director of player development, who acts as a liaison between players and management; Dirk Eldredge, a life skills consultant/addiction counselor, who helps players transition to the NFL and prepare for when they leave the game; and Gervais. By Carroll's orders, rookies receive special attention to help them assimilate.

"It hit me that in our days at USC, many of our players were drafted high, but a lot of them didn't do very well in the league," Carroll says. "They would come back to visit campus and say: 'It's hard-core. You don't know anybody. You go home and you're by yourself. You don't feel connected at all.' We had reached guys at a different level that allowed them to perform at a high level. And when they left us, they didn't have the support to carry them through."

All Seahawks players are encouraged to use the support staff the way employees in the business world rely on a human resources department. Depressed? Worried about a loved one? Sick pet? The staff wants to hear about it. And if a player is dragging at practice, a coach will be proactive and ask why -- instead of jumping to conclusions and berating him in front of his teammates. That includes assistant head coach Tom Cable, the former hothead coach of the Raiders. "I always coached how my coaches coached me," he says. Working alongside Carroll, 48-year-old Cable says he finally feels as though he's working with players the right way. "If I go ballistic on a guy because he dropped his outside hand or missed an underneath

stunt, who is wrong? I am," Cable says. "I'm attacking his self-confidence and he's learning that if he screws up, he's going to get yelled at. If you make a mistake here, it's going to get fixed."

One way or another. Last year Ramsden started screening struggling players' blood panels, looking for deficiencies in certain amino acids that act as important indicators of whether a person lacks sufficient levels of dopamine and serotonin. He's looking for why players get into a funk, not just how to shake them out of it.

If a physical solution isn't found, Ramsden, Gervais or another staff member talks players through their problems. And Carroll has empowered his team leaders to reach out to players who might not connect with a 62-year-old white surfer dude. "Coach Carroll listens to his players," says veteran running back [Michael Robinson](#). "But you need the right mix of older guys who get it. Pete can't be in the locker room all the time, and the head man won't resonate with everybody."

Make no mistake, it's not hard to find detractors. QB [Matt Flynn](#), Seattle's big free agent signee a year ago, criticized Carroll's style on his way out the door for Oakland this spring. "The way I look at it, leadership and being that guy is: Don't be someone you're not. Don't be a hoorah guy jumping around and clapping your hands if you're not that guy," Flynn told the *Los Angeles Times*. "Makes you look desperate. Makes you look silly. That's not me."

Critics in the league also point out that the concepts of "new age" and "PED abusers" don't exactly mesh. Since 2010, Seattle has had a league-high five failed drug tests, and that doesn't even include [Richard Sherman](#), whose suspension was overturned on appeal. Most of the positives reportedly were for Adderall use, although as [Jim Harbaugh](#), coach of the division-rival 49ers, pointed out in June, the NFL is prohibited from commenting on the nature of the flunked tests. "You're taking somebody at their word that I don't know if you can take them at their word, understanding the circumstances," Harbaugh said.

The most recent suspension came in May, when second-year pass rusher [Bruce Irvin](#) tested positive, reportedly for Adderall, and received a four-game ban. Carroll met with Irvin, then with Robinson, who called a team meeting and challenged his teammates to hold themselves accountable not only to coaches and league rules

but to one another. "The fact that that happened to Bruce is a gift for the next guy," Carroll says. "He made a poor choice and got hammered by it so the next guy won't have to go through that."

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**THE EVOLUTION OF** the Seahawks began on Jan. 11, 2010, the day Pete Carroll brought his sunny disposition to rainy Seattle. When asked to encapsulate his life philosophy, he answers with two words, the same ones that hang on a banner above the practice field: "Always compete."

To implement that philosophy in Seattle, Carroll knew he needed the perfect partner. From a stack of GM candidates, Carroll zeroed in on John Schneider, who, although only 38 at the time, had already built a reputation around the league as a scrappy, relentless, outside-the-box thinker as the director of football operations for the Packers. When Schneider was a junior at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, he wrote an impassioned letter to Packers GM Ron Wolf explaining why he'd make a great scout. An intrigued Wolf brought him on as an intern that summer in 1992, and Schneider has been working in the league ever since. Says Carroll of their partnership, "I was going to make this a great relationship, a famous relationship of cooperation and coordination."

In their first four months together, before their families joined them in Seattle, the two men "brothered up," as Carroll calls it. They slept on their office couches, pored over the roster and folders of draft prospects, and shared control of the stereo. In the early days, they worked to the Grateful Dead; as the draft neared, they ditched the Dead for the Doors.

They needed that time together to execute a radical roster overhaul -- more than 200 player moves that first year and more than 500 by the end of 2011. Carroll and Schneider wanted guys who truly bought in, and they weren't interested in begging for converts. On the first day of meetings in 2010, Carroll asked players to stand up and choose a new seat, to take a fresh perspective as they started a new season. "One guy in the back of the auditorium didn't switch seats," says [Matt Hasselbeck](#), the Seahawks' starting quarterback that year. "He was a big-money guy, a starter. And he was gone a week later. Pete didn't care about the seats. He just wants to

know who's with him." Another time during that first camp, Carroll turned off the facility's air conditioning because he wanted to see who would complain about the heat. The coach does not like whining. In fact, it's Rule 2 of his three decrees: 1. Protect the team; 2. No whining, no complaining, no excuses; 3. Be early.

Carroll's group prides itself on finding positive players, and that is never more evident than in the team's draft preparation. Carroll, Schneider and the scouting department look at the same physical traits every other team evaluates, but they might value interview sessions more than any other team in the league. They pay close attention to a potential draft pick's word choices and any negative language or finger-pointing. They want to hear accountability and optimism. Before the 2010 draft, Seattle was in the market for a franchise left tackle in a draft deep with left tackles. But among [Trent Williams](#), [Russell Okung](#), [Anthony Davis](#) and [Bryan Bulaga](#), Okung was the guy who stood out to Schneider and Carroll. How did they ultimately decide he was worth the No. 6 pick and a \$48 million investment? By taking him bowling and watching him roll a woeful 63. Okung played hard, and when Schneider rolled the exact same score, Okung smiled and asked for a rematch. He was a living, breathing gutter-ball-rolling embodiment of the personality blend of upbeat and fiercely competitive that the Seahawks wanted to draft.

It's also no coincidence that Wilson, the 75th pick in the 2012 draft, is a Seahawk. After all, he has a track record of setting and reaching goals. In 2011, after graduating from NC State, Wilson decided he wanted to spend his last year of eligibility playing for Wisconsin. So he faxed a letter to then-Badgers coach Bret Bielema stating that he wanted to come to Madison, win a Big Ten title, be the conference QB of the year and go to the Rose Bowl. Bielema was impressed by the QB's resolve, welcomed Wilson and then watched as the fifth-year senior checked off every item.

After being drafted by the Seahawks in the third round last year, Wilson told Carroll, "I can be the starting quarterback on this team." The QB also gave a new list of goals to the Seattle coaches and hung a copy in his locker. His list ranges from daily objectives ("Always believe in myself") to what he calls his legendary goals ("Win multiple Super Bowls"). And this was compiled *before* he was named Seattle's starting quarterback. Says Wilson: "I truly believe in positive synergy, that your

positive mindset gives you a more hopeful outlook, and belief that you can do something great means you will do something great. I believed that before I got here, and the crazy thing is, Coach Carroll and our football team believe it too."

On Day 1 of minicamp in Renton, Carroll pulls on receiver gloves and throws with an equipment manager as Macklemore thumps through overhead speakers, courtesy of the team DJ. Once practice starts, Carroll rarely stops moving, disappearing into huddles and racing across the field to high-five a defensive back for breaking up a pass. Gervais wanders the sideline much the way he does on Sundays during the season, stopping to chat with whoever walks his way. Intense offensive line drills end with combatants pulling each other up: "Stay positive," players say to each other. "Put yourself into a mindset of greatness." A touchdown catch brings hoots and hollers from the sidelines, as if the Seahawks had just won a Super Bowl.

Reality sets in after practice. Reporters confront players with questions about Irvin's suspension and Harbaugh's comments on PEDs. "We just want to keep it positive -- always," says cornerback [Walter Thurmond](#). Adds receiver [Doug Baldwin](#), "Our prefrontal cortex doesn't reach maturity until age 25."

Later that afternoon, Carroll lights up when informed of Baldwin's unusual answer. "That is when your brain develops and you take a step forward in maturity," he says. "Him telling you guys that -- that's a look into our relationship."

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**HERE'S THE THING** about the Seattle experiment: It's only the beginning of what the Seahawks intend to be a total revamp of the way a football franchise approaches the physical and mental well-being of everyone in the organization. Team chef Mac McNabb feeds the players fruits and vegetables from local organic farms. He takes any leftovers to a nearby family-run farm to feed free-range chickens, which are raised specifically for the Seahawks cafeteria. Ramsden and Gervais spend their spare time attending conferences, meeting with nutritionists and sleep experts, and, judging by the mound of boxes in Ramsden's office, buying any new tech gadget that could be the next breakthrough in maximizing athletic performance. At the start of last season, Ramsden gathered data on most of the Seahawks, including blood and vision analyses and sleep and conditioning profiles.



At practice, player movement is tracked via GPS so the team can monitor workloads. Ultimately, Ramsden would like to have players and coaches wear wristbands to track sleep habits and, when necessary, adjust practice schedules to maximize rest. (Can you imagine Bill Belichick sending everybody home from practice early to catch up on shut-eye?)

The Seahawks hope to one day have daily mental health check-ins to monitor players' off-the-field problems. Owner Paul Allen, no stranger to innovation, has indicated that he wants his MLS franchise, the Seattle Sounders, to follow the Seahawks' model.

For now, though, the next step is getting everybody on the meditation bandwagon. "Meditation is as important as lifting weights and being out here on the field for practice," Okung says. "It's about quieting your mind and getting into certain states where everything outside of you doesn't matter in that moment. There are so many things telling you that you can't do something, but you take those thoughts captive, take power over them and change them."

After last year's crushing playoff loss to the Falcons, Wilson did just that. Walking off the field alongside his teammates, he felt the darkness creeping in as he entered the stadium tunnel. Then he stopped for a moment and closed his eyes. Instead of fixating on what could have been in the 30-28 defeat, he began to visualize what could be. "We have a bright, bright future," Wilson thought in the belly of the Georgia Dome. "The Seahawks can be special for a long time."

On the team bus, he made a beeline for Carroll, unable to keep his vision to himself. Then he paused for a second, not wanting his optimism to be confused with a lack of accountability for the loss. He began slowly before Carroll cut him off. "Man, that's just what I was thinking," the coach said. "Let's not just win one Super Bowl. Let's win multiple."

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