

League Expectations for Coaches

As a coach in the league, it's important to have a good understanding of the league mission and its guiding principles. In addition, we as an organization have made a number of promises to your players' parents and are relying on you to help us keep these promises.

Westampton Recreation Flag Football Mission

Westampton Recreation Flag Football strives to create and maintain a positive, no-pressure atmosphere in a fun, safe, and supportive environment for young athletes. Healthy competition is promoted rather than the high-pressure, "win-at-all-cost" mentality prevalent in so many youth sports leagues today. The primary focus is on the kids having fun. No matter the outcome of the game, every child is a winner.

Being a community-based recreational league with "Everyone Plays" and "Equal Playing Time" policies, children of all sizes, athletic abilities, and experience are encouraged to participate in the action. Players are taught to understand the fundamentals of the game, improve their athletic skills, stay active, and learn important life lessons and skills, such as good sportsmanship and teamwork to help them succeed both on and off the field.

Promises Westampton Recreation and Its Coaches Make to Parents

1. This is a recreational league:

This means ensuring all the kids are having fun and getting an opportunity to play takes precedence over any coach or parent's desire to win.

2. Equal playing time:

All players get about the same playing time and about the same number of touches of the ball, unless they just want to play defense (some do). Our league philosophy includes a promise to get everybody involved and made to feel like he or she is an important part of the team. That means rotating positions and giving every kid a chance to make a play.

3. Practices are 1 to 1.5 hours 1 night per week:

We promise parents that practice will be 1 to 1.5 hours in duration and that would be the only practice for the week. Please DO NOT schedule any additional mandatory practices. Encourage your players to practice with their parents and friends and give them things to work on. Informal "we're going to throw the ball around in the park at 4 pm Thursday if you'd like to come by and play" get-togethers are allowed, but they must be optional, and no player should ever be penalized on game day for not attending an optional practice. Feel free to send team e-mails with any pertinent information you'd like to impart.

4. Promoting a love of sports and exercise:

Regarding discipline, if you keep practices light and fun for the players and limit the time spent standing around, you should not have any players messing around during practice. But if you do, never discipline a child by making him or her do push-ups, run laps, or do any form of exercise. We are trying to promote a life-long love of exercise so it should not be used as punishment. Instead, sit the player out for 1 or 2 minutes. They are here to play, so sitting them out, depriving them of play time, is usually an effective way to get players' attention.

5. Teaching kids the value of good sportsmanship and teamwork:

Be a role model for these kids. That means always being respectful of the officials, coaches, and players on the opposing team. It's easy to get caught up in the game and the competition, but please remember, ultimately, all the coaches and officials are there for the same reason: to ensure that the kids are having fun and playing in a safe environment. Never get into it with an official or an opposing coach, player, or parent. Remember, the kids will see the way you act. Be a role model for these kids by displaying good sportsmanship at all times and graciousness in both victory and defeat, and you will earn their respect.

6. Player safety is the top priority:

Please take it seriously—if you have any concern whatsoever that a player may have suffered a concussion, sit him or her out for the rest of the game. “When In Doubt Sit Them Out” is our policy regarding any potential head injury. No exceptions.

Keys to Coaching Success

Have a plan for the season:

Have a game plan for yourself, your assistant coaches, your players, and parents. Make sure you keep it focused and you set the proper expectations prior to your first practice.

Your first practice:

This is your most important practice of the year. This practice will set the tone for your players, coaches, and parents. Make sure it is organized, has high intensity, and that everyone is involved. Have a fun game or drill to end practice with that everyone will remember and look forward to doing again at the next practice.

Drills: What drills will your players need to work on to implement your offensive and defensive game plans? Put these together in a logical order starting from very basic fundamental drills to more complex. Drills will help your players improve their game and your strategy. See recommended drill and skill sheet attached.

The importance of time management:

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Managing your practice time is the most difficult task for any coach. You never have enough time to run enough plays, practice every drill, and cover every possible play. Prior to the start of the season is the time for you to think of ways you can maximize your practice time effectively.

Pre-season goals and expectation setting:

Setting goals will help you provide a road map for your team's season. The most successful coaches in football all set goals. Setting goals is the most important task in coaching because the goals you set will guide your team strategy, coaching, practices, and games for an entire season.

Team goals and expectations:

Team goals will set the mission for your season for your coaches, players, and parents (if applicable). Make sure you are setting realistic goals for your team based on your team personnel. This can be a delicate balance – you do not want to set your goals too low or too high. Make sure you challenge your players as the season progresses.

Coaching goals:

- Communicate effectively with players and parents
- Teach players the fundamentals of the game
- Motivate your team effectively
- Utilize positive reinforcement with your players
- Be fundamentally sound
- Be competitive in every game
- Be accountable to your team
- Have FUN no matter the outcome of the game

Player goals:

- Commitment to practicing with 100% effort at every practice
- Have FUN no matter the outcome of the game
- Accountable for myself, family, and team
- Practice at 100% each practice
- Improve my skills
- Be a leader and a good sport to opposing team

Parent goals:

- Encourage and support my player and opposing team
- Positive reinforcement
- Let the coaches coach and referees officiate the games
- Teach and practice at home

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Getting started:

Teaching young players the game of flag football can be fun and ultimately rewarding. As a coach, you will be looked upon as a teacher, leader, role model, and authority figure by the kids on your team. Don't underestimate the influence (positive or negative) you can have upon a child. Kids are very impressionable and will watch your every move. The team will take your lead, adopt your attitude, and take on your personality. Sounds daunting, but while you shouldn't be overwhelmed by the responsibility, you also should not take your coaching responsibilities lightly. Helping others, especially children, is such a rewarding endeavor. If you can have even the slightest positive influence on a child's life, your coaching experience will have been a success. Watching a player improve as both a flag football player and as a person can be one of the most fulfilling accomplishments a person can have. Valuable lessons kids can learn from sports:

- Ethics and how to follow the rules
- How to cope with failure – How to cope with both winning and losing
- Goal setting – How to set and work toward achieving goals
- Teamwork – How to work with others
- How to respect authority
- How to follow directions

League rules – Prior to the start of the season, obtain a copy of the league rules and familiarize yourself with them.

Practices and games – Know when and where and have schedules to distribute to parents as needed.

Equipment – To effectively run a team, you should have the following equipment:

- **Footballs** – You will need to have enough footballs so that you can run an effective practice. You may have 2 or 3 drills being performed at the same time, so you will need at least 2 to 3 footballs for those drills. Coaches can check out practice footballs prior to each practice and return them after practice.
- **Flags and flag belts** – Each player needs a flag belt and 2 flags. Make sure you have enough for your entire team. Encourage parents to write each player's name on them. Coaches may decide to collect all the flags each week so that they are less likely to be lost or forgotten, but some players may want to have them to practice with during the week and should be allowed to do so.

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- **Cones** – For most of your drills, you will need cones to section off an area on the field or to set up obstacles, etc, for your team. Depending on the number of players you have, 8 to 10 cones should be sufficient.
- **Whistle** – It's easier, and less taxing on your voice, to get your team's attention by blowing a whistle.

Communicating With Players

Communication:

The most important and most difficult task you as a coach will face is effectively conveying your message to your players. When talking to your players, remember that they are young. You need to talk down to their level. When explaining a drill or concept, do not get too technical. Yes, you must teach the basics, but do it in a way so that THEY can understand. If you explain a drill 3 times to your team, and they don't understand it, guess what!? YOU are explaining it wrong!

Keep it simple:

Always keep it simple enough for all your players to understand. This is not the NFL, and the main purpose is ensuring the kids are having fun. Make sure that every player has an equal opportunity to participate and feel like they are a valuable part of the team.

Always remember that this is all about the children and having fun:

As a coach, you should inspire your players to give their best and work well with other team members to achieve the team's goals. You are a role model for the children under your wing. What you do impresses them more powerfully than what you say. Strive to emphasize sportsmanship, character, and trust.

Ask questions:

If you're explaining a play, ask them questions like, "What's the reason for this?" or "Is there anything we should watch out for when trying this out?" The fact that you're asking them reinforces their self-esteem and makes them feel like they're an important part of your football team.

Don't be too dictatorial:

Be sensitive to the children's limitations and emotions. Even if they look up to you for guidance and support, you must value their opinions and understand your players' different personalities. Never humiliate a player publicly or corner a player.

The complement sandwich:

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Instead of criticizing a player, focus on the positive. For many players, this is their first experience with any organized sport, let alone flag football. At this age, children have very fragile egos. While what you may feel is correcting a player, the child may feel as criticism. Always focus on the positive.

When correcting a player, we recommend the complement sandwich: Start out by praising/complementing on what the player did correctly, and then explain what he or she may have done wrong or where he or she could improve. Once you have done this, finish with a positive complimentary statement. No one, especially a young player, needs to constantly hear negative criticism.

Learning curves and differing abilities:

You will quickly notice that some players are more coordinated than others. Also, your players will grasp concepts and learn at different paces. This is one of the challenges of coaching younger children. You don't want to "lose" any child who may not be grasping the subject. However, you must also avoid boring the other players who quickly master a drill. Spend a little extra time with the players who may be learning slower than the others. After practice, give these players some additional "homework" to do before your next practice/game. Speak to these players on a one-on-one basis in a very discrete manner (be careful not to make it look as though you are singling out these players). For the players who are excelling faster than the others, add some "twist" or complexity to a drill that the rest of the team is performing.

Keeping them moving will keep their attention:

All children, especially young children, have short attention spans. It's your job to keep them focused and interested in what's going on. The best way to keep the players focused is to have constant movement and change. If one small group is practicing plays, another group can be doing drills while waiting for their turn. This keeps everyone busy and prevents boredom. Have the assistant supervise one group while you coach the other. Use several footballs so that every player can perform the drills at the same time. That will cut down on the amount of time a player is standing around and watching the other players go through the activity. The time that a player is not engaged in activity is the time you will "lose him or her". Also, to keep everything new and exciting, each drill should last no more than 5 to 10 minutes. Gauge your team's attention span and adjust the length of each drill accordingly.

Problem players – you are not a babysitter:

Dealing with problem players can be quite difficult. Get a handle on this situation quickly. Coaching a bunch of young flag football players is difficult enough when everyone is cooperating behavioral problems and the season can deteriorate quickly. In a behavioral problem, sit and attempt to address it accordingly and as quickly as possible.

Agree on the rules for discipline:

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Setting this early can lead to a more organized practice, not just for one meeting but for the rest of the season. Earn and engage the child's respect so that he or she will stay focused on the game and not engage in disruptive activities. Call the player aside and talk to him or her if you feel it's necessary. Never use exercise (running laps, push-ups, etc) as a punitive measure. Benching players (for a few minutes) is more effective, as this deprives them of the chance to participate in the activity in which they're supposed to be engaging:

- If there are a few players who seem to fool around during practice drills, separate these players and put them in separate groups.
- If one player seems to be disruptive because he or she is bored, attempt to keep their attention by talking to them throughout practice.
- If a behavioral problem persists, sit the player down for a “time-out” for a few minutes.
- Once they see all the other players, who behave, enjoying themselves, they will want to join along.
- If all else fails, speak with the child's parent on a one-one basis, asking for their help in addressing the problem.

The first practice:

Finally, the first practice for flag football is here. What an exciting time for every flag football coach, player, and parent. You have already contacted your team and parents. Now it's time to fulfill the goals and expectations you've set for the team. The first practice is the most important practice of the year. All of your players, coaches, and parents will have your full attention. Spend the first few minutes introducing yourself to your team. Introduce your coaches and your goals for the team (play as a team, focus, improvement a particular skill). You will also need some sort of ice breaker. Have the players introduce themselves and announce one of the following:

- Favorite football player / NFL team
- Favorite football position
- School and grade

Now is a great time to ask for volunteers (for the practice and also for the whole season). This is your best chance to get as many volunteers as possible for your team parents, assistant coaches, practice coaches, and photographer.

Every practice must have a plan. **If you do not have a plan, chances are your practice will be chaotic.**

Break the practice schedule down into time periods. Clear communication and demonstration will be needed, especially for younger-aged teams. You should use the “IDEA” method for introducing new skills:

I – INTRODUCE the skill by discussing it in a team huddle.

D – DEMONSTRATE the skill by showing them the correct way to complete it.

E – EXPLAIN why mastering the skill is important to the team's success.

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A – ATTEND to players as they work through drills and helps them get better (no punishment for mistakes; just repeat the drill).

Yes, give your practice schedule to your parents. This will get your parents more involved, and they will feel more a part of the team. The first practice should be light on plays and heavy on fundamentals. Some of your players may not have played in a while or at all.

Here is an example of a practice schedule with time periods:

Wednesdays at Urbana District Park, Field #1, 5:30–6:45pm

5:30–5:45pm Warm Ups

5:45-6:15pm Flag Football Fundamentals: Quarterback/Center Exchange, QB/RB exchange

6:15-6:30pm Proper Flag Football Stances by Position, Offense/Defense

6:30-6:45pm Defense Fundamentals: Flag Pulling

Utilize drills and team scrimmages to evaluate the skills of each player to allow you to determine what positions each player can have the most success playing. By the end of your first practice or two, and depending on the age of your players (very young kids will take longer), players should have been taught the following flag football fundamentals:

- How to put on flag
- How to properly pull a flag
- How to properly catch a football
- How to properly throw a football
- How to properly hand off a football
- How to properly receive a hand-off
- How to snap (hike) the football (QB/center exchange)
- The proper pre-snap stance for QB, RB, WR defense
- Defense – how to back pedal
- Defense angle tackle – how to properly pursue a ball carrier
- How to huddle up and break the huddle

Teaching the fundamentals of flag football:

For some kids, this may be their first experience with football or with any organized sport. For such youngsters, you won't be able to teach them every concept of the game of football in a short season. Instead, the goal should be to teach players the fundamentals of the game. The basic concepts to teach players are:

- The center/QB exchange
- The proper “ready” stance
- The QB/RB exchange
- How to carry the football

- How to properly throw the football
- How to properly catch the football
- Flag pulling and basic defensive concepts

The center-quarterback exchange:

The quarterback needs to position himself or herself with hands under the center to get the snap of the ball to start the play. Without a good exchange, the play won't start. If the quarterback fumbles the exchange, the play will be blown dead by the official and the down will be lost. The quarterback should get as close to center as possible, bend the knees, and have his or her hands open and ready to accept the ball (take the snap). It is important to have all quarterbacks and centers practice the exchange before every game.

Under-center snap:

Center begins in a two-point stance (feet shoulder-width apart, knees bent, elbows resting on knees, head up). Reach throwing hand out to the football. Grip the football with the first knuckle of the thumb placed in-between the white line and the first lace. The palm of the hand should then rest on the outside of the ball, with the four fingers spread across the back. Lift head before snapping the ball.

As the ball is snapped, turn hand inward so the ball is delivered sideways to the quarterback who is standing right behind the center. Release the ball and run the play called. Age 5-6 division players may use the side snap. The traditional snap can be difficult for the younger players with small hands, even when using two hands.

Shotgun snap:

Center begins in a two-point stance (feet shoulder-width apart, knees bent, elbows resting on knees, head up). Reach throwing hand out to the football. Grip the football with the first knuckle of the thumb placed in-between the white line and the first lace. The palm of the hand should then rest on the outside of the ball, with the four fingers spread across the back. Lift head before snapping the ball. On the snap, flick wrist as the ball leaves the hand to deliver it several feet back to the quarterback.

*Depending on the player's ability to grip the football with one hand, a center may shotgun-snap the football with either one or two hands. If two hands are needed, a player should use his or her non-dominant hand to guide the football as it is snapped by placing that hand on the open side of the football.

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Proper stance prior to the snap:

The two-point stance is the proper stance for all positions in flag football, except the quarterback and center (who must execute the exchange). **The three-point and four-point stances are not legal in flag football leagues.**

The two-point stance: Players stand with their feet about shoulder width apart or a little wider if it's more comfortable for them. Put the palms of the hands on the knees and hunch over a bit more so that the arms are slightly bent. The player is now in a two-point stance and ready for the play. Receivers need to get down the field fast so receivers should utilize a modified two-point stance with one leg further back than the other, with knees slightly bent. This stance will enable your receivers to explode off the snap and head downfield.

Running the football:

For some young players, just running with the football can be a challenge. Although the size of the football is age appropriate, it still can be large and tough for some kids to handle. Inexperienced players need to be shown the proper way to take a hand-off from the quarterback and how to properly grip and run with the football.

The quarterback/running back exchange:

For a flawless exchange between the quarterback and the running back, the running back should make a “pocket” with his or her arms and hands to properly accept the football from the quarterback.

Top half of the "pocket":

- Inside elbow – Even with the shoulders
- Forearm – Horizontal with the ground
- Inside hand – Palm down, ready to accept the point of the ball

Bottom half of the "pocket":

- Outside elbow – Straight down from the shoulder
- Forearm – Horizontal across the midsection
- Outside hand – Slightly bent with the palm up, ready to accept the other end of the ball
- Fingers – Pointing toward the quarterback

Receiving the ball

- Hands – Both hands instantly secure the ball upon contact
- Eyes – Focused on where the play is designed to go

How to properly grip and carry the football while running:

The proper way to hold a football for a running back is to place the tip of the index finger directly over the tip of the ball while the rest of the hand grasps as much of the surface of the football as possible. The remaining surface of the ball is then supported by the inside of the wrist and forearm. The tips of the fingers down to the middle of the forearm sustain the football during the initial grasp.

The RB should hold the football close to his/her side. Your side can support the football and keep the ball close to you. This makes it harder to lose your grip and fumble.

Have a firm grip: Having a firm grip on the ball will help you hold onto the ball when you are running fast. If you hold it loosely, it is easier to lose your grip while running and fumble.

Avoid the temptation to show off: Common show-off moves like dancing with the ball or holding the ball out to your side are huge mistakes for some inexperienced players. Even if you

have an open field to run, showing off is not only poor sportsmanship, but can lead to losing control of the ball and fumbling.

Throwing the football:

- 1. Grip the football.** The most common way to grip the football for throwing is with the ring and little fingers crossing the laces and your thumb underneath. The index finger should be over a seam, and your thumb and index fingers should make an “L” shape.
 - Don't “palm” the football. Hold it lightly with the fingertips and try to keep space between the center of the palm and the ball.
 - Don't grip the ball too tightly. Keep your hold firm enough to keep control, but not tightly. Adjust your grip as needed.
- 2. Position your body in the throwing stance.** Face perpendicular to your target. If you throw with your right hand, turn to the right, and vice versa if you throw with your left hand. Turn your pivot foot (opposite your throwing arm) so that it's pointing toward your target. Keep your eyes on the target.
- 3. Hold the ball near your ear.** Before throwing the ball, keep it up near your ear, stabilizing it with your non-throwing hand. This allows you to be ready to throw the ball quickly.
- 4. Wind back.** Release your non-throwing hand from the ball. Wind your throwing arm back, stopping just behind your ear.
- 5. Throw in a half-circular motion.** Quickly swing your throwing arm forward in a circular arc. Release the ball mid-way through the circle. Your empty hand should then head toward your non-dominant hip, palm facing away from you. Practice this motion a few times before you let go of the ball.
 - Use the rest of your body to build momentum for your throw. The hips, legs and shoulders can add great power to a pass. Step forward with your non-dominant (or pivot) foot, and move your non-dominant elbow down toward your back. Rotate your hips and shoulders in the direction of the pass.
- 6. Release the ball with your fingertips.** As the football leaves your hand, it should roll off of your fingertips. Your index finger will be the last part of your body touching the ball. This provides the spin that creates the desired “spiral” effect.
 - A proper throw will feel like it's only utilizing the thumb, index, and middle finger. The other two fingers on your hand stabilize the ball as it's being flung. They are not generally used to impart spin on the ball.
 - To impart more spin on the pass, you may snap your wrist forward as you follow through to the hip.

Quarterback drop-backs:

For quarterbacks, learning how to drop back properly is important. Being further back from the line-of-scrimmage creates additional distance between the quarterback and the defensive rusher(s).

1. As you receive the snap, turn sideways in the direction of your throwing arm.
2. The first step is a reach step. It is a powerful, quick, deep step with the back foot.
3. The next steps (middle steps) are crossover steps.
4. The last step is the plant step. It is a small reach step. As the plant step takes place, your front shoulder should dip down slightly to help maintain balance.
5. It is important to drop back quickly and keep looking downfield for an open receiver.

Depending on the age of your players, throwing a completed pass can be a real challenge. From the quarterback standpoint, many players have a hard time simply holding the football much less securing a proper throwing grip, dropping back in the pocket, avoiding the rusher(s) and throwing the ball accurately to an open wide receiver. For receivers, many young players have a tough time catching a football when no one is defending. Add the need to run a good pass route, get open, and catch the football while the defense pursues, and it's easy to see that completing a pass involves a number a challenges for young players. In summary, don't get too frustrated if you don't have a successful passing game.

Catching the football:

Catching a football can be difficult for inexperienced players. One of the keys to catching a football that the Receiver should start by giving the quarterback a good target with hands out-stretched. Receivers should try to catch the ball with their hands, then bring the ball into their body. Many young players will try to catch the ball by trapping it with between their arms and body, which often results in the ball bouncing off their chest. Instead, try to emphasize catching with the hands. The most important thing is for players to keep their eyes on the ball. Many young players will take their eyes off the ball at the last moment (searching for the defender, looking to run, etc.)

Catching the ball:

The proper technique for catching a football needs to be taught. Most kids do not know how to catch a football properly.

1. Always catch the ball with your hands away from your body. Arms should be extended out about three-fourths of the way to allow room to cushion the catch.
2. To catch balls above waist-height, put your index finger and thumbs together to form a triangle. For a low ball, keep your little fingers and elbows together to cradle the catch. For deep passes that are over the shoulder, you want to have your pinkies and elbows

together to cradle the catch in front of your chest. This pass should be caught over the outside shoulder.

3. Keep your eye on the ball. The most important part in catching the ball is to watch the ball all the way, until it's in your hands.
4. Once the ball is in your hands, secure it by quickly tucking it away, high under your armpit, clamping it tightly to your body. Cover the front tip of the football with your fingers. Use your free arm to maintain balance.

Running good pass routes:

Running good pass routes will go a long way toward helping your team move the ball. A good route has four main parts: start, stem, break, and burst.

1. Start – A good route begins with a good stance and start. It's important to gain as much ground as you can as quickly as possible.
2. Stem – The receiver forces the defensive back up the field. Run toward the outside shoulder of the defender in an attempt to turn his hips away from the line of scrimmage.
3. Break – The receiver transitions from the stem to the burst by making a direction-changing cut. In order to get in and out of a break quickly, stay low and maintain proper balance by keeping your shoulders directly.
4. Burst – The receiver comes out of the break and attempts to create additional separation from the defender. Different routes require different bursts. A curl requires the receiver to come off the break with two steps back to the quarterback and then stop. A post requires a full-speed, continued burst after the break.

*Teaching the importance of everyone running his/her assigned route will be a challenge. This is a good time to explain and teach the importance of teamwork. Remember to be patient with your players, especially the younger ones.

The defense:

"Defense wins games" - this is the philosophy of many professional, college, and high school coaches and is also a good philosophy for Flag Football. If you can prevent your opponent from scoring, you have a better chance of winning. Don't just focus on the offense in your practices. Dedicate enough practice time to the defense and your team will be rewarded.

Flag grabbing / "tackling":

The obvious difference between flag football and regulation football is that in flag football the defense must grab the flag of the player with the ball instead of tackling the player. Believe it or not, it is often more difficult to grab and pull a flag than it is to tackle a player. Your team must learn the best way to grab an opponent's flag. You may find that most of your players will want to lunge at one of the opponent's flag with one hand. While this will occasionally work, a better technique is for the player to attempt to position himself or herself in front of the ball carrier, giving the defensive player a great opportunity to pull either flag.

Breaking down:

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The best way to make a flag pull is to be in a good position to do so. Breaking down brings the defender under control and gives him the best chance of having a successful flag pull.

- Shorten your steps. Use fast, choppy steps.
- Be balanced and in control of your body. Be ready for the ball carrier to make a move.
- Stay low, with your arms out slightly for balance and your shoulders above your feet.
- Watch the player's belly, and move toward your target (the flags).

Flag-pull:

Pulling flags is a skill that's developed only after ample practice, so go through the motions several times.

- Sprint to the ball carrier.
- As you approach the ball carrier, come to a good defensive position and shorten your strides into short, choppy steps (break down), getting ready for the ball carrier to make a move.
- Reach for the top of the flag (near the plug). Firmly grab the flag and pull hard.

Swarming around the ball:

It is good practice to teach your team to "swarm around the ball" on defense. The goal on defense is grab the flag. So you should try to have as many players attempting to grab the flag as possible. The more defenders you have around the ball, the more chances your team will have to grab a flag as well as when you have many players surrounding the ball carrier.