

In The Center By Brooke Leonard

The center's first and primary role is to pass the football to the quarterback. Because the center has an ideal view of the defensive formation before the snap, he typically makes the first line call. After the snap, the center performs blocking assignments (Center).

According to NFL.com in a ranking of football positions by importance, the center sits at No. 17, under wide receiver 2 and the strong safety. As the essential communicator for the offense and basically the person who puts the ball in play, the position is still one of the most underrated on the field. However, on some teams, the center is the playmaker and more often than not, the smartest, most dedicated man on the field.

Spring practices came to a close on a mild April evening as Eric Gallo sits at his desk preparing himself for any defense that is thrown at him. Flashcards lay strewn out next to him with position assignments, worn from flipping through them to study. He looks up from the offensive playbook that lays spread out before him and squints at the iPad that sits in front of him, "See?" he says, "That's where the play went wrong. I was supposed to block the DT (defensive tackle) on the left for 'zone left' but I didn't." He pauses his film and scribbles something in his book. The book is about three inches thick, filled with every bit of information he would need to lead an offense at Virginia Tech. He then looks back up and replays the clip in slow motion. This is his normal routine after every scrimmage or game.

"For me, watching film with myself is the easiest way to get better at the game of football. It doesn't require you to break a sweat or get really out of breath or have to run plays with an entire team, you can simply sit down by yourself and get better, become a better football player."

Gallo grew up in a football family; his dad having played in college was the first person to introduce him to the sport. It quickly became his favorite and after seeing a mentor of his go off to college to play, he soon realized that was what he wanted to do as well. "It was always just a sport to me; it was fun but when I was in sixth grade I saw an older guy in my high school, Justin Pugh, go Division I to play offensive line at Syracuse. And when I saw that happen, he kind of inspired me and showed me that it was possible to do and that you can accomplish anything with hard work. He really inspired me to take the next step and now I want to become a technician of the game and have a passion for it."

From then on, Gallo worked as hard as he could to reach that goal. Football was something that came naturally to him. As one of the biggest guys in his class, he had played at guard and then made the transition over to center his senior year of high school, all done with great success. As a junior he was named first team All-State by the Pennsylvania Football News as an offensive lineman, first team All-

Southeastern Pennsylvania as a defensive lineman and first team All-Conference on both sides of the ball. "Playing high school football was arguably one of the best times of my life. I think the best part of high school football was the players that were my teammates were some of my best friends. As a sophomore I was able to play with my older brother, which was a really cool experience that I will never be able to do again."

Gallo's cousin, Pat Taylor, was also a football junkie who now coaches the offensive line at Lycoming College. Taylor took an interest in Gallo's football career when Gallo was in high school. Taylor recalls practicing drills and helping Gallo in any way he could, which also prepared him to become an offensive line coach at Lycoming. He calls Gallo, "...still the most talented person I have ever coached." A high praise for someone who is only 20 years old. As an offensive line coach, the center position holds a huge weight on the line in Taylor's mind. "If [the] Quarterback is the most important position in football, then the guy who gives him the ball has to be pretty important as well, if not more. If you don't snap the ball correctly it doesn't matter if it's Tom Brady or Aaron Rodgers back there, the offense won't work." So why is this position so underrated when that person is seemingly controlling the offense? "If you were starting an offensive line from scratch the first two questions are.... Who is the center? Who is the backside tackle? I think that tells you how important a center is."

Gallo committed to Virginia Tech in May of 2013 and enrolled in July of the following year. Between lifting and academics, summer camp and fall practices, he began learning a new way of playing the game. He was second-string center, playing under David Wang, who now plays for the St. Louis Rams. Gallo played a total of three games and 14 snaps his entire true freshman season. The following year when Wang graduated, Gallo earned a starting position, "[I had] a lot more responsibility, definitely the biggest thing. A lot more people are counting on you. A lot more of the team's success depends on how you prepare and how seriously you take the game. But it's awesome, it's a lot of fun and I'm very thankful to be in the position I am right now." But it certainly wasn't easy. Wang had experience and athleticism, enough to earn him a contract with an NFL team, but Gallo had intelligence and a passion for the game that was unmatched among the offensive line.

Teammate Jonathan McLaughlin noted Gallo's intelligence from the start, "If he doesn't know something he will know within 30 minutes of a meeting or something. He gets everyone on the same page. He didn't need much help to begin with because of the way he approaches each game. I would honestly say Eric has helped me learn the game more."

Bleacherreport.com even dubbed Gallo as one of four Virginia Tech Hokies to have a breakout season among the football team for the 2015-2016 season. He had not started any games yet; this was merely an article written on what his teammates had to say about him. They also predicted him to be the "Hokies' best center since Jake Grove was in Blacksburg."

However, Gallo didn't get caught up in the notoriety. "Looking back on the film and my grades for the season, I thought I had an all right year, individually. I thought that I did some stuff OK, but I have a lot to improve on for my junior season and just a lot more knowledge I can gain about the sport of football."

But someone out there is surely thinking, playing the center is simple. You snap the ball, you block. However, that is not the case. Without the center, the offensive line would crumble. Gone is the organization, tempo, and eyes for the entire line. The center is exactly as the name says: the center of the offense. Also a center for the Hokies, Kyle Chung believes it is one of the most difficult positions mentally. "At the center position you have to know just about everything that is happening on the field during a play and communicate it so everyone is on the same page. That alone is one of the hardest things about the position."

"I feel like not only the center, but the entire offensive line doesn't receive as much credit as they should," Gallo says, looking up from his desk. He crosses his arms, carefully, evidence of being sore from practice the night before. His wrists are indented from tape that he wears every time he suits up and his knuckles are permanently black from lining up at the start of a play, metaphorical tattoos from the game he loves. "I think it is one of the most underrated positions on the field because if you don't have a center that can snap it to the quarterback, you don't have an offense at all. Your entire offense can't work unless your center is able to deliver the snap. Aside from just delivering the snap, if the center doesn't understand the offense and what the guard and tackles have to do, then you're not going to get very far either because the center is the chain of communication on the offensive line. They have to be able to tell the guard and the tackle on both sides what they have to do and if an offensive line isn't all on the same page then it doesn't matter how talented they are or how hard they're playing they're not going to be able to beat teams."

Playing in the center is not for everyone. It takes stamina, strength, and intelligence to be able to direct your offense, traits which many people do not possess. Especially in a team where success is challenging, Eric Gallo has shown what he has to offer, and puts the ball in play.

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