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RELAX, BREATHE, BE CONSISTENT: HOW TO KEEP YOUR QB CLEAN

Often anonymous, an offensive line melds mind with muscle to freeze out pass rushers. What goes into this all-important – but often unheralded – skill of pass-protecting?

Several NFL “OL” players and coaches recently talked about their underappreciated specialty.

“One of the biggest keys to pass-protection is your breathing,” says Cincinnati Bengals All-Star tackle **WILLIE ANDERSON**. “Young guys sometimes will go to the line of scrimmage, and as the quarterback is saying, ‘Set, hut!’ they’ll be holding their breath. That can lead to a one-shot hit, and then you can get beaten.

“I’ve learned, partially through working with pilates, that you need to keep a tight core but still have your normal breathing. In pass-blocking, you’ve got to be strong in your core but relaxed at the same time. The more relaxed you are, the more you’re going to be able to have fluid movement and stay with your man.”

The Jacksonville Jaguars have “stayed with their man” quite well in the past two seasons, especially on third down and 10-or-more yards to go – a likely passing down. In that time, the Jaguars are one of seven clubs to allow three or fewer sacks in that situation since the start of 2004.

“The biggest point we emphasize is knowing who to block,” says Jaguars offensive line coach **PAUL BOUDREAU**. “You have to make sure you take the correct steps. Not everyone is blessed with the **WILLIE ROAF**-kind of talent where you can just go out and block at ease. You always have to make sure you are in the right position.”

A look at the teams allowing the fewest sacks since 2004 on third down and 10-or-more yards to go:

Team	Pass Atts. on 3rd & 10+	Sacks Allowed	Sack Pct.
Green Bay Packers	54	1	1.8%
Miami Dolphins	77	2	2.5%
New England Patriots	55	2	3.5%
Kansas City Chiefs	43	2	4.4%
Jacksonville Jaguars	54	3	5.3%
Denver Broncos	44	3	6.4%
Indianapolis Colts	40	3	7.0%

“Strength is important,” says Baltimore Ravens’ eight-time Pro Bowl tackle **JONATHAN OGDEN**. “But the No. 1 thing is knowing your opponent. If you know your opponent and what they like to do, and you try to take that away from them, force them to another move, then that’s half the battle right there.” Ogden adds that repetition of the basics is more important than learning new tricks.

Among the NFL’s elite pass rushers is two-time AFC All-Star **DWIGHT FREENEY** of the Indianapolis Colts. It is the steadiness that Ogden speaks of that Freney sees in his most formidable counterparts. “Consistency on their protection and pass set – the best linemen don’t waver from it, regardless of what I do.”

Pittsburgh Steelers offensive line and assistant head coach **RUSS GRIMM** tells his charges to remember the basics. “It’s important for linemen to focus on their technique,” says the former Washington Pro Bowl guard. “They have to pay attention to the little things, like their footwork, in order to improve their pass blocking.”

Relax, breathe, repetition – important to remember, but what do these men think of just before the ball is snapped?

“The thing I focus on just before the snap is the inside half of the guy across from me,” says Cincinnati’s Anderson. “Coaches call it having ‘big eyes.’ You keep those big eyes focused on his inside number, the number that’s right across from you, because that’s the part of him that tells you where he’s going to go. Whether he’s going to make a move outside or try to bull-rush you.”