

Speech Drills: NFL Scout Enjoying Fluency of Speech

Calling college coaches on the phone and public speaking used to be excruciating for me. I am an NFL scout who needed to tackle my stuttering problem.

My stuttering began in childhood and perplexed me through high school and into college. I was the equipment manager for a Division 1 football program in college.

After college I started a career as an NFL Scout. Like many people who stutter I was afraid to call new people- in my case coaches I didn't already know- and introduce myself. I would change the order of my words trying to prevent stuttering. That avoidance trick would postpone the stutter but not prevent it. I learned this is called circumlocution.

Several past and present NFL players stutter. They include: Bo Jackson, Adrian Peterson (Chicago Bears), and Lester Hayes. Atlanta Falcons owner, Arthur Blank, stutters.

A scout's biggest test is public speaking in front of dozens or hundreds of NFL personnel. Several times a year we sit on a platform in a big hotel banquet room and verbally report on up to 100 players. We have to read some of the player descriptions verbatim. I use to remove words or change words I feared stuttering on. The audience had the same information in their hands in some situations. People did not know my fumbling was called stuttering and blocking. My employer suggested I get help.

In December of 2007 I started working with Tim Mackesey. Through cognitive reorganization, or reframing, he helped me remove old anxiety and fear about stuttering. This helped me gain the confidence to stop word changing and quickly improve on specific words and sounds I had feared. We removed *mindreading* when calling coaches. Mindreading is when you presume to know what people will think of you: it is always presuming judgment by the listener. Mindreading leads to anticipatory anxiety and that triggered my stuttering.

Tim also taught me some basics of *fluency shaping*. By taking a pen and marking my reading passages into phrases I developed a tempo to control my rate and ease into target words. I do not change or remove words anymore.

Some therapy programs I researched teach you to talk like a robot but they neglect the anxiety part that is a huge part of stuttering. Tim told me we were not going to "reinvent the wheel." I already had pretty good fluency in some social situations. Tim gave me a football metaphor: "you are like a kicker in football who nails the field goals in practice but misses the game winner as the time runs out." I could relate to it being largely stress related.

Being a football player I was no stranger to drills and practice. I used cognitive strategies and visualization I learned from Tim to mentally prepare for the meetings and calls. This helped remove anxiety before ever entering the situation. I would also take my pen and mark passages before practicing them out loud. If Tim said: “Dig a well before you’re thirsty” one more time, I was going to body slam him.

It is now 12 months later and I am a new man. I have several successful meetings behind me. My stuttering is nearly gone. I believe that once I have a couple more good meetings behind me I may be stable in fluency. Scouting in the NFL is close knit community. Several people have complimented me on my new poise and fluency. Those compliments were music to my ear.

My advice to kids out there is to hit back at the stuttering. Do not let stuttering take you down. Tackle the stuttering. Look at cornerbacks in the NFL. Cornerbacks are some of the smallest guys on the field but they deliver the biggest hits. They have courage and grit. Do your drills and work at overcoming stuttering.

Go for it,

A.P.- NFL Scout