

Art of the short-yardage run

How to gain inches on the ground when they matter most

BY STEVE ALIC

Real estate on a football field is no different than anywhere else. It's all about location.

And the closer you are to a first-down marker or goal line, the more it's like acquiring ocean-front property.

It increases in value and is tough to obtain.

This makes it essential for ball carriers to know the fundamentals of how to run the ball in short-yardage situations.

Indianapolis Colts running back and NFL all-star Joseph Addai is among the



MARK AHO

NFL's best short-yardage rushers. Entering this season, since 2007, Addai owns the highest 3rd down conversion percentage on rushing attempts with two or fewer yards to go (26 of 33, 78.8 pct.).

"It's essential to keep your pad level down," said Addai. "You need to make one cut and go forward.

"And you have to understand how the blocking is designed so you know the blocking schemes. It makes things a lot easier in those tight situations. I look at the tackles and guards to see how the blocks are forming."

USA Football coaching member Mark Aho is now in his 26th year of coaching youth football in the

Minneapolis area. In addition to coaching, Aho is the president of the Titan's Youth Football League and the St. Francis Youth Football League in suburban Minneapolis.

"We have a mantra that says, 'Low man wins,'" said Aho. "And ball protection is huge, so we emphasize that along with keeping the feet moving."

Tom Bainter, head coach at Bothell (Wash.) High School near Seattle and the running backs coach of USA Football's gold medal-winning junior national team this summer, adds further insight.

"A low pad level helps you to fall forward," said Bainter, who has led his Bothell H.S. Cougars to a 97-35 (.735) record in his 12 seasons as head coach. "Keep your shoulders square to get positive yards.

"In these situations, you'll also see eight or nine in the box, so protect the football, create contact



Team USA running backs coach Tom Bainter of Bothell (Wash.) H.S. runs a drill with Brian Fields of Western Michigan University.

"Protect the football, create contact with your shoulder pads so they can't hit your ribs or legs and find the crease."

– Tom Bainter, Bothell (Wash.) H.S. head coach



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All three men acknowledge that the action happens fast. Aho especially keeps this in mind as he instructs youth players.

"Keep it simple," said Aho. "Keep counts simple – I rarely try to draw a team offside. Go on the first sound or on 'One.' I stay away from weird counts or motion, too." 

USA Football Coaching Members: help your running backs move the chains and go to the Drills Library at usafootball.com. Eighteen of the more 100 computer-animated drills found here are dedicated to ball carriers.