

What Keeps Bill Parcells Awake at Night

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MONDAY

It's more than 16 hours since the Dallas Cowboys finished their first game of this season, and 25 journalists are still waiting to hear what happened. Of course, they know that the Cowboys lost to the Jacksonville Jaguars, 24-17. After racing out to a 10-0 lead, the Cowboys collapsed. They threw interceptions, dropped passes, allowed sacks, committed penalties. The journalists know this, but they also know that they saw only the same tiny slice of the game that the fans saw on TV. They don't really know why the team fell apart, and the only way to find out is from the inside — from some coach with a knowledge of the plays, who has studied the game film. But since the head coach, Bill Parcells, forbids his 14 assistant coaches from talking to the news media, the pool of possible informants is one. It's as if a sensational crime has occurred in broad daylight and there's only one witness. And he is an extraordinarily reluctant witness.

The journalists and cameramen loiter for a good hour in the hallways of the Dallas Cowboys' practice facility until Parcells finally arrives. He walks to what is in real life a small lunch table in an atrium but that on television will appear, thanks to a cloth backdrop behind him embellished with logos of the Dallas Cowboys and the Ford Motor Company, as dignified as an official briefing room.

"Fire away," he says, and glares at them.

Bill Parcells is the only coach in N.F.L. history to take four different teams to the playoffs, but that only begins to set him apart. In 1983, in his first N.F.L. head coaching job, he took over a New York Giants team that had one winning season over the previous decade, turned it around on a dime and led it to Super Bowl titles in the 1986 and 1990 seasons. In 1993, he became head coach of the New England Patriots a year after they finished 2-14. Two seasons later they were 10-6 and in the playoffs for the first time in eight years; another two seasons later, they were in the Super Bowl. From there Parcells went to the Jets, who were coming off a 1-15 season, and coached them to a 9-7 record in his first year and a 12-4 record in his second. The Cowboys had finished 5-11 three seasons in a row before Parcells arrived in 2003. His first year they were 10-6 and reached the playoffs. No N.F.L. coach has ever proven himself so clearly to be a device for turning a losing team into a winning one. And yet, even now, as he begins his 16th season as a head coach in the N.F.L., he lives the psychological equivalent of a hand-to-mouth existence.

After the late-night flight home from Jacksonville, he went to his condo to catch a few hours' sleep. He woke up not long after he nodded off, choking on his own bile. "It only happens to me during the football season," he says. "It happens no other time of the year. And it wasn't something I ate." After that, he couldn't sleep at all. He found that his ex-wife, Judy — they divorced in 2002, after 40 years of marriage — had left a message on his answering machine. She saw the game on TV. "Please don't let it affect your health," she said.

He still returns in his mind to a question his wife often asked him: why do you do what you do? Coaching football doesn't make him obviously happy. Even in the beginning, in the late 1960's, when he was an assistant coach at West Point, he would come home after games so evidently displeased that his eldest daughter would sit on the sofa next to him, silently, and put on a long face. She was 5 years old and had no idea what had happened; she just picked it up from his expression that postgame wasn't happy time. "When my wife asked me that question," he says, "I never had a good answer. There was no answer. There is no answer."

"Fire away," he says to the 25 people who are here to ask him why he lost. And they do. They ask the same question 10 different ways: who messed up? And he gives them the same answer 10 different ways: none of your damn business.

Thus begins what Parcells calls assignment-of-blame day. He knows exactly who is to blame, of course, because he has spent hours watching the video. At 5 a.m. he gave up trying to sleep and came into his office to study it. It wasn't until then that he really saw the game. When watching video, Parcells doesn't usually waste a lot of time studying his quarterback. That's one player he can see pretty well during the game. But this morning has been different. Against the Jaguars, Drew Bledsoe missed throws he once made in his sleep. He was indecisive and slow to see open receivers. As a result, he held the ball far too long. Last season Bledsoe was sacked 49 times and smacked in the act of throwing 82 times, a league high. He has been showing the symptoms of a quarterback who is looking at the rush instead of his receivers — which is to say a quarterback who should no longer be playing in the N.F.L. Parcells studied the video to determine if Bledsoe had indeed lost his nerve. The video didn't say. But the video did reveal that the Cowboys' cornerbacks were soft and that his left tackle's inability to handle the pass rush had the potential to ruin the Cowboys' season.

It galls him that the media's curiosity so closely echoes his inner concerns (by far the most common question is, are you thinking about benching Bledsoe?), and makes him even less inclined than usual to satisfy it. "We're in the business of collecting information," Parcells likes to say. "We're not in the business of exchanging information." His practices are closed to reporters after the first 15 minutes, and he's comically slow to divulge the most basic facts about the state of his team — like, for instance, which players are injured. At this very moment the Dallas Cowboys have several key players hobbling around the trainers' room, looking distinctly unwell. Left tackle Flozell Adams walks as if he should be on crutches, and cornerback Aaron Glenn is supposed to have arthroscopic surgery in eight days. And yet Parcells's postgame injury report consists of a single player, a third-string wide receiver named Jamaica Rector. When I ask him why Flozell Adams runs with a distinct gimp, Parcells laughs and says, "That's just how he runs."

He isn't exchanging information. He isn't saying who's hurt. And he isn't voicing his doubts about his quarterback. The fifth time a reporter asks Parcells what, exactly, might lead him to replace Bledsoe with the backup, Tony Romo, he glares for a beat or two, and then says, "Bledsoe's starting on Sunday, O.K.?"

TUESDAY

You can tell which day of the week it is by the video Parcells selects at six that morning. On Mondays it's the Cowboys' most recent game. On Tuesdays it's the next week's opponent — in this case, the Washington Redskins. For several hours each morning, he sits behind his desk staring at a screen, making notes on a white legal pad. This Tuesday he motions for me to pull up a chair beside him.

His office is vast and impersonal and without a trace of self-importance. Parcells has had his picture taken with presidents and movie stars, but the only photograph in the office lies facedown on a bookshelf. He turns it over to reveal a snapshot of him with three tough-looking young men — tattoos, sleeveless shirts — from a boxing gym in North Jersey he likes to visit.

His few possessions are confined to the tiny space behind his desk. At his feet rests a single, thick binder in which he has organized every last bit of his personal and financial life: divorce settlement, coaching contracts, book contracts, endorsements, agent agreements. On the desk is his other thick binder, containing practice schedules and other coaching materials. Parcells carts the baggage of his youth wherever he goes, but its contents are mainly the attitudes and emotions of a tough kid raised on the streets of North Jersey. If he decided to quit his job, he wouldn't need a trip back to collect his stuff; he could walk out the door with all of it. The only physical evidence of his past is three small elephant figurines. Parcells's mother passed on to her son an odd superstition: elephants with their trunks pointed toward a doorway bring good luck. In his condo, Parcells keeps a collection of elephant statues. Here he has just three little ones, pointed the wrong direction.

There's just one other thing that connects this office to its occupant: a thick whiteboard beside the desk, on which the Cowboys' depth chart is scribbled. Balanced on top of the board is a baseball bat. "I got that because I got a couple of St. Bernards on this team," Parcells says. "You know why they're called St. Bernards?" I don't. "Because I got to hit them with a stick to get 'em to do anything."

Then he resumes his study of the Washington Redskins, looking for player weaknesses and strategic tendencies. His greatest fear is the threat posed by Redskins wide receiver Santana Moss. One way to deal with Moss — the conservative solution — is to assign two defensive backs to cover him at all times. But that leaves one fewer defender to cover other receivers, tackle running backs or rush the quarterback. Parcells decides he would rather risk having cornerback Terence Newman cover Moss man to man. When the Cowboys are in man-to-man coverage, Newman will go where Moss goes. Parcells points out Redskins right tackle Jon Jansen. "This is Jansen getting pushed back," he says. "He doesn't look like the player he was a couple of years ago." The right side of the Redskins' line seems to have trouble with twists. If Newman can cover Moss long enough, Jansen won't be able to hold off Greg Ellis or Marcus Spears, the Cowboys' pass rushers he has to block.

When Parcells turns his attention to the Redskins' defense, he tries to see the game as the Redskins' coaches see it, with a view to the weaknesses and strengths of their opposition, so that he can guess what the Redskins are trying to do. Parcells spots an opportunity, and his fear momentarily disappears: no matter who the Redskins play, their cornerbacks have been giving opposing receivers far too much space — leaving the short routes uncontested — while still managing, on occasion, to get burned on deep routes. The Redskins' coaches obviously do not trust their corners to play tight. "I think they might be vulnerable at the corner position," Parcells says. "But we go out to exploit that, we may be vulnerable." The Redskins' cornerbacks may be relatively weak, but their pass rushers are relatively strong. Now Parcells begins to worry all over again about his left tackle, Flozell Adams, the critical barrier between the other team's pass rush and Drew Bledsoe. Against the Jaguars, during the game, Adams looked exposed; on video, he looks worse. He gave up a sack, was penalized for a false start and was routinely beaten by quick defenders.

Again, there are ways to compensate. The Cowboys might play with extra tight ends, to help Adams block. But if they do that, the Redskins will respond by inserting extra linebackers — by going into what they call their Diamond Point defense — and Parcells believes the Redskins' defense is more effective in this mode. So he decides the Cowboys will tempt the Redskins with a vulnerable Flozell Adams all on his own and hope that he proves invulnerable.

Having zipped through all of Washington's preseason games, Parcells then studies the Redskins' first regular-season game, against Minnesota, when their offense looked like it belonged to a different team. As the video reaches the end of the first quarter, Parcells points to the screen and says, "They've shifted more than they did the entire preseason." The Redskins' offense suddenly looks less like the handiwork of their head coach, Joe Gibbs — whom Parcells has faced 20 times over the years — than of Al Saunders, the associate head coach for offense the Redskins poached from the Kansas City Chiefs in the off-season. Parcells moves on to examine the 2005 Chiefs. "If you can just understand what they're about, a lot of other things follow," he says. "It's like finding a common denominator in mathematics." What the Chiefs have long been about — and what the Redskins are newly about — is exploiting the width of the field. Their running game tends to avoid the inside, or the middle of the field; it's built instead on sweeps and reverses. Their passing game has a lot of quick screens to the outside. And before every snap there's a lot of running around. "One of the worst things you can do on defense is be a reactive defense," Parcells says. "You can't worry about what they're doing. All that shifting, all that movement before the snap, is designed to get you worried about what they're doing. They don't want you to get a good fix. They don't want you to stare down for 10 seconds. They want to create indecision."

Over the next couple of days, Parcells and his coaching staff can drill his team to be ready for pretty much everything that the Redskins can do. He can design a game plan to exploit slow tackles and weak cornerbacks; he even sees an advantage for the Cowboys in the Redskins' new fast-strike style. Referring to Al Saunders, Parcells says: "This other guy, I think, he's a lot more indiscriminate. I think he's not going to be as concerned about the effect on his defense." In other words, the Redskins' defense will pay the price — in time spent on the field, in fatigue — for Saunders's disinterest in controlling the ball and the clock.

The game plan doesn't take long to create. Parcells has a dozen assistant coaches studying the same video. There will be no secrets. Information about the surface of the game is not the problem; if anything, there's too much of it. I ask Parcells if there is anything he would like to know that he doesn't know: that is, if he had a spy inside the Redskins who could provide him with answers to any of his questions, what would he ask? He thinks a bit before he finally answers. "I'd like to know their mechanism on audible," he says. "I'd like to know how they were changing the plays."

What has him troubled — what has him waking up choking on his bile — isn't what you might expect. It's not concern that the Redskins' coaching staff could spring something on the Cowboys for which they are entirely unprepared. And it's not his team's raw ability. It's a thing that's harder to put into words, and impervious to strategy. Even as he is trying to study his next opponent, he can't shake what happened on Sunday. How his team, the moment the Jaguars pushed back, collapsed. How, the moment the players felt the pressure, they began to commit penalties and the sort of small but critical mental errors that only a coach watching video can perceive. In their performance he smells the sort of failure he defines himself against.

At the back of Parcells's personal binder there are a few loose, well-thumbed sheets that defy categorization: a copy of a speech by Douglas MacArthur; a passage from a book about coaches, which argues that a coach excels by purifying his particular vision rather than emulating a type. Among the papers is an anecdote Parcells brings up often in conversation, about a boxing match that took place nearly 30 years ago between the middleweights Vito Antuofermo and Cyclone Hart. Parcells loves boxing; his idea of a perfect day in the off-season is to spend it inside some ratty boxing gym in North Jersey. "It's a laboratory," he says. "You get a real feel for human behavior under the strongest duress — under the threat of physical harm." In this laboratory he has identified a phenomenon he calls the game quitter. Game quitters, he says, seem "as if they are trying to win, but really they've given up. They've just chosen a way out that's not apparent to the naked eye. They are more concerned with public opinion than the end result."

Parcells didn't see the Hart-Antuofermo fight in person but was told about it, years ago, by a friend and boxing trainer, Teddy Atlas. It stuck in his mind and now strikes him as relevant. Seated, at first, he begins to read aloud from the pages: how in this fight 29 years ago Hart was a well-known big puncher heavily favored against the unknown Vito Antuofermo, how Hart knocked Antuofermo all over the ring, how Antuofermo had no apparent physical gifts except "he bled well." "But," Parcells reads, "he had other attributes you couldn't see." Antuofermo absorbed the punishment dealt out by his natural superior, and he did it so well that Hart became discouraged. In the fifth round, Hart began to tire, not physically but mentally. Seizing on the moment, Antuofermo attacked and delivered a series of quick blows that knocked Hart down, ending the fight.

The Redskins video is still frozen on the screen behind Parcells. He is no longer sitting but is now on his feet. "This is the interesting part," he says, then reads:

“When the fighters went back to their makeshift locker rooms, only a thin curtain was between them. Hart’s room was quiet, but on the other side he could hear Antuofermo’s cornermen talking about who would take the fighter to the hospital. Finally he heard Antuofermo say, ‘Every time he hit me with that left hook to the body, I was sure I was going to quit. After the second round, I thought if he hit me there again, I’d quit. I thought the same thing after the fourth round. Then he didn’t hit me no more.’

“At that moment, Hart began to weep. It was really soft at first. Then harder. He was crying because for the first time he understood that Antuofermo had felt the same way he had and worse. The only thing that separated the guy talking from the guy crying was what they had done. The coward and the hero feel the same emotions. They’re both human.”

When Parcels finishes, he says: “This is the story of our last game. We were Cyclone Hart.”

Then, with the greatest care, as if they’re an old and cherished possession instead of a couple of grubby sheets of paper, he returns the pages to the binder that holds his private business. He returns to watching video of the Washington Redskins. “Their receivers are upgraded from last year,” he says. “If we aren’t able to cover Moss man to man, we’ll lose.”

WEDNESDAY

Terence Newman has no idea that he is so high on Bill Parcels’s list of concerns. “What else did he say?” asks the fourth-year cornerback, when I tell him that Parcels seems to think that his ability to handle Santana Moss in man-to-man coverage is the key to shutting down the Redskins’ offense. “Coach doesn’t say too much,” Newman says, “unless you do something bad. If he’s not saying anything to you, you must be doing something good.”

At different times, Parcels tells me that the Cowboys will lose if (a) his left tackle, Flozell Adams, cannot protect his quarterback, or (b) Newman fails to shut down Santana Moss in man-to-man coverage, or (c) his quarterback, Drew Bledsoe, makes poor throws. He refers to no other player or position as a necessary condition for victory. He can survive poor play by his linebackers, or interior linemen, or receivers, or backs. His concerns about his quarterback are predictable. His concerns about his left tackle and the cornerback are telling: they mirror almost exactly the shift that has occurred in football finances since Parcels became a head coach. When free agency arrived in 1993, defensive backs were the lowest-paid players on an N.F.L. defense. Offensive linemen were just about the lowest-paid players on offense, and the left tackle was paid no more than any other lineman. The cornerback is now the best-paid defensive position and the left tackle the second-best-paid offensive position; indeed, after the quarterback, the left tackle is the highest-paid position on the field.

Adams is listed at 6-foot-7, 340 pounds, and he is, if anything, heavier. Terence Newman is listed at 5-foot-11, 195, and he is, almost certainly, smaller. That they are even allowed to engage in a contact sport together is a cause for wonder; that Terence Newman has survived as long as he has is something of a miracle. But they have several things in common. Both do much of their job while running

backward. Both operate on the edge of the play and find themselves in hand-to-hand battle with recognized superstars. The left tackle typically blocks the best pass rusher, who attacks from the quarterback's blind side; the cornerback frequently covers the most threatening offensive player. And both needed free agency for the N.F.L. to reward and publicize their importance.

I tell Terence Newman that in addition to worrying that Newman may single-handedly blow the game, Parcells is also worried Flozell Adams may single-handedly blow the game. This doesn't make Newman feel better. He confesses that he spends at least some small amount of his time wondering what Parcells thinks of him. What's odd about this is that he doesn't appear to spend a great deal of time wondering if he's any good — nor should he. Newman was the first player Parcells drafted after arriving in Dallas, and he has proven to be a shrewd choice. In his rookie season with the Cowboys, he was a Pro Bowl alternate, as he was again in his third season, when he didn't give up a single touchdown.

"But isn't Moss faster than you?" I ask.

"He's fast, but I don't know if he's faster than me," he says.

"How fast are you?"

"Come on in here," he says, and I follow him into the film room used by the defensive backs. He hits a few buttons on a computer terminal and up on the screen pops a play from last year's game between the Cowboys and the Oakland Raiders. The ball is on the Oakland 14-yard line. Oakland's star receiver, Randy Moss — no relation to Santana — lines up across the field from Newman, and is covered by the other cornerback. Moss finds a seam in the middle of the field, snags a pass and appears bound for the end zone. There isn't anyone within 10 yards of him, and no one between him and the goal line. But what should be an uninterrupted 86-yard dash ends after 79 yards, when Newman pulls Moss down from behind. "I'm that fast," he says.

And then Terence Newman smiles almost shyly. He looks about 15 years old, and now fesses up: when he was at Kansas State, he was the Big 12 100-meter and indoor 60-meter sprint champion. Speed isn't a problem. "I'll just try to buy as much time on the line of scrimmage as possible," he says. Then he wanders off to another endless meeting.

Because it's Wednesday, Parcells is watching video of his own team. For the next three days he will study not game videos but videos of the Cowboys' practices. When he does this, he tends to focus on what he couldn't see clearly from the sidelines. And what he can't see from the sidelines is usually pretty much everything that happens along the line of scrimmage. His obsession is with space — creating it on offense and filling it on defense. Parcells is interested especially in the first step or two that players take, because that is when almost all of their critical mistakes are made. He's looking for bad angles, missed assignments, confused play. He'll watch the first one-third of a second of a play, stop the video in a fury and holler for an assistant coach. He does this now.

“Freddie!” he screams, loud enough that the Cowboys’ tight-ends coach, Freddie Kitchens, can hear him two offices down the hall. On his television screen, the players are all frozen two steps into a play. “Freddie!”

But there is no need to shout twice; Kitchens is already hustling into Parcells’s office. Parcells rewinds the video and replays the first millisecond. It appears to be a passing play, though Drew Bledsoe has only just begun to turn and drop back. But in those first two steps, says Parcells, the rookie tight end, Anthony Fasano, has managed to doom the entire play. Fasano’s job is to block Redskins linebacker Marcus Washington. But the angle Fasano takes as he leaves the line of scrimmage means he’ll push Washington inside instead of taking him outside, as he’s supposed to.

“I know,” Kitchens says. “We already talked to him about it!”

“You go over it with him again,” says Parcells. “You tell him Coach is a little disturbed.” And with that Kitchens leaves.

“All we need is about four or five of those in the game,” Parcells grumbles, “and we’re done.” Then he fast-forwards the video in search of the next seemingly trivial error, which he knows he will find and yet is unsure he will be able to correct. “Just because you can identify a problem,” he says, “doesn’t mean you are any closer to fixing it.” He’s an odd combination of fatalism and can-do spirit. He seems both to believe and yet not to believe that he can get through to his players. On the one hand, he says, “the players now have so many people telling them what they want to hear that it’s harder to get through to them with words.” On the other hand, the Cowboys’ locker room is decorated with words to live by:

“Blame nobody, expect nothing, do something.” “Losers assemble in little groups and bitch about the coaches and the system and other players in other little groups. Winners assemble as a team.” “Losing may take a little from your credibility, but quitting will destroy it.” “There are many exit doors in pro football. Don’t take them.” “Don’t confuse routine with commitment.”

Each of Parcells’s little inspirational sayings comes with a provenance. The one about routine and commitment, for instance: Parcells directed that at a young Aaron Glenn in the Jets’ weight room nearly a decade ago. A few months later, Glenn, a defensive back, confessed that it had stuck with him. And so now it’s stuck on the Cowboys’ white cinder-block wall. The players can’t go to practice without being hectorred, silently, by their head coach. Parcells says he has no idea if his words have any effect.

THURSDAY

The second and final day of full-scale practice. Never have so many millionaires been so regimented and subdued as when an N.F.L. team gathers to practice. If they didn’t wear numbers on their jerseys, the stars would be indistinguishable from the scrubs. The only exception today is wide receiver Terrell Owens, who reminds everybody of his own importance. In huddles he stands apart. In wind sprints he races out into the lead — look at me! — and then, midway through, gives up altogether and falls to the rear (look at me, again!). There’s no such thing as too much attention, and no event too trivial to

disrupt, albeit mildly. The team's owner, Jerry Jones, strolls onto the field, and the first thing he does is seek out T.O. to make overeager chitchat, like an airplane passenger trying to distract the guy with the shoe bomb. Even Parcells, when T.O. joshes with him, seems uncharacteristically willing to be distracted.

One of the strange things about professional football players is how little time they spend playing football. Their schedules begin at dawn, and their coaches don't have time to sleep. But the players spend more time sitting in meetings, lifting weights and taking showers than they do playing football. If you added it all up, they probably spend more time wrapping various body parts in surgical tape than they do playing the game. Wednesday and Thursday are the two days the Cowboys practice longest and hardest, but even these practices last just a few hours and only faintly resemble an actual football game. Football is the sport in which practice is least like the game. Because the risk of injury outweighs the reward of repetition, they don't hit each other and they seldom run all out. And it's never truly competitive; the players who aren't good enough to start are assigned to imitate the opposition for the benefit of the first-string offense or defense. The scrubs play the role of the Redskins so that the Cowboys' starting defense can pretend to stymie the Redskins' offense, and the Cowboys' starting offense can run up the score on the Redskins' defense. If the coaches didn't scream and yell so much, you'd never guess that any of it actually mattered.

During practice Parcells says little, but what he says tends to make an impression. (To defensive end Kenyon Coleman, after a mistake: "You just happy to be here again, Kenyon? Ain't gonna last long this year!" To the rookie wide receiver Sam Hurd, after he runs the wrong route: "Not good, Sam! I'm trying to get comfortable with even the idea of putting you in a game.") But for the most part he stands on the sidelines with his arms crossed high over his chest, hands tucked under his armpits, collecting information.

Today, without seeming to, he's making a study of his troubled place kicker, Mike Vanderjagt. Last season the Cowboys finished 9-7, but essentially missed the playoffs by a field goal. Against Seattle in the fourth quarter, "we miss a field goal from the 10-yard line," Parcells says. "On Thanksgiving Day we miss a 34-yarder versus Denver, and the game goes into overtime. Last season we had 8 games decided by 3 or less and 11 games by 7 or less." This isn't too far off the league average: half of all N.F.L. games are decided by 7 points or fewer, and a quarter are decided by 3 points or fewer. "I knew I was in trouble last year," Parcells says, "when my long snapper, my punter and my field goal kicker were all from out of the country."

To fix their kicking problem, the Cowboys signed — and gave a \$2.5 million bonus to — a Canadian, Mike Vanderjagt, formerly of the Indianapolis Colts. At that moment, Vanderjagt was the most accurate place kicker in N.F.L. history. His final act before the Cowboys signed him, however, was to miss a 46-yard field goal in the last minute that would have tied an A.F.C. divisional playoff game and given the Colts a shot at getting to the Super Bowl.

He turned up at the Cowboys' camp with a pulled muscle that the Cowboys' trainers couldn't locate, and sat out most of the first three preseason games. In overtime of the Cowboys' fourth and final preseason game, against the Minnesota Vikings, he missed a potential game-winning 33-yard field goal. The

Cowboys got the ball back and drove to the Vikings' 14-yard line, and Parcels, thinking it might help his new kicker get over the humiliation of the miss, sent him back out. He missed again. ("I could have made that kick," Parcels says.) Against the Jaguars, Parcels didn't even have his expensive kicker dress for the game, but instead used the guy on the taxi squad, Shaun Suisham. "You miss the kick that puts your team in the Super Bowl. ...," Parcels says, without finishing the thought.

It's an elemental thing — that mysterious something in a player under pressure that either snaps or holds — and elemental things are what interest this old coach. Golfers with the yips, big-league catchers whose careers end when they find themselves suddenly unable to throw the ball back to the pitcher — these he understands. He was in the stands during a spring-training baseball game when the St. Louis Cardinals tried to bring back their mentally broken young pitcher, Rick Ankiel — and watched Ankiel throw the ball over the catcher's head, several times. "Ian Baker Finch!" Parcels exclaims, once he has warmed to the subject. "Ian Baker Finch won the British Open. Two years later he couldn't hit a golf ball with a golf club." Fear of failure can infect the mind and turn sport into a kind of walking death. "If you can find a solution to that problem," he tells me, "quit writing. You'd make a fortune. You got all these sports psychologists. None of them can help these guys."

Now, as he conspicuously pretends not to notice his \$2.5 million kicker shanking 30-yard field goal attempts in practice, Parcels wonders if he's witnessing another one of those inexplicable and total collapses of nerves. ("And don't tell me that it can't happen with kickers," he says.) He doesn't talk to Vanderjagt, and Vanderjagt doesn't talk to him: all this drama and anxiety occur without a word of direct, verbal communication. "But," Parcels says, "even when he doesn't think I'm watching him, I'm watching him." Standing on the sideline, staring at his first-team offense as it scores yet another touchdown against the scrubs, the coach who is in the business of collecting information listens to a report from Tony Romo, the backup quarterback and the one who holds the ball for the place kicker. Romo tells him that Vanderjagt is finally hitting the ball squarely. "Yeah," Parcels says. "In practice."

Toward the end of practice, right after the defense stuffs a cheap imitation of the Redskins' offense, and just before the offense triumphs over a cheap imitation of the Redskins' defense, Parcels strolls out onto the field from his usual place on the sidelines and chats with Terence Newman. He has noticed that just before the ball is snapped Newman, instead of being set and square to the line of scrimmage, is slightly turned (the better to call back and forth to other players). Parcels is worried that Newman is falling into a habit of never being exactly ready. He can get away with this on some Sundays, but starting sideways to the line will cost him half a step, and that half-step could be all Santana Moss needs to run right by him.

Every Thursday afternoon after practice and after watching that practice on video, the coaches meet around an oblong table to make their final personnel decisions. They have already pretty much decided how many players at each position they will dress for the game — seven offensive linemen, three running backs, four wide receivers and so on — but there is one last unanswered question: one kicker or two? It's highly unusual to dress more than one kicker, but this is a highly unusual situation: a kicker on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"Anyone got anything to say?" Parcells asks.

No one has anything to say. Parcells relates the news, reported by Romo, that Vanderjagt is hitting the ball more squarely.

One of the coaches pipes up: "At least he looks like he's kicking the ball instead of just flailing away at it."

"I don't know if there's a right decision," Parcells says. "It's a coin flip."

He declines to flip the coin. He wants to preserve the mystery of who will kick on Sunday, right up to game time. So the coaches spend the entire meeting figuring out which of the other 44 players on the game-day roster might be dropped, with the smallest ripple effect, to make way for an extra kicker. There's no longer such a thing as a bench warmer in the N.F.L. — every one of the 45 players allowed to suit up for a game must be able to play, to justify his spot on the sidelines. Back and forth the coaches go, between a rookie linebacker named Oliver Hoyte and a third-string tight end named Ryan Hannam, before deciding Hannam will sit out, because he's less useful on special teams.

Once that's settled, they toss around a few plays that might work and a few that might not. Parcells is one of those people who find out what he's thinking by what he does. He trusts his gut, and so spends a lot of time rationalizing actions that did not arise from logic or argument. "I do a lot of things on the fly," he admits. Now he blurts out to his offensive coaches that there's no point practicing a certain pass play with Bledsoe as quarterback because he thinks that, for that play, he holds on to the ball too long. But, he says, "you can run that with Romo."

FRIDAY

Friday is the best day of the week, Parcells says. On Friday the game plan is set in stone, all preparations are finished and there isn't anything to do. "What about tomorrow?" I ask. If Friday is a picnic, Saturday should be a cakewalk. "Tomorrow you start worrying about the game," he says.

And with that he goes to have the chiropractor break down scar tissue in his upper thigh. He hurt himself playing golf. He doesn't actually play much, but he'll go out on the range and hit hundreds of balls. "I like practicing," he says. "It's therapy for me."

Rich Dalrymple, the Cowboys' director of public relations, walks in and says, "Gibbs is saying Portis isn't playing."

"Get out of here!" His defense just spent the week focusing on Clinton Portis, a Redskins running back.

"It was on the wire," Dalrymple says.

“That means Duckett’s playing,” says Parcels. That would be T. J. Duckett, acquired just three weeks earlier by Washington from Atlanta.

“I don’t know,” Dalrymple says.

“Find out!”

“How am I supposed to find out?” Dalrymple asks.

Parcels shakes his head: not my problem.

“Give a guy a morsel and he wants a fillet,” says Dalrymple, and Parcels laughs.

SATURDAY

It’s heresy in the N.F.L. to suggest there should be free time, or that there is such a thing as diminishing returns to work. But the truth is that there are some days when there is more to do than others, and on Saturday there is next to nothing to do. All strategic decisions have been made, all plays practiced, everyone who needs to be yelled at has been yelled at, at least twice. When I ask Parcels how he spends Saturday, he says, “Worrying about the game.” One sign of how little actual work needs to be done is that he sets aside the morning for the photographers to take this season’s official team photograph.

By the time the players — 63 of them — have arranged themselves on the scaffolding, there are, in addition, 32 coaches, trainers and other support staff. The number of jobs on the playing field has remained steady for decades, but the number of ancillary jobs has boomed. (This is one of the two notable differences when you compare current team photos with those from the early 1960’s that decorate the Cowboys’ hallways. The other is the increasing numbers of black players.) In 1961, the Dallas team photo had just 6 men out of uniform; as late as 1980 it had a mere 13. The turning point came in 1990, when the team photographer could no longer cram all the nonplayers into a single row and began to stick two at both ends of the rows. As the price of the asset — the N.F.L. player — has skyrocketed, so has the value of those, however peripheral, who can extract a bit more value from it. As the game becomes more complex, it requires more people to understand it, and as more people are brought in to parse it, it becomes more complex. By about 2030, the Cowboys’ team photo will be a handful of players nestled among hundreds of trainers and coaches and God knows what else. Competitive forces break people’s nerves. They also reshape football teams.

The photographer shoots 12 pictures. In between, the players laugh and joke. But the moment the photographer says, “One, two, three,” the laughter evaporates and their faces freeze in expressions of grim manliness. Even T.O., fixing his mouth the exact same way each time, is as serious as a debutante posing for the society pages.

SUNDAY

More than any other sport, football is meant to be viewed from a God-like angle. Pacing up and down the sidelines, the head coach has the worst view in the house — except for everyone else on the sidelines. The sidelines are an obstacle course of thick cables, Cowboys cheerleaders, flatbed trucks with TV cameras, pushy cameramen and wide people with even wider sound dishes. So the only way to tell if a play is good or bad for the Cowboys is by the crowd's reaction and the replay on the Jumbotron, which the players themselves watch when they're curious about what has happened. The closer you are to the action, the more desperately your eyes search for the televised image. All in all, the sidelines illustrate that physical proximity to a complicated event doesn't necessarily help you understand it.

Removing myself to the press box, I see that for almost an entire half all goes well for the Cowboys. More than well: none of Parcells's fears and all of his hopes are realized. Flozell Adams is as impenetrable as a symbolist poem, and Drew Bledsoe resembles a quarterback in his prime. The Redskins' cornerbacks are indeed vulnerable, exactly as Parcells had imagined. Double teaming Terrell Owens, they leave the receiver Terry Glenn in man-to-man coverage, and Glenn makes them pay. The Redskins' cornerbacks, increasingly insecure, commit dumb holding penalties. The Cowboys' offense moves at will, despite dropping nine passes and committing nine penalties. The defense establishes the virtuous circle that has been the signature of Bill Parcells's defenses since he rejoined the Giants in 1981 and unleashed Lawrence Taylor: Terence Newman covers Santana Moss well, which in turn forces the quarterback, Mark Brunell, to hold on to the ball a fraction of a second longer than he should, giving the Cowboys' fastest pass rushers just enough time to hit him. In response, the Redskins' tackles assigned to block the pass rushers grow twitchy and jump offside. Midway through the second quarter, a Redskins cornerback beaten on a deep route by Terry Glenn is called for interference. The Cowboys punch it into the end zone, and go up, 17-3. The game is on the brink of turning into a rout. Midway through the second quarter, the Redskins have more yards in penalties than from gains.

But if all you saw of the game was Bill Parcells's face, you'd never know life was good. Over and over again, NBC cuts to a close-up of Parcells on the sidelines. When he took over the Giants in 1983, the television cameras seldom found the coach. Now the coach is the go-to guy for the emotions of the game. Parcells's face appears four times for each shot of Joe Gibbs, and it's not hard to see why. Gibbs gives the cameras nothing. He keeps his head down and fails to convey much at all. Parcells, on the other hand, is a study in dissatisfaction, and the TV people have figured that out: they focus on him only after some Cowboy has screwed up. Disapproval to Parcells is like snow to an Eskimo: he has spent so much time living with it that he has developed an elaborate range of signals, many of them nonverbal, to express the subtle shades of dissatisfaction. One time he looks as if he has eaten a bad oyster, another as if he has just been told his car has a flat tire. In any case, NBC relies on him to convey what is wrong with his team, but not what is right.

The material rapidly improves. The Cowboys kick off, and the Redskins' Rock Cartwright — to whom no attention was paid by the Cowboys' coaches during the past week — returns the ball 100 yards for a touchdown. This is the first time the Cowboys have allowed a kickoff return for a touchdown since 1993. Now the score is 17-10, and in a mere 13 seconds, the mood of the game has changed. The Cowboys

have become Cyclone Hart. They make so many mistakes; they drop passes ever more egregiously and commit ever more foolish penalties. Just like that, the Cowboys are back in another tight game.

At halftime there's no chance for a speech — several of the Cowboys reappear on the field four minutes after they left — but Parcells has taken precautions. This morning, before the game, he called a meeting of the players without the assistant coaches. "I don't want to talk with the coaches around," he told me beforehand. "I want the players to know that I am trying to make a point." This morning, he broke into his personal binder, took out the story of Vito Antuofermo and read it to his players. All week long it wasn't strategy that occupied him; it was character. There's a tendency to believe that, to be successful, a pro football coach must have a gift for the chessboard aspect of the game. But strategy isn't what chiefly interests Parcells. His success depends on his ability to demand, and to receive, higher levels of performance from his players. He doesn't say so explicitly, but his actions speak for him: he spends much more time thinking about getting inside his players' heads, and their skins, than about anything else. He tries to make them uncomfortable. On a baseball team or a golf team, this sort of pressurized approach might lead to a team-wide nervous breakdown. In football — at least for him — it works magic.

But midway through the third quarter there is no sign that Parcells has had any effect. Once again, his Cowboys reel the moment they are jolted. Their mistakes become more and more outrageous and self-defeating until, finally, they fumble away the ball in their own half of the field. The Redskins begin to drive. On a crucial third and 9, on the Cowboys' 21-yard line, Brunell drops back. He spots and throws to an open receiver, Chris Cooley, streaking down the sideline. Out of nowhere comes Cowboys safety Roy Williams. He intercepts the pass, on the 1-yard line. And then — just like that — the rout is on again. Terry Glenn catches a bomb for a touchdown. Mike Vanderjagt hits a 50-yard field goal. The Cowboys win, 27-10, but it could have easily been two touchdowns worse for the Redskins. Still, Parcells allows himself no obvious pleasure and exhibits only the most fleeting hint of relief. He passes Terence Newman and tells him he has done a good job. (And he has: on Newman's watch, Moss caught just one pass for 7 yards.) He walks over to left tackle Flozell Adams and pats his cheek, and Adams, whose idea of an emotional outburst is a wince, actually smiles.

But mainly the old coach looks sick to his stomach. As the clock winds down, and the camera lingers on Parcells, lips pursed as if he has just finished sucking the world's largest lemon, NBC's play-by-play commentator Al Michaels laughs and says, "You'll never see an expression indicating pleasure on Bill's face."

MONDAY

Before the game I asked Parcells what time to expect him in his office the following morning. "If I can't sleep it could be as early as 5," he said. "If we win it could be as late as 7. Probably win or lose, I'm not going to be in the best of moods. Something's gonna happen."

I turn up at 7 and find him well settled in. He got out of bed at 4, was in the shower at 4:20 and at his desk at 5, consumed with loathing for self and team. “We had 70 yards in gains negated by 60 yards in penalties,” he says. “That’s 9 points.” I ask him if there was any pattern to the penalties. “Yeah,” he says, “they were all stupid.” It’s the same problem: the Cowboys just happened to win in spite of it. “When your players do dumb things, either they are dumb players or you are not doing a good job of getting across to them what causes you to lose games.” The moment the Cowboys hit the locker room after their victory, Parcells told them, “You know, guys, I just want my team to play better.”

Now he begins to review the video. It’s seven hours before he will meet with the news media for what he calls distribution-of-credit day, when the only positive thing he’ll go out of his way to stress is Mike Vanderjagt’s clutch kick, which wasn’t clutch. (There’s no shame in missing a 50-yarder. It is, from a kicker’s point of view, all upside.) He was right: there is always something. One tight end, Anthony Fasano, missed blocks; the other, Jason Witten, dropped balls. Parcells arrives at the play just before Roy Williams intercepted the pass that, had the Redskins caught it, might have tied the game. “Right now,” he says, “I think we’re going to lose.” They didn’t lose, of course, but you wouldn’t know it from Parcells. He’s seeing what’s wrong. Four times, for instance, his rookie safety, Patrick Watkins, goes low to make a tackle and leads with his neck and shoulders. “He’s block tackling,” says Parcells. “I’ve seen more guys get hurt doing that than any single thing in football.”

He calls one of his trainers for an injury report. “I apologize to you for being a little rough on you last night,” Parcells says. (He barked at the trainer for taking Terrell Owens into the locker room before the end of the game to have his finger X-rayed. In the first place, it made it harder for Parcells to claim Owens wasn’t injured. In the second place, it was a finger.)

“I appreciate you saying that,” says the trainer, who then explains that it was Owens, not him, who insisted on the X-ray. “I asked him, ‘You want to go in?’ and he said yes,” the trainer says.

Parcells sighs and says, “Now, Terry’s not hurt that bad, is he?” Terry Glenn has something wrong with his shoulder.

The trainer — no doubt sensing that his injury report is about to be edited — says he’s unsure.

“Well,” Parcells says, ending the conversation before any other players have a chance to get hurt, “you better order a coffin for Watkins. The way he’s tackling, he’ll need it soon.”

He was right: there’s always something. It’s in the nature of the job. “Guys can’t take it,” he says, “that’s why they get out.” Some of the best coaches the game ever saw — Bill Walsh, John Madden — quit simply because the strain was too great. Parcells won’t quit. He now knows that about himself: he needs it more than it needs him. He just turned 65. His marriage is over, and his daughters are grown. “My whole life I’ve always had some guys,” he says. “You gotta have some guys. That’s probably one of the fears I have when I get older: that I won’t have any guys.” His younger brother Don died last year. Most of his close friends who haven’t died are back in New Jersey. His legacy is secure: he will one day have a bust in the football Hall of Fame. But then his legacy was secure in 2003, before he took the Cowboys’ head-coaching job. Before he did so, he had a surprising number of plaintive phone calls from former

players. “My old players didn’t want me to take the job,” he says. “They were afraid I’d embarrass myself. They didn’t get it. It’s not about your legacy.”

Right now he is living alone in what amounts to a hotel room in Irving, Tex., whose sole virtue is that it is a 10-minute drive to both the Cowboys’ practice facility and Texas Stadium. It’s just him and whatever it is that keeps him in the game. For the longest time he pretended that he didn’t need it. He walked out of two jobs without having another in hand, and he has played hard-to-get with N.F.L. owners more times than any coach in N.F.L. history. After he quit the Jets, in 1999, he said at a press conference: “I’ve coached my last football game. You can write that on your little chalkboard. This is it. It’s over.” Now, even as his job appears to be making him sick, he has abandoned the pose. “As you get older,” he says, pointing to a screen, where the play is frozen, “your needs diminish. They don’t increase. They diminish. I need less money. I need less sex. But this — this doesn’t change.”

What this is, he can’t — or won’t — specify. But when your life has been defined by the pressure of competition and your response to it, there’s a feeling you get, and it’s hard to shake. You wake up each morning knowing the next game is all that matters. If you fail in it, nothing you’ve done with your life counts. By your very nature you always have to start all over again, fresh. It’s an uncomfortable feeling, but it’s nonetheless addictive. Even if you have millions in the bank and everyone around you tells you that you’re a success, you seek out that uncomfortable place. And if you don’t, you’re on the wrong side of the thin curtain that separates Cyclone Hart from Vito Antuofermo. “It’s a cloistered, narrow existence that I’m not proud of,” says Parcells. “I don’t know what’s going on in the world. And I don’t have time to find out. All I think about is football and winning. But hey — ” He sweeps his hand over his desk and points to the office that scarcely registers his presence. “Who’s got it better than me?”

Michael Lewis is a contributing writer for The New York Times Magazine. His new book is “The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game.”

Corrections: Nov. 5, 2006

An article last Sunday in Play magazine about Dallas Cowboys Coach Bill Parcells misstated the surname of a Dallas tight end. He is Jason Witten, not Whitten. The article also misstated the position that Chris Cooley of the Washington Redskins plays, and misidentified the former team of Washington’s running back T. J. Duckett. Cooley is a tight end, not a wide receiver. Duckett played for Atlanta, not Denver. The article also referred incorrectly to a playoff game last season in which Dallas’s kicker, Mike Vanderjagt, then with the Indianapolis Colts, missed a potential game-tying field goal against Pittsburgh. It was a divisional playoff game, not a conference championship game.