I Never Made it to the NFL

From *The Last Lecture*
By Randy Pausch with Jeffrey Zaslow

Professors are sometimes asked what they would say in a "last lecture." In other words, what wisdom and important life lessons would they share, if they knew it was their last chance? When Carnegie-Mellon computer science professor Randy Pausch was asked to participate in his university's "last lecture" series, he was in a unique situation: He had recently been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. On September 18, 2007, he gave what would indeed be his last lecture. Pausch, a married father of three young children, was only 46 at the time. Since then, 10 million people have watched the video of his lecture, *Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams* (www.thelastlecture.com). In April 2008, the book *The Last Lecture* was published. It contained the information in the lecture, as well as additional insights Pausch wanted to share. The book immediately became a number-one bestseller. The following selection is an excerpt from that book. Although Pausch reports in the book that he "never made it to the NFL" (National Football League), a few months after his lecture, he was invited to participate in a Pittsburgh Steelers practice. So in a different way from what he had envisioned as a boy, Pausch did achieve his childhood dream of "making it to the NFL." An award-winning teacher and researcher, Pausch also led the Alice Project (www.alice.org), which uses storytelling and interactive game playing in a 3-D environment to introduce young people to computer programming. The software makes it easy for users to create animation. Professor Pausch has also worked with Google, Adobe, Electronic Arts, and Walt Disney Imagineering – achieving many of his childhood dreams along the way.



1 I love football. *Tackle* football. I started playing when I was nine years old, and football got me through. It helped make me who I am today. And even though I did not reach the National Football League, I sometimes think I got more from pursuing that dream, and not accomplishing it, than I did from many of the ones I did accomplish.

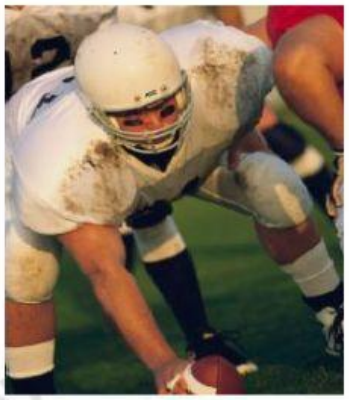
2 My romance with football started when my dad dragged me, kicking and screaming, to join a league. I had no desire to be there. I was naturally wimpy, and the smallest kid by far. Fear turned to awe when I met my coach, Jim Graham, a hulking, six-foot-four wall-of-a-guy. He had been a linebacker at Penn State, and was seriously old-school. I mean, really old-school; like he thought the forward pass was a trick play.

3 On the first day of practice, we were all scared to death. Plus, he hadn't brought along any footballs.

4 One kid finally spoke up for all of us. "Excuse me, Coach. There are no footballs."

5 And Coach Graham responded, "We don't need any footballs."

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7 "How many men are on the football field at a time?" he asked us.
8 Eleven on a team, we answered. So that makes twenty-two.
9 "And how many people are touching the football at any given time?"
10 One of them.
11 "Right!" he said. "So we're going to work on what those other twenty-one guys are doing."
12 Fundamentals. That was a great gift Coach Graham gave us. Fundamentals, fundamentals, fundamentals. As a college professor, I've seen this as one lesson so many kids ignore, always to their detriment: You've got to get the fundamentals down, because otherwise the fancy stuff is not going to work.

13 Coach Graham used to work me hard. I remember one practice in particular. "You're doing it all wrong, Pausch. Go back! Do it again!" I tried to do what he wanted. It wasn't enough. "You owe me, Pausch! You're doing push-ups after practice."
14 When I was finally dismissed, one of the assistant coaches came over to reassure me. "Coach Graham worked you pretty hard, didn't he?" he said.
15 I could barely muster a "yeah."
16 "That's a good thing," the assistant told me. "When you're messing up and nobody says anything to you anymore, that means they've given up on you."
17 That lesson has stuck with me my whole life. When you see yourself doing something badly and nobody's bothering to tell you anymore, that's a bad place to be. You may not want to hear it, but your critics are often the ones telling you they still love you and care about you and want to make you better.
18 There's a lot of talk these days about giving children self-esteem. It is not something you can *give*; it is something they have to build. Coach Graham worked in a no-coddling zone. Self-esteem? He knew there was really only one way to teach kids how to develop it. You give them something they can't do, they work hard until they find they can do it, and you just keep repeating the process.
19 When Coach Graham first got hold of me, I was this wimpy kid with no skills, no physical strength, and no conditioning. But he made me realize that if I work hard enough, there will be things I can do tomorrow that I can't do today. Even now, having just turned forty-seven, I can give you a three-point stance that any NFL lineman would be proud of.
20 I realize that, these days, a guy like Coach Graham might get thrown out of a youth sports league. He'd be too tough. Parents would complain.
21 I haven't seen Coach Graham since I was a teen, but he just keeps showing up in my head, forcing me to work harder whenever I feel like quitting, forcing me to be better. He gave me a feedback loop for life.
22 When we send our kids to play organized sports – football, soccer, swimming, whatever – for most of us, it is not because we're desperate for them to learn the intricacies of the sport.

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23 What we really want them to learn is far more important: teamwork, perseverance, sportsmanship, the value of hard work, an ability to deal with adversity. This kind of indirect learning is what some of us like to call a "head fake."

24 There are two kinds of head fakes. The first is literal. On a football field, a player will move his head one way so you'll think he's going in that direction. Then he goes the opposite way. It is like a magician using misdirection. Coach Graham used to tell us to watch a player's waist. "Where his belly button goes, his body goes," he'd say.

25 The second kind of head fake is the really important one – the one that teaches people things they don't realize they're learning until well into the process. If you're a head-fake specialist, your hidden objective is to get them to learn something you want them to learn.

26 This kind of head-fake learning is absolutely vital. And Coach Graham was the master.

5 **Reading for detail** Read the excerpt and answer the questions. Compare answers with a partner or in a group.

1. What did Randy Pausch believe with regard to his childhood dream of playing in the NFL?

2. What does "head-fake learning" refer to?

3. Why would Coach Graham most likely not last long in one of today's youth sports leagues?

4. What was Coach Graham's approach to helping children gain self-esteem?

5. What is Pausch's opinion about receiving criticism?

6 **Critical reading** Read the excerpt again and answer the questions. Make notes and compare ideas with a partner or in a group.

1. What is the author's intended audience? (Children, adults, students, or other?)

2. What is the author's point of view about:
   - learning "fundamentals"
   - building self-esteem
   - the purpose of organized sports for kids
   - "head-fake" learning?

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