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Cardiac Cats: Mental Toughness and the 2022 Jacksonville Jaguars

Sports have a way of inspiring deep passion and renewing our faith in what's possible. There's a reason why we love watching our favorite teams play, win or lose. One of the primary reasons why I love watching football is because of the life lessons the game teaches me as a person. It makes me rethink what's important in life, makes me reconsider how I go about solving problems every day, and reminds me that no matter how bad things can get there is always another play left for me to execute to get the win. Case in point, the roller coaster of a season for the 2022 Jacksonville Jaguars which culminated in pulling off a comeback victory after falling behind 27-0 against the Los Angeles in the Wildcard Round this year (Long, 2023). Not only was this game the greatest comeback in Jaguars franchise history, but it was also the third greatest comeback victory in NFL playoff history (Mullin, 2023). All it takes is the mental toughness to persevere and not give up when all seems lost. That's true in sports as much as it's true in life. Taking a terrible football team (or your life) and turning it into a true playoff contender (or a life worth living) is achieved through fostering mental toughness in three key areas: learning how to master your own abilities and overcome your limitations, establishing the proper support system to recover from failure, and never letting the moment become too big, no matter how bad the odds may be stacked against you.

“So what? now what?” -Rolfe et al.

The Jacksonville Jaguars had back-to-back seasons as the worst team in the NFL, having an abysmal record of 1-15 in the 2020 season and 3-14 in the 2021 season (Pro Football Reference, 2023). Going into the 2022 season expectations were low for this failing franchise. The team was one of the youngest in the league, with very few veterans who had the experience of winning in the regular season or going to the playoffs. Enter Doug Pederson, a Superbowl winning head coach with first-hand experience at playing quarterback in the NFL. Pederson started the season with the approach of “So What? Now What?”, which is an adaption of “What, So What, Now What” a critical thinking model developed by Rolfe et al that helps teams evaluate a shared experience or a recent event so that they can identify ways to improve or act” according to Nick Razetti (Razetti, 2019). The 2022 season started off about as well as it could have, with the Jaguars out to a 2-1 record and first place in the AFC South Division (Barney, 2022). However, that came to a hard stop after losing five consecutive games by just one score in each loss to sit at 2-6 by the season’s midway point. The Jaguars of previous seasons would have easily called it quits and given up on making any impact the rest of the season. After a terrible loss in London, England to the Denver Broncos, the Jaguars flew home without winning any games in October. However, Coach Pederson kept preaching the “So What? Now What?” model while maintaining a cool and calm demeanor in the locker room. This model helped guide the young team through the difficult process of learning how to play to their strengths to win close games. Coach Pederson’s approach never changed, and he continued to give the young team a steady hand without tearing down their self-esteem. The offense was still finding its rhythm and the defense was in search of an identity. The Jaguars were reeling, but the players and coaches rallied around each other during this stretch. Through the trials of losing the team learned the cost of victory by repeating “So what? Now What?”.

Coach Pederson gave the team a mentality of never giving in to failure, but he also instilled a culture that allowed the players to self-evaluate and support each other without laying the blame on any single person. This mentality came to fruition in come from behind wins against the Las Vegas Raiders, Baltimore Ravens, Dallas Cowboys, New York Jets, and Tennessee Titans (twice) to finish the regular season 9-8 (Pro Football Reference, 2023). In the Ravens game the Jaguars defense gave up a touchdown pass and the lead with less than two minutes to go in regulation. Instead of giving in to the pressure, the Jaguars offense drove down the field, scored a touchdown, and went for the game winning two-point conversion to pull ahead 28-27 with 14 seconds left. During the Cowboys game, quarterback Trevor Lawrence lost a crucial fumble down 34-31 with less than two minutes left in the game. Instead of folding or pointing fingers, the Jaguars defense reassured Lawrence they had his back and pulled off the stop against the Cowboys. The Jaguars defense made a last-minute stand to give the offense another chance to kick a field goal and take it to overtime tied at 34-34. Then, Jaguars safety Rayshawn Jenkins made the play of the game by returning an interception for a touchdown to seal the win in overtime with a 40-34 final score. Prior to the 2022 season, the Jaguars had only one comeback victory after falling behind by 17 or more points in their entire history. During the 2022 season, the Jaguars had three comeback victories of after falling behind by 17 or more points (Pro Football Reference, 2023). Without Pederson's tutelage, this team would not have had faith in their own abilities on offense or defense to pull off the win. Coach Pederson fostered a winning culture and gave the team the proper support system to learn from its failures. It didn't stop there either. Not only did the Jaguars learn how to win, but they also learned how to consistently win and move on to the next game.

“Good.” -Jocko Willink

Another mantra that Coach Pederson introduced to the Jaguars was the simple concept of “Good” as coined by retired US Navy SEAL Jock Willink during a two-minute clip from his podcast, the Jocko Podcast (Willink, 2016). To paraphrase Willink, the concept is that if you can say “Good” after a terrible situation, then that means you’re still alive, you’re still able to learn, and you’ve still got some fight left in you (Willink, 2016). The Jaguars finished the season with a five-game winning streak and an AFC South Division championship. In just the second time in 15 years, the Jaguars advanced to the NFL playoffs and earned a home playoff game. The defense had established their identity as a “bend but don’t break” unit with the ability to generate turnovers. The offense was rejuvenated with a gifted quarterback named Trevor Lawrence in his second year. Lawrence was widely touted as the most promising quarterback prospect out of college since Andrew Luck or Peyton Manning. All of that would come into question with his first career NFL playoff game against the Los Angeles Chargers during the Wildcard Round. The roaring excitement of the Jacksonville home crowd quickly turned into shocked silence after Lawrence threw four interceptions in the first half of the game to give the Chargers an insurmountable 27-0 lead (StatMuse, 2023). In addition to Lawrence’s four interceptions, the Jaguars muffed a punt on special teams to make it five turnovers given up to the Chargers. At one point in the game, Lawrence had as many interceptions as completed passes. Most quarterbacks would have been benched or imploded after such an atrocious start, but Lawrence never gave up on himself or his team. Lawrence and the Jaguars’ ability to rally from 27-0 and keep fighting embodies the “Good” mantra. Threw four interceptions? Good, you can throw four touchdowns to stay in the game. Gave up five turnovers? Good, you can score on five straight drives to win the game. Played the worst half of football ever? Good, time to play the best half of football ever. “Good” is a simple concept, and one of the Jaguars linemen repeated this phrase to

Lawrence after the terrible start to the game when they were down 27-0 (Busbee, 2023). Then, on the next Jaguar's drive before half-time, Lawrence stated in the huddle, "There's no 27-point plays. We've got to do this one play at a time" (Busbee, 2023). Sure enough, Lawrence and the offense drove down the field to make the score 27-7 at half-time. The Jaguars offense followed this up with four more scoring drives in the second half, and the defense only allowed the Chargers to score one field goal in the second half to win the game 31-30. "Good" helped the Jaguars maintain their composure and not let the moment become too big for them.

The NFL playoffs are some of the most nerve racking and exhilarating sporting events in modern history, inducing feelings of salvation one moment and utter damnation in the next. After the thrilling win against the Charger, the Jaguars would go on to lose in the Divisional Round to the Kansas City Chiefs 27-20 (Pro Football Reference, 2023). While the 2022 season is over for the Jaguars, the foundation for success has been laid down and I have no doubt they will be playoff contenders for years to come. Every season the NFL's coaches, players, and staff members spend nearly six months on planning, preparation, physical conditioning, and intense competition with the goal of eventually reaching the Superbowl and becoming world champions. I don't doubt that having the fastest players or the best play designs have their role in separating the winners from the losers, but there is something more fundamental to making a good team truly great. There are a multitude of teams that embody the perfect blend of talent and grit in the NFL such as the 1999 St Louis Rams, the 2007 New York Giants, or the 2017 Philadelphia Eagles. The Jacksonville Jaguars aren't Superbowl champions, but they've shown me just how much football is a game requiring mental toughness to win as well as any team. They've gone from being the Cardiac Cats to the Comeback Cats in one season. It starts with a coin toss and ends with a roar. Good.

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