

Being the underdog has its advantages

Originally published: NY Newsday, January 13, 2012 10:29 PM
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[Chase Blackburn](#) of the [New York Giants](#) celebrates after he caught an interception in the second quarter against the [Green Bay Packers](#). (Dec. 4, 2011)

This past week, [Tom Coughlin](#) was asked about being the underdog in the NFC playoffs. Not only are the [Giants](#) the No. 4 seed -- the lowest remaining on this side of the [Super Bowl](#) tournament -- but they lost 2011 regular-season games to the other three NFC teams still playing.

"I haven't thought about that, to be honest with you, but yes, we are the team that is ranked lower than the other teams right now," Coughlin said. "Thanks for mentioning that. I'll use that."

It turns out he was armed with a more powerful weapon than he may have realized. While it certainly would be nice to be a team like the [Packers](#), well-rested after a bye week and confident after their 15-1 regular season, the role of underdog has its rewards.

"When you engage the underdog position, it automatically gives you a psychological and physiological advantage," said Long Island-based sports psychologist Dr. Jack Bowman of [mindplusmuscle.com](#). "These are some very powerful psychological effects that they're engaging here. This is stuff that actually gets the job done."

The term "underdog" comes from dogfighting culture in the 19th century and originally was used to describe the combatant that wound up on the bottom, or the loser. The winner was the "top dog."

Somewhere along the line, the word came to denote not the losing team or participant, but the side that is not favored to win. In other words, expected to lose. As the [Giants](#) are Sunday. By 7½ points.

That's what gives an underdog its power, from David vs. Goliath to Douglas vs. Tyson and from [Super Bowl III](#) to Leonidas' 300.

"I think from a motivational standpoint in all athletics, whatever the sport is, [the underdog mentality] works to a certain extent," Coughlin said. "But when all the talking is done, you have to go play. That is what you have to be able to establish."

Bowman said success in sports is based on the balance between focus and distraction.

"When you are in the underdog position, it activates a perceived lack of pressure," he said. " 'We're the underdogs, they're the ones feeling the pressure.' You hear that all the time. When you do that, it's much easier to focus on the process."

Bowman also said that studies show underdogs produce a different type of hormone that gives them a "positive energy" as opposed to anxiety-causing adrenaline.

Of course, a team can convince itself that it is so much of an underdog that it talks itself right out of winning. Subtlety is the key. They may not understand the tools they are using, but the Giants have engaged in this activity all week. Such as when [Eli Manning](#) spoke about the upcoming game and said:

"I think any time you're in the playoffs, you're playing a team who's had a great season, and playing in [Lambeau Field](#) -- it's going to be cold, there are going to be [weather] conditions -- it should be a great environment."

Or when [Justin Tuck](#) said:

"We know that the [Packers](#) are the No. 1 seed for a reason, 15-1, playing in [Lambeau Field](#) . . . Those guys are pretty good. We have our hands full. I feel as though we'll be ready for the task."

That's the kind of thing Chesty Puller might have said. He was the Marine officer who, while surrounded during the Korean War, told his men they had the enemy "right where we want them" because they could shoot in any direction and hit their target.

"They are in front of us, behind us, and we are flanked on both sides by an enemy that outnumbers us 29-to-1," Puller said. "They can't get away from us now!"

Bowman said that's one of the best examples of understating the underdog role. "That showed tremendous psychological savvy on his part," he said.

Is Coughlin familiar with Puller's words? Probably. Another of Puller's famous sayings hangs on a sign in the Giants' weight room: Pain is weakness leaving the body.

So what does this have to do with football? Won't the better team win no matter who thinks they're better or who tries to convince themselves they aren't? Probably.

But the Giants have a recent history of big wins when they are doubted the most, such as their Super Bowl run after the 2007 season.

The Giants were the top seed the following season but lost to the Eagles in the divisional round. "It's a little bit different of an approach," said Coughlin, who went from hunter to hunted. "Some of the motivational tools have to be maneuvered one way or the other if you're the top seed or somebody that's not thought of in that respect."

For the defending Super Bowl champion Packers, this year's top seed, that may be as big a challenge as facing the Giants on the field.

"You definitely are not going to sneak up on anybody, so we have been dealing with that all year," said Packers coach [Mike McCarthy](#), who added that he spoke to the team about being the No. 1 seed only during the regular season when they were striving for it. He has not brought up the Packers' seeding this week.

Bowman said they're barking up the wrong underdog tree if they try to position themselves as anything but the clear favorites in this game.

"For [the Packers] to try to convince themselves and come up with some rationale for why they should be considered an underdog is going to take more work and effort than it's worth," Bowman said. "The Giants have looked at themselves as winning from an underdog position, especially when they won the Super Bowl and no one expected them to knock off those teams. And yet their success is legendary. So adopting this position for them has a historical perspective.

"As Yogi [Berra] used to say: 'Do what brung you here.' "