The support behind Arizona State defensive line coach Robert Rodriguez

TEMPE, Ariz. — On a clear day in early March, back during Arizona State’s spring practice, Robert Rodriguez waited for the defensive line to complete a drill. Then the position coach gave his group a brief pep talk.

“OK, are you guys ready to sweat?” Rodriguez said.

The Sun Devils mumbled a response.

“I said, are you guys ready to sweat?”

“YES, SIR!”

“Be explosive now. Everything we do here, I want to see you be explosive. We’ve done it, like, ‘OK, I’ll put my toe in the water.’ I want to see you push.”
Rodriguez turned and positioned himself about a yard from a south goal post at ASU’s Kajikawa practice facility. Holding a practice script in his left hand, Rodriguez did a quick rep to show the Sun Devils what he expected.

“I want to see you push off this thing,” he said, planting his left foot in the faded grass, then pushing off as he wrapped around the goal post. “It’s got to be explosive. Push off that thing! Push off it. Lean into it. Dip that inside shoulder, reach in and make a sack. Make a game-changing play.”

The Sun Devils have much in place entering coach Herm Edwards’ third season. They have a potential star at quarterback. They have young talent at the skill positions. They have an upgraded offensive line. They are strong both at linebacker and in the defensive backfield.

The defensive line? That might be the team’s biggest question, a responsibility that falls on the latest addition to the program’s NFL model. Rodriguez is a newcomer here, but that doesn’t make him special. When Edwards hired him in February, Rodriguez became the program’s sixth defensive line coach in as many seasons. Rodriguez’s initial message to his room: Don’t let the turnover affect our relationship. “Let me coach you.”

As he ran drills in the spring, Rodriguez’s expertise in technique was clear. He let nothing slide. This was how he was raised as a coach, learning under Andre Patterson, first as a linebackers coach at UTEP, then for the past five years as an assistant defensive line coach with the Minnesota Vikings. Rodriguez worked under Patterson for five years in the NFL. He has no problem saying that most of what he does — and says — on the practice field stems from Patterson.

“Boom! There we go. Turn and go,” Rodriguez shouted as junior defensive tackle Jermayne Lole completed a rep. Kneeling, the coach watched 6-foot-6 redshirt freshman Amiri Johnson take a long stride but stay too high.

“Come on, Amiri,” Rodriguez said. “I need you lower and more explosive. Push off that foot!”

A few days earlier, Andre Patterson sat inside Lucas Oil Stadium at the NFL Scouting Combine in Indianapolis. The Vikings’ co-defensive coordinator had just watched the first group of linemen work out. While he waited on the second, Patterson scrolled through his cellphone.
He came across a video of Rodriguez, his old assistant, running a rush-angle drill during ASU spring practice. Patterson knew the drill well — he designed it about 10 years ago. The reasoning: Most pass rushers drift when they get close to the offensive lineman, creating space, which works to the offensive lineman's advantage. The more a defensive lineman drifts, the longer it takes him to attack the quarterback.

Patterson's rush-angle drill trapped the defensive player inside so he can't drift. The tightness is an adjustment, but eventually players get used to it. Watching the ASU drill, Patterson noticed Rodriguez didn't have it set up correctly. He sent him a text message.

"I'm watching the drill and you got the bags too wide apart."

According to Patterson, Rodriguez responded:

"I had to do it that way because the guys were stumbling over them when they were tight."

"So what? You can't let them develop bad habits. You got to teach them to do it the way you want them to do it and if they fall, they fall. Eventually, they'll get it."

"Yes, sir."

Growing up in El Paso, Texas, Rodriguez was a workhorse running back at Montwood High, which he would use as a springboard to the city's athletics hall of fame. In college, he played linebacker at UTEP, earning WAC Defensive Player of the Year honors.

After a brief professional career in Canada, Rodriguez joined Mike Price's staff at UTEP, first as a graduate-assistant, then as linebackers coach. He was in the room when Patterson — who had extensive NFL experience — interviewed for the defensive coordinator position. (Because Patterson already had the job wrapped up, it was more of a conversation than a job interview.) Rodriguez was so impressed with what his new boss had to say, he took notes.

"I became like a groupie," Rodriguez said. "I asked him a thousand stupid questions and he gave me all the great answers. I think he enjoyed having someone there who was just so stinking curious about everything."

In Rodriguez, Patterson saw someone who was hungry. The linebackers coach wanted to learn, not just about his group, but about every part of the defense. He stuck around after meetings, asking Patterson why he made certain decisions.
Patterson stayed at UTEP for three seasons, then left to become assistant head coach and defensive line coach at Florida International. A year later, he was back in the NFL, joining Mike Zimmer’s Minnesota staff as a defensive line coach. (Zimmer calls Patterson the best D-line coach in the NFL.) Not much later, Patterson hired Rodriguez as his assistant.

“When the job came open, I wanted to hire someone that really didn’t have any background in coaching D-line. That way it was a clean slate for me,” Patterson said. “I could teach the guy what I believe instead of having to change a guy to believe what I believe in, if that makes sense.”

With the Vikings, Rodriguez ran drills, broke down film and evaluated players. After a few years, Patterson realized his assistant was ready for his own position room. When the ASU job opened, he called Edwards and co-defensive coordinator Marvin Lewis and told both: “I’ve known Rob a long time and this guy is going to change your D-line room. He’s going to change the way your guys play and he’s going to change the type of talent you bring in because he has the eye to find them.”

Rodriguez had had opportunities to return to college coaching, but it never seemed right. This felt different. Rodriguez could learn under Edwards and Lewis. Plus, with the Sun Devils moving to a four-down scheme — the same defense the Vikings used — Rodriguez could coach the same technique. “Hell, I could come here and coach like an NFL coach,” he thought.

And that’s what he’s done, bouncing ideas off Patterson the entire time, the two exchanging text messages nearly every other day.

“That’s invaluable to me,” Rodriguez said. “I was shocked that he saw that (practice) video, and obviously I was disappointed that I wasn’t perfect because there’s still a big part of me that wants to please him. When people see me, I want people to say, ‘Hey, that’s an Andre Patterson disciple and he’s damn good.’ I want to do him proud.”

Near the end of ASU’s abbreviated spring practice, co-defensive coordinator Antonio Pierce called Rodriguez the MVP of the spring. Added Edwards: “We got a good one.”

During his NFL days, Rodriguez watched film of college players entering the draft. Yes, for many, their athletic skills stood out. “This guy’s fast. This guy’s long. This guy’s powerful.” But more often than not, the prospects lacked...
fundamentals when it came to technique, hand placement or eye discipline. That, Rodriguez said, is what he can do here. While some guys get to the NFL and have to learn, he can make sure ASU players are prepared.

“He’s a real detailed guy,” said Lole, the junior defensive lineman. “All the technique he’s teaching us he taught in the league. I love the way he coaches.”

And Rodriguez loves the potential of his position room.

“I have a great group of kids, man,” he said. “Those guys have bought in. I asked them not to tip their toes in the water but to jump all the way in, and they’ve done that. It hasn’t been easy, but they just keep plugging away. We can really establish a culture that can last a long time here, if we do it the right way.”

(Photo: Doug Haller / The Athletic)