

[Redskins/NFL](#)

Redskins quarterback Kirk Cousins sought help to make his brain perform better

By [Liz Clarke](#)

September 12, 2015

From the moment the Washington Redskins drafted him three rounds behind [Robert Griffin III](#) in 2012, Michigan State's [Kirk Cousins](#) was reduced to a fallback plan. He was the football equivalent of a college applicant's "safety school" or the friend who fills in as a prom date after true love fails. ¶ Handed the chance to prove he could be more, Cousins stumbled last season, undercutting his 10 touchdowns passes with nine grievously timed interceptions while filling in for the injured Griffin. Even Cousins's body language conceded defeat as he trudged off the field in Week 7, head bowed, following that ninth errant throw. He was replaced by [Colt McCoy](#) and relegated to scout-team duty the rest of the year. ¶ Less than 11 months later, Redskins Coach Jay Gruden stepped to a microphone at Redskins Park and uttered the improbable. ¶ "[It's Kirk's team,](#)" Gruden said, announcing Aug. 31 that Cousins would be the team's starting quarterback in 2015.

Cousins hadn't played a down in a regular season game since his benching last fall. But after a solid showing in training camp, followed by a productive preseason performance, he convinced Gruden that he represents the best hope of turning around a team with back-to-back losing seasons.

But is Cousins simply the Redskins' best available fallback plan? Or has Cousins, at 27, learned to leverage his strengths and minimize his shortcomings after a three-year NFL apprenticeship of waiting, watching and too often short-circuiting in the limited opportunities he has had?

At first glance, little has changed about the 6-foot-3, 202-pound Cousins entering Year 4, apart from a beard that hints at a new steeliness.

The overhaul of consequence, Gruden believes, is Cousins's mental game.

His offseason work included copious film study and tutoring from a private throwing coach, as is common among NFL quarterbacks. But it included unlikely assists from a few dozen high school receivers who ran pass patterns and caught balls during Cousins's winter vacations in Georgia and Florida and a Michigan-based company called Neurocore that Cousins said "retrained" his brain to operate in a "sweet spot" best suited to peak athletic performance.

"It's kind of an abstract thing, but I call it brain performance," Cousins said of his training with Neurocore Brain Performance Center, which he intensified after getting benched last fall. "I see it as the

next frontier because you look at weightlifting in the 1950s and '60s, not every football player was lifting weights; they weren't sure about the benefit it would give you. Now everybody has a strength coach; everybody lifts weights. And I see brain training kind of being that next thing. I just want to maximize what I've got."

The son of a minister and a man of deep faith, Cousins conceded that dark times followed his benching in October. The NFL career he had labored for seemed at hand after he took over for Griffin and [led five touchdown drives in a 41-10 rout of Jacksonville](#) in Week 2.

The next week, he [threw for 427 yards at Philadelphia](#). The Redskins lost, and Cousins's play deteriorated from there. After a [45-14 loss to the New York Giants](#) in which he threw four second-half interceptions, Giants defenders said Cousins was telegraphing his throws.

"Anytime you have a job to do and you feel like you didn't get the job done, it's going to eat at you if you care about it," Cousins said this week when asked about his mind-set after [his Oct. 19 benching](#). "For me, I deeply care about it, and so it was eating at me."

The turning point came, Cousins said, when he quit berating himself.

"What do I do now?" he asked himself. "What can I do to get better and deliberately practice, whatever that is."

Once [Griffin was back in the starting job](#) and McCoy named the No. 2 quarterback, Cousins was ruled inactive. With no need to prepare for the upcoming opponent, he devoted his film-study to poring over footage of the NFL's better quarterbacks and taking a hard look at his own footage.

When February came, Cousins and his wife, Julie, traveled to Florida's Gulf Coast for vacation. But he wanted to keep working on his game, so he phoned a local high school near Fort Myers. He introduced himself, explained that he had his cleats and a couple footballs with him and asked whether the football coach could round up some receivers to throw to and let them use the Estero High field for a workout.

Cousins's throwing coach, former NFL quarterback Jeff Christensen, flew in from Chicago to supervise. And for three days, Cousins threw to teenagers.

"He was dead on every time," Estero Coach Jeff Hanlon recalled in a phone interview. "There was never a bad throw. Sometimes there was something he wasn't happy with — maybe the height on the ball — and he wanted to adjust it. . . ."

"And with every throw, he said something encouraging to the kids. Even if it was a dropped pass, he'd say, 'Hey, great route!' Whatever it was, he found something positive in every single rep that gave that motivation and encouragement to the kids."

While in Florida, Cousins, joined by Redskins running back Alfred Morris, also worked with Gruden's brother, Super Bowl champion coach turned ESPN analyst Jon Gruden, who mentors young quarterbacks in the offseason.

And while in Atlanta visiting his wife's family, he also tracked down high school receivers to throw to.

Also in February, he ramped up his training with Neurocore, which he had begun his senior season at Michigan State.

Neurocore was founded roughly 10 years ago to help children with attention-deficit disorders through "neurofeedback" rather than medication and expanded to applications for people with sleep and anxiety disorders as well as elite athletes. Its brain-training system starts with electroencephalograms to measure the electrical activity in the brain. If the data suggests the brain is running faster or slower than is ideal, conditioning exercises are developed to help train the brain to run at what Tim Royer, the company's founder, describes as "a sweet spot."

According to Royer, Cousins's data revealed that his brain was running faster than it should, relying on adrenaline much of the time. Readings of his cardiovascular system and respiratory system suggested a similar, over-stimulated condition that Royer likened to "somebody running from a lion."

"When you try to play sports at an elite level and the body and brain are doing that, it makes it difficult over time," Royer said in a telephone interview.

So he devised a training system to help Cousins regulate that speed and outfitted the quarterback with home-based gear to practice the exercises on his own.

In one such exercise, Cousins attaches the EEG leads to his scalp and connects it to a computer that displays the speed of his brain, heart and breathing as if it's the dashboard of a car. Then comes the "reward system" that affirms when he has relaxed or conditioned his brain to operate in the sweet spot.

As Royer explains it, Cousins puts a movie in the computer, and a program driven by the electrical activity in the brain will play the movie only when the reading confirms that his brain is running in the optimum range.

In the early going, Royer said, Cousins might have been able to watch "Iron Man" for 20 seconds of a one-minute exercise. With practice, that period of time — time in which the brain is operated at an optimal speed — increased to 30 seconds, then 40.

On Sunday against Miami, Cousins will find himself staring at Iron Men of a different sort — lined up across from a Dolphins defensive line that Hall of Fame quarterback Dan Fouts believes is the best in the NFL.

“It’s a great opportunity for Cousins and an unbelievable challenge with that Dolphins front four,” said Fouts, who will provide commentary for the CBS broadcast. “He has to start fast and have success right away.”

Pro Bowl left tackle [Trent Williams](#) will protect Cousins’s blind side. But rookie [Brandon Scherff](#) and second-year player [Morgan Moses](#) must fend off the heart of Miami’s pass rush, sack-specialists Ndamukong Suh and Cameron Wake.

Cousins has the quickest release of the Redskins’ trio of quarterbacks, which should help. He also understands protections, Dolphins Coach Joe Philbin noted, able to bark out last-second adjustments. And he knows there’s no need for high-risk heroics after he makes a mistake, whether interception, fumble or sack.

Noting the gifted receiving and running back corps around him, Cousins said this week: “It’s my job to get them the football, then let them go do the jaw-dropping stuff.”

If boos rain down from a restive fan base, Cousins has heard them before. If he falls short of his own expectation, he has been there.

This year, if the offseason lessons stick, Cousins will take a deep breath. He will acknowledge to himself that, yes, it is a huge game, but he won’t let the magnitude paralyze him or send him into panic mode.

He will breathe deeply, settle his mind and call the next play.

 **77 Comments**

Liz Clarke



Liz Clarke is on her second stint covering the Washington Redskins for The Washington Post (1998-2001; 2014 onward). Before joining The Post in 1998, she was a sportswriter at USA Today, the Dallas Morning News and the Charlotte Observer. She started her career as a news reporter for the Raleigh News & Observer, covering higher education. Follow 

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