

Music is a Team Sport

by [Dennis Winge](#)

Unless you're always playing solo, the art of playing music requires teamwork that resembles playing sports on a team that gives the players many benefits that are valuable in many facets of life. Special thanks to bassist [Tom Westcott](#) who originated the idea for this analogy during a conversation on a recent Super Bowl Sunday.

When a team comes together, they do so to achieve a specific objective, i.e. to win a game, or in the case of a musical ensemble, to win over an audience: to capture their attention, to entertain them, to make them feel something through the piece or set of music, and perhaps even to gain their approval.

Teams practice regularly; musicians rehearse. Practicing together is frequently a necessary part of making sure the ensemble sounds good, and a very important factor in determining your success as a musician, even if your objective is simply to have fun playing with others. The way you interact with other musicians off the bandstand is every bit as important as how you perform onstage when it comes to getting more gigs, being invited to sessions, and pretty much any other aspect of playing music with others.

In addition, just as top athletes are expected to maintain their overall level of fitness with healthy eating, exercise and appropriate amounts of sleep, musicians are expected to practice their parts on their own and 'keep their chops up'. Practicing at home enhances your musicianship as well as helps to make sure the group you are playing with will sound good as well.

They say there is no "I" in team, but teams allow you as an individual to shine, and when you do, you make the team sound better. What's good for you is also good for the team. If a certain musician tries to show off and it does not serve the group well for whatever reason, then it is not really 'shining' after all. On the other hand, playing with others gives you more of an opportunity to shine that you might be able to on your own. Thus, playing with a team is truly a win/win for both the team and the individual.

We could choose virtually any team sport to use as the analogy for playing music, but because of the context in which the idea was conceived, we shall use American Football. The particular song or piece of music that the band plays is like the team's 'play.' Every member of the group has a particular role that they play in order to execute the overall objective. The bassist and drummer can be likened to the offensive line; the guitar and piano can be thought of as either wide receivers or running backs; and the lead vocalist or instrumentalist is like the quarter back.

All members of the group can or even must sometimes be able to switch roles on a moment's notice, just like a quarter back who, upon finding none of his teammates available to throw a pass to, must become a running back when under pressure. An example of this could be when a vocalist needs help finding a certain note or tonal center, a pianist could play part of the melody even though that wasn't his originally intended part at that moment. Another example is during a bass solo. Prior to that time, the bass had been supporting everyone else, and now it's time for him or her to take the lead and the other instruments support it.

There is also offense and defense. The musicians are the offense, and the defense is the environment or context in which they are playing. Whether you are playing live for an

audience, or doing a live stream, or in the recording studio, for example, can drastically impact the way you play or even how you play it. In a recording studio you are going for perfection, and in front of an audience you are also usually going for entertainment or excitement or at least some form of stage presence.

How you play can vary widely depending on what the audience is doing or not doing. If they are dancing and singing along, playing louder and really grooving is probably the right thing for the moment. If they are talking loudly because they can't hear each other over the music, perhaps it's time to take the volume down. If a song isn't working or the audience is not responding as intended, perhaps it's necessary to change 'plays' quickly. The best teams study their opponent; so always know what the function of the music is expected to be before the performance begins. And, be ready to adapt to ever-changing environmental circumstances.

Even though the analogy of a sports team is useful in appreciating the subtleties of playing music with others, music is not a sport. We are not in competition with each other, contrary to certain popular TV shows that make a sport out of music. We all work together to create something much bigger than we could possibly do otherwise. Playing music with others is a joy.