

The 4-4 Stack



Introduction

As I learn more and more about football and how to coach it, ideas and strategies for improving teams and taking advantage of different types of players come to the forefront. For years I have been a staunch proponent of the Gap-8 defense, as described by Jack Reed in his books, *Coaching Youth Football: Defense*, and *The Gap-Air-Mirror Defense for Youth Football*. My feelings about this defense and its efficacy on the youth field have not changed. For any level of football below high school I consider the Gap-8 to be the most effective and easiest to teach defensive system available.

The advantages of using the Gap-8 are numerous. Since the defense is so simple and easily learned it allows you to spend a majority of your practice time on teaching and improving individual techniques, rather than on teaching responsibilities. This reduces game-day hesitation, and gives your players a skill advantage over players that might be more talented, faster or stronger. The reduced installation time also means you can spend more time preparing your team for the upcoming opponent's specific offense, taken from your scouting reports, rather than spending all your time trying to get them just to memorize their responsibilities.

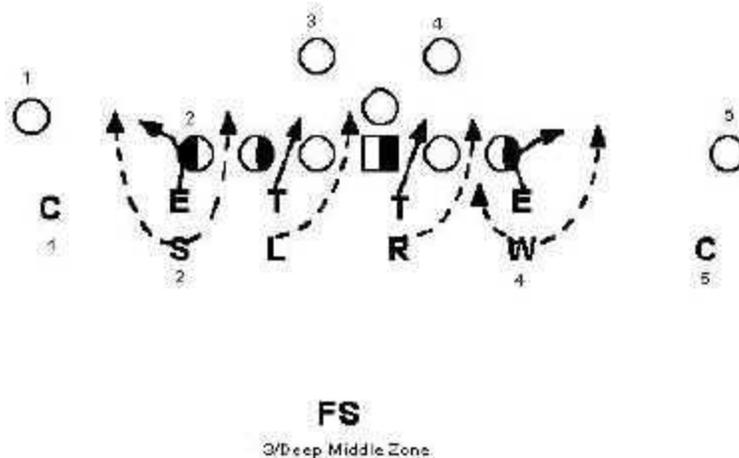
With that said, however, there are a few disadvantages of the Gap-8 as well. (*Gasp!*) Against the triple option, it is fundamentally unsound. Also, from a pure coaching standpoint, much of the enjoyment of coaching comes from the chess match between yourself and the opposing coach. 'Can I call the right defense at the right time to stop the play my counterpart has called?' Since the Gap-8 is a single-front, single-coverage defense with no line stunting or blitzing, this mental aspect of the game is reduced for the defensive coordinator.

For younger levels of football, I would still run the Gap-8 as my sole defense. At higher levels, I would use the Gap-8 for a short yardage, goal line, or 'what the heck' front to keep the offensive coordinator on his toes. It combines nicely with the 4-4 Stack since both are even front defenses and the pass coverage rules are exactly the same. The philosophy of both defenses is also the same: *Bring it!*

But this article isn't about the Gap-8; it's about a new defensive system that I've been learning about. Taken from the multiple front defensive system we use at Tomales High School, under the direction of our excellent defensive coordinator, John "Coach Mitch" Mitchell, this front is scaled down for use at the youth level, and I believe it is simple enough to be used with teams as young as 11-12.

This system is the 4-4. At the high school level, it is generally used to take advantage of a group of smaller, quicker players. Linebacker intensive, it's not the defense for every team, but it does have many things to offer to a coach capable of teaching its responsibilities and skills. Be forewarned, although I've simplified the system greatly, this is not an easy defense. You need some coaching experience and knowledge of the game, as well as players capable of handling the positions before you can install and use this system. If you have smaller, quicker athletes with some brains and noses for the ball, then this is a good system. On the other hand, if you have the quintessential big, slow guys you'll be better off in another alignment that takes advantage of what they can bring to the field.

Base alignment rules



This version of the 4-4 is designed with a stack alignment. The purpose of a stack is to hide the linebackers from the offensive line. By placing them in this hidden position, we're protecting them from blocks and allowing them to flow to the ball and make plays.

Alignment rules are relatively simple. Against all normal offensive formations, the defensive ends will take an outside shade alignment on the outermost lineman on their side of the formation that is *not* a split end. (Put more simply, the defensive end places his inside

shoulder directly across from the offensive tackle or tight end across from him.) This alignment places him directly in the “D” gap against formations using wingbacks. Specific gap or contain responsibilities will be a function of whatever blitz is called.

The strong side defensive tackle will always align to the inside shade of the offensive tackle across from him. This places him in a four technique, and inside the strong side “B” gap. No matter what defensive stunt is called, no matter what offensive play is run, the strong side defensive tackle will have responsibility for penetrating this gap, and tackling any offensive player that attacks it, whether they have the ball or are pretending to have the ball.

The weak side defensive tackle will always align with a weak side shade on the center man in the offensive formation for single tight end sets. Please note that this will not always be the player that snaps the ball. You must prepare your players to face unbalanced formations. Also, be aware that while the rules demand that seven offensive players be lined up on the line of scrimmage, there is *no* prohibition against placing *more* players there to create an unbalanced look. Defending this formation will be discussed later. The weak defensive tackle will be responsible for the gap he aligns in, and must penetrate it and tackle any offensive back attacking his hole and carrying the ball, or pretending to carry the ball.

Against the typical youth offense, the linebackers will be stacked directly behind the defensive linemen. There are four linebackers, called “Sam”, “Lion”, “Ram” and “Will”. Lion and Ram are inside linebackers, left and right, respectively, and do not change sides depending on the formation strength call. Sam is the strong side linebacker, and will always align to the tight end side of the formation. Against teams with two tight ends, Sam will align to the open side of the field, or always on the left side of the formation. You must make this determination from your scouting reports of the upcoming opponent.

Will is Sam’s counterpart on the weak side. These two linebackers will be responsible for closely observing the offensive formation as the opposing team comes to the line of scrimmage, making the correct strength call, and communicating it to the rest of the defense. Generally the defensive tackles should switch sides as well, but you may instead choose to leave them on one side. Again, this depends on your players, coaching philosophy, and scouting report.

Lion and Ram are the inside linebackers. They will never switch sides. They should align in a stacked position directly behind the defensive tackles. It should be relatively obvious that one of the primary responsibilities of the defensive tackles is to shield the linebackers from the offensive line. This keeps your best athletes free to play "sideline to sideline" and make plays. This is not to say that the defensive tackles will never get the chance to lay out the ball carrier.

Cornerbacks align to the inside shade of the outermost receiver on their side unless that receiver is a wingback or running back. In those circumstances, they align to a 1x1 relationship outside the wing. Depth of the corners is a function of your scouting reports. If the scouting report indicates a great deal of speed on the opposing team, they should give a three to seven yard cushion. If your team has the speed advantage, I recommend a press alignment, with the corner as close as possible to the receiver without entering the neutral zone.

The free safety must make a determination of three pre-snap reads in order to gauge his alignment depth and location. In order, he must determine:

1) **Passing strength of formation.** Although the tight end is on the left in a twins-right formation (from the defense's point of view), the greatest passing threat is to the weak side, where the twins are.

2) **Down and distance.** A good down and distance determination can give the free safety an edge on determining his depth of alignment. In order to be accurate, you must have a good scouting report and script your practice play calling as much as possible from your upcoming opponent's scouted game.

3) **If running is likely: strength of running formation.** Generally the free safety is a pass-first defender, and must be coached to always think of himself as a cover player. In short yardage situations, however, you may choose to use him to backstop the linebackers. Again, this is a function of the scouting report.

Typically, the free safety will align seven to nine yards deep and with five and a half offensive players on each side of him. You may shade him a half man to the open side of the field or strength, or as much as two men to a twins side.

Pass coverage can be either zone or man-to-man based. One of the better advantages of this defense is that it gives you the flexibility to teach either or both to your players. Generally, I advocate a man-to-man approach to pass coverage, with bump and run on the corners. By covering the running backs with different linebackers, we can keep the offense guessing in our blitz package. This is complex, and must be carefully taught, but can be done.

To keep the defense as simple as possible, the outside linebackers are the only linebackers in pass coverage in the "Base" defense. When the outside linebackers stunt, the inside linebacker to their side will take their pass coverage responsibility. Thus, in a "40 Strong Exit" Lion will have pass coverage responsibility over the tight end, since the Sam linebacker will be engaged elsewhere.

It is possible to stunt in such a way as to leave a receiver uncovered, such as a "Weak Fire, Ram". This leaves the running back to the weak side uncovered. This is a gamble, but the idea here is to put so much pressure on the quarterback that he doesn't have time to find the uncovered man.

The free safety is in man-to-man coverage, but the player that he will cover is the fullback. Most youth teams keep the fullback in to pass block, or run play action with him, thus freeing up the safety for deep zone help.

Zone pass coverage is difficult and generally ineffective at the youth level. It takes enormous amounts of time to teach and refine, and an amount of discipline that is simply not present in the average thirteen-year-old. Remember that while you may throw the ball fifty times during a seven-on-seven passing period to practice your pass defense, on game day your defensive backs will be looking at a run-to-pass ratio of 10:1 or more. I personally have gone entire games without ever seeing a pass thrown by either team even at the high school level, and youth teams with competent coaching generally pass much less often than they run. To see running play after running play and yet remain fifteen yards deep covering a non-existent pass takes a great deal of personal self-discipline. Frankly, even my high school players have trouble doing this consistently, as the number of throat lozenges I purchased during the 2001 season can attest.

Zone based pass defense has great potential against the run on paper, because defensive backs are looking into the offensive backfield as they backpedal downfield. This means that they can see the handoff and provide run support. Unfortunately, it also

means that they can be easily fooled with play action, causing them to leave their assigned zones and streak forward to make a tackle while the pass sails over their heads.

One advantage of zone-based coverage is that it negates a speed mismatch in favor of the offense. If the opposing team features quick receivers and running backs, playing the ball instead of the man can give you a chance to intercept the pass or knock it down. It also gives the defensive backs a chance to hammer the receivers, since they'll be looking at the ball, and not at the coverage waiting to ambush them. The problem is that there are nine passing zones to cover in order to guarantee that the receiver cannot catch the ball. Counting the linebackers, there are only seven potential pass defenders, leaving two zones open.

Since youth quarterbacks don't usually have tremendous strength of arm, it is conceivable that we could take away two deep defenders and cover the seven zones closest to the ball with reasonable success. Unfortunately, this leaves us with only four defenders rushing the quarterback. A strong pass rush is one of the best ways to defend the pass, and if the offense keeps one or both backs in to block, we could be at as much as a six to four disadvantage in trying to get to the quarterback. Indeed, one of the greatest reasons to run this defense is the blitz package that allows us to confuse the offensive line's blocking assignments on both runs and passes. Using zone coverage makes blitzing difficult, if not impossible.

To put it bluntly, while cover three is an option available for this defense, I do not recommend it.

Blitz Package

In most defenses and at most levels of football blitzing is an anti-pass tactic used to provide extra pressure on the quarterback. The higher up in football you go the more emphasis is placed upon pass coverage as part of the "Pass defense triangle" (Pressure, Bump the receivers, Cover the receivers). The NFL, in sure passing situations, will remove a number of linebackers or linemen and substitute pass defenders. "Prevent" defenses may have as few as two defensive linemen rushing the passer, while nine players remain deep to cover the pass.

In Division-1 College, the most commonly used defense is a 4-3, blitzing is as rare as it is in the NFL, and used primarily to stop the pass.

Blitzing is infrequent, and used mostly when the offense is not expecting it at these higher levels.

Moving down through high school into the youth game, however, blitzing can be used in a variety of ways. Different linebacker stunts can be used to place your best linebacker in the hole the offense is most likely to attack, pressure the quarterback, disrupt pulling blockers or provide stronger outside contain.

Blitzing is the name of the game in this version of the 4-4. The philosophy of this defense can be stated simply: ***make something happen!*** Remember that blitzes are a “license to kill” as it were, so you need linebackers with a search and destroy mentality. When the ball is snapped, they must stunt through their assigned gaps and wreak havoc in the offensive backfield.

Blitzing *can* be used as a run-stopping technique. All it takes is patient teaching to the linebackers, and discipline. Linebackers must penetrate the offensive line through the gap they are responsible for while keeping aware of the offensive backfield. It's very important that they tackle any potential ball carrier attacking their gap *before* they pursue any backfield flow away from them or rush the quarterback. Everyone wants to get a sack, but linebackers must understand that they are run-stoppers first and foremost and pass rushers second.

In the “40 Base”, as shown above, outside contain is the responsibility of the defensive ends. From their outside shade alignment, they must slant sharply inward and drive hard into the outside shoulder of the tackle or tight end across from them. This is especially important for the strong side defensive end, who must remove the tight end from his intended receiver route every single play. This eliminates the tight end look-in (quick slant) pass route, as well as gives the Sam linebacker time to read the backfield, make a pass determination, and get into coverage on his receiver. ***Defensive ends cannot forget to bump the tight ends!***

After striking the outermost blocker, the defensive ends must use a technique called “slow-playing” to remain outside the ball carrier. This is perhaps the hardest aspect of playing defensive end. As the ball carrier runs towards the sideline, the defensive end must attack his outermost shoulder, keeping himself as square as possible to the line of scrimmage. Although the running back is probably faster than the defensive end, proper execution of this technique can still defend a sweep correctly. More importantly, it keeps the defensive end safe from a kickout block by the fullback or a pulling guard,

while still allowing him a reasonable chance to stop sweeps from getting to the corner.

Above all, outside contain men absolutely must *never* get into a trailing position on the ball carrier. Attack *only* the outside shoulder.

Both defensive tackles will penetrate the offensive line with as low a line charge as is possible. Ideally, they should bear crawl, but against offenses that pull or trap, this low crawl can interfere with the tackle's ability to "track in" behind the pullers and follow them to the ball carrier. At all times they must keep their shoulder pads lower than the shoulder pads of any offensive player trying to block them. The simple rule of thumb for defensive tackles is that they must always play in the offensive backfield. Their line of scrimmage is actually one yard behind the ball.

Gaps we have accounted for at this point are the strong side "D" gap, the weak side "C" gap (or "D" gap, depending on weak end alignment.) The strong side "B" gap, and the weak side "A" gap. Three gaps remain unaccounted for: Strong side "C", strong side "A", and weak side "B". These gaps are the responsibility of the linebackers. In "40 Base" linebackers are not blitzing, so they must scrape to the gaps in response to flow.

Attacking offensive backfield flow is relatively simple for the outside linebackers, who must simply charge or trail. Inside linebackers must be more disciplined, and hold firm during flow away to prevent stepping out of position for a counter. Generally, inside linebackers should cross-key the running back farthest from their starting position on any flow away from them. Obviously this changes when the inside linebacker is stunting.

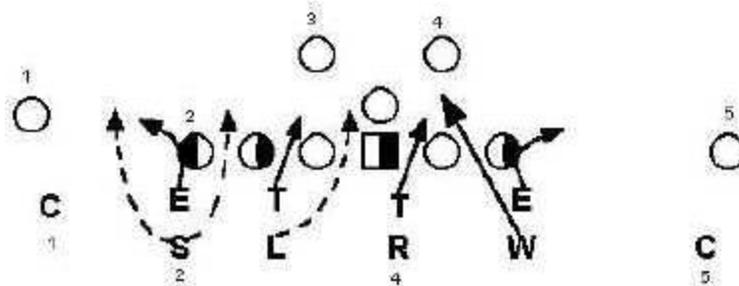
The diagram shows linebacker responsibility for specific gaps. Note that there are two linebackers attacking the strong side off tackle hole, generally the prime point of attack for youth football power plays. Ram is given sole responsibility for the weak side "B" gap, while Will is responsible for outside contain help. If the offensive formation were reversed, Lion would take the "B" gap, while Will continues to force the outside run.

Defensive backs play "Cover one, man under" with the free safety as the sole deep zone defender.

Calling this defensive play from the sidelines is easy with the use of hand signals. Hold one fist with the palm facing towards the field at about eye level. This is the same signal the referee uses to signal

Note- Do not call strong fire and lion stunts together. Lion and Sam will be trying to stunt through the same gap. It will also leave the tight end uncovered.

Weak Fire



FS

3/Deep Middle Zone

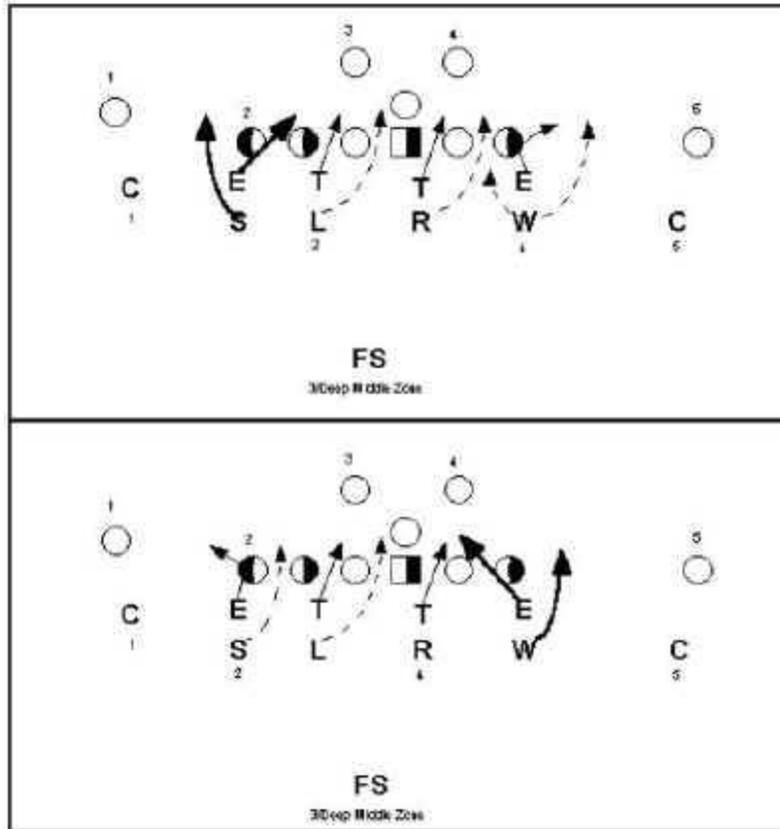
The weak fire gives Will a chance to make a play in the offensive backfield. His rules are the same as Sam's for attacking, but since he is on the weak side, you'll notice that against single tight end sets he stunts through the "B" gap, which is the same gap the inside linebacker, usually Ram, is assigned to. This frees Ram up to play the ball. He should also be aware that he is now responsible for covering the back on that side if the offensive play is a pass.

The hand signal for the weak fire is the flexed bicep, but this time with the fist pointing down towards the ground. The 'gun' remains the same.

Note- Do not call weak fire and ram stunts together. Will and Ram will be attacking the same gap.

It is very important that the linebackers understand the pass coverage responsibilities. For most of the stunts, the pass coverage on the offensive backfield will change. Linebackers must react without hesitation to cover the correct receiver from any stunt or this blitz package will not be effective. The simple rule of thumb is that when an outside linebacker stunts, the inside linebacker on that side takes his receiver.

Strong and Weak Exit



Exit stunts can be called to either side. In an exit, the outside linebacker takes over sole responsibility for all sweeps and outside attacking plays. The defensive end still takes his outside shade alignment but at the snap crashes at full speed across the face of the tight end/tackle. His goal is to get into the offensive backfield as quickly as possible, find the ball carrier, and knock him flat. He cannot be tentative, but he must also make sure to protect his gap *first*, and then seek glory in a sack or pursuit of the runner.

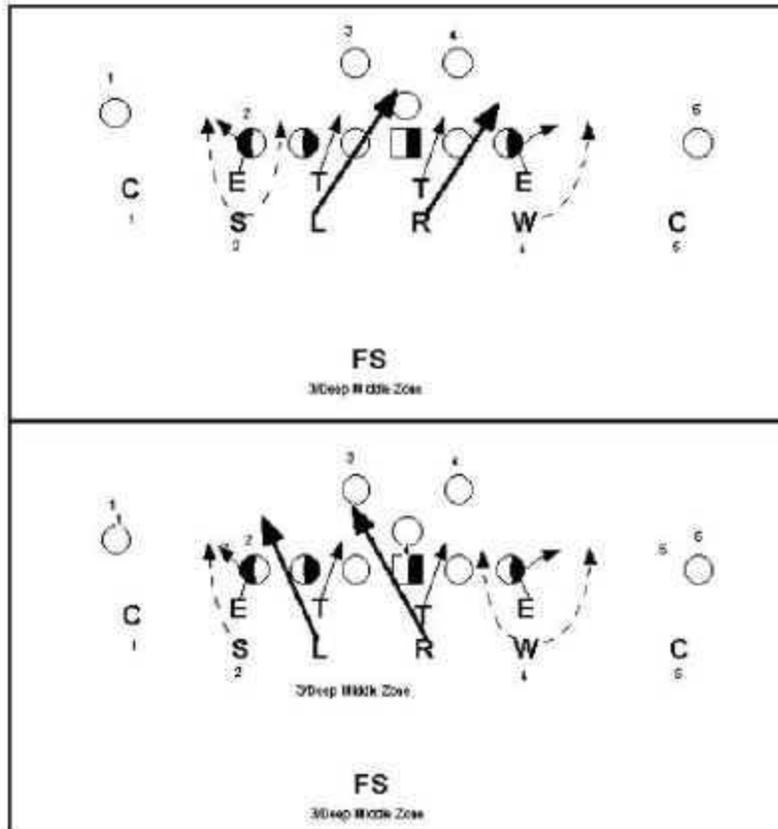
From his stacked position the outside linebacker charges immediately to a one-yard depth and prepares to slow play any sweeps to his side of the field. On all sweeps away from his side, the outside linebacker must trail the sweep through the offensive backfield at the depth of the deepest back to guard against a reverse.

His penetration does make the outside linebacker vulnerable to a kickout block by the fullback or a pulling guard, so he must be well coached to attack the blocker with his inside shoulder, without giving ground, and make a pile. A linebacker who backs up trying to stay off the blockers and make the tackle cannot be used in an exit stunt. The linebacker should try to keep his shoulders square to the

line of scrimmage while fighting off the block. This keeps him in position to attack the running back's outside shoulder and force contain.

The hand signal for the exit stunt is the flexed arm (strong or weak) and then one arm across the chest at an upward angle. Remember to make all hand signals for the 4-4 with one arm to limit confusion.

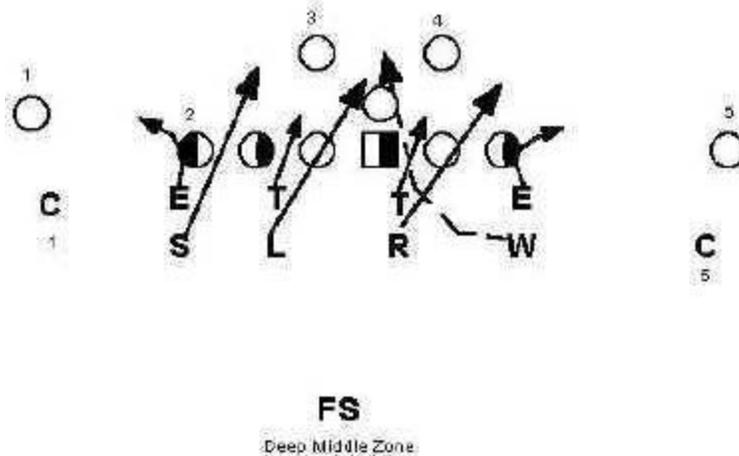
Ram and Lion



Ram and lion stunts are for the inside linebackers. In a ram stunt, both inside linebackers will attack the first open gap to their right. "Open" simply means that we have not yet designated a specific lineman or linebacker to cover this gap yet.

For Lion, this gap will usually be the "A" gap on the strong side. Ram will usually stunt through the "B" gap to the weak side. For strong right, Ram will have strong "C" gap responsibility, and will stunt through that gap.

The hand signal for a lion stunt is both fists raised in a sort of “he-man” stance. Think of the cowardly lion from the *Wizard of Oz* showing his bravery.) A ram signal is folded arms (the referee signal for delay of game).



The crash stunt is an all-out attempt to overwhelm the blockers. Despite the lack of coverage, this is the one stunt I consider to be anti-pass. All linebackers will blitz through their assigned gaps. In a single tight end set, this leaves Will without a gap to take. He should delay his blitz for a two-count and then seek an opening to get through. The slight delay should give the offensive linemen enough time to engage the rushing defenders, and Will should be able to pick a free path to the quarterback. This will take some timing. Against two tight end sets, Will blitzes immediately through the “C” gap on his side.

Pass coverage in this stunt is the sole responsibility of the corners and free safety. The free safety will not play a man at all, and should align about three to five yards deeper than normal. He plays strictly zone. Both corners should take the outermost receivers on their side of the field. Against two tight end sets, the linebackers will cover the ends, so the corners will be responsible for any split out flanker, wingback, or running back on their side.

The strong side defensive end absolutely *must* bump the tight end and throw him off his timing. If he doesn't, the tight end quick slant is open, and that is one of the few pass routes quick enough for the quarterback to get rid of the ball before the linebackers arrive.

The hand signal for the 40 crash is both palms pushed towards the field, the same signal as “pass interference”.

The beauty of this blitz package is the way the blitzes can be combined. For example, blitz combos like “strong fire, weak exit” are possible, and serve to further confuse the offensive blocking.

The simplicity of this system is a mark in its favor as well. Consider that while we can attack the offense with seven different blitzes, each individual linebacker only has to learn two of them. Sam doesn’t need to concern himself with a “Ram”, “Lion”, “weak exit”, or “weak fire” call. All he needs to worry about is strong exit and strong fire. All the linebackers should be nearly drooling whenever they hear “40 Crash” in the huddle.

Ram and Lion only need to worry about their respective calls and knowing who they cover when an outside linebacker stunts.

We’ve created an extremely simple defense to run, but an inordinately complex one to create a blocking scheme for. Since blitzing is our game, we can take an aggressive, in-your-face attitude. The offense will know by the end of the first series that someone will be coming on every play, but they won’t know who, or from what angle. Even if they’ve carefully scouted our defense, the essential randomness of the blitzing attack will make it extremely tough for them to prepare their team for us in a single week.

Special Circumstances

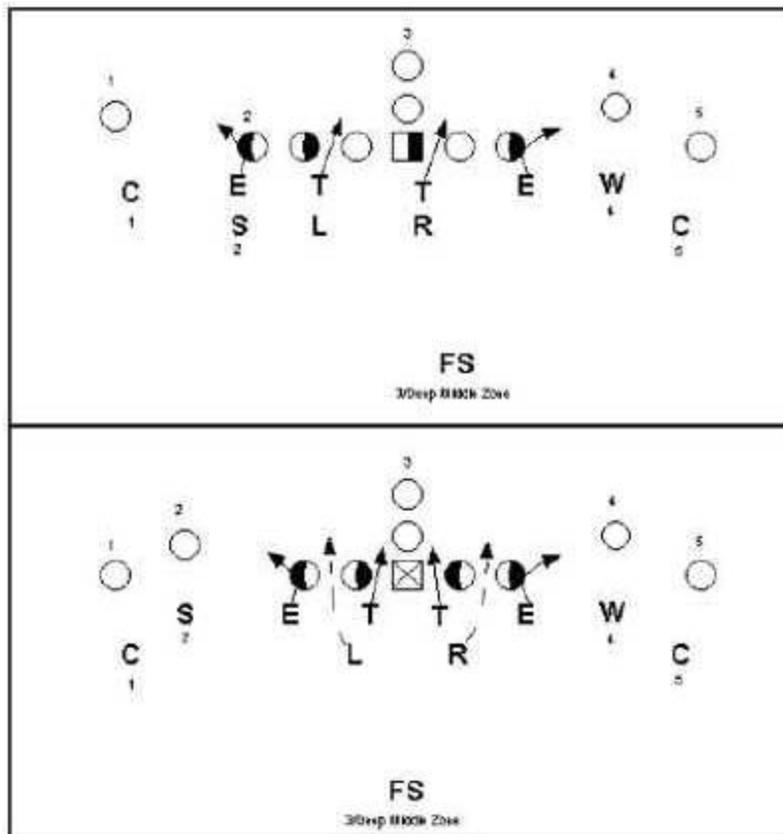
Certain offensive formations will force us to be prepared for a myriad of different attacks. There are tricks that many high school and youth offensive coordinators will use to attempt to gain a physical advantage over the defense by alignment, or to gain a one-on-one matchup in their favor. An example of this is the twins formation, primarily used at the youth level as a sweeping or passing formation.

Twins and Doubles Sets

Generally, offensive coordinators will place their best athlete/most capable receiver in the slot position. At the youth level, this gives two advantages to the offense: 1) it keeps the best receiver in a position to use motion, or to avoid bump and run coverage, and 2) it places the better receiver closer to the quarterback, making the distance the pass must travel shorter, and making the completion more likely.

With this in mind, as a defensive coordinator, we want our best athlete/best cover man in the slot position to counter this receiving

threat. Under normal Gap-8/4-4 Stack rules (as presented here) this isn't a problem. Generally the linebackers are the best athletes on a youth defense. On offense, they usually play running back or might even be that slot receiver, depending on the system their coach runs. Following the normal coverage rules of the Gap-8/4-4 Stack, the outside linebackers are responsible for covering the slot receivers in all twins and doubles (four wide receiver) sets.

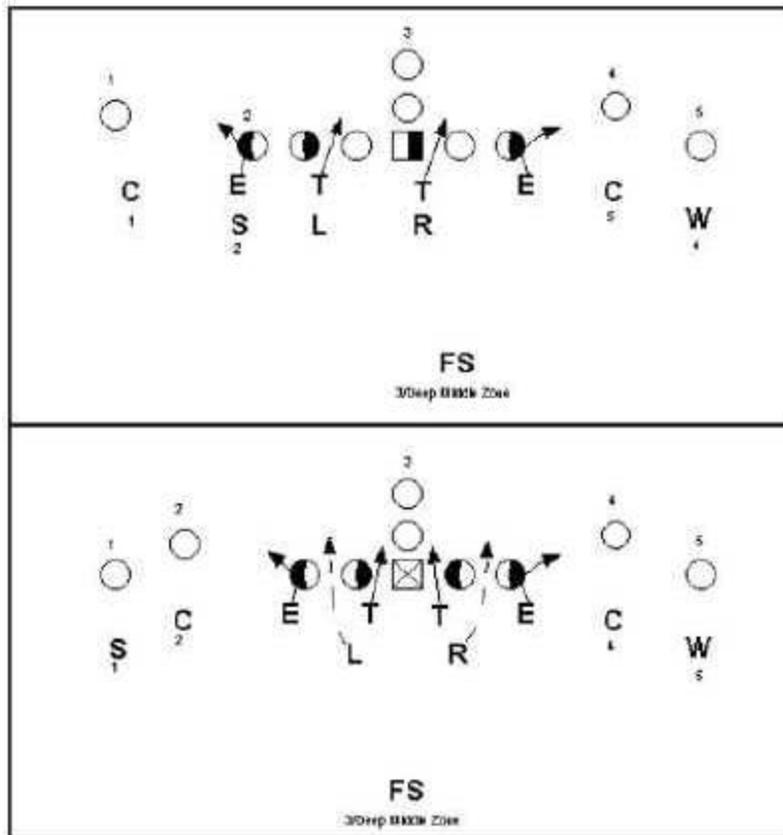


The problem is that this defense is designed for slightly higher levels of football than normal youth play. At the junior high/freshman levels of football, players begin to specialize, and coaches begin to learn how to competently take advantage of players with great speed and cutting ability. In leagues at the six to twelve age levels quick and elusive players usually play running back. In junior high, those same players are moved to flanker and split end. Coaches at those levels are also usually much more competent at installing and coaching a passing game. These traits combine to make the passing attack a much more viable threat.

But we have some good news as well. With any luck, we'll have an athlete or two that fits those same criteria on the defense. We're

probably using him on offense to play receiver as well. Defensively, though, we probably have that kid at corner.

The basic fundamental principle of defense is strength against strength. Another way to say this is to put “like types” together. This philosophy is what brings us to the high school version of this defense.



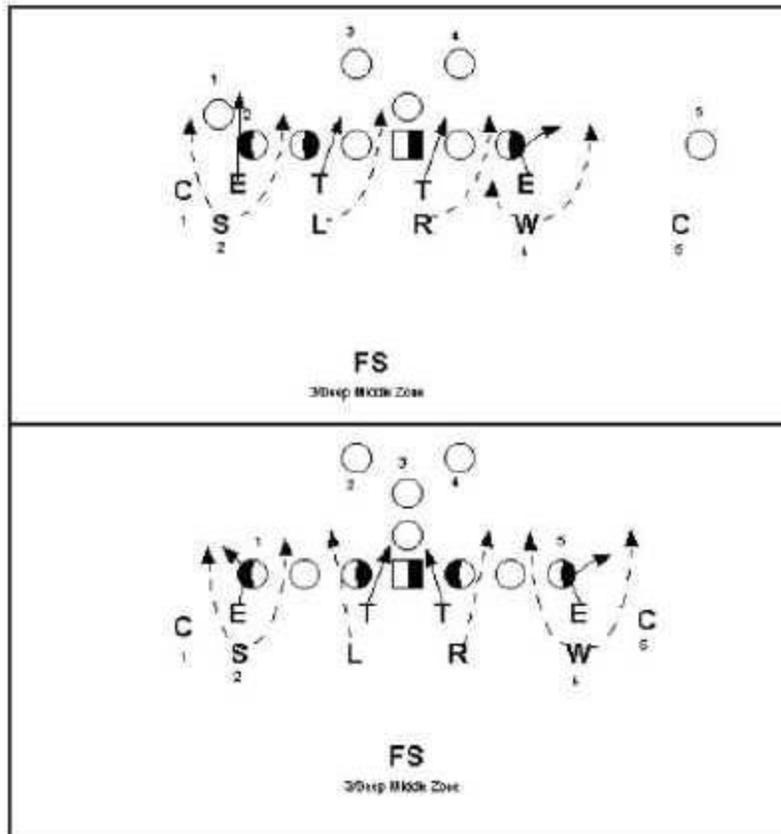
Notice that the corner has traded places with the outside linebacker in this version of the defense. At the youth level, that outside linebacker was probably the best possible choice to cover the slot receiver, but at the junior high level, this is more likely to be a mismatch in favor of the offense. Instead, we've simply switched places with the corner, putting our better cover man on the greatest receiving threat. Obviously, Will is no longer in a position to stunt, so any defensive calls such as weak fire or weak exit are now off. As soon as Will sees the twins set, he should give the code word "Off!" to the defensive end. The end should 'roger' the off call by echoing it back. "Off! Off!"

At the youth level, you'll probably see more power running, which means more two tight end and balanced formations like the double

wing and wishbone. Our normal alignment across a single tight end formation covers every other gap with one of our defensive linemen. We do not want two adjacent uncovered gaps along our defensive front.

The only way we can counter this is to shift the defensive tackles slightly and mirror their new lineup with the inside linebackers. As a result, both tackles are now aligned to an inside shade on the offensive guards. They will slant into the gaps they align in, the "A" gaps..

This leaves both "B" gaps devoid of defensive linemen. In order to shore up the weaknesses there, we must shift both inside linebackers into a head up alignment on the guards. Against this formation, if ram or lion stunts are called, both inside linebackers will blitz the "B" gap they are assigned to.



You'll notice that wingbacks also present a problem for this defense as it's drawn. Where the wing is currently placed, he is in a position to either help the tight end with a double team on the defensive end, or block down on the Sam linebacker. Either one is an

advantage for the offense, and our whole goal on defense is to take away the offensive advantages.

Countering this look isn't difficult. Shift Sam outward slightly to the outside shade of the defensive end. This should place him in a nearly head-up position on the wingback. Exit stunts are still possible, and the Sam linebacker is now in a position to take on any attempt by the wingback to block down on him. This still leaves the defensive end in position to be double teamed, but that won't help the offense as much, because it means that Sam, one of our best athletes on the defense, is now totally unblocked and in position to make the play.

Motion

Offensive coordinators use motion for a variety of reasons. It may be used to distract the defense from a misdirection play, give a lead blocker a head start to the hole, allow the ball carrier to build up speed before taking the hand off, flood zone coverage, or for a variety of other reasons. Since motion is so common, even at the youth level, a plan for countering it is necessary.

Since I advocate man-to-man pass coverage, the standard rule of thumb for the 4-4 is ***if your man goes in motion, you go with him***. This is only accurate for motion from the *outside* of the formation heading *inward*. If a corner is covering a flanker who goes in motion, then the corner should go with him. On all motion from the *inside* heading towards the sidelines, the free safety will abandon his zone pass coverage and take the motion man. This could leave the fullback free, and makes the scouting report a crucial part of defending this offensive technique. If the fullback generally goes out for passes, then consider covering him with the inside linebacker. Of course, this means that ram and lion stunts are off for that backer.

On wingback motion *outwards*, the corner can and should stay with his man. This is the only outward motion the free safety does not cover.

Option

At the lower levels of youth football, odds are the triple option is something you'll never see. Few coaches understand the attack well enough to teach it competently. In fact, I've met only two coaches out of several hundred that have used the triple option below the junior high age group. This is one reason why I feel the

Gap-8 is a viable and effective defense by itself at those younger ages.

In junior high, however, the coaching becomes more competent, and you will possibly begin to see the option more and more. This forces an adjustment in your thinking and defensive philosophy.

Most defenses are *reaction-based*. This means the linebackers and possibly even the defensive linemen make a post-snap read of the offensive play to determine the point of attack, and then move to make the tackle. The option forces these defenses to adjust their thinking more towards assignment football.

Fortunately for us, the 4-4 is not a reaction-based defense, but rather an assignment defense. Each gap is assigned to a specific defender, who has responsibility for attacking and bringing down any member of the offensive backfield trying to penetrate that gap. In 40 Base, linebackers scrape to their gaps, while the rest of the time they are usually stunting through them, but the base responsibility never changes.

Against the triple option, this is an advantage in favor of the defense. We can assign defenders to attack different potential ball carriers based on the gaps they are most likely to attack. Therefore, defensive tackles and inside linebackers are responsible for stopping the dive back if he attacks the "A" or "B" gaps. Defensive ends are responsible for tackling the quarterback, and outside linebackers play "pitch to back". This means they attack the quarterback's outside/upfield shoulder from an angle that puts them still able to tackle the pitch back. Ideally, proper positioning here can put the linebacker in a position to knock down the ball or intercept the pitch.

Corners should come up to attack the pitch back, and the safety should rotate towards the play, staying in deep pass coverage. This has the net effect of "handing off" the corner's receiver to the safety, and keeping the defense sound against an option pass.

Players should be taught to attack and tackle their assigned man whether he has the ball or not. The dive back, for example, is pretending to be the ball carrier. This makes it perfectly legal, and in fact, necessary, to tackle him, since by the time you figure out where the ball is he'll be in the defensive backfield. This can break your defense if he really does have the ball. Whether he attacks "A" or "B" gap, the inside linebackers and defensive tackles must bring him to the ground immediately.

The defensive ends should aggressively attack the quarterback, going for the tackle. Most option quarterbacks will be taught to charge towards the defensive end's inside shoulder, in an attempt to pull the end out of position for tackling the pitch back. If the quarterback keeps the ball, he'll try to run off tackle, or just inside the defensive end. The end must step down and squeeze the hole tighter, while threatening the quarterback enough to make him pitch.

As if defending a sweep, outside linebackers must attack the pitch back's outside shoulder. Since he's playing "pitch to man" he must make a quick determination which one to cover. When in doubt, go for the man. Above all, the linebacker absolutely must *not* allow the pitch back to turn the corner.

Cornerbacks are also assigned to the pitch back, and should attack his outside shoulder in an attempt to turn him back towards the outside linebacker. Remember, even if the ball is not pitched, it is perfectly legal for the corner to hit the pitch back. He cannot tackle him until the ball has been pitched, but he can make contact. I advise training the corners to do this because otherwise the pitch back will maintain his pitch relationship as he follows the quarterback downfield. This means that after a fifteen-yard gain, the quarterback can pitch before he is tackled, and the pitchman can carry the ball the rest of the way to the end zone. Take the pitchman out of the play.