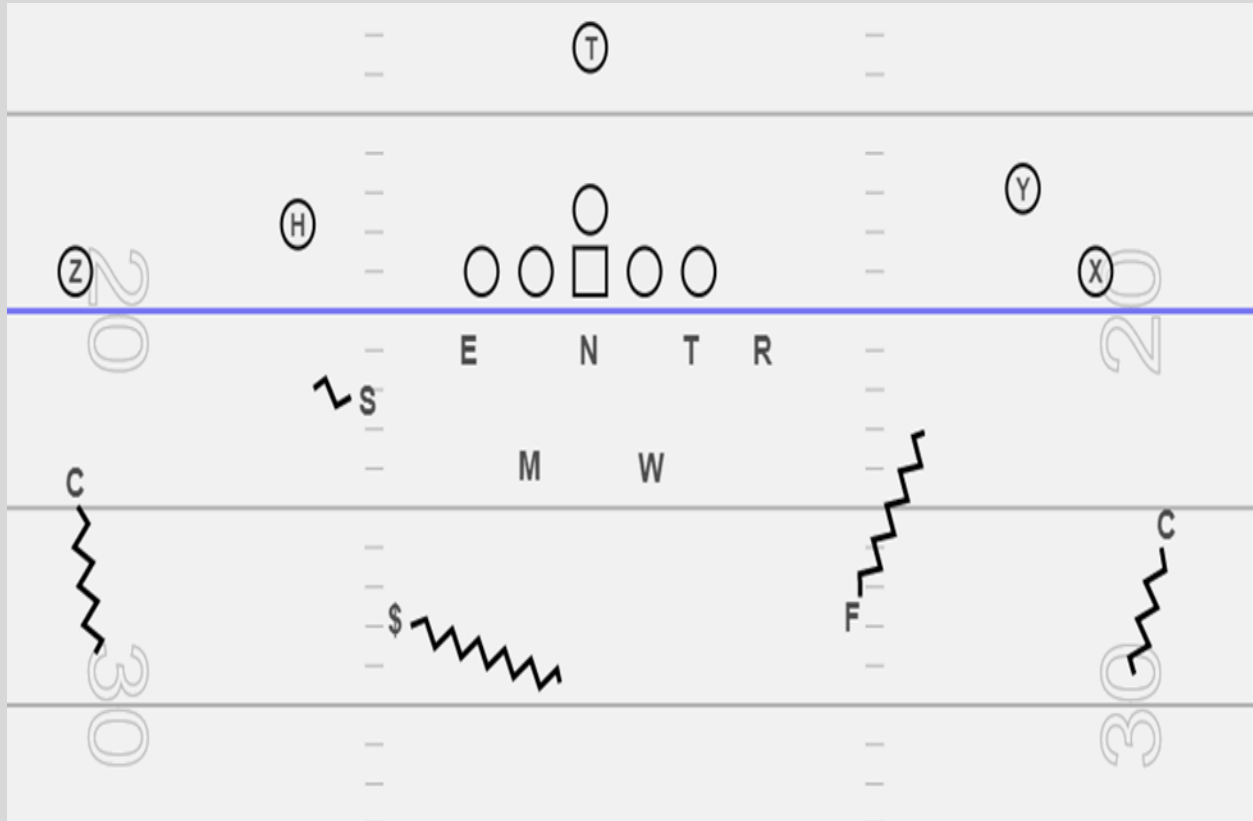


3-4 Defense Playbook



Balanced

Deceptive

Multiple

By Youth Football Online

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Philosophy of the Defense

The 3-4 defense has become more popular across all levels of football. One of the major reasons for this is the ability for the defense to adapt from week to week to combat the different offense that they may see. In addition, this defense can be adapted to use player's talents and is less restrictive on having the ideal skill sets and physical talents.

The basic premise of the defense is to present a balanced look and then be able to slant either direction. This does a couple of things to the offense. First, it slows down the offensive line and creates problems for them. When the offensive line knows where the defenders are going to be, it is relatively easy to deal with them, but once the defensive linemen start moving it creates some doubt with the offensive line and puts them on the back foot because they must react to the defender's movement. In addition, this slanting and movement can cause problems for the Quarterback in the passing game. Because the defense can slant either way and send either Outside Linebacker, the Quarterback then must deal with uncertainty of not knowing which Outside Linebacker will be dropping into to pass coverage.

Another major benefit of this defense is that smaller, weaker defensive linemen, can find success against bigger offensive linemen. Because the linemen are slanting on almost every play, they will not be taking on a whole offensive lineman. This allows them to rely on their quickness and technique to beat blocks instead of being dependent on physical strength to win the battle.

The group that benefits the most from this is the linebackers. The two linebackers are in a position where the defensive line is stunting and occupying the offensive linemen. As a result, the offensive line rarely gets a clean release to the linebackers who are free to scrape over to top and find the ball carrier.

In the Secondary the Defensive Backs are also put into a great position too. The majority of this comes from the ability of the Outside Linebackers to focus on being Alley players. This means that they will deal with any run to the outside. This frees up the Defensive Backs to focus on defending the pass and decreases the chance they will get beat in the Play Action game because they don't have a responsibility in the run game.

5 Things We Must Do on Defense

Alignment

Never get outnumbered or outflanked on any side. If we are not aligned properly, we are dead, regardless of technique. Recognize formations and align properly. Align and play ball!

Pursuit

Take good angles to the ball carrier. Force players contain, turning the ball carrier into pursuing wall players. CBs are secondary force players. Force Players: aiming point is the outside hip of ball carrier. Wall players aiming point is the inside hip of the ball carrier. Get to the football, swarm the ball carrier. Good pursuit will deter big plays and help generate turnovers.

Destruct Blocks

Defensive linemen dip and rip, linebackers shock and shed. We cannot go around blocks, we must rip and shock them. When we go around blocks, we take ourselves out of the play and create horizontal space for the ball carrier. We don't beat blocks, we destruct them.

Tackle

We must tackle safely and effectively. We must swarm the ball carrier. We must have the mindset that we will get the ball carrier on the ground. Understand leverage (know where your help is and aiming point) and make the tackle.

Turnovers

We need at least 3 turnovers a game. If we get 3 or more turnovers, we will win the game. We will utilize the rip and punch to force fumbles. Our relentless pursuit will give us numbers around the ball carrier, which will give us better odds of recovering a forced fumble. This applies on run and pass plays. 2nd player in will always hack at the football.

Position Breakdown

Defensive Line

End-The end is the defensive lineman that will align to the passing strength of the offense. His base alignment is a 4, or head up on the Tackle. This tends to be the best overall defensive lineman. He will normally be responsible for the C Gap so he must be able to beat the reach block of a Tackle so he should be the quickest of the defensive linemen.

Nose-The Nose is the heart of the defensive line. His base alignment will be directly in front of the Center. There are two types of Noses that can be effective.

The first is based on Power. If you have the player who is physically dominant this is a great player to put at the Nose and allow him to manhandle the Center who is at a disadvantage because he has to snap the ball and then block. If the Nose can effectively drive the Center back on every play he can shut down any inside run.

The other option for the Nose is a speed-based Nose. This player tends to be easier to find. The idea behind a speed-based Nose is that he is going to slant and beat the Center to the hole where he can create havoc.

Tackle-The Tackle is going to align to the weak side, or the short side of the field. This player does not need to be as dynamic as the End but needs to be able to take on a Double Team effectively. His base alignment is a 4, or head up on the Tackle and he will be stunting to the B Gap on most plays. He still should be able to play a C Gap if the stunt requires it, but because he will be on the short side of the field, he will have support behind him and won't need to cover as much ground.

Outside Linebackers

Ram-The Ram is the more physical of the two Outside Linebackers. In an ideal world this player would be able to play the physical run game like a Defensive End while also being able to defend the pass. But if the Ram is only able to do one of these, he needs to be able to play the run.

The Ram is going to be on the Short or Weak side of the offensive formation so he will not have as much ground to cover but because the Tackle will be slanting most of the time, he will have to be physical enough to handle the C Gap on his own without any help from the inside linebackers.

Sam-The Sam is what makes the 3-4 defense work. This is the most important position because he must be able to handle the run against a physical team, while also going out to play the pass against teams that throw the ball to the wide side of the field. He will align to the wide side of the field, or the passing strength. In base defense the End will occupy the C Gap so the Sam will be free to play the pass. In an ideal world he would be able to play both the run and the pass well, but the Sam is the Outside Linebacker who should be better against the pass and does not have to be as physical against the run.

Inside Linebackers

Mike-The Mike is the linebacker that is responsible for the B Gap to the passing strength. This should be the heavier, run stopping linebacker. He will be responsible for taking on any lead backs coming through the B Gap and making the tackle. One area where this player can be exploited if he is not very good on pass defense is in the Trips formation. There are ways around it, but you should be aware that when covering the Trips formation the Mike may be asked to cover a receiver in space.

Will-The Will linebacker should be the faster of the two inside linebackers as he will need to be able to provide support to the Mike on the strong side of the formation. In addition, the Will might be asked to get out into the flats if the Ram is blitzed. As a result, this needs to be a defender who is comfortable moving in space.

Defensive Backs

Cornerbacks-We believe in a primarily pass defending Cornerbacks. These do not need to be your most physical defenders because they will rarely be asked to make tackles. This is especially true on the strong side of the defense so if you have a less physical Cornerback you can put him on the same side as the Sam. In addition, the longer throw and the support that he will get from the Sam linebacker makes this the spot to hide a weaker Cornerback.

Strong Safety-This is the Safety that is going to be playing on the Strong Side of the formation, or to the passing strength. While Safeties are the more physical of the defensive backs, the Strong Safety can afford to be less of a physical player who can focus on covering over the top on any deep routes.

Free Safety-This Safety will be playing on the weak side of the formation. He must be your best defensive back because he will be asked to come down and help with the run while also providing support to the weak side CB and defend any deep crossing route that comes from the strong side of the formation.

Alignments

One of the easiest ways to allow your defense to be flexible is to give players very basic defensive rules that they can use to align. If they are able to master these simple rules, they will be aligned in a good position before each play which gives them a chance to be successful.

Outside Linebackers

Outside Linebackers have one of the toughest jobs of any defensive player. This is especially true for the Sam Linebacker who will need to check the number of linemen and the receivers on his side every play.

While he will need to check them every time, his base rules are very simple. He starts by looking at how many down linemen there are past the Center. If there are more than two offensive players on the line (either a Tight End or a Tackle Over) he is going to come down and play with outside leverage on the 3rd down lineman regardless of who it is.

If there is not a third lineman, he is going to check the number of receivers on his side and apex the #2 receiver and the Tackle. It takes a little bit to teach kids what Apex means, but when we started teaching it by telling them to align at five yards deep between the #2 receiver and the outside leg of the Tackle, they started to pick it up quicker. The key here is that he will still line up this way if there is a trips look with three receivers on his side.

The Ram will follow the same rules as the Sam, but because he is not on the passing strength, he will never have to deal with 3 receivers. If he has a third man on the line of scrimmage, he will play with outside leverage. This can be a difficult job for him because the Tackle will be slanting away from him on most play so he will need to play through the Tight End and not run upfield.

Safeties

The Safeties are the only other players who need to adjust to the different offensive formations. Their rule is that they want to align over the number two receiver with leverage to the space he creates. Again, this can be a little bit of a difficult concept at first, but once they learn it they will start to understand the game and how to defend different formation.

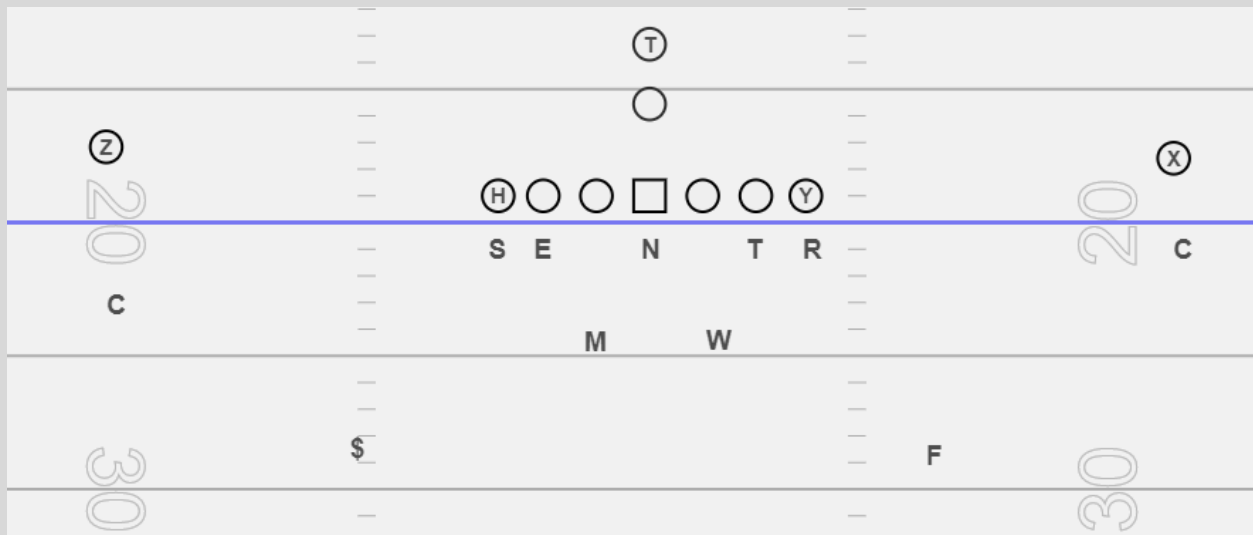
If the #2 receiver is a Tight End that means that he has created space to his outside, so the Safety needs to align with outside leverage on him. If the receiver is lined up outside (think of a

Twins or Spread alignment), he has created space inside of him so the Safety will align with leverage to the inside.

There are two areas where things get a little interesting. The first is traditional Trips where there isn't a number two receiver to the weak side. This means that the #2 receiver is on the wide side of the Field. In this case the receiver is creating space to the opposite side of the formation. So, the Free Safety will align between the backside Guard and Tackle which will allow him to play any deep crossing route from #3 and also allow him to get to the weak side to stop the run.

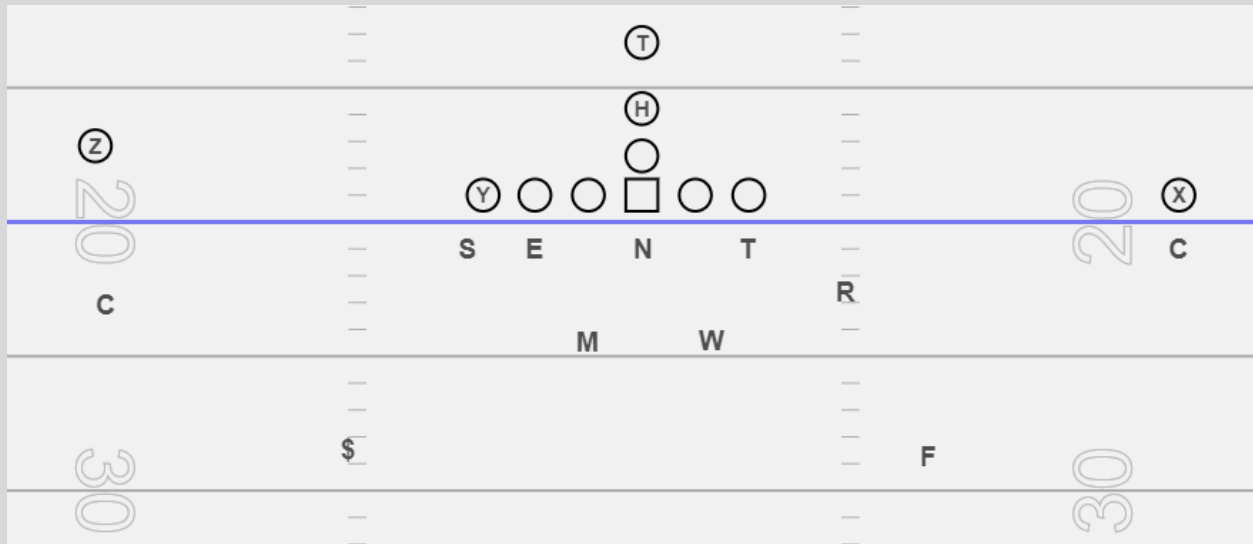
The other time things get interesting is when the offense aligns in Tight End Trips. Because of the Sam's rules he will be aligned over the Tight End. This will put him with outside leverage over the Tight End and leave the Alley empty. In these situations, the Strong Safety will roll down and replace Sam's original alignment by Apexing #2 and the EMOL.

Double Tight



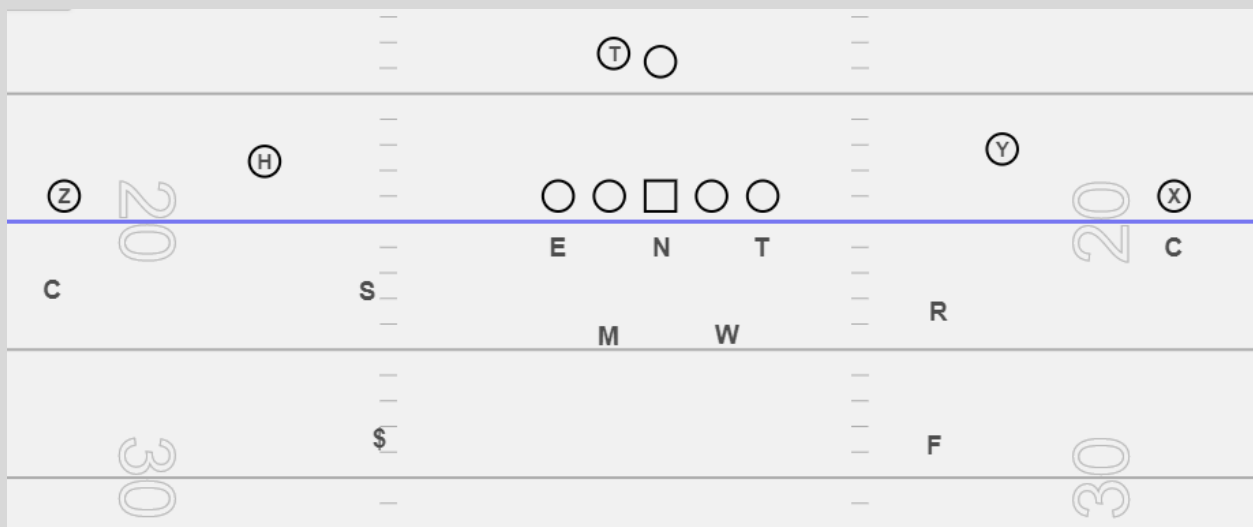
As you can see above the base rules stay consistent. Because there are Tight Ends on each side the Outside Linebackers will come down and play with outside leverage on each of them. In addition, the number two receiver on each side has created space to the outside so the Safeties will align in this space and are ready to come down and make the play on any run.

Pro



The traditional “Pro” alignment is also an easy formation to line up to as long as the players understand and follow to their rules. There is a Tight End on the Strong side of the formation which means that Sam will come down and align with outside leverage. In this case the Strong Safety should probably play down a little bit more and we would probably want to call a Cover 3 to get him more involved in the run game, but these are easy adjustments that take place on gameday.

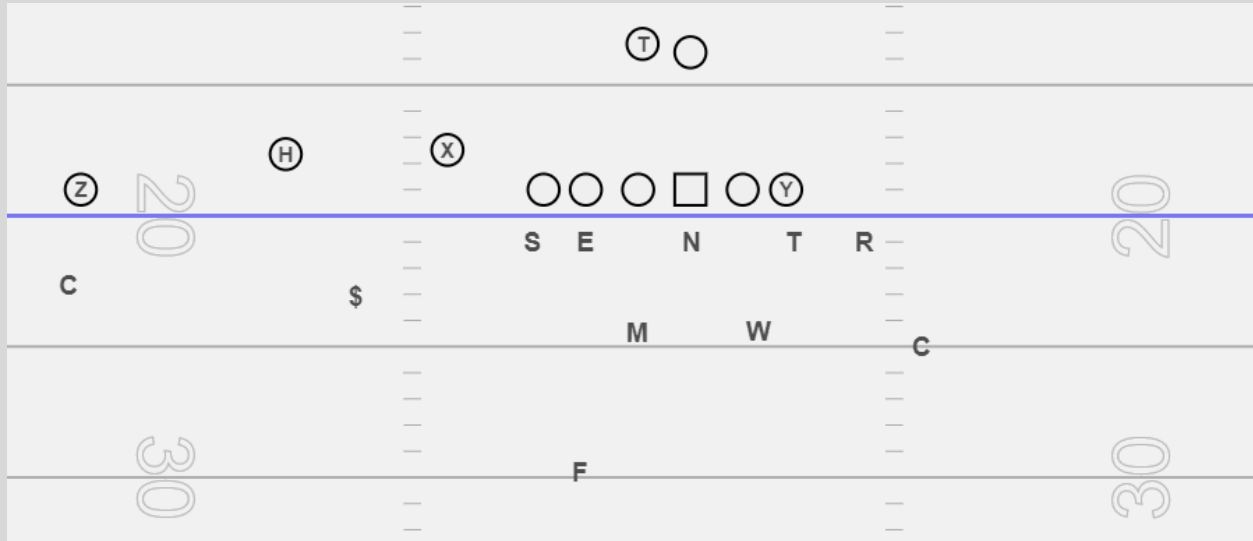
Spread



This defense makes for an easy adjustment to the traditional Spread formation. All that happens is the defenders keep to their rules and the Outside Linebackers Apex #2 and the EMOL. While it looks like the offense has a numbers advantage in the run game, the Outside Linebackers are in a position to stop any outside run which allows the defensive line to deal with the inside run.

The Safeties will align with inside leverage to force the long throw over the top. If you wanted to bring an additional defender to play the run you could go with Cover 3 and bring a defender down to cover the flats while sending the Ram.

Unbalanced

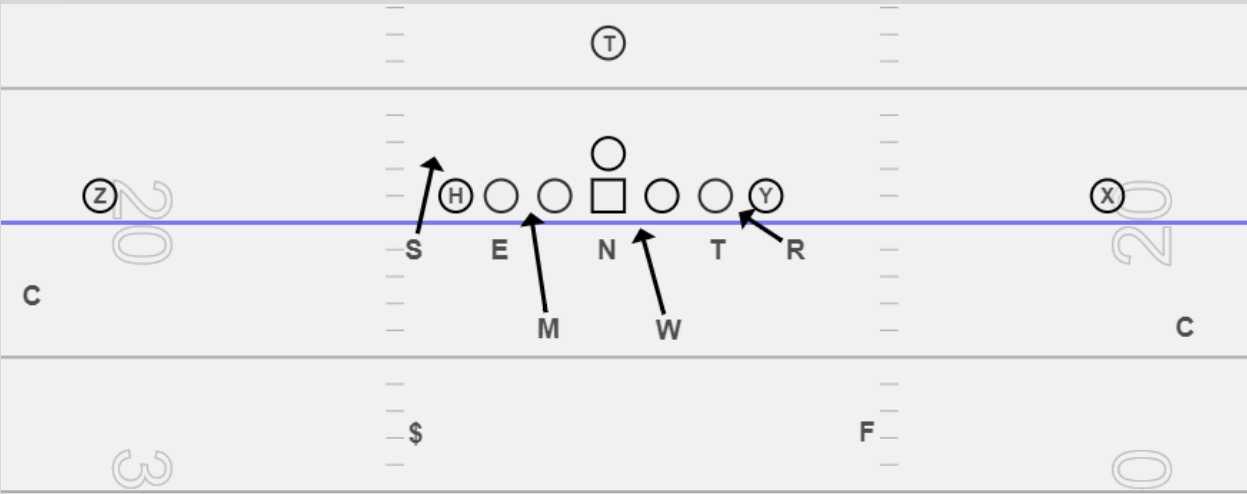


One major advantage of the defense is the ability to easily deal with Unbalanced formations. In this situation the Sam sees that there are three linemen past the Center, so he comes down to play with outside leverage. At the same time the Safety needs to see that there are Trips and that the Sam is down on the Line of Scrimmage so he will come down and Apex #2. There are a variety of different things we could do to get into a better defensive set, but the fact that our base rules keep us sound when dealing with an unbalanced look means that we will at least have a chance to make a play on a very difficult formation.

Run Blitzes

Inside Blitzes

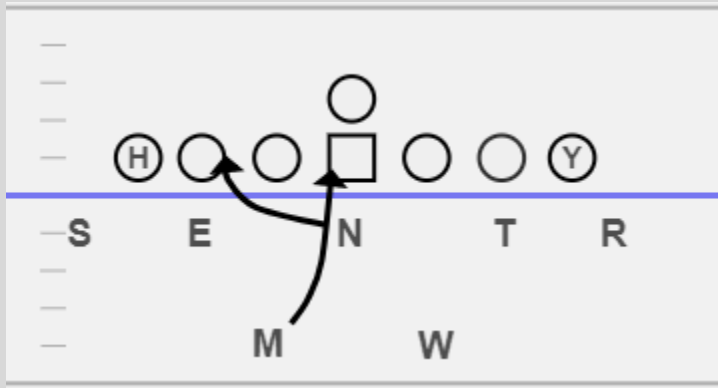
Football will always boil down to being able to stop the interior run. As a defense, if you are able to stop the interior run you make them try to run around you which allows you to use your leverage to make tackles. In addition to the base pressures, we use two main blitzes to put pressure on the interior of the defense.



Our base blitzes are very straightforward. If we signal for a specific player, they will blitz their gap. For example, if we signal Mike then the Mike Linebacker will be blitzing through the gap he is responsible for which is the playside B Gap. This applies to any of the linebackers, so it gives us an easy way to send our linebackers to make standard blitzes.

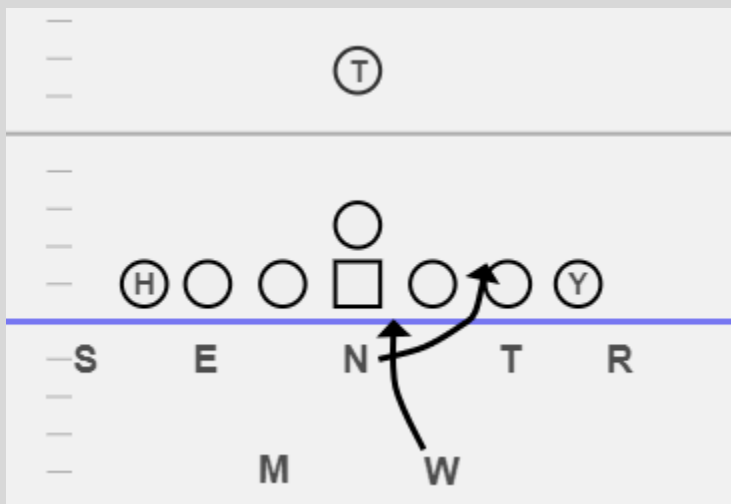
We also have two main blitzes that we use to create some twists and confuse the offensive line. These are all based on the Nose scraping over a gap. We have found that most linemen will chase a man when he stunts away. If you are able to replace the lineman with a Linebacker, he will be sitting in the hole untouched.

Numb Blitz



The first blitz we use is our Numb blitz. The blitz will speak to the Nose and the Mike linebacker. The Nose is going to start in his base alignment of head up on the Center and then stunt to the opposite B Gap. The Mike will start in his base alignment over the Guard and then come off the butt of the Nose to fill the playside A Gap. The key coaching point on this blitz is to make sure the Mike has enough depth so that he doesn't get caught up by the Nose coming down the line. If he is patient, he will show up in the A Gap in a wide-open window.

Naw Blitz



The variation that we use on this is our Naw call. On Naw the Nose will be stunting to the weak side A gap and the Will will be coming to the strongside A gap. Again, the Nose will start in his base alignment, but he can move over into the strongside A gap if you want to mess with the rules of the offensive line a little bit. On the snap he is going to rip to the weak B Gap. Meanwhile the Will is going to start in his base alignment over the Guard and come off the butt of the Nose to show up in the A Gap. This is a great blitz to shut down the Inside Zone concept because it takes the Center and Backside Guard out of the play and the Strong Guard must choose between blocking the Mike or the Will. In addition, because the Nose is getting out to the

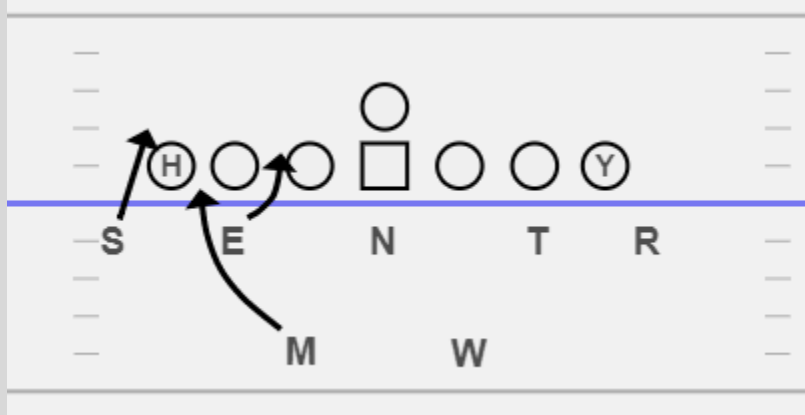
B Gap the Tackle can play the C Gap and you can drop the Ram into coverage which presents a different picture for the QB.

Off-Tackle Blitzes

One area where teams will look to create a lot of success is off tackle. This is especially true if the team is big into running the Power play where the offensive line will block everyone down and then kick out anyone outside of the Tackle. Beyond our base blitzes where we will call each player to blitz there are a variety of blitzes that we use to stop these runs.

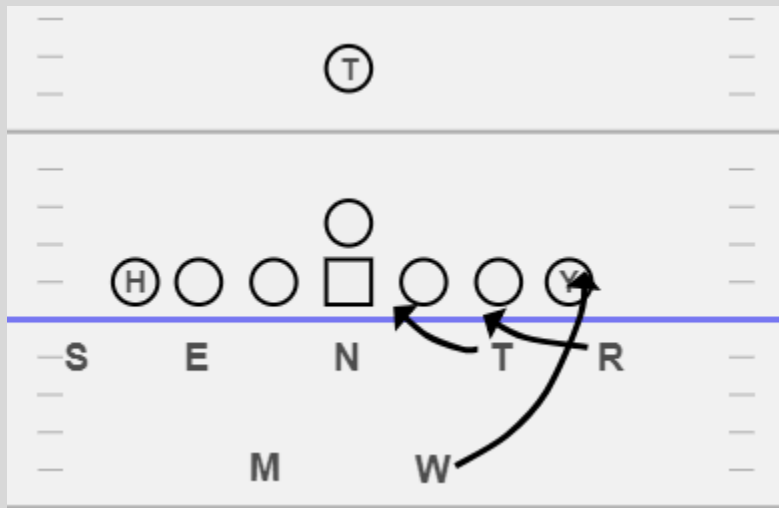
The main blitz we use to attack the Off-Tackle area is a pinch loop. This blitz can be run to either side which makes it universal and easy for the players to understand. When we run this play to the strong side, we call it Mace while on the weak side we will call it Wet.

MACE Stunt



The blitz is pretty straight forward when we are running it to the strong side. The End will rip inside to the B Gap and get vertical through the gap. We want to make sure that he does not get washed down into the A gap. Mike will come off his butt into the C Gap. On a traditional Power play the Fullback will be looking to kick whoever is outside of the Tackle which means he will need to work to get under this block but if he can work under this block he will be in a perfect position for a tackle. If the offense is running an Outside Zone or Sweep type of play the Tackle will probably go with the End stunting inside leaving an open lane for the Mike to make the play.

WET Stunt

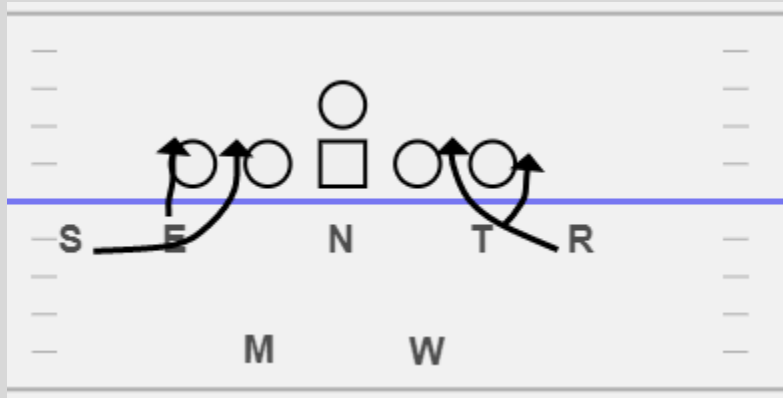


The major difference on running this to the weak side is the gap of the Tackle and the role of the Ram. We base our defense on a slant to the strong side which means the Will is responsible for the A Gap, while the Tackle normally has the B Gap and the Ram has the C Gap. In this stunt the Tackle will look to get down to the A Gap, the Ram will move to the B Gap and the Will is going to loop to the C Gap. The effect is that the offensive linemen will be brought further down than they expect which will open up a window for the Will to pop up in the C Gap and make a play.

Edge Blitzes

Bringing pressure on the edge is a huge part of running an effective defense. Luckily this defense is designed around keeping the edges strong because there are two Alley players who are responsible for keeping outside leverage on any outside runs.

Twist Stunt



Our major way of getting pressure on the Edge is our Twist stunt. This is a simple stunt that will exchange the responsibility of the Tackle and Ram on the weak side, and the Sam and End on the Strong side. This can be a great way to get pressure on a passer but is also very effective to confuse the edge blocking schemes for the offensive line.

There are a few key coaching points that apply to each role. For the straight man (End on the strong side and Tackle on the weak side) he must explode off the ball and gain outside leverage on the play. He is now going to be responsible for keeping outside leverage on the ball carrier so he needs to get upfield quickly, in addition this will open the window for the Spike player (Sam or Ram) to get through the line.

The role of the Spike player is one of the most difficult stunts in football. He must stall to get the lane open, get into his lane and then get vertical. This takes some time for players to master but once they do it can be a deadly stunt. The first thing that they must do is stall for a step. We tell them to line up with their inside foot forward and take a hard step with their outside foot at the snap of the ball. This should help to threaten the offense on the edge while giving the straight man time to clear the path. On his next step he will come straight down the line of scrimmage to get inside of the straight man. As he is doing this, he needs to work to get his shoulders and hips pointing upfield to ensure that he doesn't end up too far inside. The best way for them to do this is to get his eye in on the running back as soon as he makes his move off of the straight man.

This stunt will often leave the Spike player free and open to make the play. In addition, it will cause the Tackle to slow down on an outside block because he doesn't want to be beat inside again

Pass Coverage

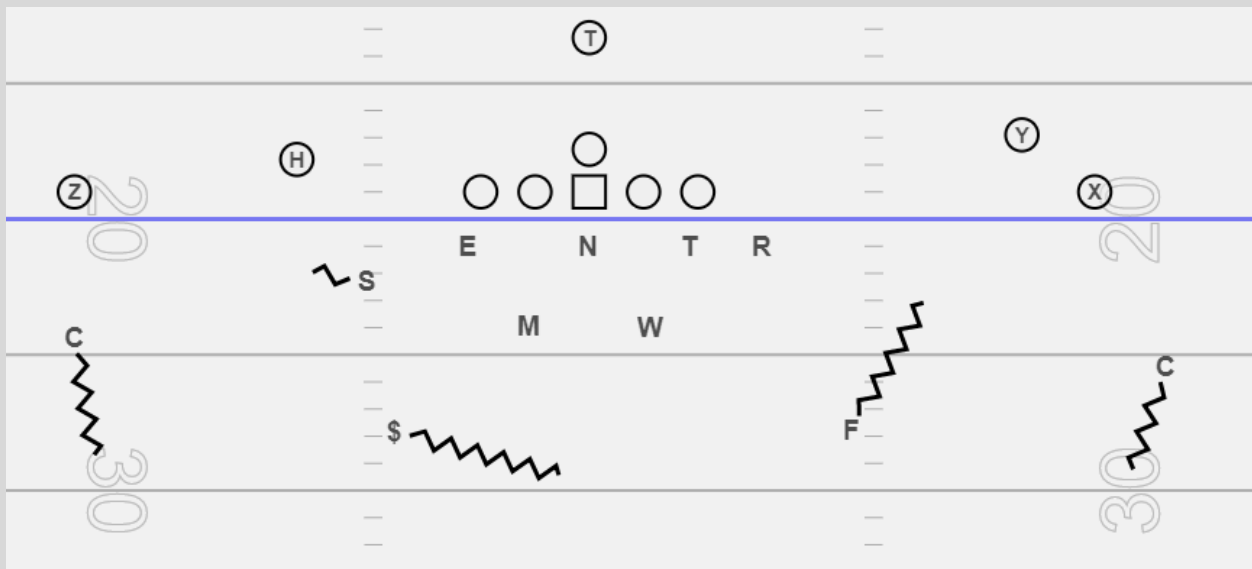
One of the best parts about the 3-4 defense is the ability to play any coverage that you need to. The ability to drop both outside linebackers into coverage allows you to mix up the coverages that you present to counter the offense and what they are trying to do to your defensive structure.

While you can play just about any coverage there is, it tends to be best if you focus in on two to three coverages. When I have run this defense in the past the three coverages that I have used have been Cover 3, Cover 4 and a variation of Cover 3 we call Special to stop Trips.

Cover 3

In Cover 3 we are looking to get an extra defender into the box to stop the run. This is very effective against teams that are very run heavy and can also be a good way to secure the edge against a team that runs a lot of Sweeps. While the pass defense in the flats can be a weakness, if you are looking to stop the run Cover 3 is one of the best coverages around.

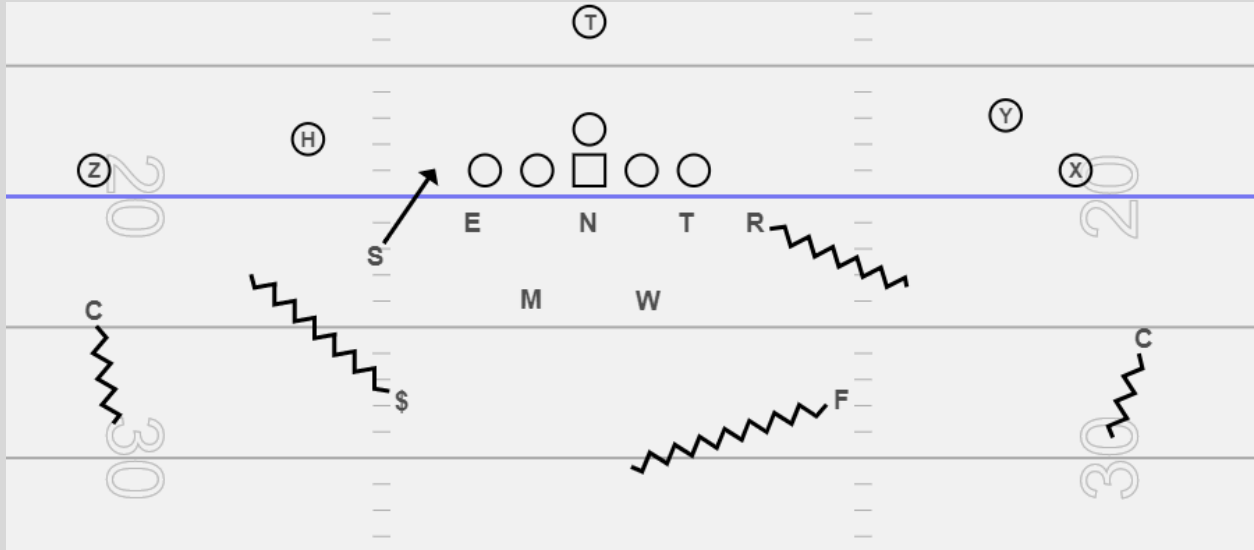
Cover 3 Weak



Our rules for Cover 3 are very simple. We want to roll the Safety who is on the same side as the Ram, in our defense this would be the Free Safety. This Safety is going to come down and he will be responsible for D Gap run and the flats, which allows the Ram to be a total run player.

On the other side of the formation the Sam linebacker will be responsible for the flats and any D Gap run. The Cornerbacks are responsible for the deep outside third while the Strong Safety is responsible for the deep middle third.

Cover 3 Strong

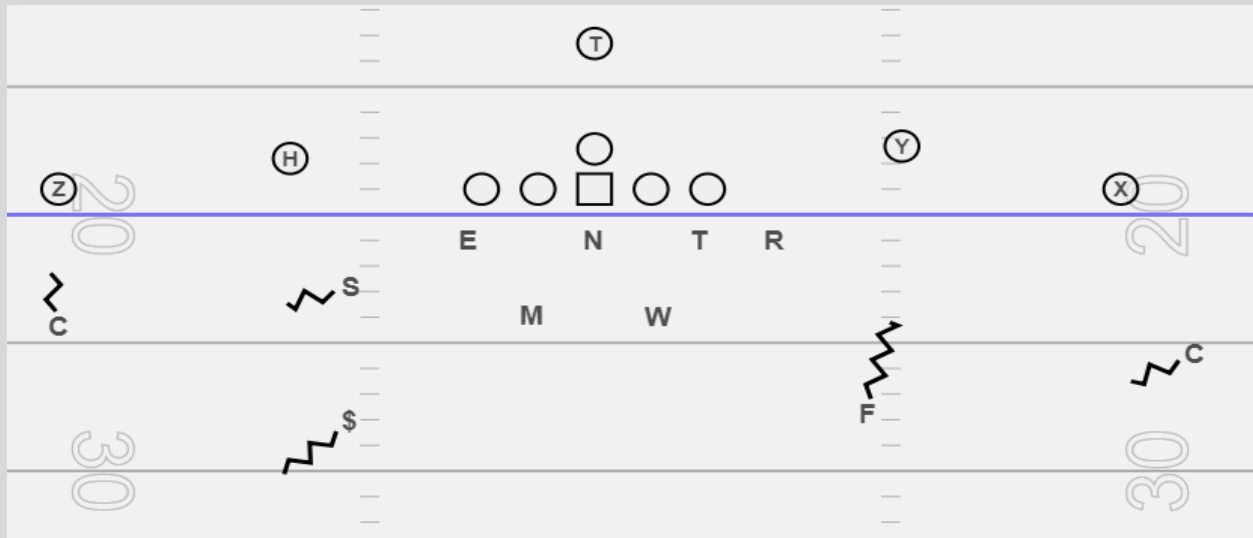


To create some variety, we can also roll down the Strong Safety. When we do this the box players will switch their slant call and now slant away from the Sam linebacker who will be a run defender. In addition, the Ram will be the flat defender on his side. This is a simple way to bring an extra defender to stop the run on the strong side of the formation.

Cover 4

There are times when we want to keep two Safeties over the top to help stop the passing game. In these instances, we will run a Cover 4 look that is very sound against the pass. In reality this is more of a hybrid between Cover 4 and Cover 2 but by calling it Cover 4 it makes things easier for the players.

Cover 4 Base

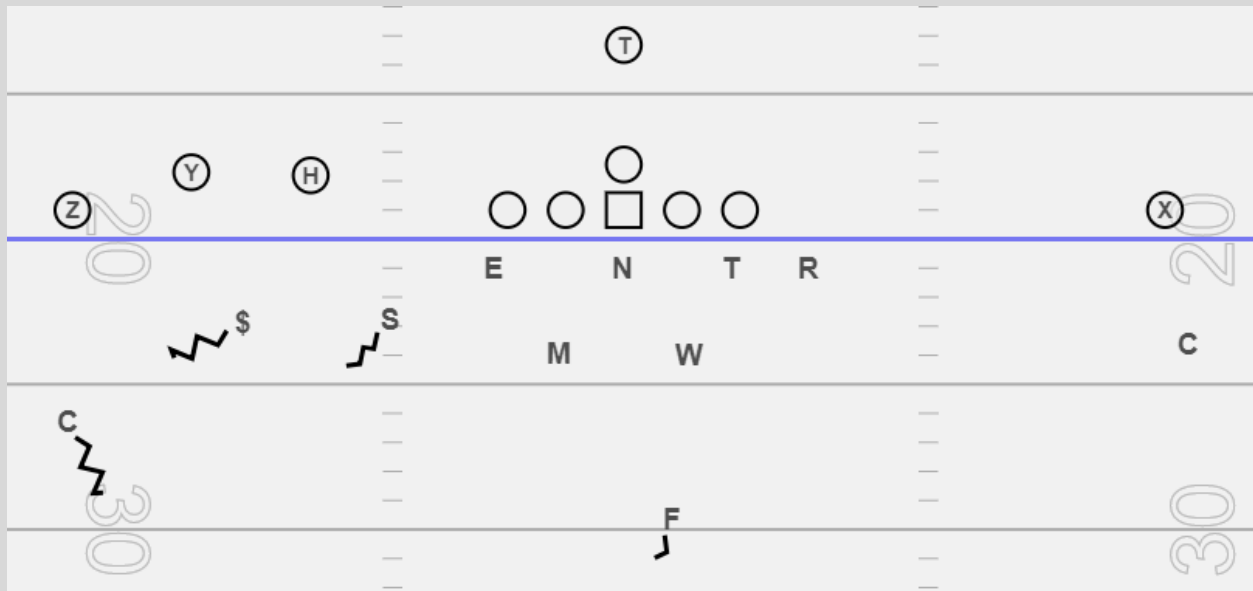


Again, the rules for our Cover 4 are very simple and based on keeping our defense strong against the run while also providing some support to the defensive backs to stop the quick game. By rule our Safeties will have the Deep Half of the field. The only difference is in stopping the run between the Free Safety and the Strong Safety.

The Strong Safety has help on his side of the field, so he has an easier assignment. He will have the deep half of the field. Because the Sam linebacker is underneath him to play the Alley, he doesn't need to worry about the short passing game or any outside run. Meanwhile the Free Safety has a tougher responsibility. The Ram is going to attack and play run or get pressure on the Quarterback on most downs. As a result, there is no defender to stop the short passing game or outside runs to the Free Safety's side. This means he is going to be more of a downhill player. As a result, the Cornerback is going to be the deep defender who takes any receiver going vertical to his side.

Special Coverage

One of the hardest formations in football to defend is the Trips formation. It becomes difficult because you have to move so many players out of the box and create a brand-new set of rules. These rules complicate the roles of the players and make them second guess themselves and play slow. To combat this, we use our Special coverage whenever we see Trips.



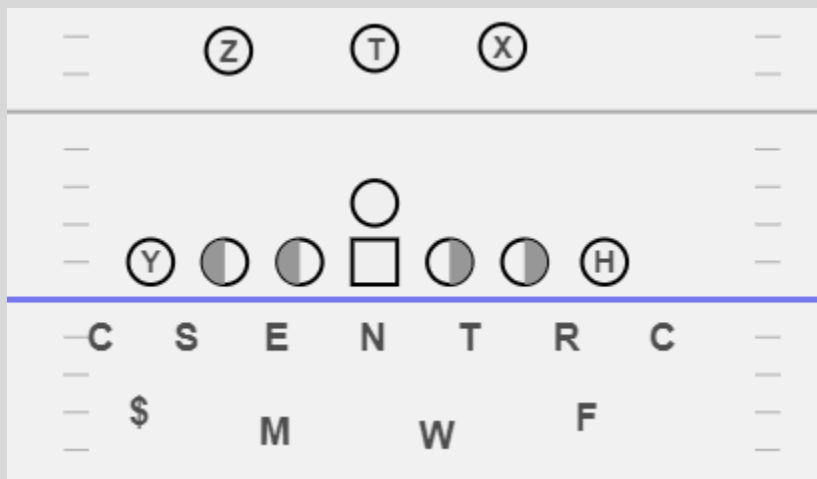
Special is just Cover 3 strong. All we are going to do is roll down the Strong Safety to just inside of the number 2 receiver. This allows Sam to treat the number 3 receiver like he was a normal slot and keep the same rules that he follows for Cover 3, the only difference being that he doesn't need to get as wide to cover the flats because the Strong Safety can now play the flats to the Trips side.

This defense is very strong to the Trips side but can be difficult for the Free Safety on the short side of the field. While the cornerback on the trips side of the field needs to be playing man to man coverage, it's really the Free Safety that is in a difficult position. He must defend the deep third of the field while also being able to stop the outside run on the short side of the field. While this may seem impossible, as long as the Ram does a good job of stringing the play out and the Sam and Mike collision and slow down any deep crossing route, he should be able to do both.

Goal Line

Another great component of the defense is the ability to quickly, and easily, transfer into a Goal Line setting. In the 3-4 defense it is easy to quickly get into a front that is very strong against the run and can help stop the offense on short yardage or red zone situations. You can do this from your base personnel or bring in a heavier set of players. By being able to stay in your base personnel or bringing in a heavy personnel you can either match the offensive personnel or just quickly go into a defense to stop the run when you think it might be coming.

The Goal Line defense in the 3-4 is commonly referred to as a Bear Front. All this means is that each player is going to move in a gap. For the End and Tackle this will mean that they will go from lining head up on the Tackles to now lining up on the outside shoulder of the Guard. Meanwhile the Outside Linebackers (the Ram and Sam) will now take their position as the C Gap player and they will align on the outside shoulder of the Tackle.



The defensive backs will play man to man and will continue to align to keep leverage on space. While the Cornerbacks will take any receiver, the Safeties will take any Tight End and align on their outside shoulder. If there is a situation where there are three backs in the backfield and a Tight End, the Safety will move to a linebacker position while still keeping outside leverage so that he continues to have leverage on the space. Meanwhile the Cornerback will move to the outside shoulder of the Tight End and keep his outside leverage as well.

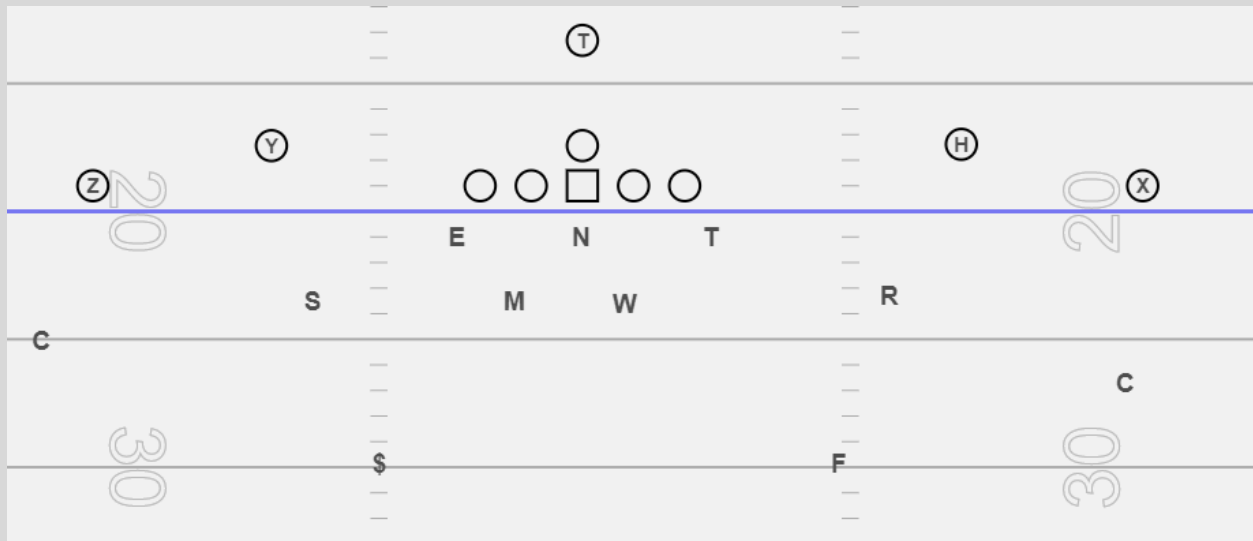
The linebackers now have a host of bodies that are going to clog up the blockers which will allow them to play over the top and make any plays. This means that they need to align a half step deeper and a full step wider. The reasoning here is that they will be making more tackles by scraping into the open gaps since the defensive linemen will be dealing with any straight ahead runs.

A solid strategy for Goal Line situations is to sub in some bigger bodies on defense. One of the best ways to do this is to put in two linemen to take the place of the End and the Tackle and pull

off two Defensive Backs. The result is that the players who were previously playing End and Tackle are now playing Ram and Sam, but in reality, they have the same assignment. Meanwhile the players who were previously playing Ram and Sam are now playing Safety, but they will more than likely be playing in a Linebacker position where they are on the outside shoulder of the Tight End.

Prevent

There will be times when it is obvious that the offense is going to be throwing the ball deep. In these situations, you will need to switch to a deep coverage that minimizes the amount of open space for the offense to throw the ball and prevents any long passing plays. Luckily, the 3-4 defense is able to easily accomplish this.



The Prevent Defense in the 3-4 is a very easy adjustment. All you are going to do is drop the Ram into the flats along with the Sam (who will be playing there anyways). Because the Ram is now playing in the flats the Free Safety no longer has to worry about any short passes. This allows the Free Safety to play deep and prevent any long passes to his side.

On the defensive line the only thing that changes is the rush lanes of the End and Tackle. Both the Tackle and the End will now align outside of the Tackle and will be rushing the Quarterback from the outside. Meanwhile the Nose will take up space and look to make sure that the back does not release on a screen.

Again, you can easily sub in a Prevent situation to put your best pass defenders on the field. The best person to sub for in this situation is the Ram. If you have a defensive back who can cover space but is not in your starting 4 this is the ideal time to bring him on and give him the responsibility of covering the flats to the short side of the field. The other option is to put this defensive back on the wide side of the field and then move the Sam over to the short side of the field. Regardless, this area is not a hot spot, but it's nice to put a pass defender there to make it difficult for offenses to complete short routes.

GOOD LUCK!

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