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DEFENDING THE SPREAD OFFENSE

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Today I am going to talk about defending the spread offense. For those of you who saw us play last year might be asking yourselves why I am talking on this topic. In most games we did not do a real good job of defending the spread. However, in some situations we did very well.

Two years ago, we played Anderson High School in the first round of the Ohio State Playoffs. That was the first time we played a team that ran the spread offense. I was completely out-coached. I was befuddled and didn't have a good concept of how to defend that offense. In the first minute and forty-five seconds, Anderson went right down the field and scored.

They kicked off and we ran three plays and punted the football. They went right down the field again. We were fortunate to stop them on a fourth down play inside the 15-yard line. If they had scored on that possession, I honestly think they would have won the game.

I didn't have an answer for their offense. I called time out and went out to talk to the team. I yelled at them and told them, "Play harder!" and "Hit them." I didn't have a clue on what they should do and I had nothing to tell them that might give them some help. I could not say anything that would give them confidence that our coaching staff knew how to defend that set.

At that moment, I made a decision not to get caught in that situation again. We spent our entire off-season last year trying to figure out a way to defend the spread. In 2000 we saw that offense one time. In 2001 we saw it seven times as a good portion of our opponent's offense. My expectation is that we are going to continue to see that kind of

offense. I think it is here for a while anyway.

My definition of the spread offense starts with the shotgun. We play teams that run this offense from under the center, but what I am going to talk about today is from the shotgun set. As I study this offense, I believe there are two types of the spread offense. I describe them to my players as the *Purdue* and *Northwestern* types of offense.

If you went to Purdue and talked to their coaching staff, they would tell you they run the spread offense in order to throw the ball. They are going to run enough to make their passing game effective. If you talked to the coaches at Northwestern, they would tell you they are going to pass enough to make their running game effective. If you wait until two-a-day practices to learn how to defend the spread offense, you are going to be in trouble. You will not have a lot of success defending that offense.

At Colerain High School, we run the triple-option and play a fifties defense. We are relatively conservative and don't throw the ball very much. I had to talk to an awful lot of people to get some understanding about how to play the spread offenses. I visited a lot of college coaches and talked to them about how to establish a plan to stop this offense.

Almost everyone in college is running some form of the spread offense. We even got into it last year, and we very seldom throw the ball. We got into the shotgun and ran it in certain situations. We used it in the two-minute drill, no huddle, and hurry-up situations.

When trying to make a plan to stop the spread

offense, the first question you must answer is, "Why do teams run this offense?" The first thing the offense wants to do is stretch defenses horizontally. It gives the offense the opportunity to widen the field. It forces the defense to defend more space.

The spread offense allows teams to utilize skilled players on the flank. In this offense, the coach is allowed to involve more players on the outside and get them into open space. In our conference, there are a number of teams that have at least one great athlete. They want to get him isolated on the flank and get the ball in his hands.

The offense wants to create mismatches. I define that as getting fast players vs. slow players, tall players vs. short players, or mismatches in the number of players. They want to get four receivers matched up against two or three defenders.

Coaches who run the spread offense want to screw up your communication on defense. They want to take away the defensive coordinator's ability to communicate with his defense. They want to take away the communication that the defenders have with one another.

When a team runs a spread offense, they take the pressure off the offensive line. That really surprised me to my way of thinking, but the spread coaches explained to me that they were eliminating the number of defenders they had to go against in the box. They want to get their offensive line in a one-on-one situation with your defensive front. They want to eliminate all the stunts that a defense can run.

They want to restore the playmaking ability of the quarterback. Spread coaches want to get the quarterback's playmaking ability back into the game plan. The kid that is taking the snap and touching the ball every time is going to be one of the best athletes on the team.

In the spread offense, it becomes easier to identify defenses. Today, one thing Coach Tressel talked about was how defenses are getting eight and nine

people into the box. The spread offense allows your team to identify those defenses quicker. It forces the defense to declare and show what defense they are playing. That allows the offense to make their checks quicker and lets them see how many defenders the defense is going to put in the box.

The spread offense creates running lanes. I was amazed at how many coaches told me they got into the spread offense to run the ball. They create running lanes and seams by widening the field from boundary to boundary, and they get as few defenders in the interior of the field as possible.

The last reason is the most important reason and it is the reason the offense is so difficult to defend. The use of the quarterback as a runner gives the offense a full running game in the backfield with four wide receivers. If you are playing a team that has a quarterback that cannot run the ball effectively in the spread offense, you can beat them handily. If the quarterback can run and make plays, the spread offense will give you fits.

You must have a plan to counteract the advantages of the spread offense. The first thing we do is play *speed* on defense. Our players on defense can run because we select them with speed in mind. We don't have any faster players than you do. But, we play our fastest players on defense.

I learned a very important thing from Jim Herrmann of Michigan. When you are sitting in your office or at a clinic writing down your players, quit putting them down in positions. I use X's. When I draw up a defense, I use eleven X's. The first thing you do when you put a player down as a nose guard is build in limitations for that player. You will think he can't do what you want him to do because he is a nose guard. Put your players in your scheme as X's, and figure out a way to stop the offense that you have to stop.

If you have to play seven defensive backs or six linebackers to stop the offense, then that is what you do. You play those types of players. Last year on our defense we had two exceptional defensive

tackles. They were both first-team all-state players. One of them was 285 lbs. and the other was 240 lbs. After that, there wasn't anyone on the defense that weighed over 200 lbs. We had a bunch of guys who could run to the ball. They weren't really good and didn't hit very well, but we could get four or five of them to the ball on every play. That really makes a difference. We had little guys but they could run to the ball.

The second thing we had to do was make a decision. It was a week-to-week decision. We had to decide whether to match up individually or double cover the receivers. The first thing a spread team is going to try to do is get one of their big guns on one of your weaker players. If you don't have one good defender that can handle their stud, they'll beat you all day long.

I was very stubborn about accepting that point. I told our coaches we were going to put one player on their stud. We were going to coach the crap out of him, teach him, and he would be all right. We played Oak Hills High School last year. They had a skinny wide receiver. We covered him one-on-one and he caught fourteen balls on us in the fourth game of the season. We let our defensive back play this receiver and didn't give him any help. That was a bad decision I made because I was being stubborn. If we don't have a player to match up with the opponent's receiver, we are going to double cover. But that is a decision you have to make. Remember, when you double cover, you become weaker somewhere else.

We want to create our own mismatches. If the offense's theory is to create mismatches on your defense, you have to turn the tables on them. You have the advantage of knowing how they are going to line up. There aren't many ways to line up in the spread. They are either going to be in a three-by-one or a two-by-two set. We have to figure out which offensive lineman we can consistently beat. Most teams are hiding someone on the offensive line. You have to be a great team to have five offensive linemen that can really block.

We want to know the one player we can

consistently beat and devise a plan to attack that guy. We can take our best defensive lineman and align him on their weakest offensive lineman, or we can adjust the front to get the match-up we want. We want numbers mismatches. We want to get three defenders on two blockers. If you bring four defenders from the weak side, you are going to give the spread offense trouble. The offense has to figure out a way to block that. In most of those offenses, it is the quarterback's job to handle a fourth defender coming from the weak side by throwing a hot route.

You need to know how to get two defenders blitzing from outside the protection scheme. That goes hand-in-hand with you understanding how the offense protects the quarterback. We want to put the pressure on the offense and make them check a play to handle what we are doing. If they check off to a different play, that is not what they originally wanted to do.

The fourth thing we use to counteract the spread offense is communication. This is a huge thing to consider in the no-huddle offense. This winter you have to decide how to handle the no-huddle offense. You can't wait until the first time you see it in September.

I believe there are three ways to handle communication with the no-huddle offense. You can use wristbands, signal and relay, or signal to everyone.

I don't particularly like the wristbands. The reason is the time it takes to actually make the wristband cards. We were spending more time making the wristbands than we were at studying the offense.

If you signal to one player and have him relay it to the defense, there is always someone who is going to miss the call. It is hard to try to adjust and listen for the defensive call at the same time.

What we do is have everyone on the defense learn the signals. Everyone looks to the sidelines. When the coach signals the defense into the game, everyone reads the signal. No method is fail proof, but this is the way we are handling the no huddle.

The second thing in communication that you need to handle with the no-huddle offense is the *pacing* of it. There are two speeds of pacing. First is a normal pace. In the normal pace, the quarterback takes his time and uses almost the entire twenty-five second clock. The offense lines up. The coach in the press box looks at the defense and sends the play to the field. The coach on the field signals the play into the game, and the quarterback automatically the play. The normal pace allows your players to relax and adjust to what is happening on the field. They understand the quarterback is not going to snap the ball while he is looking at the sidelines.

The other pace is called *NASCAR*. The offense will memorize eight plays during the course of the week. They memorize them in order and run them in order. Sometimes they simply yell, "Three!" After that the offense will run the third play in that series. The offense is coming to the line of scrimmage and snapping the ball as soon as the referee marks it. They don't care how the defense is lined up.

With the first pace, the offense is trying to figure out what you are doing on defense. In the second pace, they don't care what you are doing. You have to prepare your players for both paces. The best way to do it in practice is to go with two huddles, if you have enough scout team players. That lets you rapid fire plays at your defenders.

The worst thing that can happen to you is to have someone not lined up when the ball is snapped. The second worst thing is to have a player on the field that is tired. As soon as he gets tired, he is beat. You are not going to win with a tired football player. If you don't practice that in August, they are going to wear out when they play a team that plays with that fast pace.

The next thing that has to be communicated to your team is *personnel groupings*. This is really big if the offense is not using the same eleven players to run the offense. You have to come up with a system to let your players know the personnel on the field. You may want to substitute as well. I'm going to give you a system that I

think will work. It is a numbering system. You give your players a two-digit number. The first number is the number of tight ends on the field, and the second number is the number of backs.

It is important to know if a spread team plays with one or more tight ends. That drastically affects what personnel we want in the game. A "12" grouping would mean one tight end and two backs. That means there are two wide receivers in the game. A "21," would mean two tight ends and one back. A "0" set has no tight ends and no backs. That is the empty set with four wide receivers. With these calls, it allows the defense to match up with the personnel on the field. You don't want to have six defensive backs on the field against a "22" personnel set. You could use names, but I think the numbering system is simple to learn and teach.

Against this type of offense, you have to disguise your coverage. The reason the offense is spread is so the coach in the press box can read your secondary coverages easier. The quarterback is looking to the sideline to get the play his coach thinks will go against your coverage. You need to know what the opponent's coaches are looking at. I believe they are looking at your personnel first. We prefer not to substitute. We want to keep the same personnel on the field for all situations. If you don't substitute, they don't know what package you are going to end up in.

The second thing the opponents look at is whether or not you have a free safety. If you have a safety in the middle of the field, they know your coverage is either man, free, or three-deep zone. If there is no one in the middle of the field and safeties aligned on the hash mark that tells them you are in two-deep zone or quarter coverage.

While the quarterback is looking around, we are going to move our safety all over the place. The safeties are going to move inside, outside, up, and back. We move into our coverage late in the game or after the ball is snapped.

The thing the offense wants to know is how many players you are going to put in the box. I believe

most teams are leaving the counting of players in the box up to their quarterback. You need to figure out who is counting the men in the box. The key to that is the length of time the quarterback takes after he stops looking at the sideline and when he snaps the ball.

If the snap comes quick, the count is probably being made on the sideline. If the quarterback takes some time between the times he stops looking at the sideline and when he snaps the ball, you can almost be sure he is counting the men in the box. If you know who is making the count, you can move your defense accordingly.

I think you need to have two answers for every formation. Most of the spread teams are going to have limited formations. You need to have a plan to handle every formation if your first adjustment doesn't stop them. You have to have something in the bullpen. If what you are doing is not working, it will be hard to put something in on the sideline that you haven't worked on in practice.

The last thing you have to do is figure out a way to slow them down. One way to slow them down is to hold the ball on offense. "Three and out" is not the way to slow down the spread offenses.

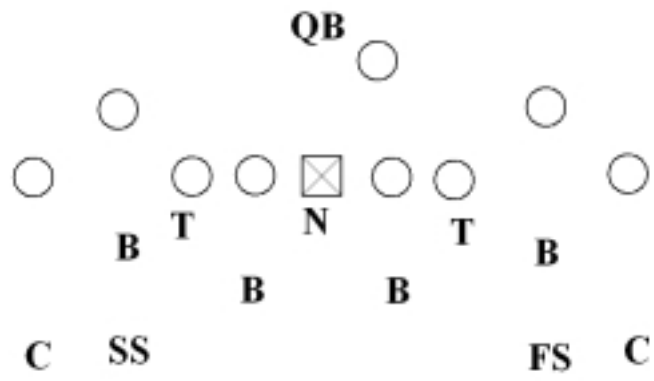
Use your time-outs to slow them down. You don't have to use your time-outs in the last minute of the half. I have learned by watching good basketball coaches that a time-out can change the momentum of a game. We do not use the time-out enough to break the momentum of the offensive team. We let them get in a rhythm and take the ball right down the field.

I failed to mention one thing. If you get into these summer passing leagues, be careful of what you are teaching. When you get into these leagues everyone is competitive and wants to win. What happens is you end up playing nothing but three deep with five under man coverage. That is fine when the offense can't run the ball. But that is not the picture you are going to see from the spread offense during the season. That doesn't help your team get ready for the real deal.

Your weekly preparation before you play a spread

team is tremendously important. The formations you are going to see from the spread offense are two-by-two, three-by-one, three-by-one with a tight end, no backs with a three-by-two, or a quad alignment for the receivers. It used to be when you started teaching your base defense, you lined up against a full house backfield with two tight ends. We don't see any of those sets any more. Unless you are playing teams like us you don't see a lot of option schemes any more. So why start off teaching your defense against those sets. Start off teaching your defense against what you are going to see in most games.

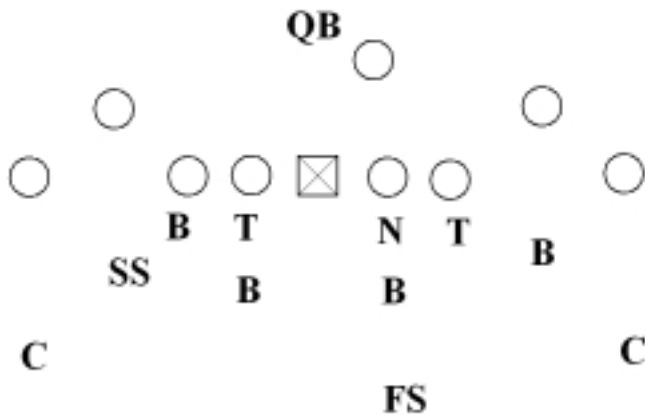
The first set we are going to line up against is the double slot or what we call *two-by-two*. We line up in our base defense which we call "50-Cover-4." We are going to align our secondary in a four-across look. From this look we can do a lot of things. We take our defensive ends and move them out on the slots quite a bit. The offense doesn't know whether they are going to drop in coverage or rush. It doesn't affect the defense one bit.



50 BASE – COVER 4 (4-DEEP)

From the four-deep shell, we can play a lot of coverage's. With our coverage's, we can get into two-deep, man-free, or any other coverage. You don't have to move to get into all those coverage's.

If we want to get into a four-man front instead of a three-man front, we slide the front one way and rotate the secondary the other way.



BASE 50 – COVER 3 (3-DEEP)

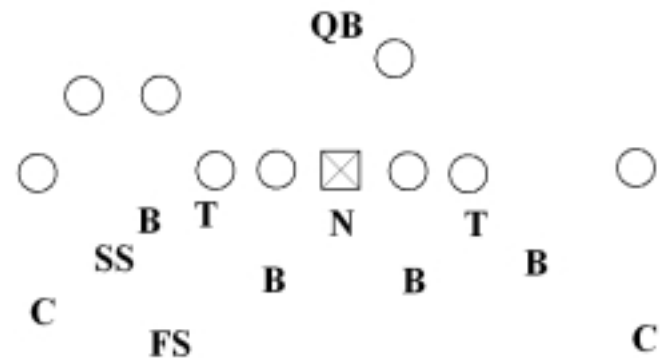
In the shotgun set, the ball has to be snapped. Most shotgun teams use a visual signal to get the ball snapped. They either raise one foot or flip their hands to cue the center that they are ready for the snap. The whole defense can see those signals and time their moves with the signals. Also, we can go from the three-man front to the four-man front after the ball is snapped by stunting.

The three-by-one formation is an often used formation in the spread offense. They like to run the ball from this set. I was surprised at that fact. I was spending all my time figuring out how to cover the trips set and the offense didn't care what I was doing. They wanted us to send a bunch of defenders out to cover their three receivers so they could run the ball. They also wanted to get the "one" receiver one-on-one with one of your defenders.

That is the first thing you have to decide when you play the three-by-one set. Do you have a defender who can handle their best receiver? If you don't, you will have to bring out a defender from the inside to give him help. Once you do that, the offense knows what your front has to do. They know who is the contain man to the one-man side and what the rest of your front is doing. You need to make adjustments to get someone beside the outside man on the line of scrimmage as the contain man.

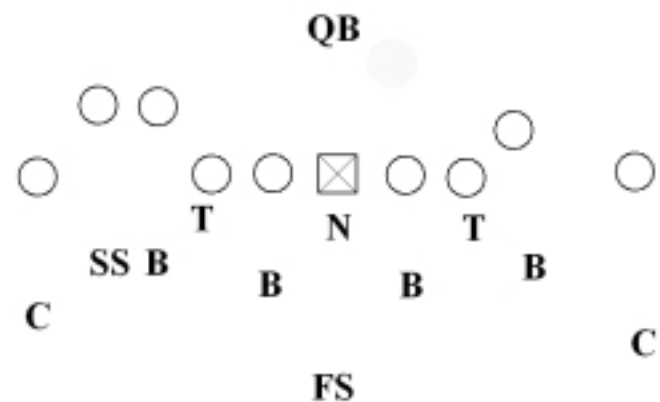
You can walk the defensive end out into double

coverage and bring him back at the last second to contain. You can walk out the defensive end, slant the tackle inside, and let the linebacker contain. You need to have a plan to give the offense multiple looks or they will eat you alive.



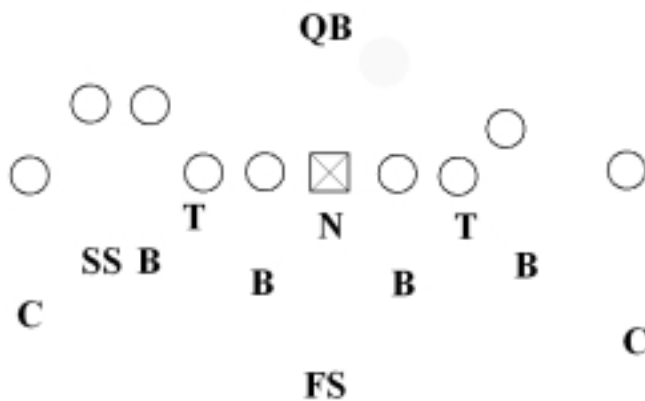
THREE-BY-ONE - BASE 50 – COVER 3

Let's look at the three-by-one with a tight end. That is a whole different problem. Now you can't walk your defensive end off the line. They take a wide receiver and move him on the line of scrimmage. This gives you a lot of problems. The good news is you have to line a man up on the tight end, but the offense will not know if he is coming or dropping until the ball is snapped.



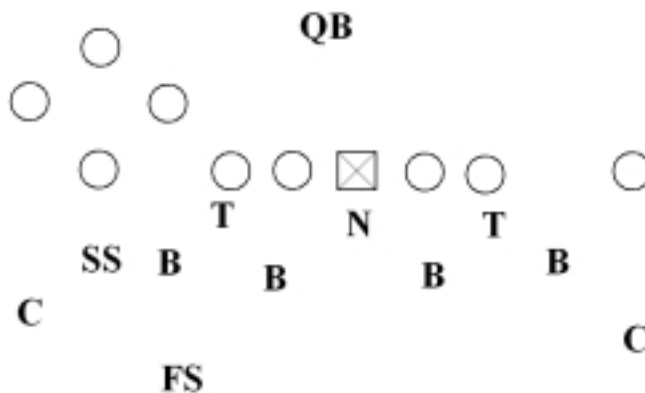
THREE-BY-ONE/TIGHT END - COVER 3

The *empty set* is a popular set with spread teams. This set is not a hard set to defend unless the quarterback is a runner. If the quarterback is a runner, you have to play five defenders in the box. You have to go to some kind of man-to-man coverage or you are going to get out numbered somewhere within that set. If the quarterback is not a runner it is not a strong formation.



EMPTY - BASE 50 – COVER 3

The empty set with four receivers to one side is a type of bunch set which we call *empty-quad*. There is a limited amount of space on the field. When the offense puts four receivers to the same side, you can handle it unless the quarterback is a runner. If he is a runner, you are probably going to get beat. You have to match up with the four wide receivers in a four receivers on three defenders alignment. You have to keep the free safety in the middle of the field to help with the quarterback.



EMPTY – QUAD

You must evaluate your opponents. We want to know two things. Who is the weakest lineman, and who can beat us? If your coaches watch their film and decide that of their eleven guys, no one can beat us, we will win the game. Most teams in our conference have someone who can beat you. You have to figure out who it is. It is your job to make sure the playmaker doesn't beat you. If the playmaker runs back punts, don't punt to him. If

the playmaker is a receiver you want to double-cover him. Don't let the guy who can beat you, beat you. That seems simple unless you are bull headed like me. I don't grasp that concept all the time.

Practice getting your personnel on and off the field when you change for a different personnel grouping. Make sure you know the cadence and snap count of your opponent. I want to know how they are getting the ball snapped in the shotgun formation.

The running game from the spread offense is a "Wing-T" running game. There are only about four plays you will have to defend from the shotgun set. They are going to run a trap play and a counter Trey. They will run the bootleg from the trap and counter-trey fakes. They will run the quarterback sweep and option. If they have a quarterback who can run, those are tough plays to stop.

Don't ever put your secondary players in a two-responsibility scheme. Don't tell him he has the pitch on the option and the deep third. If you do, you are asking for trouble. Let the defensive line and linebackers handle the option. The quarterback isolation is the last play they run from the shotgun set.

In the passing game, you will have to defend a number of things. The first thing is some type of flood pass. They will run the bootlegs. They will run the three-step hitch/fade game. In conjunction with the hitch, they like the smash pattern from the double slot. A smash to us is a flag route by the slot and a hitch by the outside receiver. They try to get you to bite on the hitch and throw the flag behind you.

In the three-step drop passing game, you are not going to get to the quarterback. Your defensive players have to run eleven yards to get to the ball. The quarterback can get rid of the ball every time. The offense will throw progression/option routes. However, there is a limit as to how much they can teach. You have to learn the progression reads by the quarterback are and how to defend them.

A big part of the spread offense is their screen package. There are all kinds of screens you can throw from those formations. You have to defend the quick or bubble screen to the outside. The shovel pass, which is a form of a screen, and the under screen when the receiver comes back into the middle of the formation.

They like to throw the slant/wheel routes. When you start to bite on the inside slant or post, the slot receiver is working the wheel route up the sideline behind the corner. The last thing you have to defend from the spread is the four/five vertical route. That is the bread-and-butter play versus three-deep coverage.

When you game-plan for the spread offense, you have to stop the run first. The teams we played were fifty-fifty with their pass-to-run ratio on first and ten and second and long. Just because they align in the spread offense doesn't mean they are going to throw the ball. They are still running teams fifty percent of the time.

That can create some problems. When you gang up at the line of scrimmage to stop the run, you give away things in the passing game. I get e-mails from band parents wanting to know if our secondary is going to get any better. That's how bad it gets sometimes. I would rather have a high school quarterback trying to throw the ball and some receiver trying to catch it, than to allow them to run the ball on us. I'm going to stop the run first.

If you don't stop the run it is demoralizing to your team. If you can't stop the run, the offense can toy with you. Convince your kids that you are going to stop the run, and they will look at the pass in a different light. If your defense can't stop the run, they are always in a state of confusion. We only lost one game this year. The reason we lost was because we couldn't stop the run. We lost to Cincinnati Elder. Elder has a great passing game, but they beat us because we couldn't stop the run.

When you commit to stopping the run you give up some things. It creates a confidence problem in your secondary. You are vulnerable to the quick

strike and big play. If you've got a lead, the offense can catch up pretty quick.

To defend the run against spread teams, you have to run defenses that are designed for that. For us, it is our straight and angle defense. You also need defenses to attack the run. That is our stunting game and our crashes with our linebackers and defensive ends.

You can't stop the run and pass at the same time. But you have to control the passing game. Determine the coverage you are going to use versus those formations and combine them with your fronts. Always keep the position of the ball on the field as related to the hash marks in mind. We use a couple of basic secondary coverages to mix with and incorporate with our fronts.

You have to figure out a way to pressure the offense. The first thing you have to consider is the type of protections they use. We have to know what type of protections and how many blockers they have. If they are using a back as part of their protection, we want to know where he is at all times. If they are slide protecting, they are sliding away from the back. We want to bring two to the back's side. That means the back has to take one of the defenders and the quarterback has to throw hot on the second defender.

When I started coaching, I didn't spend much time studying the other team's protection. That's a mistake. You need to know those things. You can find this out in the off-season.

In your blitz package, you have to do four things. You need to be able to bring four defenders from the weak side. You have to bring two defenders outside the edge of the protectors. You need to be able to bring the second blitz man up the middle and have at least one major blitz. If you are getting hammered and can't stop a team, your team has to know you can go to one major blitz that will shut them down. Don't ever let your kids think that you as a coach are just going to sit back and take it. They know that we have something in the package where we are going to go after them and stop what they are doing. Of course, you can't

use the same one every week.

Make sure you cover the situational defenses. The most important of the situational defenses is the red zone package. You have to practice that in practice. When the defense is backed up, they have to know what they have to defend. You don't want to try and yell out on the field to tighten up the secondary alignments. They should know that from practice. Practice from the 15-yard line so they know the field.

You need a third-and-long package. In this one you need two types of defenses. You need an attack plan and a defend plan. That is based on where the ball is on the field.

Make sure you have your substitution defenses ready. These are your jumbo, beef, or goal-line types of packages which you might have. The other substitution defenses are the ones you use to match up against the opponent's personnel groupings.

The last thing is your prevent defense. You need that defense for the last play of the half or last play of the game. You certainly don't want to lose a game in that situation, but you have to practice it to know what to do when the time comes.

I am sure I'm out of time. Are there any questions I can answer before I go over to the breakout room?

Here is one suggestion before I go. When we practice against our scout team, we use a nerf football to assimilate the snap. The scout team quarterback has a ball and the center has the nerf ball. We use the nerf ball to initiate the snap. That way we don't spend all the time trying to run down the bad snaps. That lets us get more reps, plus anyone can play center.

Thank you very much.