

# **Being Multiple Defensively – From Fronts to Coverages**

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Let me start off by saying I believe that unless you are just overwhelmingly more talented than your opponent, having the ability to give multiple looks defensively is crucial to your success. Offensive coordinators are too smart; they will have a great game-plan against you if they always know how you will line up and what you are going to do defensively from play to play. Therefore being multiple and giving different looks is a must. However, I believe that there has to be a system to your multiplicity. You can't just run a bunch of different stuff that doesn't relate and expect to have success. It is much like developing an offense; you have to have a system.

When I listen to offensive coaches talk there are usually a few things that stand out as reoccurring themes. They talk about developing a system that fits their kids. They talk about looking complex but being simple, meaning they will work to master a small number of plays but run them out of multiple formations or looks. These same principals hold true when looking at the defensive side of the ball, they are just accomplished in a slightly different way.

One of the most important things I have learned in my coaching career yet something I still overlook at times is that the scheme does not matter one bit if you are not teaching great technique. I love to sit down and watch film and then move the x's and o's around in a notebook or on a whiteboard. I enjoy the cat and mouse game of offense vs defense. However, without fail, anytime I begin to place more emphasis on our scheme than our techniques it always comes back to bite me. We all know that there is a ton of stuff that looks great on paper and absolutely should work in theory but it is important to remember that winning or losing games is more often reduced down to executing the proper techniques and fundamentals of whatever scheme you are using.

Having said that the first key to developing a multiple front or multiple coverage defense is deciding what your kids can be good at and what techniques you need to teach them in order to be multiple. Just as a common offensive philosophy is few plays and lots of formations, I believe few techniques and multiple alignments is a good rule to have up front on defense. In the back end I like to align the same but have multiple coverages. I know this might seem contradictory but the key is to teach no more than 3 different techniques.

## **Adjusting Defensive Line and Linebackers**

Up front, with the defensive line I believe in teaching three techniques; a shoulder shade or gap technique, a head up technique, and a slant technique. I believe that it doesn't really matter where they line up and that alignment is the easy part for DL. They can usually master their alignments the first day or two of camp. The technique of staying low, what to read, and how to react is what takes the majority of your teaching and practice time to master. Depending on our players' experience and/or ability we may never even use all three of those techniques, we may just use one or two. Remember that just by getting in some different alignments you can make it tougher on an offense

At linebacker I believe we can also shift their alignments fairly easily without affecting their overall play, they do however have to understand how alignment affects their gaps and fits but again I think that can be mastered early on in the process. Of bigger importance is developing the ability to understand and master their reads. They have to learn to attack and beat blocks and they have to be great tacklers.

### **Adjusting Coverage and Secondary**

In the back end I like to start our guys from a similar alignment every play as much as possible because we don't want to give away our coverages. From a technique standpoint for our corners we teach a shuffle-bail technique which we use in Cover 3 but also adjust slightly to play Cover 2 as well as a loose man. We also teach a press man technique. We can run 4-5 different coverages just using those 2 techniques with our corners.

For our safeties we will teach a deep middle technique, an over the top half technique, and a drop down technique. Again, these 3 techniques give us the ability to run multiple coverages while also giving us the opportunity to actually get good at our techniques.

### **Deciding What to Do**

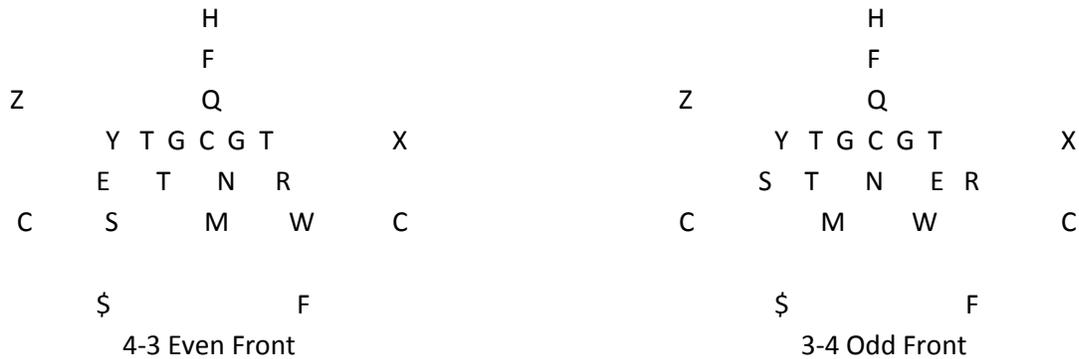
Again, I believe in being multiple within a system not being multiple across all systems. I think there are certain things that tie nicely together. If we are going to be primarily a 2 high safety team then we can teach our players to easily bounce back between a 4-3 and a 3-4. However, if we are going to be a 1 high safety team we will rotate between a 4-4 and a 3-5. In either system a players' general reads, fits, and reactions don't change much, we are simply just changing our alignments.

I believe determining what you want to do with your defensive package requires looking at 2 factors. The first is what your opponents do. Do you play a balanced, run heavy, or pass heavy schedule? Are you seeing multiple formations week to week? Are teams typically using a TE and a FB or 4 WRs? The second thing you must consider is your own personnel. What type of players do you have and what are they capable of?

### **The 4-3 / 3-4 Combination**

Running a 4-3 and 3-4 combination with a 2 high safety look gives you the possibility of more disguise and variations within your coverages. I believe it is better in defending spread teams and balanced, multiple offensive systems. You can look the same pre-snap but still easily get to multiple coverages effectively. You can get excellent safety support on a run/pass read in Cover 4 and give at least 6 coverages from a very similar pre-snap look (Cover 2, 3, 4, 6, Cloud, and Man). You can get 9 in the box and excellent run support by running Cover 4. The personnel decision with this is that your safeties have to be pretty special players and very versatile to be really effective with it. Although you funnel your run fits to the safeties you are still asking them to start 10 yards deep, fly down, and make a tackle in space. Plus, they still have a very large responsibility in the pass game. Sometimes I've had kids that can do this, sometimes not. Running this multiple defense combination would be best at

defending spread and multiple offenses but also would require you having at least 2 pretty athletic and versatile players at safety.



As stated, your defensive shell can look the same pre-snap while still being able to run a variety of coverages by rotating your safeties and secondary. In the example above, we flip our End from the strong side to the weak side and slide our DL from a gap alignment to head up to move from an even to an odd front. In both fronts the E,T,N are in a three point stance and the R plays as a stand-up end. The LBs shift their alignment to the strongside when we go from the even to odd front, the Sam LB walks down closer to the LOS and becomes the strongside edge player.

This is what we look for when running these two fronts:

E – Athletic and physical

T and N – Pretty interchangeable, big bodies that can hold their ground inside

R – Explosive, athletic edge rusher

SLB – Most physical LB, has to be able to play off the ball and over the TE

M and W – Traditional linebackers, want them to read keys and play downhill

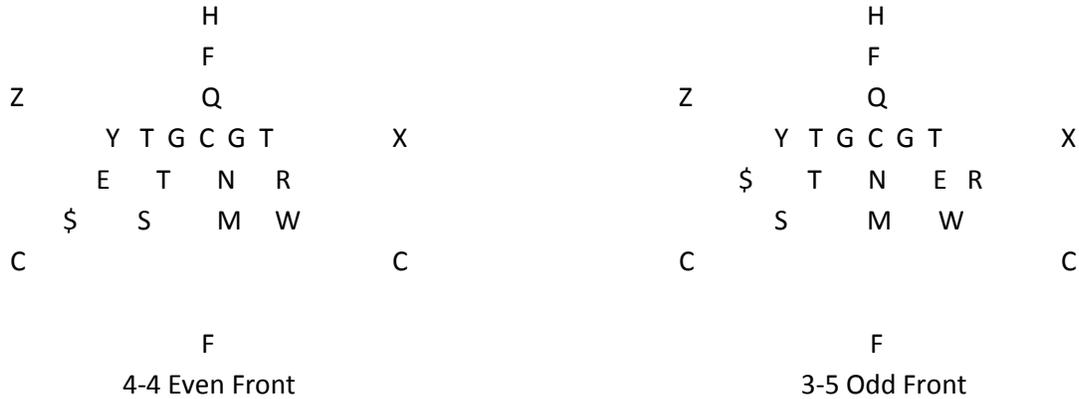
CBs – Best athletes that can't play D,R or LB (due to size, tackling ability, aggressiveness), quick with good feet

\$ and FS – Most versatile players, have to be instinctive, athletic, and aggressive. \$ is the better of the 2 as he goes to the strongside and will drop down to the extra run gap more often and drop down or cover the side with more receiving threats. Both have to be able to tackle and cover in space.

### **The 4-4 / 3-5 Combination**

The other option we have used is running a 4-4 and 3-5 combination with 1 high safety. This can be a very good system vs a run heavy and play action heavy schedule. The thing that I like about a 1 high look is that you can have a lot of players close to the line of scrimmage to defend the run. I feel this is a great answer to stopping the run if you don't have those great safety type players. You can still load the box with 8 and now all your players are closer to the line of scrimmage meaning you don't have to tackle or defend the run with as much space. I feel like generally a 1 high safety look is a safer defense

to be in. You have 8 players that can be aggressive run defenders and also disrupt underneath pass routes while still having 3 players whose primary focus is the pass and not giving up the big play. Against play action you can always have a deep middle player. However there are definitely a few holes in a 1 high look which is why I believe you still must be multiple in your fronts and coverages.



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This is what we look for when running these two fronts:

E – Athletic and physical

T and N – Pretty interchangeable, big bodies that can hold their ground inside

R – Explosive, athletic edge rusher

\$ (OLB) – Most versatile player, has to be instinctive, athletic, and aggressive. Will be out of the box in coverage vs spread sets.

S, M, and W – Traditional linebackers, want them to read keys and play downhill

CBs – Best athletes that can't play D,R or LB (due to size, tackling ability, aggressiveness), quick with good feet

FS – Rangy, instinctive, has to be at least a decent open-field tackler

### **General Installation Thoughts**

So much of what you can do with these defenses is dependent on what the strengths of your players are. Up front both systems are really similar and a lot of the stuff carries over, what you do in the secondary and the types of players you have there are really often the deciding factor for what system is best. We have found a lot of room for variations within either system from year to year. We have made several adjustments along the DL (how/who we slide or flip) as well as focusing our efforts on a few coverages each year. I certainly would say we have had more success trying to make our scheme fit our players as opposed to making our players fit our scheme. To start each season we teach all our rules in our base front and primary coverage first. I feel it is important to always have a reference

point that we try to hammer home, we then flow out from there. Finally, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of techniques over scheme. I have found that when we are good it's because we are fundamentally sound. Entering the season I think it is very important to think about and plan the drills you will need to develop the techniques necessary to fit your scheme for each position.