An Alternative to the "Triple Option"

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Surely the best of all T-formation running weapons is the option, where the quarterback keeps the ball or pitches it. Better than any other running play it can make the game a two-on-two or a three-on-three proposition, and the fewer the players involved in a given area the easier it is for the football to move. Better than any other run it uses the full 53-1/3 yard width of the field, and the more of the field used the greater the advantage to the offense. It is so fine a weapon that it is largely responsible for the single-wing formation becoming extinct in major college football.

The coaching problem is to get out of the play all that available talent can get. The most advanced form of the play is for the quarterback to option twice, deciding first whether to hand the ball off on an inside run or keep it and then whether to keep it or pitch it; and, if advanced talent (and coaching) is available, this double option, or "triple option" as it is popularly called, can be a devastating weapon. Less than advanced talent can have big trouble, however, with the part of the play that requires the quarterback to read a defensive reaction and then make a safe exchange of the ball to a back running inside. It is one thing for an athlete to call an inside run, sense the reaction of the defense, pull the ball away, and proceed with a keep/pitch option; it is quite another for him to start away from the center not knowing whether he will hand the ball off or not, see the defensive reaction that dictates the inside play, find the pocket of the running back, and make a safe exchange.

The purpose of this article is to suggest a way to have completeness in the option attack without asking the quarterback to execute the difficult part of the play, the part that causes most of the fumbles. A secondary purpose is to suggest how to do it with

out the full T-formation backfield. Using three running backs in behind the quarterback gives the option both an inside fake and a lead block, but it seriously limits pass offense. It also encourages the use of other formations in passing situations, with the probable build-up of formation tendencies.

Diagrams 1

The alternative approach. A balanced backfield is required so that the options can be run both directions with the same timing. This indicates either the I or the split formation. Or both. (See Diagram 1.) The balanced backfield also maximizes the pressure that can be exerted by the five interior linemen, and the key to the numbers game in option running is keeping five defenders busy with those linemen. This is explained in detail in the final section of the article.

The idea is to call the inside and outside plays separately, keeping the full advantage of the blocking design on the inside play. Diagram 2 shows the blocking that has cut the Oklahoma defense wide open. Leaving the man on the tackle's shoulder unblocked not only gives the point of attack an additional blocker but it can result in a sealing-off of inside pursuit. Leaving that man unblocked means also that the quarterback must not hand the ball off if the unblocked man makes a sharp move to the inside. This is, of course, what happens on the "triple option." What is different with this approach is that the quarterback calls the inside play and pulls the ball away only if he senses the inside move by the defender. The assumption, based on the writer's practice field experience, is that a good college quarterback can do this with minimum risk of causing a fumble. Blocking rules for the inside play are familiar enough to coaches.

Diagram 2

On the two outside dimensions—keep or pitch—of the three-dimensional play, it is necessary to use both the belly fake option and the straight out option. When one type can be run perhaps the other cannot, and with only two running backs in behind the quarterback, it is necessary to have both. Diagram 3 shows the belly option working against a defense
which would stop the straight out option. Diagram 4 shows a slight change in the defense which makes it vulnerable to the straight out option. Generally speaking the belly option provides a fake to hold an inside linebacker and to help the tackle get a block on a man playing on his outside shoulder, while the straight out option makes angle blocking possible because a leading back can take the outside most defender.

The alternative approach, which frees the quarterback from having to make the difficult exchange decision described earlier and which makes completeness possible in an option attack, is predicated on having both the belly and the straight out possibilities. It is also predicated on being able to get to the most efficient blocking scheme without giving defenders time to change alignments after hearing verbal calls at the line of scrimmage. While simplifying ball handling, this approach complicates signal calling.

Backfield timing problems. If a balanced backfield is necessary and if both kinds of options must be run, can both split and I alignments be used without creating difficult backfield timing problems? The answer is yes, although stances and positioning are critical. There are advantages in having both alignments—the I lending itself to sprintout pass protection, daylight running, and man-in-motion passing, and the split to quick hitting offense, counter plays, and three-man pass patterns.

The I fullback must be in a three-point, feet squared stance; the I tailback in a two-point stance with the feet spread for the fastest possible lateral start. The split halfbacks must be slightly deeper than the I fullback with three-point, staggered stances for fast starts to the opposite sides. On the belly options the faking back must have an open and fixed pocket in which the quarterback can work without any worry about moving arms hitting the ball.

The formation is a poor choice against the defense, and either kind of option either way would be out numbered. Diagram 5 shows belly and straight out plays from both formations. On the belly the play the timing must be established by the split formation. Obviously from the I, a fast starting tailback would get too far away. This is the only timing problem: On the belly play from the I, the tailback must control his speed to keep the proper pitch position on the quarterback’s hand. The straight out plays are no problem because a halfback from a staggered stance and a fullback who has to start from a three-point square stance and lose about a yard in depth get to about the same pitch position. Also, a tailback gaining ground slightly and a halfback who must take a jab step with his inside foot to get started will be about the same distance ahead of the pitch man.

Signal calling problems. Assuming the most difficult situation where the opponent is showing a variety of defensive looks, the quarterback must have a starting point for his decision making process. Five people can be handled on the deployed side, four away from it. A defender over the center is not counted. Diagram 6 shows a defense which could get six defenders into the play on the deployed side, and five away from it, assuming the inside safeties would rotate up on flow toward them. The formation is a poor choice against the defense, and either kind of option either way would be out numbered. Diagram 7 shows five on one side and four on the other who can tackle on the line of scrimmage. The point is that a counting of people is the starting point, and with experience they can be counted with a glance.
aimed between them, to block the first and second defenders. Diagram 8 shows two defenses where they can, Diagram 9 two where they cannot. Either number three or number four can be optioned with the other plus number five blocked by the end and flanker back (or slotback and end). About the only alignment where defenders three, four, and five cannot be handled with some blocking scheme is shown in Diagram 10. Blocking schemes are discussed and diagrammed in the next section.

Diagram 8

Diagram 9

Diagram 10

Diagram 11

If defenders one and two cannot be handled by the guard and tackle, it is probable that the tackle and end have angles on them, making the straight out option a possibility. Diagram 11 shows an example. The lead back and the flanker can handle the two of the remaining three who do not get optioned.

That, in brief, is the quarterback’s problem. He must have a way to switch from one type of option to the other after he sets his team at the line, and he must be able to get away from the option all together if he has six to one side and five to the other to contend with. Although only plays to the deployed side have been diagrammed, the signal calling principles are the same on both.

Blocking scheme problems. Coaches who do not believe that linemen and deployed backs can do some signal calling of their own can never maximize the option attack. Line calls are difficult, but they can put the offensive athletes into the most advantageous positions for the execution of their play.

For the belly play to the deployed side, the guard and tackle need two calls, the tackle and end two, and the end and flanker (or slotback and end) two. The basic execution would involve the guard and tackle blocking defenders one and two, the quarterback optioning three, and the end and flanker pushing deep and blocking four and five. Diagram 12 shows the guard and tackle teaming against their defenders two different ways. (No attempt will be made here to suggest verbal calls to fit these assignments.) Diagram 13 shows the tackle and end doing the same two things to defenders two and three. The faking back must know that he becomes a blocker against an inside stunt in any of these four situations.

Diagram 12

Diagram 13

Away from the deployed side the guard and tackle would have the same rules. If the end were split, his assignment would be to crackback and, if he were tight, to block inside gap or

Diagram 14

Diagram 15

For the straight out play the guard and tackle must understand that the most they are to be expected to do is scramble block men playing over them. No calls are needed. The guard and tackle block on/inside, the end inside gap or number two. The spread man and lead back would almost always be in a crackback and lead outside relationship, although one call to enable them to switch assignments would be helpful. (See Diagram 16.) The switch might take pressure off the line of scrimmage in certain situations.

Diagram 16
number two. Diagram 17 shows two situations.

Diagram 17

There is only the one situation where a call would be needed on the straight out play. On the belly play line calls are a key to success. A major point is that the blocking rules for the two kinds of plays are entirely different. Each play's blocking principles for the deployed side and the other side are the same, however.

Individual execution difficulties. There is nothing difficult about guard and tackle blocking as long as there is a great inside run fake or an angle blocking advantage. As for scrambling there is no block where physical strength means less. The reverse body block, where the blocker gets quick, solid and low contact with his hands staying near the ground while he lets a fake happen inside of him and then reverses and builds a fence around the defenders outside knee . . . this block is not difficult. Roll blocking a pass defender who tries to bump and run with a receiver is easy. Pushing a deep defender back, maneuvering slightly to one side, and roll blocking is also easy to do. Cracking back just takes practice. Backfield faking is a matter of discipline. Leading over a predetermined course and roll blocking is no problem.

It is the quarterback who has the difficult job. He must learn to see the man he will option as he makes the belly fake or as he starts straight out, move quickly to his outside shoulder, and tumble the ball to the pitch back with his eyes picking up the back just before the ball leaves his fingers. It is a mistake for the quarterback to think of optioning. He should move to the outside shoulder and pitch. The play is a pitch play. Only is the defender denies the pitch should he worry about the keep, and the keep move is, of course, a sharp and accelerating ninety-degree cut which will surprise the pursuit and make a five yard gain a consistent thing. Teaching a quarterback to do more is another subject.

If the right kind of option is selected and if the right blocking scheme is called, an option is not difficult to run. The quarterback has the pitch technique to learn, but he can practice it the year around with a minimum of assistance.

Complimentary weapons. For the belly play a scissors, shown in Diagram 18, is a standard complimentary weapon. For the straight out version, a draw-like play and a wide reverse, shown in Diagram 19, are good.

Diagram 18

Diagram 19

About defending it. A defense is in trouble against a well conceived and executed option attack as long as it is forced to play five defenders on the five interior linemen. It is a numbers game. The offense tries to get the ball to a back for whom there is no defender. It does this by letting one defender, and in the case of the rampaging double option two defenders, go unblocked. Defenses can shift to confuse blockers, pressure can deny the forward pass dimension, great ends can confuse quarterbacks and string the play out, and design can try to keep the play out numbered on the wide side of the field; but the play is still the best in T-formation running weaponry.