THE ZONE READ OPTION GAME

University of Oregon

I am going to talk about our zone running game. The first part will be about the inside zone play and the second half hour will be on the outside zone play. We had an outstanding year this past year because we had good players. That is the bottom line to the success of our season. I think our coaches do an excellent job of putting those players into situations where they have an opportunity to be successful.

What you are entrusted to do as a coach is to create an environment where your players have a chance to be successful. I have not stepped over the white sideline and played in a game in about 20 years. You cannot play—there are no players have to be an extension of what you teach them. You are creating the environment and let them play.

I am a huge clinic football coach. I love clinics. I have never had an all my life. The first clinic I attended, I listened to Joe Bugel talk about the counter trey. He talked about running the counter trey pass with linemen pulling in both directions. I knew we could not run that play. If both the linemen were not pulling in the same direction, we would not do it.

You have to pick and choose things from a clinic that can fit into what you do. You cannot install schemes. I hope you can find something that I say today that can be adapted to what you do. If you are looking for a cure-all message, you will not find it here today.

I think you can take something out of my talk that you can apply to what you do. I do not think you can take an entire offense or defense. I think you can take something that fits what you do and apply it to the players that you have.

This offense fits for us. This past season, we finished second in the country in rushing the football. We average 6.2 yards per carry. We have four running plays. We run the inside zone, outside zone, counter, and draw.

If you give your players something to hang their hats on, they will perform. If they can run the offense with any scenario they may face, you will be successful in running the ball. If they have all the answers to the problems the defense may give them, they will be good.

The best way to beat the team you are going to play is to have your team play with conviction. Are there any basketball coaches in here? The one thing I cannot understand about their sport occurs in the clutch stages of the game. With the game tied and five seconds left in the game, the coach calls a time-out. He picks up a whiteboard and draws a play. I do not know how long I would last in Eugene, Oregon if I did that.

If your players have not run that play in a critical situation over a thousand times in practice, you will not have a chance to be successful. With our inside zone play, we get so much practice time and so many reps that we can handle all the other scenarios that come about. Instead of trying to out scheme your opponent, put your players in an environment where they can be successful because they understand exactly what they have to do.

I am going to talk about the inside zone play. Paul Brown, the father of modern football, said, "If you can get your players to value the football, you will have a better player." If you tell players today to do something because I told you so, you will not reach them. We explain to our players why we do the things we do. That gives them a bit of ownership and they understand much more.
Why do we run the inside zone? The inside zone play is a great equalizer. We are double-teaming a defensive lineman with a mathematical idea behind it. We have four legs and he has two legs, so we win. The zone play can be run against multiple looks by the defense. You can draw this play up and run it against five different defenses.

The inside zone play is our "go to work" play. It has become our signature play. We want to get off the ball and be a physical, downhill-running football team. This is not a finesse play. We teach our offensive linemen a block we call the bust block. The idea is to bust their sternums up against their spines on every play. We want to come off the ball, create a double-team, knock the crap out of the defender, and deposit him in the linebacker's lap.

This is physical football. The offensive linemen play with confidence because they know they have help from their teammates in their blocking scheme. This play is great against blitzes and twists because we pick up blocks as they attack gaps.

This is the offense we run and everyone knows that. We have great players but we execute it well. We ran this play 202 times this past season. What I am going to talk about is what we do. We averaged about seven to eight yards per carry with this play.

**PHILOSOPHY OF THE PLAY**

- Physical, signature play
- Penetrates the front
- Distorts the defense
- Physical play in the double-teams

We tell our offensive guards and tackles or our centers and guards in their combinations, we want them to be butt-to-butt and cheek-to-cheek in their double-team. We want them handling the defender as if they were a bouncer in a bar throwing him out of the bar. They understand what type of force has to be implemented to throw a guy out of a bar.

In the basic concept of the play, the center must ID what we call the point. Our offensive line is going to block five playside defenders. If the defense aligns in a five-man box, it is an easy scheme. If the defense is a six-man box, the quarterback is responsible for the sixth man in the box. He reads the defender and controls him. The quarterback is blocking that defender. He cannot physically block him because that is a mismatch. What he does is run the ball if the defender attacks the running back. He makes the defender respect him as a runner and keeps him out of the play.

When the center IDs the play, he locates the 0 defender in the defensive scheme. People overcomplicate and spend time teaching defenses to the offensive line. We count defenders in our offensive scheme. We want to know if it is a 4-1, 4-2, 3-2, or 3-3 look. We are a spread team. If the defense covers the receiver, they cannot get too many more defenders in the box. If the offensive line can count to six, you have a shot to run this play.

When we coach our offensive line, we do not get into over, under, or stack fronts. You spend all your time in your meeting trying to explain all the fronts. A 4-1 look is a college 4-3 alignment, with the outside linebacker removed from the box. The 4-2 is four down linemen and two linebackers. The 3-2 is three down linemen and two linebackers. The 3-3 look is an odd stack defense with three down linemen and three linebackers. As long as the linemen can count, they do not need to know whether it is an over or under front—our rules will take care of that.

You need to have complementary plays with their play. We run the play-action pass and the naked bootleg. That keeps defenders from gang ing up on the running game. That is not a revolutionary concept.

You can play with a tight end or a detached tight end. If he is tight, his rule is to block his playside guy. If the ball is going to the right, he blocks to the right. If we go to the left, he blocks to the left. His rule is to block #3. The tackle blocks the playside gap to #2, the guard has the playside gap to #1, and the center blocks 0, which is the point from where the count starts. The backside guard blocks the backside #1, and the backside tackle has the backside #2. If there is a #3 defender to the backside, the quarterback is responsible for that defender.
The center's rule for identifying the point is the defender assigned as the A-gap player to the side of the play (Diagram #1). With the tight end in the formation against a college 4-3 defense, the center identifies the Mike linebacker as the 0 defender. The 3 technique on the guard is the #1 defender. The rush end in the 7 technique is the #2 defender, and the Sam linebacker is the #3 defender. The nose in the backside A gap is the #1 defender backside. The Will linebacker is the #2 defender. The 5-technique defensive end is #3 and the quarterback's read.

Diagram #1. Line Count vs. 4-3

In a 4-1 alignment with no tight end, the center makes the Mike linebacker the 0 defender and the linemen count from that designation. If we get a stack look, we get combination blocks between two linemen blocking in a zone-blocking scheme. In the odd 3-2 look, the count is simple (Diagram #2). The nose is the 0 point, and we count out with the linebackers as the #1. The defensive ends will be the #2. The outside linebackers will be the #3.

Diagram #2. Line Count vs. 3-2

If we run the zone play to the left, the center designates the nose as the 0 defender (Diagram #3). The Will linebacker is #1 and the guard blocks him. The defensive end is #2 and the offensive tackle blocks him. The Mike linebacker is #1 to the backside, the tackle is #2, and the defensive end is #3. The quarterback reads the defensive end coming off the right side.

Diagram #3. Zone Play Left vs. 4-2

If we run the zone play to the right, the center designates the Mike linebacker as the 0 defender (Diagram #4). The right guard has the defensive tackle on his outside shoulder. The right tackle has the defensive end on the inside shoulder of the tight end. The backside guard blocks the nose, and the tackle blocks the backside linebacker. The defensive end to the left side is the read defender. If he bends down for the running back, the quarterback pulls the ball and runs out the backside. If the defensive end comes up the field, we run the zone play to the right. The tight end has the Sam linebacker.

Diagram #4. Inside Zone Right vs. 4-2

If you spread a receiver to the outside, you must have the ability to throw the ball to him. That is the concept and basis of the spread offense. We spread the defense, so they will declare their defensive look for the offensive linemen. That makes it simple for us. The more offensive personnel we put in the box, the more defenders the defense will put in there and it becomes a cluttered mess.

I played quarterback in high school in New Hampshire. My high school coach was a prototypical crusty old football coach. He coached in work boots, Bermuda shorts, and a tank top. We ran an unbalanced, two-tight-end, power I formation. We averaged five passes a game. I threw
a lot of touchdowns because there were 90 million defenders within three yards of the ball.

When I got out of college, I went back and coached for him. I told him, in college, we split players and threw the ball to them. He thought that was a bunch of college bull. I finally talked him into splitting a receiver. We ran it in practice. I split the receiver and no one on the defense went out to cover him. Since we had never been out of the power I, the defense thought the receiver was going to get a drink. I was so excited. I ran up to the head coach and told him no one was covering the receiver. He told me, Good. Now, get him back in the box so he can block somebody. I learned on that day, you have to throw the ball to the receiver so the defense will honor him.

If the defense walks the #3 defender to the backside out into coverage, the quarterback knows he is going to hand the ball off and there is no read.

If the defense is a 3-3 stack scheme, we designate the nose as the 0 defender (Diagram #5). It is like the 4-2 scheme because there are six defenders in the box. The alignment is not the same but it does not matter. The center and backside guard handle the center stack. The middle linebacker is the backside #1 defender. To the playside, the defensive end is the #1 defender and the stacked linebacker is #2. If the tight end is tight, he blocks the #3 defender who is the force player to his side. If he is detached, he has the same rule.

![Diagram #5. 3-3 Stack](image)

The backside tackle steps into his playside gap and takes whichever player comes into that gap. The quarterback reads the remaining defender for his handoff key. This is a very simple concept. That is what we are doing in the zone scheme. The next part is the how, which is the mechanics of the play.

The depth of the quarterback is five yards from the line of scrimmage. His toes are at five yards. That is the starting point but it is more of a guideline than a rule. You have to adjust the alignment depending on the player. The running back's toes are at six-and-a-half yards. That also depends on the back.

We had Jonathan Stewart a couple of years ago and he played at seven yards. You do not want to slow a good back down. If the back is slower, move him up in his alignment. You can have the quarterback at four-and-a-half to five-and-a-half yards. The running back will be anywhere from five-and-a-half to seven yards off the line of scrimmage.

What you have to do, as the coach, is to figure out when the back is hitting the hole. If he is late to the hole, move his alignment up. If he is getting there too soon, back him up, but never try to slow down his speed to time up the play. Adjust his alignment.

I am a big fundamental coach. You must practice the shotgun snap with your quarterback and center every day. If you are not going to practice that, do not get into this type of set. It is not something you can do on Tuesday, use it in the game on Friday, and expect it to work. You have to spend a lot of time on the snap.

The quarterback has to catch the snap, but he cannot be a hundred percent focused on the ball. He has to see what the defense is doing. We think the right ratio is 75 percent on the ball and 25 percent on the defense. He has to be able to see both the ball and the defense. That is why we work so hard to perfect the skill. When we work on the snaps, I intentionally snap the ball bad to make him concentrate.

The quarterback gets in an athletic stance. I tell him he is like a shortstop in baseball. I have seen quarterbacks take the snap with their feet in a stagger. That looks good but he cannot move to either side as easily. In the square stance, he can move right or left with equal ease.
As he gets the snap, he drops his leg to the side of the ballcarrier. That allows the back to take a path to the attack area. We give the back the opportunity to run the same path every time he receivers the ball. We call it a J-path. The step looks like the letter J. The running back takes a slight open step with his playside foot. His second step replaces the spot where the quarterback's foot was. It may not be exactly where it was but it is close. On his third step, he starts to square his shoulders to the line of scrimmage. The running back takes his step and aims at the butt of the frontside guard.

The running back is responsible for the mesh. The quarterback is responsible for the read. If the quarterback is reading the defensive end and the running back is reading linebacker movement, the ball will be on the ground. It does not matter what type of play you run, someone has to be responsible for the mesh every time. If the ball ends up on the ground, it is because the running back and quarterback did not communicate enough.

Our players communicate the handoff mechanics on every single play in the game, in practice, on every down, and every day. They have to talk about the mesh and know what they are doing. The philosophy I have in coaching is: If you accept it, expect it. If they do not talk about what is going on with the handoff, expect the ball to be on the ground on Friday night. I will not accept mistakes in the handoff.

We do not always read the backside end. If we have someone to block the backside defensive end, the quarterback is responsible for the mesh. That lets the running back get his eyes up for his read on the defense. If the quarterback is responsible for the mesh, he tells the running back. He says, "Mesh, mesh." You have to get that fundamental down and if you do not, expect turnovers.

The second fundamental on this play is the fake when you do not have the ball. It is not a great play if the quarterback hands off to the running back and watches him run. Everyone in the stadium and on the defense knows who has the ball. The quarterback has to accelerate off the disconnect in the mesh area. The action has to look the same whether he has the ball or not. That is a hard thing to coach. However, if you do not harp on it in practice, you are accepting what happens at practice and you can expect it to happen on Friday night.

The same rules apply to the running back. He cannot get the ball pulled and stop running. We grade the running back on his fakes. If he does not penetrate the line of scrimmage on his fake, he gets a loaf. It is important for the running back not to cut back in the direction of the quarterback when he is faking without the ball. If he does that, he brings the defense to the quarterback. We want them going the other way. He needs to stay frontside on the play when he does not have the ball. Obviously, when he has the ball, he runs to daylight.

That is the concept of the play. It has to look like it is hitting one way, and it has to go the other. You have to make the defense defend the entire field. You must not let the defense gang up on one aspect of the play.

We tell the running back to read the first down lineman to the playside. If he expands in the gap, the running back hits the gap. The philosophy of the play is a tough running play. If the line can get up two yards on the defense, the back can too. We want him to jam the ball into the hole and be a tough runner. We do not want a jingle-footed back trying to hit a home run. We want him to hit the ball into the line and get the tough yards. We are a blue-collar guy going to work. The line will have a hat on the five defenders in the box. The unblocked defenders on the perimeter are following the ballcarrier. If he gets downhill and runs hard, it is hard for them to make the tackle. However, if he jiggles in the hole, they will make the tackle.

When we talk to the back, we tell him it is speed through the hole, not speed to the hole. When the running back receives the ball, he is at 85-percent speed. As he gets the handoff and makes a decision to take the ball frontside or cut it back, he makes one cut. When he makes his cut to the line, he changes speeds and runs through the hole.
Vision is a big part of the success of this play. Our running backs coach, Gary Campbell, does a good job of that. He can paint pictures with words. He told the running backs it is like they are out on a Saturday night and see a good-looking girl. That girl is in the A gap and you are going for her. Before you decide to commit, scan the room and have a look at the girl over there. It is amazing how many cutbacks we get after he gave them that analogy. That is something they can practice in the off-season. They are going to jam the ball into the A gap unless they see something that is prettier.

On our double-team blocks, we tell the linemen to stay on the double-team until someone has control of the defender. We want to take care of the down linemen. Down linemen make tackles for losses. Linebackers dance around the pile and make tackles for two- to three-yard gains. We must secure the down lineman before we think about coming off on the linebacker. If the linebacker is within an arm's length of the block, he can come off. Never disengage from a double-team block and have to run to get to the linebacker.

This may sound like a contradiction, but we do not read anything. When you read, you become uncertain. We want the ball in the running back's hands. We do not want the quarterback carrying the ball. The option can put the ball in his hands, but the defense can force it out of his hands. We want the quarterback to give the ball unless he cannot. When you start to talk about the read player’s shoulders or jersey number, you overcomplicate the play.

If the running back is continually getting tackled by the defensive end, the quarterback should be pulling the ball. The analogy is a 2-on-1 fast break. You tell the player with the ball to take it to the basket. If the defender commits, get rid of the ball. When we talk about this play, there are two ways to approach it. At a clinic, we say this is the zone read play. That is not what happens. This is a downhill play and the line is blocking for the running back, so give him the ball.

The outside zone play is a complement to the inside zone play. The inside zone is a hole-to-cutback play. The outside zone is a hole-to-bounce play. The reason we run the outside play is to circle the defense. When you get good at running the inside zone, the defenders begin to tighten their techniques and concentrate on squeezing the inside gaps.

If we feel that happening or we start to get many twists and blitzes on the inside, we run the outside zone play. It gives you speed in space, and the offensive line can play with confidence when you have something to change the focus of the defense. The outside zone is good against multiple looks. We ran the outside zone 122 times last season for 6.8 yards per carry. It is a good complement to the inside zone.

This is a pure zone play. The blocking rules for the offensive line are the same as the inside zone. The difference is the aiming point of the offensive linemen. The who we block is the same, but the how we block is the difference on the outside zone. The linemen take a kick-step to the outside and a karaoke crossover step to get up the field. The backside opens on the playside foot and loses ground. The farther you are from the point of attack, the more ground you can lose.

It is a stretch play, and the running back is the player who must catch up to the blocking scheme. This is not a cutback play. It is a cut-up play. If he can get the ball outside, he takes it to the corner. If he cannot get outside, he plants his foot in the ground and goes at a 90-degree angle running north and south.

This is a great play against two high safeties. The technique we use against the defenders is rip and run. We try to get to the outside shoulder. We run off the line of scrimmage and get into the defenders. If we have not reached them by the third step, we run as far as we can. If the blocker reaches the defender on the third step, it piles up everyone coming behind that block. That creates a seam. It is like elephants on break. The thing we cannot allow is penetration.

We want to run off the ball and be physical. We are flatter to the line of scrimmage as we rip off the ball (Diagram #6). We adjust the path of the running
back and the depth of the quarterback. We do not think the back can make the cut from the deep position. In this set, we want the back at about five yards and the quarterback at six yards. That allows the back to run the flat path to the outside. You see two distinct levels on the two plays. However, we run other plays using those depths. The alignment is something you cannot key.

If the defense stops the play, it will not be because they read the setup of the backs. We have to put our players in the best position to make sure they are successful. The running back has to take at least two steps past the quarterback before we allow him to cut up.

I want to leave you with some things we try to do. Steve Greatwood is an unbelievable offensive line coach. I really believe he is the best offensive line coach in the country. Our offensive line leads the country in yards per carry and rushing touchdowns and we only run four plays in the running game. The offensive line plays with conviction. If you can keep it simple for the players in the offensive line so they have confidence going into a game, you have an opportunity to win the game. The five offensive linemen are the key to your football team.

I do not think anyone on our offensive line was offered a scholarship coming out of high school. I think the system we run helps our offensive linemen. The key is to make sure they know what they are doing. They are an impressive group of guys and they shop at True Value® Hardware for clothes. If you can get those players to play up to their potential, you have a good chance to win.

I know I went fast, but I hope you got something from this talk. Thank you very much.