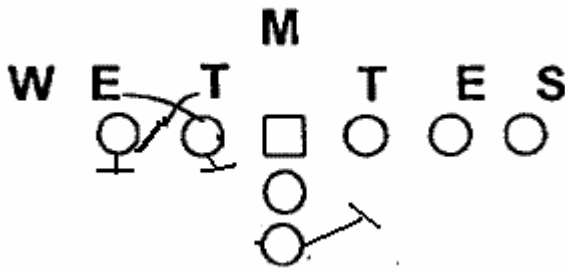


## Basic Principles of Dropback Protection

This is a deep and varied subject, but we have to have a little background to understand how the pass rush/protection game plays out. There are two types of protection schemes: (1) area or zone schemes, and (2) man schemes. Some protections blend these two approaches, either explicitly or implicitly.

(1) **Area Schemes:** An area scheme is where a group of blockers set up in a given areas and then sort and pick-up whatever “trash” comes through. For example, if the center, guard, and tackle are responsible for one side of the protection, and the defensive crosses and twists a couple defensive linemen and a linebacker. This is probably the soundest “protect-first” approach, and good teamwork will allow the line to deal with



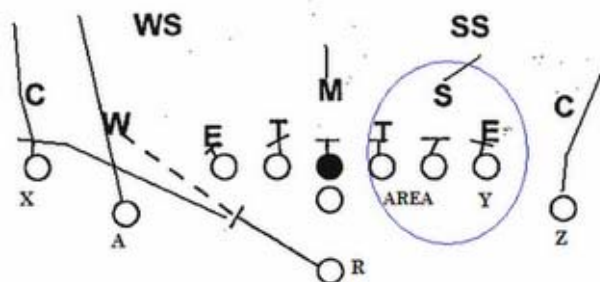
defensive creativity with a simple sound approach;

Problems with area schemes arise when you introduce running backs, tight ends, or H-backs into the equation. The problem is twofold:

(a) An area scheme could leave you with a terrible match-up, such as a running back on a defensive end (or Lawrence Taylor).

(b) An area-assigned protector who is also a skill player (like a tight end, H-back, or running back) has a difficult time releasing into the route if the defense does not blitz.

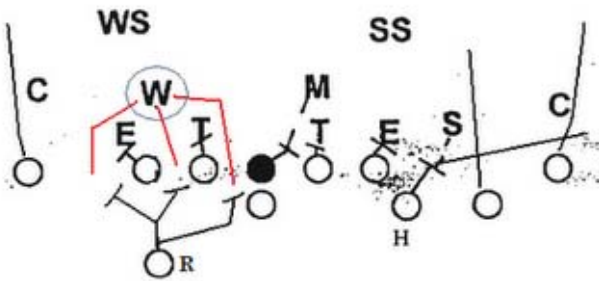
So any of those skill players who you have assigned to an area scheme likely will not get out into the route, and you might only have three receivers trying to get open against seven pass defenders. For example, see the diagram below.



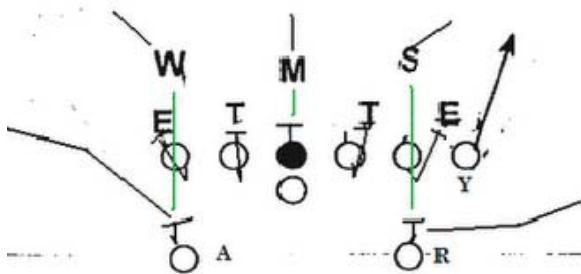
Above, we put the guard, tackle, and Y (TE) on an area scheme, making them responsible for the defensive tackle, the defensive end, and the Stronside linebacker (Sam or “S”). If they were to stunt or twist, we’d be in good shape, but look what

happens here: the DT and the DE just rush, and the Sam linebacker drops into coverage. So now the Y has to stay in to protect (where he is matched up with a defensive end!), the tackle blocks no one at all, and, at most, we can only get four men into the route. There are ways around this, but I want to highlight the concern.

**(2) Man Schemes:** The offensive front will identify their counterparts on defense and block them where they go. This is not always absolute. Typically linemen will still employ a modified area scheme (where they will trade defenders who twist), but running backs and the like, because they are set back further away from the line, can go where their counterpart goes easier than a lineman can. Look at the diagram below, the RB is assigned to the Weak ("W") linebacker on a "man" principle. Wherever he goes, he is responsible for blocking him. If Will does not rush, the RB will release into the pass route. Similarly, H is responsible for the Strongside linebacker ("S"), and if he does not rush, then H will release into the route.

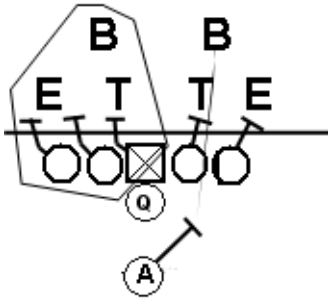


Man blocking seeks to eliminate the problems we identified with area schemes: as in the diagram above, a "BOB" approach - short for "Big on Big" and "Back on Backer." The idea is that the linemen will take the big defensive linemen (who also tend to rush the passer on most plays), while the running backs or H-Backs will block the linebackers, who are both more their size and less likely to rush the passer than a defensive lineman. So you avoid both area scheme problems: the matchups should be better for the offense and, if the defense only rushes three or four, your skill guys can still get out into the route.



**(3) Combo protection:** An extremely common protection is to area block one side of the line and man block the other side, typically the side with the running back. There is some dissension among coaches, but my view is that almost all six-man protections employ this concept, whether they do it explicitly (as I advocate) or implicitly, as others do. The idea is that most teams find it advantageous to teach their linemen to area block stunts and twists, so you wind up with a combo concept. I first explained this protection years ago here. Note that this protection employs my preferred form of "area"

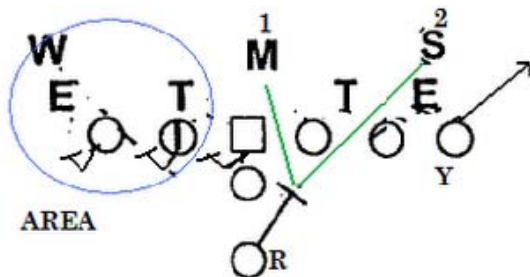
or "zone" protection, which is the "slide" protection. The details are explained below, but each area-blocking lineman "slides" to the gap away from the callside. I advocate a "full-



slide" for many quick game routes, but below is my half-slide, which is the most useful and versatile protection I know of.

**The base rules for this protection are as follows: Linemen to the callside [here, the right side] block man on until the first bubble (i.e. uncovered linemen, though the term "bubble" helps prevent against confusion due defensive players stunting). [Here the first uncovered lineman is the center.] From the bubble to backside the other will linemen will all slide away from the callside to that gap, and, as we like to say, pick up trash. For example versus a standard four man front, with the center uncovered, the center, backside guard and tackle will slide that way. The playside guard and tackle will block man on. The RB blocks LBs inside to out, from the bubble to outside rusher, or if you like Mike to Sam. If they don't come he releases.**

There's another very important concept, the dual-read. The dual-read is simply where a blocker is responsible for two-men. Usually there is a one and two: if one comes, he gets blocked, if two comes, the blocker must wheel out and block them. If they both come, he will only block one and the quarterback and receivers must complete the pass before two can get to the QB. This is easy and common for running backs. In the 1980s and for much of the 90's it was common to do this with linemen (such as guards), but



The practice has significantly decreased because it's hard for a guard to wheel out and block an outside rusher. It became much more difficult in the late 90s and 2000s because defenses became good at freezing the lineman so he couldn't get out there.

## *The Pass Protection Chess Match*

So after this romp across protection concepts, we're ready to understand some basics about the chess match between offense and defense. But first, a few preliminary remarks.

More than any other factor, sacks are primarily a function of the QB holding onto the ball too long, protection be damned. Any coach worth his salt is going to hold a stopwatch any time his QB drops back in practice. TV announcers who seek out what lineman to blame often miss the point: the QB needs to get rid of the ball quickly. The QB has just a couple of seconds to release the ball. Only a small percentage of sacks in the NFL and college can fairly be laid at the linemen's feet. Now, the QB may get pressured, or have to throw it away, but most sacks are the QB's fault.

Further, it is up to the playcaller not to make the QB a sitting duck. No one should ever call four straight drop-back (or play-action dropback) passes in a row. If the defense is going to take target practice, you should at least make your quarterback a moving target. I mean, "that's [your] quarterback."

The two best changeups – other than the run game – are the three-step passing game and the screen game. But remember: the three-step game, as Bill Walsh said, was designed to take away *obvious* opportunities from the defense, such as loose outside coverage. Three-step passes are not necessarily sufficient to sustain your offense, and further, good defenses will bait you into throwing quicks and then will come up to make the tackle. Similarly for screens, if a defense is prepared for it, it's often a negative play. So it's all about finding the proper mix. This is all consistent with constraint theory. Finally, do not forget about half-rolls and sprintouts. The run-and-shoot was based entirely on the half-roll principle,

