



**X&O Labs'**

**Coaching Research Report #110301**

# **Developing Consistency in the Inside Zone With the Covered and Uncovered Concept**

**"The blocker wants his nose on the outside number of the defender. We do not want the head down the midline, in the armpit or outside the defender. Helmet placement is more critical in zone blocking than footwork. We don't care if that first step is a bucket step, open step, etc. That's not important. Getting the helmet to the outside number is critical."**

**Mike DeBord,  
Tight Ends Coach,  
Chicago Bears**

By Mike Kuchar,  
Senior Research Manager,  
X&O Labs  
[mikek@xandolabs.com](mailto:mikek@xandolabs.com)

At X&O Labs we feel strongly about this subject. The inside zone play is taught at all levels of ball all across the country, but its teaching differs among coaches, which is why we were curious to find a common thread among your methodology. It took us some time and a good deal of research, but we eventually found how this play can be successful at any level. But, before getting into the specifics of the scheme, it's important to first address the reasoning as to why coaches are running it.

### **Why the inside zone:**

1. **It's teaching progression is universal:** whether you're a tight end or a center you only have two rules: covered or uncovered, it's that simple. Many of the coaches we spoke with set up three man drills where ANY two offensive lineman work against a defensive lineman and a linebacker on their zone steps.
2. **It's injury proof:** we've found that if you teach the zone scheme, it's much easier to replace a lineman if someone gets injured. In gap-oriented schemes like the Wing T, a guard's job description is nothing like a tackle. They execute totally different blocks. In the zone a guard can fill in for a tackle, a tackle can fill in for a center, etc. They all run the same steps. It's "plug-in and play" relevant.
3. **It takes what the defense gives up:** In this day and age it's fair to say that defensive lineman as a whole are much better skilled (and more sought after) than offensive lineman. Just a simple research check on recent NFL draft reports will show the disparity between selections in offensive and defensive lineman. So why bang your head against the wall asking your offensive tackle to drive block a stud defensive end into the water coolers every down? A zone scheme teaches lineman to knock defenders on the angle that they're on, making it a much more simple assignment.
4. **It limits negative plays:** if you go back and research inside zone schemes, you will find a very low percentage of plays that lost yardage. Trust us, we did the work.
5. **It's good against zone pressures:** Since you are blocking gaps instead of people in zone schemes, you are protected against that type of first level movement. We've found that the most difficult thing to teach high school players is that they are not blocking people just zones (which are why teams will man block outside zone plays - something we will delve into in an upcoming report with the outside zone). But once your kids get the concept, the play is productive.
6. **It has tons of complementary action of it:** Once you master the techniques of teaching the zone scheme, it really gets fun as a coach. Off the inside zone action, you have the zone read principle (the QB reads the C gap defender), the orbit reverse principle (slot comes in motion to get reverse or hold C gap defender), the split

zone or slice principle (FB or backside motion player seals the C gap defender), the lead zone principle (two back concept, in which the FB lead blocks the front side linebacker) and the bootleg or screen off it. You end up with five plays by teaching one scheme.

But excitement overwhelms you and you begin to put a new page in your spring installation manual - there is one universal truth you must understand before going further. In order to be effective in running the scheme, you **MUST COMMIT TO IT**. You must major in the zone, not minor in it. Based on our studies, **75 percent of coaches feel the inside zone must be your top run in order for it to be successful**. Because most coaches teach the zone by covered and uncovered techniques, that's what we will focus on for our report.

### **Case 1: "Covered" Lineman Technique**

Before highlighting the specific techniques of the covered and uncovered linemen, it's important to note the differences between covered and uncovered. Typically speaking, the covered offensive lineman is the player that has a first level defender (or down lineman) from his nose to the nose of the adjacent offensive lineman next to him to the play side (*Picture 1 - In this picture, if the lineman to the left is the center, the guard next to him is covered because he has a first level player from his nose to the center's nose*). This means that his adjacent gap is occupied by a down lineman, at least pre-snap. Sure, by the time the ball is snapped, this player can move into a different gap but players are blocking gaps in zones, not so much defenders.



Inside Zone Photo 1

We've found that the covered principle is universal, though the verbiage may change, most coaches disregard an inside shade to be a covered lineman. But while the assignment is understood, the technique may vary from coach to coach. Some coaches, like Mike DeBord, once the offensive coordinator at the University of Michigan and now the tight ends coach for the Chicago Bears, believes more in hat and hand placement for the covered

lineman than footwork. "We want to control the front half of the defender. Once we get to the front side number, we want to run him at an angle to the sideline," says DeBord. "The blocker wants his nose on the outside number of the defender. We do not want the head down the midline, in the armpit or outside the defender. Helmet placement is more critical in zone blocking than footwork. We don't care if that first step is a bucket step, open step, etc. That's not important. Getting the helmet to the outside number is critical."

DeBord cares so deeply about the hat placement of his linemen; he doesn't stress footwork on that first step. We've found that many coaches have gone back and forth on the debate of whether to use a bucket step or an up field step gaining ground when teaching zone blocking. Generally, there are two schools of thought on this topic. One of the forefathers of zone footwork, Jim McNally who has had 28 years of experience coaching in the NFL, always believed in the bucket step (a backward step) as a first step. It's a philosophy where lineman "lose ground to gain ground" in their assignment. While this may be used for offensive tackles to handle wide five techniques in the NFL, our researchers have found that **73 percent of coaches believe more in an angle or lead step to the target rather than a bucket step**. We've found that it's more of a psychological thing to some coaches, because the words "losing ground" can be construed for some form of blasphemy when dealing with offensive linemen.

Another zone coaching legend, Alex Gibbs, who spent 26 years in the league, was more of a lead step proponent when teaching the zone. Gibbs was synonymous for having smaller linemen, rumor has it he never coached a lineman over 300 pounds, so it was probably imperative for him to teach his guys to get off the ball with quickness. "If you're covered, your responsibility is for the outside half of the down lineman if your inside team mate is uncovered," says Gibbs. "Our first step was always a lead step with the play side outside foot, eyeballing outside number of the down lineman on you. The second step is through the crotch of the opponent." It's that second step that offensive line coaches harp on being the most imperative step. After hearing Steve Loney, another longtime NFL coaching veteran most recently with the St. Louis Rams speak at a clinic, I remember him talking about taking "any step necessary" to get to the landmark of the defender, which he taught was the middle of the play side number. He wanted to force the down defender to make a decision by reaching him. Most of our coaches felt that the second step should be more of a foot to crotch step than any form of crossover step for risk of losing strength and balance.

### **Case 2: "Uncovered" Lineman Technique**

Regardless of the defensive front, an uncovered offensive lineman is one that does not have a first level player shaded from his nose to the nose of the

lineman next to him play side (**Picture 2** - *In this picture, if the player to the left is the center, the guard to the right is uncovered*). It may also mean you have a defender that is an inside shade or second level defender stacked on you. According to our coaches, the uncovered lineman in zone schemes needs the most attention because they are essentially blocking a gap, not a man, something that can be foreign to younger players. In zone combinations, the block of the covered lineman essentially becomes a man block while the block of the uncovered lineman is more of a gap block.



Inside Zone Picture 2

Before discussing the *post-snap* techniques of uncovered lineman, Gibbs drills his players on their thought process *pre-snap*. Gibbs emphasizes the importance of understanding which player the uncovered lineman will be responsible for when the ball is snapped. While it may be true that most uncovered lineman will end up working on a double team, players can move, so a lineman needs to know if he'll be involved in a solo (one on one) block or a double team. "A crucial phase of teaching zone blocking is for the uncovered man to know the technique of the down lineman on his covered play side teammate. For example, if I'm the right guard and I'm uncovered and my play side teammate has a man on the inside shoulder, it is a 90 percent chance that I will end up taking him over. If he stunts, he will stunt to me. If there is a man head up on him, it is a 50 percent chance that I will end up on him. If there is a man on his outside shoulder, odds are only about 10 percent that I might end up taking him over. This all has to be diagnosed pre-snap."

Rich Alercio, the head coach at Castleton State University in Vermont, talks more to his players about what he calls an uncovered open gap (**Picture 3** - *The lineman to the left is in an uncovered open gap situation*). In Alercio's zone system, players that are uncovered that have an open gap to the play side are expected to be second level blockers, meaning they will eventually climb to linebacker level. "This means that there is no defender between your nose and the nose of your adjacent lineman play side," says Alercio. "This means on snap you reach and climb to second level."



Inside Zone Picture 3

When Alercio teaches the open gap principle, he emphasizes feet, not so much hands. "It's a no-hand punch because I'm anticipating working up to a linebacker. If the defensive lineman slants, I have time to engage him. If the defensive lineman doesn't slant to me I shimmy up to linebacker depth. We want to stay even and not chase anything. If he works over the top that's fine, I don't chase." Staying with the uncovered principle, now if there is an immediate first level threat to the play side of the zone, Alercio teaches the uncovered closed gap technique (**Picture 4 - The lineman to the left is in an uncovered closed gap technique**). "Now there is a defender in my play side gap. When I step to my adjacent gap, my eyes stay on near shoulder of the down lineman. If that shoulder disappears or if it engages with my teammate then I'm climbing."



Inside Zone Picture 4

When Alercio talks to his players about getting to the second level, he doesn't mention bucket steps, **and 64.9 percent of coaches agreed**. "We don't want to turn our body at all," says Alercio. "We want everything to stay square." He does this because of the path of the back in the scheme, which we will explain a bit later. He also has the uncovered lineman on a near shoulder key of the down lineman, whereas **the majority of coaches, 52.8 percent, teach a near knee principle when determining whether to double team or not**. This means when the near knee of the down lineman comes to you, you engage. If it goes away from you, you are climbing to the second level. DeBord gives the Bears a landmark of the helmet of the down defender. "He doesn't think numbers, he wants his helmet in front,"

says DeBord. "His first step must be for depth. Don't be in a hurry - check the angle of the linebacker you're climbing to."

### **This Report Continues Below. . .**

When climbing to the backer, DeBord tells his guys to work to get to the inside number, just like blocking a down defender, but never chase. "The technique is the same as the down defender. They just need to get their feet under them on contact. Those backers are better athletes. They move better."

### **Case 3: Techniques on the Play Side (the Double Team)**

Just some clinic talk here before we go further. If you get just one thing out of this coaching report this week make sure it is this: **WHEN EXECUTING A DOUBLE TEAM BLOCK AT THE POINT OF ATTACK, NOTHING IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN GETTING MOVEMENT ON THE DOWN MAN.** I'm sure you may have heard this before, but speaking from experience this is vital. Some coaches call it "MFGF," an acronym for "Move the Fat Guy First." Some coaches will say "get your fat on his fat." Whichever way you verbalize it to your kids, no double team is successful without getting movement on that first level defender. We've all seen numerous instances where our players have been so anxious to get to the linebacker that they don't do a good enough job of taking care of the 3-technique tackle and he makes the play. Remember this; a four yard gain is always better than a two yard loss. If you block the down defender and the back gets his read, you'll pick up yardage.

Now how you block that down defender varies from coach to coach. Different coaches have different philosophies on when to attack that first level defender. Traditionally, the covered lineman is the post player who will work to execute a play side shoulder or crowther block to get "lift" on the down defender, while the uncovered lineman will look to take over. Some coaches refer to it as the "hip" position (**Picture 5**), because both uncovered and covered linemen are getting their hips together to create a bigger blocking surface.



Inside Zone Picture 5

Once they get fit in this hip position, they are asked to drive the down defender until the linebacker is at their level, and never before that. Gibbs tells his covered lineman to always expect a man block, only to come off when they are "wiped off" by their uncovered partner. According to Gibbs, there will only be three scenarios when zone blocking. His players must know each of these:

**1. Down lineman is in an outside shade and stretches outside** - you stay on him and uncovered teammate works through to linebacker (**Picture 6** - *the lineman to the right should stay engaged on down defender while the lineman to the left should be climbing to the backer*).



Inside Zone Picture 6

**2. Down lineman is head up and anchors (doesn't move) on you** - use double team technique driving him into linebacker. Stay on him until wiped off by uncovered teammate then work straight up to linebacker (**Picture 7** - *both players are double teaming up to the second level*).



Inside Zone Picture 7

**3. Down lineman head up or inside shade and slants inside** - force him to flatten his slant and stay on him until wiped off by uncovered teammate then work straight up to linebacker (**Picture 8** - *because the down lineman slants inside, the left guard should be picking him up while the center works off to second level*).



Inside Zone Picture 8

As for the uncovered lineman, most coaches talk about reading the near knee or hip of the first level defender (as mentioned previously), but DeBord gets a little more technical with his teaching progression. "As the uncovered lineman steps into his area he looks at the defender on the covered lineman. If there is a piece of the defender showing inside of the covered lineman's block, he knocks him over to the covered lineman and continues to push off and climb to the linebacker," says DeBord. "But if the uncovered lineman steps play side and there is three-fourths of the defender's body showing, the uncovered lineman takes over the defender. He tries to get to the front side number just as if he were covered. If the

defender works outside, there is not much of his body to see, so he goes to second level."

#### **Case 4: Techniques on the Back-Side (Scoop or No Scoop)**

On the back-side of inside zone schemes, a decision needs to be made as to whether or not to scoop it or full zone it. In most outside zone schemes, coaches tell their back-side to run to reach or cut-off all back-side defenders. But because of the potential of the inside zone play to cut-back, some coaches want to stress the idea of getting separation. Both DeBord and Alercio have differing opinions on how to handle the back-side of zone. DeBord feels the best way to be effective is to work on getting depth by drop stepping his lineman in an attempt to cut-off defenders. "The back-side takes a drop step. They take a step so that their toes face the sideline. They have to get their hips and shoulders going down the line of scrimmage. Their aiming point is the inside armpit of the defender. They try to dip and rip his back shoulder through the outside defender to get to his block (Picture 9 - the lineman to the left is trying to scoop or cutoff his down defender by getting his back-side shoulder down). If they get their back-side shoulder too high, they will not get through to the block. Once he gets to his aiming point, they starts to work his shoulder up field. He continues to run to the sideline once he gets his leverage established."



Inside Zone Picture 9

As mentioned earlier, Alercio doesn't buy into any form of a drop step when his players can lose ground. Any time his player is covered and on the back-side, he talks about taking a base step with the play side foot in order to keep his shoulders squared. "If you're in a combination block, you're going to block half the man. You can't commit the play side shoulder because that will turn the body. If the defender stays in the gap I'm blocking, I'm going to try and lift that shoulder and get him vertical but I

won't be turning my shoulders," says Alercio. "You never know if that play can come back. Plus, once you turn your shoulders you give the back a one-way go. We want that two-way go off your block."

### **Reader Request: Footwork and Reads of the Ball Carrier**

As mentioned at the start of the report, the zone play must look the same to everybody. From a defensive standpoint, if second level players, like linebackers and safeties, are getting displaced by the movement of the offensive line, the back will have success. From an offensive standpoint, if the back and the offensive line are both stepping the same way, chances are you will get some movement at the point of attack. We realize that being under center and in the gun will have two different techniques, mainly because of the zone read component. So in this report, we will focus purely under center, which some coach's feel is the starting point of their teaching anyway.

Most backs will start at seven yards from the line of scrimmage, whether in a single back set or in a two back set. Gibbs talks about having the ball carrier take a pre-snap read to locate the "bubble" in the defensive front, meaning the gap not defended by a down lineman. In odd fronts, this is mainly the B gap, in even fronts the play side A gap. The running back's first step is lateral with the play side foot (just like the offensive line) while the second step is a crossover to slightly gain ground. The third step squares the back up so he can start up field. According to Gibbs, the back's aiming point is predicated on the front. "If bubble is over offensive guard (odd front), we aim for inside hip of offensive tackle. If bubble is over tackle or center, we aim for outside hip of guard. We read the block on the first down linemen outside the center and make our cut on their side of the LOS. If his helmet goes inside, we cram the ball up field just outside of him." (**Picture 10** - *the left offensive lineman's shoulder is too high, which could allow penetration by the down defender. Penetration is a killer for the inside zone.*)



Inside Zone Picture 10

Gibbs: "If his helmet goes outside, we cut the ball up field inside of him.  
**(Picture 11 - If his helmet goes inside, cram the ball up field just outside of him.)** If there is daylight in the gap, cram it."



Inside Zone Picture 11

Gibbs: "If his helmet goes outside, we cut the ball up field inside of him."  
**(Picture 12)**



Inside Zone Picture 12

Wherever the cut gets made, it's just going to be just one cut. Gibbs institutes a "one cut rule" to his backs - they are only allowed to make one cut and then they MUST get up field at full speed. He tells them do not cut until you have reached the line of scrimmage and do not "dance" in the hole. "By not making your cut until you replace the heels of the offensive lineman, you force the linebackers to commit to a gap and the offensive lineman can seal them away from the cutback lane," says Gibbs.

Alercio believes in the cutback, but doesn't necessarily believe in pressing the heels of the offensive linemen before making a cut. "We don't teach getting to heels of offensive lineman, because backs can either make that read or they can't," said Alercio. "So we teach him what the read is. We tell them to get as close to the lineman as they can. Some guys get it or they don't get it." Alercio's read is based on defensive structure as well. "If we see a four down defensive team, we read the play side defensive tackle to back-side defensive tackle. If the down defender's hat shows play side, we will go back-side. If it's a three down team, we read the nose. All our running back does is identify the front by seeing if it's even (four down) or odd (three down) by looking to see if both guards are uncovered or covered. If one of them is covered, it's a four down front. Either way you don't want two things: you don't want penetration and you don't want the running back to commit to soon. We want the running back to get the ball at five yards and hug the combo block to check where the linebacker shows. Check for opposite color and run a way from it."

### **Concluding Report**

The inside zone scheme has been a staple of productive offenses ever since its inception - when coaches like Alex Gibbs and Jim McNally implemented it in their offensive schemes. When X&O Labs first got the results of the survey, we found that while many coaches were using the zone scheme, **75 percent say it is run more than 15 times per game**, the teaching behind the footwork of the running backs and lineman differed from coach to

coach. As always, we try to provide you with the varying viewpoint of the scheme so you can make your own decision to what fits your program.

For questions or comments on this Coaching Research Report, please email Mike Kuchar, Senior Research Manager at X&O Labs at [mikek@xandolabs.com](mailto:mikek@xandolabs.com).