

Coaching the Inside Zone

My name is Kyle McElvany. I just finished my second season as the Offensive and Defensive Line Coach at Swanton High School in northwest Ohio. This past season was our staff's second year in Swanton as we are attempting to restore the proud tradition that the program once held. Although our record (3-7) may not indicate that we have made progress, as a staff we feel we are certainly making tremendous improvement. This was our first year utilizing the spread offense. We used multiple formations out of 10, 11, 12, and 21 personnel with 90% of the time being in the shotgun. Despite a slow start that made some of us wonder if the choice to go to "the spread" was worth it, we ended up with a 1200+ yards passing and team total of 1300+ rushing yards. I do not claim to be an expert on the inside zone or offensive line play, but my intention in writing this article is to help those coaches who may be thinking about installing or have already installed this play.

- **Why I like the Inside Zone**

Taking into account the personnel I had up front and the talented tailback that my team had coming back, I wanted a play that was simple for the linemen, and was the best way to get our tailback the football. After watching several DVDs, going to many clinics, and meeting with a few college coaches, I was convinced that the Inside Zone play was the signature play I wanted to feature in our offense. One of the reasons I was attracted to the inside zone was because of its simplicity. No matter what front the defense lines up in, if the linemen follow their rules and play aggressive, we should never have a play for negative yardage. The teaching of the footwork to the Quarterback and Running back were also very easy to implement.

Another reason I like the Inside Zone play is because it can be run out of multiple formations without any sort of rule changes. It can be just as effective in a 2x2 shotgun formation or a double-tight, 1 back under center set. Also, the naked play action off of the inside zone is a weapon in itself. Even without a strong quarterback, the play action pass off the inside zone can be very effective and is fairly simple to teach.

- **Offensive Line Coach Needs To Be Creative**

In order to get good at the inside zone, your offensive line coach needs to be an effective teacher. Just like the teacher in the classroom, you must find a way to reach every single kid on your team. Be creative! Some of the teaching aids I used included power-point presentation, video clips of various high school and college teams running inside zone, position group manuals, walk throughs, chalk talks, and even having them stand up during position group meetings and explain the concepts to me. At the end of pre season practice, I quizzed them on the various techniques and schemes we had installed. Also I recommend filming practice sessions as much as you can, not only for you to review, but for the players to see themselves on film.

- **Repetition is Key**

During pre season camps, and two a days, my goal was to rep the inside zone at least 40-50 times a day whether it be in group sessions or team periods. This requires a well-organized and up tempo practice to accomplish this amount of reps. sometimes we reached that goal, sometimes we did not. Since we see an odd front about 70% of the time during the regular season so until the second week of two a days we practiced against some type of odd front.

Also, I recommend you or having another coach, coaching up the scout team, especially the linebackers, because if you do not, they will just stand there and be blocking dummies. I feel that if you are going to run inside zone, than it needs to be your base play. You cannot just “date” the inside zone play, you must marry it. While it can be a great play, if it is not repped often, and against various fronts, it will probably fail to be productive for your team. As for the actual teaching progression I used for this play, I will list it below. One quick note, I know there is a million ways to teach, and probably better ways than the ways I used, but it is just what worked for me and the players I was coaching and my goal was to basically leave them no excuse for as to why they wouldn’t understand it.

The Teaching Progression I used for the Inside Zone (prior to actual practice installation):

- 1- Teaching the foot work used in our offense year round (lead, lateral, reach, pull)
- 2- Power Point Presentation (each player also received c.d. copy of presentation)
- 3- Walk Through’s
- 4- Whiteboard (both myself and the players quizzing each other)
- 5- Video Cut Ups
- 6- Repeat #3 and #4
- 7- Written Test
- 8- Distribution of Position Group Manual

- **Zone Footwork**

As previously mentioned in the opening paragraph, I was drawn to the inside zone play in large part because of its simplicity. The footwork for the play only required two different types of steps. One being a **lead step**, which is more-less, a short, straight ahead step to be used when you are **covered**, and a **lateral step**, to be used when you are **uncovered**. If a blocker is **covered** with an outside shade, he may also use a **reach step** to gain a better angle on the defender. Also, we will always step with the play-side foot first. To further emphasize that this is a north-south, smash mouth play, I do not teach my players to use the bucket step although many coaches do use the bucket step (and probably won a lot more games than I have ☺), because I feel at the

high school level, the idea of “giving ground to gain ground” may not always be as effective due to the variances in size.

Lead Step (*see Figure 1*): The lead step is a straight ahead step that could be anywhere from 6 inch step to merely picking up the foot and putting it down. As the blocker is taking his first step, his chest should be slightly over his knee with his neck bolted back with his eyes on the target. As he is taking his 2nd step, he should be making contact with the hands, punching in the middle of the numbers. The blocker’s hands should be close enough together as to if he has handcuffs on. As he is driving the defender, he should maintain a wide base and a coaching point I constantly preach is to get your helmet underneath the defender’s chin (in regards to pad level).

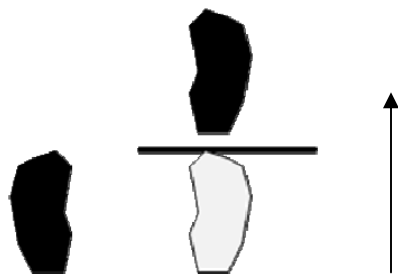


Figure 1: Lead Step

Lateral Step (*see Figure 2*): The lateral step is just what the name implies, more of a side-ways step (keeping the toes pointing north-south) that is used by an uncovered blocker on the inside zone play. The lateral step can vary from 6-8 inches in length but you are slightly gaining ground. The blocker also should try to keep his shoulders as square to the line of scrimmage as possible as we want this to be a north-south play. The blocker’s 2nd step (or as we call it “the gather step”) should also gain ground. The blocker’s target is the near number of the defender. As the blocker is making contact with the defender, he should try to keep his eyes on the 2nd level defender as much as possible. Another coaching point that has helped the players understand the concept of the step, is for them to “mentally load” their weight on the backside leg.

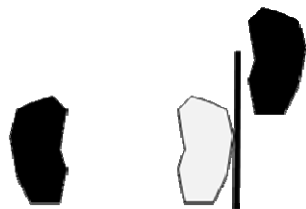


Figure 2: Lateral Step

Reach Step (*see Figure 3*): The reach step is a 45 degree angled step at the near number of the defender. The step can be anywhere from 6-12 inches depending on the alignment on the

defender. The backside foot should remain pointing north-south until it is used in the second step. On the second step which also gains ground, there should be contact with the defender, and then with the third and fourth steps, beginning a vertical movement. A coaching point I also make with the players regarding this step is that if their backside knee finishes in front of the crotch of the defender, it will be a successful block.

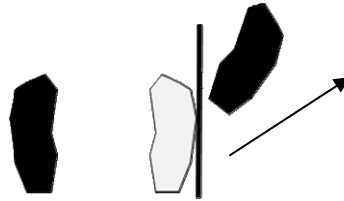


Figure 3: Reach Step

- **Covered / Uncovered Principles**

Like many coaches who have taught the inside zone play, I used the covered, uncovered principles. These rules can be applied against any front and will dictate the blocker's steps. I define being **covered** as a blocker who has a defender either head up, inside shaded, or outside shaded. Keep in mind however, one of the main concepts of the inside zone play is to block your play-side gap, so if the blocker has an inside shaded defender, he will not be as concerned with him as it will more than likely become his backside teammate's responsibility.

The question that is asked the most by the players is when he has an inside shaded defender, "How long should I block him?" After doing some more research on this specific issue and consulting with some other offensive line coaches, Texas Christian University's offensive line coach, Eddie Williamson gave me a great answer to this question, Coach Williamson told me that he will tell his players to think that they are on a train track, and that any piece of that defender's body that is on their "track", to "rip it off and take it with them". We do not EVER want to block backside on zone but if a part of the defender is in the way of my "track" we will shove it back into my backside team mate's path, hopefully helping him with his block.

In contrast, I define a lineman as **uncovered** if he does not have a defender head up, or shaded to either side. In figure 4, I have given an example of a typical front we may see. In figure 4, if we were running zone to the right, the tight end, right tackle, center, and left tackle would be considered as covered.

In the situation below (figure 4), the left tackle would be taking more of a 45 degree lead step to get the proper angle on the defender, and on his 3rd step he should be getting a vertical push on the defender. Due to the noseguard being shaded to the playside, he will be taking a larger lateral step than normal with the intention of getting to his aiming point (near number). However if the

defender slants away from his gap, he will on 3rd step begin to go on a vertical path picking up the first defender he can. In a perfect world, the center gets a good push on the noseguard with the backside (right) guard combo blocking with him to the mike linebacker. The defender on the left tackle is shaded to the inside which means that the left tackle will more than like not spend much time blocking him as the defender will likely be going into the B gap which is the responsibility of the right guard. In this instance, the right guard will be taking a lateral step, getting to the near number of the defensive tackle then getting a vertical push while right tackle will take a lead step, getting his inside arm on the defender if he can while keeping his eyes on the 2nd level defender. The tight end will look backside and since the tackle is considered “covered”, he will declare his block “solo” and his sole responsibility is to base block the defender.

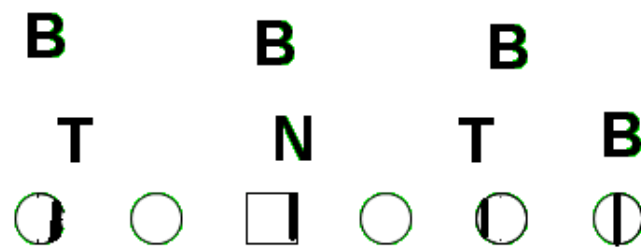


Figure 4

- **Problems I have Encountered**

The first problem I have encountered early on was my offensive linemen “chasing” defenders when they slanted away from them. They must understand that they only need to worry about the defender if the defender is threatening the blocker’s play-side gap. Also, practicing “getting off the ball” combined with the fact that the offensive line knows the snap count; there is no excuse for why a blocker cannot make contact with a defender threatening his play-side gap. The “chasing” problem has mostly occurred with uncovered blocker attempting to combo block with his play-side team mate. The blocker must understand that if the defender slants away from his gap or cannot make contact by his second step, and then he needs to continue on his “tracks” to second level. *See figure 5 for visual description.*

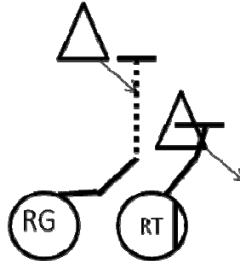


Figure 5

Another problem I encountered was linebackers “scraping” over the top of combo blocks. We encountered this problem mainly with odd fronts, particularly the 3-3 stack. The uncovered linemen must keep his eyes on the second level and “push” his play side team mate off the combo block to pick up the scraping linebacker if necessary. I recommend making up a call for the uncovered linemen to use when he sees a linebacker coming over the top of the combo block that will tell the covered lineman to come off and pick up the linebacker. *See figure 6 for visual description.*

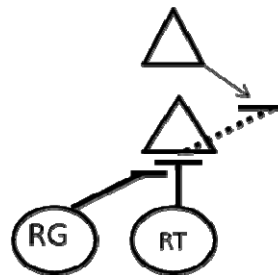


Figure 6

- **3 Step Progression**

The last bit of advice I want to share with you concerning the inside zone play is a 3 step thought-progression you can teach your linemen if they are confused on whom to block. I got this great progression from Nick Tabacca who is currently the Offensive Coordinator at Defiance College. As the blocker comes to the line of scrimmage he first checks if there is a man over him, if not then he keys the near knee of the next down defender (to the playside), if the near knee goes away (at the snap) then he keys the linebacker. See Figure 7 which is a slide from a presentation I use when teaching my players, for a better visual explanation.

Lineman Eye Progression:



1. *Man* (Imaginary 2x2 box in front of you)

2. *Near knee of next down defender (to the play-side)*
- If it comes near you. Its going in your gap and will be your responsibility
- If it goes away from you, into another gap, then it is your teammate's

3. *Linebacker*

Remember: every sound defense has someone responsible for each gap. if the next down defender goes into a gap away from you, the LB probably has your gap



- **Closing Thoughts**

I hope this article was not too confusing and gave you some useful bits of information that you can apply to your offense. I would like to thank the following people who took the time to me with me so I could learn more about the inside zone play; Kory Allen at University of Findlay, Bill Rychel at Ohio Northern University, Paul Schudel at Albion College, Nick Tabacca at Defiance College, and Eddie Williamson at Texas Christian University. Also again, I do not claim to be an expert on the zone play so I am always looking for suggestions, and more information on not just the zone play, but offensive line play in general. If you have any questions or would like to talk more about offensive line play, you may contact me at kmcelvany@comcast.net . Thank you and best of luck with your program.