

Understanding Zone Blocking and Florida State's Offensive Linemen by [Bud Elliott](#)

Today I will try to teach you something about offensive line play. Specifically, I will discuss Florida State's offensive line. In this article, I'll cover the questions "why zone blocking?", "what is zone blocking?", and "what type of players do we need to run a zone system?" In future editions, I'll cover specific plays and the passing game.

First, you may have heard that Florida State is primarily a zone blocking team. This is a departure from the days of Mark Richt and those who preceded him, who favored "man blocking" schemes.

Zone Blocking developed as a response to the increasingly athletic defensive linemen seen over the past 20 years. These defensive linemen would kill plays before they even began by achieving **penetration** in the backfield. The more traditional style, "man blocking", required players to block a specific player, often one of those elite defensive linemen (think FSU beating on Kansas in the Meadowlands in the '93 Championship year). It was very difficult for teams to find five offensive linemen who could man up and block their specified player, particularly when that assignment was shifting before the snap and running in all different crazy directions after the snap. To do so would require exceptionally strong, smart, and athletic offensive linemen, and those type players do not come around too often. As a counter, coaches began to devise ways for their players to deal with these freak defensive linemen. Instead of blocking each lineman one on one, what if the entire offensive line blocked the defensive line, functioning as a unit? Instead of each lineman having to adjust to the pre-snap movements, stunting, and post-snap twisting and stunting, the offensive line adjusted as a unit? What if linemen worked as a unit instead of chasing around these freaks that teams were now employing at defensive tackle? Welcome to zone

blocking; the thinking man's way to block. Again, the entire goal is to eliminate penetration.

Before I get into the mechanics of zone blocking, I want to establish a few philosophical goals. Think of these goals as Florida State's end, and zone blocking as the means the 'Noles will use to reach that end.

According to the father of zone running, Alex Gibbs, the man who designed the Denver Broncos running game with Terrell Davis (orchestrating one of the biggest super bowl upsets in the modern era), the entire key to the running game is to **stay positive**:

WE WANT NO NEGATIVES! We look at pass as yes/ no, big/ little, big plays and zero plays (w/ negatives). Out of a certain number of passes, we expect a certain number of failures. That is the nature of the passing game.

But the run game the exact opposite. We want NO negatives. We do not want to run plays that are big/ little, *even at the expense of big plays*, we do not want it. We want the system where even the "bad" play gains something. The entire objective is to stay out of 3rd and long. We throw out the run plays with which we cannot consistently avoid negatives.

Screw averages. We want medians. The back might average 7 yards per carry, but how often did he get stuffed and put us in 3rd and 10, causing a turnover.

And we do this by eliminating penetration and running a limited number of plays to perfection.

Gibbs was way ahead of his time. NFL and college teams are now spending a lot of money to reach the same conclusion that Gibbs reached: it's not what you average; it's what you consistently gain. It is better to have a back average 4 yards per carry with minimal carries going for 0 or negative yards, than it is to have a back average 6 yards per carry but attain that average on a mix of long and bust runs. This concept of staying out of

unfavorable down and distance (2nd and 8+, 3rd and 5+, etc) is known as "leverage". No matter the talent of the team, we now know that disaster is hugely correlated with poor leverage situations for the offense (high leverage situations for the defense). By avoiding those situations, the offense can play with favorable leverage, and in turn, the frustrated and tired defense will begin to take unnecessary risks, allowing big plays. I am not saying that big plays are not important, but rather that they will come if you build the proper foundation for them. The big plays are a combination of execution and alignment, NOT design. All of Florida State's base running plays are designed to go the distance *if* the defense gives a favorable alignment and the execution is good. FSU does not run big/little running plays (outside of some situational stuff). Bill Connelly has done some of the best publicly available work in the field for the college game, and I suggest you [peruse his work here](#). What causes offenses to fall into unfavorable leverage downs? Penetration, of course! And what do we want? No Negatives.

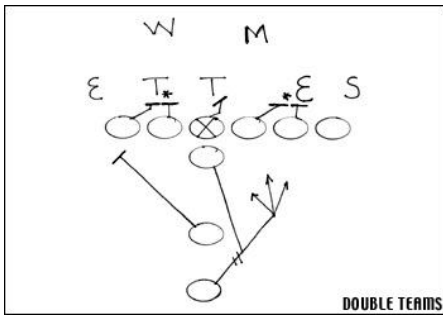
I know that you grew up on yards per carry, but I am here to tell you that it is time to change. Know why Emmitt Smith was more effective than Barry Sanders? Consistency. Barry often had the better yards per carry, but Emmitt never lost yards and never put his team in a bad situation.

Florida State runs as a team. The running game is not solely a function of the running back and the offensive line, but rather every player has a crucial role in the successful execution of the rushing attack. Running is a mentality. The offensive line coach must be able to get on the wide receivers and their coach. The head coach must allow the offensive line coach and offensive coordinator to get the wide receivers blocking. The wide receivers coach must be on the same page, and the ultimate effect is that the receivers must be a desirous participant in the run game. The quarterback is also a huge part of the scheme, carrying out fakes which allow designated defenders to stay unblocked but at the same time out of the play.

I believe there are three important principles of zone running. First, deny penetration. Second, re-establish the line of scrimmage. Third, render the playside linebacker ineffective. **The ultimate goal is to stretch the defense laterally, providing secure creases for the runner.**

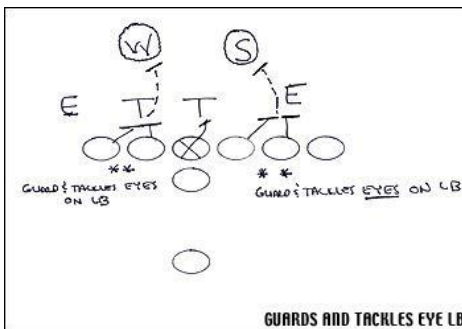
What is zone blocking?

It's actually exactly what it sounds like. Offensive linemen are looking to block zones instead of assigned men. Each lineman, either by himself or in conjunction with an adjacent linemate must account for and block a designated space. This is different from man blocking, in which each lineman must block a specified man. Zone blocking is very socialist. It is a team concept, not a collective individual concept. With zone blocking, the lineman will advance to their designated area, and block any player in that area in an attempt to "win" the zone. If the zone is initially empty, they will continue through their zone, possibly help out an adjacent lineman, or proceed to the 2nd level, (LB's and defensive backs). You may find it useful to think of this in basketball terms, with zone and man defense. The concept is for two adjacent linemen to come off in unison and attack a defensive lineman to the play side. Unlike man blocking, where each player has an assigned man to block; zone blocking creates an initial double-team with two players blocking a single defensive lineman. This allows the offensive linemen to be very aggressive because they know they have help from their linemate... It is this initial team that creates movement at the point of attack, and from which the runner will make his read and find the developing hole... This is an image from an old Bob Davie article that no longer exists on ESPN.

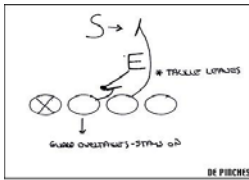


The "W, M, and S" are the Weakside, Middle, and Strongside linebackers. They are aligned in a traditional "under" front, which is similar to what Florida State runs. You can see the backside guard and tackle double team the defensive tackle, while the playside guard and tackle double team the playside (right) defensive end. It's almost impossible for those double teamed players to achieve meaningful penetration.

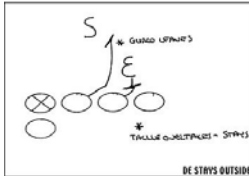
A double team, however, takes two players, and eventually, one of the offensive linemen will disengage (after the other double team partner has secured the doubled defender) to attack the linebacker. Teamwork, experience, and trust are key here. Again, back to the diagram:



Davie has two good examples of this teamwork, which I have condensed into a single diagram.



End crashes down, tackle is release man (after doubling with guard).



Here, the End stays wide, the guard checks to make sure the tackle has him and then pursues the linebacker.

This seems simple enough, but being able to gauge when your doubling partner is in position to gain sole control of the target defender is not easy.

The zone scheme is designed to create organized chaos at the LOS. The location of the running lanes are impossible for the D to predict from play to play. This variability strains the flexibility of every defensive system, making the location of run fits more difficult to predict and preparation more complex. It challenges the mental discipline of the defense, which is particularly difficult for college defenses, who often depend on athletic talent alone. It increases the likelihood of an error leading to a large gain. Fear of such errors can make the defense less aggressive and give the initiative to the O-line; or can make the defense too aggressive, allowing better cut back lanes for the diligent runner. Just as QBs who are able to run through progressions are more successful in today's game than QBs who run a set play, the zone system gives a quality runner, the man with the best

view of the action, decision making power to choose from multiple options dictated by his reads. [From Pats Fans](#).

T

Zone blocking takes a specific type of offensive lineman

Ideally, you want a lineman who is 6'6 320lbs, stronger, faster, and smarter than anyone else. Unfortunately, reality takes over, and we realize that there are probably only 7 or 8 men in the world who fit that bill and most of them play on Sundays. (Bill Parcels calls this the planet theory). From the remaining group of lineman, each probably have a few good traits and a few less desirable attributes. The key with any system is determining which attributes are critical and which are not, and then focusing on exploiting a market inefficiency, if any.

What do we look for in an offensive lineman? Let's take this from a speech by Alex Gibbs (legendary Zone Blocking coach of the Denver Broncos and one of the closest guys I've seen to Florida State line coach Rick Trickett in terms of technique and demeanor).: (roughly transcribed from a video someone sent me)

Above all, we want guys who want play so bad they could die. We want guys who can run, who are athletic, who have "recoverability", but who maybe lacks bulk and strength. Maybe doesn't know what his body is about yet. We want guys who are going to take advantage of that redshirt year.

TACKLES: Tall, length, maybe no basic strength, but he can run, and we're willing to let him add that power. 6'5 1/2" is usually the max we want.

GUARDS & CENTERS: height and length doesn't mean ****. Marginal height, but plays with great leverage. "LOW WAISTED" (long torso short legs), with leverage under our bodies. Healthier by not being heavy. RARE for them to play early. Nobody over 6'3". My center must be football brilliant.

Very intelligent on the inside. The "test score limit would SCARE YOU." We make calls from the inside out (centers call guards, guards tell tackles what to do, tackles tell tight ends what to do. Thus, there's a chain of decreasing responsibility)

No introverts for any position (communication. Low power-distance culture guys between each other and the coach).

All of them must have the ability to step laterally while keeping their shoulders square to the line of scrimmage (or risk allowing penetration).

Injury history is very important. Don't want guys who miss games, because of the importance of continuity. 4 of the 5 usually get offseason surgery. NO EGO. INSIDE 3 must be brilliant. Huge amount of time is spent on these guys making decisions. Guards must be able to decipher intricate details from the opponent's stance.

But, there is a minimum threshold of strength that a guy must have. Cannot have guys who get driven back.

Now, FSU played the youngest line in football last year, and that was effective thanks to Rick Trickett, the best offensive line coach in college football. Our offensive line scheme is not designed for young kids, in fact, it's the opposite. It's an absolute testament to Trickett's coaching job that FSU's line did what they did last year. In a normal recruiting year in which FSU will not count on freshmen to play the offensive line, we are looking for smart athletes. Not big hulking slobs, but athletes. If you'd balk at a recruit playing third base or left field for your company softball team, he's not the type we want. And he needs to be smart; possessing both football intelligence and book smarts. He must understand not only his assignment, but also the defense's alignment and tendencies. That player must be able to correctly give and receive adjustments at the line. Also important is his

commitment to the system. Even if his block makes little sense individually, he must be willing to do it because he understands it is but one piece in the puzzle that is the running game. Strength bulk do not matter in a recruit, because we feel we can add that, and when we do, we want that kid to retain his athleticism (quickness and agility).

Here is a Venn Diagram to illustrate the point.

Error! Bookmark not defined.

