

# Rufio's Playbook: Zone Blocking in the Running Game

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It is no secret that the Cleveland Browns were mostly terrible on offense last year. When I went back and watched the tape of the Cleveland Browns' 2009-2010 offense, I found a lot to talk about.

I decided to start by breaking down what I'd call our staple plays--the plays we ran frequently and with a good degree of success. Because there is so much to talk about with respect to our specific offense, I will need to talk some about football plays/strategy in general. I'll try to keep it simple, while still explaining as much as I can about what is/was going on on the field.

In conjunction with Ryan Kelsey's nice piece on our depth at Running Back, I thought I'd start with the running game.

And with that, we dive in to the zone runs.

Announcers and TV personalities often do a lot of *talking* about the zone runs, but rarely ever *say* much. This leads to a lot of misconception, mystification, and flat out confusion about the zone runs and what the team is trying to accomplish.

Furthermore, there is a lot of talk about "the" zone run or "the" zone-blocking system. There are no such things. There are two zone runs that pretty much every NFL team uses as a part of their own offensive system but they are endlessly tweaked.

Here, I will explain the outside zone run and a little of what teams are trying to do when they run the outside zone. In the next post, I will explain the inside zone run and the Browns' "tweaks".

## What are the zone runs?

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The "zone runs" or "zone blocking" are the run blocking concepts made famous recently by the Denver Broncos under Mike Shanahan. The zone runs have been around at least since the glory days of Nebraska's running game in the 1990s and I am sure long before that.

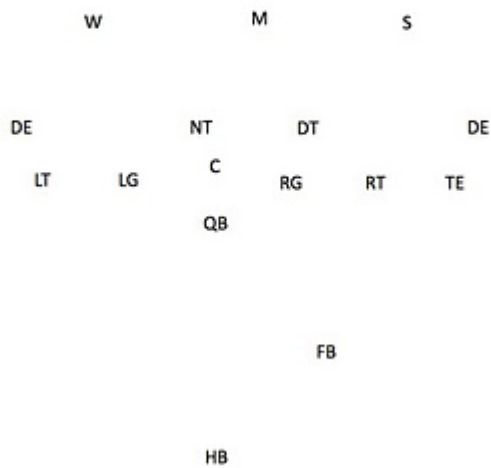
There are two basic zone runs; the inside zone and the outside zone. The easiest way to recognize either is to watch the offensive line's first step off the snap. When blocking for the zone runs, the entire line will take one lateral step to begin the play. This lateral (or even backward) step is called the "bucket step".

## Outside Zone

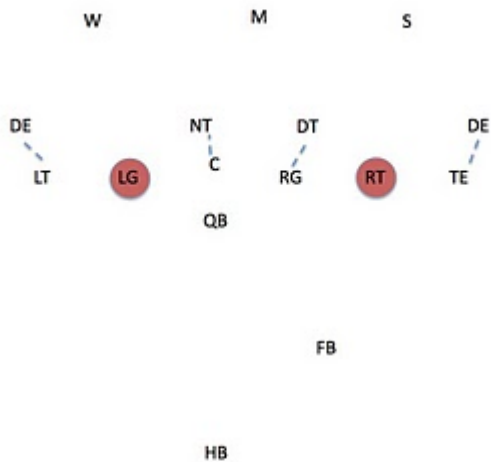
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This play is designed to go outside, around the TE and is also known as the "stretch" play. The idea is to get the blockers between the defenders and the sideline, and then to run around the blocked defenders.

Here, we'll be looking at outside zone being run from a 2 back, I-formation set with the defense in a 4-3 Over formation:

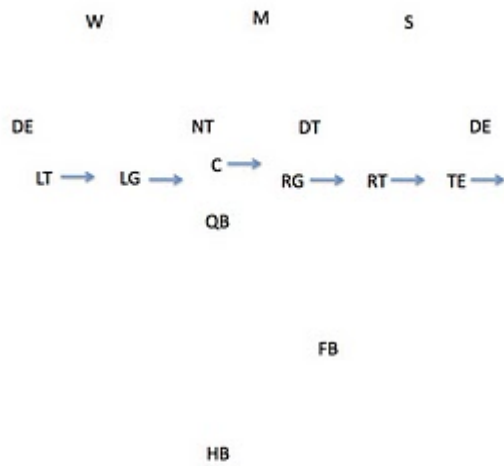


Before the snap, the line will begin to identify who they will block. Covered blockers can count on blocking the man in front of them. Uncovered blockers, highlighted here in red, will be the ones doing the zoning.

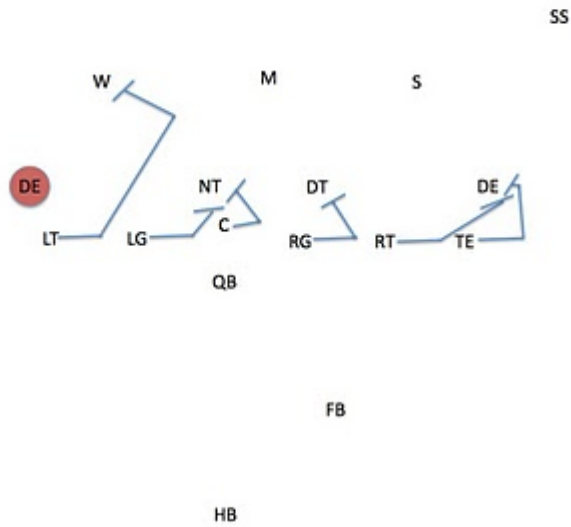


The uncovered blockers--the LG and the RT here--will be looking to try to overtake the lineman playside (to the called side of the run) of where they are. In this case, the LG will attempt to get between the NT and the right sideline, and the RT will attempt to get between the DE and the right sideline. They will have help from the C and the TE in doing this.

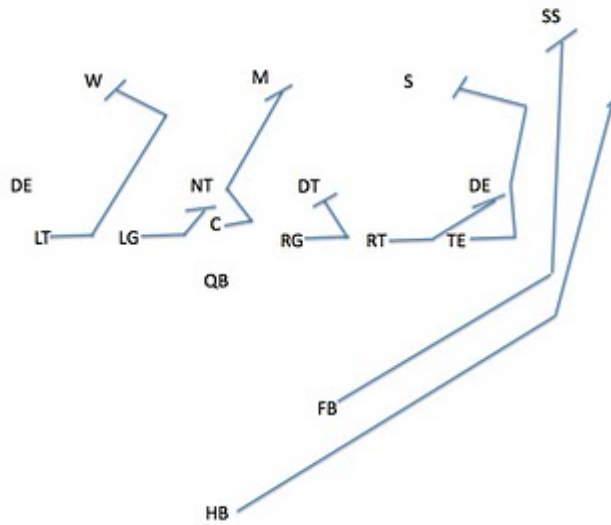
To begin the play, the offensive line, TE, and FB will take their "bucket step" to the right.



After the bucket step, you see the initial blocks below. The weakside DE is left unblocked, but we'll talk about this later. You can see the C and TE begin a double team with the LG and RT. This helps slow the defenders down because as you can see, the LG and RT have a ways to go to get to their blocks.



After the uncovered blockers (LG and RT) overtake their blocks, the C and TE leak up to the second level. The FB looks for the force defender (the defender looking to set the edge and force the RB back to the inside). The FB should attack this player's playside shoulder and seal that defender inside. If all goes as planned, the blockers have sealed *everyone* to the inside and the ballcarrier simply runs around the defense.



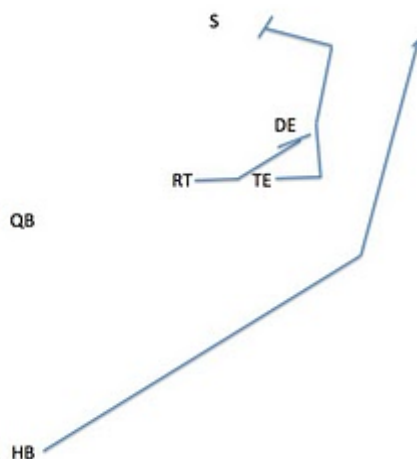
## "One Cut" Running

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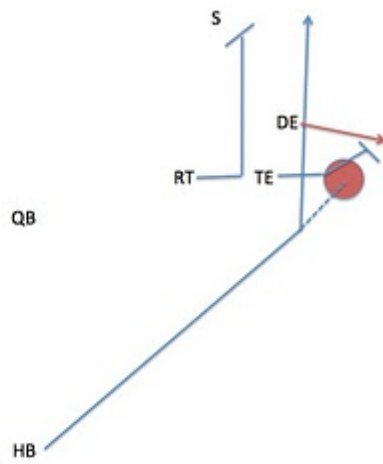
In the diagram above, the linebackers stay at home (in their gaps) and don't move much horizontally to run away from the OL. In fact, there is a lot of movement by the OL and none at all by the defense. In real life, this doesn't happen.

So what happens when RT can't make it all the way over to overtake the DE from the TE? Or if one of the defenders goes flying toward the playside sideline? Let's take a look at this, using the right side of the play.

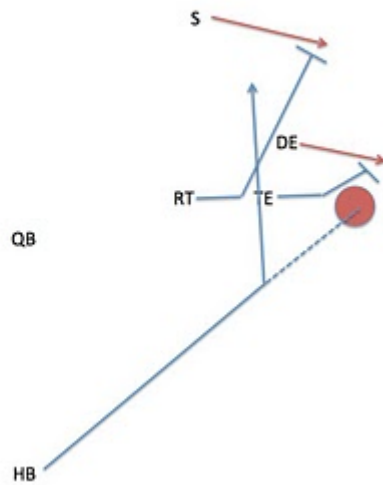
If everyone can get to their blocks, the play looks like this:



Now if the DE sees the TE trying to "reach" him, and flies to the sideline, the TE kicks him out. The RT, seeing that he can't get to the DE, releases up to get the linebacker in place of the TE. On the way to the aiming point, the RB notices this and "cuts back" behind the TE's block:

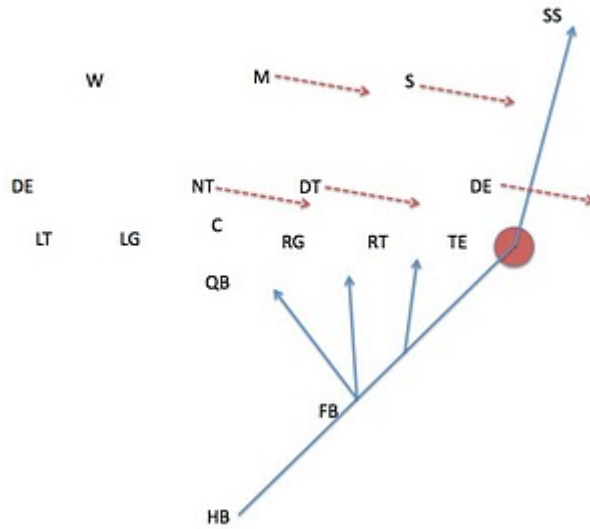


Ok, but what if the Sam linebacker flies out to the sideline too? That's no problem for the offense, as the RT kicks him out as well, and the RB cuts back behind both players.



In fact, the RB is free to choose his own gap in the stretch play. This puts the onus on every defender do his job perfectly to stop the outside zone play--and the running back to have the vision to find the hole. If one defender

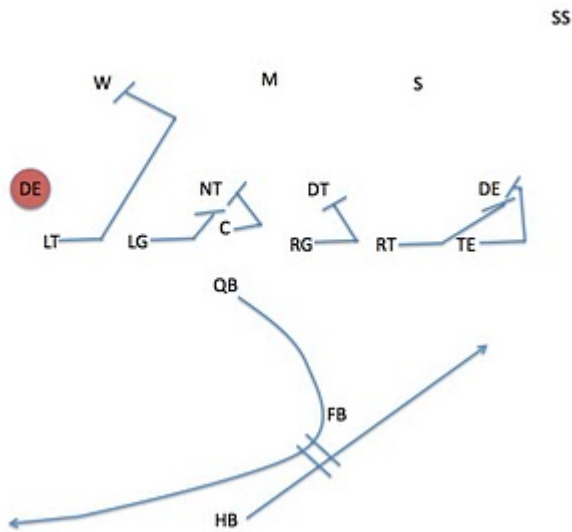
screws up, the running back has a cutback lane, and the play is going for solid yardage.



## One Unblocked

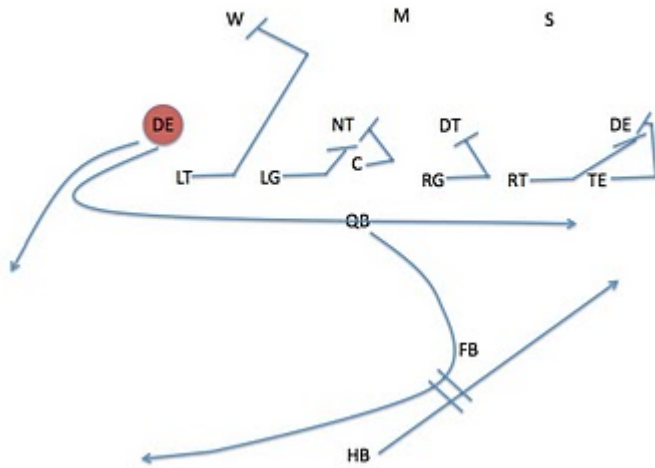
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You'll notice above that I only drew cutback lanes on the playside of the line. You remember that DE the offense left unblocked earlier? Mostly because of him, the running back can't cut back too far. In an attempt to keep this unblocked DE at home, the offense will send the QB on a naked bootleg fake away from the play:



The reason this DE is unblocked is because the DE is the one who is likely responsible for setting the edge on the weakside of the play and turning any runner back into the middle of the field. If the QB can make him stay wide or hesitate for just a moment, the cutback lanes are clear.

If the DE is free to pursue down the line and the play is slow to develop, the DE can squeeze the RB's choices of cutback lanes or even tackle him in the backfield:



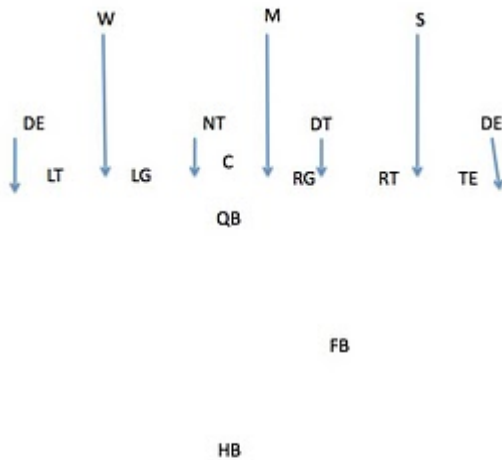
This is one of the reasons a fairly mobile QB like Jay Cutler was a great fit in Mike Shannahan's offense. If your QB is actually a threat to run, you can have him keep the ball a few times and *really* keep that DE from closing down on the RB.

What do teams want to accomplish by using the outside zone running play?

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### 1. Move the gaps.

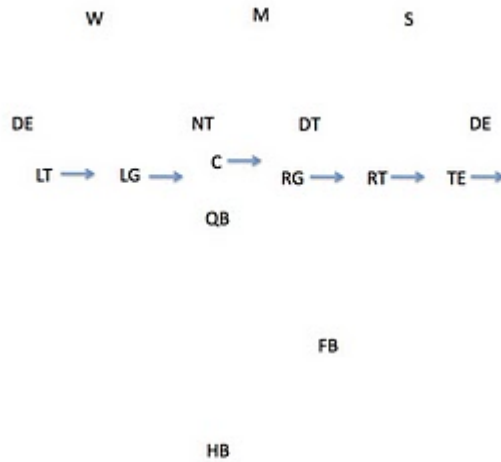
For the purposes of this post, we'll assume the defense is playing a 1-gapping, base 4-3 defense. This defense will look to stop the run by assigning one gap between blockers to each defender. The defender is responsible for not allowing the ballcarrier through his assigned gap.



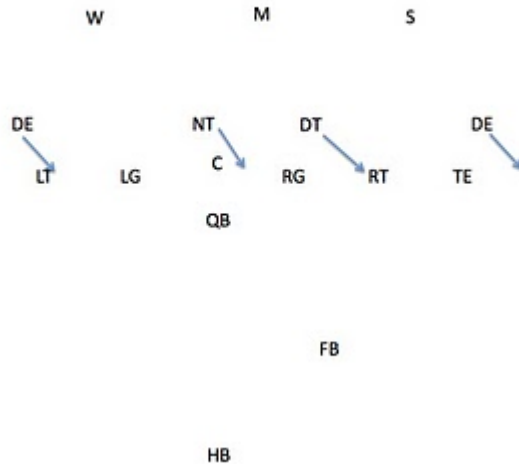
As you can see above, all the gaps are covered.

In normal, straight-ahead running plays, the gaps don't really move much horizontally. The defenders know where they will be headed to stop any play through their gap. With the zone plays, the offense moves the gap, making defenders react to this movement instead of attacking, and often putting them fractions of a second behind the offense.

Gaps move:



Defense must react:



## 2. Allow running backs to play instinctively and quickly.

Unlike other runs, there is no predetermined gap through which the ballcarrier is looking to run in the stretch play. The running back has an "aiming point" where he will begin running, but is coached to survey the line quickly, then plant his playside foot and make one cut vertically up the field through the gap of his choice as

described above. He simply runs to daylight; wherever a defender is not fulfilling his gap responsibility, the running back makes him pay.

### **3. Take advantage of a defense's under- or over-aggressiveness.**

As explained above, if a defense plays too aggressively or not aggressively enough, they lose. The defense must play with balance and controlled aggression to win.

### **3. Outrun, out-athlete, and out-maneuver the DL laterally.**

Often, teams with lighter, weaker, but more agile blockers are the ones who run the zone runs with a lot of success. This certainly used to be the case in Denver. Teams who run the zone runs often can afford to have lighter, more agile players because they are looking to double-team the bigger defenders and spreading the defense horizontally to create running lanes. This is as opposed to "normal" runs, where the offensive line is trying to push the defensive line vertically off the ball.

#### **Cleveland Browns OS Zone Runs**

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We didn't have as much success with the Outside Zone play as we did with the Inside Zone (breakdown coming soon), but we did still use the Outside Zone play a decent amount. I'll leave you with screen shots of one instance where we did have success with the play, running it from the wildcat. This is the normal zone run, only without the handoff:





Note here that everyone else is still in their stance--the LB is even still making a call--and Alex Mack is already out of his stance and getting in position to block Casey Hampton.



You'll notice we do block the DE here. Because Pittsburgh is in a 3-4, the OLB would be the unblocked man. He is over RB Jerome Harrison in the slot to the right. Because we don't have a normal QB we have an extra blocker, and Harrison can block his man.





pittsburgh aggressively flows to the left to stop the play, Cribbs cuts back.



Note John St. Clair whiffing on his block here.



Harrison still working hard on the backside of the play...



...and he manages to slow down/block two defenders (near the ref).



Brady Quinn can't quite block the CB, and Cribbs gets tripped up after a nice gain.