

OFFENSIVE FOOTBALL
THE QUARTERBACK RUN - PITCH OPTION

by

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CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL AND TACTICAL BACKGROUND OF THE QUARTERBACK RUN-PITCH OPTION

The freedom, the ability, the privilege to choose has been, throughout time, reason enough for men to take up arms. Many instances have been recorded where men have dissented against dictated policy, rather than accept as 'Gospel' the dictation. By the same token, many offensive football coaches desire the freedom, ability and the privilege to choose where to attack the opponent rather than permitting the defense to dictate and limit the attack according to alignment.

The tactic of placing a defensive player in a position where his reaction results in an offensive re-reaction is termed an option. It is this position which will be analyzed in this report. More specifically, the run-pitch option of the quarterback which is intended to devastate the flank perimeter of the defense.

"Force the defense to move," Sun Tzu said, "The highest form of generalship is to balk the enemy's plans; . . . the worst policy of all is to besiege walled cities." To attack a man in his foxhole, or to attack the defense where it is lined up, for here is where the defense is most efficient. Therefore, the offense must force the defense to move. Since the offense can start ahead of the defense, it has the advantage of surprise and speed. To meet this, the defenders must move to the ball, and in doing so, vulnerable spaces are created in the defense.¹

¹W. Woodrow Hayes, Hot Line to Victory. (Columbus: The Ohio State University, 1969), p. 7.

"Surprise lies in the psychological sphere and depends on a calculation, far more difficult than in the physical sphere, of the manifold conditions, varying in each case, which are likely to affect the will of the opponent."²

Although strategy may aim more at exploiting movement than exploiting surprise, or conversely, the two elements react on each other. Movement generates surprise, and surprise gives impetus to movement. For a movement, which is accelerated or changes its direction, inevitably carries with it a degree of surprise, even though it be unconcealed; while surprise smoothes the path of movement by hindering the enemy's counter-measures and counter-movements.³

The ability to deceive the defense is another facet of the option play. "All warfare is based on deception. A skilled general must be master of the complementary arts of simulation and dissimulation; while creating shapes to confuse and delude the enemy he conceals his true dispositions and ultimate intent. When capable he feigns incapacity; when near he makes it appear that he is far away; when far away, that he is near. Moving as intangibly as a ghost in the starlight, he is obscure."⁴

The run-pitch option of American football is executed by a lateral pass from the ballcarrier. This lateral pass can be traced to

²B. H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, (e.g. 2nd ed.; Rev. Ed.), New York: Frederick A. Prager, Inc., 1967, p. 337.

³Ibid.

⁴Sun Tzu, The Art of War, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 41.

the European cousin of American football, rugby. In rugby the forward pass is illegal at all times. If the ball carrier cannot evade a tackler, he will usually try to pass the ball laterally or backward.

So the run-pitch option of American football was born. It was born on the oversized rugby fields of Europe, but like so many other things, grew and prospered in America.

In 1937, B. W. "Bernie" Bierman, Head Football Coach at the University of Minnesota, stated, "The lateral pass, in my opinion, has merely started its development. I say this despite the fact that this thrilling play, which evolved rapidly as a standard offensive weapon after the rule was passed which prohibited running with a fumble that touched the ground, went into sort of a breathing spell in 1936."⁵

"The principle upon which the lateral pass is designed is entirely sound, and the future will find it continuing as an even more brilliant and sound part of the game than it is today."⁶

Francis A. Schmidt, former head coach at Ohio State University and a leading exponent of razzle-dazzle football added, "It involves all of the football ABC's such as good blocking, good ball handling and alertness. The mere fact that some men, who might be blocking, lurk now and then in the background, does not mean exactly that they are 'lateral crazy'. They may be decoys. Looking at it another way, there's no sense in going through a brick wall if there is an open gate to march through."⁷

⁵B. W. Bierman, Winning Football, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1937), p. 70.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., p. 71.

One must wonder if Coach Bierman really foresaw the destiny of the lateral option when he spoke of its future, or if Coach Schmidt really know how wide that "open gate" actually was. For we need only to consider the great success of Don Farout's Missouri teams and Bud Wilkinson's Oklahoma teams of the 1950's; Homer Rice's Houston teams of the middle 1960's; Darrell Royal's Texas teams or Chuck Fairbank's Oklahoma teams of the late 1960's and early 1970's, to realize the impact that the quarterback run-pitch option has had upon football.

PURPOSE

It is the purpose of this report to analyze these option plays and to point out the effect they have had on the game as we know it today.

METHOD OF STUDY

Three methods were employed in the preparation of this report. The use of the personal libraries of a number of coaches was used to gather background and technical data. Secondly, personal interviews with coaches whose experiences span the developmental period in question were also conducted to go along with the previously gathered material. The third method of study was the use of actual game films which were of extreme value, breathing into the many diagrams live action. These three methods have provided a wide range of information which is mandatory to a report of this nature.

LIMITATION OF STUDY

Although many high school and professional football teams make use of various quarterback options, my studies are limited to those

used in collegiate football. In many instances the strategy, philosophy, and techniques can, and in fact, do apply to other levels of the game, however, college football has served as the laboratory for this report; therein lies the limitation.

OFFENSIVE FOOTBALL -- THE QUARTERBACK OPTION

The options, which will be analyzed in this report, have several common denominators: an option on the end man on the line of scrimmage, an action by a running back into the line of scrimmage to freeze a defensive lineman or linebacker, and a lead blocker whose job it is to eliminate the contain support. One or all of these criteria is contained in each of these quarterback option plays.

CHAPTER 2

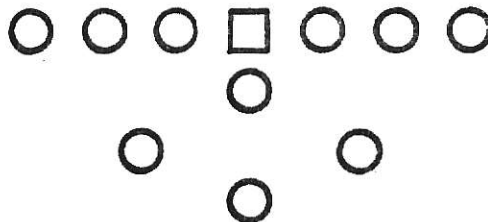
THE BELLY OPTION

The belly option is an integral segment of a devastating offensive football weapon, the belly series. This particular series played an important role in college football's development. The belly series came into prominence at the beginning of the 1950's. Bobby Dodd's Georgia Tech teams of 1951 and 1952 had striking success with it. "It adds to the T-formation the faking and deception of the spinner and buck-lateral series from the single wing, with the quarterback working the old shell game in putting the ball into the belly of the fullback, "riding" with him toward the line, and then leaving the ball there or withdrawing it to slip it to a halfback or to keep it for a run or pass."⁸

The belly option was, at the time of its inception, the hardest offensive play to stop. It took a coordinated defense to stymie this maneuver. Likewise, a perfectly timed offense was a necessity if it was to be a success.

The T-Formation (Diagram 1) was the basic alignment for the belly option. However, the play can be executed from other similar formations.

Diagram 1. T-Formation

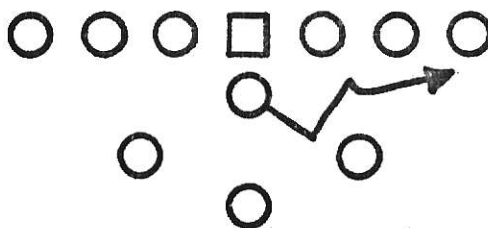


⁸Jordan Oliver, Offensive Football, (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1958), p. iii.

The T alignment places the fullback four to four and a half yards off the line of scrimmage directly behind the center, and the halfbacks three and a half to four yards off the line of scrimmage with their outside foot in a line directly behind the offensive tackle.

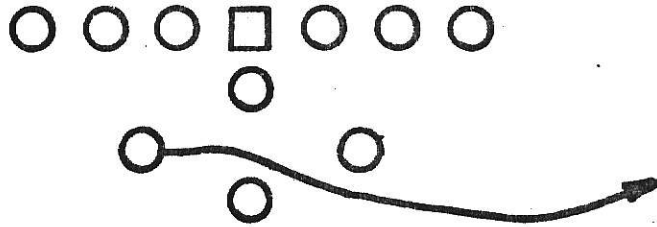
There were no wide receivers in this formation; thus all seven offensive linemen were lined up within five yards of the ball. The space between them varying from one to three feet.

Diagram 2. The Action of the Belly Option Quarterback



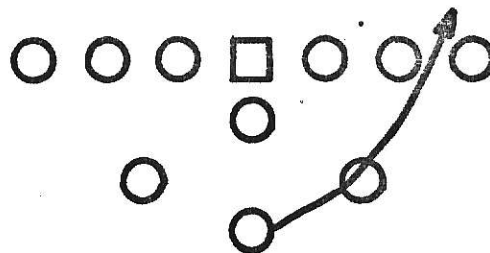
The quarterback begins movement with a forty-five degree turn to the play side. He continues on this plane for two more steps. At this point he will meet with the fullback. The quarterback should be in an erect position and must reach at arms length to put the ball in the belly of the fullback. This makes the fake more distinct, freezing the linebacker. He then pushes off with the back foot and his fourth step is a long slide with his left foot toward the line of scrimmage. The fourth step is coupled with a deliberate arm and body ride with the fullback. At this point the quarterback is looking over the back of the diving fullback at his final target, the defensive end. He then pulls the ball out of the fullback's belly, and steps at a 45° angle to the line of scrimmage behind the fullback with the right foot. He continues on this path, toward the defensive end.

Diagram 3. The Action of the Belly Option Left Halfback



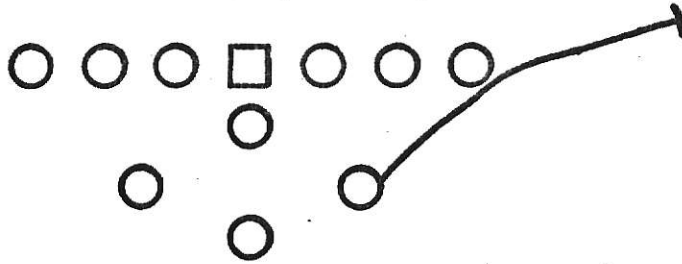
The first step of the left halfback is a lead step with the right foot, followed by a cross-over step with a push-off by the left foot. These two steps will put him in the proper relationship with the quarterback. He should attempt to maintain a cushion of four to five yards from the quarterback. It is also important for him to keep his eyes on the quarterback at all times since he could get the pitch at any time.

Diagram 4. The Action of the Belly Option Fullback



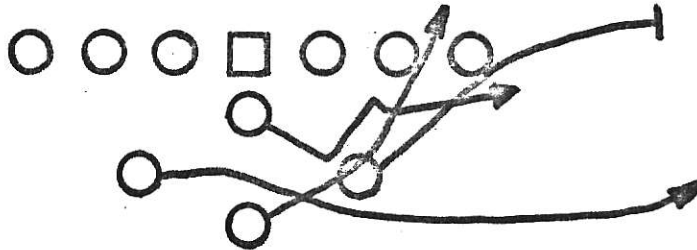
The fullback begins his route with a lead step directly to his right, not gaining any ground. His second step is also parallel to the line of scrimmage. His third step heads him for the hole between the right tackle and the right end. He must not explode with a burst of speed until he feels the ball removed from his belly. If this fake is carried out properly, the fullback will probably be tackled by the defensive end or linebacker. If the fullback does not get tackled he will continue into the secondary and block the first man in his path.

Diagram 5. The Action of the Belly Option Right Halfback



The right halfback will release on an inside-out path toward the defensive end. This action gives the defensive end the appearance of a run inside of his position. The right halfback then veers to the defensive end's outside hip, avoiding any collision, and continues to block the contain support.

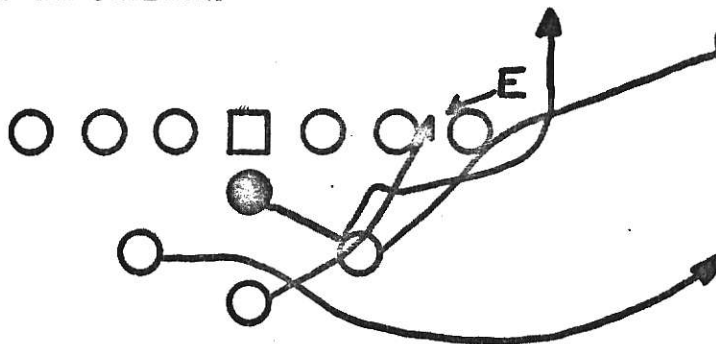
Diagram 6. Composite Action of the Belly Option Backfield



At this point the reaction of the defensive end will determine whether the quarterback will keep the ball and run, or lateral the ball to the left halfback and block.

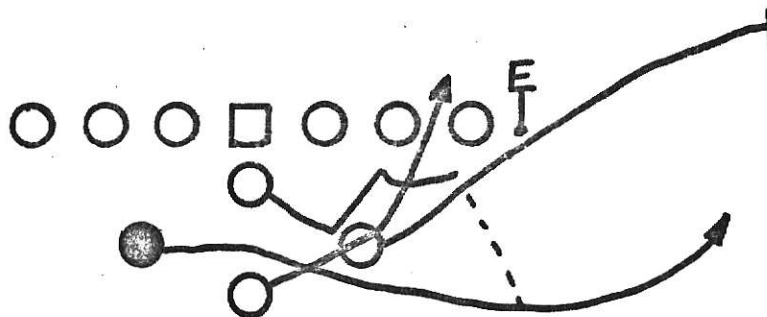
If the defensive end has reacted to the inside-out block of the right halfback, he will have attempted to tackle the fullback. The quarterback will then keep the ball and run downfield immediately.

Diagram 7. Reaction of the Belly Option to a Defensive End that Attacks the Fullback



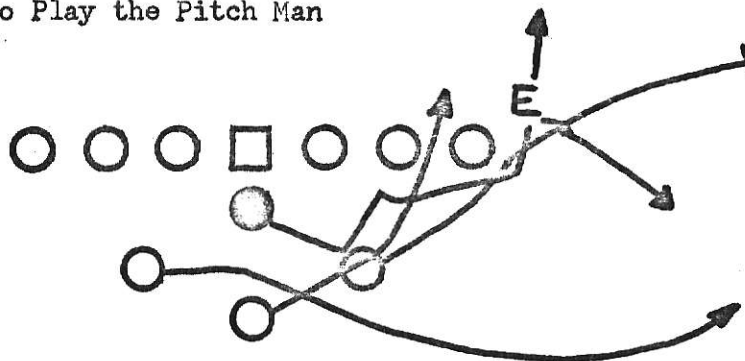
If the defensive end is waiting on the line of scrimmage for the quarterback, the quarterback will run directly at him and at the last moment lateral to the left halfback.

Diagram 8. Reaction of the Belly Option to a Defensive End that Waits for the Quarterback



If the defensive end has gone wide the quarterback will keep the ball and run inside.

Diagram 9. Reaction of the Belly Option to a Defensive End that Widens to Play the Pitch Man



CHAPTER 3

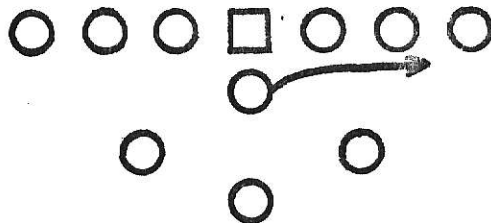
THE SPLIT-T OPTION

"This play is more closely identified with the split-T type of attack than any other single play in the offense. All standard "T" teams use the hand-offs and jump passes, but not many of the standard Shaughnessy, or Chicago Bear type teams (of the 50's) use the quarterback as a ball carrier...it is important that the quarterback has the ability to carry the ball."⁹

The split-T offense was the brain-child of Don Farout, formerly the head coach at the University of Missouri. It was this offense that propelled Coach Bud Wilkinson into college football immortality at the University of Oklahoma. The Sooners went undefeated in 54 games.

The split-T option is run from the T-Formation as shown in Diagram 1. The placement of the defensive end in the option position takes advantage of him regardless of how he plays. The assignments of all men are constant, whether the quarterback keeps or laterals, except for the fullback's block on the defensive end.

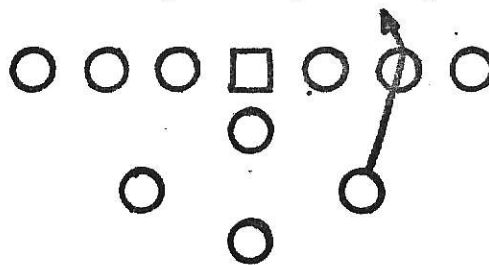
Diagram 10. The Action of the Split-T Option Quarterback



⁹Charles Wilkinson, Oklahoma Split T Football, (New York: Prentice Hall Inc., 1952), p. 153.

The quarterback receives the snap from the center and pushes off with his left foot, turning his body so that he is running directly at the defensive end, shoulders perpendicular to the line of scrimmage. As the right halfback is diving toward the line of scrimmage, the quarterback will meet him; however, it is not the responsibility of the quarterback to execute a fake. The quarterback continues down the line of scrimmage, never taking his eyes off the defensive end, thus reading his reactions. If the defensive end attacks the quarterback, the quarterback will pitch the ball to his left halfback (Diagram 18). If the defensive end widens on the line of scrimmage or comes across, gaining depth toward the left halfback, the quarterback will keep the ball and run inside of him (Diagram 17).

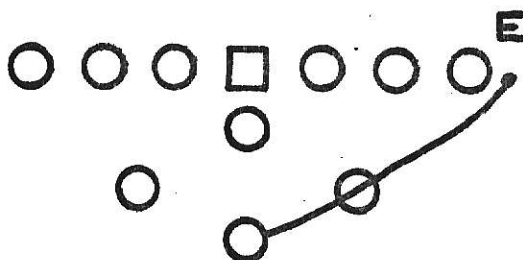
Diagram 11. The Action of the Split-T Option Right Halfback



The single most important technique involved in the split-T option is the faking of the right halfback. This fake is so important that it may, in fact, dictate the success or failure of the play. A good fake at this point will seal off the inside of the defense by forcing the linebacker or the defensive tackle to take the right halfback. If the defense does not react to the dive fake, the right halfback will then block the first man who comes across his path.

The right halfback sprints forward as if executing the dive play. With his arms across his chest, he holds his inside elbow high and his right hand in position to receive the ball from the quarterback, forming a pocket. The position of his arms is important since they are used in faking the hand-off by lowering the inside elbow and bending over as he would do if he had the ball. This puts him in a position to be tackled or to block, as the situation dictates.

Diagram 12. The Action of the Split-T Option Fullback



The fullback will run for and through a spot two yards in front of the defensive end. By the time he arrives at this spot, the defensive end will have done one of three things. If the defensive end remains in his original position, the fullback will run directly over him, not blocking him in or out (Diagram 13). If the defensive end has moved inside the spot, the fullback will pass him up and block the defensive halfback (Diagram 14). If the defensive end has moved outside the spot, the fullback will brush him and block the halfback (Diagram 15).

Diagram 13. The Action of the Split-T Option Fullback When the Defensive End Remains on his Spot

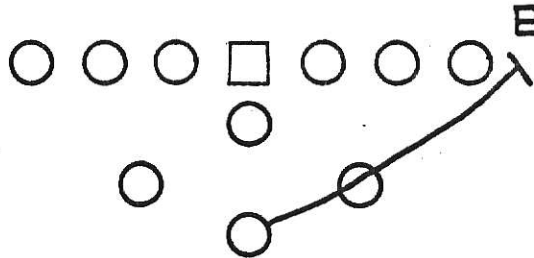


Diagram 14. When the Defensive End Moves Inside his Spot

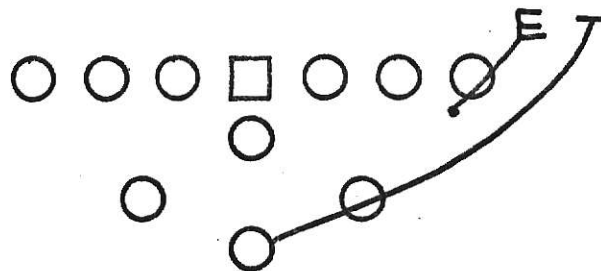
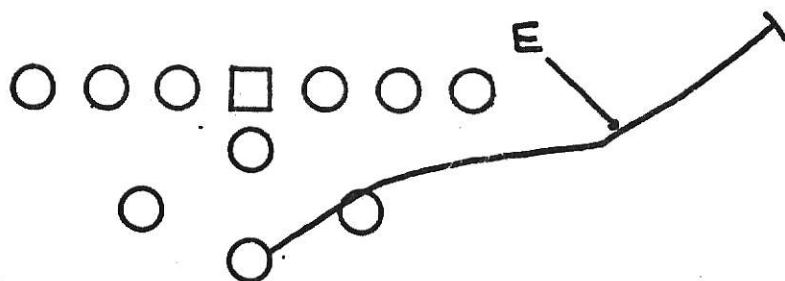
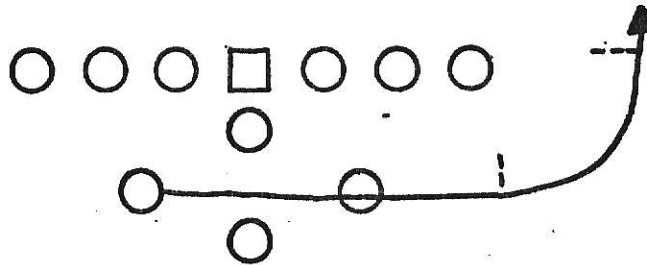


Diagram 15. Action of the Split-T Option Fullback When the Defensive End Moves Outside his Spot



The fullback in the split-T option acts as the lead blocker, and it is often his block that enables this play to gain big yardage.

Diagram 16. The Action of the Split-T Option Left Halfback



The left halfback will push off with his left foot and run parallel to the line of scrimmage at a depth of four and one half yards. This exact depth is extremely important, because at this depth the defensive end must play either the quarterback or the left halfback, not both. If the defensive end attacks the quarterback, the left halfback should expect the pitch at a point just outside the offensive tackle (Diagram 16-A). If the defensive end widens to cover the left halfback, the quarterback will turn upfield; in this case the left halfback will plant his right foot and turn upfield maintaining the four and one half yard cushion between him and the quarterback. He should expect the lateral as the defensive halfback closes in on the quarterback from the outside (Diagram 16-B).

Diagram 17. Composite Action of the Split-T Option Backfield

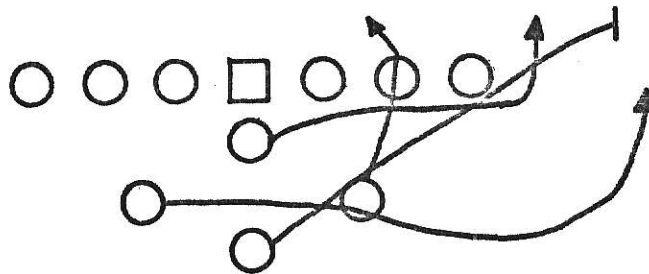


Diagram 18. The Split-T Option When the Defensive End Attacks the Quarterback

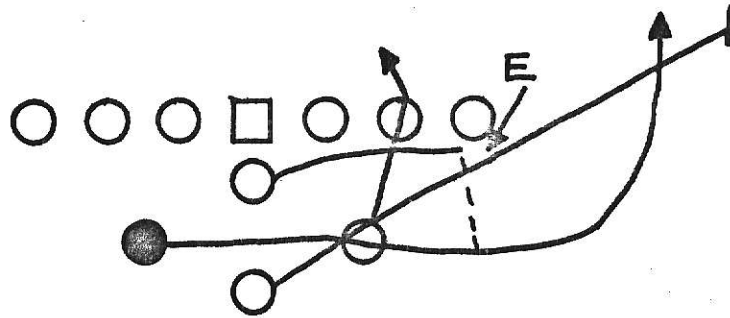
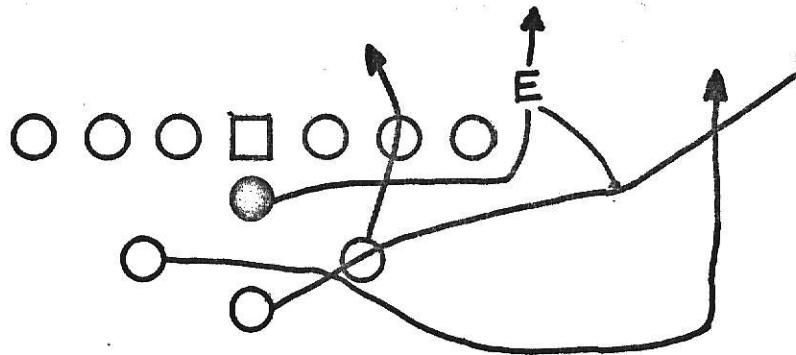


Diagram 19. The Split-T Option When the Defensive End Widens to Play the Left Halfback



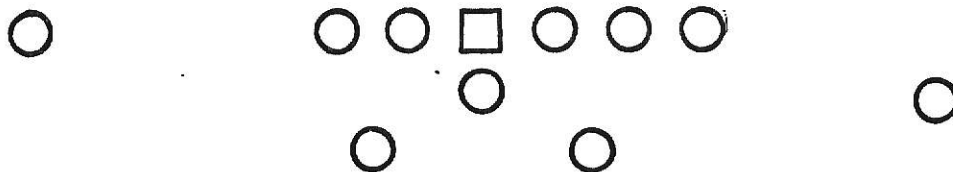
CHAPTER 4

THE PRO-SPLIT TRIPLE OPTION

Bill Yoeman, head coach at the University of Houston, is given credit for the development of the triple option. This option is probably more difficult to execute than the options that have been discussed previously. The reason for this is the fact that the quarterback now has to choose between three options instead of two. Whereas, in the belly and split-T options the quarterback knew he would not give to the diveback, this is not known beforehand in the triple option. The three options of the quarterback are: give to the diveback, keep and run inside the defensive end, or pitch to the left halfback.

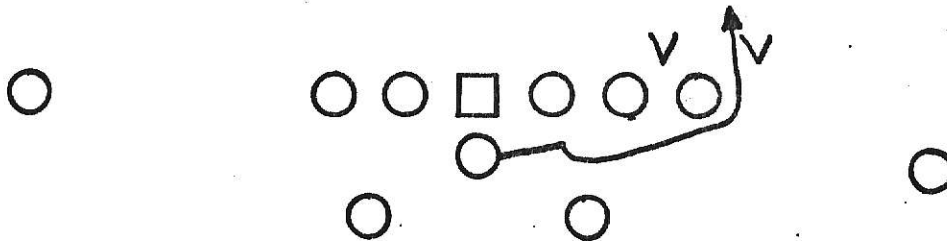
The formation first used to run the triple option was from the pro-split formation (Diagram 20).

Diagram 20. The Pro-Split Formation



The pro-split formation provides an excellent alignment for throwing the forward pass, with two wide receivers and both running backs in positions to release into the pass patterns quickly.

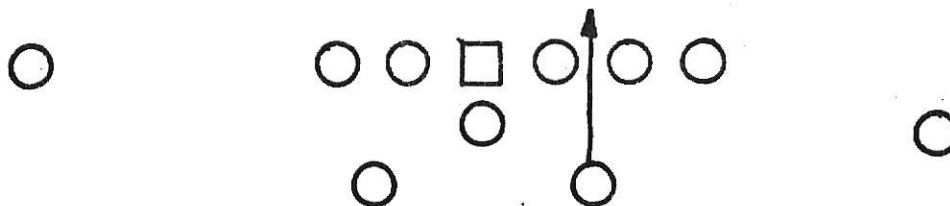
Diagram 21. The Action of the Pro-Split Triple Option Quarterback



The quarterback takes the ball from the center and pushing off with his left foot, starts down the line of scrimmage, his shoulders perpendicular to the line. The quarterback's first responsibility is to look immediately at the first man outside of the offensive tackle.

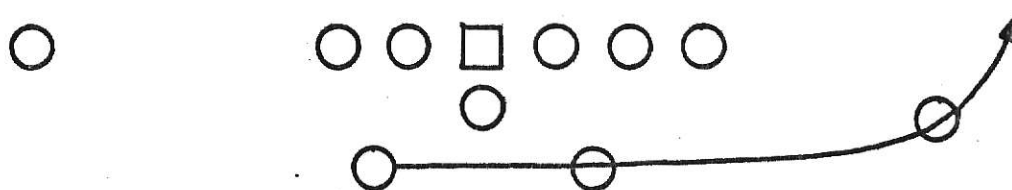
At a point behind the outside leg of the offensive guard he will meet the diveback. By this time the quarterback has read the man outside of the offensive tackle, the first key. If he has not moved or has moved to the outside, the quarterback will give the ball to the diveback. The hand-off point must be at the exact point every time. If the first key moves toward the diveback, the quarterback keeps a firm grip on the ball, removes it from the stomach of the diveback, steps around the diveback and heads directly for the next widest man, the second key. If the second key is attacking the quarterback, he pitches the ball to the left halfback. If the second key widens to play the left halfback, the quarterback fakes the pitch, plants his right foot and turns upfield crossing the line of scrimmage at a ninety degree angle.

Diagram 22. The Action of the Pro-Split Triple Option Diveback



The diveback, doing as his name implies, dives at the outside foot of the offensive guard. He must have his inside elbow up high and his outside arm ready to stop the ball. This forms a good pocket in which the quarterback can place the ball. Experience will tell the diveback whether he is getting the ball or whether the quarterback will pull it back out. When he feels the inside hand of the quarterback pull out, he will grasp the ball and continue upfield.

Diagram 23. The Action of the Pro-Split Triple Option Left Halfback



The left halfback is the third option in the triple option play. His responsibility is to sprint along a path parallel to the quarterback's, four and one half yards deep and one yard in front. He may receive the pitch at any time after the quarterback's mesh with the diveback. If the quarterback decides to keep and run upfield, the left halfback will maintain his four and one half yard cushion with the

quarterback, for he may receive the lateral beyond the line of scrimmage.

Diagram 24. Composite Action of the Pro-Split Triple Option

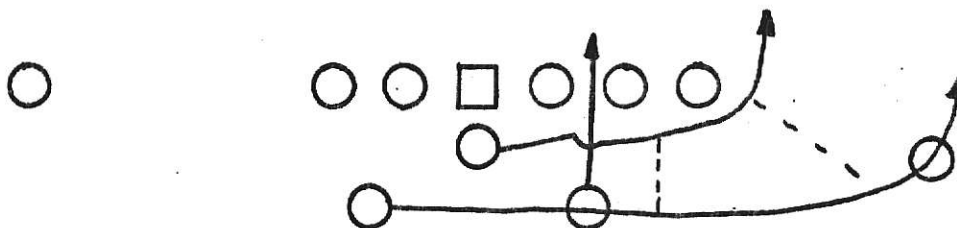


Diagram 25 shows the action of the pro-split triple option when the first key does not close on the diveback.

Diagram 25.

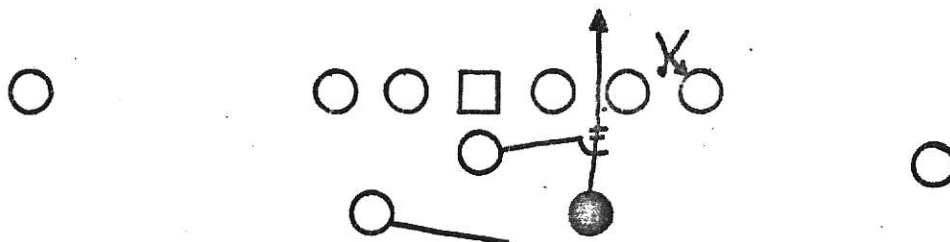
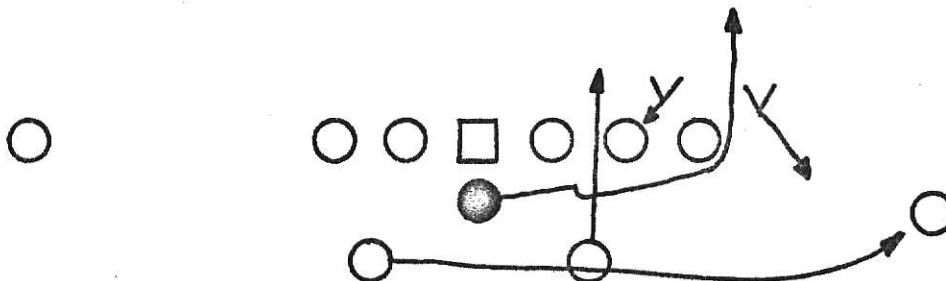


Diagram 26 shows the action of the pro-split triple option when the first key does attack the quarterback and the second key plays the left halfback.

Diagram 26.

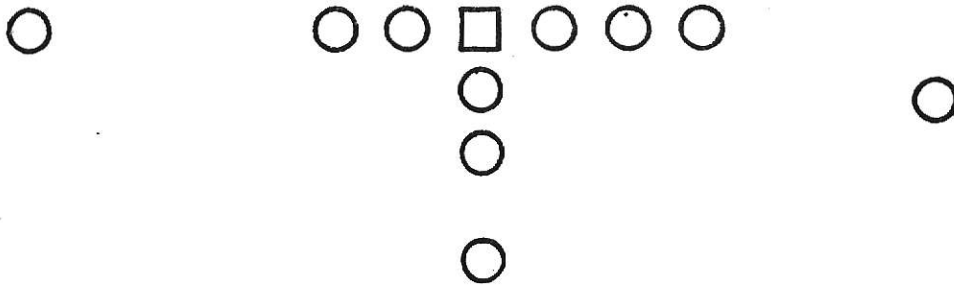


CHAPTER 5

THE PRO-I FORMATION - TRIPLE OPTION

The triple option offense has also been executed from the pro-I formation (Diagram 28).

Diagram 28. Pro-I Formation



The pro-I formation adds several advantages to an already potent offensive play. In the first place it aligns the diveback closer to the line of scrimmage, enabling him to hit the hole sooner. This forces the first key to commit himself immediately. Secondly, the diveback will be the only back that needs to master the technique of meshing with the quarterback. Thirdly, it places the best running back in a central position, where he can take the pitch, going right or left. In the split-back alignment both backs had to have the ability to run wide and the power to run through the heart of the defense.

One disadvantage to this formation is that the backs cannot release into the pass patterns as fast. This is due to the fact that they are aligned in the center of the formation and not on one side or the other.