



## Which Offensive System is Right for Your Players?

In 2002 I received an email from another youth coach, congratulating me on my web site and asking about a particular offensive system.

The coach had already chosen his offense, and mentioned that he intended to run about thirty-five offensive plays. That sentence sort of brought me to a screeching halt.

Now, this coach hadn't asked for my advice, but I felt compelled to mention that, in my opinion, that was an awful lofty number of plays for a youth football team. I drew a comparison between the playbook at Tomales High, where I coach now, and his youth team, pointing out that even at the varsity high school level, we feature an offensive system with only eight running and six passing plays.

I think that this coach fell into one of the more common traps set for the unwary youth football coach. Unlike Little League baseball, or youth basketball, a football offense is an incredibly complex system of interconnected parts. No other sport in America features eleven separate players in so many disparate positions, each with its own responsibilities and techniques. No other sport relies so heavily upon utter teamwork. In basketball, Michael Jordan was able to dominate the NBA and win multiple championships for the Chicago Bulls virtually on his own (not to detract from the skills and hard work of his teammates). In soccer, only a few players can traverse the entire field at any one time, so while the sport includes eleven players, the actual play rarely involves more than three from any one side. Other sports like lacrosse and hockey are quite similar.

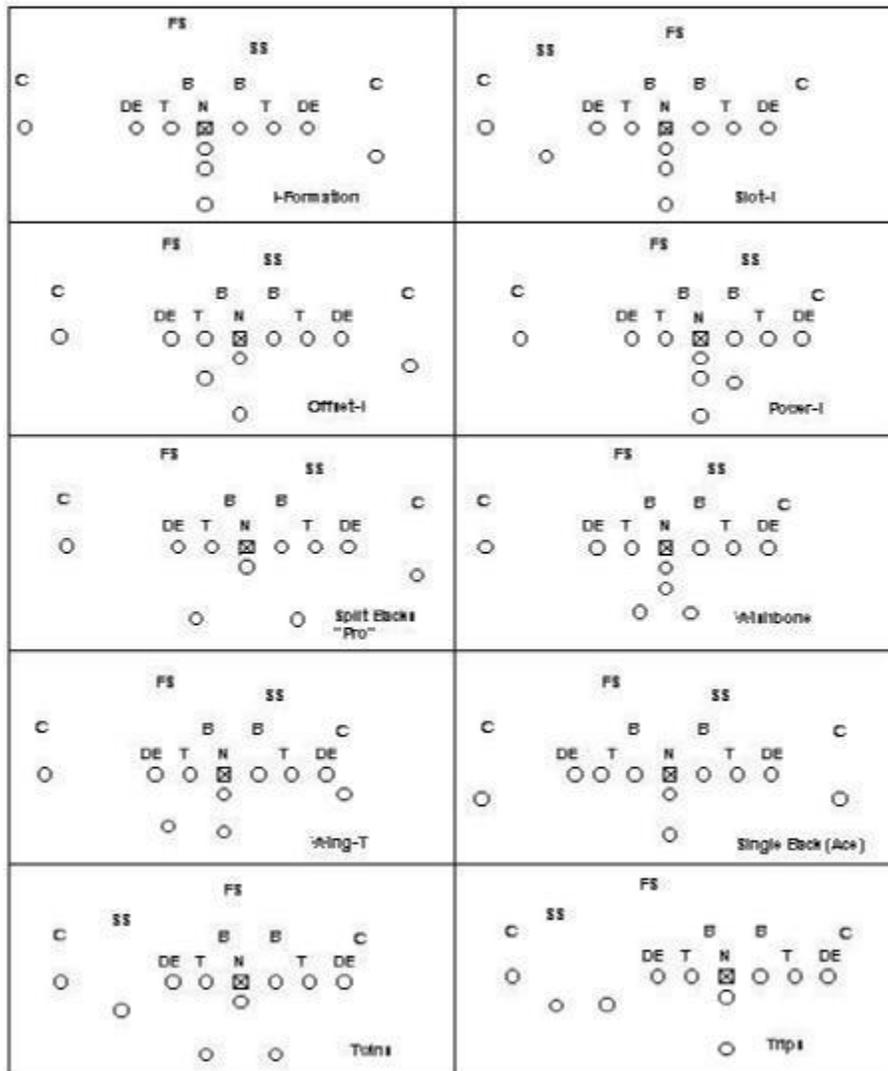
Football, however, is so much more complex it almost defies description. As long as you place the minimum seven offensive linemen on the line of scrimmage, what you do with the remaining five is entirely up to you.

Here is a brief list of just a few offensive formations that are reasonably well known:

- 1) I-Formation
- 2) Slot-I
- 3) Offset-I
- 4) Power-I
- 5) Split Backs ("Pro")

- 6) Wishbone
- 7) Wing-T
- 8) Single back
- 9) Twins
- 10) Trips

Figure 1 shows these offensive formations.



**Figure 1: Typical offensive formations.**

Note that these are offensive *formations*. An offensive system is something completely different. A system may contain several of these formations, and use them at different times to try to force the defense into an unsound alignment. For example, the famous "Run and Shoot" offensive system features the single back, trips, and twins formations, among others.

This may sound obvious, but many rookie coaches don't seem to understand the advantages of using one formation over another. Even worse are the ones that add formations without understanding how to integrate them into the existing system.

Frequently, coaches use the name of their primary formation to describe the offensive system they run. "I run the wishbone." In reality, they may run the wishbone, power-I, and offset-I formations within a wishbone system.

This is inaccurate, but commonplace. Describing a system takes more effort.

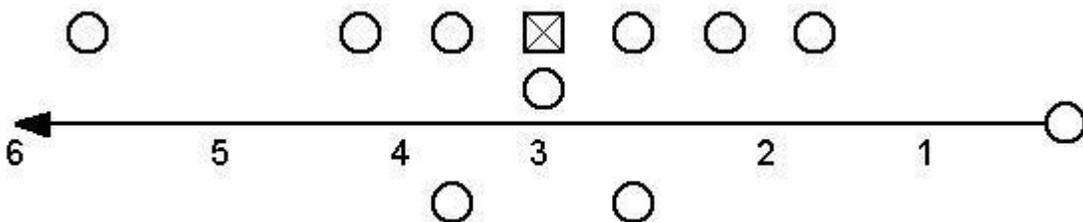
Generally speaking, a system is a series of plays, blocking schemes, and the formations they can be run from. These are usually the integral offensive weapons designed to hit multiple points of attack. A properly designed offensive playbook will feature a system that can be run from multiple formations with very few changes to the base blocking schemes of each individual play.

For example, if you selected the I-formation as your primary formation, you'd have to be aware that the primary offensive play of that set is the blast, which is a quick hitting play attacking either the "B" or "C" gaps with the fullback lead blocking for the tailback. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense to add the single back formation to your offensive system then, because there will be no lead blocker for the ball carrier.

True, you can use motion to move a flanker into position as a lead blocker, but motion changes your offensive formation. It still has potential for creating defensive confusion, but you should remember that whatever formation you end in is the true formation you are running from.

Jack Reed, author of *Coaching Youth Football* has the following description of motion in his book:

"When a man goes in motion, he changes the nature and strength of the offensive formation with every step he takes. Let's say he starts at right flanker and goes in motion toward the ball.

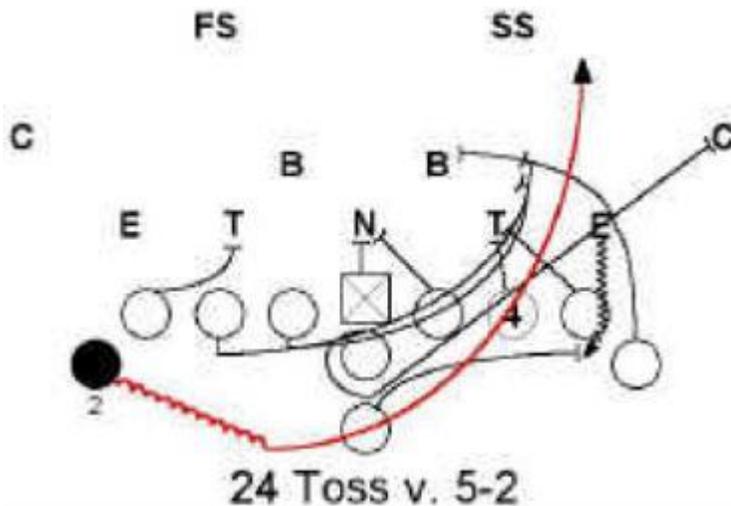


"When he gets to point #1, your formation has changed from flanker right to wing right; 2, upback right; 3, wishbone; 4, upback left; 5, slot left; 6 twins left. Each of those formations represents a different threat to the defense." (p.171)

It makes a lot more sense to me to add the power-I and offset-I formations to an I-formation playbook than it makes to add a formation like the split backs, and yet that is precisely the mistake that many new coaches make. Those two formations are the most common in youth football, probably because they are so widely used in televised football games like the NFL and NCAA.

A good offensive football system also includes straightforward and easily retained blocking rules for offensive linemen. These rules must remain standard if the system is to be effective from multiple formations.

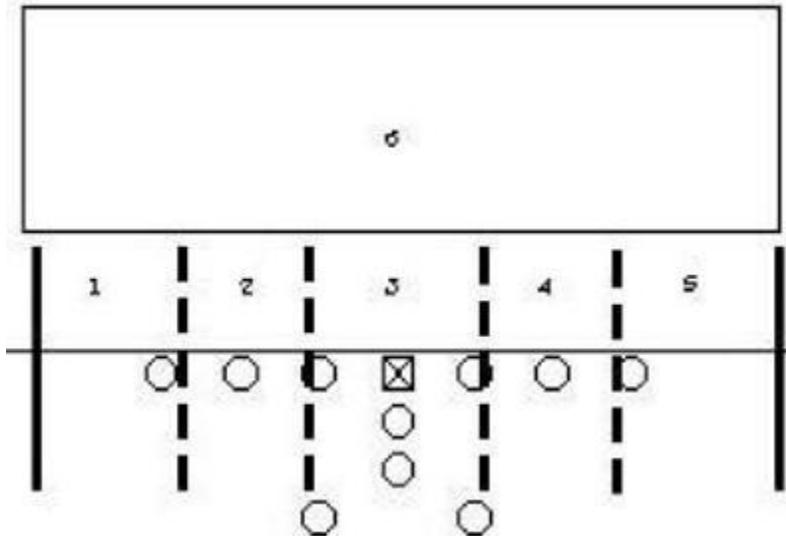
For example, figure 2 shows the play "Toss right" from Coach Jerry Vallotton's book *The Toss- A New Offensive Attack for High Scoring Football*. The play is drawn against a fairly common youth defense, the odd fronted '5-2'. The formation used is the tight Double Wing.



**Figure 2: Toss right from Double Wing.**

Now take a look figure 3, the same play from the Spread formation. Note that even with both ends split wide, we can run the play without any more than the most superficial changes to our blocking schemes.





**Figure 4: Six defensive zones to attack.**

Zones one and five can be attacked by sweeps, reverses, pitchouts, and other wide hitting plays. Generally you need to have a speed advantage to hit these areas. The option also does an excellent job of attacking this area if the quarterback pitches.

Zones two and four are the off-tackle holes. Blasts, isolations, and other plays with at least one lead blocker are the best ways to attack these areas. The option can strike here if the quarterback keeps the ball.

Zone three is the hardest area to attack. Generally, youth offensive linemen in these areas do not have mechanical advantages over their counterparts, and blocking here becomes a one-on-one test of strength. This is fine if you have the biggest and strongest guys in the league, but if you don't have the size and strength, you need to do some careful planning before you hit this area. Dives, wedges, and the quarterback handoff to the fullback on the triple option all attack these areas, some better than others.

Zone six is downfield. You attack this area with passes, whether straight drop backs from your quarterback, roll outs, play action, and even halfback passes.

Please note that these defensive zones are not passing zones, with the exception of zone number six, which is nine different zones in and of itself. What I mean is that you must be able to attack at least five specific areas of the defense in order to find the weaknesses in it, and to respond to adjustments they make.

For example, let's say you're running the wishbone. On your first play from scrimmage, you call a blast off-tackle that gains you eight yards because the defensive end penetrated too deep.

If you're me, you'd call the play again. This time, your lead blocker seals the outside linebacker out of the play completely, and your runner breaks a tackle, so you get fifteen yards. Heck, call it until they stop it!

After the third time you call the play and get more than six yards, the opposing coach calls for a time out and comes on the field to talk to his defense.

When play resumes, you realize that the defense has changed slightly. Now their outside linebackers are stationed in the "C" gaps. This time your off-tackle play only gets two yards.

But wait! Since the defense responded to your success by moving their personnel to the outside, they've left the middle of the field vulnerable. For your next play you could probably call a dive with a reasonable chance of success. Even better would be a play that fakes the off-tackle the defense has learned to expect but actually hits another point.

To hit these five areas requires five offensive plays. Note that I said five and not thirty-five. Even the great Vince Lombardi only had seventeen offensive plays in his playbook. In 1999, my Senior Division (11-12 year olds) Champion Kodiak Lions had four running plays and one passing play.

Something as simple as flipping your offensive formation and running the same plays to each side can allow you to gain just enough complexity to keep the defense off balance without confusion in your own troops.

I feel that the greatest offenses for youth football are those that combine the following four traits:

- 1) **Misdirection**- Youth defenses don't usually have the discipline required to stay home and defend traps, reverses, and other sleight-of-hand tricks. Invariably a good faking offense will work quite well against youth defenses.
- 2) **Power**- Every so often the trickery fails. The defense you're facing turns out to be well coached, and misdirection just doesn't work well. At times like these, having the ability to flat out run over the defenders is useful. Power also helps set up misdirection, as in our example above using the wishbone. When the defenders start flying to stop your power plays, it's time to fake that play and hit another hole.
- 3) **Simplicity**- Offensive systems like the "multiple offense" are structured to use different formations and motion in an attempt to confuse the defense. I hate this idea! Remember, you can't control the confusion level of the opposing team. Only their coach can control how confused they are. If he has done his homework, scouted your offense, and properly coached his players then you are more likely to confuse your own team with a complex system.
- 4) **Mechanical Advantages**- One assumption I always make prior to the start of the season is that my players will be weaker and less athletic than my opponents'. I don't do this to put my kids down, I do it to put myself in the proper mindset. I absolutely never ask a lineman to make a solo block on a

defender without boosting the odds in his favor. I do this by assigning him a partner to double team with, giving him a down blocking angle, or allowing him to trap or kick out block.

Look at this mathematically. I always assume that my players will rate a "3" for athleticism. If I ask a "3" to block a "5" by himself, we're going to lose that battle just about every time. However, if I assign a second "3" player to help out with a double team, now our total blocking power is "6" versus the defender's "5". We have a much better chance to get that block, now.

Another thing that I think is important, but not crucial is that your offense should be different, or "contrarian", to quote Jack Reed again. You can gain a significant advantage for your team by lining them up in a formation that your opposite number has never seen before. If he's never seen it, then he probably hasn't got a clue how to defense it.

Keeping all of this information in mind and using it as criteria, the top five offensive systems in youth football are, in my opinion:

- 1) Double Wing
- 2) Single Wing
- 3) Wing-T
- 4) Wishbone
- 5) Notre Dame "T"

All of these systems allow misdirection, feature power running, are simple enough for youth football (or can be easily simplified), and give your offensive linemen mechanical advantages against the defense. All of these systems also have a track record of proven success.

Selecting an offense for your youth football team is one of the most important responsibilities of a coach. It can make or break your season, and be the difference between champion and chump. Whichever offense you finally select remains entirely up to you, but I strongly encourage you to research it well and make sure that it has the attributes I've listed above before you install it.



