

## **SHOTGUN WIDE OPEN SPREAD OFFENSE**

**West Virginia University**

My topic tonight is "Running Out of the Spread Offense" which I have been doing for 15 years. I heard Urban Meyer talk about the things he has done at Utah. Everyone has some version of the spread offense running game in his package.

I started running this offense when I was the head coach at Glenville State College, a Division II school in West Virginia. I want to give you some of the background as to why I went to this type of offense. The offense is a shotgun wide-open spread offense and a zone-read scheme.

I stayed there seven years and then went to Tulane University to have some fun down there. When I started running this offense, I had a six-foot quarterback. We started running the zone play out of the shotgun. I was not smart enough to think about the read option from the play. My quarterback was smarter than I was. This kid scored about 1600 on his SAT test.

We practiced the zone play all practice and the defensive end kept making the play on the ballcarrier. After practice, my quarterback told me he would take care of the defensive end tomorrow. I asked him what he planned on doing. He told me he would "read" him and pull the ball if he came down the line after the ballcarrier. That was in 1990, and we stumble onto the read on the zone play by accident.

We had some good years at Tulane when Sean King was the quarterback there. When we went to Clemson, we developed another diminution. We had a quarterback in our offense that ran the ball like a tailback. That added a diminution because of the faking and the ability to run a quarterback trap and other companion plays.

The biggest coaching point I can give you about offensive football is to find something you can hang your hat on. You have to be flexible but simple and fit your offensive schemes to the personnel. I know you cannot recruit in high school, but if you have a big, strong athlete, build the offense around him.

If we can recruit a great athlete that can run and throw, we emphasize those parts of our offense. Our offense is flexible enough to take the things he does well and build the offense around those skills. Your offense has to be simple enough for everyone to understand.

If you have eleven dumb players and can only run one formation, make sure you can execute that formation. It is not what the players know; it is what they can execute. If you cannot execute the zone-read plays, do not run them.

The more people run a particular scheme the faster the defense catches up with what the offense does. Defenses are finding ways to get more defenders into the box. We still run the ball, but we found it goes much better if you can be versatile with your formations.

We hang our hat on the zone scheme. Bill Trickett tells his offensive line we will run the zone play each game as a major part of our offense regardless of what the defense does. If the defense gives us what we want, the play gains 10 or 15 yards. If the defense does a good job, we still get something positive. Our players believe in the zone play. If the numbers are in your favor, the four- or five-yard runs become 10- or 15-yard runs.

I am going to get into my clinic talk and I go to you. If you have a cell phone, turn it off or put it in your pocket. I do not like the phone ringing because

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interrupts me. Besides, having the cell phone in your pocket on vibrate is fun sometimes.

The offense has certain advantages. They know where they are going and when they are going. That means they know the play and the snap count. The offense can establish the tempo of a football game. In our no-huddle offense, we have three tempos that we use. Our regular tempo is a quick tempo as compared to other teams. We have a tempo called indy. The indy tempo is fast but we sometimes change the play we have called. The last tempo is get tempo. The get tempo is a tempo that says, "As soon as the umpire spots the ball, get the hell out of the way. We are running the ball." We practice all three tempos and they are part of the game plan. If the offense knew the defensive alignments before the snap, they could call a play that would go 100 percent of the time. When you control the tempo of the game, that is the situation you get into. We snap the ball so fast that the defense we saw on the last down is the one we see on the upcoming down. If we do not huddle, the defense cannot huddle. I can call the right play for the defense, but we may not execute it or we might be whipped.

Another reason we change tempos is to prevent the defense from stemming from on defense to another. When they align, it is hard from them to communicate a change before we snap the ball. What you see is what you get. On occasion, we have to wait for the defense to align because we are ready to go before they line up. In that case, the quarterback is not sure what the defense is.

Even if I were a huddle team, I would still use tempo to make it hard on the defense. On one down, I would sprint to the line out of the huddle and snap it quickly. On the next down, I would use the regular tempo and try to draw the defense off sides. I would keep them off balance and make them stem early or not at all. When I talk to our defensive staff, they tell me the change in tempo screws them up as much as anything.

I prefer to have fewer schemes and more formations. It is easy to teach formations. I would rather take one run and run it from a multitude of

formations than add another run. The first thing the defensive coordinator does on Sunday night as he puts the game plan together is list the formations the opponent runs. He lists all the formations, all plays run from each formation, and how he will line up against them.

We use the no huddle because we can control the tempo. The no huddle eliminates disguises and stem by the defensive line. If you ever watch the classic games of the past on ESPN, the teams that played in those games ran one front, one formation, and only one pass coverage the entire game. They ran power and isolation and had one play-action pass. In present times, nobody does anything like that. Every one is in multiple fronts and formations. They run all kinds of coverages and blitzes. By going to a no-huddle scheme, we eliminate many those types of things.

Running the no-huddle scheme gives the coaches time to change a play. The quarterback does not make an audible and change a play. Although a quarterback is a junior or senior in our program, he uses the checks we call. He knows what are good plays and bad plays, but the coaches make the audible. I trust our coaches more than I trust the quarterback. Some quarterbacks can handle the audible, but most of the quarterbacks I coach watch cartoons on Saturday mornings. They are not watching film of the opponent. Therefore, I trust my judgement and the decisions of my coaches in the press box before those of the quarterbacks.

If you are a no-huddle team, you have more practice repetitions. In a five-minute period, most teams run seven or eight plays. We run 13 plays in a five-minute period. We go fast and get more repetitions for our time on the practice field.

The last reason is important in running the no-huddle offense. It makes conditioning a factor earlier in the game. The most compelling factor in determining the outcome of a game is conditioning. That holds true for professional, college, or high school football. You run your team during pre-season and two-a-days, but after the games start there is

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that doubt of running them too much. Coaches talk all the time about making conditioning a factor in the fourth quarter. It may be too late by the time we get to the fourth quarter. We have to make conditioning a factor in the first quarter. Our team prides themselves on running the no-huddle offense.

In West Virginia, we have about 50 signs with our slogan posted all over the complex. It is a simple message: spot the ball. That is not just an offensive slogan; it applies to defense and special teams. When the referee spots the ball and gets out of the way, we are ready to play. We take a lot of pride in it and conditioning is a big part of it.

We are a shotgun team and there are advantages of being in the gun. Being in the shotgun gives the quarterback time when a defender comes free on a missed block. It gives the quarterback vision. If you have a short quarterback and put him under the center, he cannot see peripherally the way he can in the shotgun. If we back him away from the center five yards, he sees the outside so much better.

When a quarterback throws an interception, the reason is because he did not see the defender. That is his excuse when he comes back to the sideline after the pick. More times than not, the quarterback is right about the play. I do not expect him to say I saw the defender and threw the ball to him.

I had a 6'5", 245-pound quarterback that could throw the ball a mile. The first game he played, he threw three interceptions. I noticed when he looked to the sideline for the signal he squinted all the time. I sent him to the eye doctor after the game for an examination. The eye doctor called me after the examination and told me he should not be driving a car. The doctor fitted him with contacts and the next game he was 35 out of 45 in the passing game. Vision is important in the mechanics of the quarterback.

What I want to talk about before I get into the zone play is the game plan. When you decide what you are going to emphasize in your offensive scheme, you must have the answers to all the

defensive adjustment the opponents will throw at you. We put together what we refer to as an answer sheet. The thing we look at between series, halftime, and during TV time-outs is the answer sheet. It has the adjustments we go to if the defense plays a certain defense. If a team is playing a Bear defense, the answer sheet tells us the adjustments we need to make. We have a series of plays that provide the answers to the questions.

We establish the answer sheet at the end of spring practice or at the end of two-a-day practice. We sit down as a coaching staff and decide what we should do against different defensive looks. The answer sheet does not change during the season. You must have more than one answer for each situation. The answer sheet helps our coach in the press box when things go fast and we need answers.

An example from the sheet is a change in cadence. We are in the shotgun and the center has control of the snap. The defense watches film of the center snap. If they find the center is in rhythm from the time he looks to the time he snaps, we must have an answer for that problem. To keep the defense from timing up the shotgun snap, the center has to change up his rhythm to keep the defense onside.

We have to do the same thing with the quarterback. He signals the center when he is ready, and the center snaps the ball when he is ready. If you have 15,000 fans in the stands, you can say "Go." If you have 60,000, it makes a difference with communication. The quarterback has an indicator to let the center know he is ready. At times, the quarterback uses a leg lift, a clap, or a finger signal as the indicator. We give false signals to keep the defense confused.

On the answer sheet, there are solutions for coverages, fronts, and stunts. All our coaches understand what how to use the sheet and what to look for. On the main page of the answer sheet are the down and distance situations. It lists calls for third and long yardage, third and short yardage, and medium yardage, and every different situation you could possibly have.

There is a special section for a great player. If you have a great athlete, you want the ball in his hands. We list ways to get the ball to the star and beat special defenses designed for him.

One of the biggest advantages of going to a no-huddle offense is the NCAA rules that govern it. There are no NCAA rules that govern the number of players you can have on the field. If you huddle, you can only have eleven players in that huddle. If you break the huddle with 12 players, that is a five-yard penalty. If you are a no-huddle scheme, you can have the whole team on the field before the snap of the ball.

That reminds me of a story. In my early years of coaching, we were struggling with finances. I had a big booster that wanted to donate \$10,000 to the football program. He had a nephew playing in our program. This boy was the worst football player I had ever seen. The booster wanted to know if he could see his nephew on the field. I told him he would be on the field for about half the snaps in our game. I told the player I wanted him to check the numbers on the field. I told him to go out on the field, run to the number, stand for three or four seconds and run right back off the field. He was on the field for 35 plays and did not interrupt anything.

I want to get into the zone play. A rip formation for us is a four-wide receiver formation. There are three principles for running the football. The principles are numbers, angles, and grass. That sounds simple and it is. When we run to the numbers, it means the number of defenders to each side of the center. If there are four defenders to the right of the center and three to the left, I want to run to the left.

The grass principle relates to the wideside of the field. We want to run the play to the area that has the most room or most grass. The hash marks in the college game are 20 yards off the sideline.

The angles refer to the blocking angle we get from our offensive line. I would rather run at a 1 technique than a 3 technique. It is easier for a guard to block down on a 1 technique than it is to reach out for the 3 technique. If the numbers are the same,

we run at the 1 technique.

The reason we like the zone play is the fact that the 1 technique does not stay a 1 technique after the snap of the ball. Generally, the 1 technique is slanting somewhere else. The zone play allows us to zone block on moving linemen.

We run the ball to the grass. That means if your numbers and angles are the same, we run to the wideside of the field. If the defense is head up on their techniques and evenly defended on both sides of the ball, we run to the wideside of the field. That gives us more room to run the ball.

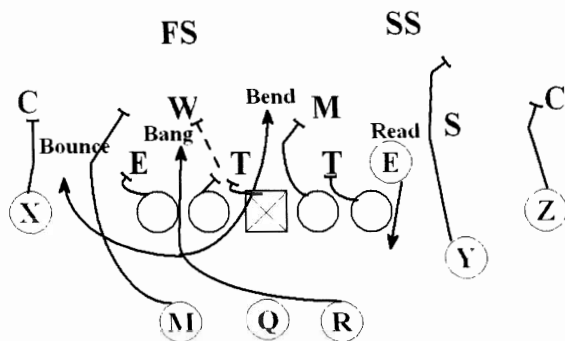
The most important thing is the numbers. We want to run and throw to the numbers of the defense. If the defense is in a cover zero, you should be throwing the football one hundred percent of the time. If there is one safety deep, you have numbers to run the ball.

It is still a numbers game because if we run the football, we have four defenders coming to the weakside. The defense shows you three defenders weak and brings the four players from outside the box to balance their scheme. Even with the safety aligned on the hash mark, we expect to get a safety rolled into the box from somewhere. When we design the offense, we must be able to block four defenders to the weakside.

The split between the guard and center depends on the alignment of the defense. If the center has a shade technique on him, the guard is almost toe-to-toe with the center. He has to be in a position to cut off the shade in the zone play.

In our formation scheme, we play with three wide receivers on the field most of the time, and sometimes with four. We name our receivers with letters. We have an X-, Y-, Z-, and H-receiver in our offense. The quarterback is in the shotgun set with the tailback to his right or left depending on the play or blocking scheme. The zone play in the first diagram comes from a "rip Max" formation with the outside zone play going to the left. In the formation, rip means right and Max gives a two backs in a split set in the backfield. We have Y- and Z-receivers in a

wide slot right, and the X-receiver in a split position left (Diagram #1). We tell our wide receivers to stalk the defensive backs unless they can run them off. It is easier to run off defensive backs than to stalk them. We tell our receivers to get in front of the defensive back and allow him to run over him slowly.



**Diagram #1. Outside zone**

We pick up the extra blocking on this play because the quarterback is reading the backside defensive end. If he chases the ball down the line of scrimmage, the quarterback keeps the ball and runs out the backside. That is one reason we run the shotgun.

To run the zone play, the offensive line needs to give a little ground to gain a little ground. We do not give as much ground as traditional zone teams because penetration kills you. We take a quick-set step, turn, and put the hat on the outside of the breastplate of the defender. We would like to knock the defender down the field, but many times it is not going to happen. If the offensive lineman is good enough to get in front of the defender and get run over slowly, that is good enough for us.

That theory is the same with pass blocking. In the pros, you might see an offensive lineman lock up a defensive man, but at the college level that does not happen often. We coach our players to get in front of the defensive lineman, get a good hold on him, and allow him to run over the blockers slowly. The coaching point is to make sure he comes over the top so the lineman can pull him down as he falls backward.

If the nose guard stays in a 1 technique, the offensive center gets help from the guard. The guard stays on the nose tackle until the center can come to take him over. When the center takes the

nose tackle over, the guard climbs up for the Will linebacker. The coaching point for the guard is not getting in a hurry to get to the linebacker. He stays on the 1 technique as long as he can. The faster the guard gets to the linebacker, the faster the linebacker steps up.

As long as the linebacker stays deep, the guard can stay on the 1 technique. The backside guard zone steps to the inside and climbs to the next level to cut off the Mike linebacker. The backside tackle zones steps and tries to reach the 3 technique. If there is movement in the 3 technique, the tackle cannot reach him. In that case, he pushes him down past the hole and the back runs on the backside cut back lane. That is a hard thing for a back to do initially.

The way the back runs this play is the whole key to the play. He is toe-to-toe with the tackle in his width. He opens, cross steps, and on the third step he is parallel with the quarterback. The biggest mistake a tailback can make in the zone play from the shotgun is to start immediately downhill after he receives the ball. When the back starts downhill, the Will linebacker starts downhill. When the linebacker starts downhill the guard cannot block him.

The aiming point for the back is the outside hole of the offensive tackle. After he receives the ball, he goes two more steps parallel before he starts to press his aiming point. I do not care how wide open the play looks; he must take those two additional steps. He reads both down defensive linemen to playside. He reads the end first and the tackle second. If we reach the defensive end, he bounces the ball outside.

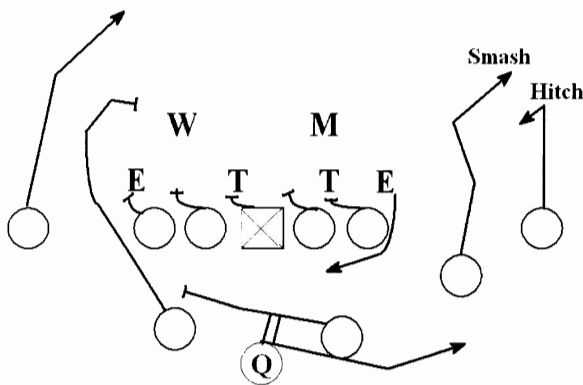
If the defensive end beats the reach block, the running back's cut depends on where the defensive tackle is. If the center has taken over the shade tackle, he cuts the ball into the hole. If a shade tackle slides down the line of scrimmage, the tailback bends the play behind him. The tailback has three paths to run the ball. He bounces it outside, bangs it into the crease, or bends it back. If the defensive front is an even front, we generally get a bounce or bang path for the tailback. If the front is an odd front, the play is usually a bang or bend path.

It has been our experience, that we will not get a bounce on an odd-front defense. The odd front has a nose tackle, a 5 technique, and a linebacker outside of him. You cannot get outside on that type of alignment.

If we have a split backfield where we have a second back in backfield, it is a Max set. He aligns toe-to-toe behind the offensive tackle. He reads the defensive end for his blocking key. If we reach the defensive end, he goes outside and blocks on the run force player.

The left tackle splits about two feet. The split of the right tackle may be tighter because he has to cut off the 3 technique to his side. If we get the backside tackle cut off, we have a play.

The companion play to the outside zone play is the naked bootleg by the quarterback (Diagram #2). The offensive line blocks the outside zone play and stay on the line of scrimmage. They cannot get downfield. The outside receiver runs a hitch at five yards. The inside receiver runs the smash route. The smash route is a short corner route. This is a good play because both plays look alike.

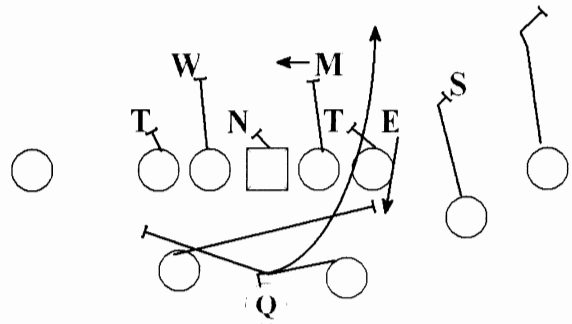


**Diagram #2. Naked bootleg**

The difference between the naked bootleg and the outside zone for the quarterback is the mesh. On the zone play, the quarterback does not put the ball into the pocket of the tailback and ride him. In the zone play, the quarterback does not ride the tailback and decide to pull the ball. By the time the tailback gets to the mesh area, the quarterback has decided what to do with the ball. It is not like a veer play. He gives the ball to the tailback or he keeps it around the end.

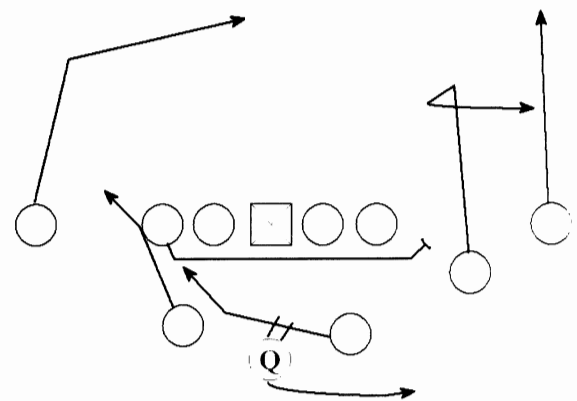
On the naked bootleg, the quarterback puts the ball into the pocket of the back and rides him. He pulls the ball after the ride and runs the pattern.

Once the backside defensive end begins to play the naked bootleg, we run the quarterback trap play from the same set (Diagram #3). The Max back comes across and kicks out on the defensive end. The quarterback rides the tailback, keeps the ball, and runs inside the Max's block. That is a nice adjustment to that series of plays. That is an answer for the defensive end playing the bootleg.



**Diagram #3. Quarterback trap**

When we run play-action pass, our linemen do a good job of keeping their pads down. They do not sit with a high hat to tip the defensive linemen. They go through their run blocking and assignments and try to stay down on their blocks. We tell them to go at the family jewels. We do not tell them to go at the knees. Defensive players will protect their knees, but if they are any men at all, they will protect the family jewels first and stay down.

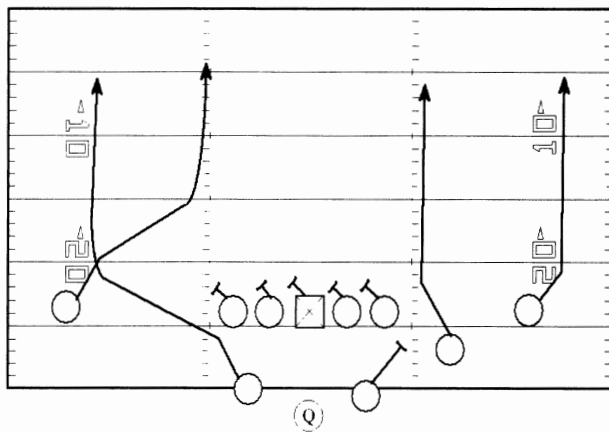


**Diagram #4. Play-action pass**

This is different from the naked because we pull the backside guard to protect the quarterback.

(Diagram #4). To the twin receiver side, we run a take-off for the outside receiver and a snag route by the inside receiver. The X-receiver comes across the middle on a deep cross. The quarterback rides the tailback and brings the ball to the outside.

On this pattern, we go further down the field with our routes because we have some protection on this pattern. The play we like to run takes some time (Diagram #5). Against a cover-3 secondary, we want to get four verticals down the field. We use the same type of action in the backfield. To the twin side, the outside receiver runs his vertical up the numbers of the field. The inside receiver comes into the hash marks to that side. To the backside, we bring the X-receiver into the hash marks to threaten the safety right away. The Max back comes out of the backfield and runs a wheel-up route down the numbers to the backside.



**Diagram #5. Four verticals**

The protection for these types of plays is gap protection. Gap protection gives you a zone type of blocking scheme for your protection. We block both backs one way and the line blocks the other. We do not have many man-blocking schemes. When you set up your blocking schemes, you have to consider your personnel.

Your blocking scheme depends on the ability of your offensive linemen. Remember you should always play to your strengths and never your weaknesses. If your linemen are athletic, you can do more man schemes. If your linemen are short, fat, dumpy players, use zone schemes.

I had one player play for me that was two inches from being a complete circle. He was 61 inches tall and 59 inches around. We tried to get him to be a complete circle. We bought him a bunch of cheeseburgers and French fries to help him make it.

I played defense at West Virginia University. When I first started coaching, I was a defensive coach. My first full-time coaching job was as a defensive coach at Salem College in West Virginia. At Salem College, if you could spell Salem they would let you enroll. If you could not spell it, they gave you the S, A, and L, and hoped you could come up with the E and M.

Corky Griffith, a coach from the state of West Virginia, was the head coach at Glenville State. I was 22 years old and this was my first full-time coaching job. I ran the defense at Glenville State. At our first coaches meeting, Coach Griffith comes in the office. He was a good ole' hillbilly and he called everyone "Jack." He told me he wanted me to run the "Cat" defense. Since he was the head coach and I was a company man, I was going to do what he wanted me to do. He told me he coached the Cat defense and one year his team got 16 sacks in one quarter using it.

I told him I had to see that defense. I asked him how to run the Cat defense. He said, "After the offensive linemen get in their stance, you flex the defensive linemen off the ball and back them up five yards." I thought he was talking about the flex defense that Dallas ran at that time. He told me "You flex all the defensive linemen five yards off the ball. You have all the fat offensive linemen up on the line of scrimmage. We have our defensive linemen five yards off the ball.

"You get your fastest and quickest defensive player back and he is the 'Cat.' You put him at the end of the line of scrimmage in front of the end man on the line. Remember, you have the defensive line backed off the ball five yards. As the quarterback starts calling out the cadence, the Cat starts walking up and down the line of scrimmage. He walks up and down the line of scrimmage mocking the quarterback. He points to one of the offensive linemen and tells

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"I am the Cat and I am going to get you now! I am the Cat and you cannot block me."

Coach Griffith went on to describe the Cat defense. The idea is for the Cat to make something happen. He wants to disrupt the offense and get them to jump offsides. He goes from one gap to the next gap yelling, "Here comes the Cat! Here comes the Cat!"

Those offensive linemen start thinking, "What is he going to do next?" You know how those fat offensive linemen hate blocking those small skinny defenders. You can imagine what they are thinking. They get in their stance and then they start yelling. "Watch out, here comes that Cat. Man, I hope that Cat does not come through my gap."

The Cat is trying to get the offense to make a false start to draw a penalty. The Cat goes from one gap to the next gap screaming, "Woo-e, woo-e!" Coach Griffith is serious as a heart attack. He told me to run the Cat defense in practice. He said, "As a matter of fact, I want you to run the Double Cat too." I asked him what the Double Cat was. He said, "You get one Cat on the left side of the line and one Cat on the right side of the line. They both start yelling and screaming at the same time. When the Cat strikes, there will be a hole in the line for him to run through."

I was not going to tell Corky I was not going to use the defense so I made some notes on it. Two weeks later, we started spring practice. I got the practice schedule and saw that I had a 10-minute period to work on the Cat defense. At the end of practice, we had a scrimmage set up. I was to run the Cat defense in the scrimmage.

I had a set of twins on the defense and they were perfect Cats. They were about 5'10" and 190 pounds and they could run all day. So I worked on the Cat defense to get ready for the scrimmage. That first scrimmage we were only running the Single Cat, not the Double Cat.

At the end of practice, we came together to scrimmage. On the first play from scrimmage, the

offensive right guard jumped offsides. Coach Griffith came sprinting up to me screaming, "I told you it would work, I told you it would work."

Coach Griffith told the offense to run the play again. The offense wore one of the twins out. The offensive line knocked his butt 20 yards down the field. They ran up and down the field with ease for about five plays. Coach Griffith started yelling at the defense, "You guys are doing it all wrong, damn it." I asked him what he meant by that. He said, "The Cat can't just walk up and down the line of scrimmage like that. It is all rhythmic, Jack, all rhythmic."

When I first went to West Virginia University as head coach, I was about ready to run it. I wanted to be creative, but I was not brave enough to run the Cat defense. We did have a lot of fun with the defense. If I see the Cat defense show up in Florida, I will know where it came from.

Now, most teams are going to some form of the spread offense. People think when you get in the shotgun that you lose the timing of your throws to the receivers. Our timing from the shotgun is just as efficient as it was from under the center. When we throw from the shotgun, we want the timing to be the same as it is from the three-step drop or the five-step drop. If the snap is good, we can get the ball off in the same amount of time as in the drop scheme, and sometimes we can get it off faster.

If the snap is bad, the quarterback's eyes come off the coverage to catch the ball. After he catches the ball, he has to refocus and throw the ball. If the snap is away from his face the timing is good. The timing is the same in the shotgun or under center for the five-step pass. In the shotgun on a five-step pass, we throw it with the same reaction as we do on a three-step drop. That makes the timing the same or better from the shotgun.

If the quarterback runs a play fake from the shotgun, he has to speed up his throw to keep the timing the same. He play-fakes, sets his feet, and throws to keep the timing the same.