

OH, THOSE X's AND O's!

OR THE EVOLUTION OF PRO FOOTBALL STRATEGY

by Jim Campbell

There's an old saying in pro football that goes something like this: "There's nothing new under the sun, just a few wrinkles added to what already exists." This is not to say that original pro football formations approximate to a great extent the sophisticated sets and formations of today -- West Coast Offense, Red Gun, Silver Stretch, and other modern-day tactics. But the evolution from very basic football of the 1920s to the latest strategies and techniques may not be as long a pass as might at first be thought.

Jurassic Offense

Lets's start with what was in vogue at the time the NFL was formed. Nearly every team of the day -- college and pro -- lined up in the T-formation. It is a formation that was the first recognized in football. The early "Treatise on American Football," published in 1893 by Amos Alonzo Stagg and Henry L. Williams included play diagrams that resembled what is today called a "full-house T." That is, a seven-man line, a QB right behind the center and a left halfback, fullback, and right halfback in a straight line. The QB was not up under center as is the case today and the ball wasn't delivered by a direct snap, rather it was rolled back -- but the basic formation was the one that wouldn't change for many years.

Many early NFL teams had as their normal attack formations the Single Wing and Double Wing, but even they came out over the ball in a T and shifted to those various formations.

George Halas, first with the Decatur Staleys and subsequently with the Chicago Bears, was one of the pioneers who stayed with the T while others installed newer formations. There were even some early NFL teams -- the Buffalo All-Americans, Chicago Cardinals, and Dayton Triangles -- who ran a multiple offense, one that incorporated each of the formations in use at the time (T, Single Wing, Double Wing, and Short Punt). This was difficult to do, because each formation required different things from the players. For example, a T quarterback must be a slick ball-handler and an accurate passer. A Single Wing QB, sometimes called the blocking back because that's what he did mostly, had to be sturdy enough to do lead blocking on most plays, but agile enough to go out for passes, or even occasionally run with the ball on a direct snap -- (as that evolved into the way the center got the ball back to the OB.)

Whatever the offense, it had to be kept simple. Players didn't get together to practice regularly, for the most part. Some early pros like Arda Bowser, a fullback from Bucknell, played for more than one team. In 1922, in addition to coaching at his alma mater in Lewisburg, PA, Bowser played Saturday games for the Frankford Yellowjackets and then rode a train all night to play Sundays with the Canton Bulldogs. Like most out-of-town pros of his era, Bowser learned the team's signals riding in an open touring car on the way from the train depot to the playing field.

At first, there were no huddles -- so QBs just barked out a series of coded numbers that told the offense what the play was, and hopefully didn't tip off the defense as to what was coming. These signals were akin to latter day "automatics" or "audibles."

Many of the earliest NFL coaches were player-coaches. They favored the systems they had run in college. Their signals were probably very similar, too, to those of their college days. This, however, posed problems if college teammates were on opposing pro teams.

Most of the offensive systems were conveyed by word of mouth. Playbooks of the time were nearly non-existent. There surely were none comparable to a playbook as we know it today. Coaches just instructed players and walked through plays when time and circumstances permitted. There were no precision-drawn plays, no film study (no films). Halas used large pieces of posterboard, which he held up in practice to show how the play was to be run.

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Defenses were even less sophisticated -- six-, seven-, and eight-man lines were the norm for the NFL's first decade. But the defensive unit, which was just the offensive unit without the ball -- players went both ways -- seldom had to worry that their one or two basic defenses could not stop the offense. Whatever the offense in the pioneering days of pro football, it most likely featured a conservative ground attack, with both halfbacks and the fullback as runners.

Coaches were seldom daring in the early days. According to Bowser, "Our coach felt that the edge was with the defense. So, the rule was to keep it basic, maintain field position, and let the other guy make a mistake -- then capitalize."

To help with this, teams practiced a precision punting game. A high premium was placed on "coffin corner" kicking -- punting so the ball goes out of bounds very close to the goal line.

Charts exist that show a football field divided into "tactical zones." From your goal line to the 20-- punt (sometimes on first down, surely no later than third down). From your 20 to the opponent's 20 -- run conservative ground plays. From the 20 to the end zone -- trick plays or even passes. Is it any wonder that a considerable number of early NFL games ended in 0-0 ties in the early decades of the League?

So ground-oriented were the early teams that the Detroit Lions ran for 2,885 yards in 1936 (12 games) to set an NFL single-season rushing record that stood until 1972 (14 games).

They Shall Not Pass

Passing in the initial days of the NFL was mostly a desperation maneuver. It wasn't an integral part of a team's offense -- it was primarily used when a team was behind and needed to advance a lot of yards in a little time. The tactic seldom worked.

Rules of the day also mitigated against passing. There was no pass interference -- an intended receiver could be tackled before the ball arrived. No pass could be longer than 20 yards. Two incompletions in the same series of downs and the ball went over to the opponent. An incompleting in the end zone was like a punt -- a touchback for the other team. An incompleting out of bounds at the sideline was also like a punt -- the opponent's ball where it went out. If a pass wasn't touched by a receiver, the ball went over to the opponent. The pass had to be thrown from at least five yards behind the line of scrimmage and within five yards of either side of the center. While not all of these rules were in effect at the same time, they all made it very hard to mount a consistent, viable passing attack.

An early exception to no-passing was Pro Football Hall of Famer Earl "Curly" Lambeau of the Green Bay Packers. At first using himself and later using fellow Hall of Famer Arnie Herber, Lambeau was the first true pro proponent of a designed passing game. Johnny Blood (McNally) was the most consistently prolific receiver in the game until the immortal Don Hutson came along and broke, or more accurately, created the mold for the modern-day wide receiver. Blood accomplished all he did as a receiver while playing as a fulltime running back and playing defense.

The T Returns With Flourishes

The Bears began as one of the NFL's better teams -- a consistent winner over the years. But when they experienced their first losing season in 1929, Halas retired as a player and resigned as head coach. He hired Ralph Jones, the backfield coach at Illinois when Halas was a collegian there. Jones, who would earn an NFL championship quickly -- in 1932, created a more wide-open version of the T-formation. He introduced man-in-motion, split ends, wider spacing in the line. In short, he stretched the offense -- and the defense had to spread itself a little thinner to compensate. Jones also spread the field vertically. He had the Bears' ends and "motion" halfback running more precise and deeper routes.

Even with the success of the Bears, most pro teams did not jump on the Chicago bandwagon. They continued to immitate the most successful college teams of the day -- Notre Dame and Knute Rockne's famous "Box" formation, Minnesota and Bernie Bierman's innovative shift, and Stanford and Pop Warner's Single and Double Wing formations.

In 1937, Lambeau's Packers lost their monopoly on the passing game. Rookie Sammy Baugh came out of TCU to lead the lust-moved Washington Redskins to a League championship. Greatly aiding Baugh and other passers was a mid-30s rule change that legalized passing from anywhere behind the line of scrimmage -- previously, a passer needed to be the aforementioned five yards deep and within five yards to either side of center. Colleges didn't modify their rules for more than another decade. The NFL ball was also slimmed down in circumference.

While still a Single Wing tailback, Baugh showed the passing skills of a T-quarterback, which he would become in the latter half of his 16-year NFL career.

The pros were a little more sophisticated than their collegiate little brothers in that they had ways around the no-coaching-from-the-sidelines rule. It was a 15-yard penalty, until 1945, for a coach to signal in plays or some other way communicate tactics to the team on the field.

Conversations with players and coaches from the previous eras reveal that various signals, albeit subtle ones, were used to communicate from sideline coach to on-field signal caller. Nearly every team had such a set of signals, though all would deny it at the time.

73-0 !!!!

Things were beginning to open up. The bruising off-tackle smash -- the one play that seems to have been around forever, the quick-kick, the brute strength of massed play at the point of attack were fading. December 8, 1940 was the day that modern NFL football was born, in a sense. It was the date of the NFL championship game won by the Bears over the Redskins, 73-0.

It didn't happen all at once. That summer, Halas had hired Clark Shaughnessy, an underappreciated offensive genius to further refine the man-in-motion T. "Shag," as he was called, spread the entire formation even wider, and at the suggestion of line coach Hunk Anderson, had the linemen take wider splits and use Anderson's newly-developed brush blocking instead of the rib-wracking cross-body blocks required in the Single Wing. With the splits in the line already having created holes, the brush block needed only a momentary neutralization of a defender to allow a back to scoot for positive yards on a quick-opener.

In the T, backs were already moving forward to take a handoff almost at the line of scrimmage. The wing formations (single and double) had a deep back receiving a direct snap from center in a stationary position. Instead of having forward momentum, the non-T back needed to generate it. Shaughnessy, a true intellectual, was a student of military history. He insisted that his inspiration for the get-'em-before-they-know-what-hit-'em attack of the modern T was General Heinz Guderian. Guderian wrote a book called *Achtung, Panzer!* It featured "war of movement."

After having friends at the University of Chicago, where Shaughnessy coached, translate the German officer's book, Shaughnessy adapted the Blitzkrieg tank techniques to football. It worked for the Bears. Unfortunately, it also worked for Guderian on the battlefield -- obscure at the time the book came out, his swift, devastating conquest of France in the summer of 1940 gained him instant notoriety.

So profound was the impact of the 73-0 championship game score, that by the next season new Philadelphia Eagles coach Earle "Greasy" Neale, another Pro Football Hall of Famer, had his team running the T. A friend of Neale, with theatrical connections, was able to get the sly coach the entire '40 title game on film. Neale dissected it play-by-play with the rapt attention of a mad scientist. By the late-40s all pro teams but one were using the T. The exception was the Pittsburgh Steelers. They were the last NFL team to convert from the Single Wing in 1952.

Two-Way Time

This was also the era in which separate offensive and defensive platoons emerged and brought about the specialization that makes pro football so watchable for the spectator.

While the T was more wide open than the brute-strength power formations, at first it wasn't that wide open. Leon Hart, the last lineman to win the Heisman Trophy (1949), had a fine career with the Detroit Lions. On a visit to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, after viewing Detroit game-film from the Fifties, he said, "Geez, look how closed we are. I can't believe it. All bunched up together in the middle of the field -- and we thought we were spread out all over the place. Wow!" It would seem that all things are relative.

Defenses after World War II were still quite basic, mostly five-man lines. The anchor was the middle-guard, usually a huge man like the Lions' 349 1/2-pound Les Bingaman, who was amazingly quick in covering the five-yards of territory for which he was responsible, or the Packers' 285-pound Ed Neal, a burly type who was reputed to break just-drained beer bottles over his anvil-like forearms (he was a blacksmith between seasons).

When Jack Christiansen arrived in the Lions' camp out of Colorado A&M (now Colorado State at Fort Collins) in 1951, it marked the beginning of a trend -- put your best athletes on defense. Chris turned out

to be a Hall of Fame defensive back and set a record by returning four punts for touchdowns in his rookie season. Before him, players who "couldn't cut it" on offense were given a second chance with the defensive platoon. Chris's Crew as Christiansen and his fellow d-backs were known in Detroit, were the first to popularize zone pass defense.

Paul Brown, with his cerebral approach to the game, gave pro football another facelift in the late-40s when the All-America Football Conference was born. Ridiculed as "a high school coach with a high school team" because of his incredible success at Washington High in Massillon, Ohio, (he once went a season without having to punt, and Ohio high school coaches lobbied to get him the head coaching job at Ohio State so they would have a chance of winning a state scholastic championship).

Brown was a true football genius. Many aspects of the game today resulted from Brown's innovations. Brown was the first to require players to produce a playbook in loose-leaf binder form, the first to require players to study it and quiz them on it (the Brown's spent more time in the classroom than on the practice field), the first to make coaching a year 'round profession, and the first to make extensive use of "position" coaches. Earlier pro staffs usually had one or two assistants -- a line coach and/or a receivers coach.

The Pass Takes Center Stage

As pro football moved toward a passing game, a new position evolved -- flankerback. Elroy "Crazylegs" Hirsch of the Los Angeles Rams and Dub Jones of the Browns were the first to popularize the position. Both were accomplished runners as halfbacks; now they'd be mainly pass receivers -- split wide in the backfield. This is how the three-end offense evolved. It's generally thought the '49 Rams were the first to extensively employ this with Tom Fears and Bob Shaw on the line and Hirsch flanked in the backfield, but proving there is really nothing new under the football sun, Ralph Jones used this type of system with the Bears nearly two decades earlier.

Great quarterbacks drove the game in the Fifties. They were the glamour guys -- many became Pro Football Hall of Famers. Sid Luckman, Otto Graham, Bob Waterfield, Norm Van Brocklin, Bobby Layne, Johnny Unitas, Y.A. Tittle, and Sammy Baugh -- though Baugh, Luckman, and Waterfield were really holdovers from an earlier decade.

Offensive ends, who didn't have to worry about stopping end sweeps on defense or doing heavy duty blocking, helped tremendously -- Dante Lavelli and Mac Speedie, Billy Howton, Pete Pihos, Billy Wilson, and Raymond Berry.

The defense wasn't exactly sleeping through all this. In 1950 Steve Owen of the New York Football Giants devised the umbrella defense -- the four defensive backs were spread out like the spokes of an umbrella that covered the field against passes. Owen had future Hall of Famer Emlen Tunnell, but was greatly aided by the acquisition (from the defunct AAFC's New York Yankees) of such ballhawks as Tom Landry, Harmon Rowe, and Otto Schnellbacher.

Football was becoming like a "Tom & Jerry" cartoon, a classic cat and mouse confrontation. When one platoon gained an advantage, the other was quick to produce a counter-move that provided it with an edge. Later, rule changes would effect the balance of power more than innovative technique.

In the Fifties Tom Landry, by now a player-coach with the Giants, would develop the 4-3 defense, which evolved from the Eagle Defense -- one that had a seven-man line, but with the ends dropping back to cover passes. It was a pro standard for years and was refined even further when Landry became head coach of the Dallas Cowboys. One of the things the 4-3 did was eliminate the huge, somewhat stationary middle-guard of the 5-3. The middle-guard was replaced by the middle linebacker, a smaller, more mobile player.

Legend has it that the Bears' Bill George was the first. As a rookie in 1952, he was playing middle-guard on the nose of the offensive center. He complained that he couldn't see anything in his three-point stance.

Wily veteran George Connor, an eventual Hall of Famer, said, "Well, then stand up and move back to where you can see." George did. He did it so well, he found his niche -- like Connor -- in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Middle linebacker became such a dominant position that five middle linebackers were enshrined in the Pro HOF before Bobby Bell became the first outside linebacker to be inducted in 1983. The hard-hitting quintet was: Dick Butkus, Bill George, Sam Huff, Ray Nitschke, and Joe Schmidt.

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The Fifties also brought about an emphasis on pursuit by the defense -- most two-way players just didn't have the energy nor the willingness to run down plays that were run away from them. Contrary to what some writers state, Big Daddy Lipscomb did not "invent" pursuit. He was just good at it at a time when too few players bothered to play sideline-to-sideline. The most highly- respected defenders of previous eras were the ones who did track down plays everywhere on the field.

Also, by the Fifties, something else was changing the game -- much for the better. Black athletes were bringing more speed to the game. Coaches were realizing that no matter how hard a player hit, if he couldn't catch up to the guy with the ball he couldn't stop him. Conversely, if a player could get the ball and get upfield faster than most, he would be harder to catch. Teams followed the lead of the Rams when they signed Paul "Tank" Younger out of Grambling in 1949, and began scouting, drafting, and signing the superb athletes from the nation's historically black colleges. At one time in the 1970s, Grambling and Southern players were as plentiful -- if not more so -- as those from Notre Dame and USC.

The AFL brought the "vertical" passing game to Pro Football in 1960. Critics will tell you the reason "the other league," as NFL purists called the AFL, was pass-happy was because of the dearth of quality secondaries. However, Sid Gillman's approach to the game; the catching of Lance Alworth, Lionel Taylor, Charley Hennigan, Bill Groman, and others -- the passing of George Blanda, Jack Kemp, and John Hadl, probably had more to do with it. The AFL also made use of the zone defense -- in 1961, the Chargers picked off 49 errant passes.

Lombardi And Basics

Football swung away from passing, back to the running game, about the time Vince Lombardi's Packers were becoming a dynasty and the Team of the Sixties -- doesn't each decade have to have a designated "team of"? Lombardi believed in attacking a team's strength -- beat them there and they are demoralized. His offense was basic. Opponents knew what to expect -- they just couldn't stop it. Lombardi, in what was supposed to be a sophisticated era, preached one basic tenet: "Whosoever blocks and tackles harder wins."

To accomplish this, Lombardi employed (what was for then) a big-back offense -- goal line-seeking Paul Hornung (215 pounds) and earth-moving Jim Taylor (220). The Green Bay Power Sweep featured pulling guards Fuzzy Thurston and Jerry Kramer, throwbacks to the Single Wing era. Tight end, as first played by Ron Kramer, gave even more heft to blocking schemes -- he was like a third offensive tackle, but he could, and did, catch. The other staple of the Pack attack was the off-tackle slant. It is perhaps the oldest running play in football, and one of the best. In one form or another, the off-tackle play is part of any formation.

Others imitated Lombardi, none with as much success.

Under Landry the Cowboys employed motion, player shifts, and other tactics designed to give opponents as little time as possible to recognize and see the offensive set before the ball was snapped.

In the 1970s, coaches realized two things and adjusted accordingly: 1. The other team can't beat you if they can't score; 2. Offense sells tickets -- defense wins championships.

In their halcyon days the Packers employed at least five defenders who eventually found their way to Canton. Other successful teams, too, made use of strong defenses -- Dallas' Doomsday, Minnesota's Purple People-Eaters, Miami's No-Names, and Pittsburgh's Steel Curtain. The Steelers' defense of Joe Greene, Jack Lambert, Jack Ham, and Mel Blount was noteworthy in that the secondary hit with the same zeal, power, and aggressiveness that the line and linebackers did. Appropriately, most of the teams with the good defenses also had quality offenses -- or at least the defenses made them appear that way.

In the earliest days of the League, there were no such things as hashmarks. If a play was run out of bounds, the ball was played one yard in bounds from the spot where it left the playing field. The indoor championship game of 1932, because of the Chicago Stadium's ice rink's boards being the out of bounds, forced a change -- bring the ball in ten yards to start the next play. It became a permanent rule in 1933, and gradually the hashes kept getting closer to the middle of the field -- 15 yards in 1934, 20 yards in 1945. The big change came in 1972. The hashmarks were moved to 23 1/3 yards in from the sidelines. This made the distance between the left and the right hashmarks equal to the distance between the goal posts. The rule was instituted to help the passing game. Defense were using the sidelines on the short side of the field as a 12th man. It virtually eliminated the short side and opened up both the running and the passing game. Teams could run to either side and have plenty of room to maneuver.

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As pass-rushing specialists such as Gino Marchetti and Deacon Jones developed, quarterbacks such as Fran Tarkenton became a valuable commodity -- from the original scrambler through Bobby Douglass and Randall Cunningham, to Jeff Blake and Steve Young. Coaches now value these mobile quarterbacks for their "escapability" as much as they do their actual scrambling for positive yardage.

George Allen, who else?, took credit for hiring the first special teams coach in 1969 -- Dick Vermeil. But the same year that Vermeil joined the Rams' staff as special teams coach, Marv Levy filled a similar position on Jerry Williams's Eagles staff. Regardless, special teams were getting special attention. It occurred to Allen and Williams that the kicking game was about one-third of the game and it was foolish to ignore it. Just how effective was the attention to punting, punt coverage, kickoff returns, and kickoff coverage? Punting ceased to be a ball-placement tactic. Punters just kicked the ball as high and deep as they could and let the kamikaze coverage men keep the ball from being brought back for a long return.

Another rule change that affected strategy was the moving of the goal posts to the end line -- from the goal line -- in 1974. They had been on the goal line for four decades. In addition to moving the actual posts, the new rules stated that a missed field goal would give the opponent the ball at the line of scrimmage -- not at the 20 yard line (i.e. a touchback) as had been the case previously.

What this did away with was attempting a field goal nearly anytime a team's drive bogged down after crossing the 50 yard line. The added distance, combined with the unfavorable spot on a miss, caused field goal attempts to drop from 861 in 1973 to 553 in 1974.

Except for "nothing to lose" situations at the end of the first half, long range field goal attempts were limited to near-desperation predicaments.

A look at the decline in the punt and kickoff return averages through the Seventies shows the kickers and the bomb squadders or kamikazes were doing their jobs. This is not to say that returners such as Gale Sayers, Rick Upchurch, Billy "White Shoes" Johnson, Vai Sikahema, and Eric Metcalf weren't doing theirs. So valued were kick-cover players and long-snappers that some players made careers out of being that -- and not much else.

With larger staffs -- teams have a coach for about every four players -- systems, both offense and defense, became much more intricate. The key in playing defenses, which had blitzes, red-dog packages, and stunts, was to disguise these tactics -- show one thing before the play starts and actually do another when the play got underway. For the offense, in many instances, it was similar kind of thinking. Show a formation or "set" that indicated the likelihood of a certain play, then make a quick change that allowed something different from what the defense was likely to have been prepared.

Trapped

One of the most enduring aspects of the recent development of pro football has been the Steelers' running game. An opponent once said, "They start trapping you when you get off the team bus." This is a reference to the kind of line blocking that sprung Pittsburgh runners loose -- from the Chuck Noll era (Franco Harris) through the Bill Cowher era (Barry Foster, Bam Morris, and Jerome Bettis).

The mouse trap (as it was first called) or trap has been around since Single Wing days. A defender is either unblocked or mildly interfered with, so that he penetrates into the offensive backfield. Just as he is about to pounce on a seemingly unprotected runner, he is unsuspectingly knocked down by a blocker from a crossing angle. The hole created by the hapless defender is the hole through which the unimpeded runner scampers.

At no time was this done better than in the Seventies when Dan Radakovich worked his unorthodox magic with a group of seven or eight, light, quick, and interchangeable Pittsburgh offensive linemen. There is a reason that both Harris and Rocky Bleier each gained more than 1,000 yards in 1976.

A variation of trap-blocking, used by many teams but none more successfully than the Miami Dolphins with Larry Csonka carrying the ball, is mis-direction. In the case of Miami, the left guard would pull, giving the illusion that the play was a sweep right. The quarterback would hand off to the fullback (Csonka), who would barrel into the vacant left guard spot -- the defensive player having left it open to chase down the bogus end sweep.

In the Seventies and Eighties, running attacks usually consisted of a feature back, the primary runner, and a blocking back, who did mostly what his label implied. O.J. Simpson and Jim Braxton at Buffalo typified this kind of tandem. Harris and Bleier, who began as a "third guard" (a reference to his superb

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blocking) before given an opportunity to carry the ball significantly, formed another such combination. No one practices this better today than Emmitt Smith and Daryl "Moose" Johnston in Dallas.

The Redskins, under Joe Gibbs in the early-80s, employed a single-back, two-tight end set. The second tight end, usually Don Warren, was called an H-back. Essentially, he was a fullback in a different location. With the wideout spreading the defense, the H-back provided better running lanes for the feature back -- John Riggins at the height of its effectiveness. On passing plays, the H-back, stationed on the line of scrimmage, could get downfield more quickly. Warren was especially adept at this from a wider position on the line than that of most tight ends. If he stayed close in, he was in excellent position to make a key block -- something Warren did so well announcer John Madden sung his praises enough for him (Warren) to be no longer under-appreciated.

Speed

Artificial turf and speed, a combination that works hand-in-glove, changed the look of the game. With speed a highly-prized commodity, turf just seemed to accentuate it.

There was a time, especially with wide receivers and defensive backs, when if you were fast enough, size didn't matter. A team would find a way to take advantage of the one thing no one can coach -- speed! Flea-like wide receivers were challenging and blowing by defensive backs. Then equally-fast defensive backs were sought. In the never-ending chess game that is pro football, speedy-but-larger receivers were recruited to out-muscle the smaller DBs. Then larger-but-just-as-fast DBs became desirable.

New Formations

The I-formation -- so called because the center, quarterback, fullback, and halfback formed a straight line -- influenced the pro game. The deep back or tailback, a term borrowed from the Single Wing nomenclature, was as far as eight yards behind the line of scrimmage. He'd take a quick toss-back from the quarterback and then head into the line, not necessarily for a designated hole, but for any opening that he thought he could exploit for positive yardage. This is a throwback to Vince Lombardi's old run-to-daylight theory. Eric Dickerson, Herschel Walker, and Barry Sanders fit this category.

Coach Mouse Davis has brought his run & shoot to the NFL with various clubs. The most recent form had been Atlanta's Red Gun -- speedy, quick receivers seem to flood the secondary even before the ball is snapped.

Drawbacks to the true run & shoot are that this "spread" formation has no fullback nor tight end -- their places are taken by additional receivers. Critics say the offense lacks scoring punch in the "red zone."

It's a valid criticism. Detroit's Silver Stretch after several years of struggling, adapted a system that featured a tight end and a fullback. This only helped Barry Sanders become a bigger threat -- it also helped the passing game. Herman Moore's 123 receptions in 1995 attest to this.

Bill Walsh, with his Super Bowl success in San Francisco, caused a stir with the "West Coast" offense. Much was made of the "scripting" of the first 25-30 plays to be run, regardless of the defense set up, at the start of a game. With Joe Montana, and later Steve Young under George Seifert, the short pass, possession game was/is hard to stop.

It's an offense of mismatches, quick short passes that can be broken for long gains, especially in the hands of a receiver such as Jerry Rice. The set is predicated on quarterback reads, receivers making adjustments on-the-fly, and options by both. It is a classic example of "taking what the defense gives us." Sometimes the offense takes before the defense gives. Quarterbacks look at coverage as it unfolds. They know if "this" is covered "that" is uncovered. Without looking first, a Montana or Young would just go to "that" and make the play more times than not. Receivers also made the same kinds of reads to alter patterns and get open. Tremendous coordination and near-telepathic communication is needed -- something that can only result from long hours of on-field practice and film study.

As one coach put it, "You read your way through the play -- there can be two or three different options once the play is underway. And it's not like pulling off the road to read a map. It all happens in seconds." What was called as a run, could become a pass and vice versa.

Big, Fast Deep Blue

Football, as mentioned, has been likened to chess, played with 22, 250-pound (for the most part) players. For every move there is a counter move. The game has evolved into something that closely resembles a science.

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Computers, scouting combines, personality tests, and almost anything else -- real or perceived -- that will provide an edge will be brought into play. Whatever some unnamed assistant may be working on today to give the offense a slight advantage, it is safe to say a defensive strategist will be working tomorrow to negate any edge.

"Bigger, stronger, faster," in describing modern players has been used so long and so often it has become a cliché. But it is also a truism. Coupled with better nutrition, year 'round training and conditioning, and more-knowledgeable coaching, it has produced a much better athlete -- at least in terms of pure athleticism.

Two-way players, however, (though their numbers are dwindling as attrition takes the NFL players of the 1930s and 1940s) question the modern players dedication and toughness. Regardless of what the leather-helmet-no-facemask set thinks, today's game has an almost universal appeal.

The game of pro football today is like a game of one upmanship. However, the man who is up today may not enjoy that position for long.