

Coaching Defensive Linemen

Part I: Philosophy, Constants and Key Points

Mike Walker

Defensive Line Coach, Ishpeming (Mich.) H.S.

Regardless of the defensive scheme you run, to teach it effectively you must break down the techniques and skills that each position requires, and you must have a system to communicate and teach those techniques and skills.

In other words, as a coach it is your responsibility to give your players the tools and confidence they need to be successful in what you are asking them to do.

The system to teach those techniques and skills consists of philosophy, drills, and key/code words. However, coaching isn't always about what you teach. It is often about what you emphasize. The trick is to make sure you are teaching what you emphasize.

For example, if a coach emphasizes turnovers, but never practices the techniques and skills necessary to create them, then he shouldn't be surprised his team doesn't create a lot of takeaways.



As a defensive line coach I must have a specific, organized and realistic approach to practice so that the techniques and skills my players need are developed and fit into the overall defensive concept.

Before I get into my approach of accomplishing this though defensive line progressions, I want to discuss philosophy, constants and key points of coaching defensive linemen.

1. Our defensive players are always either in a football position or running. Anything else is a waste of time and energy, and isn't contributing to us being a dominating defensive team through technique and pursuit.

2. To play defense you must be able to run and tackle. You intimidate an offense through relentless tackling and pursuit play after play. Get players on the field who can run and tackle.

3. Demand effort. You don't have to be a great athlete to give great effort. Effort is a mental skill. Great effort is demonstrated through consistent technique and pursuit. A defensive lineman giving great effort gets off of blocks, never stays on the ground, changes direction quickly, doesn't get passed in pursuit, and gets into the "pile" before the whistle.

Coaching Defensive Linemen
Great effort is demonstrated through consistent technique and pursuit.

4. Team speed is not based on a stopwatch. Team speed is based on effort. If all 11 defenders on the field run a 5.0 in the 40, then it is my responsibility to make sure they are all running at a 5.0 effort from the first play of the game to last play of the game. If they do that, then we will have team speed. A lack of team speed is often an indicator of a lack of team effort. It could also indicate that players are confused regarding their technique, assignment and responsibility.

5. Most drills that begin with the defensive linemen in a stance should start with some form of a snap simulation. I use a cadence, but it's only to get them used to ignoring the cadence. We tell our players not to listen to quarterbacks because they lie. We want to be deaf on the line of scrimmage and go on the snap of the ball ("Attack the snap!"). If you want them to do it in the game, then you must emphasize it in practice.

6. When the center touches the ball in practice and in the game, defensive lineman yell "Ball!" This does several things for us:

- It sets the defensive line. We are in our stances and ready to play football. We want our defensive line set before the offense is. If players get caught out of position (weak end on the strong side, etc.), once "Ball!" is called they stay on the side they are on (but play the correct technique, for example the weak end would then play as the strong end, etc.).
- It reminds us what we are keying on - the ball.
- It reminds us to "attack the snap" instead of the quarterback's cadence.

Instead of yelling from the sideline "watch the ball", "be disciplined", "nobody jump" we just yell "Ball!" to communicate all of those important points.

7. We want to be the world's fastest 2-yard sprinters. A 2-yard sprint puts our heels on the heels of the offensive lineman and reestablishes the LOS on their side of the ball. We don't want our defensive lineman any deeper than a yard across the LOS unless they are attacking the ball. Ball carriers have to come to the LOS, so we want to control the LOS without creating seems and cutback lanes.

Coaching Defensive Linemen

We want to be the world's fastest 2-yard sprinters.

It is during the 2-yard sprint that we read offensive linemen and blocking schemes. If it takes defensive linemen longer than that to read blocks they can't consistently stop trap, defend the reach block, or defeat a double team.

8. The only thing that a blocker is allowed to touch on defensive linemen is the top of their arms and the top of their shoulder pads (get your chest on your knee and keep your butt away from the blocker). This reinforces keeping our pad level low.



At the start of every defensive practice I ask the players to show me what the offense is allowed to touch. They immediately get into a good football position with their shoulders behind their shoulder pads and run their hands over the top of their arms and shoulder pads.

From this position a blocker shouldn't be able to get to their numbers, hips, or legs. This stance also puts us into a good power angle and allows us to use full body strength to take on blockers and ball carriers.

Coaching Defensive Linemen

The single most important factor in controlling the LOS is a low pad level.

9. The single most important factor in controlling the LOS is a low pad level. I call it playing "chest on knee". We literally want to practice

at that level, with our shoulders that low and our back that flat while attacking the LOS and defeating blocks. If I can see the number on the front of your jersey your pad level is too high.



All through practice you will hear me remind players to play with "chest on knee" and to make their "numbers disappear". The intensity, speed and excitement of a game will cause a natural rise in pad level, but by emphasizing this low level during practice we still play at a good level during the game.

10. We want to keep our power angle on all contact. We don't rise up on contact to defeat a block - we don't snap or roll our hips on contact. Instead, we control the LOS and defeat blockers by keeping our pad level low and not giving up our power angle while moving forward - not up.

The most important muscle groups for defensive linemen are their gluts and thighs. When we talk about a power angle we are talking about keeping our body in a position so we can take advantage of our gluts and thighs on all contact. The power angle consists of a "Z" in the knees, ankles behind the gluts, feet and knees pointing to where we want to go (not pointing out), hips locked to keep a flat back, shoulders behind shoulder pads, shoulders squared to contact, and eyes/head up so we can see where we are going and what we are hitting.



Again, during the game there is a natural rise, but if we emphasize the power angle throughout practice we will play much lower when we attack blockers on Friday nights.

11. All initial contact is made with our shoulders - not with our hands - in the center of the offensive lineman's chest, which keeps us in a good power angle with a low pad level. We want the full force of our body to neutralize the initial approach of the offensive lineman and to run through the contact - to continue to move forward instead of trying to hold our ground.

We want contact in the center of the offensive lineman's chest. We don't want to chip or hit the edge of the shoulder pads, but instead want a full force "slam" into the chest of our opponent. Once we've made solid contact we shoot our hands inside and work to extend our arms to separate from the blocker. As we shed the blocker we still want to play as low as we can without giving up our power angle.

12. Hand placement should always be inside the "Pentagon", the area from the neck, to the shoulders, to the pecs, with the thumbs pointing up and elbows inside the frame of your chest. This will maximize your players upper body strength when taking on blockers.

Coaching Defensive Linemen
Hand placement should always be inside the "Pentagon", the area from the neck, to the shoulders, to the pecs.



Pentagon



Incorrect Hand Placement



Correct Hand Placement

An easy way to demonstrate this is to have a player fully extend his arms in front of him with his fingers pointing up. Grab him by the wrists and push his arms down while the player resists. He will struggle to keep his arms up. Then have him point his thumbs up. This time it will be easier to resist the pressure. By simply turning the thumbs up it allows him to use his upper body muscles and joints from a more powerful angle.

A great hand placement technique is to have players click their wrists together as they are working their hands into the Pentagon. The "wrist click" forces their thumbs up and reinforces keeping their hands inside the Pentagon.

13. All defensive linemen have two basic block reactions - dip or squeeze. Any time a player is blocked he automatically dips - resets his power angle and pad level by putting his chest on his knees. It doesn't matter if the block comes from the player in front of him, from the inside, outside or the backfield, if he gets blocked, he dips to defeat the blocker and control his gap.

Coaching Defensive Linemen
All defensive linemen have two basic block reactions - dip or squeeze.

If he doesn't get blocked, he squeezes to the inside. He doesn't hold his ground and looks for

the next blocker, he instead literally “squeezes” all of the air out of the inside gap. He breaks off his penetration, and goes flat down the LOS and eliminates all air between him and the next blocker. It doesn’t matter if his visual key releases to the outside, inside or down blocks, if he isn’t blocked he squeezes the inside gap.



When the defender (42) is blocked he dips (resets his power angle and pad level).



When the defender (76) isn't blocked he squeezes (eliminates the inside gap).

It is important to understand that we dip on all contact, so after squeezing, the defender still dips to take on a trapper, or kick out block by a back, etc.

14. Safety has to be an important factor in everything we do on the practice and game field. Two of the most important things we can teach our players are to keep their feet moving at all times and to see what they hit.

Coaching Defensive Linemen

Safety has to be an important factor in everything we do on the practice and game field.

- **Keep your feet moving:** There are two keys aspects to this. First, most serious leg injuries happen when a player is flat footed. When your feet are dug into the ground (pushing, leaning, overextending your legs) there is no give if a player contacts your legs from any angle.

The second thing regards the old “hammer” and “nail” analogy. During contact the player with the most momentum is going to deliver the blow. The slower, or stationary player, is going to receive the brunt of the blow. By teaching your players to give maximum effort (which keeps their feet moving) it can reduce the chance of injury.

- **See what you hit:** A catastrophic injury can occur when a player makes contact with his head down. By taking the blunt of a blow on the top of the head it puts a great amount of stress on the neck and spine. Here is a simple way of demonstrating the unnecessary risk players put on their bodies by putting their heads down on contact. Have your players tuck their chins against their chests as tight as they can. They will feel some stress on the back of their necks. Then have them put their hands on the back of their heads and apply pressure. The pressure on their neck and spine is very obvious. Ask them to imagine the amount of pressure that would be applied to their neck and spine if they made contact in this position while at a full sprint.

Then have them lift up their heads and look at you, and again apply pressure to the back of their heads. The difference is obvious and they get the point. By teaching players to keep their eyes/head up - to see what they hit - reduces the chance of catastrophic injury.

Here is a great link about how to reduce head and neck injuries in football provided by the [National Trainers' Athletic Association](#).

Coaching Defensive Linemen

It is more important to have drill categories than to have drills.

15. There are a lot drills you can use to teach skills and techniques. However, it is more important to have drill categories than to have drills. We have identified eight drill categories that defensive linemen need to be successful: Stance/Starts, Running/Pursuit, Tackling, Turnovers, Separation/Escape, Anti-Block, Anti-Score, and Keys/Blocking Schemes.

Within each category we have several drills that emphasize and teach the category. Based on the goals of each practice we will choose specific categories, then we will select the drills we want from that category. It is important to practice each category, it is not important to use each drill in the category. As often as possible we combine categories such as adding a turnover component to tackling drills.

During two-a-days we have more time in group work, so we will often hit each category in a practice, or at least over two practices. We may spend more time in some categories than others, but we will hit them all. As the season progresses, as practices get shorter,

and the amount of time we have in group work is reduced, we won't be able to hit every category in every practice, but we will hit every category during the week.

16. Everything you teach must "stack". There must be a logical order to what you are teaching regarding terminology and the progression of skills and techniques. For example, if you are doing a drill that starts from the stance, then don't allow the stance to get sloppy just because it isn't the focal point of the drill. If you let each point disappear as you go to the next progression, then you are giving your players inconsistent messages and aren't emphasizing the things that will make them successful.

17. Name your drills. This communicates to your players what you are about to do, the goal of the drill, and how to set up it in the quickest time with the minimum amount of description or direction.

18. You should see your drills in game film. If you don't see your drills in game film, then either the drills aren't being taught right, or the drills are unnecessary. While watching film with your players point out the drills (or ask them to point them out to you). This is a good way to reinforce - and create confidence in - what you are teaching.

19. You increase efficiency in performance by eliminating variables. If it takes a player six phases to do one technique, there are six opportunities to do the technique wrong. If you can get that technique down to three variables, then you increase the player's chance of accomplishing the technique by 50 percent.

Coaching Defensive Linemen
You increase efficiency in performance by eliminating variables.

A perfect example of this is our dip or squeeze philosophy as our two basic block reactions.

20. One of the most important things you can emphasize with your players is to "finish strong". Help them to develop the habit of finishing the rep, drill, play, practice, and game stronger than they started it. Finishing strong demonstrates effort, a team first attitude, and mental toughness.

21. Film your practices. Why should game film be your only source to identify costly technique or assignment mistakes? Why not identify and correct those mistakes before you play the game?

22. You have to have players that enjoy competing, and accept the challenges that comes with competition. You can develop competitors by making competition an important part of the off-season and during the season. Find ways to compete during drills, in the weight room, with running drills, etc. Get them used to competing as much as possible while always emphasizing to "win the drill" (rep, 1-on-1 match up, tackle, block, game, etc.).

23. The number one thing I look for in a player is performance. Can he get the job done? I once played a backup safety on the defensive line over big strong kids that couldn't make a play. He wasn't going to put either of the starting safeties on the bench, but he was a good enough athlete that we had to get him on the field. We put him on the line and he had three sacks his first game.

Common traits for players that make plays include effort, a positive, coachable attitude, being a competitor, and mental toughness. A mentally tough player is one who gives his best every play against superior and inferior opponents, who doesn't offer any excuses, and who responds to challenges and adversity with his best effort. Sometimes we make the mistake of playing a kid with potential based on size, strength, or reputation instead of looking at what really matters: does the kid make a difference when he's on the field.

24. Defensive linemen must understand the 3 A's of Defense: Alignment, Assignment, Attack. A lineman can't always control what's going to happen to him after the snap, but he can control most of these things before the snap. Alignment includes stance and lining up at the correct spot at the correct depth. Assignment includes knowing your technique (base, slant, etc.), visual and pressure keys, and responsibilities (which gap does he have, does he have contain, pitchman, etc.). Attack includes attacking the snap, attacking the blocker and attacking the ball.

Coaching Defensive Linemen
Defensive linemen must understand the 3 A's of Defense: Alignment, Assignment, Attack.

The is no excuse for a breakdown in the 3 A's of Defense. These are all things we can control. Our opponents are well coached, and they don't need our help. If a player understands the 3 A's of Defense, it makes him a better player and us a better defense. In every drill we want to incorporate some form of the 3 A's of Defense.

25. Require your players to coach each other during all phases of practice because the one doing the work is doing the learning. If I am doing all of the work on the practice field then I am doing most of the learning. As the old saying goes, it's not important what the coach knows, it's important what the players know. By encouraging and expecting players to coach each other it causes three things to happen.

Coaching Defensive Linemen
Require your players to coach each other ... because the one doing the work is doing the learning.

First, in order to teach something you have to understand it. So if a player is able to teach a teammate, then that means he understands

the technique, assignment, etc. This makes players responsible and accountable to each other.

Second, it teaches players how to communicate and problem solve. I can't see everything going on in drills, in team, and especially during the game. However, if players are encouraged to coach each other, they can make adjustments during practice and games instead of waiting for coaches to make all the corrections or adjustments.

Third, it introduces leadership and positive peer pressure to the team. We have all coached the player who takes everything personal and is convinced he is doing everything right regardless of what you say. But teammates rarely treat each other that way. They are often more receptive to each other, especially if it's one of your "stars" who is doing the coaching. If you hit this level of leadership it will have a major impact on your team.

Coaching Defensive Linemen

Part II - Practice Categories and Drills: Stances/Starts, Running/Pursuit

Mike Walker

Defensive Line Coach, Ishpeming (Mich.) H.S.

In the first part of this series, we discussed philosophy, constants and key points of coaching defensive lineman. In the following parts we will discuss what we do in practice.

When it comes to teaching the techniques and skills defensive linemen need to be successful in our defensive scheme, we use the eight drill categories we introduced in [Part I, 15](#): Stance/Starts, Running/Pursuit, Tackling, Turnovers, Separation/Escapes, Anti-Block, Anti-Score, and Keys/Blocking Schemes. I will give examples of some of the drills we use in each category.



Again, within each category we have several drills that emphasize and teach the category. Based on the goals of each practice we will choose specific categories, then we will select the drills we want from that category. It is important to practice each category during the week, but it is not important to use each drill in the category. As often as possible we combine categories such as adding a turnover component to tackling drills.

One key point to include in most drills is when a player's rep is over, he SPRINTS back to his starting point, while the next athlete is already set for his rep. This allows you to evaluate the focus and discipline of your players while reinforcing the attitudes and expectations that you are demanding from them.

The following covers the Stance/Starts and Running/Pursuit categories with sample drills.

Category I: Stance/Starts

Every day in group work we start with stances and starts. The linemen line up by position. We will line up based on the front we will probably run the most for Friday's game. For example, if we expect to play a lot of 40, we will make a strong right or left call and line up appropriately. Starters are in the first line and players fill in primarily where they will get the most reps during the week.

As we line up, I ask the players what the offense is allowed to touch and they will immediately get into a football position with their shoulders behind their shoulder pads and run their hands over the top of their arms and shoulder pads ([Part I, 8](#)). Then I quiz them about the 3 A's of Defense - Alignment, Assignment, Attack ([Part I, 24](#)). Then we move into our drills.

1. Check Stance

Start in a right-handed stance, with the right hand on a line. Coach does a quick walk through complimenting and/or correcting. Switch to a left-hand stance.

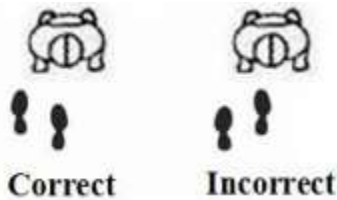
Coaching Points: Feet are shoulder width apart with the feet staggered in a heel-toe relationship. Turn heels out slightly (toes in) to control the direction and power angle of steps out of the stance. This also puts the weight on the inside of the feet which makes lateral steps quicker and easier. Grab dirt with toes. This puts you into a position to explode forward.

Never let a defensive lineman adjust his feet once his hand is on the ground. This will take away his balance and ability to explode out of his stance. The back is flat with the tail even or slightly higher than the shoulder pads (never lower than the shoulder pads). Shoulders are square to the line of scrimmage. Eyes are up. The off hand is up and ready (not hanging down, or resting on the leg).



Don't over-coach stances. Some players prefer to be in a four-point stance. If a player is explosive out of his stance, doesn't waste movement (readjusting feet and/or hips, or raising up), and is able to play "chest on knee", then I am flexible regarding his stance.

However, there is something that I am not flexible with. We are a gap control defense and the first rule of defensive linemen is to never get reached. So that means in our base stance, the near foot of the shade is back and the near hand is down. For example, if you are in a shade to the left, your right foot is back and your right hand is down.



By having your shade foot back that means your first step is into the frame of the offensive lineman you are shading, and your second step is into your gap responsibility. If your feet were aligned with the shade foot up, that means your first step would be into your gap, and your second step into the offensive player. If the number

rule is to never get reached, how are you supposed to beat the reach with your second step landing behind the blocker?

2. 5-yard Sprint

Make a strength call and the first line gets into right-handed stances. Give “Ball!” call visual cue ([Part I, 6](#)). I hold my arms out to my side and stand about 2 1/2 yards in front of players to make sure they don’t rise up during sprint. On a simulated snap, they sprint through five yards as low as they can. After all players have sprint through I turn around to face them and we return with 5-yard sprints from left-handed stances.

Variation: Additional reps can be run with slant or stunt footwork.

Coaching Point: The first step is a six-inch power step, followed by several quick steps. We don’t want a long first step. That forces our pads up, and it takes more time to get the second step down (makes you slower adjusting to block recognition). Long steps break your momentum on contact and cause you to extend your legs - which gives up your low pad level and your power angle when taking on blockers.

We are looking for an explosion out of stances without raising up. This drill is a competition. Who is the fastest out of their stances, who can cover the distance the fastest? Win the drill, finish the drill.

3. 2-yard Sprint

Make a strength call and the first line gets into right-handed stances. Give “Ball!” call visual cue. On a simulated snap, they sprint two yards and finish in a good football position. We check their depth, pad level, and power angle. Make sure to rep from right and left-handed stances.



Coaching Point: We tell our defensive linemen that our goal is to be the world’s fastest 2-yard sprinters ([Part I, 7](#)). A 2-yard sprint will move their heels from their stance to the heels of the offensive lineman. This will put us one yard across the line of scrimmage and reestablish the line on the offense’s side of the ball. As I stated in Part I we want to run through the contact of a blocker (not catch, or try to hold ground) and the 2-yard sprint emphasizes that.

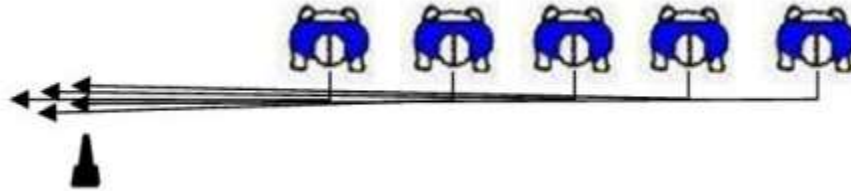
We are looking for an explosion out of stances without them raising up. This drill is a competition. Win the drill, finish the drill.

Category II: Running/Pursuit

This category could include cones and bag drills, but I don’t do a lot of those drills during the season. I prefer change of direction drills that incorporate pursuit concepts.

1. 2-yard Sprint and Chase

This teaches how to get to the ball while following one of our main rules: you are always either in a football position or running ([Part I, 1](#)).



Set up cones ten yards outside both defensive ends. Start the drill the same as the 2-yard sprint (explode out of stance, chopping feet at 2 yards), however, after a second or two I point to either the left or right. The players immediately burst 90 degrees into a full sprint in that direction. There are two things each player is trying to accomplish, overtake the player in front of them and get past the cone before being tagged or passed by their chaser.

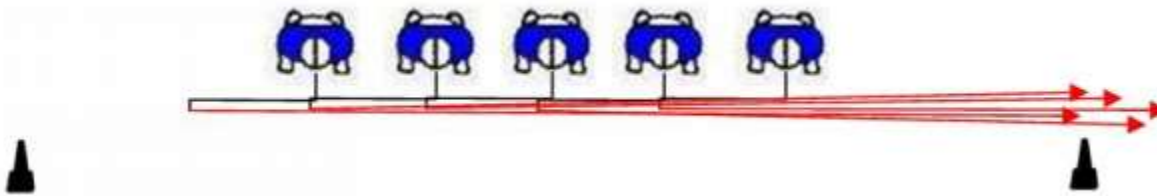
This is a rapid fire drill and players usually get a couple of reps both way. Don't let players trade technique for speed. On Friday nights the adrenaline and intensity of the game will take care of speed, but won't have the same affect on technique, so don't let technique get away from them during drills.

This drill becomes very competitive and players will discover that the only way they can burst into a 90-degree sprint is by being in a good football position with their feet under them. The taller they are and the wider their feet, the harder it is to change direction and to be in a full sprint in two steps.

Note: An important code word is "Burst". Players must burst into the direction they are going in by opening their hips and planting the toes of their lead foot in the direction of their target, and then getting into a full sprint on their crossover step. The first step is a pointing step that doesn't gain a lot of ground, but the second step must get off the ground as fast as possible and gain ground. They must rip the lead elbow behind them while snapping their head and chest into the direction they want to go without rising up. I will often shout "Burst! Burst!" during these drills and in team to reinforce the importance of this concept.

2. 2-yard Redirect

Redirect is a big word to our defensive linemen. Redirect means to change direction as fast as possible without giving up gap or pursuit responsibility. The drill is the same as the 2-yard Chase except now after I point to either the left or right, after a few steps I call out "Redirect!" and the players have to immediately change direction by 180 degrees, and then chase the player that was previously chasing them.



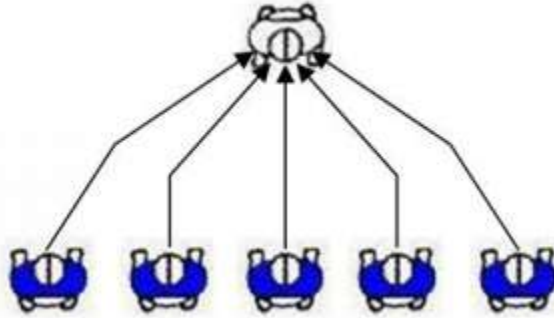
Coaching Points: Make sure they redirect towards the ball. In these drills I am the ball, so they must snap their heads and turn with their chests toward me. This helps them to keep sight of the ball and to keep the proper pursuit angle while making a 180 degree change of direction. If they turn their backs to the ball, they will lose sight of the ball carrier and drift away from the LOS. That will create gaps in pursuit and tougher tackling angles on the ball carrier. In team, I call "redirect" on reverses, cutbacks, boots, etc.

The biggest mistake players make when trying to change direction is to push their hips forward to slow down. This forces their shoulders up. They need to learn to change directions by sinking their hips and keeping their feet under them under them and inside a "barrel". This will enable them to "buzz" their feet. That means taking

short, choppy steps to stop momentum and then bursting into another direction. We want to take as few steps as possible when buzzing our feet, but we must take as many as necessary. They must get used to keeping their feet moving at all times because it's difficult to change direction and/or run with feet stuck into the ground.

3. 5-yard Rush Points

The difference between 5-yard and 2-yard sprints is that the former is more pass rush oriented while the latter is more run oriented. We start this drill like the 5-yard sprint (strength call, stance, "Ball!" call cue, simulated snap, sprint) and we rush to a quarterback at 5 yards.



If I call out "Pass!" during their rush they have to immediately stop coming up field and go vertical with their arms as high as they can get them in an attempt to block the pass - or at minimum to take away a passing lane. I could call "Pass!" at any time (1 step, 1 yard, 3 steps, 4 yards, etc.). They should jump as many times as possible before I end the drill.

After one or two reps, we then add quarterback movement to the drill (sprints, boots, scrambles) and the defensive linemen have to take the correct angle and speed adjustments to maintain their rush points and to make sure they keep the quarterback inside and in front of them.

Coaching Points: Never rush past the quarterback - we always want him inside and in front of us. On the first rep the players sprint to their quarterback rush points and breakdown on him in a good football position while chopping their feet. We rise as we get to the quarterback because we want to hit him high (top of his numbers) to prevent the pass.

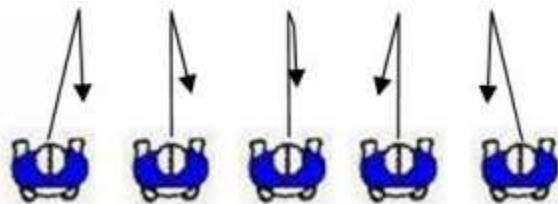
When defenders jump to block a pass (or take away a passing lane), they must go straight up (not forward).

I use a player as the quarterback so that I can observe overall technique and rush lanes.

Note: On our pass rush we have specific rush points. The defensive ends rush to the quarterback's near ear while keeping him inside and in front of them. The defensive tackles rush the quarterback's near eye while keeping him inside and in front. If we have a nose, his job is to rush the quarterback's nose. If the quarterback sprints out or scrambles, each player must adjust appropriately to maintain his rush point responsibility.

4. 5-yard Retrace

Remember, 5-yard drills are usually pass oriented. Retrace is a redirect in the passing game. We call it retrace because usually it means linemen go back to where they came from in immediate pursuit. This drill simulates reacting to draws, quarterback scrambles, screens, and downfield passes. It is the same as the 5-yard Rush Points drill except now we add the redirect element. The players change direction on my call. I can give the call at any point in the drill. If they get all the way to the quarterback they will stay in a football position while chopping their feet until the call is made.

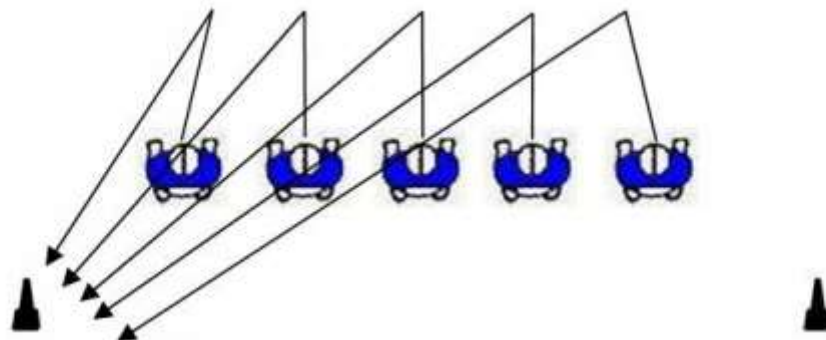


Coaching Points: On the retrace, the key point is for all players to turn towards the ball. For example if it is a quarterback draw over the center, then the defenders turn their chests to the inside and retrace the rush lane they just came from. This helps them to keep sight of the ball and to keep proper pursuit angles while changing direction.

Note: Defensive linemen are required to get into pursuit on downfield passes. They are not allowed to turn around and watch the play with only linebackers and defensive backs responsible for the ball. We always want to hit the quarterback (take every legal hit you can get), however if a player can't get to the quarterback then he starts to retrace his footsteps as the quarterback is finishing his throwing motion.

5. Pursuit Drill

This drill is similar to the 5-yard sprint except we add pursuit to it. Place a cone 10 yards wide by 10 yards deep from the defensive ends. On the snap simulation the players begin their 5-yard sprint upfield. At some point during the drill, I will point at one of the cones. If they go five yards before I give them a direction they break down in a good football position while chopping their feet. Once I give a direction, all players immediately turn their chest toward the cone and sprint. They are trying to be the first one to the cone.



Coaching Point: Never chase the same color jersey, always move one man over to the inside. When the players get to the cone they should be in football position side by side (touching shoulder to shoulder) instead of in a straight line stacked behind each other. Often you will see a player get passed in pursuit and move one jersey over. That's when you know they get it. We stress never getting passed in pursuit, but I am realistic to know that sometimes I am going to have a big boy at defensive tackle who is going to be passed. If he's moving over a man and going all out I can live with that.

Note: Occasionally we will do a redirect during the pursuit. It's a great change up and reinforces redirect while giving maximum effort in pursuit.

Coaching Defensive Linemen

Part III - Practice Categories and Drills:

Tackling and Turnovers

Mike Walker

Assistant Coach, Ishpeming (Mich.) High School

In the third part of this series, we will discuss the Tackling and Turnovers categories with sample drills.

Category III: Tackling

If you list the best tacklers you have seen you would probably name a lot of linebackers and defensive backs, but probably not a lot of defensive linemen. For some reason we don't think of linemen as great tacklers. Again, it's not always what you teach, it's also what you emphasize. We want our defensive linemen to be great tacklers.

We use all of the techniques and skills that we have already taught defensive linemen to be a part of their tackling. If their pad level is low, if they are keeping their power angle, if they are giving effort and moving their feet, then making a tackle will be easy.



We have one basic tackling progression - Fit, Rip, Drive (FRD). The progression is Locked In, Backed Up and Close the Distance. We might get to all progressions in one practice, we might only want to do a couple of them, or we might want to emphasize certain aspects on a given day.

The progression teaches the proper Fit on the ball carrier (nose fits into the ball while maintaining the correct power angle and pad level); how to use your shoulders, arms and hands in the tackle by using a Rip technique (delivering a blow with our shoulders, ripping our arms up through the tackle in a violent manner, grabbing cloth high on the back of the jersey of the ball carrier); and how to Drive through a tackle (go through - not to - the ball carrier).

We want to run through all contact and always drive the ball carrier backwards to eliminate yards after contact while maintaining a low pad level and keeping our power angles. In this drill, and in team, we want all ball carriers driven back five yards. We also want to stress how proper helmet and hand placement during the initial contact of a tackle can create turnovers. We want to tackle the ball carrier through the football every chance we get.

1. FRD Locked In - Bird Dog

Partner up. The "offensive" players' feet are on a yard line while holding (or simulating holding) a football under their right arm. On the "Fit" command the defensive players fit their noses on the ball while demonstrating all of the techniques we have learned (low pad level, proper power angle, etc.). Their elbows are tight to the body and bent as if the about to un-holster guns from the hip.

On the "Rip" command they violently rip their arms up and grab cloth as high up the back of the ball carrier as possible while maintaining the best football position possible. Keep shoulders behind shoulder pads. They are leaning hard into the ball carrier with their toes grabbing dirt. The ball carrier has to lean into the defender to keep his balance.

On the Rip, grab cloth and pull the ball carrier into you by pulling your elbows back past your ribs (elbows don't get wide, keep them tight to the body during this motion). We aren't trying to wrap our arms around the ball carrier. We are grabbing cloth as high up the ball carrier's back as possible and hugging while pulling him into us as we sprint through the tackle.



Fit nose on ball, maintain pad level and power angle.



Rip arms up, grab cloth high on back of ball carrier.



Drive - sprint through ball carrier for five yards.

Note: We aren't trying to roll our hips into the tackle, but instead trying to pull his hips into us. This helps us keep our power angle while moving our feet. In this way, we keep our energy moving forward instead of up (when our energy goes up, it means we are extending our legs and are playing under our shoulder pads instead of keeping our power angle and playing behind our shoulder pads). Of course we realize that there is going to be a natural rise during a tackle as players battle for leverage and momentum, but we still stress pulling the ball carrier into us as a way to maintain maximum power angles and foot drive.

On the "Drive" command we SPRINT through the ball carrier and take him back 5 yards. We don't want to drop the ball carrier, and after a yard the ball carrier relaxes his pressure (this is a drill for the tackler not the runner). However, sometimes players will fall so the ball carrier must protect himself during the drill. Once the tackler starts the sprint there will be a natural rise as he drives the ball carrier back. That is alright as long as he stays square on the ball carrier (doesn't turn his pads, gets lopsided one way or the other, or starts twisting), keeps his shoulders behind his pads, and keeps his power angle (Z in the knees, ankles behind his gluts, hips locked, back flat, eyes up) throughout the Drive.

On the whistle, tacklers stop and are checked for technique. Their partners help coach them up also. Turn around, have the ball carriers switch the ball to the left arm and repeat the drill. When we get back to the original yard line the players switch positions.

Note: Bird Dog means to move step by step on separate commands.

2. FRD Locked In - One Motion

This is the same drill without bird dogging it. Now we carry out all three phases in a single motion off one command, "Set ... Hit!"

3. FRD Backed Up

Now the tackler is in a good football position one-yard from the ball carrier, and he will have to take a couple of step before going through the FRD all in one motion. The ball carrier does not come forward on this drill, but must lean into the contact. We are looking for a fluid motion through the contact to Fit-Rip-Drive without any hesitation in motion, or adjustment of technique or power angles. Each player gets a right and left rep.



Tackler backed up one yard from ball carrier.



Variation 1: Tackler perpendicular to ball carrier.

Variation 1: Have the defender face perpendicular to the ball carrier at the start of the drill so he has to turn his body into the contact.

Variation 2: Incorporate an "effort indicator". For example, the linemen could lay belly-down 2-yards from the ball carrier. On

command, the defender gets up and completes the drill. The key here is that the player gains ground as he gets up off of the ground. This will put him into the desired football position with the correct power angle in two short yards, instead of popping up like toast and trying to recover his technique while moving forward. The secret to accomplishing this is to lift one foot all the way under his hips as he does a pushup so he can get into a sprint as he is getting off the ground.



Variation 2: Tackler starts from a prone position.

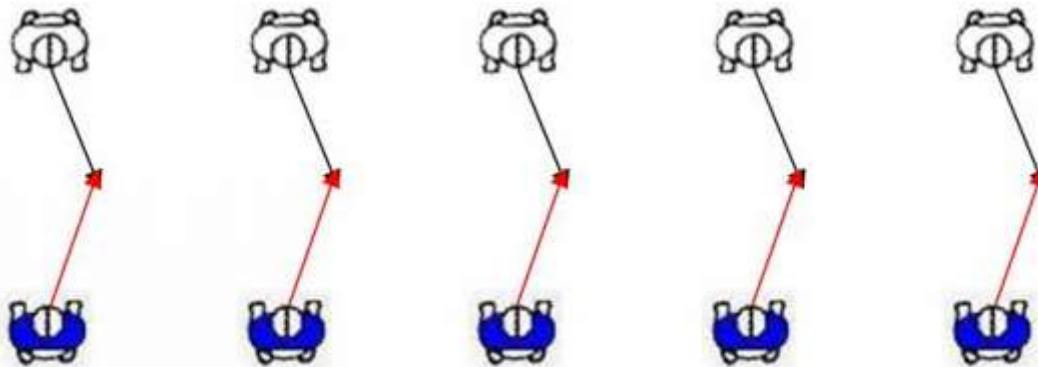
Variation 2: Tackler explodes from the ground.



Variation 2: Tackler Fit-Rip-Drives the ball carrier. Note the perfect form of the tackler on his approach.

4. FRD Close the Distance

This incorporates both players moving. You will need to make sure there is at least 5 yards spacing between the groups to prevent players from tripping over each other. All action starts with a hand signal by the coach instead of with a verbal command. The coach stands behind the linemen and points to a direction to the ball carriers (right/left), then says “Set” to ready the players. The coach raises his arm up and when he drops it the ball carriers will begin moving (no audio command to start the action).



The defenders must react to the movement and take the proper angle to make the tackle. The ball carriers are aiming for a point two or three yards outside of the tackler in a straight line. This is a sprint between the ball carrier and the tackler to see who will cross the midway first (2 1/2 yards). The ball carrier is aggressive through initial contact and then relaxes and protects himself as the tackler drives him back five yards.

Variation 1: Have the defender perpendicular to the ball carrier at the start of the drill so he has to turn his body into the contact.

Variation 2: Incorporate an “effort indicator”. For example, the linemen could lay belly-down facing the ball carrier at the start of the drill.

Category IV: Turnovers

This is perhaps the most under-coached aspect of defense overall and particularly with defensive linemen. It’s easy to incorporate turnover skills and techniques into tackle and pursuit drills. You must teach defensive lineman how to hold the football. We don’t do anything complicated. All we teach them is to wrap both arms around the ball across our chest. That’s it. We just want the possession. Any yards you can get after possession is gravy. However, you have to practice it and emphasize it to make it happen.

1. Fumble Recovery Drill

This is your basic ball on the ground recovery drill. Line the players up in two lines and 10 yards apart. The front player in each line stands 10 yards in front of and facing his line. He represents the offense. The first player in the line represents the defense and gets into a good football position. The offensive player rolls or bounces the ball to make it difficult to recover as all defensive players yell "Ball!" The defender recovers the ball by scooping it into his body and getting into the fetal position. It doesn't matter if the ball is bouncing around, do whatever it takes to get on it. Recover the ball with your eyes - never take your eyes off the ball the whole drill.

The next defensive player in line covers his teammate after he recovers the ball to prevent cheap shots or someone from taking the ball from him.

Both lines go at the same time. It is a rapid fire drill. The coach jumps back and forth emphasizing the correct fetal technique. It usually takes only one rep to get it, but have them take another rep if they are sloppy in their effort or fetal position.

Coaching Points: The key point is to get into a good fetal position. The player should be laying on his side. He should pull the ball into his chest as tight as possible with both arms wrapped around the ball while pulling his knees up to his chest and tucking his chin. His whole body should be cradling the ball.

2. Fumble Battle Drill

Keep the players in the two lines, but now the two lines are 3 yards apart. The coach will roll the ball between the first two players in the line who will battle for the recovery. Make it a slow whistle to end the drill so that if the player who recovered the ball isn't in a good fetal position the other player can still try to strip it and take it away. Each line cheers for their teammate. You can turn it into a competition with the team recovering the fewest fumbles having to do 5 up-downs or 10 pushups, etc. Make sure the players understand the purpose of the drill. It isn't to hurt anyone, it's to get the football for your team.

3. Scoop and Score Drill

I don't spend a lot of time teaching the fumble scoop to defensive linemen. Most of their opportunities come in a congested area (fumbled snaps, missed handoffs, etc.) and we want the ball. If you are going to teach the scoop, the main coaching points are to scoop with two hands, bend at the knees - not the waist - when picking up the ball, pick it up from the side if possible (not in front of you to eliminate kicking the ball), and to pick it up with your eyes - never take your eyes off the ball until it is secured in your arms. You can add scoop drills at the end of bag drills, as part of tackle drills, etc.

4. Strip Drill

The Strip Drill is a 2-on-1 drill. Two defenders are in a good football position three yards apart with a ball carrier splitting them from three yards away. On command, the ball carrier attacks one of the two defenders at full speed. That defender carries out the Fit-Rip-Drive drill (full speed, try to take the ball carrier back five yards, etc.). The second defender is responsible for attacking the football and creating the fumble. The ball carrier must give maximum resistance (he should not twist or turn and should keep his feet during the drill) and protect the ball (he is not allowed to fumble).

The defense only gets about 2 or 3 seconds to create the turnover. If there is no fumble - or if the ball carrier breaks the tackle - the offense wins the drill. If there is a fumble, the defense must recover the ball to win the drill. You can use either the Fumble Recovery Drill or Scoop and Score Drill for recovery, but they must gain possession of the ball to win the drill.

Coaching Point: If the runner has the ball well secured (elbow tight to the body, front tip pointing up), then attack one of its two points (front/back) through either the elbow or the hand. The key is to aggressively rip the ball, hand or elbow away from the ball carrier with maximum force (up, down, out whichever works best for the situation). Any time the ball carrier doesn't have the ball secured (away from the body, front tip pointed down) punch or club through the ball. The defender should try to wrap his off arm around the ball carrier to help secure the tackle in case he doesn't create the turnover.



The ball is tight to the body, so the defender should attack either the front point or the elbow.



The ball is away from the body, so the defender should either punch up or club down on the ball.

5. Volleyball Drill

We won't spend a lot of time working on interceptions with the front line, but again, if it is a skill that you want your players to have you must emphasize it and teach it at some point. A quick and fun way to teach interception skills is the Volleyball drill. Set up four (three, five, etc.) lines with the front player in each line simulating the defensive front. The coach tosses a ball up high to any of the defensive linemen, who does a high volleyball serve, with a second and then third defensive lineman repeating the serve until the fourth defensive lineman makes the interception (or interception attempt).

Coaching Point: Intercept the ball at it's highest point (don't let it come to you, go get it). Get both hands on the ball. You must watch the ball into your hands - **CATCH THE BALL WITH YOUR EYES** - and immediately fold the ball into your arms across your chest, then burst into a five-yard sprint as your teammates block for you. If the player drops the interception everyone should good-naturedly boo him.

Coaching Defensive Linemen

Part IV - Practice Categories and Drills: Separation/Escape, Anti-Blocking

Mike Walker
Assistant Coach, Ishpeming (Mich.) H.S.

In the fourth part of this series, we will discuss the Separation/Escape and Anti-Blocking categories with sample drills.

Category V: Separation and Escape

This is the single most important category there is for defensive linemen. Without being able to separate and escape from a block there is no reason to teach how to tackle, create turnovers or read blocks.

1. Chicken Fight

This teaches proper hand placement in the Pentagon. The key points here are that your thumbs are pointing straight up and your elbows are inside the frame of your body ([Part I, 12](#)).

Players partner up over a yard line, get into a good football position, and try to get their hands inside the Pentagon. On command, both players battle to get their hands inside the Pentagon (both players are on defense) to control their partner and the first player to get both feet across the yard line wins the drill.



Both players must fight to get their hands inside and should use the wrist click ([Part I, 12](#)). If a player is losing control, he must sink his hips and knees, keep his shoulders behind his shoulder pads, keep his head up, keep his eyes lower than his opponent's eyes, and turn his toes in (pigeon toe) to regain his power angle. This ensures that the players energy is going forward instead of straight up.

This is a competition drill. Win the drill.

Variation: You can use this as a partner drill where players alternate driving each back for three yards. The offensive player must lean hard into the defensive player to force proper technique and power angles by the defender.

2. Rip

Partner up across a yard line. One line is designated the defense. The defensive players get into a good football position with hands in the Pentagon, while the offensive players get a good bend in their knees and lean into their partners. On command, one line will execute a Rip to the left (using right hand) with the coach checking for proper technique and being in a good football position as they clear the blocker. On command they reset, and then execute a Rip to the right (using left hand). Then their partners get their reps. Do as many reps as necessary with both lines.

Variation 1: As players start to master the technique (learn the technique first) add a second element, such as redirect, form tackle, or fumble recovery technique.

Variation 2: As the season progresses, the players partner up and do multiple rapid fire rips independently, while the coach goes through observing groups and complimenting and/or correcting.

Coaching Point: The defensive player must maintain his power angle and stay in a good football position. We don't want to raise up and expose our body to the blocker. On a Rip to the left, we want to push the blockers shoulders up with the left hand (you may have

to take a quick lateral step with the left foot for maximum leverage), while ripping the right hand under the shoulder pads (arm pit). We want to punch the sky with the Rip. Swing the arm with full force right off of your hip (tight) while stepping through with the right foot at the same time. We want to get our shoulder completely under and pass the blockers shoulder pad edge. We want to get behind the blocker, and as we clear him we want to slap his thigh with the Rip hand (this brings our pad level down to a good position).



Force the blocker's shoulder up with opposite hand.



Rip and step with the same side hand and foot.



Slap the blocker's thigh with the rip hand after clearing the blocker to keep the correct pad level.

Make sure you step with the correct foot on the Rip (right hand equals right foot). If you step with the wrong (outside) foot you give up the leverage to push the blocker's shoulder pads back and up with the outside hand, and you run the risk of being blocked out of your gap because of poor balance during contact.

3. Turn Drill

This teaches how to use leverage on a laterally moving blocker (i.e. reach). Players line up in two lines along a yard line (one side represents the offense). A cone is placed five yards down the yard line. The first two players get into a good football position, head up, with the defender's hands in the Pentagon, thumbs up, elbows in (Chicken Fight Drill). Place a cone five yards down the line.

On command the blocker aggressively tries to move the defender off the LOS and finish the reach block. The defender attacks the offensive player and has five yards (to the cone) to defeat the reach by turning the blockers shoulder pads while forcing the linemen to lose ground off the LOS.

The defender locks out the arm in the direction of the offensive lineman's block and pulls his other arm in tight. He is trying to turn the pads of the blocker to take away his blocking angle. For example, if they are moving to the defender's left, he locks out his left arm and pulls in with his right arm. While we are doing this we are violently attacking the blocker, trying to force him up, his chest towards the sideline, and his body into the backfield.



We continue to shuffle with the blocker until we reach a point where we can explode to the ball. While engaging the blocker we want to remain as square to the LOS as possible. As you escape the blocker, the angle of the attack on the ball carrier will determine your hip action. If the ball carrier is still in the backfield and about a yard to your outside remain square and use the rip to attack the ball. If the ball carrier is further than a yard, already at the LOS or crossing the LOS, burst down the LOS to the ball carrier.

This is a competition drill. Win the drill.

Variation 1: You can start the offensive players head already to the reach side, forcing the defender to start the drill from a bad position.

Variation 2: When initially teaching the technique, you can partner up all of the players and signal the offense which way to block. Then on command all players practice the turn technique.

Variation 3: As players start to master the technique (learn the technique first) add a second element, such as form tackle or fumble recovery techniques.

Coaching Points: You want your head to the side of the shuffle. Your hands are in the Pentagon, thumbs are up and grab the breastplate of the shoulder pads. When you lock out it is a violent push. When you are pulling the other arm in, you are trying to turn his shoulders with an aggressive pull, but you aren't trying to pull him into your body - keep him off your body by pushing your butt away from the offensive player.



The pull with the opposite arm is aggressive. Keep the blocker off the body by maintaining correct pad level.



Lock out the playside arm with an aggressive push. Notice how the hands are still in the Pentagon.

During the lock out, shuffle your feet - don't crossover your feet during any of the contact. The location of the ball carrier gives the direction of the release. Sprint down the line, or upfield.

4. Superman

This teach full arm extension after making contact with the shoulder pads (remember our concept of making all contact with shoulders first) and how to use the hips without giving up the correct pad level. Players partner up along a yard line and get into six-point stances (hands, knees and toes on the ground, with the toes curled under) while sitting back on their heels.

The coach tells the defenders which way to shade and then signals the cadence to the offense. On the cadence, the offensive player drives into the defender without lifting his knees off the ground. On the offensive player's movement, the defender fires into the blocker without lifting his knees off the ground, slams the blocker with full shoulder contact, and then shoots his hands into the pentagon.

The defender should get a full extension of his body while throwing the blocker straight back. If the defensive player does it right, his momentum will leave him laying flat on his belly with his arms out in front of him (like Superman flying through the air), and the offensive player will be laying on his back of sitting on his rear.



When we first teach the drill, all of the players are lined up but we go one group at a time so that the correct technique can be coached and observed. Once the correct technique is understood and being performed, then we have the full line go simultaneously to see who can throw their blocker back the farthest.

Coaching Point: We want our energy to go straight through the blocker. The defender should not rise up, but should maintain a flat back and the correct pad level through contact. Once contact is made with full force, and after the hands are being shot into the pentagon, the hips are used to finish the drill. In other words, the defender brings his shoulders and hands first and his hips last. A common mistake is to bring the hips immediately on contact, which forces the defender's energy up instead of forward.

5. Push-Pull Leverage Drill

On all run blocks we want to attack the blocker in the center of his body with our shoulder pads. We want shoulder contact before we shoot our hands into the pentagon. The only time that changes is when we recognize a high-hat pass block. Versus the pass block we don't want to get into the body of the blocker, and we want to get our hands on the blocker as quick as possible.

Our basic move to escape the pass blocker is the push-pull leverage technique. We want to get our hands on the blocker as quick as possible and use his leverage against him. If you push a person, he will lean into you to maintain his balance (be on his toes). If you pull a person forward he will pull away from you to maintain his balance (on his heels). This drill teaches how to take advantage of the leverage created by pushing and pulling a blocker.

Players partner up with the defender's hand in the pentagon. On command the offensive player drops back into high-hat pass protection while the defensive player alternately pushes (up) and pulls (down) - dictated by the blocker's momentum - for about 10 yards. What this does is teach the defender how to use the blocker's leverage against him while still maintaining the proper power angle and pad level. Once the blocker is to the cone, the defender rips if the blocker is on his heels (while continuing to push up with the non-rip arm), or punches his arm over if the blocker is on his toes (while continuing to pull down with the other arm).

Coaching Points: The arm over is an aggressive punch over the blocker's shoulder pad. We want to get our elbow over and pass the blocker's pads as quickly as possible (don't wind up, and don't bring the arm up high into the air). As you punch, make sure you step with the same foot. For example, if you are pulling down with the left hand, then bring the right foot with the right arm. You want to get behind the blocker, and as you clear him you want to slap his thigh with the arm-over hand (this brings your pad level down to a good position).

Obviously when a player pulls the blocker down, for a split second he won't be gaining ground. The key is for the defender to keep a good pad level and a good base so he can explode and take advantage of the offensive player adjusting his balance in only two steps. The first step is a quick and short lateral step with the outside foot to set up the arm over punch. This helps the player with balance and keeps him from locking his feet into the ground. The second step is the step and punch technique.

Category VI: Anti-blocking

This is where we teach how to defeat the specific blocks we will see during a season. It is also where the dip or squeeze concept ([Part I, 13](#)) is perfected. If we are blocked from any angle, we dip - reset our power angle and pad level (chest on knee). If we aren't blocked, we squeeze the air out of the inside gap (squeeze down to the next offensive lineman). It is important to understand that we dip on all contact, so after squeezing, the defender still dips to take on a trapper, or kick out block by a back, etc.

The key to defeating run blocks is to be in the proper football position and power angle ([Part I, 9](#)). This is why we stress the concept

of chest on knee, the power angle, and sprinting through contact. You can't defeat a base, reach, down, double team, or trap block if you are showing your numbers, giving up your gluts and thighs, or leaning into blockers.

When taking on any block you must understand your visual and pressure keys. The visual key is the man you read, which is usually the player you are aligned on. The pressure key is the man blocking you. The pressure of the block tells you the direction of the play (pressure on your right, ball is going to your right).

Often your visual and pressure key are the same man. You always dip into your pressure key. If you have two pressure keys (double team block) you attack the first pressure key (the closest blocker). If on the snap you don't have a pressure key, then you squeeze and attack the blocker that is coming. He is the pressure key. Again, it is important to understand that we dip on all contact, so after squeezing, the defender still dips to take on a trapper, or kick out block by a back, etc.

1. Pinch Drill

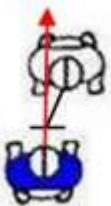
This features one-on-one blocks. The players partner up across a yard line, with each set of players about five yards apart. One line is designated the defense and are given a shade and strength call. The coach signals the block (base, reach, slip, down, cutoff, pass) and cadence to the offensive players and then all players get in their stances. On the cadence the offensive players execute the correct block (or action). The defensive player must attack (dip) and defeat the block, or react correctly if he is unblocked (squeeze).



Note: This is an aggressive and competitive drill that we use a lot during the preseason and then early in the week during the season. The offensive player wants to dominate the defensive player with his block, while the defensive player wants to destroy the block and both players battle to the whistle. This teaches how to destroy a block and control a blocker (do not avoid the block or work on quick escapes). It is a physical drill and the defender must neutralize the blocker completely. This emphasizes the proper pad level, power angle and effort needed to dominate a blocker.

Here are examples of the blocks we will work against during the pinch drill:

Base Block: This is when your visual key comes right at you and tries to move you off the LOS. You must dip and control your gap. The side the blocker is trying to work his helmet to is your pressure key. Defeat the base block with your shoulder technique and the 2-yard sprint.

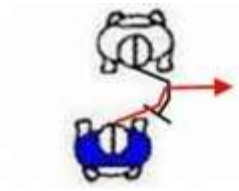


Reach Block: This is when your visual key tries to reach your gap responsibility shoulder. The play is coming toward your gap shoulder. You must dip and control your gap. Our number one rule is to never get reached and this is why your initial stance footwork is so important ([Part II, Category I, Check Stance](#)). Attack the blocker and work laterally and upfield to prevent the reach block. You must work the blocker into the backfield while keeping your head and hips in the gap you are responsible for.



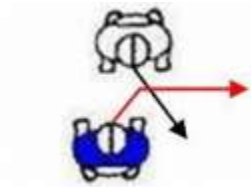
Cutoff: This is when the ball is going away from you and your pressure key (could be your visual key or an adjacent player) is trying

to cut you off from pursuit by turning his hips perpendicular to the LOS. (It is only a cutoff block if the blocker turns his hips. Otherwise it would be either a base or reach block.)



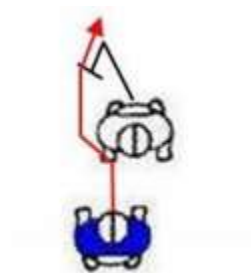
We play this the same way as a down block. We want to play behind the cutoff block to keep gap integrity and to get into pursuit quicker. You are being blocked so dip. Once you have dipped, you must take away the power angle of the blocker with the Pivot technique. This means you change the direction of your power angle by pivoting your hips perpendicular to the LOS toward the cutoff block.

Slip Block: This is when your visual key tries to avoid you by slipping to the inside (most likely on a down block to a linebacker). You must make aggressive contact with the lineman on the LOS to prevent an easy release to the second level, then squeeze the inside gap and wrap arm the blocker coming your way (expect a trap or kick out block).



A slip block means you aren't being blocked on the snap so you will squeeze the inside gap - after making contact on your visual key. When a tackle squeezes, he turns his shoulders parallel to the LOS and sprints down the line looking for a trapper. When an end squeezes, his angle is determined by where the blocker is coming from - the backfield or down the line. In all situations, you want to attack the next blocker, don't let him come to you.

Pass Block: A pass block is a high-hat block. If you don't get a high-hat block, then play run - dip on contact, squeeze on non-contact. Versus the pass block you don't want to get into the body of the blocker, but instead you want to get your hands on the blocker as quick as possible. (Use the push-pull technique, which should end with either a rip or arm over technique). It is very important to understand that you don't want to run around and avoid a pass blocker. That will only widen your pass rush lane (remember the ears, eyes and nose pass rush rules [Part II, Category II, 5-Yard Rush Points](#)) while making the blocker's job easier.



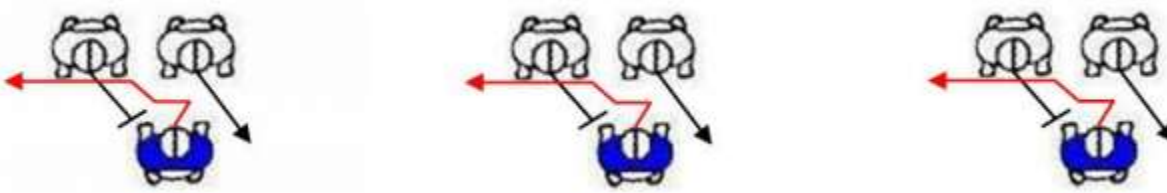
There are three parts to the pass rush, the takeoff, getting past the blocker, and getting to the quarterback. The takeoff is the most important part. Get out of your stance and attack the blocker. The key to getting past the blocker is attacking half of the blocker - half a man is easier to beat than a full man. If you can get your shoulder pads behind the blocker's pads, then you have beaten him. Getting to the quarterback includes any action that disrupts the passing game including sacking the quarterback, disrupting the timing of the pass, or taking away a passing lane.

Note: It is important for pass rushers to defeat the blocker before worrying about the quarterback. Quarterbacks need time to make their drop, set up and then throw to an open receiver. If a rusher attacks the snap and attacks the blocker, then he will have time to take away a passing lane, disrupt timing, or get to the quarterback.

2. Combo Drill

This features combination blocks. The players are divided into groups of three or four. One player will be the defender with the rest

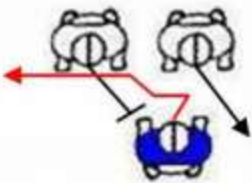
representing the offense. The coach signals the block (double team, scoop, trap, pulls) and cadence to the offensive players and then all players get in their stances. On the cadence the offensive players execute the blocks (or action). The defensive player must attack (dip) and defeat the block, or react correctly if he is unblocked (squeeze).



Note: This is an aggressive and competitive drill that we use a lot during the preseason and then early in the week during the season. The offensive players want to dominate the defensive player with their blocks, while the defensive player wants to destroy blocks and all players battle to the whistle. This teaches how to destroy blocks and to control blockers (do not avoid blocks or work on quick escapes). It is a physical drill and the defender must make the correct read and reaction and neutralize blockers completely. This emphasizes the proper pad level, power angle and effort needed to dominate a blocker.

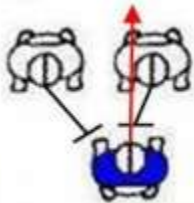
Here are examples of the combo blocks we will work against:

Down Block: This is when the adjacent blocker to your outside blocks you inside (washes you down the line). This is the single most difficult block for a linemen to defeat. Your visual key could be down blocking, slipping, or pulling. Our base rule is to play behind the down block because it help you keep your gap integrity and you will get into pursuit quicker. If you try to play in front of a down block, there is a higher chance of a blocker riding you into your teammates which interrupts gap integrity and pursuit lanes.



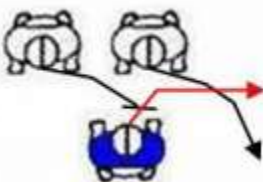
The man over you is your visual key and the player down blocking is the pressure key. The ball is coming outside of the down block. In all situations where you have a pressure key - being blocked - you dip. Once you have dipped, you must take away the power angle of the blocker with the Pivot technique. This means you change the direction of your power angle by pivoting your hips perpendicular to the LOS toward the down block while keeping the correct power angle and pad level. This takes away the blocking angle of your opponent and allows you to get into pursuit behind the LOS.

Double Team Block: This is a combination of two blockers using a base and down block on you. The ball is going outside of the down block. Although you are being blocked by two players, we treat this as a base block because it is easier to attack one player than two. Dip and attack your visual key. Your goal is to get penetration and make both players block you (so one can't slip off and go to the second level).



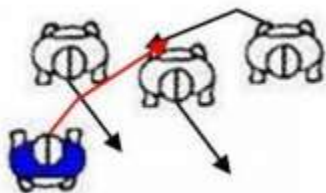
However, if you start to lose any ground against a double team, immediately drop your nose to the ground. Literally drop down to your hands and knees with your nose on the ground. That will prevent you from rising up to fight the pressure and getting driven off the LOS. It is the quickest and easiest way to break momentum and cause a pile of players at the LOS.

Scoop Block: This is when your visual key releases away from your gap shoulder to work to another defender, or the second level, and the adjacent blocker tries to reach your far shoulder (if your visual key releases toward your gap shoulder we consider it a reach block instead of a scoop).

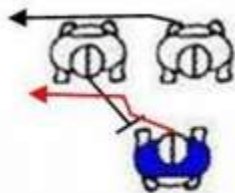


Treat this like a slip block. You aren't being blocked on the snap so squeeze the inside gap - and make contact on your visual key. Turn your shoulders parallel to the LOS and sprint down the line. This turns your back to the scoop player, making it a more difficult block for him, it gets you behind the LOS (we want to come behind the slip player), and it helps you maintain cutback and pursuit integrity.

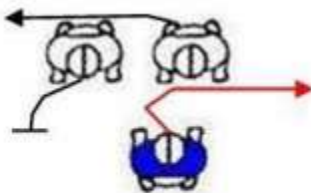
Trap Block: This is when your visual key leaves you unblocked so that a pulling lineman (near guard, far guard, far tackle) blocks you. You are the POA. You aren't being blocked, so squeeze the air out of the inside gap. Turn your shoulders parallel to the LOS, sprint down the LOS and wrong arm the coming blocker. You must squeeze the gap completely. It isn't enough to take on the trapper in your gap, you must squeeze the gap and trap the trapper the next gap over. In other words, don't let the trapper come to you, attack him instead.



Pulls: This is when your visual key releases down the line behind the LOS. It is difficult to make contact with a well coached puller so we want to make sure we react to the pressure key as quick as possible. Outside pulls are often combined with a down block, which becomes your pressure key. You are being blocked so that means you dip and play the down block (pivot). If he pulls to the outside and you aren't blocked, immediately squeeze the inside gap (don't chase the puller outside if you aren't blocked) and attack the next blocker - don't let him come to you.

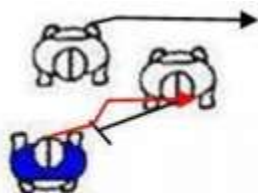


**Outside Pull
with Down Block**

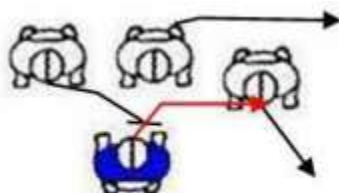


**Outside Pull
and Unblocked**

Inside pulls are often combined with a cutoff block, which becomes your pressure key. You are being blocked so that means you dip and play the cutoff block (pivot). If he pulls to the inside and you aren't blocked, treat it like a scoop block. You aren't being blocked on the snap so squeeze the inside gap. Turn your shoulders parallel to the LOS and sprint down the line. This turns your back to a possible scoop blocker, making it a more difficult block for him, it gets you behind the LOS (we want to come behind the slip player), and it helps you maintain cutback and pursuit integrity.



**Inside Pull
with Cutoff Block**



**Inside Pull
with Scoop Block**

Coaching Defensive Linemen

Part V - Practice Categories and Drills: Anti-Scoring, Keys/Blocking Schemes

Mike Walker

Assistant Coach, Ishpeming (Mich.) High School

In the final part of this series, we will discuss the Anti-Scoring and Keys/Blocking Schemes categories with sample drills.

Category VII: Anti-Scoring

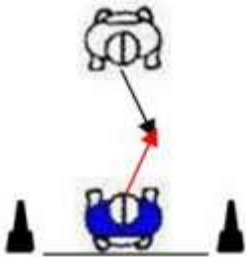
While this category emphasizes anti-blocking and tackling skills, I list it as a separate category because of what is emphasized: keeping the ball carrier out of the end zone while the defense is in its most vulnerable spot of the field - inside its own five yard line.



It also simulates important short yardage situations (3rd and 2, 4th and 1, etc.). This is a competitive category that emphasizes making the play anyway possible.

1. One-on-one

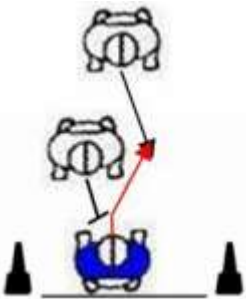
Mark the goal line (first-down line, etc.). The defensive player's heels are on the goal line and the offensive player is 3 yards away. Cones or dummies mark the boundaries five-yards apart. On the signal the offensive player does everything he can to score and the defensive player does everything he can to stop him from scoring. This is a live drill.



The drill ends on a tackle, a score, a turnover, or if the defensive player runs the ball carrier back several yards. The goal is to stop the score. This is a very competitive drill and should be taught as a competitive drill. It's a pass/fail drill. Either you stopped him or you didn't.

2. Nutcracker

Same as above except now the defender has to defeat an offensive lineman to make the play. Regardless of scheme, usually in a goal line situation a defensive lineman is a gap player. Give a shade and the offensive linemen will lineup next to the opposite dummy. A variation is to have two defensive and offensive linemen.



Note: This is a short drill with a quick whistle. The point isn't to beat up players, but to teach them to make the play - no excuses - in an important situation. It is about developing an attitude.

Category VIII. Keys/Blocking Schemes

This category incorporates the 3 A's of Defense ([Part I, 15](#)) against the blocking schemes we will see Friday night.

When teaching keys and blocking schemes, players must be able to identify if a block signifies a run or pass, if it's a run toward them or away, and if it's a run toward them, are they the Point of Attack. If they are the POA, they must be able to control their gap, even if that means they do it with the body of the blocker. If they aren't the POA, they must understand their gap, cutback and pursuit responsibilities.

Players also need to know where a block can come from and what kind of block he can expect from each offensive player. For example a 3 technique can be blocked by a guard (base, reach, double team), tackle (down, scoop, double team), center (down), or far guard (trap). As a coach you must make sure each week that your linemen know who can block them, and how.

This is also where players master their visual and pressure keys ([Part IV, Category VI, Anti-Blocking](#)). The visual key is the man you read, which is usually the player you are aligned on. A pressure key is the player blocking you. The pressure of the block tells you where the ball is going (pressure on your right, ball is going to your right).

For example, if you are a 3 technique and the offensive guard tries to reach you, then the ball is going to your outside. However, if the offensive tackle is trying to scoop you, then the ball is going to your inside (or actually the opposite side of the center).

Often your visual and pressure key are the same man. You always dip into your pressure key. If on the snap you don't have a pressure key, then you squeeze the air out of the inside gap and attack the blocker that is coming. He is the pressure key.

Again, it is important to understand that we dip on all contact, so after squeezing, the defender still dips to take on a trapper, or kick out block by a back, etc.

There are two parts to this category - individual reactions (Partner Drill) and group reactions (Scheme Reads). For individual reactions, we often separate tackles and ends so they can work on the keys and blocking schemes unique to their positions.

For example, a defensive end has to be able to play a kick out block from a near back, near guard, far guard, or far tackle, while a defensive tackle primarily only has to play a kick out (trap) block from a far guard.

Group reactions combine two or more players reading the same blocking scheme at the same time. Combinations can be set up by strong side or weak side players, interior players, full line, etc.

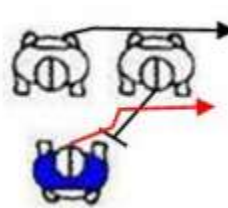
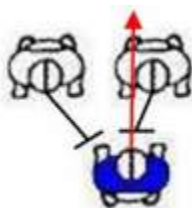
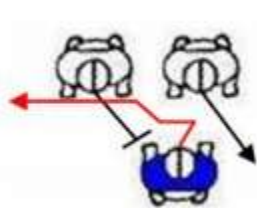
It is important to understand that the further away from the center a defensive lineman plays, the easier it is to read blocks and the fewer blocking angles he has to face. However, he has to be a better athlete in space and able to cover more distance quicker.

It is just the opposite for defenders closer to the ball. The nose tackle has more players to read but less time to read them, more angles he can be blocked from, and he must be a stronger player able to consistently take on bigger athletes and more double teams.

It is your responsibility as the coach to let players at each position learn and develop accordingly, and you must take that into account as you develop your practice progression.

1. Partner Drill

This is very similar to combo drills except it is more of a mental drill and each group works independently of each other. Break up the players into groups of three (hopefully ends with ends and tackles with tackles). One player will be on defense, the other two will



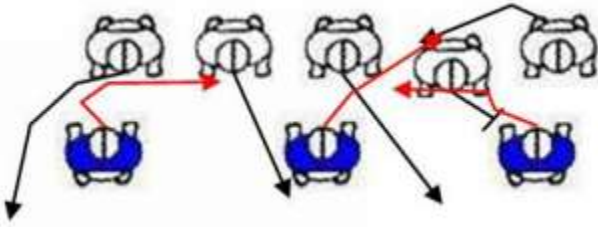
simulate offensive linemen. The groups can go half speed, or full speed but with limited contact.

The defensive player works on his reads and reactions. Each player must go through all of their reads and keys for the upcoming opponent. After several reps, the players rotate within their group. They continue rotating until each player gets reps on the right and left. Each group works independently of each other with coaches moving from group to group observing and coaching.

Note: Although this is a less physical drill, make sure that players are still using the correct stance, pad level, power angles and dip and squeeze techniques.

2. Scheme Reads

Instead of breaking players into groups by position, we are now coaching groups in combinations such as the strong side end and tackle, or the interior tackles in the 50, or all the starting linemen.



If we are working strong-side combinations we will line up against a tight end, tackle, guard, center and possibly a wingback, weak guard and running back (based on scouting reports). I will signal the offense the blocking scheme and the cadence. I will then start the drill with the cadence and the linemen make their reads and complete their assignments as a unit.

This can be done as a walk through, half speed, or full speed based on your goals during this drill. You can also incorporate stunts, slants, etc. into this time.

Note: Although this is a less physical drill, make sure that players are still using the correct stance, pad level, power angles and dip and squeeze techniques.

Conclusion

We have covered a lot of topics about coaching the defensive line, but there are two important points I want to reemphasize. The first is the importance of breaking down the techniques and skills that each position requires, and having a specific, organized and realistic approach to developing those skills and techniques.

The second is to create drill categories. We believe our defensive line drill categories teach the techniques and skills that enable our players to be successful in what we are asking them to do regarding our defensive schemes and objectives.

I hope this overview has provided you with some ideas or concepts that will be beneficial for you and your players this season.