

Inside Linebacker Play

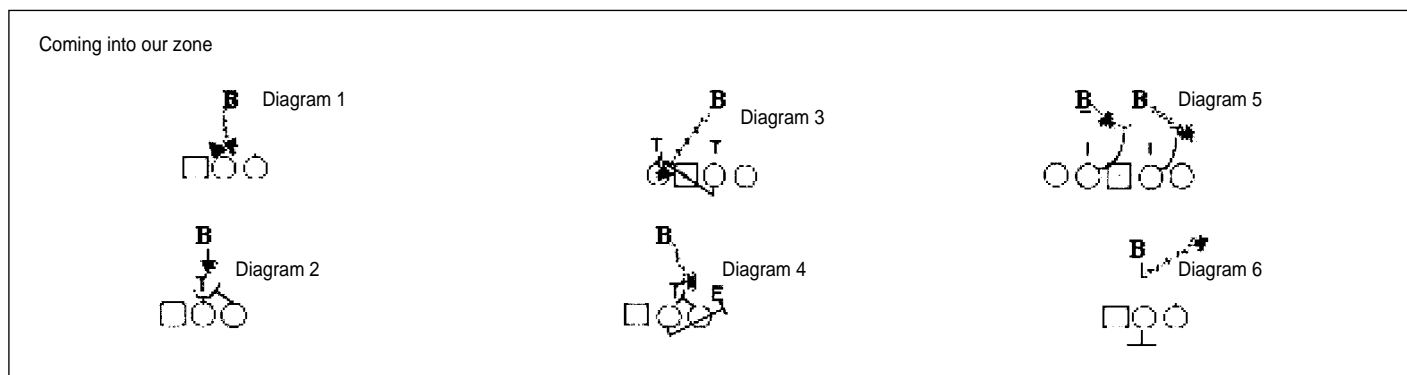
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Our philosophy of inside linebacker play is based on our players understanding of recognition. We feel that technique is very important and we do take time to coach our linebackers on proper techniques and fundamentals. However our main focus is in teaching our linebackers how to recognize keys and the process that they will follow to put themselves in the right place to make plays. Practice time can be limited and many times we are faced with the choice of coaching more technique or recognition so in those cases we take recognition.

The first and most important part

of the recognition process is keying our opponents guards. They must have controlled momentum going to the LOS. We start out by teaching only the first step that mirrors the guards movement. Eventually working our way to three steps; always explaining to them to keep shoulders square to the LOS and action moving to the line. Diagram 1 shows the "down block." When your guard blocks down we teach the backer to mirror the down and then their eyes can go to the backfield, second level, to find the flow of the ball. They should fill the gap hard keeping their outside shoulder free on the lead block and run your feet on the tackle. In diagram 2 we talk about the

for cutback and finding an open alley to the ball. We coach the linebackers to be extremely aggressive in finding this alley. When teams pull across the ball it creates a natural seam that we encourage our players to run through to the ball. Our initial aiming point is the opposite "A" gap for the run through alley. Once they discover how the alley takes you to the ball they will take it all the time. We do explain to them that if they take the run through and the runner gets the cutback on us or trap then our linebacker is wrong. They have to be disciplined in that they have the cutback responsibility first. There will be times that he will get caught by the



of the recognition process is keying our opponents guards. We teach our linebackers to focus their eyes on the guard covering from the helmet to shoulder pad area. They have to stay disciplined in locking their focus on that guard. Do not allow their eyes to drift into the backfield, that will come later. Explain to them that the guard will take them to the play. Once we have explained this we begin teaching our read step. The read step is a mirror of the guard's step. This step always has to be toward the LOS. It may be at a 45 degree angle or straight ahead but never backward or lateral. We talk about this step being the difference in making the play or not. This read step insures that they are responsible for run first. We coach the player to be up on the balls of their feet to the toes and not on

"base block" and how again the backer needs to take the mirror step to the LOS and their eyes can come off to the second level so they can fill to flow. We explain to the backer that they always need to attack the play by keeping their outside shoulder free. We do this so that if we miss or plug the gap, the ball spills to their partner. In diagram 3 we show the guard pulling towards the ball. A pull toward the ball means that the flow of the ball is moving away from you. We teach our backer to yell "guard" "guard" to help his partner know that the ball is coming his way. We feel the guard call helps the other linebacker to get over the top of blocks to his side. All of this needs to take place at the same time that he is taking his step mirroring the guard. After the guard call they need to understand that they are responsible

blockers and when this happens he needs to attack the blocker head up and not pick a side. If he does choose a side he might be creating the cutback that he is suppose to be defending. Diagram 4 shows the pull away from the ball by the guard. We teach this slightly different than we do the pull toward the ball. In the pull to your side we know that the play is coming to your side so we do not need to make the guard call. We again take the mirror step to the outside but instead of looking directly to the second level we coach them that they need to see who is going to block you. We teach them that their eyes need to go to the tackle or tight end to see which might be coming off to block you. They are taught to rip over the top of the block making sure that their tempo does not beat the flow of the ball. Once they have

ripped over the top of the block then they need to see second level and get to the inside of the run lane. They cannot get caught up in the interference and if they do they have to keep battling to get over the top. Diagram 5 shows how we teach against the zone block. Once again, take the mirror step to the direction of the block. This mirror step and read allows us to beat the guard to the spot in which they are attempting to cut us off. We attack the outside shoulder of the blocker and at the same time we see second level for the flow of the football. We tell them that they cannot get too far over the top of the flow of the football. We are inside out players, meaning that we pursue to the football with an inside out angle. We talk a lot about being the inside of the funnel. Diagram 6 deals with pass blocking. We really feel as though the guard reads are just as valuable in the pass game as in the run. We feel we get a much faster read on pass from the guard than looking to the backfield. We teach them that as soon as the guards head pops up to pass block it's pass. They first take a read step and make sure it's not draw, then we get our heads on a swivel and drop with a purpose. We need to see what is coming into our zone.

Alignment and depth are also important parts that we teach and feel very strongly about. We explain to the players that when reading the guards we cannot get caught up in the line interference. We endlessly tell them that they cannot be closer to the LOS than 5 yards, a little more is fine but never less. When we creep up to close we have a tendency to get caught up in the line interference and get blocked.

In short yardage situations we do things slightly different. We teach our linebackers to read fullback or near back but our teaching does not change. When the back flows away they are still responsible for cutback and look for the run through alley. When the back action is to them they fill hard to flow. We still teach the inside out principle which is the inside of the pursuit funnel. We always make sure that our heels are on the first down marker or the end zone. They always need to be aware of the distance that the opponent has to go to get the first down or score. We always attack the LOS and fill

hard to flow.

Lastly, we coach our players to understand the flow, which is the direction of the play, and tempo, which is the speed at which we attack the play. Flow and tempo are critical when it comes to our second level reads. They need to understand what the best and most appropriate path is to the football. The guard will give us the direction of the play and now they need to see the second level for the flow of the play and the tempo in which we can aggressively attack it. There are certain rules when it comes to flow as well. They need to understand that if flow is outside to their side they can never take a path underneath the block. They must fight over the top. If they take the easy way they will never make the play and it hurts us at the point of attack. The tempo comes into play when they get a good read and get over the top of the block and they don't over pursue the play. Their tempo must fit with the flow. They need to stay to the inside of the ball carrier, we say a yard, and press him to the outside of the funnel. When the inside meets the outside of the funnel is when we impact the ball carrier, pore the fuel. We don't want them to play lateral to the LOS. Better to have a little more depth than get your shoulders turned to the LOS. Turning your shoulders will give the opponent the advantage and you become the prey and not the predator. It is even more crucial that the linebacker understand flow and tempo. When your read goes away and you see the flow at the second level, your tempo has everything to do with your ability to take the alley or the run through. It also is important seeing the flow in defending the trap coming back to you. The flow is away but your tempo has to be disciplined. Meaning that your tempo is first idled down to your responsibility and if you fail to take care of the trap or cutback you are wrong. When the play is going outside, then your tempo should take you to the ball carrier in the backfield once they take the run through.

Our linebacker recognition has also lead us to make some changes recently in what we do against rollout pass. We were running into problems with our backers reading run initially and teams hurting us

in the hook to curl area that our linebacker was not getting to. We made the change to allow for our play side linebacker to have an automatic blitz off the edge as soon as the QB was outside the tackle box. Most of the time the blocker responsible for the edge is focusing on the defensive end and does not realize that our backer is not dropping but coming off the edge. We have also coached our backside backer to replace the play side in his drop zone. It is relatively easy to coach the other backer to replace because his flow is already taking him in that direction. We understand that there is a void in the backside hook to curl but we are willing to take our chances on the QB throwing across his body and across the formation to complete the pass.

We have started coaching this as early as their freshman year. We consider it an introduction year and are not overly concerned with the guard reads at this time. We do start teaching them how to read the backfield and coach them on their responsibilities when it comes to flow to them or away. It really has helped us when we bring them in at the varsity level. They have that prior experience and it helps us transition them into recognition of the guards. Our linebacker play has been very solid over the time that we have been coaching recognition. We feel very strongly that it allows us to play a more aggressive style of defense without having to consistently blitz. It does take time to get the players to understand it but once they experience it there is no going back. Chad Fredericksen graduated from North Dakota State College of Science, Wahpeton, North Dakota, in 1987 and Valley City State University, Valley City, North Dakota in 1991. He started his teaching career in Warren, Minnesota, and moved to Breckenridge in 1995, where he continues to teach and coach. Chad has 16 years of football coaching experience. He was an assistant at NDSCS and is currently the head football coach at Breckenridge High School. He lives with his wife, Janel, and their three children in Breckenridge.