



St. Cloud Tech's 3-5 Defense

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We feel fortunate to have been asked to write an article for the Minnesota State High School Football Coaches Association. Our staff attends as many association events as possible in an effort to increase our own knowledge. Like many of you, we attended the Nike Coach of the Year Clinic in March and the Hall of Fame Banquet at the Doubletree in April. The MN Football Coaches Association continues to do an outstanding job providing opportunities for coaches to improve their knowledge of the game through clinics and publications as well as recognizing the achievements of its members.

The football program here at St. Cloud Tech (1917) is one of the oldest in Minnesota and has a strong tradition and proud history. Our kids attained a milestone for the school and community last fall securing the programs 500th victory. This was achieved despite the fact that our players faced a tremendous challenge a year ago dealing with the death of our head coach, Ron Kaczor. During the 2006 Playoffs, Ron learned he had a very aggressive form of cancer and lost his fight with the disease only six months after his diagnosis. Needless to say, our community, school and football family was in a state of disbelief. Ron's ability to build on Tech's tradition of excellence by surrounding himself with quality assistants throughout the program made my first year as a head coach far easier than most. Our seniors also played a key role in the transition by epitomizing what Ron called being "championship people" serving as tremendous role models for our younger players during a very difficult time. With the leadership provided by our upperclassmen, we were fortunate enough to be able to advance to the Class 5A State Semi-Finals last fall at the Metrodome.

Obviously, there are many factors that lead to success in the game of football. Our staff believes that our ability to adjust schemes to fit our personnel is critical to Tech's continued success. Since 1996, we have run the Wing-T, "I" and Spread offenses. Our

defense, has transitioned from a 4-3 to 5-3 and finally to a 3-5 defensive front. In this article, we will discuss how moving to the 3-5 Defense two years ago helped lead to an 18-5 record, Central Lakes Conference Championship, Section 8-5A Title and a trip to the State Class 5A Semi-Finals. As always, the decision to make a change was predicated on utilizing the strengths of our players in order to maximize their talents.

Traditionally, we have been a program that possesses tremendous size and physical strength. Over the past three years, however, we have seen a drop in the overall size of our kids while gaining players with greater speed, quickness and ability to run and hit in the open field. Because only three down linemen need to be identified in the 3-5, it made logical sense for us to make the move. The success at the remaining eight positions at the second and third level of the defense requires the ability to move in the open field. These are the kind of kids we have right now and the 3-5 allows us to put them in positions on the field where they can be successful.

Finding the right person for each position is critical to utilizing the strengths of the 3-5. More than anything else, you need a nose guard who has the ability to be a two-gap player. The remaining down linemen need to be mobile and be able to effectively fight pressure along the line of scrimmage. The outside backers have to move well on their feet and be tough enough to effectively take on a trap block. The Buck linebacker needs to be a run stopper and have a nose for the ball. Finally, the Mike backer must be a tough, gritty player who can lead the defense and is a student of the game. Once you have determined your personnel, teaching the players their basic responsibilities becomes the focus.

One of the 3-5's strongest attributes is its adaptability to multiple offensive sets. We see a wide variety of offenses in our league ranging from the Wishbone to the Wing-T as well as variations of the Spread offense



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including the shotgun. The 3-5 easily aligns to multiple formations keeping the game simple for our down lineman. Players at the second and third level can quickly adjust to mirror the offense and we never face a situation where we have to move a down man to an upright position where he has to play on his feet and cover a back or receiver in space. The 3-5’s ability to keep basic alignments consistent and assignments simplistic allows our kids to be aggressive on the defensive side of the ball.

The wide variety of blitz packages is another benefit of the 3-5. These looks are easily disguised regardless of the offensive set because we are in the same basic alignment at the snap of the ball. The key to the deceptiveness of the 3-5 is its ability to bring varying combinations of five second-level players in a coordinated blitz package. Like most high school teams, we consistently place seven men “in the box” to help stop the run. Obviously our blitz packages change slightly from week to week depending on our opponent. With the trend of more pass-oriented offenses, the 3-5 also allows us more flexibility stopping the pass. The 3-5 allows a wider variety of coverage options due to the number of second and third level players. We design our pass defense from the secondary forward to the line and is predicated on the fact that we are going to take away the offenses strength in the passing game. We then design our blitz package and line stunts to match the secondary call.

Like all of you, we religiously break down film to identify as many tendencies as possible on our upcoming opponent. We believe a team’s offensive tendencies can be exploited more by the 3-5 than traditional defenses because it allows us to put players in a position to impact the game as the ball is being snapped. For example, if an opponent is an outside run oriented team, we will develop a blitz package that sends extra defenders to that zone. Likewise, if we face a passing team, we identify their primary protection scheme and develop a blitz package that overloads a zone allowing one player to come free. Because there are five players at the second level, the number of different blitz packages that we can employ is almost limitless. All in all, the 3-5 is an attack-

ing defense that our kids love to play and our staff loves to coach. Thanks again to the Minnesota Football Coaches Association for the opportunity to share some of our ideas with you and good luck next fall.