

SPREAD PASS GAME

The spread offense has taken over from coast to coast, from high school to the NFL. Designed to be distribution-friendly, it forces defenses to worry about every eligible receiver on the field, spreading the defense out horizontally while stretching them vertically. Despite its popularity, it is difficult to define what "spread" means, given that the term has become such a catch-all.

The story of how the one-back spread offense went viral in an era without internet can be traced back to a Los Angeles high school coach named Jack Neumeier, whom Sports Illustrated credits as the inventor of the modern spread offense. Neumeier was influenced by another high school coach in Ohio, Glen "Tiger" Ellison, who wrote "Run and Shoot Football" in 1965 to win a championship in 1970 using spread concepts. Then in 1976, a quarterback named John Elway enrolled as a freshman and his college coaching father, Jack, watched Neumeier's offense from the stands. Their success made Granada Hills high school "a must stop destination for college coaches across the nation."

Father Elway took this high school, one-back spread offense to San Jose State and Stanford. His offensive coordinator, Dennis Erickson, used it to win 1991 national championships at Miami and installed it with the Seattle Seahawks and SF 49ers. Elways' coaching buddy, Mike Price, used it to win the 1997 Rose Bowl with Washington. Joe Tiller learned it from Erickson while at Wyoming and set national passing records in 1999 at Purdue with Drew Brees at QB. Urban Meyer learned it from Erickson's ex-QB and used it at Utah ('04), Florida ('06), and Ohio State ('14).

During the 1970s, Darrel "Mouse" Davis used Ellison's Run and Shoot to win the Oregon state championship and then set 20 NCAA records at Portland State, leading the nation in scoring three times. The Run and Shoot relied on *both* the QB and WR reading the defense, using pre-snap motions. It is criticized as being one-dimensional since it does not use a Tight End and the Quarterback is vulnerable to blitzes and pressure.

In the late 70's, San Diego Charger coach Don Coryell, influenced by Dutch Meyer ('50's) and Sid Gillman ('60's), introduced the NFL to "Air Coryell", using Tight Ends, backs in motion and shotgun formations. Ten years later Bill Walsh's West Coast offense also relied on precise timing, but unlike Gillman and Coryell, Walsh's schemes focused more on short routes. While the wishbone, Wing-T, and Veer were playbooks, Bill Walsh's West Coast offense was based on concepts.

This evolution has led to plenty of versions of spread offenses. There are Air Raid attacks that rely on high-percentage passing games and run-oriented attacks built with tight ends, H-backs and dual-threat quarterbacks. The one thing they all have in common is forcing the defense to cover the entire field from sideline to sideline. These innovations have made the game faster and higher scoring, there is debate whether the offensive system is as effective as it seems, especially at the high school level with teams that cannot recruit.

Despite the tons of different off-shoots, or variations, they all fall into 4 main categories: