

DEFENSIVE BACKS: TECHNIQUE AND LANGUAGE 101

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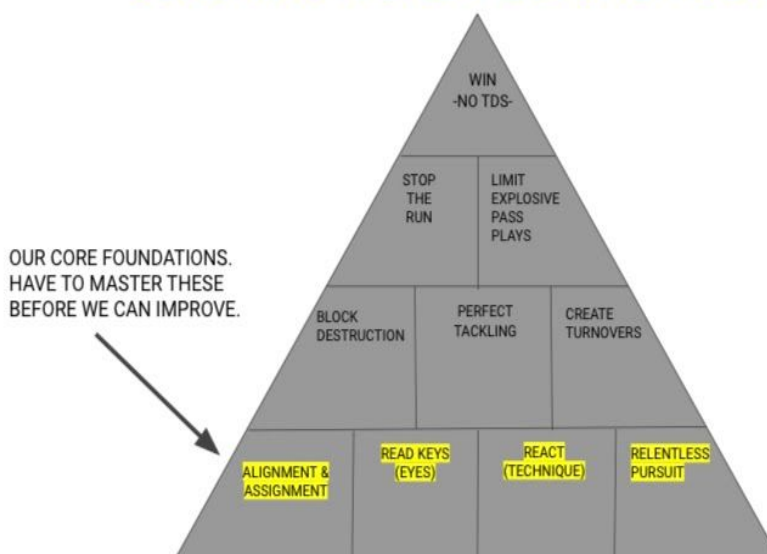
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INTRODUCTION

Over the years of coaching Defensive Backs, I have felt there is almost not a better position to epitomize the saying, “Football is a game of inches.” In any good secondary, every single step and movement is treated with importance. This article will break down key fundamentals for man and zone techniques, and will also provide a daily footwork drill progression that emphasizes these fundamentals. The progression can be applied to almost all different schemes.

COACHING A GREAT DEFENSIVE BACK



STANCE

Our stances differ slightly by the scheme technique we are using, but these key ideas are always there.

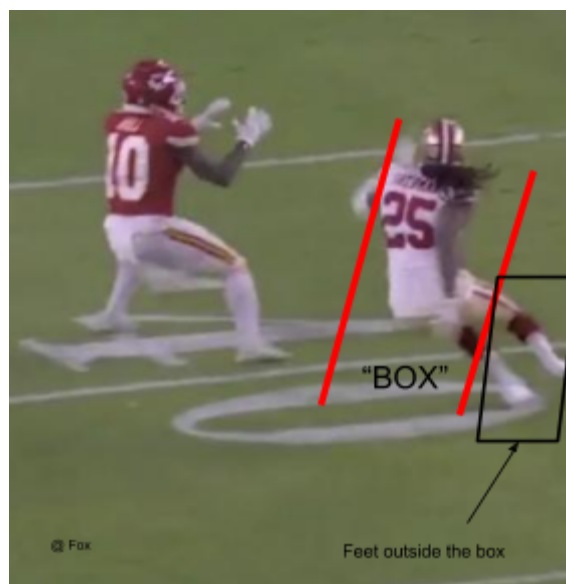
- Weight on your toes, never on your heels.
- Knees slightly bent, but not too much.
- Chest down.

For our safeties, we typically put them in a staggered stance with our feet about a fist’s distance apart, and our numbers square to the line of scrimmage. For our corners, we will vary. If a corner is in a zone coverage, he lines up with his back to the sideline, and his feet slightly wider than his shoulders. We call this a “Shuffle” or “Turn” technique. If we put the corner in a man-technique, he aligns square to the receiver, with 2-3 yards of cushion. It has become vital for us to disguise these looks as season’s go on. One way we started using this was the “Press-Bail” technique, where we have our corners show man coverage alignment, then bail to their zone on the snap.

PEDALS & BREAKS

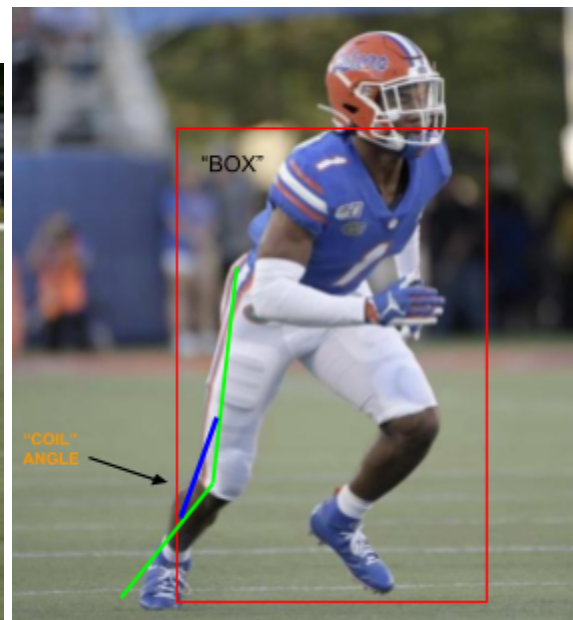
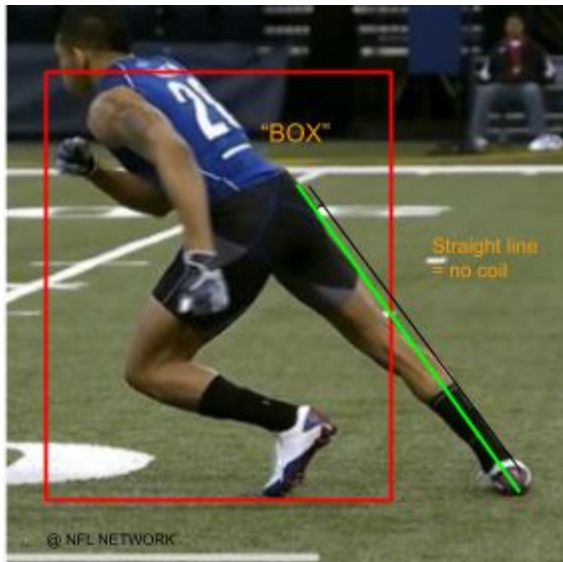
There are multiple different opinions out there on the different techniques for backpedaling and breaking. Even I have changed my opinions on such things over the years. For the most part I cannot determine whether one way is truly right or wrong, but I have come up with a few constants over the years that have definitely proved true. You can watch NFL games on Sundays and NCAA games on Saturdays and still see these same foundations hold true.

1. “THE BOX”. You have to keep your feet inside your box. The “box” as we call it, is the imaginary frame that runs slightly outside of your shoulder-frame down to your feet. If your feet leave your box at any point in a backpedal or a break, you’re almost certain to slip, fall, or have about the slowest break you’ve ever seen.
2. THERE IS NO EVIDENCE TO PROVE THAT T-STEPPING IS BETTER THAN BICYCLE BREAKING, AND VICE-VERSA.



The fact is, both can be done quite efficiently if taught properly (break off the left to go right, and the right to go left). The other fact is this: you cannot t-step a break outside of your front 45 degree range. Our solution: some kids are t-steppers and some bicycle step (keep toes square), but we teach every kid how to bicycle step before they’re allowed to transition into a t-step. The reasoning for this is that the most efficient way to break 90 degrees or higher is to turn your plant toe in towards the direction you want to go, then take your drive foot and point it in that same direction. A t-step turns your hips the wrong way from the direction you’re going, and you actually lose your ground by doing so. Once they have mastered bicycle breaking and keeping their feet underneath them, we then transition into allowing them to t-step ONLY if it is within their front 45 degree range. By doing so, they will keep their plant foot underneath them and actually transfer the weight on the ball of their foot, instead of overreaching their box and going flat-footed.

3. "THE COIL." The coil in a break is the most important part of achieving a good break. It is the same reason I've chosen to teach kids to bicycle step initially before transitioning into the t-step. The idea of this is that the plant leg on a break stays near a 135 degree angle. If the leg is coiled at this angle, it creates explosion in driving out of the break. If you extend, or lose your "coil", in your plant leg, you lose your explosion, and will either slip or have a slow break.



DAILY DRILLS AND TECHNIQUES

In order to enforce these basic fundamentals, we utilize 2-3 drills every single day during our individual time, then use supplemental drills for our schemes that week. Our athletes know the importance of our INDY time to stress these fundamentals and that in order to be perfect on game-nights, they have to first get it perfect during INDY time.

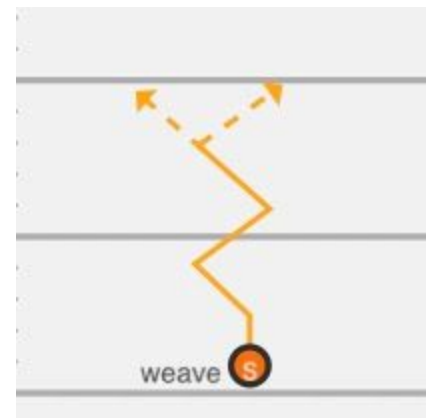
1. "CLOCKWORK." The first thing we do every single day is run the "clock". The clock works like hands on an old watch, in that every angle is crucial and has different values. Every angle provides in-game relevance, as the film will show. Our safeties practice "CLOCKWORK" out of a backpedal while our corners practice it in the



“Shuffle” or “Turn” technique. You’ll notice our “Kill-Zone” is our front 45 degrees. On “Kill-Zone” breaks, we end it on a shimmy, or a “thud” if we are in a practice situation. Anything outside of the “kill-zone” we run through and shoot a hand, or “whiz” the opponent if we are in a practice situation. We determined that this is the most realistic for Defensive Backs to finish a play in a game-like situation.

DRILL FILM: [CLOCKWORK DRILL](#)

2. “WEAVE & ZONE.” A great drill to teach a 1-high or 2-high safety how to weave-pedal laterally, while still being able to flip his hips and break. The Safety is given a “Trigger” based on the Quarterback or the #2 receiver in his zone. We primarily use this to teach how to split-2 verticals and stay “Man-On-Deep” or MOD in our zone schemes. Safeties are taught to keep their hips and shoulders square to the Line of Scrimmage, while our zone corners are taught to keep their numbers to the sideline and push for depth in their shuffle-weave. At the end, the DB has to break on a ball out and make a pick. Applications of these techniques can be seen in the film.

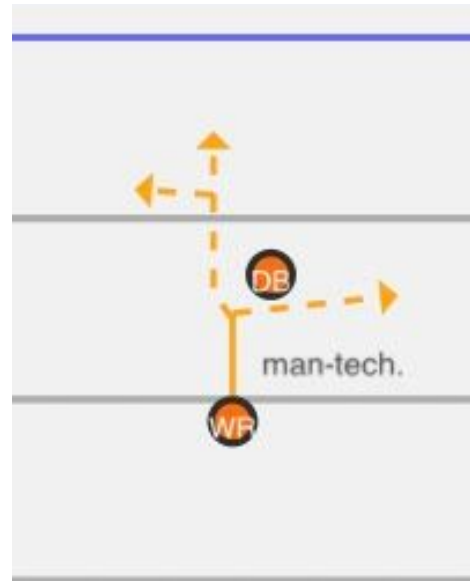


CORNER ZONE FILM: [CORNER ZONE PLAY](#)

SAFETY ZONE FILM: [SAFETY ZONE PLAY](#)

3. “MAN TECHNIQUE.” As the game has progressed over the years and RPO’s continue to be more and more common, playing man coverage has become an essential part of good defensive football. A lot of coaches will say, “We don’t have the athletes to play man.” There is some truth to that. However, I believe creating man-to-man defenders on the perimeter requires more fundamental development than anything else. The footwork has to be flawless and little details are more crucial. While our safeties remain in their backpedal technique in man coverage, our corners will get out of their “Shuffle” technique and actually square up to the receiver, with about 2-3 yards cushion. Communication with cushions is vital so that our secondary can create levels to avoid issues with rub-routes. Everyone will align their outside eye with the receiver’s inside eye in 0-coverage, and vice-versa in cover-1. Eyes will remain on the receiver’s hips until the route is broke and

they are “in-phase.” We teach “in-phase” and “out-of-phase” by hand placement. Once the receiver has declared his route direction, the defender will place his near hand on the defender’s hip. We use this to track a receiver down-field in-phase and to help re-route receivers. If the defender is “out-of-phase”, he is far enough away that he cannot reach the receiver’s hip with his hand. In this scenario, the defender keeps his eyes on the receiver and continues to play through his hands. We work simple inside/outside releases in this same drill every single day. Initially, we teach our guys to do this without hands, so they can get their feet right and learn how to lock in their inside leg to prevent getting beat inside (the same way an Offensive Lineman uses a post-foot to past set). We eventually allow them to use their hands, and then add a ball to the drill to teach in-phase and out-of-phase techniques. Application of these techniques can be seen in the film.



MAN TECHNIQUE FILM: [PRESS-MAN AND OFF-MAN TECHNIQUES](#)

CONCLUSION

These are some of the techniques, drills, and language that I have lived by as a Defensive Backs Coach. It has allowed us to become more and more advanced with our schemes and supplemental drill work as we continue to improve at these basic, necessary fundamentals to be great Defensive Backs. All of these drills and techniques can be adjusted and tweaked to fit most defensive schemes and coverages. Hammer down these little details and don't get complacent with them, and your secondary will shine under the lights. Always remember that the most important part of coaching is building relationships with your kids. The kids that played the hardest for me are the same ones I had the best relationships with.

MEET COACH IRSIK

Coach Irsik is entering his 1st season as the Head Football Coach at Syracuse High School in Western Kansas and his 6th year coaching football. Prior to that, he was the Defensive Backs Coach at Garden City High School (KS-6A) in 2018-2019, and the Defensive Backs Coach at Wamego High School (KS-4A) in 2015-2017. He was a part of a Regional Championship Coaching Staff in 2015 at Wamego. In his first 5 years, Irsik has coached 12 players that received All-Conference Honors, and 4 that received various All-State honors. Prior to his coaching career, Irsik played college football and was a student-assistant at Butler Community College and Ottawa University in Kansas. He has a bachelor's degree in Secondary Education from Kansas State University and is currently working on his Master's in Educational Administration at Fort Hays State University.