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Setting up procedures as a weapon to attack a defense



To start, utilizing tempo needs to become part of the structure of the offense. This is much like an operating system on a computer, the different tempo tools you can utilize in your offense provide a framework for the run and pass plays which are like the software.

In January, 2012, I had the opportunity to talk ball with Jon Gruden. The first topic he discussed was tempo. He spent time watching an Oregon practice and was present for West Virginia's dismantling of Clemson, and he stated that tempo and operating procedures were the biggest area right now in which an offense can gain an advantage. I was thrilled to hear that because, in 2011, we used 12 different procedures that were a variation of either speed-it-up or slow-it-down tempos. After talking with Coach Gruden, we developed three more, and tempo become embedded in the system.

Before we delve into being a multiple-tempo team, let's start with basic offensive procedures including cadence. Cadence is an underutilized weapon for the offense. It's not just about trying to draw a defense offside to get a cheap five yards; it's slowing them down and not allowing a rush. For a while it seemed that going on two was going to disappear from the game with the advent of the no-huddle. For many teams in their initial use of no-huddle, varied snap counts disappeared and many teams went on a fixed cadence. Having visited with other teams, I've seen more and more creative ways to use varied cadence in no-huddle, yet keep it simple enough and disguised enough to give the advantage back to the offense. Because it's always been my philosophy that snap count gives the offense an advantage, we have found ways to incorporate it. I'm glad to see the creative ways which no-huddle teams are integrating this important aspect into their offense. Here are a few ideas:

1. Have a specific set of words that mean nothing else in your offense except indicating when the ball will be snapped. I've seen this done in various ways with the count being given at various times during pre-snap routines. Here are some examples of the words that can be used (you are limited only by your creativity).
 - a. Days of the week: Sunday= on set, Monday=on one, Tuesday= on two
 - b. A set of words that starts with an A, B, or C. Atlanta, Boston, Charlotte.

c. Months of the year. January=on one, February=on two.

2. Have a “hot” word in your cadence indicating that the next word or two is live. For example, “Red” is your word to indicate that the next “Set-go” is live. It could sound like this with numbers to start a false cadence or give live info, “328, 328 Go – Go, Red, Set-Go.” Peyton and Eli Manning, use the hot word “Omaha” indicating the live snap count is coming next. Other teams will simply say “Hurry-Hurry (pause) set-hut.” Again, you can tailor this to fit your preferred sequence of words you use pre-snap. This certainly could be combined with the ideas in the first set of methods with your snap count indicator like “Tuesday” indicating the cadence is now live, and we are going on two.

3. Include a live word, but also use a word to tell the offense that we are using a false cadence or dummy call. For example, the words “Harry” or “Lloyd” (characters from the movie “Dumb and Dumber”) could be your words indicating that the entire cadence is dummy and no one should move with the exception of a motion or a shift. Some teams call this “Freeze” and use words like “Frosty” or “Snowball” or “Alaska” to indicate that no one should move on the cadence. A false cadence is a valuable tool in trying to get a defense to show their intentions and gather information. Using motion may give the offense even more information. Dummy or false cadence can be used to peek to the sideline for the live call or a quarterback may have his system of checks allowing him to make the decision on the field based on some simple indicators he is given. Again, a live word as described in number two could be used to tell the offense to be locked in and ready to go after the play is confirmed or changed.

- Tip: One concern is always having a lineman flinch because the defender is coming toward him. If the defender doesn’t cross into the neutral zone, then the penalty will be false start. One remedy that we learned is to have players on the line of scrimmage close their eyes when they hear the code word for false cadence. In this way, they are both reminded that they aren’t moving, and they are not induced to react to defensive movement.

Uptempo Does Not Require No Huddle

Let's start this discussion on tempo with a basic understanding: up-tempo is not limited to no-huddle. While no-huddle does provide advantages in operating at a fast pace, teams that huddle can also do this. I had the opportunity to go to a Boise State game last fall, and their operation out of a huddle was as fast as some no-huddle teams. They were like a finely tuned machine with the pace they were able to keep throughout the game.

No Huddle is Not Limited to Spread Offense

Furthermore, no-huddle, up-tempo offense is not limited to spread teams or teams that use few personnel changes. A power running team that uses multiple tight ends, or a multiple formation, multiple personnel team can utilize no-huddle and up-tempo procedures. Basically, anything that was being done before using a huddle can be accomplished without one. The key to execute this is to develop clearly defined procedures and gain proficiency with them through practice.

Evolving Tempo and Procedures

At Baldwin-Wallace University, our offense evolved from using three basic tempos: base tempo in which we wanted to get up to the ball and snap it as quickly as we could after relaying necessary information to the offensive line, "look" tempo in which we read the defense from the press box (we used this very little), and our fastest tempo which we used in two-minute and other times that included a memorized set of 10 plays. We operated primarily from 2 x 2 and 3 x 1 spread sets and changed personnel rarely.

The following year we incorporated a tight end into our offense and increased the number and type of formations we used. Our tempos remained the same, but we did use our look tempo much more as we wanted to get as close to an ideal defensive look as we could for our young offensive line. We also had a very tough defense, so being able to run the ball and grind out the clock was a valuable mode of attack as well.

After the season in which we incorporated a tight end, we knew the added formation terminology which was primarily a memorized system, had become cumbersome. We were limited in what our players could remember and play fast, so we incorporated a system that

cut our terminology from 45 memorized formations and adjustments to 18. The system broke information into different parts, and it drastically cut down the number of signals. We could now get into more formations easily and relay that information to the sideline quickly. Most players really only needed to know eight to ten words and signals to align because the other words and signals did not affect them. However, our ability to align in anything we could think of was preserved.

We also revamped the way we thought about personnel. Our formation system allowed us to focus on the skill sets of our players. Our efficient operating system allowed us to do more with less terminology.

This use of tempo started with a well-defined sideline and signal procedure which we installed from day one of practice and constantly worked to perfect. Our players provided great feedback in the process of developing our procedures. As we introduced a new tempo tool, we always met with the players and discussed what worked and what we could do better. We also evaluated the usefulness and effectiveness of it with player feedback.

Tempo Philosophy

With any part of our offense, we had a brief philosophy that outlined what we were trying to accomplish within that aspect of our offense. Our philosophy for tempo was as follows:

- Tempo will be used as a weapon to keep the defense off balance.
- We will have tempos that speed play up and slow play down.
- In varying our tempo, we will keep defenses from keying in on our formations or personnel and force them to get their calls in early.

Some general procedures we put in place helped us operate at a maximum pace:

- When the play is whistled dead, all 11 offensive players must look to the sideline to get the call.

- As the ball is being spotted, everyone should hustle (run, not walk or jog) to the ball. OL should get set and receivers must address the defense.
- We are up-tempo all of the time in that we will force the defense to align and get their call in as fast as possible. This is done even when we are slowing our tempo down.
- This is all part of effort. Procedures must be 100%! You must get to the LOS and force the defense to get a call in!
- When we false cadence, everyone must be aware of the defense jumping and the ball being snapped. OL should wait until they hear the QB say “chill” to relax their stances and wait for the live play call.

What makes using up to 15 different tempo tools in our offensive attack possible is our sideline procedure. This is probably the single biggest factor that allows us to use so many variations with extreme speed. Our procedure is outlined below:

- One coach, “the director,” will be responsible for communicating tempo, personnel, formation, and play verbally to the personnel going into the game. All personnel groupings should be behind the director as a play is being run on the field.
- The director will hold a short huddle and give all information to the group coming in. Everyone coming out should hold until they see their subs moving in from the sideline.
- Both those coming in and those leaving the game should be on the run to their formation and stress the defensive formation recognition.

This is something we work on every day in both group and team periods. Communications must be perfect for us to execute at a fast pace.

Movie 2.1 shows how we execute our sideline substitution procedures.

As the ball is whistled dead, the entire group of personnel who might substitute steps in front of the coach that we name “the director.” The director is in charge of the sideline and is responsible for relaying the call to all signalers and giving any substitute the entire play. This is a very disciplined process. Though the personnel on the field see the signal for per-

sonnel and know that they may be coming out, no one moves until the personnel coming off the sideline begin running onto the field. The personnel moving onto the field will stay with the director until he finishes his “mini huddle” and says, “go” sending the grouping onto the field. This procedure is used every down whether or not we are substituting. We want everyone to hold and move at the same time so as to not tip our hand to what personnel is coming on the field. We say we want that movement to be a run, so if you run a 4.6 second forty, we want you running on or off at a 5.0 with a sense of urgency.

Once personnel have changed or remain in the game, we align quickly and go.

This is the framework for using tempo procedures. No-huddle teams typically have three or more tempos that they use. The challenge, it seems, is to find a way to run faster. In our experiences over the last two seasons we have expanded the tempo tools we use within our attack to over 15. These are variations on speed-it-up and slow-it-down.