

CHAPTER 21: GAME PLAN CONSIDERATIONS & READY LISTS

TEX BONE ADVANTAGES (REVIEW)

Let's review some of the benefits of the Tex-Bone before examining some considerations a play caller needs to make before creating a game plan.

- The Tex-Bone offers modern advances to time tested schemes. The system provides a great deal of flexibility to tailor what you do with your personnel and opponents characteristics.
- Spread-based defenses use predictable alignments that are often vulnerable to triple option. This is the strength of the triple option compared with one-back spread formations.
- Blitzing and twisting line games are dissuaded by option schemes. Dealing with less defensive pressure and line movement is a big advantage the Tex-Bone creates.
- The Tex-Bone is unpredictable and hard to defend. Every play features spread or option looks.
- "Stop the option" defensive strategies lead to big plays in the play-action passing game.
- Runs and passes look identical in the Tex-Bone. The more time a team spends trying to play the option, the less time they spend on pass defense.
- The Tex-Bone gives you two offenses with one set of players. We run traditional triple option schemes from multiple formations. We also retain spread elements.
- The only limit to the Tex-Bone is your imagination.

USE YOUR ADVANTAGES

Play callers must use their team's advantages when game planning. Defensive responses to the Flexbone formations are tough to predict. The rules-based nature of the Flexbone makes responses easier to devise however.

Unpredictability is what makes running the Flexbone both good and bad. Opponents plan for the Flexbone in their own way. This plan is not seen ahead of time because the Flexbone is so unique. Chances are there is not another option team running the Flexbone in your conference. With that consideration in mind, an offensive coordinator wants to make the opponent defend the Flexbone option on their terms.

Incorporating the Flexbone into the game plan forces your opponents to spend valuable time planning and practicing to stop it. This means less practice time for stopping other aspects of the Tex-Bone.

Remember, you are probably better at running your Flexbone offense that your opponent is at defending it. That being said, the rest of the Tex-Bone is still at your disposal even if an opponent is successfully countering the Flexbone.

Being better at the executing Flexbone than the defense is at preventing it is usually (but not always) the case. We played the eventual national champion the year before this was written. Their personnel were better than ours at most positions. Their size, skill, and speed helped them slow the Flexbone. We earned chunks of yardage from our other Tex-Bone formations (the triple option specifically) after the Flexbone was neutralized.

Remember, the Flexbone is one triple option variant in the Tex-Bone offense. The system adapts well to spread formations as well. Most teams apply their base defense rules to the triple option instead of reinventing the defense for a single week. This is true against any formation a team runs the Tex-Bone out of. Time constraints for opponents are doubled given the uniqueness of the Tex-Bone overall and the nearly insurmountable challenge of scheming for every Tex-Bone triple option look (Flexbone, spread, etc.).

There is simply not enough time during a week of game planning for defenses to create a complete response to all your Tex-Bone variations. The advantage of this scenario is twofold: (1) opponents generally use base defenses against this unfamiliar offense which (2) makes offensive game planning slightly easier and more effective because an offensive coordinator knows a base defense is most likely coming.

This does not mean that defenses take a “roll the dice” attitude however. Opponents attempt to adapt their base defense to make it option sound by studying formations on film, looking for tendencies, and creating scout team looks during the week. All defenses develop a zone read philosophy that they expand to defend the triple option. This predictability is highly advantageous. Offensive coordinators are able to identify and exploit who takes the dive, who takes the quarterback, and who takes the pitch.

Other teams are likely to get film of your earlier opponent’s defensive schemes against Power Read and Zone Read. This is not necessarily a disadvantage though. The defenses other teams ran against your offense earlier in the year are likely duplicated by future opponents. A weekly game plan is then built around this knowledge.

Remember, modern defenses are geared toward stopping one-back offenses with plays that are not blocked for touchdowns. Safeties are free runners against most one-back teams. These unblocked defenders are used to moving free in space to make tackles. Defensive coaches do not want to change how their safeties play through the alley. This knowledge allows you to predict how an opponent’s safeties are going to play the triple option (taking the pitch man or the quarterback in the pitch phase).

OPPONENT ANALYSIS

I prefer to start game plan preparations with an analysis of the opponent’s base defense. Doing this gives me a better understanding of their overall defensive philosophy. Knowing an opponent’s philosophy is important for a Tex-Bone coach. It helps you accurately predict how a defense aligns against the triple option. The first step in that process is learning their philosophy against the spread.

I like to watch an opponent based on down and distance next. What do they do on Third Down and Fourth Down? How often do they adjust what they do on 1st and 10? These are important factors to research and become familiar with.

After that I study an opponent based on common game situations. How do they change based on field position? What game situations cause them to change? What field zones cause them to change their defense? What do they do when a team is backed up? What do they do when a team is inside their 5-yard line?

The next step is studying pressure tendencies. When do they blitz and why did they blitz? What players do they like to blitz with?

In the final step I research other clues that reveal how they plan to defend the Tex-Bone. Looking at how they react to motion is one example. It is important to ascertain what advantages are gained by motioning when creating a game plan.

An offensive coordinator might look at previous games against an opponent as a separate study. It doesn't matter if your previous teams ran Tex-Bone or not. This information informs you about how they put together a defensive game plan. It's valuable to revisit how an opponent lined up against your formations in previous years.

Follow the trail of information you uncover and follow your instincts. Watching film and looking at cut-ups reveals advantages. Go down a rabbit hole if you find one! It is common to find an edge you didn't know was there until an in depth opponent study is made. We are always looking for "outside of the box" ways to gain an advantage in preparation for our opponents. Sun Tzu in *The Art of War* wrote know the opponent as well as you know yourself. The same is true in football.

Checklist of Considerations

We use a checklist of considerations when game planning. The list contains all our base runs and passes. This includes the Flexbone, spread formations, and empty formations (both Flexbone and spread). We take into consideration what plays we like to run, what plays are we good at, and what plays best fit our personnel this week. From these considerations we create a base list of plays to start the game plan with.

An offensive coordinator is able to decide what plays to include in the weekly game plan based on this list. A smaller list of game planned runs and passes is then created from the larger base list. Everything in the Tex-Bone is rule based. This makes any play in the offense available against almost any defense. We still want to put plays into the game plan that are specifically designed to take advantage of an opponent even though most of our offense is adaptable to any defensive look. These new plays are not necessarily brand new for the week. Often they are familiar plays ran with a different look. Formations are also made new by introducing different motions. Personnel grouping changes also present the opportunity to make a familiar play different for an upcoming opponent.

We like to put special plays into each game plan. These are new plays unknown to our opponent. (They are unknown in terms of not showing up on traded film or were not used against an opponent in previous years.) We sometimes use a reverse, a double pass, or an unbalanced formation. There are lots of choices in terms of special plays. Legendary San Francisco 49ers coach Bill Walsh was an advocate of special or "trick plays." His advice was run your trick play before the opponent does. The surprise factor gives your team an edge. We certainly like gaining an edge against opponents with new or special plays. Our game

plan details specific situations where the new plays for the week are most advantageous. Sometimes we hold special plays as a wildcard too.

We also look to see what others teams did against our opponent successfully. We check to see if schemes that worked for other opponents are related to a Tex-Bone scheme already in place. Sometimes we put an opponent's actual play into our offense if it was extremely successful against the team we face that week.

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR GAME PLAN DUTIES

Scouting Report

The first thing to consider in game planning is the scouting report for players. Our scouting reports include:

- A cover page with some sort of “rah-rah” statement or quote. This “bulletin board” material is something to pique player interest and give them a little bit of extra extrinsic motivation to start the week.
- Information about the opponent's two-deep roster. Height, weight, and other basic information are important to include.
- A section of special notes, instructions, or rules. We put this at the beginning of the report because these are the details we want our players to see early in the week. These are ideas we revisit throughout the week. We want players thinking about them as they prepare.
- A plan for personnel groups. We use as many as 10 personal groups per game when running the Tex-Bone. We do this because it is critical to only ask players to do what they are good at. We do not want to put players in a position to fulfill a role they are not well suited for.
- Diagrams of the opposing defense. This includes their base fronts, base coverages, base blitzes, and base defensive line games. We want to give our players a visual representation of the opponent's defense for study purposes. This lets them know how we plan on lining up that week and what they should expect in response.
- Diagrams of our plays against their defense. The time invested in creating basic diagrams of our base plays against the opponent's defense is well worth it. Generally this is not an extensive time commitment given our staff's familiarity with our base offense. The payoff is great for our players. It is a useful reference guide for players as they study an opponent and visualize their performance.

Our scouting report is:

- Rules to dictate execution. We try to make the weekly game plan simple, clear, and concise for players.
- Solutions to problems. It tells players what to do if an opponent does not play base defense. This information informs quarterback decision-making in particular. Quarterbacks meet with the offensive coordinator during the week to go over the game plan in detail.
- Information to prepare players for what the opponent is likely to do in specific situations. We include diagrams of the opponent's base defense and how we block against them.
- An on-the-fly playbook. When adding new plays, motions, formations, or looks for the week we want to make sure players are provided clear diagrams and instructions about how to execute these new demands.

Our scouting report is not:

- More information than players need to comprehend the game plan. Our scouting report is typically six to eight pages—maybe ten at the most. We do not want to overload our report with minutia that causes player hesitation on game day.
- Charts and graphs chalked full of percentages and statistics. Charts, graphs, and percentages are useful for play callers but a distraction for players. Does your quarterback need to search his memory to recall blitz on third down statistics as he comes to the line of scrimmage in a critical situation? The answer is probably not. This statistic is important to the play caller, not the quarterback. He needs to know what to do if a blitz is encountered in this situation. Does the quarterback need to make a check? Does he know what checks are good against pressure? Our goal is not to clutter any player's brain (especially the quarterback) with erroneous or excessive information. Over thinking often leads to mistakes and slower game play. We only give our players the information they need to play aggressively and react instinctively against an opponent.

Personnel Analysis

The offensive coordinator needs to develop a plan for rotations and reps in both practice and game situations. This plan also needs to include specific personal groupings and substitutions.

We favor numbering our personnel groups rather than using traditional 10, 11, or 21 designations. This allows us to carry multiple personnel groups for the same formation. We often use two or three different Flexbone personnel groups for example. Our personnel groups are created around players more than formations. This is different than how most teams look at personnel groupings. On top of our base personnel groups we also create single player personnel tags to modify a specific player or position in a group. This is advantageous in a third and short or goal line situation.

Figure 247 shows a personnel page from a scouting report. On this diagram there are nine personnel group options. (There is no number five.) We fill in the opponent at the top. Then we drop our players into a two-deep chart so they know what personnel groups they are part of and what positions they are playing.

The first group on the personnel page is Jet motion or other motion plays. Group two is for split back formations and three is for one-back spread formations. The fourth and sixth groups are for Flexbone formations. Group seven is for Flexbone with a tight end and group eight is for empty formations. The ninth and tenth groups are for 2x1 open formations with a single wing.

"Opponent"- Personnel									
Pos	1 Jet/Motion	2 Split Backs	3 Spread	4 Flexbone	6 Flexbone	7 TE Flexbone	8 Em. Flexbone	9 Single Wing	10 Single Wing
X									
2nd X									
F									
2nd F									
H / FB									
2nd H / FB									
Z									
2nd Z									
Y (TE)									
2nd Y									

Fig 247

These groupings change from week to week. Some weeks we use more than two Flexbone personnel groups. Other weeks we use more one-back spread personnel groups. It all depends on the opponent and the game plan.

We group players that work best in various formations instead of creating groups that align to specific formations. The sixth personnel group (Flexbone) also works well in spread formations. Our emphasis is on grouping players for formations. The goal is to get as many players involved in game plans and personnel groups as possible. Players who are ready for varsity action see the field. We are able to do this because of our focus on player strengths. We don't need players that fit all roles—we need ones who fit specific rolls.

PLAY CALLER'S MENU: the “Ready List”

There are many different ways to organize a play-calling menu. I've used them all at some point over the years. It's important for a play caller to review what's working for them currently while considering what changes are needed in the future.

The following are essential components of the Tex-Bone play-calling menu. They include:

- Runs and passes by formation. Much of what the Tex-Bone does involves understanding how teams align to our different formations. This makes it logical to group the ready list based on formation. Listing plays based on formation gives quick information access when a defense gives looks that were anticipated during the week. Arranging the menu this way is also valuable because it provides information on how plays in a formation are potentially affected by defensive looks that were not anticipated in the game plan.
- The menu must contain offensive responses and counterattacks. The play caller must anticipate what the defense might do differently and have responses ready to counter it.
- Opening (possession or possessions) script. Are there formations you are almost certain you know what the defense alignment against them is? If yes, plan to attack that early. Naturally there are formations where you are not sure what defense you might see. Working those formations into the game as early as possible is a good idea as well. This allows the offensive coaching staff to diagnose and respond to the defense moving forward.
- All game plan menus must account for specific game situations. You want plans for third and fourth down as well as sub-plans for red zone and backed-up scenarios.
- A list of “must call” plays. These are plays based on analysis you think are the “best of the best” elements of the game plan. They are the “go to” plays you expect to succeed. They are plays you want to make sure to call during the game.

The next illustration (Figure 248) shows one of our Tex-Bone ready lists. The far left side is a list of plays based on formation families. We put plays grouped by 2x1 formations in the top left. We highlight pass plays with a blue background and run plays with a green background. We also include groupings for 2x2 formations and 3x1 formations because we expect to know how the defense plans on lining up against them. Our plays are grouped overall according to our knowledge of how an opponent lines up against specific formations.

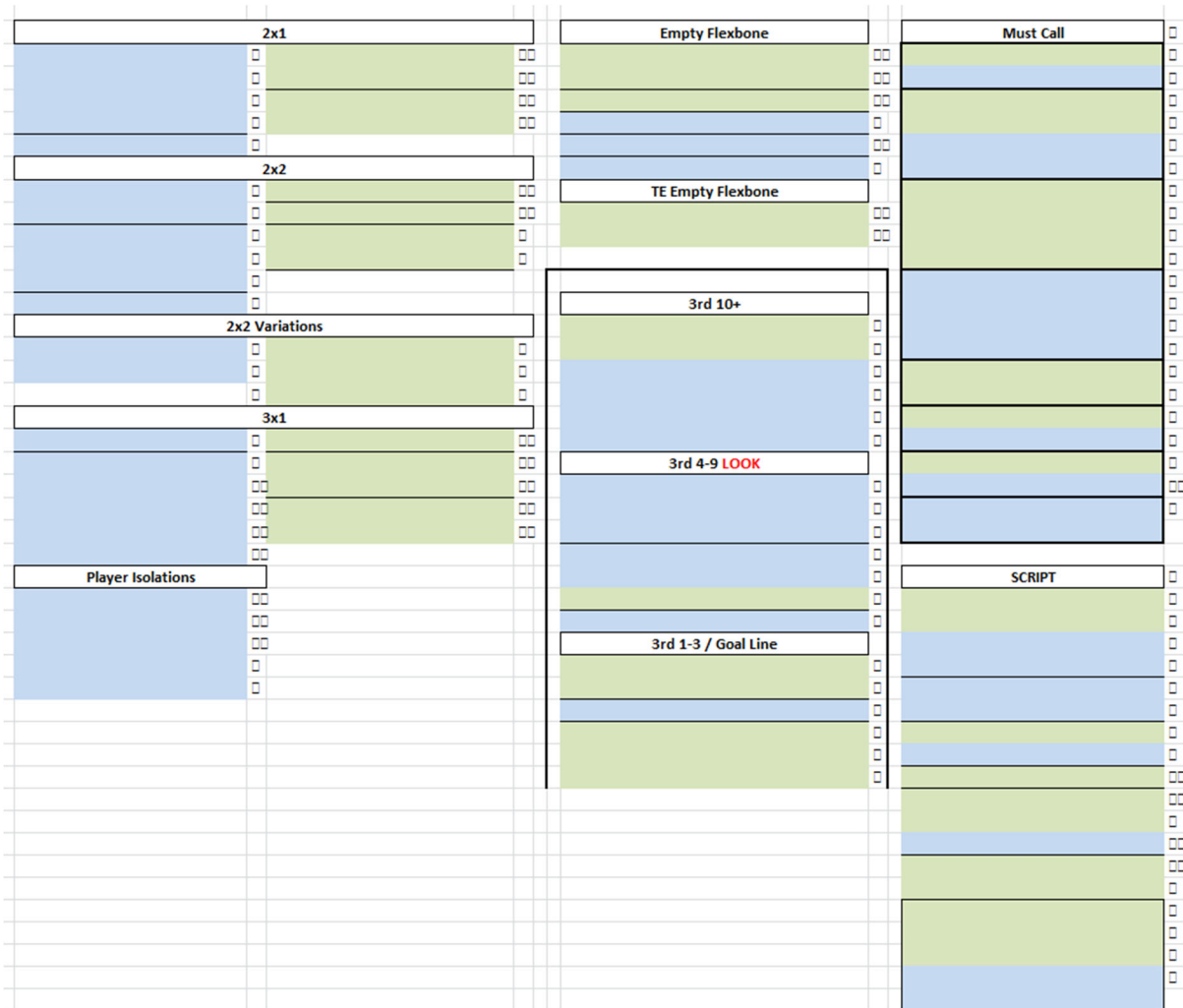


Fig 248

Next, we include a section for player isolations where the goal is to get the ball to specific player. In the middle area of the menu we put a plan for empty formations and empty Flexbone. Below that are groupings for specific situations. We divided our third down plan into three different situations: (1) third and 10 or more, (2) third and four to nine, and (3) third and one to three yards in the ready list above. These plays were grouped together on this ready list specifically because we felt our opponent's short yardage/goal line defense was similar to their third and 1 to 3 yards defense.

In the top right corner is our must call list. These are plays we felt were the best pieces of the game plan that we need to call during the game. In the bottom right corner is our opening script. This is a list of plays we want to look at early. Some of the lines on the opening script include two check boxes. That means if the play works well the first time we might consider coming back to it again before leaving the opening script.

Was Bill Walsh Right?

Bill Walsh is widely credited as the father of modern offensive game plans. A wide variety of Bill Walsh books and materials about game planning are available. Walsh invented the play caller menu we use today. The Walsh chart included a plan for every situation imaginable. His philosophy was that it's easier to make decisions in the office on Wednesday than it is to make decisions with the play clock running down on game day.

Was Bill Walsh right is the big question. How much is too much? When do you hit paralysis by analysis? When does a play caller get distracted by his chart and stop watching the game? What if the plays on the call sheet aren't working? These are all important considerations for a play caller to sort out.

Notice in the Tex-Bone menu on the last page there is not a written plan for what to do if we are up by 14 in the first quarter and it starts to rain. Bill Walsh created a section for this. I personally find that level of detail a bit too much. You decide for yourself.

An Alternative to the NFL Sized Menu

I suggest visualization exercises for play callers as an alternative to an NFL sized play menu. In doing this you pre-rehearse reactions to a wide variety of game situations and defensive countermeasures. That way if you are ahead early, down early, if it rains, if there is an injury, if you face a defense you didn't expect, or any of the other situation like this you know what to do. Visualization allows you to rehearse these scenarios and mentally map a response. Visualization keeps you calm and focused during the hectic and pressure filled nature of the game. Visualization exercises are strongly recommended for athletes as well.

The Tex-Bone structure alleviates some of these concerns over stressful in-game situations. Remember, the Tex-Bone is a rule-based system. A large part of what Bill Walsh did on offense was game planned week to week at a genius level. This put pressure on the offensive coordinator to "reinvent the wheel" in certain circumstances. This is not to say that Walsh's ideas weren't innovative or influential—they certainly are. Our point examines Walsh's approach from a broader perspective, noting that no system is perfect.

The Tex-Bone System contains a reliable systematic structure. This frees an offensive coordinator from drawing up a brand new game plan every week. The fact that solutions to defensive pressure, line games, and multiple coverages are built into the system is a stress reliever for play callers.

Sideline vs. Pressbox Play Calling

There is a quiet and calmness to the press box. The press box also gives the best view of the action. There is room for materials including charts, diagrams, and notes. You are able to bring as many different colored markers or pens as needed. You also get room for as many cans of Diet Coke as you need.

The field is chaos by comparison. Sight lines are limited and there is no room for materials. Extra charts and diagram are not an option and you are basically limited to one pen. You are reliant on spotters with better sightlines and view of the game.

I recommend putting the play caller in the press box unless he is the head coach. The press box is a much more calm and quiet environment. It is a better location for analysis of the opponent and there are better

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sightlines. Is calling plays from the sideline an option? Certainly. I call plays from the sideline as the head coach. I readily admit it is a difficult situation that takes practice to perform effectively however. From the sideline you are reliant on assisting coaches. Play callers need to train coaches on how to spot for you in order to overcome these limitations.

