

# CHAPTER TWO

## Reading Coverages

Teaching your quarterback how to read defenses usually begins with teaching him the different coverages that defenses play as well as their weaknesses and how to attack those weaknesses. Developing this skill in your quarterbacks is a must and that is why we begin here.

### **COVERAGE FAMILIES**

One of our first lessons in understanding coverages is to teach the quarterbacks the two families of coverages. In a single safety coverage, we talked about the middle of the field being *closed*. It means if you look between the hatches at the high school level, you'll generally see a safety anywhere from 12 to 15 yards occupying the middle of the field. Once he's in the middle of the field, and we've determined that it's a single safety coverage, it can only be one of two things: it's Cover 1 (man coverage), or it's going to be Cover 3 (zone coverage).

When there are two safeties deep, we consider the middle of the field *open*. You'll have a safety at somewhere between eight to 15 yards just outside the hashes. This family has got a few more different coverages that we can see. We can see anything from Cover 2 to Cover 4 (quarters) and all the variations that exist within those two coverages.

Another middle of the field open coverage would be when there are no safeties

deep. The safeties would be up tighter than eight yards, so they would be below what we call the hard deck line. In that case, it's Cover 0 (blitz coverage).

### **Method for Determining Coverages**

To determine the defense's coverage, we teach them about the depth, eyes, and leverage of the defenders. The very first thing the quarterback needs to do is to locate safety. Look down the field, do you see two safeties, one safety or no safety? The quarterback needs to then determine if the coverage is in the middle of the field open or closed family.

#### **Depth**

He then needs to look at the position of the safeties and outside linebackers in relation to the hard deck line. The "hard deck line" is an imaginary line that is eight yards downfield from the line of scrimmage. That line gives us a frame of reference to determine if any safeties are going to be rotating or if any linebacker is going to be coming because you see the safeties stacked behind linebackers.

Next, the quarterback will determine the width and the depth of the corners. Are they above the hard deck line? Or are they at or below the hard deck line? Below the hard deck would signify a Cover 1 press look, or perhaps a hard Cover 2 look.

#### **Eyes**

Third, the quarterback will look to where their eyes are. At high school level the eyes don't lie. We tell them that eyes and body position help give a lot of coverage away. So, if their eyes are on the receiver, it's generally man (Cover 1 or Cover 0) and their bodies are a little more rigid. If they're open and looking into the football, it's most of the time going to be zone coverage.

#### **Leverage**

Lastly, the quarterback will look at their leverage. Are they inside or outside shade? The defenders' leverage position will help you see where they can expect help. Inside leverage tells you that they either are using the sideline for help or a deep safety. Outside leverage tells you that the defender expects some inside help whether that be a linebacker or safety.

When you teach the quarterback to take the depth, eyes, and leverage into consideration, he'll be able to start determining coverages much better. Coverages can change, so before the snap, they may show two high and as the ball gets snapped,

they rotate to one high. But if you look exactly where they're located in relation to the hash, or where their feet are, they don't lie and then you'll be able to figure out what their intentions are.

## Understanding Zone Coverages

It's important for your quarterbacks if they're going to attack defenses to understand how the zones work.

These zones don't change in each coverage. When we take a look at the underneath coverages the underneath

DEEP LEFT		DEEP MIDDLE		DEEP RIGHT
FLAT	CURL	HOOK	CURL	FLAT

coverages start at the line of scrimmage, and they go to about 18 to 22 yards downfield, and there's five underneath

coverages. The underneath areas are: the flats on each side, the curl on each side; and one hook. These zones are where the defensive players position themselves in zone coverage. And so, there are only five zones because there are only five players that can go out for a route at any given time. Starting at 18 to 22 yards, all the way through the back of the end zone, there are the three deep zones. The number of these defenders they put in these zones depend on the coverage (Cover 2 = two deep; Cover 3 = three deep; Cover 4 = four deep). In the following sections, we will go over each of these zone coverages and learn how the number of deep defenders affects the underneath zones. From there, you will learn how to teach your quarterback the weaknesses to each zone coverage.

### Cover 2

Again, the areas don't change. There are always five underneath zones and three deep zones with the defense determining how many players they need to go cover those zones in relation to what you're doing offensively. When a team is playing Cover 2, they want to take away your quick game. Sometimes with a zone blitz they may give up five of those underneath areas, but in normal Cover 2, there are five underneath defenders in each zone with two deep safeties splitting the deep part of the field.

The weakness of Cover 2 is that they're taking two defensive players to cover the whole field. The cornerback is going to play your wide receiver with outside leverage.



would attack any Cover 3. We'll identify the underneath area where they are getting to late (or not at all because they are giving up one of those underneath zones) and we will attack them underneath with our quick game concepts.

There is also an area that we call "the jungle" which you can exploit with a back shoulder fade or a comeback to your number one receiver. You can also attack this area by throwing downfield in the seam to your number two receiver. If you have the speed or can run great releases and not get touched by the outside linebacker or strong safety, you'll make life miserable for the middle of the field safety as you run your seams downfield.

### **Sky and Cloud**

Sky means that the one of the safeties is going to cover the flats while Cloud tells the one of the corners to cover the flats. The drawing on the previous page shows Cover 3 Sky with both corners playing the right and left deep zones. In Cover 3 Cloud, one of the safeties would play a deep outside zone over one of the cornerbacks in the flat.

The teams will generally play Cloud because they want to take away one of your wide receivers and quick game to the field. In this case, they're covering up your best quick game receiver because they don't want you to get an opportunity to play catch. He's going to be leveraged outside of this receiver forcing him to go in because if he allows him to go outside, it's going to be a long way for the safety to get over the top. One of the key giveaways that you're going to notice is the safeties aren't quite on the hash. He's going to be well-off the hash and he's going to have to be moving before the snap to get to his deep third over the Cloud cornerback.

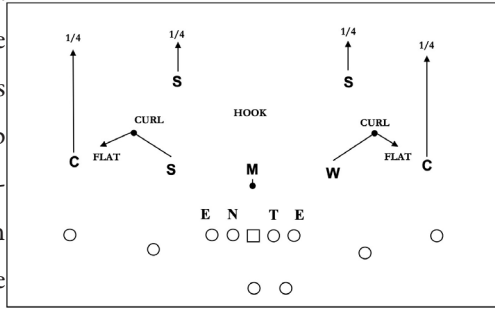
For both Cloud and Sky, you can teach your quarterbacks through film to read the hips of the safety who is either rolling or going over the Cloud cornerback. For Sky, the safety cannot stay at the hash at the snap, but will have to be coming down in order to play his zone. Likewise, in Cloud, the safety will probably start opening his hips to the outside zone he is going over. Usually these things will tend to give the defense's intentions away through doing film study.

### **Cover 4**

One of the strengths of Cover 4 or Quarters Coverage is any pattern that's run over 10 to 12 yards is covered up and possibly double teamed. Another strength

## READING COVERAGES

is they're going to sit the safeties a little tighter, and they're going to be involved in the run game. As soon as they see a run, they're going to fit up into the box. A weakness of the coverage is the quick game, particularly in the flats because there are only three underneath defenders. The other way



that we would attack them is with play action to try to get a deep shot down the middle of the field or inside up the hashes.

The safeties are going to take read steps when the ball is snapped. In Cover 2, you're generally going to see them fly out of there. In Quarters, they're going to sit and read the end man on the line of scrimmage. If the man on the line of scrimmage gives them a run, they're going to fit down at some point in the box based on how the outside linebacker is fitting. As soon as they see the pass, they're going to read number two. And if number two continues deep, it now just becomes like man coverage for that safety. If number two cuts his route right off short, that safety is now looking up number one, and it becomes a double team on number one. The cornerback is going to be sitting a little deeper, sitting in outside shade, and he's going to pick up number one on any deep. If number one runs anything deep, he becomes his man. If number one cuts his pattern off short, he now doubles up on number two who's running anything past 12 yards. The outside linebacker are going to go out to the flats, usually a little late because they are coming from inside the box.

## HOW TO TEACH THE COVERAGES

Every year we teach the quarterbacks the coverages from the drawings and on the board. Before we even get to watch any video, I get my players up on the board to ask them them questions and to draw up coverages. If they've played in our offense, they'll know some of the stuff that we've run ourselves. Board work is a great way for coaches to check the understanding of their quarterbacks as you're teaching them. PowerPoints and the presentations are great but you've got to actually get your quarterback up on a board and get him working through some of these problems. One of the ways that they check for understanding in school is to have the students actually

work on some problems in the class, so this does the same thing for the quarterbacks. So, during this time, we ask our quarterbacks to know the coverages and then be able to explain how to attack the coverage within the context of our offense.

Let's look at Cover 2 as an example of how we teach the quarterback on the whiteboard. As mentioned earlier, the strength of Cover 2 is five players underneath. They've got five players to cover the five zones underneath and it can be really hard to run short to intermediate range patterns. However, the weakness of Cover 2 is there are only two players covering the three deep zones. One of the things that they're relying on is that no offensive player will have the opportunity to run free through a zone to get to the deep zones. So, even though there's only two players deep, they're relying on the five guys underneath to get hands on offensive bodies so that players are not running free to make the safeties' job really difficult.

The very first thing that I ask our quarterbacks is how can we take what they do well, and use it against them to complete some quick game passes. So, I'll ask them can you run? Can you run slant-bubble? And the answer should always be "no." Because the slant, which is number one, eventually becomes number two. And number two, the bubble, eventually becomes number one. Even though a player is moving as he sees the bubble, he eventually hears an in-call and moves to cover the slant with the cornerback sitting right on top the bubble. So, that route combination should never be open.

So, then we ask them to think of other routes that we do or you've seen that could take advantage of what they're doing well. The quarterback should take notice of the leverages of the cornerback (outside leverage) and the outside linebacker (inside leverage) and think of something that can attack in between. So, if we run a double slant with the outside receiver runs a three step slant and the inside receiver runs a one step slant, the linebacker becomes the key defender read.

If he turns his hips and runs inside and prevents the inside slant from running inside by melting to him, there is a huge window to throw the outside slant because this route is breaking away from the cornerback's leverage.

That's just an elementary way of showing your players or getting them to work through how to use some quick game concepts versus Cover 2. There's a lot of different ways that you can use your players to manipulate defenders and apply what

they're doing against them in your favor.

The next thing that I would do with the quarterbacks is we would actually bring up game film of our games. Sometimes we bring up some NFL and college game films as well. We bring up the film from the games and have them identify the different coverages that they learn. I would recommend that when you're installing new concepts, install them, and draw them up a bit and see how they attack the various coverages.

## **CONCLUSION**

The two coverages that we left out, Cover 1 and 0, are a whole different bird. Those are coverages where we want to take advantage of matchups or create matchups through certain routes. For identifying man coverage, as mentioned earlier, the eyes usually give it away because they are staring directly at their man. For the zone coverages that we went over here, I hope that you are able to use this as a foundation to teach your own quarterbacks. Having a quarterback that can communicate these things to you is a big advantage and by the time they have gone through a whole off-season, they should know all the coverages your team will see and what routes your teams runs to attack those coverages.