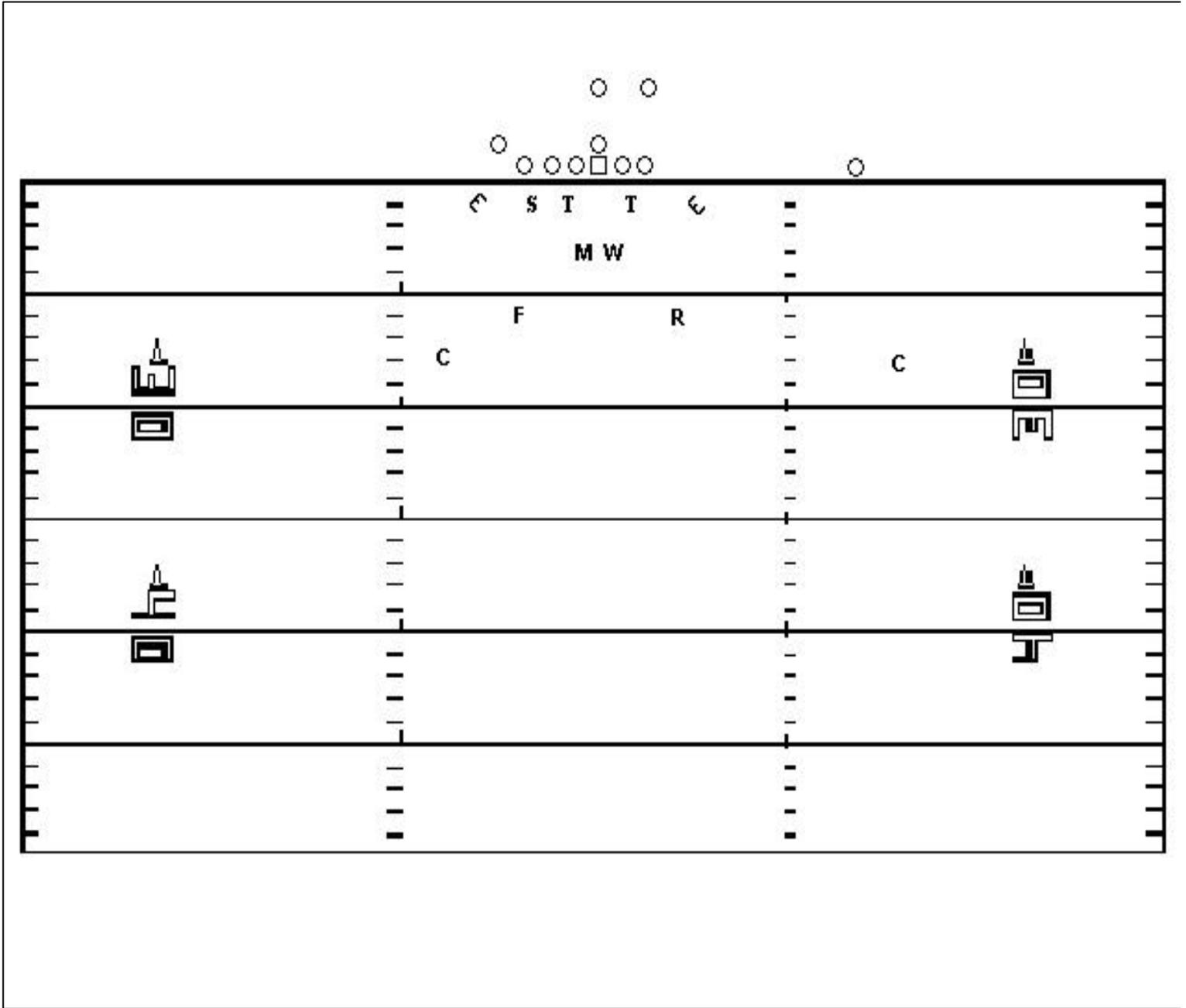


# THE 4-4-3

STACK/SPLIT COMPLEX FOR YOUTH FOOTBALL



By Ted Seay

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## INTRODUCTION

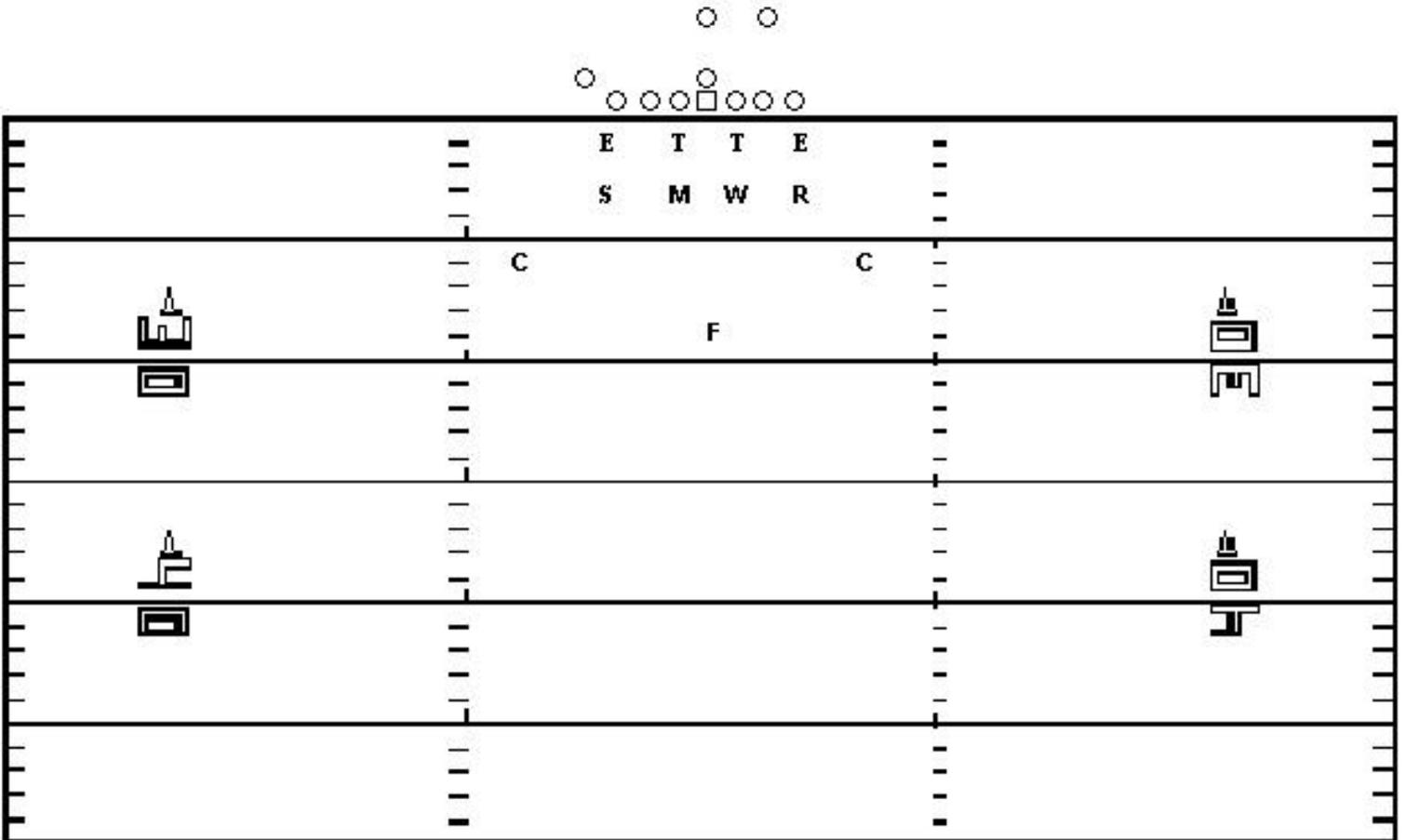
I was asked by another coach to lay out a simple but powerful defensive system for use at the youth level. He specified the Wing-T, Power I and Wishbone as the offensive formations he was most likely to face, so I have diagramed Stack and Split, the two base defensive fronts in my 4-4-3 complex, against these sets. The first priority against these formations will be to attack the inside and off-tackle running games; second priority will be play-action passing and the counter running game; and finally, drop-back and sprint-out passing, as well as the option. These priorities change drastically the higher the level of sophistication of the offense. This paper is intended to address the needs of a youth football defensive coordinator.

My experience with the Split-4 defense goes back to the early 1970's, as a high school player and then coach. Gaillard Bellamy's Split/Pro Defense made a profound impact on my defensive thinking, and was in fact the only defense I used until 1988 when I switched to Coach John Thomson's 5-5-1 "Two-Level" defense, which I have used ever since. Along the way, I also experimented with a 4-4 Stack, and have included the Split and Stack here as a complete defensive system. I have outlined line stunts and linebacker blitzes, as well as secondary coverages.

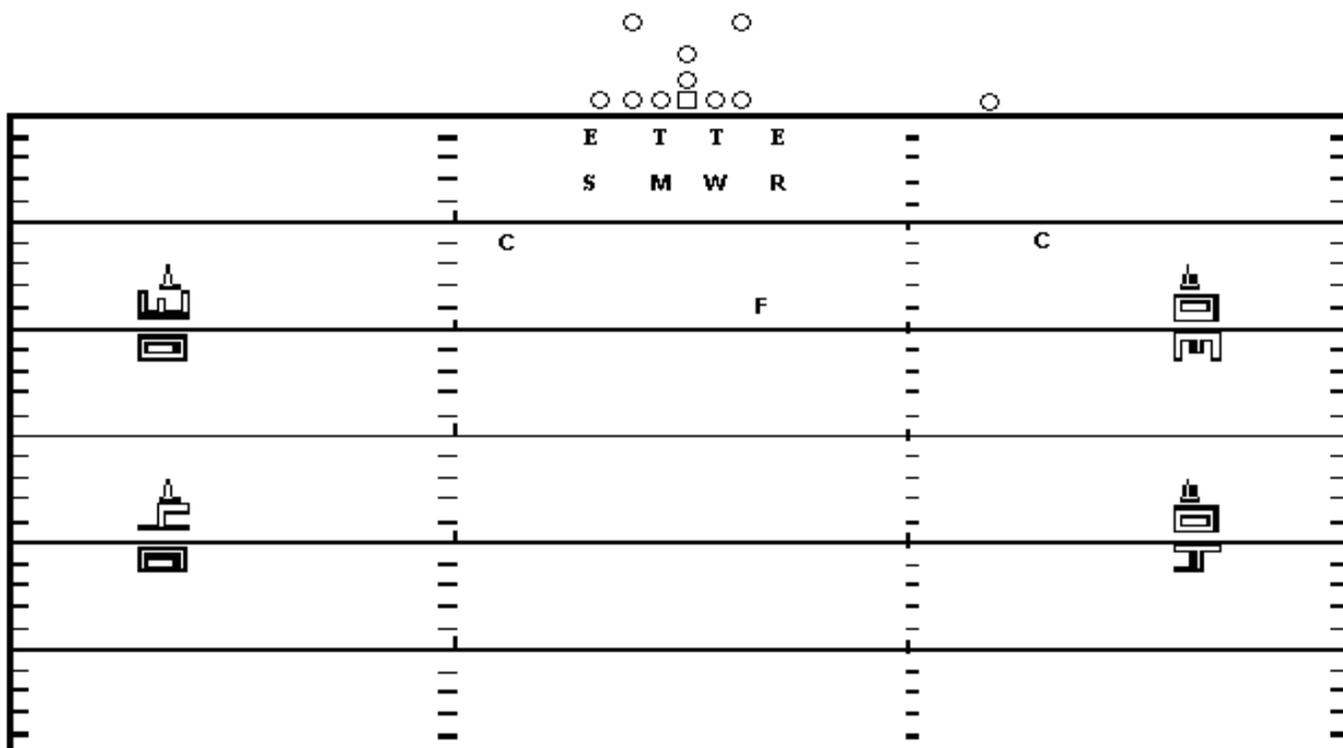
While my guiding principle in all football is KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid!), I believe this is especially important at the youth level. I have tried to limit the number of line stunts from Stack, for example, which are theoretically almost without limit. Similarly, there are only two base coverages from Stack (although you can live with one), and four to choose from in Split -- three versus split ends, one versus double tight ends.

In matching players with positions, the following guidelines should help. Defensive Tackles are responsible for a gap about 80% of the time, and for the 3 R's (rip, read, react) on the man directly opposite them the other 20% of the time. Therefore, larger and slower kids can be fitted in nicely at this position. Defensive Ends should be among your taller and stronger kids -- if they also have speed over 5-10 yards, you have the perfect candidate. The Sam linebacker is almost another End, but with pass coverage responsibilities. He needs to be able to contain, rush the passer outside-in, and anchor the off-tackle hole until help arrives, in addition to pass coverage in the flat. Mike and Will are identical players -- kids with a nose for the football and a whole lot of want-to are ideal here, even if they aren't your best physical specimens. The Rover is ideally a mixture of Sam and Free Safety, but either type will do. The Corners play straight Cover 3 most of the time, although they do have some quarters/match-up responsibilities. Speed is important, as well as a willingness to work hard to learn pass coverage skills. The Free Safety can be among your least talented kids physically, but he needs a dash of intelligence (street smarts will do fine) and a love of hitting.

## 4-4 STACK

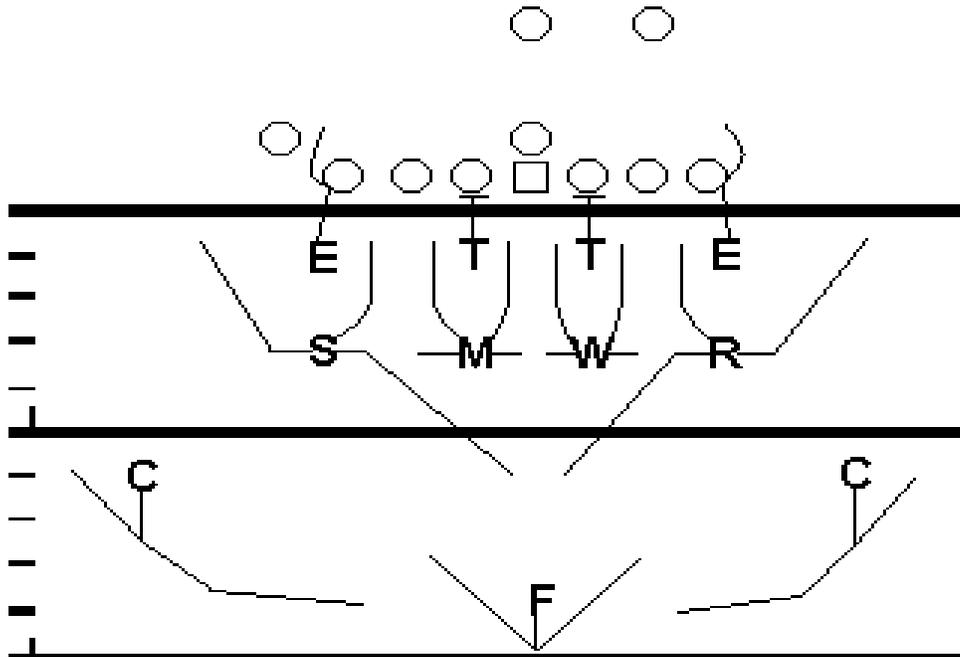


Stack is the front of choice against double-tight formations. DT's are in a 2 technique on the offensive guard, with Mike and Will stacked behind them. DE's are in a 9 technique on the outside shoulder of the TE, with Sam and Rover stacked behind them. In both Stack and Split, all four LB's will align relative to the declared strong side in the following order -- Sam, Mike, Will, Rover, whichever the strong side is. CB's are 2-3 yards outside the #1 receiver to their side at +6 yards deep, while FS splits the difference between the widest receivers at +9 (although we may alter his alignment based on scouting). The Stack adjustments to a split end are on the next page.



Against a split end, the weak DE will play an 8 technique outside the OT, while the weak CB maintains his outside leverage on the split end, and the FS adjusts to the middle of the offensive formation. Again, Stack is not our preferred front against a split end, but it is a workable front against one split end, and should be used as a change-up -- the strength of this 4-4-3 complex is the ability to show multiple looks with very little extra teaching for the defense.

## STACK ASSIGNMENTS



This one is so basic we just call it "Stack". The same principles apply to the whole D-line: 3R = Rip, Read and React. Notice that the DT's take on the OG's head-up -- they deliver a strong rip move and lock the guard out as they look into the backfield for their keys. Against the Wing-T, they will read through the QB to the FB. If their OG disappears, they will keep their shoulders square and expect a down-block from the direction in which the OG is heading, or a trap block from the opposite direction. In either case, they should shuffle forward with their shoulders square and use their peripheral vision to find the blocker, then attack him with the near arm while keeping the other arm free. This is the only case in the entire defensive system when the DT's appear to be responsible for two gaps, but we tell them not to worry -- they never have two gaps by themselves, the linebacker stacked behind them is ALWAYS there to help.

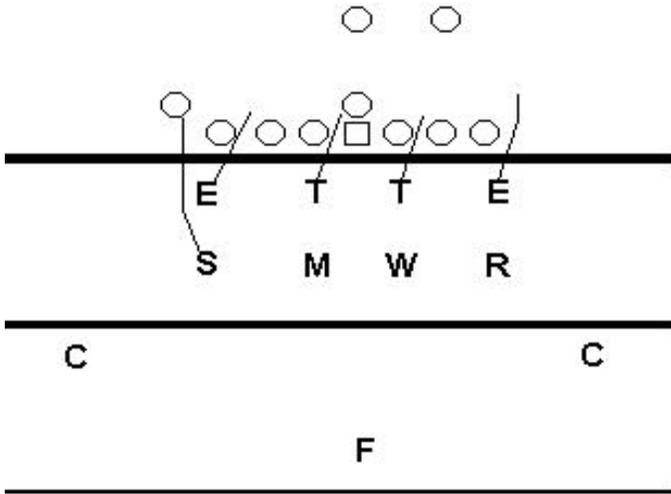
DE's rip the TE with their inside arms and continue through him to a depth of one yard, reading the offensive backfield. Their job is simple: CONTAIN. If there is no TE, read the play from the same 1 yard depth upfield before committing to contain. If a pass develops, rush the QB outside-in.

All LB's read their keys: S reads near TE (or TE/WB combination against a tight wing formation like the Wing T), near guard and near back. M and W read through both guards to the QB. Rover reads the near guard and near back, and TE if one is over him. LB's plug plays coming at them, and scrape to flow otherwise. The ILB away from flow has cut-back responsibility -- he scrapes under control for three steps, looking for counters or reverses, before initiating pursuit. Sam and Rover have primary force

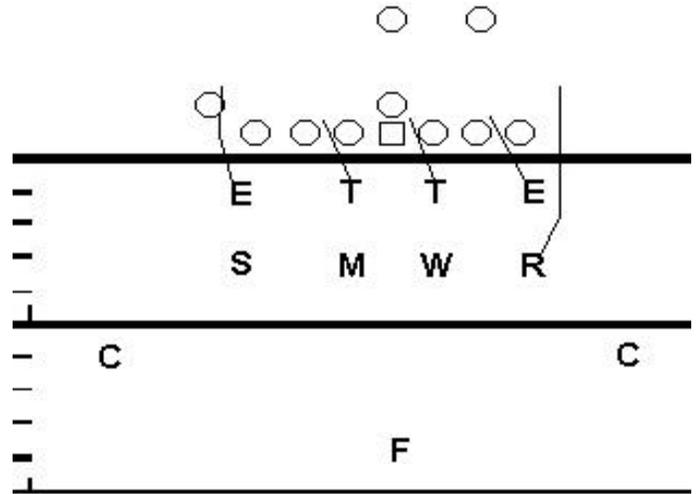
against outside flow to their side, and trail against flow away -- they drop back toward the deep middle, then transition to pursuit once the ball crosses the LOS.

The DB's have simple responsibilities -- they drop to their respective deep 1/3's of the field unless and until the ball crosses the LOS, either on the ground or on the air -- then they react up to it. The depth rule is to drop to about +15-20, but never to let a receiver get behind you. Depth of drop will depend on our scouting reports; if a team is known for its passing, we will play it safe and drop deeper than against a Power I ground-attack offense. If the ball crosses the LOS on the far side of the field, CB's in particular will take the proper pursuit angle to cut off the touchdown.

**LINE STUNTS**

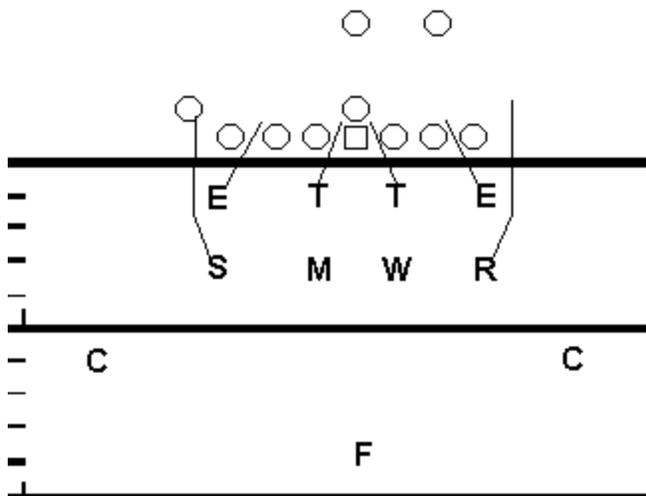


Stack **RIGHT**

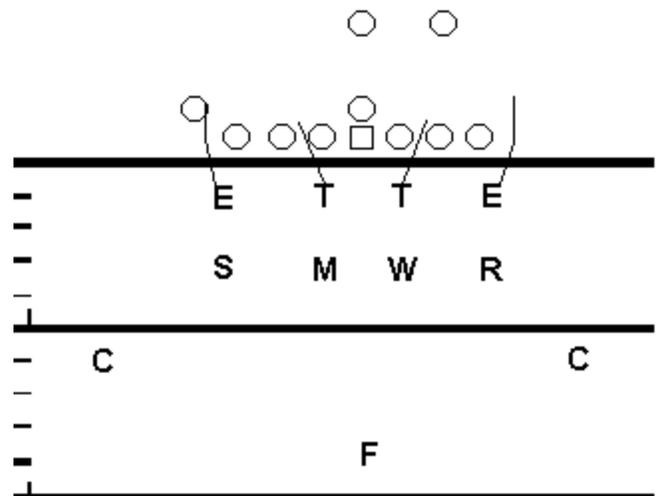


Stack **LEFT**

**RIGHT/LEFT:** The first important principle to remember in Stack is this: No LB is ever forced to blitz, although in some circumstances Sam and Rover may be called on to contain. One of these circumstances is the Right/Left stunt. All D-linemen stunt into the gap on the side called under control -- once they have penetrated to a depth of one yard upfield, they read and react. If a pass develops, they "throttle up" and rush the passer from their gap, which becomes their pass-rush lane. The OLB behind the DE on the backside of this stunt -- Sam in Right and Rover in Left -- MUST assume his DE's Contain responsibility. The other LB's read and react.

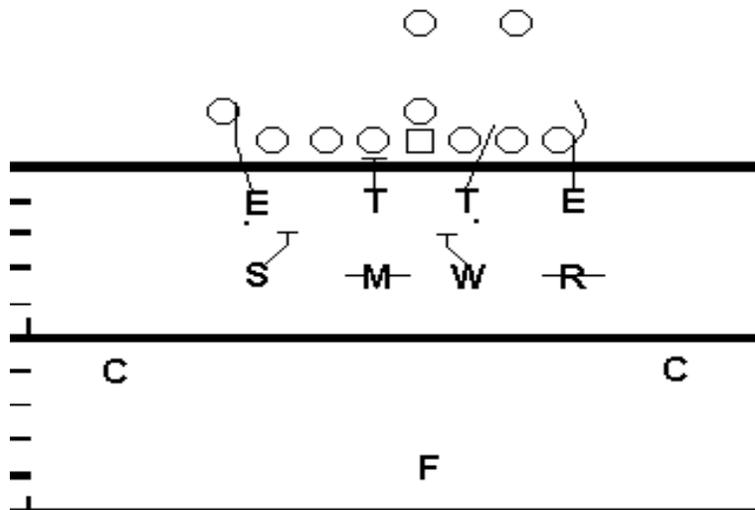


Stack **PINCH**



Stack **FAN**

**PINCH/FAN:** These two stunts send the D-line in or out, respectively. Notice that in Pinch both Sam and Rover **MUST** contain, while in Fan neither is forced to.



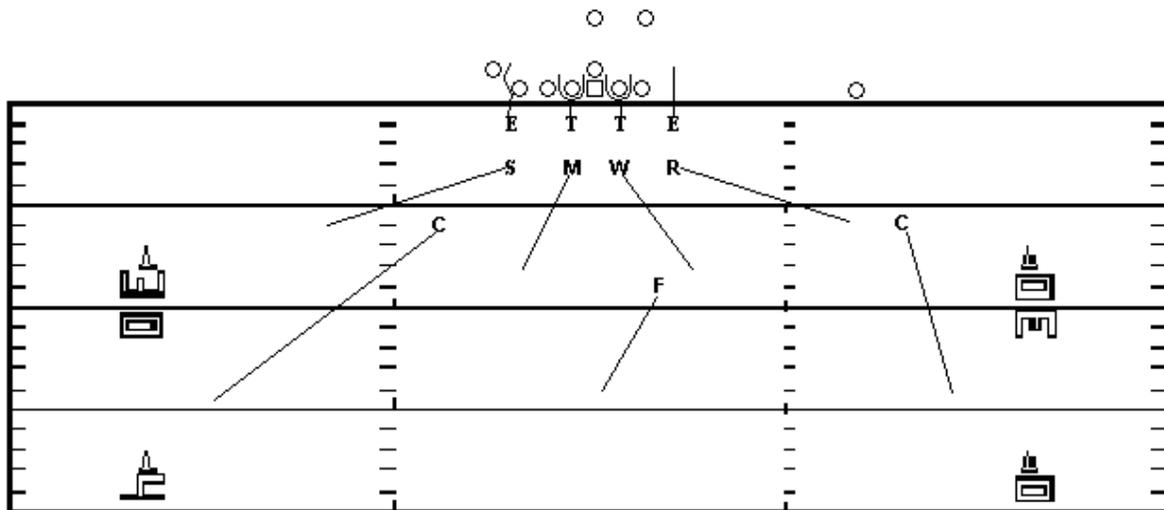
Stack **TAPS**

**TAPS:** This last Stack stunt is a special case, and gives extra responsibilities to all four LB's. In Taps, an LB can tap the DL in front of him on either butt-cheek to indicate which gap the DL should stunt to. In the diagram, "Sam/Will Taps", the left DE and right DT have been tapped, and they charge those gaps under control. The left DT and right DE, meanwhile, play "3R" techniques. Notice Sam and Will are not blitzing, because in Stack no LB is ever forced to blitz -- but they are responsible for the gap opposite the tap side. They can read and react, OR they can blitz the gap opposite the tap -- if it looks to them like a blitz will accomplish something. We always want our LB's

to know that we will NEVER penalize them for being aggressive -- their job is to make things happen. We WILL ask them to use good judgment -- if the ball is disappearing around the right end on a quick pitch, we would rather the left OLB not blitz -- we need his pursuit angle more than a gap filled on the backside of the play. We will determine from scouting how many and/or which LB's we will give Taps responsibility to: it can be "All Taps", "Sam Taps", or any combination in between.

## PASS COVERAGE

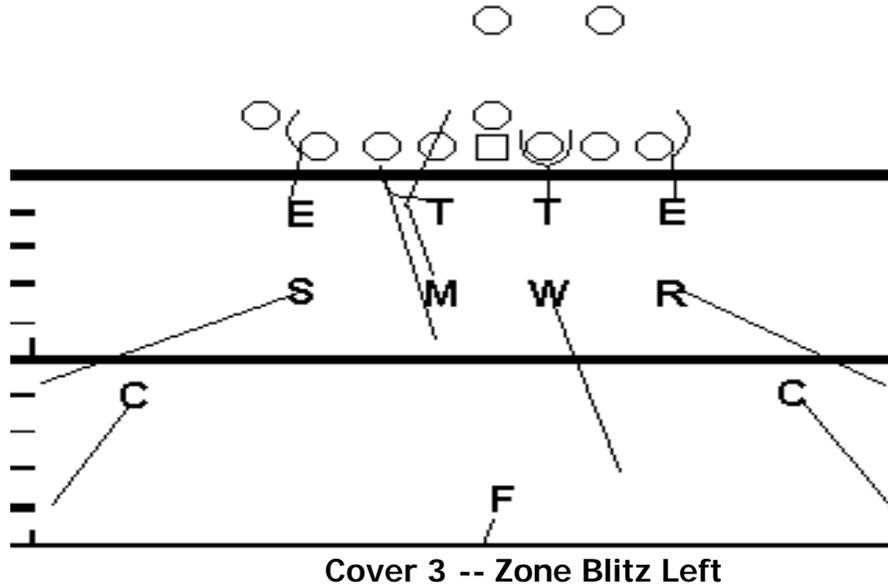
The first consideration against the pass is the D-line rush. If no stunt has been called, the D-line will shift gears after the initial rip in their "3R" technique -- they will read pass and "throttle up" their motors. We ask the D-line to stay in their pass rushing lanes -- DT's can take either gap or rush right through their OG, but no further east or west than that -- we want them heading straight upfield to converge on the ball. DT's should keep their eyes open for draw plays and inside screens, and DE's should watch for outside screens and sprint draws, but in no case do they have primary responsibility -- nothing should distract themselves from their primary responsibility -- pass rush. If they make the tackle on a screen or draw, great -- but we do not assign "spy" duties to our D-line.



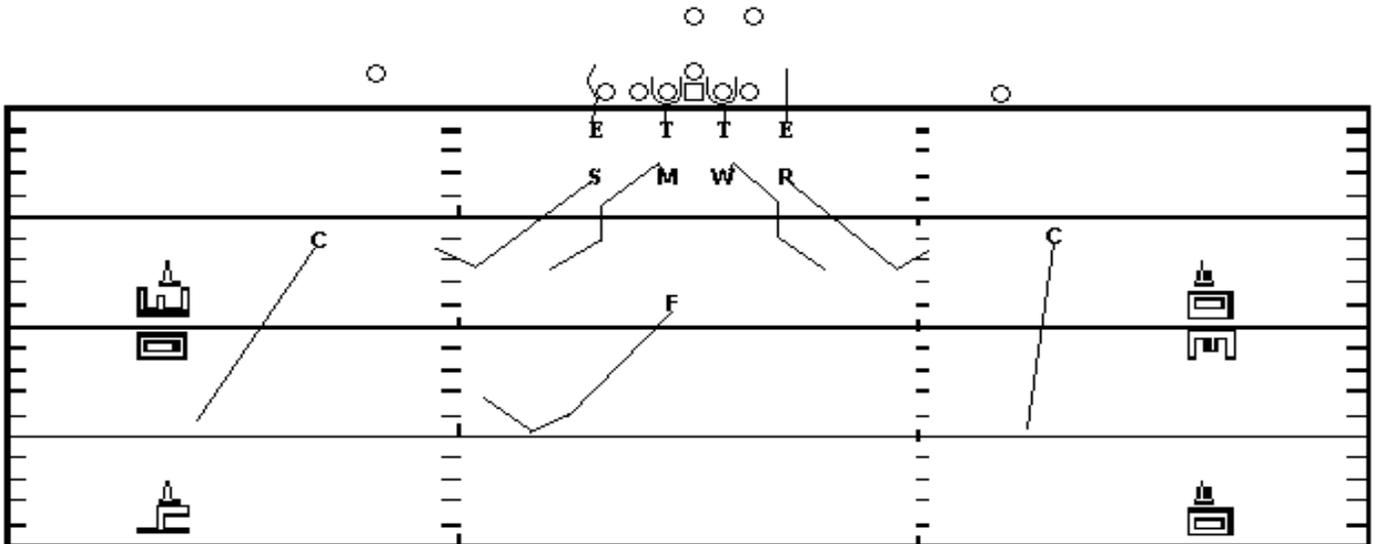
**Cover 3:** Mike and Will drop to Strong and Weak Hook, respectively, at a depth of about +8; Sam and Rover drop to their respective Flat areas at about +6; while the Corners and Free Safety drop to their respective Deep 1/3's at a depth of +12-15, depending on the opponent and/or game situation. Again, the defensive backs' law is to let no one behind them.

This is a "plain vanilla" Cover 3, and we spend a lot of time drilling zone reads -- following the quarterback's eyes while glancing at receivers in your zone.

Zone Blitz: A variation we run from C3 is to allow one DT or the other hit the OT to his side, then drop into coverage at about +5. DT's LOVE this, as do the ILB's who get to blitz. Again, LB's are never forced to blitz in Stack, but with someone covering their zone in Zone Blitz, we suggest that the ILB think hard about blitzing the passer.



If the ILB does blitz, like Mike in the diagram, we tell him to hide behind his DT. The DT loops out to engage the OT before dropping; Mike follows behind the DT until he is roughly at the DT's pre-snap depth -- we are trying to draw the OG's block to the outside -- before cutting back sharply inside and ripping or swimming through the OG, who is probably off-balance at best. This maneuver takes practice to keep Mike or Will from getting flattened by a highly-enthusiastic DT doing his pass coverage thing.



**Match-Up Zone:** The other coverage in Stack is a variation of C3, but one that gives the offense very different reads. It is most useful against formations that have two

immediate receivers to one side, like the Wing-T or (even better) the Pro-T. You can either install both coverages from Stack, or you can pick one based on the offenses you are most likely to face. If you do choose to install both, I highly recommend teaching "vanilla" C3 first, before trying the more "exotic" Match-Up.

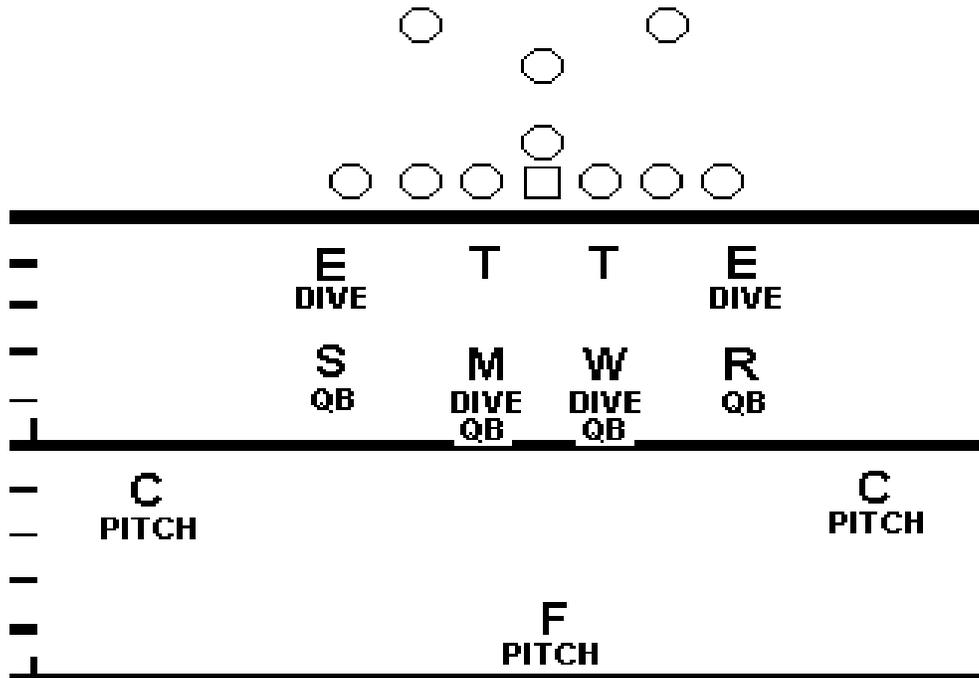
In the diagram, Stack Match-Up is employed against a Pro-T look. The Strong Corner drops to the outside deep 1/4, and his responsibility is the #1 receiver. FS drops to the next deep 1/4 inside the CB, looking first for #2 to go vertical: if he does, FS will play him man up; if not, he will continue to drop through #1's Post area, before coming back slightly to #1's Curl area. The backside CB will drop to deep 1/2, looking for #1. If the strongside #1 receiver breaks horizontally early on (up to about #5), the strong CB will help FS if #2 goes vertical; otherwise he will play his deep 1/4 and react up when the ball crosses the LOS.

Sam's rule is Combo #1 strong: He drops to strong Curl, looking to play any short-breaking routes by #1, then continues to the strong Flat. Rover has the same rule to the backside.

Mike and Will also have identical duties: They take one step forward and read draw; then they start to drop diagonally toward their respective Hook zones, looking first for screens, then for crossing routes to wall off. Once they reach Hook, they continue to read the QB's eyes as they continue to their respective Curl zones, which Sam and Rover will by now have vacated on their way to the Flats.

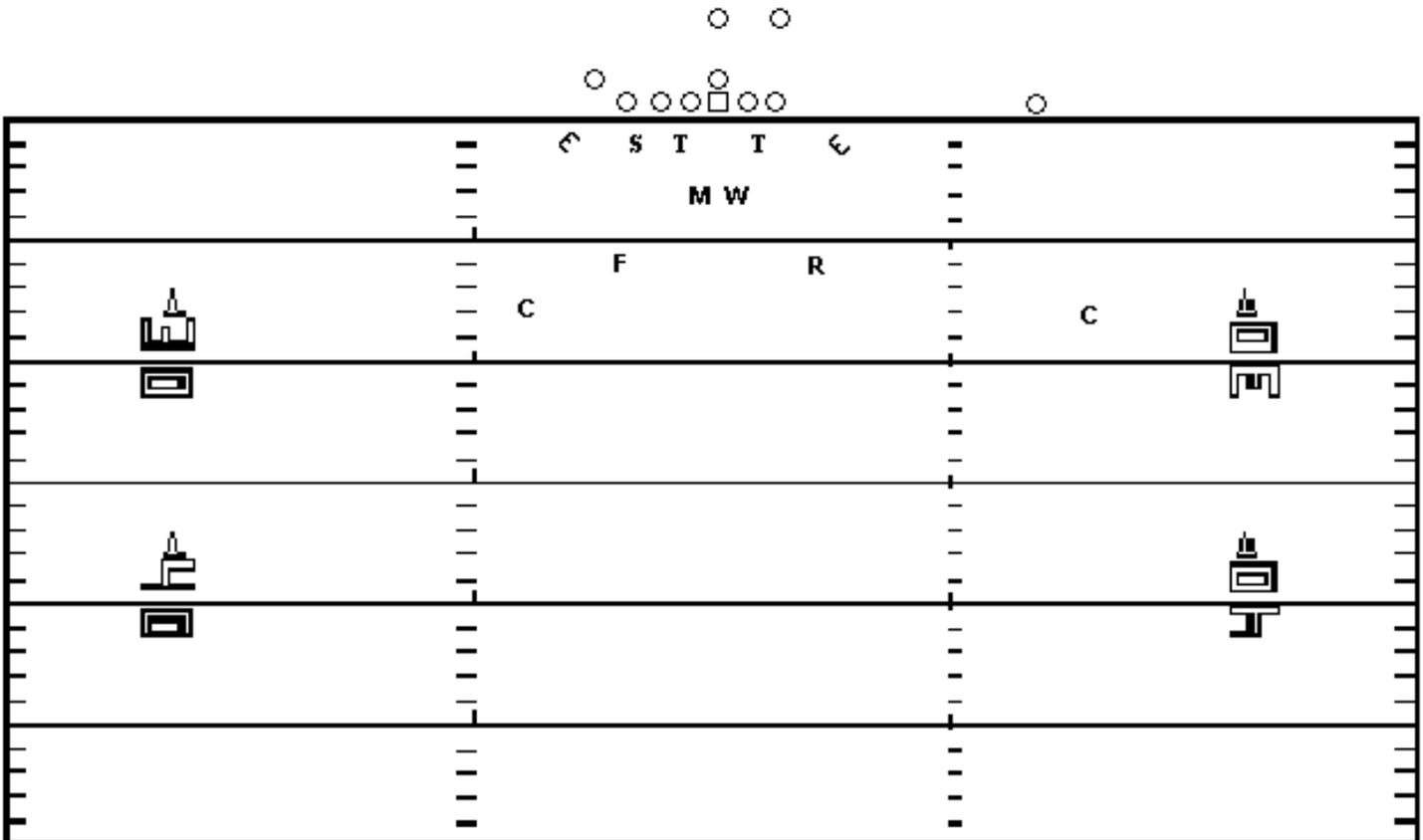
Stack is not really designed to deal with 4- or 5-receiver sets, or motion offenses which create Trips or Quad looks. If you face one of these teams, I recommend mixing up Stack Match-Up with one of the Split coverages.

**OPTION RESPONSIBILITIES**

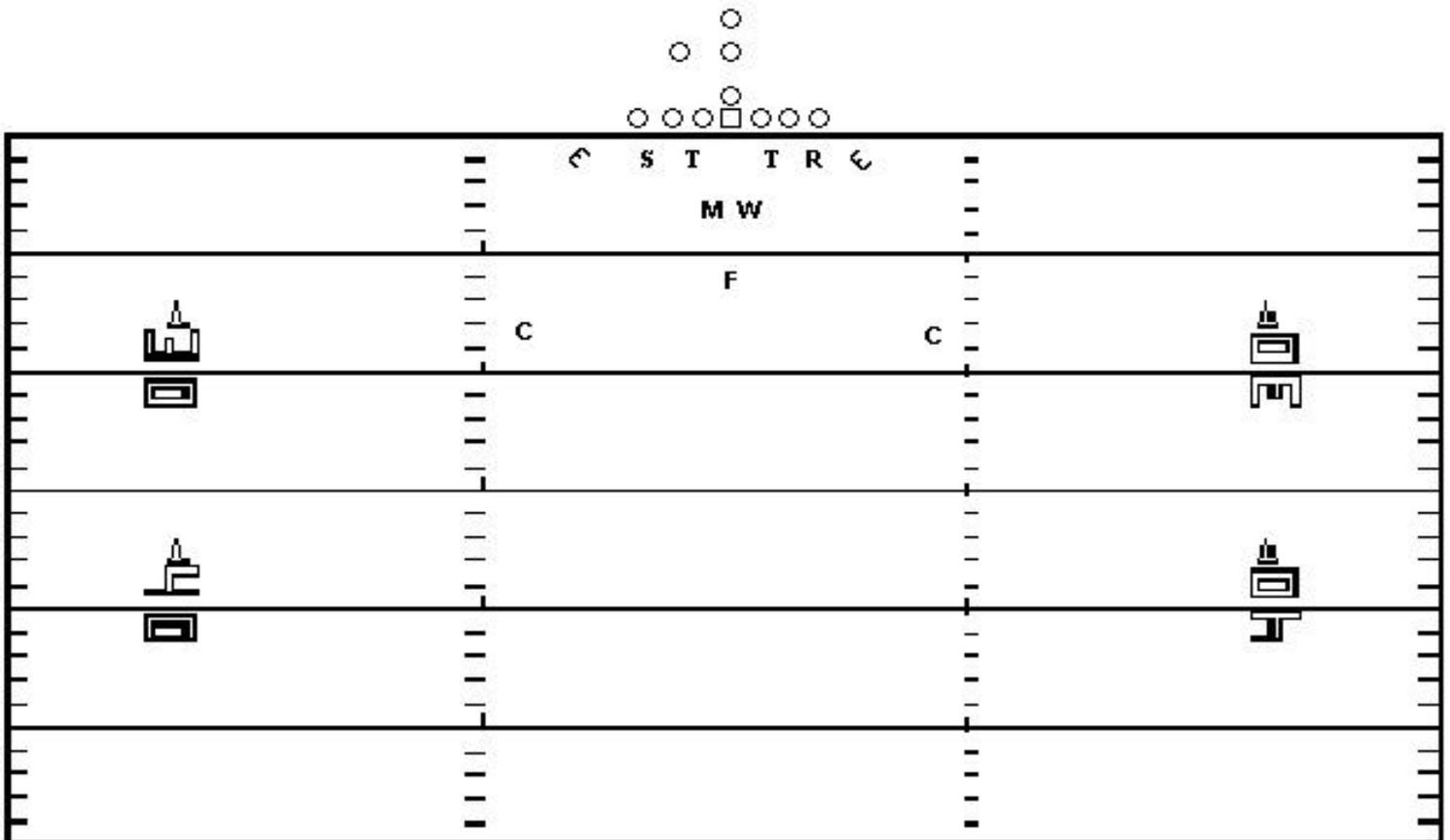


I have diagrammed the basic responsibilities against option teams. We encourage more stunting against option teams, both inside and outside. When stunting, however, LB's should realize their option responsibilities probably change. When facing an option team, these responsibilities and the way they change during stunts should be drilled at length. Note: Mike and Will have Dive on flow to their side, and QB on flow away.

## 4-4 SPLIT

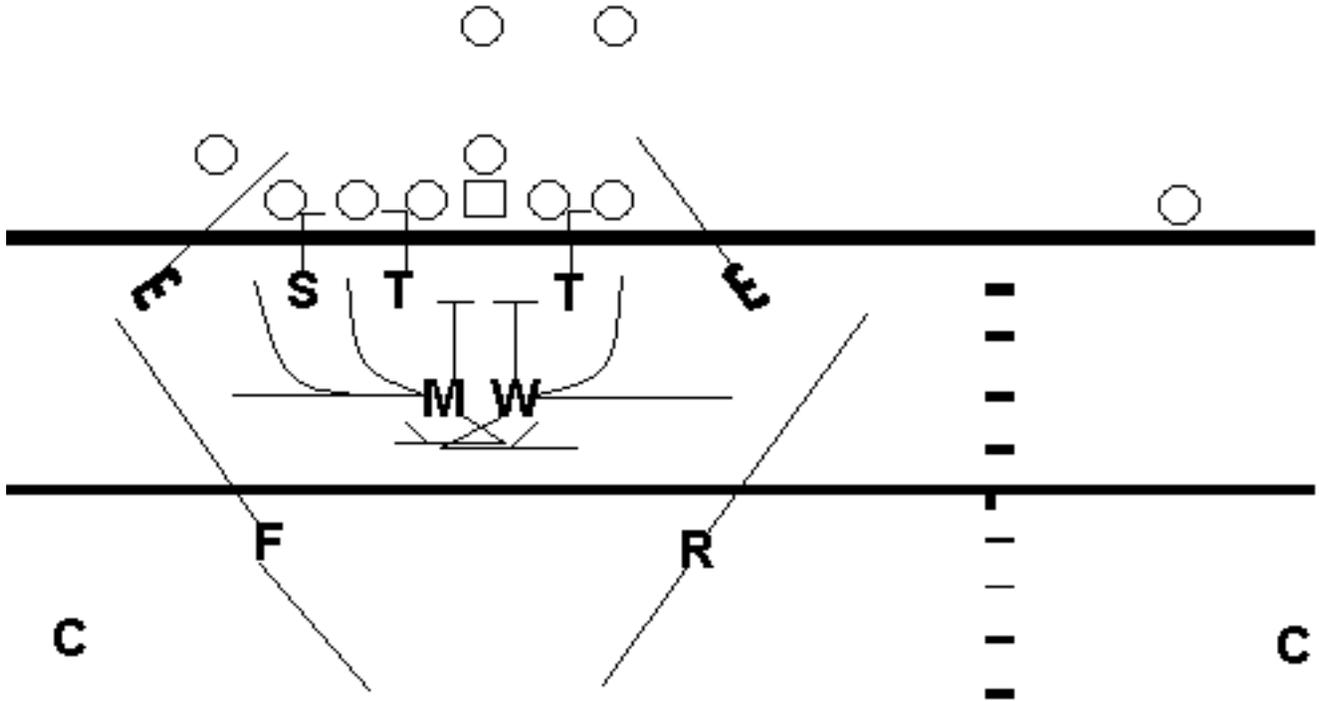


The other basic "look" in our 4-4-3 complex is the Split-4. I have diagramed it first against a split end because Split is the first-choice defensive front against offenses that split one or more ends. DT's play a 3 technique on the outside shoulder of the OG. DE's play an 8 technique outside a TE or an OT, but in both cases slanted inside at a 45 degree angle. ILB's are in a 1 technique on each shoulder of the C, 3 yards deep. Sam plays a 7 technique on the inside shoulder of the TE. CB's play the same distance outside the #1 receivers to their side, 2-3 yards, as they do in Stack, but they line up deeper -- 8 yards against a TE, and 8-9 against a SE. FS and Rover are lined up as invert safeties, a yard outside the OT to their side and +6 yards deep.



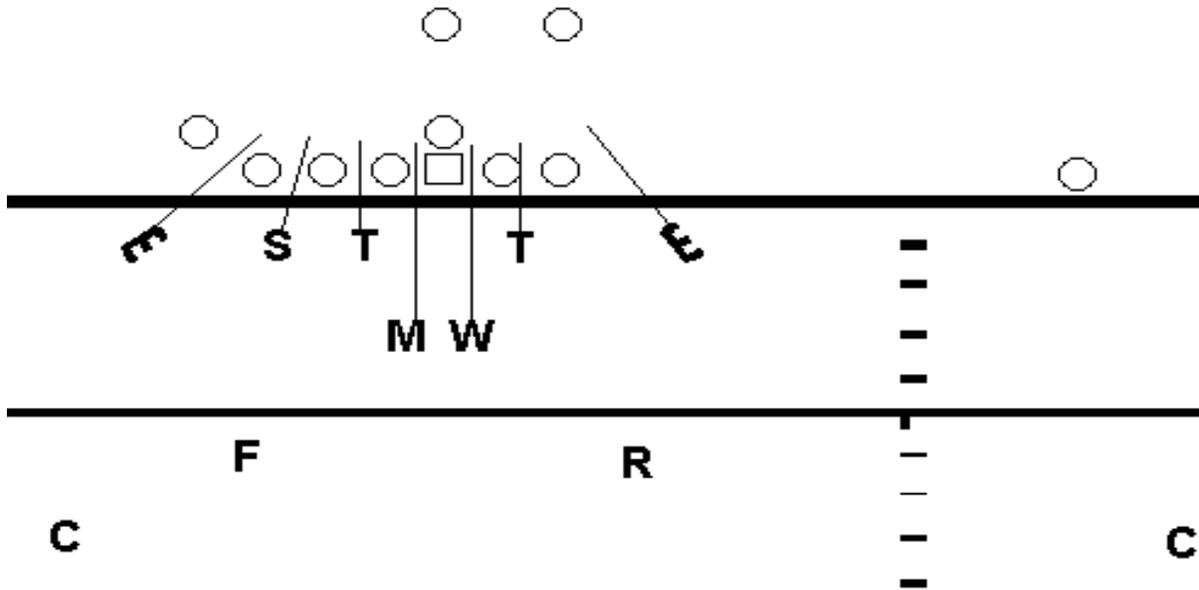
The Split reverts to a three-deep look against two tight ends, although the FS remains inverted. Rover takes up the same position as Sam, a 7 technique inside the TE.

## SPLIT ASSIGNMENTS

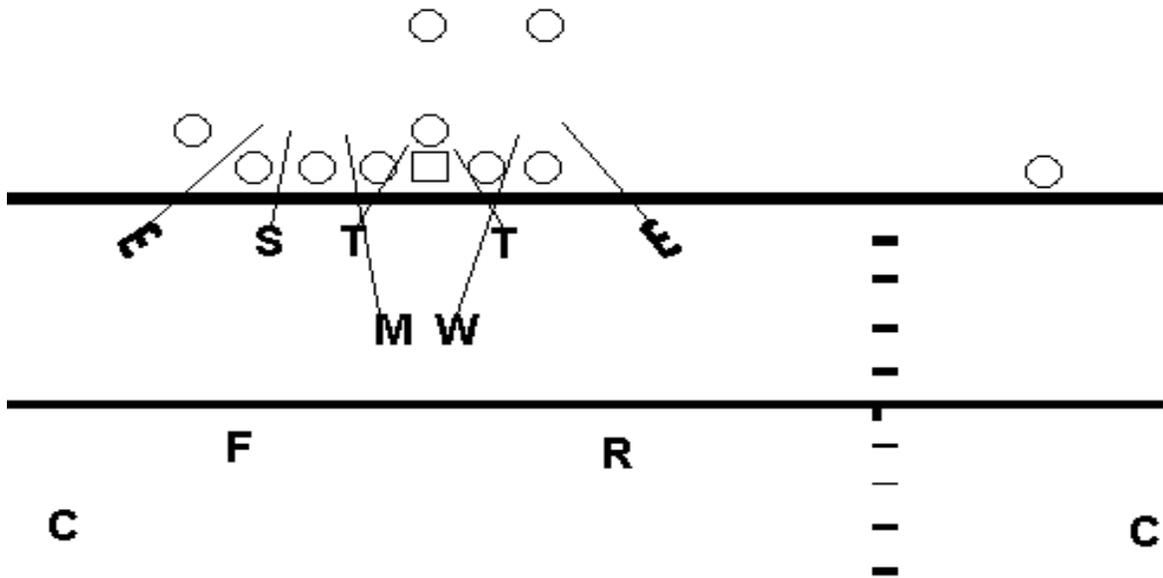


DT's rip the OGs and fill the B gaps. DE's crash at an acute angle, maintaining containment while disrupting the offensive backfield. Sam rips the TE, preventing his inside release, then plugs the off-tackle hole on flow toward or drops into a pursuit angle on flow away. If pass shows, he rips the TE and drops to his responsibility. Mike and Will plug or scrape to flow; the backside ILB will check cut-back before pursuing. FS and Rover will force inside-out on flow to their side, or drop to deep middle 1/3 on flow away; after the ball crosses the LOS, they can take a pursuit angle forward. CB's play the pass first and stay deep until the ball crosses the LOS, when they too will take the proper pursuit angle.

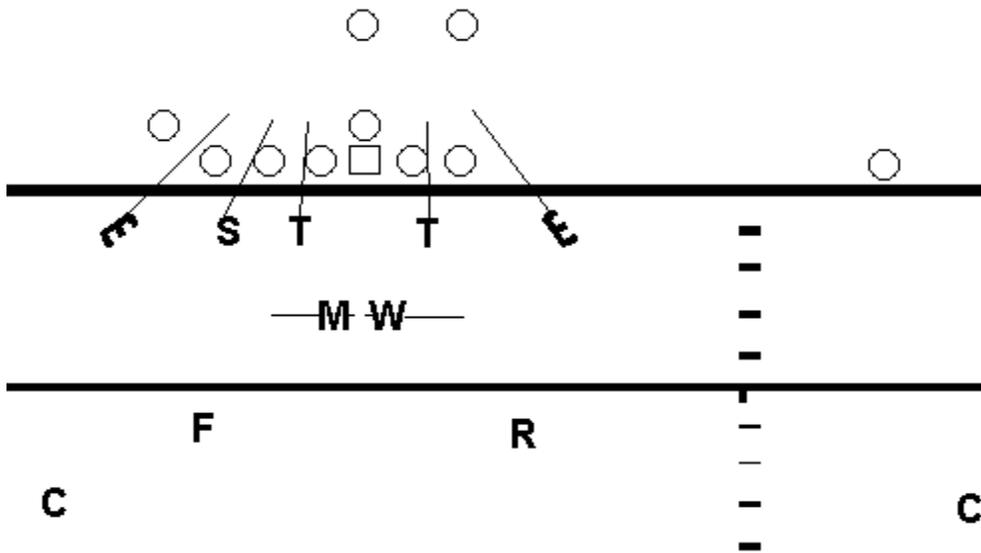
## LINE STUNTS



Split **FIRE**: ILB's fire straight ahead; everyone else on the line, including Sam, shoots their gap under control, looking for the ball.



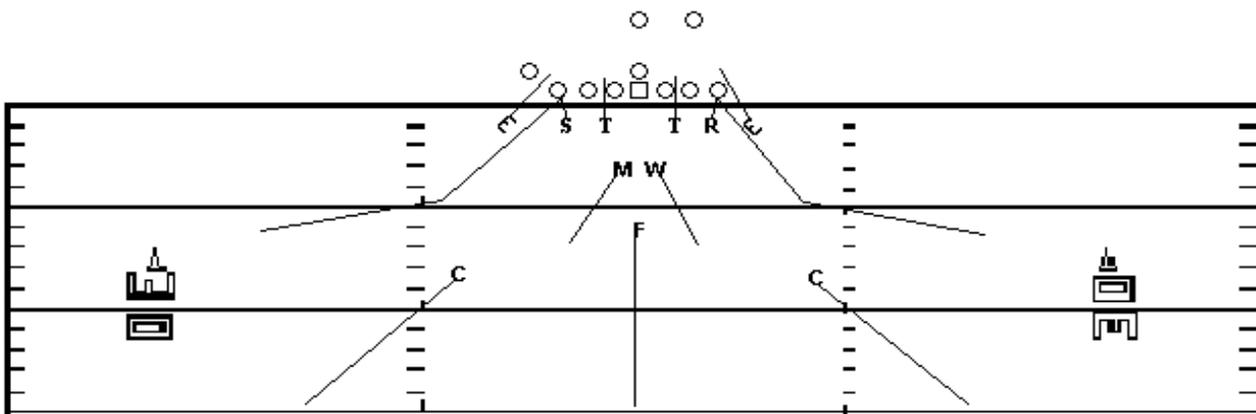
Split **FLARE**: DT's crash inside while ILB's shoot the B gaps, all under control.



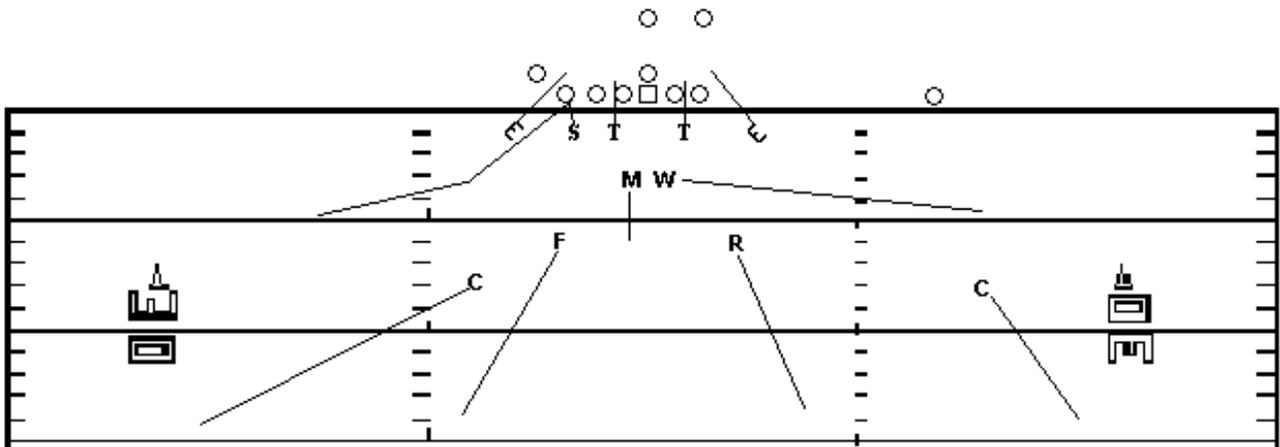
Split **DIG**: D-line and Sam shoot their gaps under control, while ILB's read and react.

### PASS COVERAGE

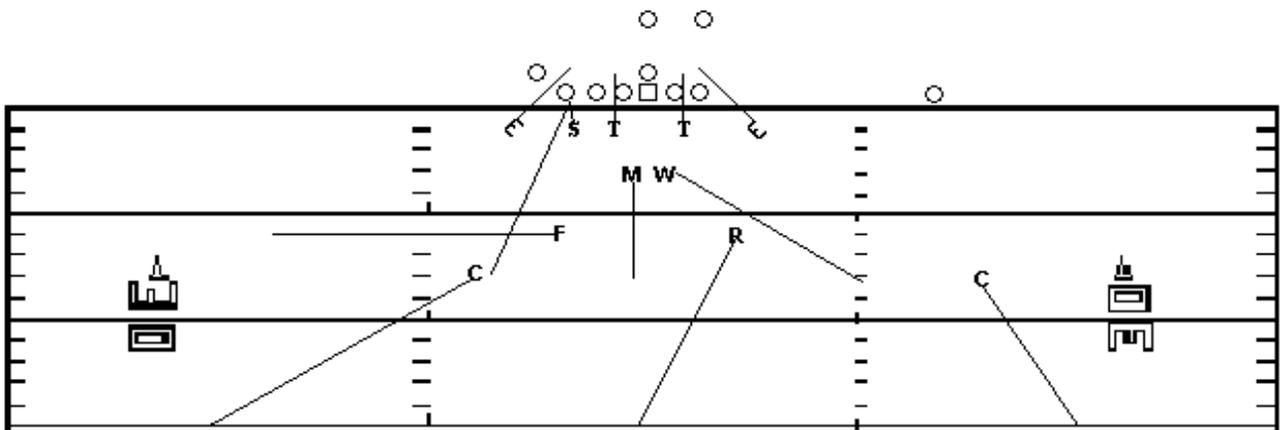
We only use one coverage for Split against a tight formation and two against a split or spread formation.



**Tight Cover 3**: Against two tight ends, the only coverage from Split is Cover 3. Even though the FS lines up inverted against a double-tight formation, he drops to deep 1/3, as do the CB's. Mike and Will drop to Strong and Weak Hook. Sam and Rover rip their TE, then drop through Curl to the Flat on their side. DT's and DE's rush through their gaps, which become their pass-rush lanes. Their goal is to converge at the QB.

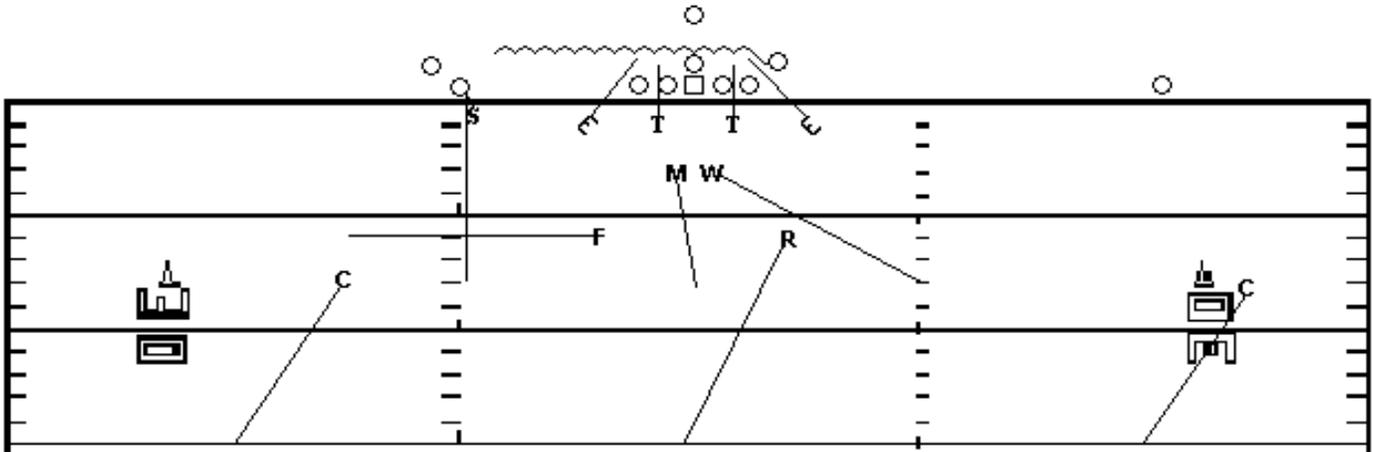


**Quarters:** D-line rushes the passer through their respective gaps. Sam rips the TE and releases through Curl for the Flat. Mike walls off crossing routes. Will sprints to his Flat. CB's, FS and Rover have deep 1/4 coverage, but with the following keys: CB's take #1 receiver if he goes vertical; FS takes #2 strong if he goes vertical or doubles #1 if #2 breaks his route off short; Rover has the same responsibilities on the weakside.



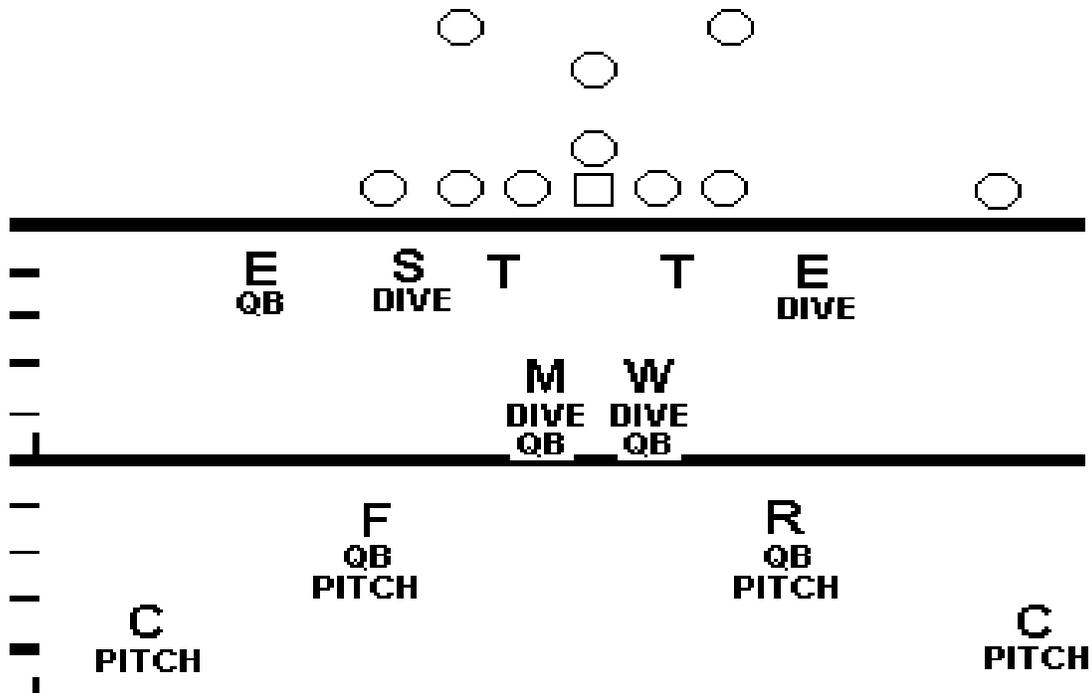
**Sky:** The remaining coverage rotates from the inverted Split defensive backfield to a Cover 3 look with motion, to strength and/or to field. This can either be called in the huddle or at the line by Mike. D-line rushes the passer through their respective gaps. Sam rips the TE and drops back to Strong Curl. Mike drops straight back to Middle Hook, while Will drops to Weak Curl. CB's drop to deep outside 1/3, while either FS or Rover will rotate to the flat to the side where coverage has been called, and the other safety will drop to deep middle 1/3.

**DEALING WITH MOTION**



The Split/Stack 4-4 complex is not intended to be a solution to today's 4- or 5-receiver sets; having said that, it is possible to cope with some degree of spreading and motion on offense by running Split Sky to motion and/or to Trips or Quad receiver sides. The illustration shows the author's Wild Bunch offense against Split Sky -- even against a modern offensive look like this, Split Sky holds up well. It has proven more than adequate at the youth level.

**OPTION RESPONSIBILITIES**



Note: Mike and Will have Dive on flow to their side, and QB on flow away, while FS will rotate up to take QB on flow toward, and pursue to help with Pitch on flow away. Whether facing a tight offensive formation or one with one or more split ends, the Split defensive front will meet strength with strength by rotating the secondary to flow against option offenses.

## **RUNNING THE STACK/SPLIT COMPLEX**

Youth coaches should explore the possibilities provided by this defensive complex. There are multiple fronts and coverages, line stunts and blitzes, yet the entire package can be installed in as little as two days and mastered in a week.

Stack gives an unusual look to youth defense, and becomes an excellent method for combating power running formations by threatening multiple stunts across the defensive front on every down. The base look protects the ILB's from all but acute-angle blocks, and makes it easier for the defense to put pressure on the youth QB's it will face. While not an ideal look against spread offenses, the Stack can be successfully adapted to a split end, and should be used in conjunction with Split when facing teams that split one end out on offense.

Split, meanwhile, may seem more familiar to youth coaches, but is in fact a powerful gap-control defense that can also double cover receivers when necessary. Split makes an excellent complement to Stack, and in fact defenders become adept at switching between the two looks, even when necessary after an audible and before the snap. The pass coverages from Split are simple but effective, and allow the defense to show a variety of coverage looks to the offense. Even if faced with a Run-and-Shoot or Spread offense, the defense can cover all threats from Split Sky.

Coaches should feel free to contact me at [seayee@hotmail.com](mailto:seayee@hotmail.com) with any questions.