Coaching Defense
Defensive players begin every play at a disadvantage. While offensive players know which play they will run and when it will begin, defensive players are waiting for the offensive center to snap the ball so they can quickly try to determine which play the offense is attempting to run, react to the play, and try to get in on the tackle.

The role of the defensive team is to stop the offense. They can do this by denying the offense a first down (forcing them to give up the ball), by making them punt the ball, by recovering a fumble, or by making an interception. And finally the defense must also think about scoring. Playing defense is part instinct, part effort, and part technique. You, as a coach, can improve your players’ instincts through teaching technique, practicing plays, and repetition. This chapter focuses on the defensive techniques and tactics—plays—that your players must learn to succeed in youth football.

**Defense Must Be Fun**

Defensive football players are the aggressive kids who love to run and make contact. If you encourage emotion in defensive players, they will become excited when they make a tackle, recover a fumble, or intercept a pass. This excitement adds to team unity, and the players will perform at a higher level. Encourage team tackling, with everyone pursuing the ball until the whistle blows. This motivates defensive players to swarm the ball carrier and adds to team spirit. Stress hard work in an attempt to gain success, but make sure you add fun to the game.

**Defensive Techniques**

The defensive team is made up of the defensive line, the linebackers, and then the defensive backs. Each group of players performs specific tasks and must master the skills needed for their position. These basic skills are an integral part of all defensive football, serving as the foundation your players will build on to play well at all levels. The basics your defensive players must master are assuming the defensive stance, defeating blockers, tackling, rushing the passer, and covering receivers.

**Stance**

The proper initial alignment of the body for the defensive player is key to reacting instantly and being able to effectively play the defense. Teach the defensive line players—linebackers and defensive backs—the proper stances for their respective positions. Be sure to emphasize to defensive players that they must move out of their stance immediately when the ball is snapped in order to
counter the advantage the offense has of knowing where the ball is going and when the play will begin.

**Defensive Line**

The typical stance for defensive line players is similar to the offensive line player’s three-point stance (see figure 6.2 on page 63). However, some defensive line players are more comfortable with the outside hand on the ground, creating a four-point stance as shown in figure 7.1.

When in either stance, players should place more weight on their hands so that they can move forward and should use a stance that is a little wider than the offensive stance so that they have better balance when they’re being blocked. Players should keep their outside hand (the hand away from the blocker) free to try pass rush techniques and to keep from getting hooked. The player’s body must be low to the ground and must control the line of scrimmage from under the opponent’s shoulder pads.

**Linebackers**

Linebackers should have a good balanced stance, which means that their feet are shoulder-width apart and slightly staggered (see figure 7.2). The knees should be bent slightly to ensure low body position with the hands near the upper thighs. Their eyes are focused on the player that they will get the “cue” from. One foot is slightly forward and linebackers step with this foot first as they react to the key and find the football.

If linebackers are catching the blocker, this often occurs because they have their shoulder in front of their
Coaching Tip
Defensive linemen with their feet behind their hips in their stance typically rise up, rather than move forward on the snap of the ball. This makes them easier to block. If you see defensive linemen standing straight up, have them move into their stance and watch to see if they move their feet back as they place their hands on the ground. Correct them immediately and have them place their hands on the ground without adjusting the foot position.

Defensive Backs
Defensive backs should line up with a slightly staggered stance in a relaxed position as shown in figure 7.3a. Before the play starts, the defensive backs should position their heads so that they can look to the ball and see the start of the play. Their shoulders should be in front of their hips, and their arms and hands can hang down in a relaxed position.

Corners keep their feet slightly staggered, with the inside foot back (see figure 7.3b). They should bring their outside foot to the center of the body so that it is on the ground in line under the chin, and the foot should be turned so that they can push off the side of the foot and not just the toes. Corners should push off their front foot and take a step back at the start of each play.
Free safeties line up with a square stance (see figure 7.3c), and strong safeties line up with a slightly staggered stance similar to corners as shown in figure 7.3b. The toes are pointed straight ahead and the players should assume a slightly crouched position with the knees slightly bent. Eyes are focused on the player that the safety will “key” from. Safeties can take a short read step on the snap, and then react to the play.

### Defeating Blockers

Every defensive player needs to understand the importance of defeating an offensive blocker before locating the offensive player with the ball and moving to be part of the tackle. A defensive lineman or linebacker’s first indication that the offense will run the ball is when the offensive linemen aggressively attack across the line of scrimmage the moment the ball is snapped. In that instant, defensive players must determine who the blocker will be if they are to defeat the block.

For the defensive linemen, the blocker will be close, directly in front of them, or to one side or the other. Linebackers who are lined up off the line will have more time to determine who is going to block them. Defensive backs, who are lined up the farthest off the line of scrimmage will easily see who is assigned to block them on each play.

Once defensive players have determined the offensive player assigned to block them, they need to attack by stepping into the blocker, keeping their shoulder pads below the blocker’s pads. In the case of the defensive linemen, as they step to meet the blocker, they need to bring up their forearm into the blocker’s body as their shoulder pad makes contact. Once the blocker’s momentum has been stopped, the defensive players need to push the offensive player away and off the block with their other hand, locate the player running with the ball, and move in that direction to make the tackle. A linebacker may have the chance to use the same forearm technique to defeat the blocker if the blocker raises up as he comes off the line of scrimmage. Linebackers and defensive backs may find that the blocker is lower than they are in their stance so they will need to defeat the blocker by extending both arms and stopping the blocker by hitting out with the palms of both hands into the shoulder pads of the blocker.

**Coaching Tip**

The receiver often reaches the defensive back too quickly if the defensive back steps forward on the first step rather than back. Emphasize to defensive backs to push off their front foot and take a first step back with their back foot, stepping so that they start their momentum away from the receiver they want to cover.

**Coaching Tip**

If a defensive player is continually getting blocked, often it is because the player is looking into the backfield, trying to find out who has the ball rather than locating and defeating the blocker first.
Tackling

If you want to have a good defensive team, you must teach your defensive players how to tackle. As the players grow and progress to learn the game, it is important to teach them the proper tackling techniques. When first introducing your players to tackling, it is important to start at half speed until they master the correct technique and feel comfortable with the contact associated with making a tackle.

Tacklers should always be in the proper hitting position with their head up, back straight, knees bent, and feet shoulder-width apart as shown in figure 7.4. They should also focus on a target when making the tackle—generally the area near the runner’s belt buckle. If tacklers always focus on this target, their opponents will not be able to fake them out with a fancy shoulder move, head fake, or spin maneuver.

It is important to note that all tackles should be made with the shoulder pad and never with the helmet. You must stress to your players that they always keep their head up and eyes open and position their body so that they tackle with one shoulder pad or the other and never with their head.

The three basic tackles that your players will use are the head-on tackle, the angle tackle, and the open-field tackle. Following are coaching points for each type.

**Head-On Tackle**

Defensive players use the head-on tackle when they line up straight across from the offensive runner coming toward them. Tacklers should first make sure that they are in a good hitting position and are ready to make the tackle.

Tacklers must maintain a wide, balanced stance while keeping the feet moving with choppy steps. The back is arched and the knees are slightly bent. The head and arms should extend in front of the body, and the head should be up. A head-on tackle means that the ball carrier is coming straight toward the tackler; it does not mean that tacklers lead with the head! Be sure that tacklers slide their head to the outside before making contact.
When executing the head-on tackle, tacklers explode off of the foot on the same side as the shoulder with which they will make the tackle. They drive their shoulder into the runner's abdomen as they thrust their hips through as shown in figure 7.5. With their arms, they grasp behind the legs of the ball carrier and pull the player toward them, lifting and pulling the ball carrier toward them as they take them off their feet. Tacklers should remain under control so that they don’t overrun the ball carrier or dive and miss the tackle.

When players miss tackles, make sure they have widened their feet and shortened their stride and they are bending their knees and not leaning forward at the waist.

![Figure 7.5](image) Proper head-on tackling technique.

**Head On—Tackling Drill**

Players are divided into two groups and positioned as shown in the diagram: one group of ball carriers (BC) and one group of tacklers (T). On the coach’s command, the first BC in line and the first T in line start toward each other at half speed. At 5 yards, the T explodes off the left foot and makes contact with the BC with the left shoulder pad to make the tackle. The T must remember to keep the head up and not tackle with the helmet. Players switch lines after each player has had a turn.
**Angle Tackle**

The angle tackle is necessary when the ball carrier runs a wide play or gets close to the sideline. Tacklers must first make sure that they are in a good hitting position and must maintain a good balanced stance when preparing for this tackle.

When executing the angle tackle, tacklers must drive the head in front of the ball carrier’s number, across the line of his run, and drive the shoulder upward on the runner at about waist level (see figure 7.6). When players are angle-tackling with the ball carrier breaking to their right, for example, they use the left shoulder pad to make the tackle and explode off of the left foot. The back should be arched to lift and drive through the ball carrier. With the arms, they should grasp the runner behind the legs and lift him off the ground and keep the feet moving with short, choppy steps as they finish the tackle. Tacklers should remain under control and ready to move in any direction.

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**Coaching Tip**

If players have trouble getting their head in front of the ball carrier, check to see that they are taking off with the correct foot. Players should use the shoulder pad and foot on the same side when making the tackle.

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*Figure 7.6  Angle tackle.*
Angle-Tackling Drill

Players are divided into two groups and positioned as shown in the diagram: one group of ball carriers (BC) and one group of tacklers (T). On the coach’s command, the first BC in line and the first T in line start toward each other at half speed. At 5 yards, the BC breaks at an angle to his right. The T breaks to his left at the same time. The T explodes off of the right foot and makes contact with the right shoulder pad to make the tackle. Players switch lines after each player has had a turn.

Open-Field Tackle

After the runner has cleared the line of scrimmage or when a receiver has caught the football and has just one player to beat, defensive players must make an open-field tackle. Tacklers should learn that the most important thing to do in the open field is to get hold of the opponent and pull him to the ground (see figure 7.7). In the stance, tacklers must remain under control with their legs bent, head up, and back straight and be prepared to move in any direction.

When executing the open-field tackle, tacklers should remember that their number-one priority is to grasp the runner. They should use the sideline to their advantage,

Figure 7.7  Open-field tackle.
penning in or getting an angle on the runner. Once they have a hold on the runner, help should soon arrive. But, if possible, they should try to drive the ball carrier out of bounds or pull him to the turf. Tacklers shouldn’t worry about driving through the player or delivering a hard blow. The sole responsibility is to get hold of the player and prevent the score.

Players who must tackle a ball carrier in the open field often lunge at and miss the ball carrier. Remind them to be patient, make certain where the ball carrier is going, and then commit by opening up and stepping with the foot on the side of the direction of the ball carrier’s movement.

Rushing the Passer

When the offense runs the ball, they use aggressive blocking when the play begins. And when they’re going to pass the ball, the offensive blockers sit back rather than firing out. Defensive linemen must recognize this change and immediately think about charging across the line to put pressure on—or rush—the quarterback. At this time, defensive players must determine which offensive blocker will block them. On the pass, they must defeat that block before looking for the quarterback.

To improve the pass rush of the defensive line players, teach them to know where the quarterback will set up and encourage them to plan their pass rush technique before the play begins. If defensive players have an idea of which pass rush technique they will use as they charge from their stance, the greater their chance of defeating the pass protection block and reaching the quarterback.

When teaching pass rush techniques to young players, teach only a few techniques that your players can perfect. Defensive players can put pressure on—or rush—the quarterback in three ways: the bull rush technique, the rip or swim technique, and the spin technique.

Coaching Tip

If players using a bull rush are blocked right at the line of scrimmage, make sure they drive their feet with short, choppy steps; have good forward lean; and have a wide base. This continued forward charge will ensure that they move across the line of scrimmage and force the blocker back into the area where the quarterback is setting up to throw.

Bull Rush Technique

A bull rush occurs when the defensive player controls the offensive blocker by locking both arms into the offensive blocker’s armpits, and, with the leverage provided by locking the elbows, lifts the offensive line player up, forcing the blocker back into the quarterback (see figure 7.8). This type of rush requires good arm and hand strength.

Rip or Swim Technique

In the rip or swim pass rush technique, the defensive player moves around the offensive blocker and then attacks the quarterback. The rip and the swim movements are similar; the
arm farthest from the blocker repositions the blocker, while the arm closest to the blocker creates the movement for the defensive player to move past the blocker.

In the rip technique, the defender moves the forearm up and under the blocker’s arm (see figure 7.9a) in an attempt to knock the blocker off balance and allow the defensive player to move around the blocker. If the defensive player is going to his right, he uses the left arm to “rip.” The right arm should push the blocker’s left arm up and back. As the left arm rips, it is important to step by the blocker with the left leg.

In the swim technique, the defender extends the arm and “swims” over the top of the blocker (see figure 7.9b). If the defensive player is going to his

Figure 7.8    Bull rush.

Figure 7.9    (a) Rip or (b) swim technique.
right, he uses the left arm to swim. The right arm should push the blocker’s left arm down and in. As the left arm swims, it is important to step by the blocker with the left leg. Once the arm is over the blocker, the defender pushes off and moves toward the quarterback. The swim motion and the push-off should be one continuous movement.

Players who have trouble making contact and directing the blocker’s arm on the side of the pass rush and getting past the blocker with either the rip or the swim technique often start the move too far away from the blocker or use the wrong technique for the opponent. It is often more effective for a shorter defensive player to use the rip technique. A taller player often has more success using the swim technique. Try to match the physical stature of your players with the pass rush technique that will work best for them.

**Pass Rush Drill**

Players divide into two groups of five defensive line (DL) players and five offensive line (OL) players positioned directly across from each other as shown in the diagram. Another player acts as the quarterback (QB) and is positioned as shown in the diagram. The coach indicates a pass rush technique and indicates which DL and OL go first. The coach signals the snap count to the offensive player and calls out a cadence to start the drill. On the coach’s command, the DL pass rushes the QB until the whistle is blown. The DL and OL start at half speed until they have mastered the pass rush techniques. Players rush one at a time to avoid injury, and the coach should work on one technique at a time. Players switch positions after the rush is completed. Repeat drill.

**Spin Technique**

In the spin technique, rushers use their hands and arms to spin the blocker and get into the offensive backfield. The defender spins a full 360 degrees in getting around the blocker. The defenders should start the spin by moving in
close to the blocker, hitting the blocker in the chest with the forearm on the side of their spin, and then throwing the opposite leg and arm around as the forearm pushes off the blocker.

Blockers can adjust their position to make a block if players don’t make solid contact with the blocker and try to spin from too far a distance. Defensive players using this technique to rush the passer should make certain that they are close enough to the blocker to make good contact with their forearm as they start the spin.

**Covering Receivers**

On any offensive pass play, you will have a group of defensive players rushing the quarterback as he sets up to throw and the remaining defensive players trying to prevent the ball from being caught if it is thrown by the quarterback. These remaining players are involved in what is called the pass coverage. These players usually include the defensive backs and the linebackers. The primary objective in covering receivers is to stop them from catching the pass, and if they do, to make certain that they are tackled immediately. The defense must be able to cover the receivers to stop the offense from moving the ball through the air.

**Proper Alignment**

In a proper alignment, the defensive corners should line up 5 to 7 yards off the wide receivers. The safeties should line up 8 to 12 yards deep off the tight end or slot receiver. If you are playing only one safety, he should line up deep in the middle of the field. From this position the corners and safeties are in position to make plays if the offense runs or passes the ball.

**Backpedal**

When an offensive play begins, the defensive backs need to start moving away from the line of scrimmage until they determine whether it is a running or pass play. Running backward—backpedaling—is the initial movement your defensive backs will make at the start of every play. The backpedal should start with a step backward with the back foot and a push off the front foot. As players backpedal, they should bend forward at the waist and reach back with each step and pull the body over their feet. Their arms should move in a normal, relaxed running fashion. They should keep their shoulders in front of their hips. Players should remain under control so that when receivers make their break to their final pattern to catch the ball, the defenders are ready to drive on them.

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**Coaching Tip**

If players have trouble maintaining a smooth backpedal, make sure that they are not leaning back and that their hips and shoulders are not behind their feet.
Pass Coverage

You will consider two basic types of pass coverage as part of your defensive tactics. In man-to-man coverage, one defender is assigned to and stays with one receiver all over the field for the entire offensive play. In zone coverage, the defensive players drop—move into—a designated area of the field and are responsible for deflecting any pass thrown into that area.

**Man-to-Man Pass Coverage** In a man-to-man defense, each player on the defense covers a specific offensive player (see figure 7.10). This defense works best when you have athletic players with speed and the ability to run backward and react to the offensive player’s pass pattern. Playing man-to-man pass defense requires mental toughness and a willingness to accept the challenge of staying with a receiver for the entire play. You must also consider the team you are playing. If your defenders can match your opponent in speed and athletic ability, you may want to feature a man-to-man pass defense to provide tight coverage on your opponent’s pass receivers.

When using the man-to-man pass coverage, defensive players must keep their eyes focused on the belt region of the receiver they are responsible for. They should maintain a 3- to 4-yard cushion between themselves and the receiver and should never turn their back on their receiver. Defensive players should learn to let the receiver take them to the ball by recognizing and reacting to the receiver’s pattern. Players should look for the ball only when they are running with the receiver and can physically reach out and touch the receiver.

**Zone Pass Coverage** In a zone defense, each defensive player covers a certain area of the field (see figure 7.11). Zone coverage is different from man-to-man coverage; the defensive players are assigned an area of the field to cover, and they focus their eyes on the quarterback, not on a particular receiver as they do in man-to-man pass coverage. Zone pass coverage can help guard against big

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**Figure 7.10** Man-to-man pass coverage (5-2 cover 1).
offensive plays because defensive help from another defensive player is never too far away. Mistakes made in zone defenses often are not as costly as those made in man-to-man defenses. This is a good type of pass defense to use when your opponent has superior speed. A disadvantage of the zone defense is that the opponent can overload a zone by putting more offensive receivers into the zones than there are defensive players. In this case, the defender in that zone should cover the deepest offensive player in the zone until the ball is thrown to an offensive receiver in front of him.

When using zone coverage, players line up in their respective positions, and on the snap, players drop into their assigned areas—zones—on the field. Each player should focus on the quarterback and the ball and watch for the ball to leave the quarterback’s hand. When the quarterback is set and ready to throw, the underneath defensive players (the defensive players not assigned to cover a deep area of the field) should stop their backpedal, settle, and take short, choppy steps. The players assigned to a deep zone should continue their backpedal in their deep zone until the quarterback releases the ball. As the quarterback starts moving forward to throw, all the defensive players should break in that direction and allow the ball to take them to the intended receiver.

**Coaching Tip**

Breaking up the pass, either by deflecting the ball away from the receiver or by jarring the ball loose when it is just being caught, is a great defensive play and is equal to tackling the ball carrier on a running play before the ball carrier gains yardage.
When drilling players on zone pass defense, do not use receivers. Instead, use a cone or a shirt to designate the location of the wide receivers and tight end, and use one player, acting as a quarterback, to drop back a full five steps, set up, step, and pass. This teaches the defensive players to focus on the quarterback and the ball and to break in the direction of the pass the minute the ball leaves the passer’s hand. Once receivers are reintroduced into the drill, you may see that a defensive player is not reacting the instant the quarterback throws the ball. Immediately check to see where the defender is looking. Is he looking at the receiver running in his zone instead of looking at the quarterback?

**Three-Deep Zone-Drop Drill**

Defensive backs (DB) position themselves as shown in the diagram. The coach designates which DB drops first. Once the DB is in a proper stance, on the coach’s command, the DB drops into the proper zone using the backpedal technique. As the DB drops, the focus should be on the coach and the ball. You may practice the strong safety’s drop by having the DBs sprint to get width, swing the inside leg around, and then move into the backpedal. After the DB has dropped 7 or 8 yards, the coach can raise the ball, point in the direction of a pass, and then throw the ball. The DB should roll over his foot in that direction and break to the area of the pass. Players drop one at a time and repeat the drill as an entire group. This drill can also be adapted for a two-deep zone by indicating two DBs to act as safeties and aligning them.
Defensive Tactics

Every defense has a purpose. It can be designed to blitz, penetrate, pursue, contain, or perform in various ways to disrupt or stop the offense when they run the ball. You can align the 11 players that make up the defensive team in a variety of ways. This alignment indicates the number of actual players from each defensive group (defensive line, linebackers, and defensive backs) that you have on the field for any play. Your defensive alignment must capitalize on the team’s strengths and compensate for its weaknesses. For example, if you have a somewhat big, slow team, use more players on the line of scrimmage and try to control and contain the offense. If you have a small, quick team, use more linebackers and do more blitzing to take advantage of their quickness. Once you have determined your style of defense, stay with it. The following are the three most important goals a defensive team can strive to accomplish:

1. Prevent the easy touchdown.
   Although the obvious objective on defense is to keep the opposition from scoring, a more functional objective of defensive play is to prevent the opposition from scoring the easy touchdown with a long pass or a long run. Your opponent must earn every point it scores if you have a defense that challenges every yard. Emphasize to your defense that stopping a team on third down is vital and praise players for preventing third downs that force the offense to give up the ball.

2. Get possession of the ball.
   The defensive team may gain possession of the ball by preventing the opponent from gaining the next first down on four downs, forcing a punt, recovering a fumble, or intercepting a pass. Players, especially defensive backs, should be cautioned never to gamble on an interception if missing the ball can result in a touchdown.

3. Score.
   The defense can score by returning a punt, a fumble, or an intercepted pass. The defense also can score by downing the ball carrier in the offense’s own end zone for a safety.

In addition to these three important goals, you must also be flexible; understand the differences between man-to-man and zone coverages; teach your players attacking, contain, and pressure defenses; and keep your defense fun. Finally, as your players advance, you will teach them how to read the offensive plays.

Flexibility

Team defense involves a group of players performing their individual techniques for the good of the team. Get the right players at the point of attack at the right time, and your team will be successful.
The offense’s position on the field, the score, the time left in the game, and the type of offense your team is facing are all factors that influence the defense that you should run. You must prepare the defense to cover various formations and series of plays. For example, if the offense lines up with a wing back and is running the ball successfully to that side, you could slant your entire defensive line into the gaps in that direction. If the offensive team is employing a spread formation using three or four wide receivers, you may want to use a four-deep coverage and substitute an extra defensive back into the game for a linebacker.

By knowing the mechanics of football and learning as much as you can about the strengths and weaknesses of your defense, you will be able to make the proper adjustments during the game. You should also consider limiting the defense according to the skill level of your team. It is more effective to run a few defenses well than to run many defenses poorly.

**Defensive Alignments**

It is important to take a closer look at the different types of defensive alignments to see how your choice of coverage can affect the game.

**Man-to-Man Defense**
In man-to-man defense, each player on the defense is assigned a specific offensive player to cover. This defense works best when you have athletic players with speed. Inexperienced or slower players tend to get beat more often in one-on-one situations, leading to big gains or scores for the other team.

Think in terms of the team you are playing. If they have fast, athletic receivers, you may want to play a zone defense to reduce the risk of getting beat for a big play. Consider how your opponents are performing as well as the abilities of your own players when deciding whether or not to use a man-to-man coverage.

**Zone Defense**
In a zone defense, each defensive player is assigned a certain area of the field to cover. A zone can help guard against big plays; defensive help is never too far away. Mistakes made in zone defenses often are not as costly as those made in man-to-man defenses. A disadvantage of using a zone is that the opponent can overload a zone; in this case the defender in that zone should cover the deepest offensive player in the zone until the ball is thrown to a different player.

By carefully analyzing the abilities of your opponent and your team, you will be better prepared to make a proper decision on whether to use the man-to-man or zone coverage. In addition to knowing how and when to use those coverages, you must know the basics of attacking defense, pressure defense, and contain defense.
**Attacking Defense**

Use the attacking defense when the offense moves the ball rather well or if your defense is particularly strong. When using the attacking defense, adjust your basic alignment based on what your opponent is doing. For example, if the other team is running the ball up the middle at your linebackers, switch to a defense that puts a defensive line player in the middle who can move across the line of scrimmage, through the gaps—or spaces—between the offensive blockers. The hope is that this will disrupt the blocking of the offensive play and your team can gain the advantage.

**Pressure Defense**

A pressure defense uses eight players within 5 yards of the line of scrimmage who can rush or be in position to play the run (see figure 7.12). One or more linebackers are assigned to blitz—charge across the line of scrimmage—through predetermined gaps the instant the ball is snapped. The pressure defense forces the offensive team to make mistakes. An example of this type of pressure is when the defense forces the quarterback to throw the football before he is ready by rushing the linebackers in addition to the defensive linemen at the quarterback as he sets up to throw. The pressure defense also changes the tempo of the game, preventing the opponent from retaining possession of the football and driving down the field.

Use the pressure defense when you are confident in your players’ abilities and techniques. This is important because in this defense your defensive backs are isolated one on one with their receivers in true man-to-man coverage and may not get help from the safety.

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**Coaching Tip**

Incorporate the best physical skills of your defensive players in your defense and then work to perfect these strengths rather than trying to teach every type of defense to your players.

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![Pressure defense alignment (S 4-4 defense).](https://via.placeholder.com/150)
The pressure defense provides a good change-up, rather than being the defense you use on every down. Have it ready to use in all down-and-distance situations where you need added pressure across the line to stop the offensive team. You may not want your defensive backs playing man-to-man pass coverage for the entire game, but use the pressure defense when you feel that they can execute the pass coverage for a few plays each game without being beaten on a deep pass route. If you find a blitz that gives the offense trouble or that they cannot pick up, keep using it until they make the proper adjustment.

When using pressure defense, teach your defensive players the following points:

- A pressure defense uses man-to-man pass coverage and tries to bump receivers as the receivers start to run their pass routes.
- Designated linebackers attack the line of scrimmage on the snap, trying to disrupt the offensive players’ blocking schemes.
- Defensive players can jump up into the line of scrimmage and then retreat. They can loop on their pass rush. They can overpower an offense by rushing more defensive players on one side of the ball than there are offensive players to block.

**Contain Defense**

The contain defense plays a little softer than the attacking or pressure defense, and its goal is to keep the offense from getting outside or deep. This type of defense requires disciplined players who fully carry out their assignments. It is effective in normal and long-yardage situations just before the half and at the end of the game to ensure a victory. Effective tactical coaching is very important to the success of a contain defense. The defensive players must be able to recognize formations, types of running plays, and types of passes and must adjust to stop the play.

In a contain defense, the defensive player who has contain (the responsibility for turning the ball carrier back to the center of the field), the end man on the line of scrimmage, a defensive end, linebacker, or defensive back who is aligned and in position to be able to react to any blocker and ball carrier who tries to run outside of them. After defensive players read their keys, they first control the gaps or areas of the field that they are responsible for and then react to the football. The defensive backs may use zone coverage on passes to ensure that the receivers do not get behind them. Figure 7.13 shows a sample alignment for a contain defense.

**Coaching Tip**

When you find that defensive players are late in moving to their assigned gaps, make sure that they are lining up so that they can see the center snap the ball and move with the movement of the ball.
Reading the Play

It is important for every defensive player to have fun, and one way to increase their enjoyment is to teach them how to read offensive plays. This is a more advanced skill, so you should stick to just a few reads and be sure to keep it as simple as possible.

The most basic read is made by “keying” in on an opponent’s formation, tendencies in play selection, or individual player cues. For example, the first key for defensive linemen or linebackers is the player directly in front of them, then the offensive player to their right or left. The movement of the player directly in front of the defensive player should alert the defensive player to a run or pass play. If the offensive linebacker or blocking back sets up to pass-protect, the defensive players can assume it’s a pass play and focus on covering their receiver. If the defensive players see the linebacker or blocking back drive-block, they can anticipate a running play and move into position to stop the ball carrier.

In addition to paying attention to what the offense is doing, defensive players also need to understand their team’s defense for the play, because the type of coverage will affect the decisions they make. For example, with both a zone

![Diagram of Contain defense alignment (3-4 cover 2).](image-url)
or man-to-man pass coverage, defensive backs can look in at the quarterback at the start of the play to try to pick up cues that the quarterback is sending. In man-to-man, however, after two steps, the defensive back must refocus on the wide receiver.