

THE COMPLETE IDIOT'S GUIDE® TO

"One of Joe's gifts is the ability to clearly explain to anyone watching a game what is happening. That's why he's one of the elite TV analysts. He's taken that same approach to this guide. You'll know the game better after reading this book."

—Brian Billick, head coach, Baltimore Ravens

Football

SECOND EDITION

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Joe Theismann
with **Brian Tarcy**



THE
COMPLETE
IDIOT'S
GUIDE[®] TO

Football

Second Edition

by Joe Theismann
with Brian Tarcy



A Pearson Education Company

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Contents at a Glance

Part 1: Learning the Rules and the Lore	1
1 So You Want to Be a Monday Morning Quarterback <i>A primer on why so many people dig this game.</i>	3
2 Looking at the Field and the Ball <i>Explaining the weird-shaped ball and the proportional field.</i>	13
3 You Get Six Points to Do What? <i>Learn how to keep score and keep time.</i>	27
4 Every Player Has a Different Job <i>An overview of those big guys and what they do.</i>	39
5 Coaching: Win, Get Fired, or Go on TV <i>Study the coaches and the various ways they try to win.</i>	51
6 Understanding the Lore <i>Remember these words: “The frozen tundra of Lambeau Field.”</i>	63
Part 2: Learning the Offense and the Penalties	73
7 The Quarterback Is the Movie Star <i>Glamour, guts, and glory—or else he’s a goat.</i>	75
8 The Offensive Line: They Called Mine “The Hogs” <i>They protect quarterbacks and open holes for runners.</i>	89
9 The Receivers: Glue on Their Fingers and Rockets in Their Shoes <i>These guys perform ballet in a demolition derby.</i>	99
10 The Running Backs: Great Ones Control Games <i>Why teams must have a running game to win.</i>	111
11 Strategies: A Lot of Ways to Go Eighty Yards or One <i>You can go by air, you can go by land, and on rainy days, you can go by sea.</i>	123
12 Advanced Offensive Strategies: Like Rocket Science <i>Moving the ball with brains and supreme coordination.</i>	135
13 The Guys Who Control the Chaos <i>The men in striped shirts see everything.</i>	149
Part 3: Learning the Defense and Special Teams	163
14 The Defensive Line: Get the Ball, Hit the Quarterback <i>Why you need big, mean guys named Bubba.</i>	165

15	Linebackers Do Everything <i>The quarterbacks of the defense and the best athletes, too.</i>	173
16	The Secondary: The Last Best Hope <i>If these guys make a mistake, the score changes.</i>	181
17	Strategies: Attack or React <i>Both strategies work; both also fail.</i>	189
18	Advanced Defensive Strategies <i>Special schemes designed for certain situations. It's chess with giants.</i>	201
19	Special Teams Really Are Special <i>More than just guys with million-dollar feet.</i>	213

Part 4: College and Pro **225**

20	College Football: More Than Marching Bands and Cheerleaders <i>Even an idiot knows where the NFL gets its players.</i>	227
21	The Draft: The Best Day for the Worst Teams <i>Those stars come from college.</i>	237
22	Alternative Football Leagues <i>Trying to copy the Best League isn't easy.</i>	247
23	The NFL: The Best in the World <i>This is the grand stage for football.</i>	255
24	The Road to the Super Bowl <i>A step-by-step explanation of how to get to the big game.</i>	265
25	The Business of the Game <i>Guess what? It's all about money.</i>	273
26	Television and the Media: The Show About the Show <i>A look at the star machine that doubles as a money tree.</i>	285

Part 5: The Essentials of Fandom **295**

27	Game Gear: What to Wear <i>Paint your face or buy a shirt, but dress like a fan.</i>	297
28	The Joy of Being a Fan <i>Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh! Go Team!</i>	305
29	Rivalries: The Essence of It All <i>When two teams don't like each other—a lot.</i>	311

Appendixes

A	Gridiron Talk Glossary	317
B	National Football League Team Addresses	327
	Index	329

Contents

Part 1: Learning the Rules and the Lore	1
1 So You Want to Be a Monday Morning Quarterback	3
The Lure of the Game	4
The Passion	5
Why Is It So Violent?	8
The Connection Between Football and Community	9
2 Looking at the Field and the Ball	13
Why Is the Ball Shaped Like That?	14
The Object of the Game	15
The Dimensions and How They Figure into the Game	15
What Is a Goal Post?	17
Hashmarks	19
The Chains, the Sticks	20
The Imaginary Line That You Can See	21
Artificial Turf or Natural Grass?	22
Indoors or Outdoors?	24
The Red Zone	25
3 You Get Six Points to Do What?	27
Touchdowns	27
Extra Points	29
Two-Point Conversions	31
Field Goals	33
Safeties	34
Quarters and Halves	34
Game Time Doesn't Include Commercials	35
The Two-Minute Warning	35
Overtime	36
The Play Clock	36
Time-Outs	36
Play the Game	37
The Anatomy of a Play	38
4 Every Player Has a Different Job	39
The Uniform	39
<i>Helmets and Facemasks</i>	40
<i>Shoulder Pads, Hip Pads, Knee Pads, and More</i>	41
<i>Flak Jacket for the Ribs</i>	41
<i>It's Gotta Be the Shoes</i>	41
<i>Jerseys, Pants, and Socks</i>	42
Always Eleven on a Side	43
The Offense	44
The Defense	45
Skill Players	46
The Trenches	47
Special Teams	47

Kickers Are Different	48
Rookies and Veterans	48

5 Coaching: Win, Get Fired, or Go on TV 51

X's (or V's) and O's	52
Film Study	54
Motivation	55
Coordinators and What They Coordinate	57
The Progression from Position Coach to TV Personality	58
The Various Philosophies of a Blue-Collar Game	59
The Personality of the Coach and the Team	61

6 Understanding the Lore 63

The Frozen Tundra of Lambeau Field	64
How It Began	65
How It Evolved	65
The 1960s—You Say You Want a Revolution	67
The 1970s—When Perfect Was the Standard	69
The 1980s—When Guys Named Joe Went to the Show	70
The 1990s—When the Teams Moved	71
And into the New Millennium	71

Part 2: Learning the Offense and the Penalties 73

7 The Quarterback Is the Movie Star 75

Two Choices: The Hero or the Goat	75
It All Starts Here	77
Working the Pocket	79
Spirals	80
Touch Passes and Bullet Passes	80
Reading Defenses	81
Calling Audibles	82
Looking off Defenders	83
Pump Fake	83
Throwing It Away	83
The Bomb	84
The Hail Mary	85
Running with the Ball	85
The Passer Rating System	85
The Evolving Nature of Quarterbacks	86
Joe's Top Five Quarterbacks	87
Statistics to Look for in a Great Quarterback	87

8 The Offensive Line: They Called Mine "The Hogs" 89

Hogs and Such	90
Who Are Those Five Big Guys?	91
One Line, Two Jobs	92
They Get Noticed When Something Goes Wrong	93
Holding Is Only Holding If You Keep Holding	94
Blocking Schemes	94
<i>Trap Block</i>	95
<i>Reach Block</i>	95

<i>Double Team</i>	96
<i>Slide Block</i>	96
<i>Cutoff Block</i>	96
<i>Zone Block</i>	96
<i>Man-on-Man Blocking</i>	96
The Push Off of the Line	97
Joe's Top Five Offensive Linemen	97

9 The Receivers: Glue on Their Fingers and Rockets in Their Shoes 99

Who Are They?	100
<i>How Receivers Line Up</i>	100
Speed Guys	101
<i>Possession Guys</i>	102
Tight Ends—Like Hogs with Hands	103
The Patterns	104
The First Five Yards Off the Line	106
Going over the Middle: Leave Your Sanity on the Bench	107
<i>Using the Clock</i>	107
Yards After Catch—Also Called YAC	108
End-Around—It's a Trick Play	108
Joe's Top Five Receivers, Starting with Jerry Rice	109

10 The Running Backs: Great Ones Control Games 111

The Importance of the Running Game	111
Fullbacks: Leading the Way	112
Halfbacks: Ball Carriers	113
The R Back	113
Halfbacks and Fullbacks, a Great Tag-Team	114
Vision and Quickness	114
North-South Runners and East-West Runners	115
Catching Passes: A Safety Valve and More	116
Formations for Running Backs	116
<i>Split "T"</i>	117
<i>"I" Formation</i>	117
<i>Offset "I" Formation</i>	118
<i>Two Tight Ends with an R Back (Ace Formation)</i>	118
Between the Tackles: The Meat and Potatoes of the Running Game ..	118
The Sweep	119
The Draw Play	119
Joe's Top Five Running Backs, Starting with Jim Brown	120

11 Strategies: A Lot of Ways to Go Eighty Yards or One 123

Run, Throw, or Mix It Up	124
Don't Make Mistakes	125
Formations: Playing Chess with Giants	126
<i>The Split "T" Formation</i>	126
<i>Two-Tight-End Formation</i>	126
<i>Three Wide Receivers</i>	126
<i>Four Wide Receivers</i>	127
The Shotgun	128
Smashmouth Football	128

Air-It-Out Football	129
Big-Play Football	129
The West-Coast Offense	130
The Run-and-Shoot	130
The DNA of Offense	131
The Two-Minute Drill	132
The Size of the Field	133
When to Go on Fourth Down	133
12 Advanced Offensive Strategies: Like Rocket Science	135
The Communication System—Say What?	136
<i>What's in a Name?</i>	136
<i>But Wait, There's More</i>	137
Where Do the Runners Run?	138
The Quarterback Isn't Listening to Elvis	139
Audibles: Changing the Play	141
Shifting	142
Motion	142
<i>Mismatches</i>	143
Blitzes	144
Tackle Eligible to Catch a Pass	145
Trick Plays	145
The Game Plan	146
Building the Perfect Offense	147
13 The Guys Who Control the Chaos	149
Who Are These Guys and Where Are They?	150
<i>Referee</i>	150
<i>Umpire</i>	150
<i>Head Linesman</i>	151
<i>Line Judge</i>	151
<i>Back Judge</i>	151
<i>Side Judge</i>	151
<i>Field Judge</i>	152
A Few Basic Referee Signals	153
Controlling the Chaos	154
Instant Replay	160
Part 3: Learning the Defense and Special Teams	163
14 The Defensive Line: Get the Ball, Hit the Quarterback	165
Who Are These Guys?	165
Stopping the Run	167
Pass Rushing	168
<i>Stunts</i>	170
<i>Bull Rushing</i>	171
Joe's Top Five Defensive Linemen	171
15 Linebackers Do Everything	173
The Menu: Three Linebackers, or Four?	174
In the Middle	174
<i>The Different Jobs in the Middle</i>	175
<i>The Quarterback of the Defense</i>	175

The Outside: A Place to Raise Havoc	176
Two Different Outside Linebackers	177
In the Mind of a Linebacker	178
The Spy	179
Joe's Top Five Linebackers	180
16 The Secondary: The Last Best Hope	181
Small, Quick, and Fearless	182
Cornerbacks: Life on an Island	183
Safeties Are Enforcers	184
Zone or Man-to-Man Coverage	185
Bump and Run	186
Joe's Top Five Defensive Backs	187
17 Strategies: Attack or React	189
Attacking vs. Reacting	190
Basic Alignments: The 4-3 and the 3-4 Defenses	190
Stopping the Run	191
Stopping the Pass: Zone or Man-to-Man Coverage	192
Situation Substitutions: Welcome to the Age of Specialization	195
Blitzing	196
Short Yardage and Goal Line Situations	197
The Prevent Defense	198
18 Advanced Defensive Strategies	201
How Defensive Philosophies Became Important	202
<i>The Flex Defense</i>	202
<i>The Over Defense and the Under Defense</i>	203
<i>The 3-4 Defense</i>	203
<i>The 46 Defense</i>	204
<i>The Eagle Defense</i>	205
<i>The Double Eagle Defense</i>	206
Pass Coverage Packages	206
<i>The Nickel Package</i>	207
<i>The Dime Package</i>	207
<i>Combination Coverages</i>	208
<i>Quarter Coverage</i>	208
<i>Nickel Combination Coverage</i>	209
<i>Two-Deep Zone</i>	209
<i>Two-Deep Man-Under</i>	210
Zone Blitz	210
Building the Perfect Defense	211
19 Special Teams Really Are Special	213
Games Can Turn on Special Teams Play	214
Two Ways to Be Special	214
Kickoffs: Rolling Thunder	215
<i>Anatomy of a Kickoff</i>	216
<i>The Five Parts of Kicking Team Coverage</i>	217
Kickoff Returns: A Flash of Lightning	218
The Onside Kick	219
Punts: Your Turn	220

Punt Returns: Life on the Edge	221
Field Goals and Extra Points	223
Part 4: College and Pro	225
20 College Football: More Than Marching Bands and Cheerleaders	227
The Pageantry	228
What Is the NCAA?	228
Divisions I-A, I-AA, II, III	229
The Conferences	231
Notre Dame and Everybody Else	231
The Bowl Games	232
The All-Star Games	233
The Heisman Trophy	233
The College Passer Rating System	234
So What's All This Got to Do with the Pros?	234
The Draft	235
21 The Draft: The Best Day for the Worst Teams	237
How the Draft Works	237
Finding the Players	238
<i>The 2001 Draft Calendar</i>	239
Evaluating the Players: Welcome to the War Room	239
Testing and Testing	240
Money, Dreams, Money, Jobs, Money—and Did I Mention Money? ..	241
The Pressure to Be Good NOW	242
Decision-Making: The Role of Free Agency	243
Mocking the Draft	243
Some Great Bits of Draft Lore	243
Beware the Bursting Bubble	245
Draft Day: When They Call Out Your Name	245
22 Alternative Football Leagues	247
The NFL: A History Lesson	247
<i>The American Football League, Version One</i>	248
<i>The American Football League, Version Two</i>	248
<i>The All-America Football Conference</i>	248
<i>The American Football League, Version 3</i>	248
<i>The World Football League</i>	249
<i>The United States Football League</i>	249
The Modern Companion Leagues	250
<i>The Arena Football League</i>	250
<i>The Canadian Football League</i>	251
<i>NFL Europe</i>	252
The XFL: Definitely NOT the NFL	253
23 The NFL: The Best in the World	255
The NFL Is “The Show”	256
The NFL Is a Business	256
The Superstar League	258

The Culture of the Game	259
How Teams Are Built	260
The Players	262
<i>Finding the Players</i>	262
<i>Young Guys or Grizzled Veterans</i>	263
<i>Start with a Quarterback</i>	263
24 The Road to the Super Bowl	265
Slice Up the League	265
The Regular Season Is Too Exciting to Be “Regular”	266
Cheer Loud, Your Team Needs You	267
Scheduling	267
Sixteen Games, Then What?	268
Jack Up the Intensity Level for the Playoffs	270
The Super Bowl	271
25 The Business of the Game	273
The Collective Bargaining Agreement: To Know It Is to Love It	273
How Many Superstars Fit in the Salary Cap? It’s a Riddle	274
Free Agency Isn’t Free	276
Different Kinds of Money: Defined Gross Revenue	277
How Money Has Changed the Game	278
The Story of a Team Called the Cleveland Browns	280
Money on the Outside: Gambling	281
<i>Pools</i>	282
<i>900 Lines</i>	283
26 Television and the Media: The Show About the Show	285
Made for Television	285
There’s No Business Like Show Business	286
The Other Side of “Up”	287
The Pregame Show: Get Ready, Get Set	287
The Game Is On!	288
The Postgame Show: What Happened	288
Who Are Those Folks on TV?	288
<i>Play-by-Play: The Meat and Potatoes</i>	289
<i>The Color Analysts: Why That Happened and Not Something Else</i>	289
<i>Sideline Reporters: Eyewitness News</i>	290
The Camera Takes You There	290
Newspapers and Magazines	291
Talk Radio	291
The Internet	291
Local and National	292
Part 5: The Essentials of Fandom	295
27 Game Gear: What to Wear	297
Getting Ready to Watch: The Ritual	298
Official Game Gear	298
Some Logos Never Change, Some Do	300
Protect Yourself Against the Elements	301

Homemade Gear	302
Who Are These People?	302
Joe's Top Five Original Fan Outfits	303
28 The Joy of Being a Fan	305
Tailgating Is a Profession, a Craft, and an Art	306
Consumption	307
Greeting Fans from a Foreign City	308
How to Visit Another City	308
We're Number One!	309
Do Fans Matter? Consider This Story	309
29 Rivalries: The Essence of It All	311
You and Me, Outside—Right Now!	312
Anytime, Anywhere	312
The Toughest Guy in the Neighborhood	312
A Good Way to Start a Rivalry Is to Meet in the Playoffs	313
The Braggin' Bowls	314
How to Create a Rivalry	314
Joe's Top Five Rivalries	315
Appendixes	
A Gridiron Talk Glossary	317
B National Football League Team Addresses	327
Index	329

Foreword

Prior to the Ravens' Championship season, I had Joe speak to our team during training camp. We wanted our players to hear from a champion like Joe, who had won a Super Bowl as the Redskins' starting quarterback when he was one of the league's best and most competitive players. I know Joe well and obviously respect him. I knew he would be good. But he was better than I could have hoped. He had our players and coaches in the palms of his hands. We could have walked out of that room and beaten anyone that day—and this was the first week of training camp.

Joe is a special communicator. He could be a great coach or teacher, and in many ways, that's what he does when he broadcasts a game. He teaches the audience about the game in ways that everyone can understand. He does the same thing in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Football, Second Edition*. He uses his special abilities as a communicator to make football more fun for everyone.

We have our own language in football. If you attended a meeting with coaches and players, even some pretty sophisticated football fans would scratch their heads about what we're talking about. You might call them outside or middle linebackers, we talk about "Wills and Mikes," and so on and so on. Joe can speak that language with us, but he's able to take that inside look and explain in layman's terms the basics and the nuances of the game.

Those who don't know football will learn the basics of the game from this book. Those who know a lot about football will get a deeper appreciation of the game and enjoy football more after reading this book.

Combine Joe's tremendous knowledge and understanding of the game with his great communication skills, and the result is a book that anyone who watches football or wants to watch football should read.

Brian Billick

Head Coach, Baltimore Ravens, Champions, Super Bowl XXXV

Introduction

Take your wildest dream, the thing you want to happen more than anything else, the thing that you absolutely can't live without, and then make it come true.

Stand at its doorstep. That's what it feels like to be standing in the stadium tunnel waiting to play for the NFL Championship in the Super Bowl. It's like a first kiss.

The game is bigger than life.

My first Super Bowl was in Pasadena, California, before more than 100,000 people. It was surreal, like going on that first date, waiting for that first kiss. I was so excited. It is the greatest thing to ever happen to a player, and yet, I don't remember the first three or four minutes of the game. It was almost paranormal—I went into a zone, an absolute zone.

That's football. Three or four days later I watched film of the first few minutes of the game, and I didn't remember any of it. Yet I functioned. I called plays, threw passes, and gave hand-offs. I completed passes. But I don't remember any of it. After getting kicked in the head, though, I remember it all. Yes, I remember it all.

This book is about what I remember of NFL football. It includes everything but the first three minutes of that Super Bowl. I know and love the game, and I want to share that knowledge and love with you.

How to Use This Book

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Football, Second Edition, is divided into five parts, just like a class on football. But don't worry—no boring lectures. This is a book about *football*. It doesn't get any better than this!

Part 1, "Learning the Rules and the Lore," deals with the foundation of football—the rules. In this part, I discuss the field, the ball, the players' jobs (in general), and the role of coaches in this most emotional of games. I also give you a quick primer on the lore of the NFL. The lore doesn't end. Watch the games. You're bound to see something amazing happen!

Part 2, "Learning the Offense and the Penalties," deals with the offensive side of the ball—what teams try to do to score. This part covers the roles and duties of each offensive player, position by position. It also covers strategies. By the time you finish this part, you'll have an advanced degree in offense and be ready to complain about the play calling by the third quarter.

Part 3, "Learning the Defense and Special Teams," deals with the defensive side of the ball, where a group of guys is trying to stop the other team from scoring. It covers the role and duties of all the players on defense, and it tells you of basic and advanced defensive strategies so you can second-guess your defensive coordinator if he blitzes on first down.

Part 4, "College and Pro," deals with the structure of the game. The college game is, in many ways, like a minor league for the pros, and that relationship is examined here. In addition, this part considers the NFL—why it's the pinnacle of the game and how teams advance to the Super Bowl. It also explores the business of the game—which no fan can ignore. Finally, it discusses the relationship of the media and the game.

Part 5, "The Essentials of Fandom," deals with your life as a fan. I discuss clothing, joy, and rivalries here. You want to cheer? Hey, this part tells you how. As a fan, you *do* make a difference.

Some Play Calls to Help You Understand

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Football, Second Edition, provides numerous gems of wisdom and lore to help you understand the game even more. Look for these sidebar boxes to get extra information:



Joe's Gridiron Talk

These boxes define common and uncommon football terms.



Joe's Rules

This box details the rules of the game, on and off the field.



Joe's Record Book

These boxes include interesting facts from the game so you can stump your friends.



Joe's Tips

The information in this box helps fans enjoy the experience of being a fan.

Acknowledgments

From the authors:

This book could not have been completed without the expertise of Alex Stern of The Elias Sports Bureau, Laronica Conway of the NCAA, and Mike Florio and Ryan Early of Sportstalk.com, who helped us get the facts straight, and Vince Casey, who helped us understand the Collective Bargaining Agreement. Also, Betty Shaughnessy of Atlantic Edtek Typing was fast and accurate with transcriptions of our conversations. And, we thank Tricia Trilli of the Professional Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, for her help with our research.

From Joe Theismann:

I would like to first thank all of my former coaches and teammates for giving me an opportunity to make a dream come true.

I also want to thank my wife, Robin, for her patience as I relived my years on the gridiron.

And in particular, I would like to thank three gentlemen who made me the football player that I was. I want to thank Joe Walton for his guidance and driving discipline, Jack Pardee for believing in me and giving me a chance to compete, and Joe Gibbs for putting me in a system that allowed me the opportunity to achieve the ultimate dream.

Finally, I would like to thank my collaborator, Brian Tarcy, who did an excellent job turning thoughts into words. I'm glad he finally got his Cleveland Browns back. Now, for his sake, I hope they start playing like a real NFL team.

From Brian Tarcy:

I would first like to thank Joe Theismann, who taught this crazy fan more about football than I could have imagined knowing. And you “got” the project—working like a maniac and always treating me like a friend. Thank you. Joe, the highest compliment this fan can offer is that you should've played for my team, the Cleveland Browns.

I would also like to thank all my previous co-authors for teaching me about more interesting things than I thought I'd ever know. I want to thank Paul and Heidi Perekrests, who have always been there for me—the absolute definition of “friends.” I would like to thank Vaughn Sterling, Gregg Alexander, Dan Ring, Bob Vander Pyl, Sandy Sutherland, Stan Ingram, and Gretchen Klaasen for just being great friends in this adventure of mine. And I would like to acknowledge Jason Rutledge as well as Miles, Morgan, and Tristan Anders for just being themselves and making my life richer. And I want to thank Paul Sigler—a.k.a. “Wally”—for being the funniest person I've ever met (and the coolest as well) even if you are wrong about everything all the time. Oh yeah, Wally has a brother named Robb.

I would like to thank my parents, Paul and Dorothy Tarcy, for all their love and for raising me as a Browns' fan. As for my brothers, Gary and Dave, who played for the famous schoolyard gang, Massler's Mooses, thanks for leading the way.

I have a best friend—the best friend anyone could ever dream of, Maureen Anders. Just thank you. We sure have a pie-full of fun. I love you.

But most of all, this is for my children—Denim, Derek, Kayli, and Marissa. You four are the champions of my life. I win.

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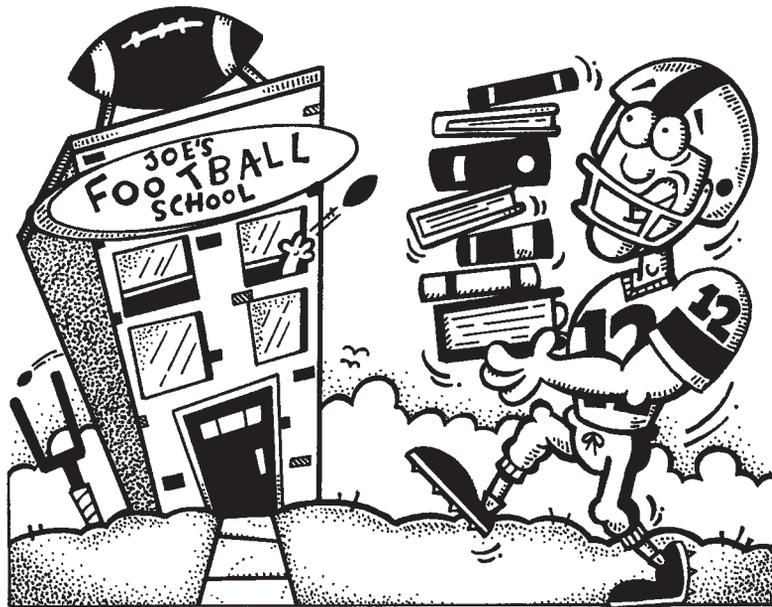
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Part 1

Learning the Rules and the Lore

On Sundays in the fall, you cannot avoid professional football. Who would want to? The game has everything—gladiators, bright colors, physical confrontations, and a vivid joy that is nothing short of pure exuberance. It has excitement and drama, and it is played by the biggest and most spectacular athletes in the world. It is pure competition. Football is about winning.

Part 1 explains why so many folks love the game. It also details how it works—from where it is played, to the ball it is played with, to how teams win. This part also covers the folks who run the games—the great generals called coaches. And finally, this part gives you a sense of the history of football. When something wonderful happens on the football field—and something always does—it reminds fans of something else. Football is rich. Check it out.





So You Want to Be a Monday Morning Quarterback

In This Chapter

- ▶ Why the game is so loved by so many
- ▶ How emotion plays into the game
- ▶ The connection between football and community

The best part of the National Football League (NFL)—if you don't get to play—is acting like you know something about it. Football is all about opinions. *My team is better than your team.* Professional football is a *topic*. It's love and hate, power and pride, all the competitive *stuff*. And professional football is *professional*, so it also deals with money, which is a necessary ingredient to throw into the mix if you're looking for drama. Yes, there's plenty of drama in the NFL.

This is a step-by-step book about the drama of professional football. If you can understand the game, you can argue more effectively; and if you can do that, just think of the friends you can make. Well, think of the arguments you can win. Think about how smart you'll look to all those so-called football geniuses at the office. One of the true joys of football is standing around the water cooler, discussing the play-calling in the third quarter of yesterday's game. But if you don't know what a third quarter or a play call is, you'll have some trouble participating in the conversation.

This football stuff really isn't hard to learn. Football is a fairly simple game with a complex language and a violent temperament. But don't worry—I'm going to teach it to you, one step at a time.

Think of the first step this way: There are two teams. Each wears different colors, and each is trying to get the football into opposite end of the field.

Okay, that's enough for now. Go get a drink of water and impress someone with your new knowledge. When you get back, I'll tell you about the lure of the game, the passion of football, and why violence is such an integral part of it. I'll also talk about the connection between community and team, because that's really the most special part.

The Lure of the Game

So much of what people love about this game has to do with childhood fantasies. Heck, football is a kid's game. Many of us remember throwing, running, and playing on the sidestreets, backyards, and open playgrounds of America. From New Jersey to Ohio to California, kids play football because football is a game of *heroes*.

Think about it: You wear the jersey of your favorite player and, for a brief while, you are that player. It's true. If you want to know what football is to so many, it's the opportunity to experience the emotional extremes in the most emotional of games. Football is full of special moments.

Some of us are lucky enough to live those fantasies. Others live those fantasies vicariously. Regardless, we all enjoy the game for what it is—a chance to go to your emotional well, a chance to vent, a chance to celebrate. For the fans and the players, game time is a chance to act the way you would never dream of acting in the real world.

As you start to follow the game, you'll soon learn that the sport has a rich history laced with gigantic names that have taken on legendary status. Nevertheless, football is a game of *the present*.



Joe's Record Book

William (Pudge) Heffeling, a former Yale All-American guard, became the first professional football player when he was paid \$500 in 1892 to play a game for the Allegheny Athletic Association against the Pittsburgh Athletic Association. He was worth the money. The AAA won the game after Heffeling returned a fumble 25 yards for a touchdown.

When the quarterback slings the ball downfield, 60,000 fans hold their collective breath until it's either caught or dropped. When the ball goes into the air, possibilities and opportunities are up there with it. When it comes down, you hear either "Awwwwwww" or a loud roar. Something has happened, and everybody witnessed it. In a stadium, there's no hiding.

The lure of football is deep and multi-faceted, but a lot of it is tied up simply in what happens when the ball flies through the air. Don't breathe, just watch.

But the allure of the game is also about those gigantic names: Jim Thorpe and Jim Brown, Bart Starr and Joe Namath, Joe Montana and Brett Favre. There was once a kid growing up in New Jersey who was convinced that Joe Namath was the coolest person ever to walk the planet. That kid was me, and I grew up to play against Joe Namath. That's just one example of how football can make kids' dreams come true.

Football is about dreams that come true. It is about the pursuit of dreams. It is, in fact, a celebration—a very violent celebration—of the pursuit of dreams.

The lure of the game is the opportunity it offers you to be a part of history—to say, “I was there.” You were *there*? Wow, that must have been something!



Joe's Tips

If you don't know who to root for, consider that there are 31 professional teams in the National Football League (the thirty-second team, the Houston Texan franchise, will enter the league in 2002). Also, consider that I played for the Washington Redskins, so that team would be a good choice. Then ask yourself these questions:

- Do you like the name, colors, or city of any particular team?
- Do you live near a team?
- Do you like the current players? (Keep in mind that the players will change.)
- Do all your friends cheer for one team?
- Where did you grow up?

I can remember being in the stands in Giants Stadium in 1962 when everybody took out their hankies and sang “Good-bye Allie” to Y. A. Tittle as he limped, bloody, off the field. I'm very proud of that. It is something that will be with me forever.

You have to understand that football players are gladiators. You have two teams of titans, representing a city, a culture, and a segment of the country, and they are going at it 'til the end.

There is something primal about the look of football. The colors. The huge men. The ferocious clashes. This whole football thing really is simple: It's each guy saying, “Look, I'm better than you. I want to prove that I'm better than you are.”

The Passion

Football is 15 percent physical and 85 percent mental. The mental part isn't merely strategy, but also force of will. Football is a game about engine power, so rev it up!



Joe's Rules

In 1880, a Yale rugby player named Walter Camp invented modern football by suggesting the rugby scrum be changed to a "scrummage." This had one effect. It allowed a team to take possession of the ball before play began. Rugby was a spontaneous game. Football, as Camp envisioned it, would be more orderly. The scrummage meant that teams could plan what they wanted to do and then do it. The *line of scrimmage* (LOS) is the imaginary line across the field where the ball is placed at the beginning of the play.

If you're going to understand the game of football, you have to understand the emotional energy that it takes to play the game. When you see someone cheering for a football team, that person is living their life vicariously through a player or the players on the field. And the players on the field are playing on overdrive.



Joe's Record Book

How popular is the NFL? In 2000, 16,387,289 people attended NFL games for an average attendance of 66,078 per game. About 80 million Americans watch NFL football on television every Sunday. A whopping 131.5 million Americans watched Super Bowl XXXIV on television, while more than 800 million people watched it worldwide.

The human heart is endowed with the capacity to push the body to incredible limits. Football is a game that epitomizes the power of the will. There is only one way to play the game: all out. There's no speed but full speed. When football players talk about giving 110 percent, they mean it.

You see, football is a game that requires its participants to ride the wave of emotion. Why is the game so emotional? There are a million reasons. The biggest reason is that there's a great fear factor in football. It's a macho game. It's each player saying, "I don't want to let you show me up."

Each player is trying to overcome his own limitations (playing past the point of exhaustion or reaching a personal best, for example), and each team is trying to overcome the emotional challenges in playing as a unit. Noble reasons—men striving to be better individually and as a team—are what push these titans.

The game appeals to the basest emotions of the human psyche and allows for a healthy release of those emotions—for both players and fans.

Players put it all on the line—right in front of an average of 66,078 fans. And for fans, Sunday afternoon is a chance to do the same thing: Take your emotions out of hiding and let them go for a three-hour ride. When you watch your team play, that's what happens. You go on a three-hour ride that ends in either ecstasy or agony.

Fans understand. Just take a look at any stadium. You aren't seeing insanity in action. Nope. Just think of it as some folks who want to share in the passion of the moment. If you're a football fan, I have one thing to say: "You people are nuts!" I mean that in the nicest way.

I remember instances during my career when I was coming out of the locker room thinking I wasn't nervous—until I looked at the fans. All I could think was, "Thank God they're on my side." When they were the other team's fans, I tried not to pay attention. The truth is, football is a very interactive game. Both fans and players feel the power of the passion. It's a game that boils the blood and makes the heart do jumping-jacks. Fans feel the power coming from the players, but players also feel it coming from the fans. Actually, I think players feel it more. It's like a plug full of energy—pure power.

Fans are definitely part of it. In fact, they're a huge part. The fans are a part of your family, and you are a part of theirs. If you hurt, they hurt. Fans all know the players on a first-name basis.

There are 31 (soon to be 32) franchises in the NFL. Therefore, there are 31 hero-making machines across the country. I get 15-year-old kids who come up to me and say, "Joe! Hi, Joe!" They know me by my first name. Those of us who have played pro football are more than entertainers. We represent our fans' city and their culture. Their enthusiasm and passion are tied to the team and its accomplishments. Thus, there is a bottom line to that passion. The bottom line is winning.



Joe's Tips

If you're going to try for the full emotional experience of being a fan, be careful of the effects of alcohol. It can cloud your judgment and you may end up doing something in the heat of the moment that you could later regret. Always be a smart fan.



Joe's Record Book

In the 1880s, linemen (the big guys who initiate contact on each play) could do anything to each other. "It was the heyday for the good boxer and the slugger type of player, for there was no penalty for rough work," said Amos Alonzo Stagg, who coached the University of Chicago football team for 41 years.

Why Is It So Violent?

Somebody wants to go someplace where somebody else doesn't want them to go. That's football. It's as simple as a bully saying, "I don't want you to go across the street."

Oh yeah?

Yeah.



Joe's Rules

There are a number of penalties (rules violations) that pertain to the illegal use of violence. Although the game is physical, players cannot try to intentionally hurt other players.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Snot bubbles are a sensation caused by a big hit. When you actually have bubbles coming out of your nose after you've been hit, you know you've been hit good. And it's a good thing to give another player a case of snot bubbles.

The question of violence in the game is not a question at all. Football is physical. It's a culture, a world, a society of its own. There are rules in that society, and you must understand them before you enter, because the rules allow some form of violence.

Of course, that's part of the appeal of football. Who can deny the traffic accident effect that occurs on highways all across the country—you can't resist slowing down and looking. There's even a term for it—rubbernecking. Well, the NFL is designed for all the rubberneckerers in America. The picture becomes clear when you see the colorfully clad gladiators lined up face to face. There's a traffic accident in Washington, and look, it's scheduled for one o'clock on Sunday afternoon!

The thing about football violence is that it is extreme and continuous; it's two men repeatedly running at approximately 30 miles an hour and crashing into each other. Imagine the sound, then watch a game. It can rock your bones. Trust me, I know.

Football, you see, is not part of the "real world"—the rules of the real world do not apply in football. It's more a surreal world, but it's all happening in real time. In the game, the violence is not evil or malicious. It's competitive.

But that competitive violence can sometimes come across as evil if you compare it to the rules of society. In fact, if you did on the street what we do on the football field, such as hit someone so hard he blows *snot bubbles*, you'd be thrown in jail. That's not bragging or a macho statement. It's just the truth.

The game is not promoted as a violent game, but that's what it is, and every player and every fan recognizes

this. Violence is part of the appeal. There is no way to downplay the fact that you have large, fast, agile men slamming into each other at what they hope are precise angles.

Sometimes the hits cause injuries, and the truth is, even those are part of the appeal. I know. I suffered a broken leg in a Monday Night game against the New York Giants in 1985. It was a fairly gruesome affair, and it taught me a bit about the appeal of the game.

On the night when my leg was broken, many people saw it live. But later, it was played over and over on every sportscast in the country. Inevitably, the announcer would say something like, “You might not want to see this, but look.” And people did.

The Connection Between Football and Community

When a football team goes into formation, from the stands it can look like a flag. The set formation has colors and patterns all its own. It almost makes you want to stand and salute (at least in the cities that have winning teams).

There is no doubt that a football team belongs to a specific city or region. It’s our team, our colors, and our tradition. It belongs to us. (Of course, it actually belongs to somebody with a bunch of money called an owner, but that’s another story.)

Football, because of the pure man-on-man nature of the event, is the sport that best exemplifies the civic nature of modern athletics—our guys versus your guys. That’s football, and many people take it seriously.



Joe's Record Book

The NFL supports local communities in many ways besides simply giving folks a team to root for on Sundays. In fact, since 1973, NFL charities have given out more than \$35 million to more than 250 community organizations. In addition, more than 50 players have their own charities in their local communities. And players volunteer by the boatload for projects like the United Way Hometown Huddle. In this program, players and coaches from all 31 teams volunteer for projects such as building houses and playgrounds.

It’s a game and it’s a business. But football is more. Mostly, I think, football is about the relationship of the team to the community. Football is a great game because a team can represent what the cavalry represented in an earlier era—a chance for

individuals to move on in the world, and a chance to defend the honor of a home city. A football team can exist somewhere in the pulse that runs through a community, and when it does, there is no sporting relationship quite like it. It's not an understatement to call it a love affair.

It's not hard to figure out. Just watch a game. The connection is total and it isn't faked. The emotions spent by the fans and players are real for both sides. Fans may be surprised to know (although they shouldn't be) that players get a tremendous amount of energy from fan support. That's not a line. That's the truth.

Fans offer the players a chance to be part of their families. We feel that we really are welcomed into fans' families. We feel the energy from the roar of the crowd, and it affects us. It really does.

The impact of fan support is especially magnified in football—more so than in other sports. First of all, because there are only eight regular-season home games each season, there is more pressure not to mess up; fans don't want to spend that rare chance watching their team lose. Additionally, there is more of an opportunity between games to build emotions into a frenzy. When there are only eight home games each regular season, every game is an *event*.

But a home game is even more than a sporting event. It's a civic event. When your team trots out onto the field wearing your colors, the players are not just out there to entertain. Sure, football is entertainment, but it's much more. When that team goes on the field, the players are going to war and the fight they're fighting is for your honor. The honor of your city. The honor of your place.



Joe's Record Book

As a player, I knew my performance affected the mental attitude of my fans for the next week. When I played for the Washington Redskins, if we had a bad game on Sunday, Congress inevitably had a bad day on Monday. I couldn't make this stuff up if I wanted to. It's true!

Players really do get it. We understand.

Football is more than a mere spectator sport. It's a national passion that is part of 31 different civic cultures across the land. Football teams are really like armies sent out to defend a city. There are rules to the battle, but it's a battle nevertheless.

Fans also are quick to recognize what football players actually do for a living. Are football players overpaid? Sure they are. But then again, they're paid exactly what they're worth. Go figure.

The truth is that fans don't much care about the money part of it and are more intrigued by the gladiator aspect. There is a connection there that I have felt as a player and as a fan. I know both sides, and I know for a fact that the connection exists. It really is tangible.

I have had people come up to me and show me autographs that I signed 20 years ago. I had no idea these people kept the autograph in their wallet all those

years. But they pull them out, and when something like that happens, you can't help but feel a sense of obligation to the fans and community.

That's why so many players volunteer to appear at children's hospitals and so forth. We know it means something. The player is the person who the child saw on television. On television, that person is bigger than life. When the player shows up, it *is* life (the players usually seem bigger than life in person, too), and that has an effect.

Football is a game of confidence and raw emotion. We players understand what our presence can mean to someone fighting an illness because we know what the presence of cheering fans does when we're fighting out on the field. Vocal support means a lot. So yell, and yell loud. We like it.

In the 1996 playoffs, the Carolina Panthers came back out of the locker room after a win and ran a lap around the field. That was not a curtain call asking for more cheers. That was not the Carolina Panthers looking for adulation. It was, instead, the players wanting to show their gratitude to the fans. And when the Jacksonville Jaguars returned from beating Denver in the playoffs, they were not taken from the airport directly to their cars. No, instead, they were brought to the stadium at 1:30 A.M. so they could be welcomed home by 40,000 fans. This is at 1:30 in the morning. Communities and football teams are involved in nothing short of a love fest. Believe me, players understand. They get it.

The thing to understand about the connection between the players and the community is that before we played in the NFL, every one of us watched the game on television. We all had heroes.

In my first year in the league, I was the third-string quarterback for the Washington Redskins. That year, we played the New York Jets and Joe Namath was the quarterback. After the game, I went up to him and said, "Mr. Namath, my name is Joe Theismann and when I was growing up in New Jersey, you were my hero."

"Nice to meet you," he said, and he shook my hand.

"I would be honored if I could carry your helmet to your locker room," I babbled.

"That's all right, kid," said Namath. "I can carry it myself."

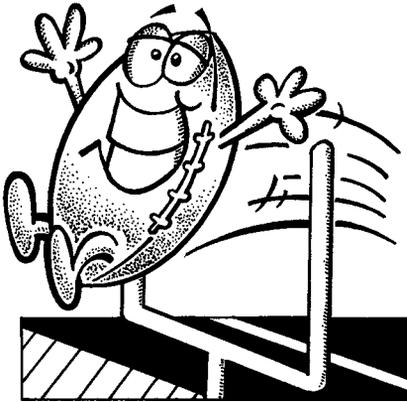


Joe's Record Book

In the early days of professional football, teams were congregated in a few places in the East and Midwest. In 1904, the state of Ohio had seven professional teams.

The Least You Need to Know

- When you learn about football, you become capable of engaging in scintillating Monday-morning conversation.
- Football is played on overdrive and cheered at the same speed.
- Football is a violent game, and that's part of the attraction.
- Football teams are like gladiators representing a city. The bond between a team and the home fans is remarkable.
- Players and the NFL show appreciation for fan support by trying to win and by supporting local charities.



Looking at the Field and the Ball

In This Chapter

- ▶ Sizing up the field and the ball
- ▶ The pros and cons of artificial turf
- ▶ Why the final 20 yards before the end zone are special

Football is a weird game. On one hand, you have a rectangular field with specific dimensions, and you have precise rules. On the other hand, you've got this odd-shaped ball. When you put the two together, you get organized chaos. It's perfect.

Both teams in a football game aim for precision in the midst of chaos. If you watch, you'll see that football is in some ways a finite art. The lines are always in the same place.

But inside those lines is another world. The game is designed to create excitement. That's why the field is big. Think about it. What is the absolute, perfect measurement of big? Ever heard something like, "That aircraft carrier must have been about three football fields long"? That says it all. A football field is the definition of big.

This is a chapter about the field the game is played on and the ball it is played with. Okay, I admit it, these aren't the most exciting aspects of football, but they are key ingredients. As your coach, I think it's important that you get a thorough understanding of the basics.

Why Is the Ball Shaped Like That?

The football evolved from the rugby ball, which evolved from the soccer ball. In other countries, folks refer to soccer as “football.” So, you see, there is a connection between the two games. One game just stopped evolving.

In 1875, an egg-shaped ball was used instead of a soccer ball in rugby. The new rugby ball became the official ball of football until 1896, when the term *prolate spheroid* came to define the shape of a football.

The average, early football looked like an elongated pumpkin. At first, there were no official dimensions, just an official description of the shape—a prolate spheroid. Pat O’Dea of Wisconsin kicked many of his collegiate records at the turn of the century with the original prolate spheroid ball.

Today’s more elongated football is shaped to be easy to throw. When I wrap my hand around the ball with some of my fingers on the laces and my thumb on the back side of the ball, I feel in control of the ball. The ball is designed to inspire that kind of confidence. It seems to work—at least for the good players.

With its tapered ends, a football is aerodynamically designed to spin after it is thrown. Although it’s quirky in the way it bounces, it is quite true in the way it flies. A football is perfectly engineered to be a football. There are no design flaws (although there were days when I’m sure I could have found plenty—but more on that later).

The ball itself is also easy to grasp if you want to run with it. You can put your hand around one end of it and tuck the other into the inside of your elbow and maintain a running rhythm. The folks who designed this thing were geniuses. You can even kick it!

Today’s regulation NFL football is designed for straight flight.



The ball is made of pebble-grained leather, which makes it easy to grab and, at least in dry conditions, easy to catch.

The home club supplies the balls for each game and must have 36 balls available in open-air stadiums; 24 must be available in dome stadiums. The referee is the sole judge of whether a ball meets the official requirements. Unfortunately, quarterbacks are given no say in the matter. Go figure.



Joe's Rules

The official NFL game ball is ...

- Called a "pigskin" but made of leather.
- A Wilson brand bearing the signature of NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue.
- Inflated to between $12\frac{1}{2}$ and $13\frac{1}{2}$ pounds.
- Between 11 and $11\frac{1}{4}$ inches long.
- Between 28 to $28\frac{1}{2}$ inches in circumference around its long dimension.
- Between 21 to $21\frac{1}{4}$ inches in circumference around its shorter middle dimension.
- Shaped like a prolate spheroid, tapering at each end.

The Object of the Game

You want to win, of course. But in order to win you have to score more points than the other team. You score by controlling the ball and moving it, within the boundaries of the playing field, all the way down the field into a designated *end zone*.

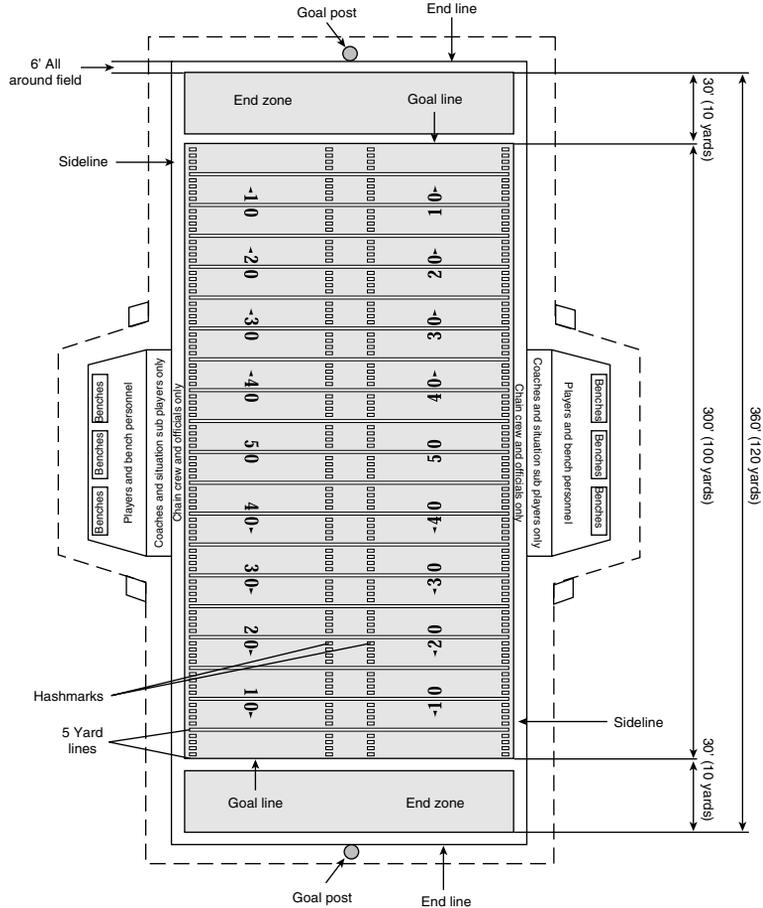
The game involves a series of *plays*, in which action begins when one player (the center) *snaps* the ball to another (usually the quarterback). The play usually ends when a person carrying the ball, the *ball carrier*, is tackled. A ball carrier is *tackled* when he is brought to the ground while being touched by an opponent or when he runs outside the boundaries of the playing field. A play also ends if the ball is thrown forward and is not caught. A play can also end when the ball lands after it's kicked toward the goal posts in an attempt to get points. (See Chapter 3, "You Get Six Points to Do What?" for more details on how the game proceeds on the field.)

And there are many rules that, if broken, can cause the play to stop, be played over again, or even be started from a new position on the field.

The Dimensions and How They Figure into the Game

The playing field is a rectangle—a big rectangle measuring 360 feet in length and 160 feet in width. At each end of the length of the rectangle is a 10-yard-long box called the end zone. End zones are very important in the game of football.

The dimensions of a football field are awesome.



Joe's Record Book

In order to re-sod Green Bay's Lambeau Field for a 1997 playoff game, sod was shipped from Maryland to Green Bay in 28 heated tractor trailers. The new field cost the NFL about \$150,000.

An end zone is not just a box on a field. It's more like a candy store. The end zone is a special place for many reasons, not the least of which is that it's the only place you can score touchdowns.

Touchdowns are worth more points (six) than any other type of score. Therefore, the end zone is the Promised Land, because that's the only place a touchdown can happen.

The rest of the field, that part between the end zones, is where the battle is fought.

The field between the end zones is 100 yards long. If you look down the field, you'll see a series of lines running horizontally across it. Those lines, parallel to the goal line, are *five-yard markers*. Every other line has a number by it—a multiple of 10.

The middle of the field is the 50-yard line. The highest number on the field is 50. So, how come the biggest number is 50 but the field is 100 yards long?

Simple. It's 50 yards from each end zone to the middle of the field. So, when you're 40 yards from one end zone, you're on that 40-yard line going toward the 30, 20, and 10 yard lines, each of which you will reach before the end zone. But if you're 60 yards from one end zone, you're on the other team's 40-yard line, and you must cross the 50 first when heading toward the end zone before you come to the other 40, 30, and so on.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Unless you're on the 50-yard line, the yard line belongs to either your team or your opponent. The yard lines between your **defensive end zone** (the end zone you want to keep your opponent out of) and the 50-yard line are *your team's* yard lines. If the other team has the ball 30 yards from your end zone, they are on *your* 30-yard line. If they're 70 yards away, they're on *their* 30-yard line.

There is an eight-inch-wide line that separates the playing field from the end zone. This line is called the *goal line*.

There is one other marking on the field. Two yards before each goal line (on the playing field, not in the end zone) there is a one-yard-long line that is parallel to the goal line. This is the line on which the ball is placed for an extra point or a two-point conversion after a touchdown. (I'll explain what extra points and two-point conversions are in Chapter 3.)

What Is a Goal Post?

At the back of the end zone is something called a *goal post*. The goal post is composed of a bottom or base pole that rises straight up from the ground; a second pole (called a crossbar) at the top of the



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A ball kicked **over the crossbar and between the uprights** is worth points (the number depends on the situation— see Chapter 3). If a kick is **wide left**, the ball flew to the left of the left upright. **Wide right** means the kicked ball went to the right of the right upright. If the kick is **short**, the ball didn't make it over the crossbar.



Joe's Rules

Here are a few more facts to know about the football field:

- The line around the field is a six-foot solid white border.
- Players and coaches on the sidelines are allowed to stand only between the 32-yard lines.
- The goal line is eight inches wide.

To score points, the kicker must kick the ball over the crossbar and between the uprights of the goal post.

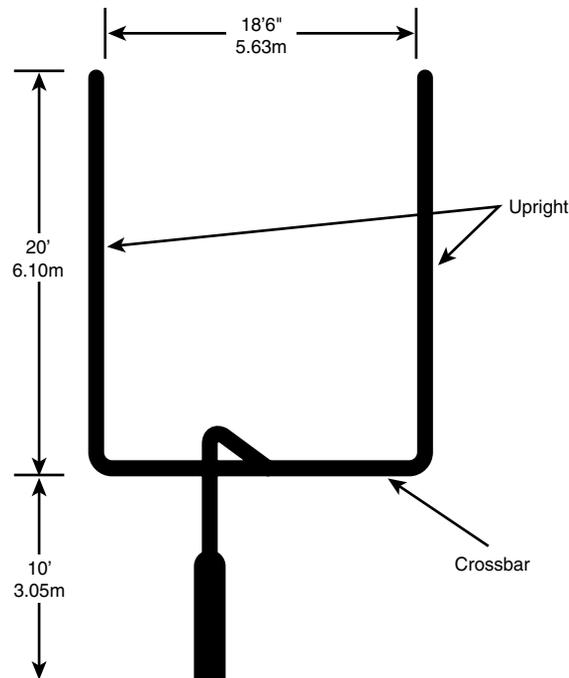
base pole, parallel to the ground; and two poles attached to either end of the crossbar, perpendicular to the ground, called the uprights.

The goal post is an important factor in scoring. Your team has to kick the ball over the crossbar and between the uprights to get points (three for a field goal, one for an extra point—see Chapter 3 for more about how to score by kicking).

The crossbar is ...

- Eighteen feet, six inches in length (so it spaces the uprights to that distance apart).
- Ten feet off the ground.

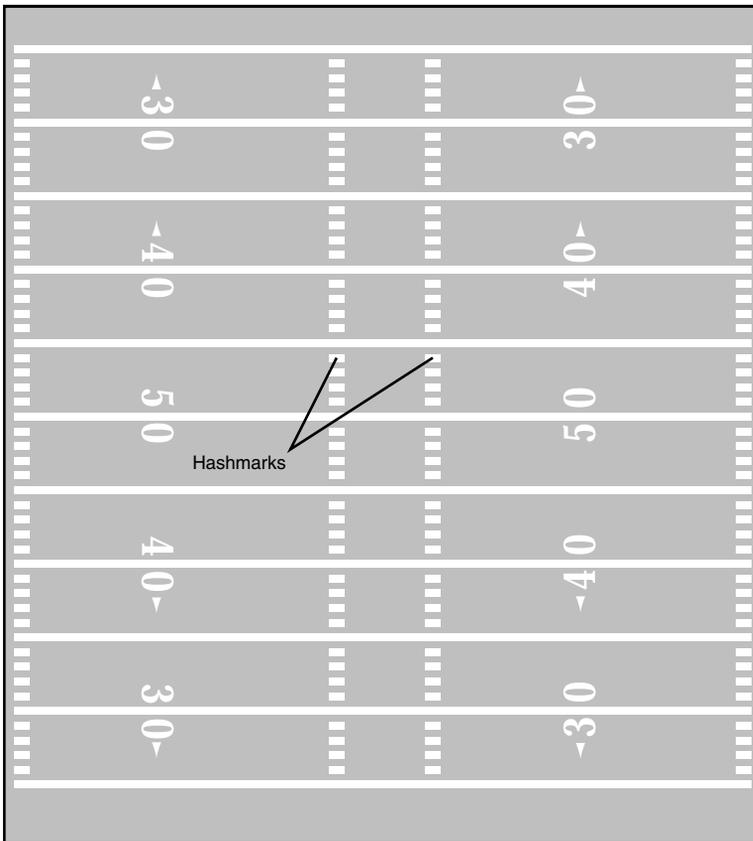
When teams win big games, rowdy fans sometimes try to tear these goal posts out of the ground and carry them around. This is not really a good idea.



Hashmarks

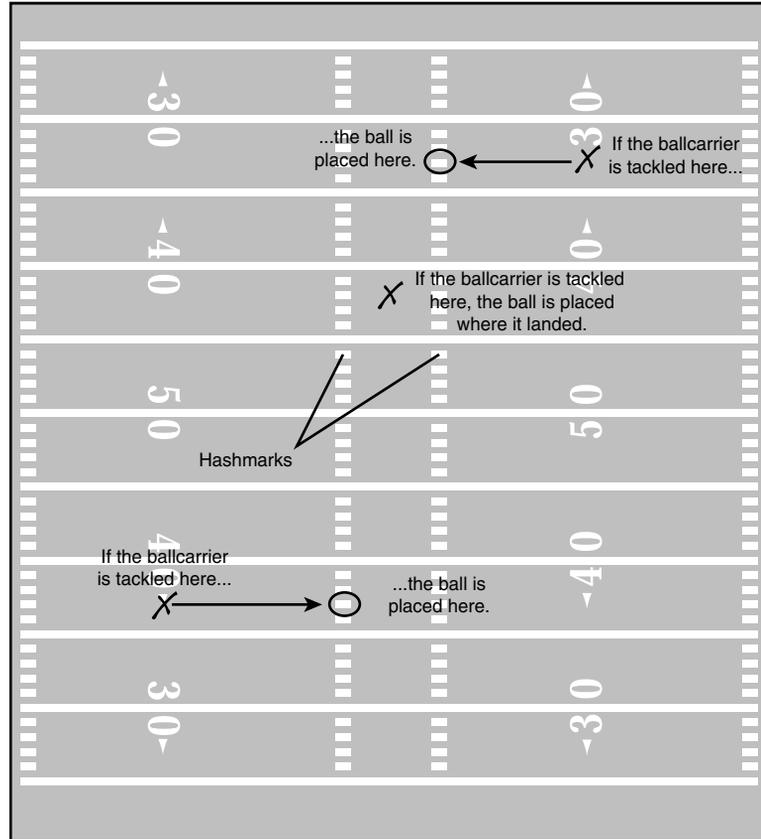
In between each of the five-yard markers are two sets of four short lines, with each pair designating a one-yard increment on the field. All plays begin between the two *hashmarks*, toward the center of the field.

Hashmarks were added to football fields in 1933 as a way to bring the start of the play away from the edge of the field. If a ball carrier is tackled between the hashmarks, the ball is placed where it landed when the player was tackled. But if a ball carrier is tackled outside the hashmarks, or if the ball goes out of bounds, it is brought to the same yard line, at the hashmark nearest the side of the field or sideline where the ball ended up.



Hashmarks between each five-yard line indicate one-yard increments.

Each play must begin in the center area between the hashmarks.



Starting plays between the hashmarks gives a team a better chance to direct the play in either direction. In 1972, the hashmarks were moved even closer to the middle of the field to create more opportunity for excitement.

The Chains, the Sticks

If you're on the "chain gang" in the NFL, you've got a great view of the game.

You see, a football game is designed to essentially take place in 10-yard increments. If your team can move the ball forward 10 yards within four plays, you are allowed to retain it for another four plays. Consequently, 10 yards is an important measurement to know.

The 10-yard measurement is so important, in fact, that there are officials in charge of keeping it marked with special equipment called chains or "the sticks"—two sticks held together by a 10-yard chain.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A series of “**downs**” is the four plays you have to move at least 10 yards; we use the term *down* because each play ends when the ball or the player is knocked to the ground. **First down** occurs when a team moves forward at least 10 yards toward its scoring end zone from where it began. The team is then given four more plays to move forward at least another 10 yards. If it does not do so (each play is numbered consecutively) in four downs, the other team is given the ball (given possession), and it becomes first down for them.

These chains (really only one chain, but never mind) are used to determine whether a team made it the 10 yards they need to retain possession of the ball. One stick marks where a series of downs begins; one marks 10 yards further. There is a third stick, which is not attached to a chain, that marks the current position of the ball at the beginning of a play. This stick has a number at the top that displays the current down—from 1 to 4.

If the team that possesses the ball moves it 10 yards toward the team's scoring end zone in four plays, the team is rewarded with a new set of four downs. It becomes first down again.

If there is a question about whether the team moved the ball far enough to get 10 yards, the two people with the chains run onto the field and measure from where the series of downs began to the ball's present position on the field. This measuring process can be exciting and nerve-wracking, because sometimes only an inch or two makes the difference in whether a team gets to keep the ball.

The Imaginary Line That You Can See

When you watch a game on television, you'll see a bright line, called *the first down line*—usually orange or yellow depending on what network is broadcasting the game—that appears before each play from scrimmage. This line doesn't really exist except on TV and, hopefully, in the minds of the officials. The line is a computer-generated image to enhance the game for TV viewers by showing them exactly how far an offense needs to go to get a first down. If the ball crosses this line, or even touches it, it's a first down. Simple.

Artificial Turf or Natural Grass?

Football is played on two types of surfaces: artificial turf and natural grass. Both are green, although not the same shade. Artificial turf can be darker or lighter than real grass, depending on the kind of turf—but it always seems to be brighter.



Joe's Record Book

In the National Football League, 19 stadiums have grass and 11 have artificial turf. There are only 30 stadiums, since the Jets and Giants both play at the Meadowlands in New Jersey.

Natural grass is exactly that. It's grass, just like on the lawn or at the playground or in the outfield—only better because it's cared for by the NFL.

Artificial turf is what the name suggests—artificial. It doesn't grow. There are no artificial turf farms in Kentucky. Artificial turf is synthetic material placed on a pad that is set upon asphalt. It's like carpet, and you can even get carpet burns when playing on it. When I was a kid, we played ball on driveways or in the street and sometimes you took a spill on the ground. You would end up with a long, deep, red scrape that we called a "raspberry." Well, you get a lot of raspberries playing on artificial turf, especially on your elbows.

The original intent of artificial turf was to enable a game to be played indoors at the Houston Astrodome—the first domed stadium. Once it was shown that AstroTurf (artificial turf) could be used indoors, it was then considered for use outdoors for one simple reason—it kept the uniforms clean.



Joe's Record Book

Human beings are pretty good at figuring things out, and maybe the solution to the problem with artificial turf has finally been innovated away. The Seattle Seahawks play on a new type of turf—called FieldTurf—which has been reviewed well enough to lead others to install it on practice fields. A similar product, NeXturf—a blend of polyethylene and nylon fibers knitted together to create a nonabrasive surface that drains well—has been installed in the Philadelphia Eagles home, Veterans Stadium. Time will tell if these new innovations satisfy the players and the accountants who pay for it.

In games played on grass, players sometimes became so dirty and muddy that the fans could not read the uniform numbers. Owners wanted the fans to know who was out there, so for a while, teams switched to artificial turf.

Another reason for a team to use artificial turf is that it's a relatively low-maintenance surface compared to grass, which must be cared for, fertilized, and mowed. In addition, there are many cities that have multi-use stadiums with artificial turf for both baseball and football. In these cases, artificial turf has extra economic value.

But recently, there has been a trend in the other direction. Some outdoor stadiums have gone back to natural grass.

The game is different on the two types of fields. The game is so different that teams actually pick their players based upon what kind of surface the team plays on for home games and how well the players they want play on that type of surface.

The game is faster on artificial turf. Thus, teams that have artificial turf on their home fields want faster players. The footing on artificial turf is so sure that it is sometimes tough to believe what you see players do. It causes the players to have a little different running style. On artificial turf, you have to pick your feet up when you run. You can make cuts (sharp turns and sidesteps) on artificial turf that would be almost impossible to make on grass.

On artificial turf, you “stick” every single step. I've never run with suction cups on the bottom of my shoes, but to me, that's the feeling of running on artificial turf. The footing is unbelievable. Think of the phrase, “turn on a dime.” The footing is that precise. Sometimes, I think it's too precise.

Football is a tough job. All players recognize the risks. Injuries happen on both kinds of turf. But still, the game's field and equipment should all contribute to minimizing injuries where possible. Artificial turf is a tough point with some players, and I believe there is some merit to the argument that it shortens careers because it produces wear and tear on the joints—especially the knees.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The footing on artificial turf is so sure that there is actually an injury called **turf toe**, in which the big toe is jammed into the ground because you've stopped too abruptly. It's like a stubbed toe, except you're wearing a shoe.



Joe's Record Book

Teams will do anything they can to win—an attitude that extends to the grounds crew. For instance, if a fast team is visiting a field with natural turf, the grass will be grown a little longer so the guys move a little slower. You know—“Maybe I didn't cut it on Sunday. Maybe I didn't cut it since Friday. Well, oops, I forgot.” Just another part of the strategy of winning.

Even standing on artificial turf for a few hours gives me a backache. When you move on it repeatedly over an extended period of time, your knees and ankles begin to feel the wear.

I like football on grass. To me, it's just like the schoolyard stuff we used to play on years ago when mud or snow just made the game better. Sure, you may be a bit slower on grass, but there's just something about playing football and getting a little mud on your jersey. It makes you remember the look on Mom's face when she saw you return from a day of playing. Yes, Mom's famous football-laundry face. This indeed is a game of childhood fantasies and memories.



Joe's Record Book

No teams were undefeated at home in 2000—neither indoor nor outdoor teams could pull off the feat.



Joe's Record Book

Until the St. Louis Rams, who play in the Trans World Dome, won Super Bowl XXXIV in January 2000, no team that plays its home games in a dome had ever won the Super Bowl.

Indoors or Outdoors?

Football was originally designed to be played outdoors in the fall. But a number of stadiums are now designed to keep the temperature at a cozy 72 degrees for the entire game. A lot of stadiums are now enclosed—what is called a *dome*.

A dome is a big stadium with a roof on top. Indoor football is always played on artificial turf. Artificial turf, as you learned from the last section, is like a carpet. So, here's what you do: Clear out your living room of furniture, invite 22 of your biggest friends over, give them a football, and, voilà—you have your own domed stadium. Well, okay, it's a few hundred-million dollars more complicated than that, but you get the idea.

Dome football isn't quite the same as football outdoors. Indoors, you don't have to deal with the elements—wind, rain, snow, cold, or heat. I think it makes you soft, so when you do have to face the elements, you're not prepared.

Football is a mental game, and the way you build mental toughness for the elements of nature is to be out in the elements. If I'm a mountain man and I've lived in the elements and I want to play a football game in the mountains against you, and you've lived in a house all your life, your reaction to the weather is going to be different than mine.

I don't believe the weather gives you a home field advantage on game day. The advantage weather gives is in the preparation. It's as cold outside for a quarterback from Green Bay as it is for a quarterback from Tampa. But if the quarterback from Green

Bay is used to cold weather (and he can't help but be used to it), then it's less of a distraction for him. Mentally, he's prepared for it.

But fans, especially fans in cold-weather cities, seem to revel in bad weather. They believe it gives their team an advantage, and they love to be part of the experience of surviving the wrath of Mother Nature.

The Red Zone

The *red zone* is the area between the 20-yard line and the end zone. You're only considered to be in the red zone if you're within 20 yards of scoring a touchdown. You're not in the red zone if you're within 20 yards of your defensive end zone. But if the other team had the ball, they would be in their red zone. The red zone is not marked on the field. It's simply a figurative area that coaches and players refer to as critical.

So why are the final 20 yards so important? Why give them a special name and color?

Well, the thinking is that if you can bring the ball all the way down the field to get in this zone, you'd better take advantage of the opportunity and score a touchdown. If you get into the red zone and only score a field goal, you've given your opponent—who was trying to stop you—a psychological edge, and you never want to give those.

Think about the importance of that area this way: If you score a touchdown and convert the extra point, the other team can drive down the field twice, kick field goals both times, and you're still up by one point.

One reason the red zone is different than the rest of the field is that it is actually a smaller field, therefore cramping both the offense and defense in closer quarters. With the smaller field, the defense has less to cover, making it more formidable. But still, when you're in the red zone, you need to score a touchdown for it to be a successful visit.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **red zone** was so named because it represents the area where a red flashing light should go off. This is where it counts. Don Shula, long-time NFL coach, called it the **green zone** because that was where the money was made.

The Least You Need to Know

- The ball is designed to fly true when thrown, plus it fits neatly into the crook of your arm between your hand and inside of your elbow for when you need to run.
- The field is big to create excitement.
- There is an end zone at each end of the field. That's where touchdowns are scored.
- The lines on the field help you figure out how far you need to go to reach the end zone.
- The game is faster on artificial turf because turf offers better traction.
- The weather is always perfect inside domes. Yet, teams that have outdoor home fields are more accustomed to varying weather conditions.
- The red zone is the final 20 yards of the playing field before the end zone. Although it's not actually marked on the field, it's considered a critical area of the field.



You Get Six Points to Do What?

In This Chapter

- ▶ How do you score points?
- ▶ How do you keep time?
- ▶ Why you need a coin

In football, you want to win.

No kidding.

So how do you win?

You win by finishing with more points than the other team.

So how do you score points?

Ah, good question.

That's what this chapter is about—how to score points and keep track of time. By the time you're done reading this chapter, you'll be able to keep score of a football game all by yourself. Is this a great book or what?

Touchdowns

Six points.

Touchdowns are the best thing that can happen to you and your team in a football game. Your team scores a *touchdown* by having possession of the ball in the other team's end zone.



Joe's Rules

A touchdown was originally worth only four points. In 1898, a touchdown was changed from four points to five, and in 1912, it was changed again to six points.

If you don't know anything about football (or, for that matter, baseball), let me put it this way: Touchdowns in football are like home runs in baseball, only better. Touchdowns are a really big deal. This must be clear if you want to understand football. Touchdowns are the best.

So say this: *"I love it when my team scores a touchdown."*

There you go. You are now talking the talk.

Touchdowns are worth six points, and there are a few different ways to score one—always in your opponent's end zone:

- You can run the ball into the end zone.
- You can catch a pass in the end zone.
- You can fall on a live ball in the end zone.



Joe's Record Book

Three players have scored six touchdowns in an NFL game, and all three games involved the Chicago Bears:

- Ernie Nevers of the Chicago Cardinals versus the Chicago Bears, November 28, 1929.
- Dub Jones of the Cleveland Browns versus the Chicago Bears, November 25, 1951.
- Gale Sayers of the Chicago Bears versus the San Francisco 49ers, December 12, 1965.

You can also score a touchdown if ...

- You have possession of a ball and both of your feet are in the end zone.
- The ball is in your possession and it crosses into the air above the end zone. (In fact, the ball does not even have to be in bounds. If your feet are in bounds before the goal line and the ball crosses the plane of the goal line, even if the ball is out of bounds, it's a touchdown.)

- You're carrying the ball and the ball itself breaks the plane of the goal line with your upper body. (Even if a defender pushes you back before your feet cross, you still score.)

Let's review:

Touchdown = hold the ball in the other team's end zone (the end zone the other team is defending)

Touchdown = six points

The great thing about a touchdown is what it represents. It's more than just six points. It says to the other team, "We have gotten the highest score possible this time down the field." It's a statement.

There have been people or groups who have made a touchdown celebration or *touchdown dance* in the end zone quite entertaining. Ickey Woods, who played for the Cincinnati Bengals, had one called the Ickey Shuffle. For a group celebration, the Washington Redskins had seven guys who used to get in a circle and on a count of three, jump up and touch hands. They were called the "Fun Bunch." The latest single version is by Jamal Anderson, of the Atlanta Falcons. His "thing" is called the "Dirty Bird," while the new group celebration, though illegal, is called the "Bob 'N Weave." It comes to us compliments of the St. Louis Rams.

If you think about it, the originators of football were really smart when they designed its scoring system. Giving more than one point for a touchdown makes the game seem even more exciting. For instance, consider a game that ends 21–7. If you counted touchdowns by 1 (and for the moment disregarded extra points), the score would be 3–1. Now, what would you rather watch? A 21–7 game, or a 3–1 game?

Extra Points

One point.

An extra point has the perfect name: extra point. That's what it is—extra, and worth one point.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **touchdown dance** is a celebration players have in the end zone after scoring a touchdown. There's a fine line between spontaneous joy and arrogant showmanship. A little of both makes for a heck of a dance.



Joe's Tips

When your team scores a touchdown, that's when you're supposed to scream, yell, give high fives, and hug all your friends and neighbors. If the other team scores a touchdown, pull out your four-letter-word dictionary and yell a few choice phrases at the opposing quarterback—you'll feel much better.

An *extra point* is one of two ways to add to the score after a touchdown. You have to score a touchdown first, or you can't get an extra point opportunity. If you score six, you can then try to go for one. For this reason, the extra point is sometimes called a *point after touchdown (PAT)*.

See, the more you learn about this game, the better it gets. It just makes perfect sense all the way around. It works like this: When a team scores a touchdown, the ball is placed on the other team's two-yard line (the two-yard line right in front of the end zone where the touchdown occurred). The kicker for the team that scored the touchdown then must kick the ball off the ground through the uprights of the goal post, over the crossbar.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **kicker** is the player who kicks the ball on kickoffs, field goals, and extra points.

To complete the extra point kick, the ball is "snapped" from the two-yard line by a player, called the center, to a kneeling player. That player, called the holder, is seven yards behind the line of scrimmage. (The line of scrimmage [LOS], remember, is the starting line for each play.)

The holder, when he receives the snap, stands the ball up, one pointy end down and the other up, held in place by his finger.

The kicker then kicks the ball. If it goes through the uprights on the goal post, the team gets the extra one point.



Joe's Record Book

Here are a few extra point experts:

- George Blanda, who played professional football for 26 years, holds the record for the most extra points successfully kicked—943.
- Uwe von Schamann, who kicked for the Miami Dolphins, has the record for most extra points attempted in a season—70 in 1984.
- Three players share the record for most extra points, nine, kicked in a game: Pat Harder of the Chicago Cardinals did it in 1948; Bob Waterfield of the Los Angeles Rams did it in 1950; and Charlie Gogolak of the Washington Redskins did it in 1966.

The extra point is that little way of punctuating the big event, the touchdown. It says, “You could come back and score a touchdown and match my big event, but if you miss the extra point, I still have you.” The extra point is indeed extra, but it isn’t really a bonus. It’s more of a must. If you don’t make it, you lose some of the psychological advantage of the touchdown.

The extra point is so much of a given that sometimes you hear announcers refer to a touchdown as seven points. But remember: A touchdown is worth six. The extra point is worth one.

Two-Point Conversions

Two points.

After you score a touchdown, you have a choice. You can kick the extra point, which is the “safe” choice, or you can live dangerously and try for not just one extra point, but two—a riskier choice called a *two-point conversion*.

After a touchdown is scored, the ball is always placed at the other team’s two-yard line. If you want to score two more points, your team must move the ball forward two yards into the end zone by having a player carry the ball over or having the quarterback throw the ball to a player in the end zone—and you only have one play to do it.

One play. Two yards for two points: the two-point conversion.

The two-point conversion is also called “going for two.” Say, “*I think we should go for two.*” Be careful when you say it, though, as most times it’s not smart to go for two. It’s safer to say, “*I don’t think we should go for two.*”

Even coaches need a little help deciding when to go for two and when to go for the much-safer extra point. They usually use the following table for reference.

Deciding When to Go for Two Points After a Touchdown, Based on the Current Score

If Your Team’s Ahead By:	You Should:	If Your Team’s Behind By:	You Should:
Even	Kick	Even	Kick
1	Go for 2	1	Kick (depends on time, consider going for 2 to win)
2	Kick	2	Go for 2
3	Kick	3	Kick
4	Go for 2	4	Kick (but consider going for 2 to win with a field goal)
5	Go for 2	5	Go for 2

continues

Deciding When to Go for Two Points After a Touchdown, Based on the Current Score (continued)

If Your Team's Ahead By:	You Should:	If Your Team's Behind By:	You Should:
6–10	Kick	6–8	Kick
11	Go for 2	9	Kick (but consider going for 2 because you'd only need a touchdown to tie)
12	Go for 2	10	Go for 2
13–18	Kick	11	Kick
19	Go for 2	12	Kick (but consider going for 2 because then a touchdown and field goal could tie)
20	Kick	13–15	Kick
21	Kick	16–18	Go for 2
22	Go for 2	19–20	Kick
23–24	Kick	21	Go for 2
25	Go for 2	22–24	Kick
26–28	Kick	25–26	Go for 2
		27	Kick
		28	Go for 2

This table is only a guideline. Coaches use their own judgement in deciding what to do, but this table gives them a basis to start thinking from so they don't have to mathematically evaluate every possible scoring outcome while the game is being played.

Teams don't usually go for two because they *want* to, but rather because they *have* to in order to tie or win.

Let's say your team is behind, but you just scored a touchdown with three minutes to go in the game. You know you're probably only going to get the ball back one more time to try for another touchdown. The touchdown you just scored makes the score 24–14. You now have the choice of kicking the extra point or going for two. If you kick the extra point, you still need nine to tie the game. And you can't get nine points at once in football. But if you get two, the score becomes 24–16. If you can then score another touchdown and two-point conversion, you can tie the game. By going for two instead of kicking the extra point, you've given yourself a chance to tie the game with another touchdown and two-point conversion.

You probably didn't think football was that complicated, did you? Now you can appreciate how tough it is for coaches to make decisions. That's why they use the table.

Field Goals

Three points.

Kicking a field goal is like kicking an extra point—a kicker kicks the ball off the ground through the uprights. But field goals occur in different circumstances and are worth three points instead of only one.

A *field goal* is easier to get than a touchdown, but it's only worth half as much. On any down in an area close enough to the goal post for the kicker to have a shot at making it, the offensive team can elect to kick the ball through the goal post uprights for a three-point score. Field goals usually occur on fourth down but not always.

There are a couple things to keep in mind about field goals. First, the goal post is at the back of the end zone, which is 10 yards farther than the front of the end zone. And second, the ball is placed about seven yards behind the line of scrimmage when it is kicked. Therefore, a kick is always 17 yards farther than the line of scrimmage. So, if the line of scrimmage is the 20-yard line, the kicker will try a 37-yard field goal.

Most kickers have a range of between 45 and 50 yards. It's safe to say that the 35-yard line is the most distant spot of a kicker's field goal range.

The following table shows how often NFL kickers make field goals in various yard ranges.



Joe's Record Book

Prior to 1966, the goal posts were on the goal line and had two bases. They were moved to the back of the end zone in 1966, and one year later, all goal posts had a single base. Safety concerns (of players running into the base) were behind both changes.



Joe's Record Book

The longest field goal in the history of the NFL was first kicked by Tom Dempsey of the New Orleans Saints against the Detroit Lions on November 8, 1970. Dempsey, who was born with half a right foot and wore a special shoe, kicked the ball 63 yards. (Alex Karras of Detroit didn't even rush to try and block the kick. He just laughed.) On October 25, 1998, Jason Elam of the Denver Broncos kicked the second 63-yard field goal in league history.

2000 Field Goal Kicking Performance by NFL Kickers

Field Goal Length (in Yards)	Kicks Attempted	Kicks Made	Percentage Made
1–19	29	29	1.000
20–29	240	224	.933
30–39	283	232	.820
40–49	297	208	.700
Over 50	68	38	.559

The other thing to realize about kicking a field goal is that it requires tremendous coordination between the snapper (a.k.a. the center), the holder, and the kicker. The entire process takes approximately 1.4 seconds.

Snap, hold, kick.

That quick.

Safeties

Two points.

A safety is a *gotcha!*

A *safety* is scored by the defense, the team that doesn't currently have possession of the ball. Simply put, if the defense tackles the offense in its own end zone or gets the offense to commit a penalty in its own end zone, the defense scores two points.

Another way to get a safety is for the offense or a team receiving a kick to cross behind the back line of its own end zone with the ball. The defense can also score a safety if it blocks a punt out of the end zone, if the offense fumbles the ball out of the end zone, or if an offensive player runs out of bounds in the end zone.

But it gets better. The team that the safety was scored on then must go to its own 20-yard line and kick the ball away. This kick is called a *free kick*, in which the kicking team can either punt it or kick the ball off the ground.

The bottom line to a safety is that the defense gets two points and then possession of the ball—not a bad deal.

There is also a tremendous momentum swing that occurs with a safety. To either be sacked in the end zone or lose yardage, resulting in a safety, also says that the offense can't handle the defensive pressure. It can really deflate your morale.

Quarters and Halves

Keeping time in a football game is easy. The game is broken into two halves, which are then broken down into four quarters. One game is equal to one hour, and the hour is broken into halves and quarters as well. It's like this:

- 1 game = 60 minutes
- 1 game = 2 halves
- 1 half = 30 minutes
- 1 half = 2 quarters
- 1 quarter = 15 minutes

Just as there are four quarters in a dollar, there are four quarters in a game. The first two quarters, together, are called the first half. The last two quarters, together, are called the second half. The quarters themselves are called the first quarter, second quarter, and so on. A quarter is also called a period.

There is a two-minute intermission between quarters in each half. There is an intermission between halves, too, called halftime. Halftime is 12 minutes long, unless otherwise specified. For example, halftime is longer for playoff games and the Super Bowl so that the television networks can run more commercials and make more money.

Game Time Doesn't Include Commercials

There are aspects of a football game that are a bit more complex than counting to four, for instance, the way time is kept. Time in a football game is not real time. It's *game time*. Real time includes commercials. Game time does not.

An official carries an official game clock, which stops and starts at different times. A stop of the clock means that the countdown of time left in a quarter stops and doesn't resume until the start of the next play. Here are the instances when the game clock stops:

- A change of ball possession
- An incomplete pass (when the quarterback throws the ball to another player but that player doesn't catch it)
- A penalty
- A ballcarrier goes out of bounds
- A team calls a time-out (more on these shortly)
- An injury
- An official calls a time out to measure for a first down or to spot the ball
- A team scores a touchdown, field goal, or safety
- A coach issues a challenge to an official's call

The Two-Minute Warning

The final two minutes of each half are considered special. Thus, when there are two minutes left in the game, there is an official time-out. Both teams can then confer with their coaching staff.

And then, in those final two minutes, there are some special rules:

- On a kickoff, the game clock (also called *the clock*) does not start until the ball is touched by a player in the field of play. In all other cases, it starts with the kick.
- If a ball is fumbled in the last two minutes, it may only be advanced by the offensive player who fumbled the ball or by any defensive player. No other offensive player may advance the ball.
- If a player is injured in the final two minutes, his team is charged a time-out. At any other time in the game, his team is not charged a time-out.

Overtime

If a professional football game is tied at the end of four quarters, it doesn't end. Instead, teams play to *sudden death*, in which the team that scores first wins. They play for 15 minutes, called an *overtime period*. If no one scores by the end of an overtime period, the game ends as a tie.

Got it? Good, because it doesn't always end as a tie. In playoff games and the Super Bowl, teams keep playing overtime periods until one team scores and wins.

The Play Clock

The NFL wants there to be lots of plays (you'll learn more about plays soon). Thus, teams are given 40 seconds from the end of one play to start another.

If, however, the officials become involved for any number of reasons, teams are given 25 seconds from the time the officials finish their business (and blow their whistle) until the team must start a play.

Time-Outs

Teams are given three *time-outs* per half. A time-out is exactly that. It means we on the team want to stop and think about it. No need to act hasty. Actually, it could mean we panicked, we don't have the right guys on the field, or any of a million other things, too.

Time-outs serve two purposes: They let the coaches and the team think about the upcoming play—usually an important one—and they stop the clock.

Teams are only given three time-outs each half. You can't save the ones from the first half for the second. If the game goes to overtime, each team is given two time-outs per overtime. If there are any time-outs left from the second half, they don't carry over into overtime.

Play the Game

So, you've got points, you've got quarters, and you've even got time-outs. But how the heck do you start?

Well, you start with a coin.

That's right—you flip a coin to see who gets the ball first. The visiting team gets to choose heads or tails. Whichever team wins the coin flip can choose whether they want the ball or whether they want to defend a certain end zone. They can't do both. Sometimes, because of wind or weather conditions, teams may choose the end zone. Every quarter, teams switch end zones and go the other way.

But usually the team that wins the toss elects to get the ball. But if they don't want to decide they can *defer* to make the choice until the beginning of the second half. Usually, the team that kicks off in the first half receives the ball to start the second.

When it is decided which team gets the ball, the other team lines up on its 30-yard line (the 30-yard line it's defending), where the ball is placed on a *kicking tee*.

The other team receives the kick and runs it back until it is tackled or forced out of bounds. That team then starts with *first down and 10 yards to go*. This is common lingo for the current situation in any game. When a team has the ball, it wants to get a first down. It has a certain number of yards it needs in order to get a first down, and, in fact, the current situation carries with it a down. It's either first down, second down, third down, or fourth down. So, if it's *second and seven*, that means it's second down with seven yards to go until a first down.



Joe's Record Book

In Super Bowl XX, Walter Payton was the captain of the Chicago Bears. He was told by the official tossing the coin to "call it in the air." He didn't. The official tossed the coin. It landed. It stopped. Payton then said, "Heads." The Bears got the ball and went on to win 46–10. Despite that, I don't think the coin flip affected the outcome.

To start each game, one team places the ball in a kicking tee like this, then the kicker kicks the ball.



If a team does not get a first down in three plays, it usually elects to *punt*, which means that it kicks the ball to the other team. A punt is a different kind of kick than field goals, extra points, or kickoffs. A punt is a kick in which the punter (the player who punts) receives a 15-yard snap and then drop-kicks the ball. When a player on the punt-receiving team receives the punt, he can run it back until he's tackled. It then becomes first and 10 for the team that just received the punt.

The Anatomy of a Play

A *play* is the offense's attempt to move the ball, and for each play there is a "plan" dictating what each player should do.

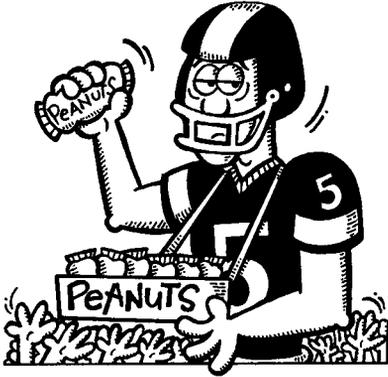
Each play starts with a huddle (unless the offensive team is running a no-huddle offense) in which the *offensive* team (the team that has possession of the ball) gathers around the quarterback a few yards behind the line of scrimmage, where the ball came to rest at the end of the previous play. The quarterback gives the team the strategy for the play (the plan the team will follow to make the best progress during the play).

The offensive team then comes to the line of scrimmage and lines up, and the defensive team lines up across from them. Offensive players must get into a *set position*, meaning they must set their bodies steady until the play begins. The quarterback then calls signals. At a certain sound uttered by the quarterback (usually the words "Hut two!"), the play begins. The offensive players follow the plan for the play, trying to advance the ball as far as possible. The defensive players try to stop the offensive players from advancing at all.

The defensive players have a plan of their own. They try to stop the offense from making a first down or scoring a touchdown.

The Least You Need to Know

- A touchdown equals six points.
- A field goal equals three points.
- A safety equals two points.
- A two-point conversion equals two points.
- An extra point equals one point.
- Time is kept on a game clock. Each game is 60 minutes long; those 60 minutes are divided into four quarters. Halftime occurs after the first two quarters (called the first half).
- The winner of the coin toss usually chooses to receive the ball first.



Every Player Has a Different Job

In This Chapter

- What players wear
- The differences between offense, defense, and special teams
- Defining skill players

Football players aren't just a bunch of big guys. Well, they are a bunch of big guys, but there's much more to the story.

In fact, football is a game with diverse skill and size requirements. There are 11 players on offense and 11 players on defense. There are different team units for punts, kick-offs, and returns of both. There are short-yardage units on both offense and defense. There are other specialized groups, each of which has 11 players. And each player has a different job.

This chapter is an introduction to the different types of players that make up each team, what they wear, and what they do. Entire books could be (and, in some cases, have been) written about just one position. This is one chapter about all of the positions, so we'll cover the different positions very generally.

But first, let's start with the uniform. After all, everybody's gotta wear a uniform.

The Uniform

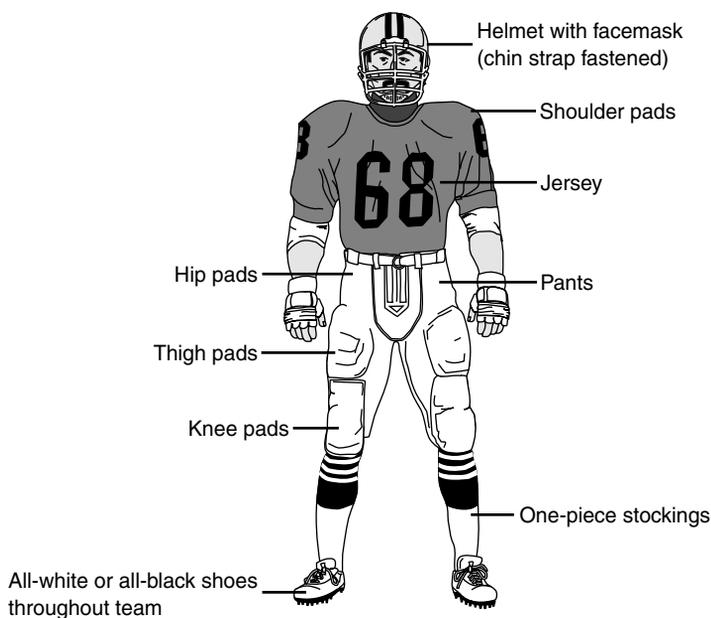
The psychological effect of the uniform is immense. When you're wearing your football uniform, you look large to the other team. You feel large. The colors are vivid, and are either urban and hip or historic and legendary.

The colors alone make the game seem like a clash of titans. I'm not exaggerating. Watch a game. The players look like knights in armor attacking each other. The padding amplifies this perspective.

Although all players must wear helmets and padding, different players holding different *positions* (jobs on the field) wear different types of helmets and padding.

The basic uniform looks like this.

Professional football players wear this uniform, which offers a substantial amount of protective padding.



Helmets and Facemasks

Helmets and facemasks are designed to protect the head and face.

Helmets come in many different sizes for different sized heads. Thus, some large helmets weigh more than small ones. In fact, one player, Steve Wallace, offensive lineman of the San Francisco 49ers, wore a *cap* on top of his helmet. The cap is essentially like the bumper on a car—it sticks up a little bit higher and helps absorb the shock.

All helmets come with a facemask, which is a bar or a series of solid plastic bars that act like a rollbar for the face. They protect the face from pokes and hits and damage that comes from falling on your face.

I wore a single-bar facemask specifically because it helped me to see better. No quarterbacks wear them anymore. I was probably the last one to be stupid enough to wear one. If I were playing now, I'd still want to wear a single bar, but the league has since outlawed it—except for kickers.

Shoulder Pads, Hip Pads, Knee Pads, and More

This is basic science. Shoulder pads are worn to protect the shoulders. Hip pads are worn to protect the hips. Knee pads are worn to protect the knees. Guess what the elbow pads protect? Very good. See, you're no idiot!

All the pads simply protect the various body parts from the ferocious blows that are delivered in football. The idea is to make it a game about the power of muscle, not the ability of the body to absorb *everything*.



Joe's Record Book

Aaron Gibson, right tackle with the Detroit Lions, wears the largest helmet in the NFL. His $8\frac{3}{8}$ stretched helmet is the largest helmet ever manufactured by Riddell.

Flak Jacket for the Ribs

A few types of players that you'll learn more about later in this chapter—quarterbacks, running backs, and wide receivers—sometimes wear flak jackets. A flak jacket looks like a vest and protects the ribs. Flak jackets don't interfere with mobility, but some guys still don't like them. Sometimes running backs don't like to wear them because they can't feel the football next to their body as they run.

It's Gotta Be the Shoes

Players wear different types of shoes for different types of playing surfaces.

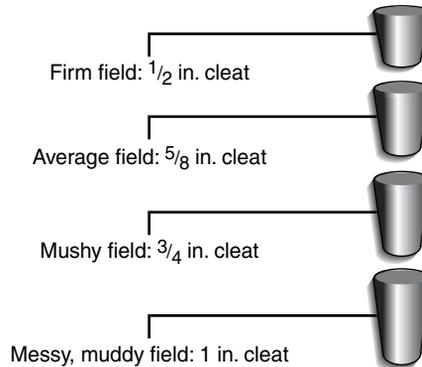
On a grass field that is wet, you need to dig in more, so you wear a longer cleat. (The term *cleats* refers both to the blunted spikes added to the bottoms of shoes for traction and to shoes that have actual cleats.) On a dry grass field, you still want some "dig," so you wear a cleat, but not as long.

On artificial turf, though, you wear something akin to a basketball shoe; you don't need cleats for extra traction because the surface is already "sticky," as I explained in Chapter 2, "Looking at the Field and the Ball." On outdoor artificial turf, you could also wear a shoe that has rubber nub cleats on the bottom for a little bit more traction.

And, depending on the condition of the grass field, you could change the length of the cleat as the game progresses. Normally, you go out during warmups and try out different shoes. In cold-weather games, if the field has just been uncovered, you are able to dig your spikes in, but then, as the game goes on and the field starts to freeze, you may want to consider changing spikes to give you better traction.

The following illustration shows some typical cleat sizes NFL players choose from for playing on grass fields in different conditions.

Cleats give players better traction in varying conditions.



Joe's Record Book

Players cannot wear any piece of clothing with a logo or personal message on it. Jim McMahon, the irreverent quarterback of the Chicago Bears during that team's 1985 Super Bowl run, didn't like the rule. So to protest commissioner Pete Rozelle's enforcement of the rule, McMahon wore a headband with the word "Rozelle" written on it during the Super Bowl. Rozelle thought it was funny.

Jerseys, Pants, and Socks

There is great uniformity to the clothes players wear when they play. (That's probably why it's called a uniform.)

There are several specific rules that pertain to the uniform. Here are a few:

- The jersey must be tucked in at the waist.
- Towels can only be eight inches long and six inches wide and must be tucked into the front waist of the pants.
- The exterior sock must be one piece, solid white from the top of the shoe to no higher than midpoint of the lower leg.
- The sleeves cannot be torn or cut.
- The uniform pants must meet the socks below the knee.
- Tape used on shoes or socks must be either transparent or a color matching the team uniform.

The clothes that players wear are governed very closely by the NFL. If a jersey isn't tucked into the pants, the NFL will fine a player. The NFL is such a stickler for detail that it even governs the color of tape players can use on their socks. If the tape doesn't match the color of the uniform, the NFL will fine the player.

Offensive and defensive linemen (the guys who line up opposite each other at the beginning of a play—you'll learn about them shortly) often wear jerseys that are skin-tight, and the players need help getting them on and off. Because linemen are allowed to grab a jersey in certain instances during the game, the players want to give as little to grab as possible. Some guys have even been known to use a silicon spray on their jerseys to make them harder to grab. It's like putting Pam on a skillet before you cook—no stick, just slick.



Joe's Tips

Who is where and when? Through the course of a game, there is a lot of substitution. It takes great coordination to get every player to know where he is supposed to be on every play. Some guys play on some plays, some guys play on others, some guys play on all in the same position, and some guys play on all in different positions. As simple as it sounds, there is great choreography in that 11-man show.

Always Eleven on a Side

Okay, the players all wear uniforms and protective equipment. But what do they all *do*?

To start with, there are always exactly 11 players on the field for each team: 22 in all. If your team has more than 11 players on the field, your team gets a *penalty*, which is the formal name for a violation of the rules, and you're charged five yards. That means that if your team has possession of the ball, you're pushed back five yards and have to travel that extra five yards to make a first down. If your team doesn't have the ball, it means that the opposing team will have five fewer yards to travel to make the first down.

If your team has fewer than 11 players on the field, it isn't a penalty, but it is a competitive disadvantage—a big competitive disadvantage. (Ironically enough, Tony Dorsett of the Dallas Cowboys set the record for the longest run from scrimmage—99 yards—against Minnesota when Dallas had only 10 men on the field.)

The Offense

The 11 guys that have possession of the ball are called the *offense*. The offense's job is to try to score points. On the way to scoring points, the offense tries to move the ball at least 10 yards every four plays to keep making first downs and retain possession of the ball.

Generally, the offense consists of the following:

- Five offensive linemen
- One quarterback
- Two running backs
- One tight end
- Two wide receivers

Other than the quarterback and offensive linemen, there is a great deal of flexibility in how the offense lines up. For instance, instead of the preceding configuration, the offense could have no tight end, only one running back, and four wide receivers. A team would employ this alignment if it needed to throw a pass. Regardless of who is lined up where, the offense must always have only 11 players on each and every play.

One rule that you should be aware of is that the offense must have at least seven players lined up on the line of scrimmage (LOS). In other words, no more than four players can line up behind it.

Here's a quick review of how the offensive players line up and what each player's job is:

- *Offensive linemen* line up in front of the quarterback. There is a *center*, who snaps the ball from between his legs to the quarterback. Two *guards* line up on either side of the center. There are also two *tackles*, who line up on the outside of the guards. All five linemen are responsible for blocking defenders from getting to the man with the ball, creating running lanes for the man carrying the ball, or creating throwing lanes for the man throwing the ball.
- *Quarterbacks* call the signals and take the snap from the center. Their primary job is to throw the ball, hand off, and provide leadership.
- *Running backs* usually line up behind the quarterback. Their primary job is to take the ball from the quarterback and run with it as far toward the goal as possible.
- *Tight ends* line up next to one of the offensive tackles. Their job is two-fold—to block like a lineman and to catch passes like a receiver.
- *Wide receivers* line up on the line of scrimmage, to the right or left, away from the offensive line. Their job is primarily to catch passes thrown by the quarterback, but they also block on running plays.

The chapters in Part 2, “Learning the Offense and the Penalties,” provide a more detailed look at the various players on the offense.



Joe's Rules

Players cannot just pick their favorite number to put on their jersey. As with the rest of football, there are rules governing what number they can wear:

Positions	Numbers
Quarterbacks, punters, and placekickers	1 to 19
Wide receivers (if 80 to 89 are taken)	10 to 19
Running backs and defensive backs	20 to 49
Centers	50 to 59
Centers (if 50 to 59 are taken)	60 to 69
Offensive guards and tackles	60 to 79
Wide receivers and tight ends	80 to 89
Defensive linemen	60 to 79
Defensive linemen (if 60 to 79 are taken)	90 to 99
Linebackers	50 to 59
Linebackers (if 50 to 59 are taken)	90 to 99

The Defense

The 11 guys who try to stop the offense from scoring points are called the *defense*. On every play, the defense lines up across from the offense on the other side of the line of scrimmage and tries to stop the ball carrier by tackling him.

Generally speaking, the defense consists of the following:

- Four linemen
- Three linebackers
- Four secondary players (also called defensive backs)

Take a look at how the defensive players line up and what each player does:

- The *defensive linemen* line up directly across from the offensive line. There are usually four defensive linemen—two *tackles* in the middle and two *ends* on the outside of the tackles. The linemen are responsible for stopping the run and getting to the quarterback.
- *Linebackers* are the most athletic players on the field. They line up a few yards behind the line. Their job is to sometimes stop runs, sometimes rush the quarterback, and sometimes defend against passes.
- The *secondary* consists of two *cornerbacks*, who cover wide receivers, and two *safeties*, who help out on coverage where needed.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **rush** is the action that occurs when defenders try to get to the quarterback. Defenders **cover** receivers by trying to stay with them and prevent them from catching passes.

Of course, just like the offense, the defensive configuration can vary quite a bit. In fact, it's almost as common to see three linemen and four linebackers as the other way around. And on passing plays, teams may take out a linebacker or defensive lineman and replace him with an extra player in the secondary. It all depends on how a team wants to play.

If you want to learn more about the players on the defense, skip ahead to Part 3, "Learning the Defense and Special Teams."



Joe's Record Book

Who makes the most money? Quarterbacks, of course. In 2000, 6 of the top 10 highest-paid players were quarterbacks. Drew Bledsoe, quarterback of the New England Patriots, was the top 2000 money man, earning \$8.54 million.

Skill Players

As you can probably tell by now, there are many different names and labels in the game of football. One of the more misleading may be the term *skill player*, which simply refers to players who handle the football.

The truth is that every player in the game of football is a skill player. In fact, the position of offensive line, which is naively thought by some to be a position of mere brute force and no skill, is in fact one of the most difficult positions in all of football to learn.

On offense, skill players include running backs, quarterbacks, and receivers.

On defense, the skill players are the players in the secondary, because they are the ones who are in a position to intercept passes and get their hands on the ball.

The Trenches

Think of the term *trench warfare*, and you'll get a sense of what the announcer means when he talks of the trenches in football. The trenches are where the big guys do battle—where the offensive line battles the defensive line. Say this: *"If we win the battle in the trenches, we'll be in good shape."* There is much truth to that statement, so say it often.

A big part of the offensive line's job is to create holes for ball carriers to run through and passing lanes for the quarterback to throw through. The offensive line must also protect the quarterback so he can safely deliver the ball before being tackled.

Conversely, the defensive line wants to get to the quarterback, or free up holes for the linebackers to blast through. Simply put, if your big guys are able to push their big guys around, your skill guys have a chance to show off their skills. If not, forget it.

Special Teams

Special teams handle any play that does not involve the offense or defense. But many of the players on the various special teams play offense or defense as well. (Chapter 19, "Special Teams Really Are Special," covers special teams in more detail.)

Special teams play during the following:

- Kickoffs
- Punts
- Field goals
- Extra points
- Two-point conversions (Offense may also be involved in these.)

In these plays, both sides put out a group of 11 players. No matter what side of the play they are on, each group of players is called a special team. About one third of the game involves special teams. These plays are just as important as those involving offense and defense. Good teams realize this and work hard to have competitive special teams.



Joe's Record Book

In the 1997 Super Bowl, Desmond Howard of the Green Bay Packers won the Most Valuable Player Award as a special teams player. Howard finished with 244 return yards, including returning 4 kickoffs for 154 yards and 6 punts for another 90 yards. The big one, though, was a 99-yard kickoff return that came on the heels of a New England Patriots touchdown.



Joe's Rules

Special teams have the potential to create some of the most exciting plays in football. However, in recent years, as kickers have gotten stronger, kickoffs were often going into the end zone and not being returned. The NFL remedied that in 1994 by moving the kickoff back 5 yards, from the 35-yard line to the 30.

Besides the kicker, there are two positions on special teams that are extra special: the kick returner and the punt returner. These two players, specialists on punts and kick-offs, receive kicks and run them back. They must be quick and elusive.

The importance of special teams, besides being involved in one third of all plays, is that they often dictate *field position*—where you start when you get the ball. If your special teams are good, you'll end up with better field position on offense, and you'll give the other team bad field position when you go on defense. There's a lot of truth in the simple idea that the farther a team is away from scoring, the harder it is to score.

Kickers Are Different

There are two types of kickers: punters and place kickers. Both are part of special teams and both kick the ball, although they do it in different ways.

Place kickers are responsible for kickoffs, extra points, and field goals. For kickoffs, they kick off of a tee (see Chapter 3, “You Get Six Points to Do What?”). For field goals and extra points, another player positions the ball on the ground, and the place kicker kicks it from there. Kickers are not allowed to use a tee when kicking field goals or extra points.

When punters kick a punt, it's called *punting the ball*. In a punt, the ball is snapped back to the punter, who drop-kicks it to the other end of the field.

Football is probably the ultimate team game, yet kickers and punters are in their own little world. In many ways, kickers and punters are like tennis players, golfers, bowlers, and other athletes who compete in individual sports. In this emotional game, their job is nonemotional. They must stay steady and not get frazzled. Although they rely on coordination from others, their job is very individualistic. They rely on themselves.

Rookies and Veterans

A first-year player is called a *rookie*. A player who has played a year or more is a *veteran*. There is more of a difference between rookies and veterans than you may at first imagine.

Rookies come into the league having usually been a superstar at the previous level, college, and suddenly find that everyone they play against has out-of-this-world skills. (Plus, they learn that the rules in pro football differ a bit from college football.) I look at it this way: The jump from Pop Warner (or Pee Wee, or any of the other names for little league football) to high school is a big jump. The jump from high school to college is a bigger jump. But the jump in talent level from college to the pros is the biggest by far. The talent level in the pros is so high that it takes even the best rookies a little while to get acclimated.

There are, of course, exceptions to every rule. Dan Marino, the great Miami Dolphins quarterback, had great success in his first year. Many players take years to become successful, however. Still, the NFL pays young players so much money now that they often feel pressure to leave college and start playing earlier than perhaps they should. Often, these young players do find success.

But there is one position that just takes longer than the others to learn—quarterback. Generally, there is a four-year rule for quarterbacks. The first year, he learns his team's offense. The second year, he learns the opposing defenses. The third year, he learns how to use his offense against opposing defenses. By the fourth year, he should be ready to perform at the most competitive levels. For example, Troy Aikman of the Dallas Cowboys won the Super Bowl in his fourth year. And Drew Bledsoe of the New England Patriots took his team to the Super Bowl in his fourth year.

The Least You Need to Know

- Uniforms must be worn exactly as mandated by the NFL or else the league will fine players.
- The offense is the team that has possession of the ball.
- The defense is the team that does not have the ball and tries to keep the offense from scoring.
- Special teams handle about a third of the plays, including kickoffs and extra points, and usually involve kickers.
- The term “skill players” refers to those who handle the football.
- During a player's first, or rookie, year, he has a lot to learn to play successfully with the best players in the world.



Coaching: Win, Get Fired, or Go on TV

In This Chapter

- Strategies and playing head games with other coaches
- Motivating players
- How different philosophies can succeed or fail

Coaching is one of the most brutal professions in the world. There are a lot of ways to do it, but it almost always results in an ulcer. You see, football is a bottom-line business. All businesses are, but this one is exaggerated because of the public nature of the job. There are only two results: Win or move on.

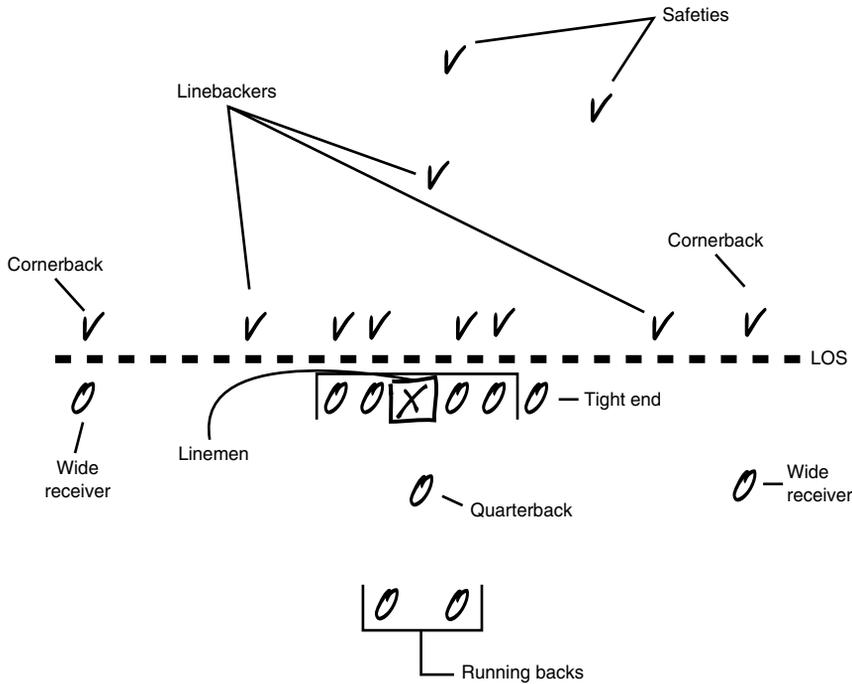
The bottom line, of course, is winning, and to win in this game of strategy, motivation, and, yes, deception, coaches have to dedicate their entire lives to the profession. What does this mean? It means what it says. Coaches don't have lives. Well, not outside of football, anyway.

There are coaches who literally live at the football facility. From July to January, they see much more of their wide receivers than they do of their wives. They breathe game film, dream of offensive and defensive schemes, and recite speeches in the shower. Coaches in the NFL, despite the glamour, lead quite unglamorous lives.

This chapter is about this most grueling of professions. It is about how coaches design game plans and motivate players. Coaching is not a one-man show, and this chapter examines how coaches rely on assistant coaches for help. It also looks at the different philosophies that work and how a team takes on the personality of its coach. (And if you knew some of the NFL's coaches, that's a scary thought.)

X's (or V's) and O's

Part of the job of a coach is to design a strategy for running the football game. This is called dealing with the *X's and O's*, because when coaches draw up plays on a chalkboard, they usually use an O to designate offensive players and an X or a V to designate defensive players. Some coaches get creative and use the O to designate defense and the X or V to designate offense, but you get the idea. They draw up plays.



The standard offensive/defensive setup serves as the basis for plays created by coaches.

From this standard setup, coaches then can dream up any number of plays by drawing arrows showing where the players should go. If the standard setup looks like a sort of chess match, that's because that's exactly what it is—a matchup of wits between two generals who command comparably equipped armies.

But drawing up plays is not the primary job of the coach by any means. In fact, coaches are responsible for creating a much more complex process known as a *game plan*. The game plan is the approach that a team takes to an entire game (a plan of attack). The coach may also want to develop a detailed list of the first several plays for the game. This is called *scripting the plays*.



Joe's Record Book

How much does a coach mean to a team's success? In 1997, the New York Jets, in a complicated negotiation, hired Bill Parcells, who had been coach of the New England Patriots. To get him, the Jets gave the Patriots the rights to pick four college players in the future. Was he worth it? The Jets thought so: Parcells had won two championships with the New York Giants.

Coaches try to cover every possible scenario and situation that can occur in a game. It isn't just a matter of figuring out which plays to call, but when. It's a psychological war with the other coach.

Coaches are always thinking about different situations. Which plays should they run on first down and 10 yards to go? Which plays to run on second down and seven yards to go? Second down and 10? Second and more than 10? For every situation, there is a standard strategy and a lot of options. The options are almost unlimited. Plays on third down and short will be different than plays on third down and 12.

It gets trickier. You see, all coaches know the standard type of plays that teams run in various situations. So they try to outthink the other team.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The San Francisco 49ers under former coach Bill Walsh began every game by knowing which 15 plays the team wanted to run first. This was known as **scripting the plays**. Walsh's idea was to have his players think about how they would attack the other team and then make changes as the game warranted. It was quite successful. Walsh won three Super Bowls, and now many teams script their opening plays.

Follow this line of thinking and you'll get an idea of how a coach's thought process goes: He thinks, *I'm going to do ABC. But I know that the opposing coach thinks I'm going to do ABC, so I'm going to do XYZ instead. But wait, he probably also knows that I know that he thinks I'm going to ABC, so he is probably expecting XYZ. So, maybe, I really will do 123. Or, maybe, I'll do something else entirely.* Sometimes coaches outthink themselves. (Maybe he should have just gone with ABC.)

Got it? See, it's a head game, a battle of wits, a chess match. And the good coaches are always a few steps ahead of the others in thinking what the other guy is thinking.

Film Study

If you watch a movie more than once, you'll see things you didn't see the first time. You see nuances, things placed in the background for subtle effects. You have the same experience when you repeatedly watch film of a football team.

A coach spends a great deal of his time studying film to learn about his own team's tendencies—and more important, about the tendencies of future opponents. A coach knows that football players are creatures of habit, so he studies game film to learn what those habits are. Then, the coach can teach his team to watch for those little habits that the opponent has and take advantage of that knowledge.

First, the coach is looking for how a team reacts to different formations. Then he looks to find a matchup that can give him an advantage.

For instance, some young offensive linemen might have a tendency to raise their rear up a little bit higher when they're going to be blocking for a run than they do if they're going to be blocking for a pass. Now, if a defensive lineman knows who has this habit, he can often read what play is coming before the snap. Little things such as this give teams a big advantage.



Joe's Tips

Some offenses are much more complex than others. Some teams have more than 500 different plays in their offense. Other teams only prepare 50 different offensive plays. Knowing more plays does not necessarily make an offense more successful.

Here are a few other things they look for:

- If the quarterback walks slowly from the huddle to the LOS, it usually means a quick count, meaning that as soon as he gets under the center, the center will snap the ball on the first sound out of the quarterback's mouth.
- If the quarterback is in a "shotgun," a formation in which he is five yards behind the LOS, when he raises his foot you can count to two and that's when the ball will be snapped. This is used in stadiums where the noise level from the spectators is such that the center can't hear the quarterback calling signals.

- If a cornerback has his feet parallel, it's usually going to be man-to-man coverage because he is squared up on the receiver. If he's up on the receiver and his feet are staggered, it usually means he's going to back out and play zone. (For more on man-to-man and zone coverage, see Chapter 16, "The Secondary: The Last Best Hope.")
- If the tight end is "flexed," which means he is not next to the offensive tackle, but "split" three to five yards away, it usually means the offense wants to throw the football.

In recent years, technology has changed film work significantly, making it easier to find and study specific plays. In the old days of mere film or videotape, coaches spent a lot of time rewinding or fast-forwarding. Now, computer technology enables coaches to zip right to a specific play in any game film.

Motivation

As you learned in Chapter 1, "So You Want to Be a Monday Morning Quarterback," football is a very emotional game. It really is 85 percent mental and 15 percent physical. Although coaches obviously must spend time working with players to improve physical skills, their real job is to prepare the players mentally.

Motivation is such an important factor in football that the pregame speech is often the stuff of lore. The coach's job is much more than to just get the players to know what to do on the field. It's to get the players excited to do it. The coach needs to rev up their energy levels and to push their players to the utmost. Coaches are responsible for getting their players ready to play.



Joe's Record Book

Perhaps the greatest motivator of all time was Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers. Lombardi once said, "Coaches who can outline plays on a blackboard are a dime a dozen. The ones who win get inside their players' heads and motivate." Packer tackle Henry Jordan once said of Lombardi, "He's fair. He treats us all the same—like dogs."

So, how does a coach motivate? Well, any number of ways. No one method works for every player. Some players need to be kicked in the butt. Some need to be stroked and coddled. Each method could backfire if used on the wrong player. Coaches, to some extent, are like child psychologists, dealing with a variety of maturity and intelligence levels.

In Jacksonville, Tom Coughlin is known as a disciplinarian. Many players complained about his methods, but the team was successful, making it to the AFC championship game in his second year with the team.

In Minnesota, Bud Grant and, later, Jerry Burns were much more relaxed. For a while, both coaches had great success. They would bring players into training camp only one week before the first preseason game. Other coaches had their players in three weeks before the first preseason game.

So what works? Well, both styles work, and both don't, too. It depends on the players that coaches select to be on their team. They aren't like relatives. You aren't stuck with them. If there are some that don't buy into your program, you can get rid of them.



Joe's Tips

A coach's relationship to the media does not have much to do with winning; it has a lot to do with ticket sales. However, if you listen closely, you will hear motivational clues. For instance, in preseason, a coach may say that one player has had a "good week of work." The other players may read this to mean that they better work harder.

When I first joined the NFL, I was primarily a punt returner playing for George Allen, coach of the Washington Redskins. One week I was hurt. I had a bad thigh bruise. The coach came to me, on the trainer's table, and asked if I could play that week against the Green Bay Packers. I said, "I don't know, coach." Allen didn't say a word. He just looked at me like he was disappointed. He knew how to get to me, and it worked. I dressed for the game and returned punts.

Every coach has a different way of doing things, just as every parent has a different way of doing things. When I was in high school, most of my friends didn't have to be home until 11 P.M. I had to be home by 10 P.M. That didn't make my parents, or my friend's parents, bad. It just meant that they had different methods. It's the same in coaching: No one method is right. Different methods work on different players in different situations.

Here are some examples of the ways coaches motivate. They might offer defensive players \$50 for a sack, \$100 for an interception. If the coaches think you were the player of the game, you might win a television. One of my favorites is the free dinner. When the offensive line doesn't give up a sack, the offensive line coach takes them all out to dinner. Now think about this. How would you like to pay for seven 300-pound guys having dinner? If you're a quarterback or a line coach, it would be your pleasure.

Beyond individual motivation, coaches also must motivate players on a group basis. Remember, this is the ultimate team game. Some players motivate themselves. Some players have a great degree of pride and get their minds to work to accomplish great things. But even a great player who is motivated can only accomplish a limited amount of success without the full support of his teammates.

Coordinators and What They Coordinate

In some ways, the head coach does not appear as important as his assistants, but he is. He is really a head administrator.

Each team has an offensive coordinator and a defensive coordinator. There is also a coordinator of special teams. Each of these assistant coaches, the coordinators, is in charge of a specific unit. For example, the offensive coordinator is in charge of the offense.

Head coaches are involved in every aspect of the team, but coordinators are specialists. The game has become so complex that it's impossible for the head coach to know everything about everything. There just isn't enough time in the day. There are some who contend that one of the primary jobs of a head coach is to hire good coordinators. Good coordinators can, in fact, make or break a team, and quite often do.

Coordinators, in many ways, have the same role as the head coach—except it is reduced to their specialty. They still draw up schemes. They study the personnel of their team and the opposition. And, yes, they motivate. The coordinators spend more time with their players than the head coach can because, obviously, the head coach is in charge of all the players.

During game time, a coordinator can be on the sideline or up in the pressbox. Some coaches feel more comfortable upstairs where they can see an overview of what's going on. Other coaches want to be down on the field with their players where they can look them in the eyes. In either case, the



Joe's Record Book

When the Chicago Bears defeated the New England Patriots 46–10 in Super Bowl XX, the Bears head coach Mike Ditka was carried off the field. The Bears defense also carried defensive coordinator Buddy Ryan off the field. It was the only time in Super Bowl history that a team carried a coordinator off the field.



Joe's Record Book

In 1998, when Brian Billick was the offensive coordinator in Minnesota, the Vikings were the highest-scoring team of all time. But Brian adjusted his talent in Baltimore where, as head coach, his Ravens defense gave up the fewest points of all time and wound up winning Super Bowl XXXV.

coach does not have a lot of time for one-on-one contact with the players. But, both can get that if they need it. How can a coach in a pressbox get one-on-one contact with a player? Simple. They use the telephone. Or, in the case of the quarterback on the field, he receives radio communication from his coach right into his helmet. One other tool that teams use are photographs taken of actual plays during the game. The idea is to see what the other team did in the series before.



Joe's Record Book

When Pete Carroll was the defensive coordinator of the New York Jets, a stuffed beaver was given to the player who made a play that led to a fumble. The beaver, described by many as "the hardest working animal in the animal kingdom," symbolized a great play. Despite playing for millions of dollars, players took great pride in having possession of the beaver for a week.

Besides the coordinators, there are coaches who are in charge of specific positions. There are, for instance, linebacker coaches, secondary coaches, and defensive line coaches on defense. These coaches also teach schemes and use motivational techniques. But the major job of position coaches is to teach players how to do the job.

In addition to the head coach, coordinators, and position coaches, there are strength coaches, trainers, psychologists, equipment managers, and even secretaries who contribute to the success of the team. Like the administration of a large company, the makeup of a football administration is quite complex.

The Progression from Position Coach to TV Personality

There is a hierarchy in coaching that extends *beyond* the coaching ranks. In this hierarchy, position coaches hope to rise to coordinator, and coordinators hope to rise to head coach. It's a logical progression. Head coaches are usually successful coordinators who rise up to the top job. Some are successful college coaches, and some are previously successful coaches who had retired for a while to go on television as an analyst.

At the end of the gig, when head coaches leave the job, they often either go on TV to become analysts or go back to being coordinators. This often depends on whether they retired as winners or were fired. It also depends on their personalities.

Successful coordinators who don't win as head coaches are still capable of going back to being successful coordinators. The jobs are different. But those who win as head coaches and then retire get to go to the broadcast booth. Some who weren't winners but have charisma have also been hired into the booth. And in the booth, life is different.

Remember, the stress to be a successful NFL head coach is enormous. This is not the kind of job that is very good for anyone's mental health, but certain types of individuals can thrive—at least for a while. But usually, within 10 years, coaches get burned out. I mean, they get really cooked. So sometimes, even successful coaches need to get away from their football teams. That's when some coaches move on to TV.

Up in the booth, as an analyst, a coach gets something he never gets on the sidelines—perspective. Plus, he can relax away from the stress of running everything. Although the burning desire to win is still there, the pilot light has gone down to low and they need to rejuvenate. And, after a while, these folks who used to run everything find that not being in charge is not as comfortable for them as they thought it would be. They're at someone else's mercy, and they don't like it as much.

And they still need a challenge. So, when an owner desperate to create a winner calls and offers a boatload of money, coaches do what they do—they coach. The door from the sidelines to the TV booth is now a revolving door.



Joe's Tips

In the past, when a coordinator rose to take a head coaching job, he would become that team's coordinator (on offense or defense) as well. Now, coaches are seeing the value in hiring a coordinator so that they can concentrate on the big picture. They also realize that there isn't enough time to do everything.

The Various Philosophies of a Blue-Collar Game

There are a lot of ways to focus a team. Sure, as you know, there are always 11 players on a side, so the ways are not infinite. But there are various philosophies that have worked to create successful teams. In fact, these same philosophies have also failed.

Clearly, there is no one right way. But there are ways.

For instance, on offense, there is the *grind-it-out offense* that attempts to run the ball over and over again until it wears down the opposition's defense. This philosophy relies on a powerful running game (and running backs). The justification of this philosophy is that a running game takes up time on the clock because the clock does not

stop between plays. If you remember, a pass play that is incomplete (and about 50 percent of pass plays are incomplete) means the clock automatically stops.

Now, if a team is winning and wants the game to end, grinding the ball into the other team's gut has great appeal because you can run the clock down and keep the other team from getting another opportunity to score. When I played for the Washington Redskins, we had one of the greatest power runners in the history of the game—John Riggins. We would grind it out by giving the ball to John, and he would run behind our huge offensive line we affectionately called “The Hogs.” And, believe me, John made my job as quarterback a lot easier. I have a Super Bowl championship ring to prove it.

In recent years, a new philosophy has come into vogue—the *West-Coast offense*. This philosophy, first brought to the forefront by Coach Bill Walsh of the San Francisco 49ers (it started in San Francisco, thus the name) relies on using short, quick passes to serve the same purpose as running plays in the grind-it-out offense. The Green Bay Packers won Super Bowl XXXI using this philosophy.



Joe's Tips

Count how many passes versus runs that a coach calls in a game. If a team is throwing the ball a lot, the score will probably be high. If the team is running a lot, the score will probably be low.

In addition, there have been teams that have almost eliminated the running game and have gone with something called the *run-and-shoot offense*, in which a team uses four wide receivers, one running back, and no tight end. This is an offense in which a great majority of the plays are passes. Although it's similar in philosophy to the West-Coast offense, the run-and-shoot relies even more on the pass. No team using the run-and-shoot offense philosophy has won the Super Bowl. However, the West-Coast offense has won quite a few in recent years.

Finally, there is the *air-attack offense* in which a coaching staff is so confident in its quarterback and wide receivers that they're willing to go for much longer and riskier passes than normally employed by either the West-Coast offense or the run-and-shoot. The most famous proponent of the air-attack offense was Don Coryell, who coached the San Diego Chargers in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Coryell had Dan Fouts as his quarterback and he let Fouts wing it to a set of great receivers, including tight end Kellen Winslow, and wide receivers Wes Chandler, John (J. J.) Jefferson, and Charlie Joiner. Although the Chargers never won a Super Bowl, they were one of the most exciting teams of the era and went to the AFC Championship game in 1981.

Almost two decades later, an air-attack offense led by Kurt Warner did win a world championship for the St. Louis Rams. This again started defensive coaches scurrying to find spots on the roster for at least one more defensive back to cover all the fleet-footed receivers.

The average length of passes attempted in the various styles of offense are as follows:

- West-Coast: 7 to 10 yards
- Run-and-shoot: 7 to 15 yards
- Air-attack: 15 to 25 yards

On defense, there are also various philosophies. Some teams are more aggressive than others. Some attack, some react. Again, there is no one style that always works.

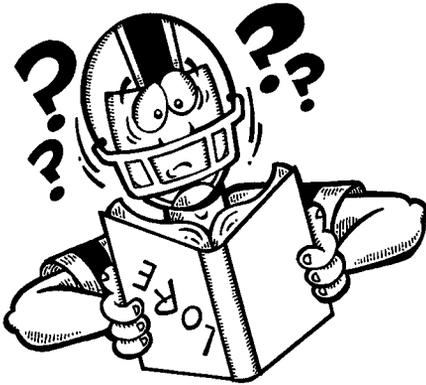
The Personality of the Coach and the Team

Teams tend to take on the personality of their coach. A fiery coach will usually have a highly emotional team, whereas a more restrained coach may have a more machine-like team.

Despite the fact that football is an emotional game, it does not require an emotional coach. One of the greatest coaches in the history of the game was Tom Landry, who coached the Dallas Cowboys. Some accused Landry of coaching “a precise, mechanical brand of football that is so efficient it is boring.” Landry didn’t care what others said. He believed in efficiency. “A team that has character doesn’t need stimulation,” he said.

The Least You Need to Know

- Coaching requires absolute dedication. Coaches seldom have lives outside of football.
- Coaches motivate in many different ways; no one way is guaranteed to be successful.
- Teams tend to take on the personality of their coach. A defensive-minded head coach will probably be more concerned with stopping a team from scoring, whereas an offensive-minded coach thinks just the opposite.
- Coordinators on offense and defense draw up the play-by-play plans.
- Teams rely a great deal on film study in order to learn what their opponents tend to do in games.



Understanding the Lore

In This Chapter

- How football began
- How football evolved
- Names and games you should know

“Once upon a time in a place called America ...”

That phrase evokes the essence of football. From the very first collegiate soccer game on November 3, 1869, when the roots of football first started to grow, the game has taken on storybook proportions.

There is a legacy to football. It has been passed down by word of mouth, newspaper clippings, and, in recent decades, television. Ah, television. The game of football was made for television. That magic, flickering box has been a showcase for drama, comedy, news, and sports since it was born. But just as football was made for television, television was made for football, because football is a sport full of drama, comedy, and news.

The story of football is rich. This chapter is about that history—the names, the games, the lore, the scores. The texture of the game is deep and multi-faceted. There are more than 100 years of history. You can’t learn it all right here, but there are aspects of the history that every fan should know.

Try this experiment: Walk into a sports bar and say, “Excuse me, who is Joe Namath?”

When you do this, be sure to be carrying this book, because someone is liable to say, “What are you, an idiot?” And you can say, “Not anymore.”

This chapter will teach you about Joe Namath and more. Here, briefly, is the story of football and the NFL starting with the game's defining moment.



Joe's Record Book

The NFL underwent a metamorphosis in the late 1960s. Prior to merging with the AFL, the NFL did not have two conferences. NFL teams played each other in a championship game. The Super Bowl championship originally was not the NFL championship.



Joe's Record Book

The first Super Bowl was not called a Super Bowl. It was called the AFL–NFL World Championship Game. In the 1960s, there was another professional league, called the American Football League—the AFL. On January 15, 1967, the Green Bay Packers, NFL champions, beat the Kansas City Chiefs, AFL champions, 35–10. Only later did the game become known as Super Bowl I.

The Frozen Tundra of Lambeau Field

Every American should know that George Washington and his troops endured bitter cold at Valley Forge in order to defeat the invading British army. Every football fan should know that Bart Starr and his Green Bay Packer teammates endured bitter cold at Lambeau Field in order to defeat the invading Dallas Cowboys.

These two heroic stories obviously don't compare, except that I just compared them. See, football is what you make it, and the NFL has made football into *folklore*. Remember these words: ... *the frozen tundra of Lambeau Field* ... Now say them with a deep, theatrical baritone and imagine those two football teams playing on December 31, 1967, as the temperature fell to 13 degrees below 0 with a windchill factor of 50 below. Say the words to yourself, *13 below 0*, and imagine the two teams, the Green Bay Packers and the Dallas Cowboys, staring each other down with the NFL championship on the line. The winner would go on to Super Bowl II.

With 16 seconds left on the clock, the Packers were on Dallas's 1-yard line, trailing Dallas 17–14 and 1 yard away from scoring. Two plays in a row, the Packers tried to run, and on both plays their running back slipped. It came down to one play.

One play.

One.

On the frozen tundra of Lambeau Field.

Bart Starr, quarterback of the Packers, walked to the line and across from him stood Bob Lilly and Jethro Pugh and the rest of the Dallas Cowboys's defense. It was the coldest day in NFL history. Brutal. It was a mean kind of cold, and these two lines of large men stood facing each other. Steam poured from their face-masks. Like animals that were exhausted and angry,

they dug in. The green-and-gold of the Packers face to face against the silver-and-blue of the Cowboys. Both sides dug in for the fight, laying it all out for everyone to see. One last time. For one play. One final burst. Just one ... *on the frozen tundra*

Starr took the ball and, instead of handing off as expected, he was bold. He put his faith in one man, Jerry Kramer, his right guard, who caught Jethro Pugh with a block just right, so Starr could follow Kramer into the end zone. It was power versus power—old-time football. John Facenda, the longtime voice of NFL Films, later captured the moment in that phrase because, as Facenda told it in his greatest baritone, the drama unfolded—you know where this is going—*on the frozen tundra of Lambeau Field*.

The Packers went on to win Super Bowl II, 33–14 over the Oakland Raiders.

How It Began

Football began as collegiate soccer in 1869 and then evolved into rugby. The game started changing into football when a Yale student named Walter Camp became involved. In 1876, he wrote the first rules for football. Camp, who later ran a clock factory, invented the first scoring system, and he invented the line of scrimmage (LOS), which is where a play starts.

In 1892, William (Pudge) Hefflinger earned \$500 to play a game for the Allegheny Athletic Association and became the first professional football player.



Joe's Rules

In 1906, the forward pass, where the quarterback throws the ball to a receiver down field, was legalized. George (Peggy) Parratt of Massillon threw the first pass completion to Dan (Bullet) Riley.

How It Evolved

The game that Camp invented was still a kicking game. Teams originally received more points for field goals than they did for touchdowns. In 1909, a field goal dropped from four points to three. In 1912, the touchdown became worth six points.

From there, there is so much history that I will only briefly touch on many names and places.

Jim Thorpe was the first superstar football player. He was a former football and track star at Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. He was a double gold-medal winner at the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm. If you ever visit the Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio (and you should—it's great), you'll see Thorpe's statue in the entranceway. Thorpe played for the Canton Bulldogs and is said to have possessed astonishing talent.

I didn't see him play. Neither will you. That was a long time ago, but his is a name from the lore that you absolutely must know.

In 1919, Earl (Curley) Lambeau formed the Green Bay Packers with \$500 he borrowed from his employer, the Indian Packing Company. In 1921, player-coach George Halas took over the Decatur Staleys and moved them to Chicago. A year later, they became known as the Bears. These are the two oldest original teams, and both Halas and Lambeau are legends of the game.



Joe's Record Book

On November 28, 1929, Ernie Nevers of the Chicago Cardinals scored 40 points, which is still the record for the most points scored by one player in a single game, against the Chicago Bears. He scored six touchdowns and kicked four extra points.



Joe's Record Book

There have been four different American Football Leagues during the past decades. None exist now. The first AFL folded in 1926. A second AFL existed for two years, 1936 and 1937, and a third was formed in 1940 and folded two years later. The fourth AFL was born in 1960, and it merged with the NFL in 1969.

There had been more than one league and many league names, but on June 24, 1922, the American Professional Football Association changed its name to the National Football League.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the league and the game evolved into, if not maturity, at least adolescence. There were stars like Thorpe, Red Grange, Ernie Nevers, and Halas himself. In a game in 1923, Thorpe fumbled on the two-yard line and Halas picked up the fumble and ran it 98 yards for a touchdown. It was an NFL record that stood until 1972.

Grange was the first to energize the NFL up to its potential. When he joined the Chicago Bears, attendance records were shattered. Suddenly, in New York, 73,000 people turned out to watch football. And in Los Angeles, 75,000 watched the Bears defeat the Los Angeles Tigers in the Los Angeles Coliseum.

The National Football League, which was born in the heartland—Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—began to move its base to the larger cities of the East in the late 1920s.

In 1930, a huge bulldozer of a man named Bronko Nagurski, a fullback, joined the Chicago Bears. Quarterback Sammy Baugh of the Washington Redskins was a star of the 1940s.

The 1930s and 1940s saw the NFL faced with rival leagues, including two versions of the American Football League, and then the more formidable All-America Football Conference in 1946.

The AAFC began play with eight teams. The Cleveland Browns, coached by Paul Brown, won the championship of that league four years in a row. In 1950, three teams from the AAFC—the Cleveland Browns, the San Francisco 49ers, and the Baltimore Colts—joined the NFL. In the first game of the year, the

Browns beat the NFL champion Philadelphia Eagles 35–10. The Browns won the NFL championship their first year in the NFL.

In 1951, the NFL championship game was televised nationally for the first time.

On December 28, 1958, the Baltimore Colts defeated the New York Giants by a score of 23–17 in the first championship overtime game. Although football had been televised for a few years, this was perhaps the first televised game to really capture the nation’s attention. Commissioner Bert Bell said it was the greatest game he had ever seen.

The game ended after 8 minutes and 15 seconds of overtime when Alan Ameche of the Colts scored on a 1-yard touchdown run. Colts quarterback Johnny Unitas completed all seven of his passes on a 12-play drive that led to Ameche’s run. Millions saw it on television, and the myth of the game had a new technology to feed it. The game *worked* on television. Who wasn’t moved by that game? Suddenly, people had heard of Johnny Unitas.

The 1950s featured big-time stars, such as quarterbacks Otto Graham of the Browns, Unitas of the Colts, Bobby Layne of the Detroit Lions, and running back Frank Gifford of the New York Giants.

The 1960s—You Say You Want a Revolution ...

Football in the 1960s became showtime. Television, money, pop culture, and the American Football League showed up at the same time like stars aligning in the sky, and suddenly it was a golden age for the sport.

The power behind football’s growth was its growing partnership with television. When 33-year-old Pete Rozelle took over as commissioner in 1960, one of his first priorities was to grow football on television.

In 1960, the fourth American Football League formed, and, although at the time it seemed to be



Joe’s Record Book

The most lopsided championship game in history was on December 8, 1940, when the Chicago Bears beat the Washington Redskins 73–0.



Joe’s Rules

It wasn’t until 1943 that all players were required to wear head protectors.



Joe’s Record Book

A documentary aired on CBS television in October 1960 brought new light to the allure of the NFL. It was about the middle linebacker of the New York Giants, and it was called *The Violent World of Sam Huff*.

a bad thing for the sport, the new league turned out to be a jolt of energy. From its outset, the infant league was brash. For the first few years of the AFL's existence, the two leagues didn't play each other at all. The Green Bay Packers dominated the NFL, winning five of seven championships, plus the first two Super Bowls. The Packers were the creation of Vince Lombardi, who is generally regarded as the greatest coach of all time. Lombardi, a gruff, religious man with a possessed passion to win, guided the Packers with his iron will. The Packers were a powerful football team that didn't try to fool anyone. They simply dared the other team to stop them.



Joe's Record Book

The highest-scoring game of all time was November 27, 1966, when the Washington Redskins beat the New York Giants 72–41.



Joe's Record Book

The 1960s were an era of transition for the great coaches. In 1969, Vince Lombardi left the Packers to become coach of the Washington Redskins. He died a year later of cancer. Paul Brown was fired as coach of the Browns in 1964. He emerged as coach of the new Cincinnati Bengals in 1968. In 1968, George Halas retired after 40 years of coaching the Chicago Bears.

The greatest running back of all time played in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Jim Brown of the Cleveland Browns was huge, fast, and overwhelmingly powerful. In his career, he gained an average of 5.22 yards every time he carried the ball. There were times he had three or four men hanging off of him and he would still be running down the field.

But the biggest hero of the 1960s was a man who was drafted out of the University of Alabama to play for the upstart American Football League in New York City. His name was Joe and he went to Broadway in 1965. Joe Namath of the New York Jets changed football. A number of positive circumstances were working for Namath—the country was changing, the media growing—and he took full advantage of his opportunity. A year after Namath joined the AFL, the two leagues announced an impending merger that was to take effect in 1969.

Until the official merger, the two leagues agreed to play a championship game at the end of the season between the champions of each league. That game eventually was called the Super Bowl. The first two Super Bowls were won decisively by the Green Bay Packers of the NFL. Everyone assumed it would take years for the AFL to become of equal strength with the NFL.

But then came the 1968 season. The Baltimore Colts rolled through the NFL that year, winning the NFL championship 34–0 over the Cleveland Browns. The Colts were being anointed champions before they even arrived in Miami to play Super Bowl III. Some thought the Colts were even more powerful than the great Green Bay Packers of the previous years. Bookies in Las Vegas had the Colts favored to win by 19 points. This meant that a bet on the Colts would only

win if they won by more than 19 points. (More on gambling will be covered in Chapter 25, “The Business of the Game.”) It was the largest point spread in Super Bowl history. The AFL champions, almost an afterthought, were the New York Jets, led by a brash young quarterback, Joe Willie Namath.

Namath was arrogant with a quick wit and a golden touch in his arm. In the era of The Beatles and the Rolling Stones, Namath fit in perfectly—a sort of rock-n-roll rebel with long hair, a fu manchu, and a sparkle in his eye that said he was having *fun*. But Namath was more than a star. He was a competitor.

At the Miami Touchdown Club a few days before the game, someone asked how the Jets were going to be able to handle playing such a tough team as the Colts. Namath got angry. He thought the Colts should be worried about playing a team as tough as the Jets. He said, “We’re going to beat the Colts on Sunday. I guarantee it.”

The guarantee became instantly famous. He was guaranteeing that his team would pull off the biggest upset in Super Bowl history. What nerve.

But Namath delivered. On January 12, 1969, the Jets beat the Colts 16–7.



Joe’s Gridiron Talk

The **Heidi Game** took place on November 17, 1968. The New York Jets were leading the Oakland Raiders 32–29 with 50 seconds to go when the time became 7 P.M. NBC put on the scheduled children’s movie, *Heidi*, right on time. In the remaining 50 seconds, the Raiders scored two touchdowns. But no one saw it because *Heidi* was on instead.

The 1970s—When Perfect Was the Standard

After Namath won Super Bowl III, the leagues merged and divided into two conferences, the National Football Conference (NFC) and the American Football Conference (AFC). The name of the merged league remained the NFL. Three NFL teams, the Baltimore Colts, the Cleveland Browns, and the Pittsburgh Steelers, joined the AFC.

The story of the early 1970s was the dominance of the 1972 Miami Dolphins. They were more than dominant—they were perfect. The Dolphins won every game that year, going 17–0 as they won the Super Bowl with a strong defense and a powerful, multi-faceted running game featuring powerful Larry Csonka, versatile Jim Kiick, and fleet-footed Mercury Morris. This was the only team in the history of modern professional sports that has gone undefeated for an entire season.

The Pittsburgh Steelers won four Super Bowl championships in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Led by a dominant defense nicknamed *The Steel Curtain*, Pittsburgh overpowered their opponents.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **immaculate reception** occurred at the end of the first playoff game that the 1970s Steelers team ever won. The Steelers were losing to the Oakland Raiders by one point with five seconds to play. Steelers quarterback Terry Bradshaw threw a pass that bounced off of a Raider into the outstretched fingertips of running back Franco Harris. Harris ran the ball in for a touchdown.

The 1980s—When Guys Named Joe Went to the Show

The early 1980s were my time and included the two Super Bowls that I quarterbacked for the Washington Redskins. In my first Super Bowl, in 1983, I played well, my team was focused, and John Riggins, our big running back, ran like a bull as we beat the Miami Dolphins 27–17. In our second Super Bowl, I didn't play well, the team wasn't focused, and we were beaten 38–9 by the Los Angeles Raiders.

As the 1980s progressed, the game was dominated by two teams—the Washington Redskins and the San Francisco 49ers. My career was shortened by a broken leg in 1985, but coach Joe Gibbs proved he could win with more than one quarterback. He next won a Super Bowl in 1988 with Doug Williams as his quarterback. He won again the next decade, in 1992, with Mark Rypien as his quarterback.

The San Francisco 49ers, with innovative coach Bill Walsh at the helm and the unflappable Joe Montana as quarterback, won the Super Bowl in 1982, 1985, and 1989. In 1990, George Seifert became the 49er coach, and the team won the Super Bowl again with Joe Montana. Jerry Rice, the greatest receiver of all time, played for the 1989 and 1990 teams, as well as the 1995 team that again won the Super Bowl, this time with Steve Young as the quarterback.

But in the 1980s, the most dominant single-season team was the 1985 Chicago Bears. That Bears team was an arrogant bully of a team that smothered its opponents. It featured the famous “46 defense” designed by defensive coordinator Buddy Ryan, the great running back Walter Payton, and a wise-acre, sunglasses-wearing quarterback named Jim McMahon. The Bears lost only one game all season and beat the New England Patriots 46–10 in the Super Bowl.

The 1990s—When the Teams Moved

The 1990s ushered in the new era of the Dallas Cowboys. The Cowboys, a great team of the 1970s behind legendary coach Tom Landry and the great clutch quarterback Roger Staubach, had faded by the late 1980s. In 1989, Jerry Jones bought the Cowboys and replaced Landry as coach with Jimmy Johnson, Jones's friend from college and the coach at the University of Miami. Johnson then traded the Cowboys's best player, running back Herschel Walker, to the Minnesota Vikings for draft choices that soon became some of the Cowboys's new generation of stars. The Cowboys won the championship in 1993, 1994, and 1996 behind quarterback Troy Aikman and running back Emmitt Smith.

Unfortunately, there was another trend in the NFL: team relocation. The relocating started when the Baltimore Colts moved to Indianapolis in 1983, but it accelerated in the 1990s when the Los Angeles Raiders, who had moved to L.A. from Oakland, returned to Oakland. The Los Angeles Rams moved to St. Louis, the St. Louis Cardinals moved to Arizona, the Cleveland Browns moved to Baltimore and became the Baltimore Ravens, and the Houston Oilers moved to Nashville and became the Tennessee Titans.

On the field, in 1997, the Green Bay Packers took Super Bowl history full circle by winning Super Bowl XXXI. The Packers have a new generation of heroes. Led by fiery, strong-armed quarterback Brett Favre and the spiritual toughness of defensive end Reggie White, the team brought a championship back to the little town in Wisconsin that is called, in the lore, *Titletown*.

And into the New Millennium

Maybe the greatest sports story of all time played out in the 1999 season—culminating in the 2000 Super Bowl. Kurt Warner, who came from the Arena League (see Chapter 22, “Alternative Football Leagues”), landed the starting quarterback job with the St. Louis Rams when the slated starter, Trent Green, got hurt. Warner, who was undrafted and spent some time as a bagger in a grocery store, went on to win the league MVP and then the Super Bowl MVP.

One year later, the story was defense—a ferocious Baltimore Ravens attack led by relentless linebacker Ray Lewis. But the defense still needs a nickname.

Soon, football will be back in Houston where the Houston Texans are scheduled to start play in 2002.

And the story continues ...

The Least You Need to Know

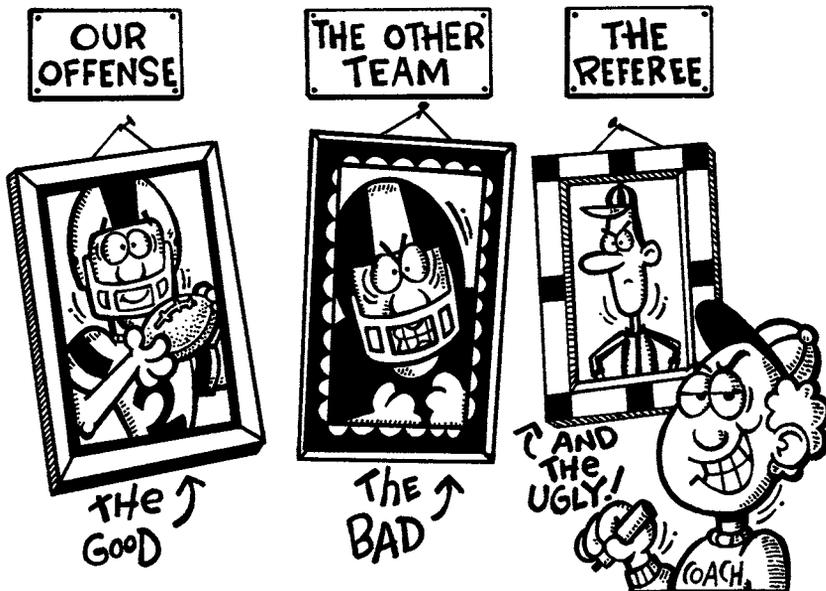
- The Green Bay Packers beat the Dallas Cowboys in 13-below weather *on the frozen tundra of Lambeau Field*.
- Football evolved from soccer and rugby around the turn of the twentieth century. It was a kicking game until 1912, when the value of a touchdown was raised to six points, making it the most rewarding way to score.
- Joe Namath guaranteed that his AFL New York Jets would beat the heavily favored NFL Baltimore Colts, and he won the game 16–7.
- In 1969, the AFL merged with the NFL to form the present-day NFL.
- The only team that ever went undefeated the entire year was the 1972 Miami Dolphins.
- The history of football is full of historic names like coaches George Halas and Vince Lombardi, quarterbacks Joe Montana and Terry Bradshaw, and running backs Jim Brown and Walter Payton. These are names that any idiot could drop—so feel free.

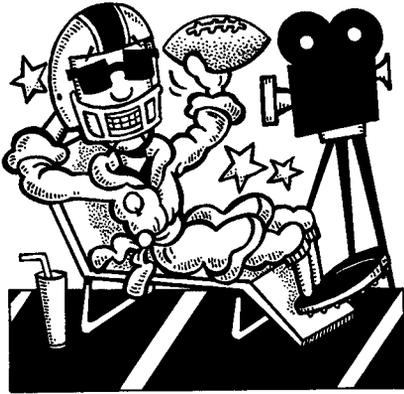
Part 2

Learning the Offense and the Penalties

I was once a quarterback in the NFL. What a fantastic job. In the annals of history, I don't believe there has ever been a better way to make a living. It was more than a living, it was a life. Playing on the offensive side of a football team is challenging, exciting, fun, and rewarding.

This part deals with the offense. I'll go through each position, including my own, and give you a job description of who does what and how they do it. I talk about the mental and physical parts of each position and describe different strategies that each player uses. And speaking of strategies, you'll learn how teams put together an approach to winning. I cover the basic ways of doing it, and then go into detail about how teams use skullduggery as a means to an end—the only end, winning.





The Quarterback Is the Movie Star

In This Chapter

- The skills of the job
- The mental duties
- Joe's top five quarterbacks in no particular order

On the field, there is one man at the center of the action. And, no, it's not the center.

The man at the center of the action on a football field is inevitably the quarterback because all the action goes through him. Quarterback is a glamorous, dangerous, high-risk/high-reward position—the showpiece job in the NFL.

Quarterbacks are leaders and loners, men who carry the weight of a city's hopes on their shoulders, men with the flair of Cary Grant and the iron will of General George Patton. Quarterbacks are heroes—or goats.

This chapter is about the most complex position in football, one that requires skill, passion, intelligence, and innovative savvy. You'll learn about the mental abilities the position requires, the various jobs of a quarterback, the different skills in throwing the ball, and my personal list of the five best quarterbacks of all time.

Two Choices: The Hero or the Goat

The job of quarterback is like no other in sports. When you follow the game, you have to think of the quarterback as different than the other players because, in fact, a quarterback *is* different. The quarterback is the focal point. Any "idiot" could see that.

Your eyes can't help but go to where the ball is, and the ball starts with the quarterback. He's the one who calls the signals and gets to make the first decision on what to do with the ball. Sure, the center touches the ball first. But the center must always snap the ball. And, almost always, the quarterback is the one receiving the snap.



Joe's Rules

The quarterback is not allowed to throw the ball if he runs past the line of scrimmage (LOS) toward the goal. He can't even return behind the line of scrimmage and then throw. If the quarterback throws the ball when he is past the LOS, his team is penalized five yards and a loss of a down. If the quarterback goes past the line of scrimmage and then returns behind it and throws a pass, the penalty is a loss of a down. Chapter 13, "The Guys Who Control the Chaos," provides more information about penalties.

The quarterback has many responsibilities, but perhaps the biggest is just plain *taking* responsibility. When things go right, the quarterback gets the credit. Quarterbacks make more money than anybody else, and they get an unfair proportion of the credit when things go right. It's true.



Joe's Record Book

Bernie Kosar, who played most of his career for the Cleveland Browns, holds the record for the most consecutive passes without an interception—308. You'll learn about interceptions later in this chapter.

I always thought of a victory as a team victory. It was always *our* win. The quarterback is the most dependent position on the football field, and any good quarterback recognizes that he can't do his job without a great supporting cast.

But every fan recognizes that the other players are exactly that—a supporting cast. The irony is that a great team can't win with a bad quarterback, and a great quarterback can't win with a bad team. Teams and quarterbacks are forever linked.

Despite the importance of the other positions, the fact is that quarterbacks are the ones we remember. Even Super Bowls are remembered more for a specific quarterback than for the team. Ask a football fan about the *Joe Namath Game* and they'll know which game you mean. Joe Montana (San Francisco 49ers) and Terry Bradshaw (Pittsburgh Steelers) each won four Super

Bowls. Football fans know the difference between the Roger Staubach Cowboys and the Troy Aikman Cowboys. Both won Super Bowls, but in different eras, and the different teams are identified by their quarterbacks.



Joe's Record Book

Dan Marino of the Miami Dolphins holds the record for the most touchdown passes in a season—48. (When a receiver catches the ball and scores a touchdown on a play, it's called a touchdown pass.) Marino also has thrown more touchdowns than anyone else and for more yards than anyone else. Marino holds so many quarterbacking records, he was running out of ones to break before he retired at the end of the 2000 season.

The statistics of a quarterback are often the product of the offensive system. For instance, an offense that throws the ball 45 times a game will help boost a quarterback's statistics, whereas a team that only throws the ball 20 times a game will not allow a quarterback to get gaudy statistics.

It's such a high-pressure, high-glamour, high-blame position that not many have the make-up it takes to handle the heat. I know both sides of the heat. I've experienced both in the biggest game in the world.

Two years in a row, I brought my team to the Super Bowl. The first time, I played well and we won. When we did, as I said earlier, it felt more like a *WE* experience. But the next year we lost Super Bowl XVIII, and I felt it was *MY* fault.

As a quarterback, I understood that winning and losing were my legacy. I will be remembered for both, and that is why the job is so appealing and so demanding.



Joe's Record Book

Jim Hardy of the Chicago Cardinals has the record for throwing the most interceptions in one game—eight—in a game versus the Philadelphia Eagles on September 24, 1950.

It All Starts Here

The quarterback is in charge. He runs the huddle, where details for the play are finalized, and then breaks the huddle and moves the team to the LOS where he barks the

commands that start the play. As soon as the ball is snapped, it goes into the quarterback's hands and he decides what to do from there. That's why the quarterback is the focal point of the action.

It's a strange position. The quarterback is the one player on the field (during regular play) who does not get to hit someone but is constantly a target himself. Players on the offense get to hit someone on almost every play. But the quarterback's job description includes the phrase "ability to take punishment." Everybody on the defense wants to hit the quarterback.

The quarterback doesn't just have to know his own job; he has to know what everyone else on his offense is supposed to do. But it's more complicated. He is also expected to know what the defense is going to try to do to stop his offense. He has to instill confidence in his team that he knows how to beat the defense and then, most important, he has to deliver.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **huddle** is the meeting on the field that is held by the 11 players before the play begins. On offense, the huddle is run by the quarterback. Huddles can be set up many ways, in a semicircle or perhaps with the quarterback facing all of his teammates. Most quarterbacks like to have the huddle so they are facing forward to make it easier to visualize the play.

As for knowing his team, he has to know the blocking assignments of his line, the routes his receivers will run, and the duties of his running backs—whether they are to block, run, or go out for a pass. On any given play, the quarterback is expected to know where all 22 men will be on the field at any time during that play. Does he always know? Of course not. The defense is doing its best to fool him. But if he doesn't know most of the time what is about to happen, he won't be an NFL quarterback for long.

There are five essential characteristics of an NFL quarterback. A quarterback must ...

1. **Be able to throw the football.** That's what the quarterback does that no one else does. Without that skill, you can't be an NFL quarterback. And you must be accurate. You can be big or have a cannon for an arm, but if you can't get the

ball to the receiver, it's all wasted. Accuracy, more than anything else, is the physical talent that gives you a chance to be great.

2. **Be smart.** There are more than 500 plays to learn and upward of 30 different defenses to understand.
3. **Have some athletic ability.** In order to elude pass rushers and to run the ball if necessary, a quarterback must also have some athletic skills.
4. **Have supreme confidence in his ability.** Because confidence is catchy and teammates need to believe in their quarterback, a cocky quarterback can inspire his teammates.
5. **Be self-critical.** Quarterbacks need to objectively examine their own performance in order to be able to criticize others.

Quarterbacks who have these characteristics can succeed in the game. Those who don't, don't have a chance.

Now, let's look at the specific skills and techniques in the quarterback's job.

Working the Pocket

The "pocket" is the refuge of the quarterback—an area that the offensive line tries to keep safe from defenders so the quarterback has time to evaluate the progress of the pass play, find a receiver downfield, and throw accurately. In theory, the more time the quarterback has in the pocket, the more accurate his passes will be.

Technically, the pocket is an area that begins two yards outside of either offensive tackle, and it includes the tight end if he drops back into pass protection. The pocket area extends back as deep as the offensive tackle drops—approximately seven to nine yards.

The idea of the pocket is for the quarterback to be able to find receivers and throw the ball through *throwing lanes*. If the pocket holds up, the quarterback should have time to throw the ball and will be less likely to throw *interceptions*.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

An **interception** is a pass that is caught by the defense. (Boo, hiss!)



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Throwing lanes are the areas between linemen that the quarterback can throw the ball through. There is a misconception about quarterbacks that they must be tall to throw the ball over linemen. In fact, coaches design blocking schemes to create throwing lanes for quarterbacks.

Spirals

A spiral is a tight spin or rotation on a thrown football. A spiral cuts the wind, so the ball doesn't waver and the throw is more accurate. It aerodynamically works for you. If you watch a spiral go through the air, it looks still as a picture. It's just another part of the beauty of the game.

Different quarterbacks have different ways to throw the ball, but all try to create a tight spin. Jeff George, now of the Washington Redskins, and Terry Bradshaw, who won four Super Bowls with the Pittsburgh Steelers, both placed their index finger directly on the back point of the ball. This is an unorthodox method and does not work for everyone. I've tried to throw the ball like this and found that, for me, it's impossible—the ball went end over end. But that only means it was wrong for me. Bradshaw clearly had success with this method.

Most quarterbacks grab the ball on the laces. But not Vince Evans, who played for the Chicago Bears and Los Angeles/Oakland Raiders. When Evans was a kid, he played with a ball without laces, so he learned how to throw without using them.

Normally, you put your middle finger on about the third lace in from the end. The inside of your pinky finger catches on about the fifth lace. The last finger to leave the ball is your index finger, causing the ball to spin in a spiral.

There isn't one right way to do it. Quarterbacks need to find the grip that is the most natural and comfortable for them, and then they need a fluid delivery.

One more important point about throwing a football: When you release the ball you want to snap your wrist counterclockwise (down and out). That creates the tight spiral. Really, what a quarterback tries to do is to get the same feeling a pitcher gets throwing a screwball.

Touch Passes and Bullet Passes

Quarterbacks can throw the ball many different ways. Some passes are meant to be thrown hard, so hard the receiver almost needs a catcher's mitt to catch it. These are *bullet passes*.

Others are soft passes that drop into a receiver's hands; he catches the ball as if he were catching an egg. These are *touch passes*.

Even long passes can be thrown both ways. Some quarterbacks, such as Jeff Blake of the New Orleans Saints, throw the ball with a high arch. Yet others throw a long pass on a flat trajectory. Both ways work, although my belief is that a high arch on a long ball gives the receiver a better chance to catch it. If the ball is thrown flat, it must be a perfect throw or it won't be caught. A ball with a high arch gives the receiver time to adjust to the ball, and it also improves the chances that the defender will commit interference, which is a penalty that occurs when a defender illegally touches the receiver before he can get to the ball.

Reading Defenses

My first quarterback coach with the Redskins was Ted Marchibroda. Ted didn't give me a playbook for a month. Instead, he gave me a reel of film with defenses on it.

The idea was that he wanted me to first learn the 11 basic defenses that were played in the NFL in the early 1970s. I had to study that film, and once I could recognize a defense, he would give me the offensive plays to run.

Athletes are creatures of habit. And the idea behind reading defenses is to learn those habits and recognize what they mean. For instance, if you see that a cornerback is lined up inside of a receiver, that usually signals man-to-man coverage, which means one defensive man is responsible for covering one offensive player. However, if the cornerback is lined up outside of a receiver, it usually signals zone coverage, which means the defense is in a setup where different players are responsible for defending different zones of the field.

The first thing a quarterback tries to learn in his *read* of a defense is whether it suggests man-to-man or zone coverage. Another way to get a read on this is by looking at the safety, who is the defensive back in the middle of the field. If the safety is lined up five to seven yards deeper than the other defensive backs, then the team is probably playing a zone defense.

If you want to boil the art of reading defenses down to one thing, I believe it's the quarterback trying to read the safety first. That one player can tell a quarterback what the other 10 defensive players are going to do.

When the ball is snapped, the quarterback knows the safety has to go someplace. As quarterback, my first step and his first step tell me basically everything I need to know. Within .2 seconds, I know where I want to go with the ball. I have put my life in the hands of those five guys up front, my offensive line. Their job is to create the pocket for me and protect me. For that reason, I don't worry about the defensive line. I focus on the safety. The safety's actions tell me the best chance I have to complete a pass is on a certain side of the field. His actions could take me to a side of the field or to one specific individual.

There really are two parts to reading a defense. One part is to know where the defense is; another is to know where your players are in relation to the defense. You not only need to know where the holes will appear in the defense, but you also want to be sure that your offensive players find these



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **hard count** is when the quarterback yells a signal louder than the other signals he yells in an attempt to fool the defense into thinking the play is beginning. The idea is to get the defense to jump offside, which is a penalty. The defense cannot cross the line of scrimmage (LOS) before the ball is snapped.

holes (a hole is a space between defenders)—and not just find them, but get in them and not run through them. You see, quarterbacks aren't the only ones who read defenses. A good offense is one in which receivers also read defenses and know when to slow down when they reach a hole in the coverage.

Reading defenses doesn't happen overnight. It takes great coordination between players and an enormous amount of film study to understand the tendencies of the other team as well as of your own team.



Joe's Tips

If the quarterback, after he puts his hands under the center, backs away and gives hand signals or begins yelling to both sides of the field, it usually means he has called an audible and is switching the play at the line of scrimmage.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Dummy audibles sound like audibles but are really meaningless. The idea is to not let the other team know what you're using as your audible signal, so you call a number of signals that are known by your team to be meaningless. Just more smoke and mirrors.

Calling Audibles

A play is a blueprint of where each player should go. The specifics of play-calling will be covered in much more detail in Chapter 12, "Advanced Offensive Strategies: Like Rocket Science." However, for our purposes here, you should know that each play (and some offenses have up to 500 plays at their disposal) tells each player exactly what he should do. The quarterback has to know what every player will do, and then get the ball to the player who has the best chance of a successful gain.

That's where audibles and reading defenses come in. As the quarterback approaches the line of scrimmage and begins to read the defense (in other words, study the safety), he gets an idea of what the defense is going to do on that particular play. If the play the offense has planned won't be the best one against the current defensive setup, the quarterback can replace it with a different play by calling an audible. An *audible* is simply the quarterback calling a play change at the line of scrimmage.

There are two reasons to use an audible. First, the audible usually is designed to get the offense out of a play that appears destined, because of the defensive alignment, to fail. The other reason for using an audible is if the quarterback notices a deficiency in the defense that he thinks he can exploit for a big gain.

Here's an example of when to call an audible: Say I have a running play set up to go to the right. Then I get up to the line and see that the defense is shifted to the right. I know that the way we have this play blocked, we can't block all the people. So that's a bad play. The idea, then, is to call an audible so we can

run a play to the opposite side, or throw a pass. Hopefully, one of those will have a better chance of success.

You see, it's all a head game. In the example I just cited, the defense may be shifted to the right because they've seen in their film study that our team, in similar situations to the one we now face, has a tendency to run to the right. Therefore, they've adjusted to our tendency. We must now adjust to their adjustment and hope that they don't then adjust to *our* adjustment. It's a circle that can go on forever, and yes, it is easy to outthink yourself.

Looking off Defenders

Quarterbacks don't want the defense to know where they're going to throw the ball. So, to put it simply, the quarterback tries to look somewhere else until the last second. If the quarterback stares at the receiver he intends to throw to, the defense can set up and defend the play much better. Instead, the quarterback knows who he wants to throw to, where that player will be, and when he will get there. He waits until the last second, then turns and fires.

Pump Fake

There are times when the quarterback fakes a throw to get the defense to react. The receiver runs a short pattern and the quarterback fakes the throw. Then the receiver takes off deep. If it works, the defense tries to go after the faked throw, then the quarterback throws a pass that hopefully beats the defense. A *pump fake* is almost always followed by a real throw. It is usually a two-step motion. First the fake, and then the throw. That fast. Boom, boom—fake, throw.

Throwing It Away

There are times when a quarterback won't have an open target. Instead of taking a *sack*, which is when a defense tackles the quarterback behind the line of scrimmage while he's attempting to pass, the quarterback will often deliberately throw the ball away. The idea is to end the play without losing any yards, since an incomplete pass brings the ball back to the spot where the last play started. Thus, there are times when an incomplete pass is a good thing.

Throwing it away is to throw the ball away to avoid a sack; you aren't penalized for it, because you threw near an eligible receiver. *Intentional grounding* involves a pass that is not thrown near an eligible receiver.



Joe's Rules

Intentional grounding is a penalty given to the quarterback if he throws a pass that he does not really attempt to complete. If the quarterback is in the tackle box—defined as the area one yard outside the tackles and extending all the way back to the end line of the end zone—and is pressured by the defense, he's guilty of intentional grounding if he throws a pass he doesn't have a realistic chance of completing. However, if he is out of the pocket, it is NOT intentional grounding if he throws the ball past the line of scrimmage, even if an offensive player has no chance of catching it. The penalty for intentional grounding is one of the following:

- Loss of down and 10 yards from the previous spot if the passer is in the field of play
- Loss of down at the spot of the foul if it occurs more than 10 yards behind the line
- A safety if the passer is in his own end zone when the ball is released



Joe's Record Book

On September 22, 1996, at Foxboro Stadium, Mark Brunell of the Jacksonville Jaguars completed three Hail Mary passes—one at the end of the half and two at the end of the game. The third, which would have won the game, ended on the one-yard line. The Patriots won on a field goal in overtime.

The Bomb

The *bomb* is a long pass. It's one of the most exciting plays in football, but it's also a low-percentage play. Bombs are not often successful, but when they are, they are a thing of beauty.

From a strategic standpoint, the bomb does a couple things. First, it keeps defenses from crowding your receivers. In essence, it stretches out the field because it lets the defense know that the offense is not afraid to go for a big play. The defense is put on alert that the offense can and will go for it all in one play. This can then open up the short pass plays by making the defense back up a bit.

As a quarterback, there is no greater feeling than completing a bomb. I can remember getting hit and laying on the ground watching the play unfold. I would be on the ground and the ball would still be in the air

and it seemed like it all took place in slow motion in front of me. You can almost see the laces spinning as the ball falls into the receiver's hands. It's as beautiful as a Hawaiian sunset.

The Hail Mary

This is a desperation pass that got its name because it is usually thrown at the end of a half or the game. Simply put, it is a prayer.

Hail Marys are thrown by teams that are far away from the end zone and need a touchdown to win. The quarterback backs up and throws the ball to an area on the field. Most NFL quarterbacks can throw the ball about 65 yards.

A Hail Mary pass is pure chaos. Usually, the offense has three players waiting for the ball, and the defense has at least five players. The offensive players first want to try to catch it. If they can't, the next thing to do is to try to get a hand on the ball to keep it up in the air and hope for a lucky tip. It sometimes happens. It looks like a jump ball in basketball with more than just two players.

Running with the Ball

Occasionally, the quarterback needs to run with the ball. Sometimes, on a short-yardage play, the quarterback will take the snap and immediately push forward to try to get enough for a first down. This is called a *quarterback sneak*.

Other times, he may find that his receivers are all covered and he will run with the ball. This is called a *scramble*.

To avoid being tackled, quarterbacks are allowed to end their runs by sliding with their feet forward. When they do, they are not allowed to be hit by the defense. As soon as they begin the slide, the ball is considered down.

The Passer Rating System

The passer rating system, devised in 1973, is the kind of thing that could make a mathematician blush. At the end, though it does not take into account what a quarterback does as a leader or with his feet, it's a fairly good representation of what kind of season a guy has had.

So here's the math, for those of you with advanced mathematical degrees:

- **Percentage of completions:** Subtract 30 from the completion percentage and multiply the result by 0.05. Use this result. If the results are less than zero, award zero points. If the result is greater than 2.375, award 2.375.



Joe's Record Book

Fran Tarkenton, a quarterback with the Minnesota Vikings and New York Giants who was known as one of the greatest scrambling quarterbacks of all time, was also caught a few times behind the LOS. In fact, in his career, Tarkenton was sacked 483 times.

- **Average yards gained per attempt:** Subtract 3 yards from yards gained per attempt and multiply the total by 0.25. Use this result. If the results are less than zero, award zero points. If the result is greater than 2.375, award 2.375.
- **Percentage of touchdown passes:** Multiply the touchdown percentage by 0.2. Use this result. If the results are less than zero, award zero points. If the result is greater than 2.375, award 2.375.
- **The sum of the four steps** is divided by 6 and multiplied by 100.

I have no idea what professor made this up, but I can imagine. The truth is it's just a way to measure and it gives you a pretty good idea of how good a quarterback is or at least how good a season he had. The math is for others who are much smarter than me!



Joe's Record Book

The highest rating a quarterback can receive is 158.3—which is considered perfect. In the 2000 season, it happened in three different games: Kurt Warner of the Rams did it on October 1 by completing 24–30 for 390 yards, 4 touchdowns, and no interceptions. Peyton Manning of the Colts was perfect on October 22, when he completed 16–20 for 268 yards, 3 touchdowns, and no interceptions. And Doug Flutie had a perfect rating on December 23 when he was 20–25 for 366 yards, 3 touchdowns, and 0 interceptions.

To confuse matters even more, there is a different system to rate quarterbacks in college. And Web sites such as Sportstalk.com have devised new ways to rate quarterbacks that take into account stats like yards gained by running.

The truth is, the best way to rate quarterbacks is to look at the record of his team. In football, winning is still the only thing that counts.

The Evolving Nature of Quarterbacks

Drop back into the pocket and fire the ball with verve and accuracy down the field. That has always been in the job description. Pick people up off the floor and *make* them believe that they can win this game right now. That has always been in the job description. But now, there is a new line in the Help Wanted section for quarterbacks: "Must be big and be able to escape from monsters."

Before, it was insinuated that a quarterback could move around in the pocket and sidestep tacklers. Now, they're expected to run like Eddie George and pass like Peyton Manning. And you know what—Daunte Culpepper can do both.

The position of quarterback has changed, and Culpepper of the Minnesota Vikings—all 6'5", 266 pounds of him—may be the prime example. He is the size of Deacon Jones, the great mean defensive lineman of the 1960s and 1970s. And he can throw the ball beautifully. Put together, he is the complete package that NFL teams are now looking for—big, durable quarterbacks who throw the ball and yet know when to run.

Sometimes, of course, there are exceptions to the rule—and my favorite exception is Doug Flutie, who, although small for an NFL quarterback, has proven to be durable and successful. He may not throw with the most pop, but he wins games.

Joe's Top Five Quarterbacks

Although the game has changed over the years, these quarterbacks would have been stars in any era. Here are the top five quarterbacks to play in the NFL, in no particular order, in my opinion.

- **John Elway.** Quarterback of the Denver Broncos, he may have been the most physically gifted quarterback to ever play the game. He could do anything, and when he finally got a running game, he won two Super Bowls.
- **Joe Namath.** Quarterback of the New York Jets who won Super Bowl III, the first time the AFL beat the NFL. Namath had guaranteed the victory beforehand.
- **Terry Bradshaw.** Quarterback of the Pittsburgh Steelers who won four Super Bowls in the 1970s.
- **Joe Montana.** Quarterback of San Francisco 49ers who won four Super Bowls in the 1980s.
- **Dan Marino.** Quarterback of the Miami Dolphins who holds most all-time quarterback records, including most yards and most touchdowns.

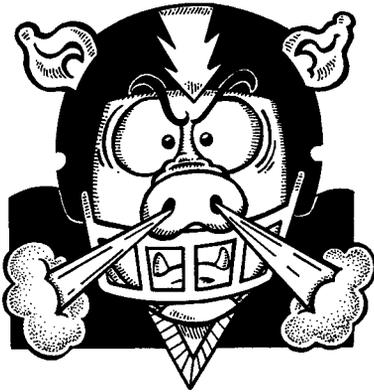
Statistics to Look for in a Great Quarterback

Here are some statistics to look for in a great quarterback:

- **Touchdowns versus interceptions.** If a quarterback throws twice as many touchdowns as interceptions, he's doing a good job.
- **Pass-completion percentage.** If a quarterback completes more than 60 percent of his passes, he's doing a good job.
- **Sacks.** If a quarterback only gets sacked 15 to 20 times in more than 400 pass attempts, he's making good, quick decisions.

The Least You Need to Know

- Quarterbacks get both the blame and the credit because they play the most visible and important position on the field.
- Quarterbacks must be able to throw because that is their primary skill. Throwing is the quickest and easiest way to advance the ball down the field.
- Quarterbacks read defenses because they want to figure out what the defense is going to do. They do this by looking at the safety first. The safety's actions signal zone or a man-to-man coverage and which side of the field he should throw to. (Zone and man-to-man are explained in Chapter 14, "The Defensive Line: Get the Ball, Hit the Quarterback.")
- Quarterbacks can change the play call at the LOS by calling an audible.



The Offensive Line: They Called Mine “The Hogs”

In This Chapter

- ▶ Who were The Hogs?
- ▶ Room to run and throw; what these heavy hitters accomplish
- ▶ Blocking schemes—different ways to do different things

An offensive lineman once said to me, “My job is to make heroes.”

Offensive linemen are the guys who do the dirty work so others can get the glory. They get their noses bloodied, their faces battered, and their bodies smashed and smacked on every play. But they also get to do a bit of the bloodying, battering, smashing, and smacking. Offensive linemen are blue-collar guys who thrive on repetitive physical contact. And that is exactly what they get.

This chapter is about the guys who have one of the toughest physical jobs on the football field. On every play they are supposed to hit and get hit. But their job is more than just physical—these guys also have one of the toughest mental jobs in the game. You see, despite the fact that these guys make their living from their brute force, there is incredible coordination that goes into being an offensive lineman, which will probably surprise the novice fan.

Take, for instance, a guard and a tackle (you’ll learn more about these positions later). If the two guys they’re facing try to do something, the guard and tackle need to know whether to zone-block, block man-to-man, or double team—and they need to communicate quickly. The area on the football field where there is the most communication is the offensive line.

An offensive line position, as all in football, requires skill, yet it's the one position in which work ethic can make up for limited skills. Offensive linemen can outwork other players, and often do.

This chapter covers my offensive linemen and how they became one of the first groups at that position to get some prestige. It covers different offensive line-blocking schemes, the difference between pass-blocking and run-blocking, and the importance of the initial push off the line. This chapter is about the guys on the offense who make their living in the trenches.

Hogs and Such

For decades in football, offensive linemen were the invisible men. Their job was to block so the quarterback could pass and the runners could run. A *block* is when an offensive player runs interference for the man with the ball. He tries to “block” the opposing team’s effort to stop the ball carrier. No glory there.



Joe's Tips

What's the difference between a block and a tackle? A player executing a block is trying to help his teammate advance the football. A tackle is when a player on one team wants to stop a player on the other team from advancing the football. A simple example of a tackle: Wrap your arms around a friend and throw that person to the ground. You've just tackled him or her.

The only people who ever knew anything about the offensive line were their coaches, quarterbacks, and ball carriers because those were the people who understood very clearly the importance of the job. But to everybody else, offensive linemen were just big guys.

The truth is that offensive linemen have a very complex job. Only recently have those outside the game begun to notice.

In 1982, George Stark, a teammate of mine on the Washington Redskins, decided that offensive linemen deserved some glory. He came up with an idea to give the Redskins offensive line an identity. He decided the unit should be called “The Hogs.” It was brilliant.

He picked The Hogs because offensive linemen seem to always be the ones in the dirt. The other offensive linemen, tackle Joe Jacoby, guards Russ Grimm and Mark May, and center Jeff Bostic, posed for a poster, with Bostic sitting on a bale of hay. For the first time ever, the least-glamorous position in football finally began to receive some recognition.

Of course, it didn’t hurt that over time, the Redskins—my team, *our* team—became a dominating power football team. The Hogs could have an identity because they were good. They were *really* good. Add to that the fact that we had a running back, John Riggins, who ran with such overwhelming power behind that huge line, and the entire thing became something of a myth in Washington.

It was a good thing to be a Hog. Riggins was eventually honored by The Hogs and named a Hog himself. And I’m honored to say that, after a game against the New York Giants in which I threw a block, The Hogs made me their piglet.

I look at it this way: I accomplished many things in my NFL career that make me proud. Among other things, I won a Super Bowl and I was MVP of the League. However, other guys have won Super Bowls and every year, somebody has to win the MVP. But I’m the only player in the history of the NFL to become a piglet. Now *that’s* something.

Who Are Those Five Big Guys?

The five offensive linemen line up next to each other at the beginning of the play, just along the line of scrimmage (LOS). The one in the center is called, get this, the *center*. The center is the one who snaps the ball between his legs to the quarterback, whose hands are under the center’s butt. The center is also the one who calls most of the signals for the line and who coordinates the blocking schemes. What’s a blocking scheme? Just keep reading.

On each side of the center is a guard. Although all offensive linemen are powerful, guards are perhaps the most powerful—they push open holes for running backs and they fight off defensive tackles, who tend to be the largest defensive players on the field.



Joe’s Record Book

They’re getting bigger. My offensive line, The Hogs, in Super Bowl XVII weighed an average of 267 pounds. By contrast, the Super Bowl XXXV champion Baltimore Ravens had an offensive line that weighed an average of 316 pounds.



Joe’s Gridiron Talk

The **neutral zone** is the area between the offensive and defensive lines. It is the length of the ball in width. No player except the center may enter the neutral zone until the ball is snapped.

On the outside of each guard is a tackle. As offensive linemen go, the tackle is the prestige position. Why? Because tackles are on the outside of the line and are called upon to stop defensive ends and outside linebackers, who tend to be quick, strong, and mean and really like to hit quarterbacks.

The most prestigious position is usually left tackle because most quarterbacks are right-handed. When a right-handed quarterback drops back to pass, his back is facing the left. Therefore, the left is his *blind side*, and protecting a quarterback's blind side is of utmost importance. Obviously, a quarterback doesn't want to get blindsided by a 300-pound defensive lineman. It can really ruin his day—or career, as in my case. That's why quarterbacks like their left tackles so much.

One Line, Two Jobs

The offense is going to pass or it is going to run. That means offensive linemen are going to pass-block or run-block, and those two jobs are different.

Both, however, involve the simple concept of blocking. The easiest way to describe a clean, legal block is to position yourself somewhere on the front part of your opponent's body. If you grab him, hit him from behind, or chop at his knees from the side, you've committed a violation. A *holding* penalty costs you 10 yards. *Clipping* (hitting from behind, or a chop at the knees) is a personal foul and results in a 15-yard penalty from the spot of the infraction.

Run-blocking is an aggressive type of blocking that offensive linemen use when creating holes for running backs to run through. When an offensive lineman run-blocks, he comes off the line, making contact with the defensive player and pushing him in a certain direction. He continues to do that until the whistle blows, stopping the play. One important difference between run-blocking and pass-blocking is that offensive linemen can continue to block downfield while a play is in progress when they are run-blocking.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **sack** occurs when a quarterback is tackled behind the line of scrimmage while trying to pass.

Pass-blocking is usually more reactive. Usually, pass-blockers back up and take the hits from the defense instead of moving forward and giving the hits as they would on a run-block. However, as was mentioned in Chapter 7, "The Quarterback Is the Movie Star," offensive linemen on passing downs do more than just protect the quarterback from punishment. Remember, the guys coming after the quarterback are often huge. So offensive linemen try to create *throwing lanes* for the quarterback. The idea is to give the quarterback an open slot of air to throw through as well as to see through. But most important of all is to protect the quarterback from getting *sacked*.

There are times when pass-blocking is aggressive. Those times are when the offense wants to fool the defense in what is called *play action*. In play-action plays, the offensive line pushes forward as if blocking for a run, a running back pretends to take a hand-off from the quarterback, and the hope is that the defense will try to tackle the running back. If it works, the defense is fooled and the quarterback should have time to throw—and should have a wide-open receiver as well.

They Get Noticed When Something Goes Wrong

Although they’re finally beginning to get some acclaim, offensive linemen still lead rather anonymous lives on the field. The truth is, about the only time they get noticed is when they do something wrong.

So, when you hear an offensive lineman’s name or number called during the game, chances are he committed one of the following infractions:

- **Holding.** When an offensive player grabs a defensive player or wraps his arms around a defensive player and hangs on too long. Ten-yard penalty.
- **Encroachment.** When an offensive player enters the neutral zone and makes illegal contact with the defense. Five-yard penalty.
- **False start.** When an offensive lineman moves after assuming a *set position*. Five-yard penalty.
- **Ineligible receiver downfield during a pass attempt.** When an offensive lineman advances down the field after losing contact with his opponent at the line of scrimmage. This is an arbitrary decision by the official. Usually, if an offensive lineman is three to five yards down the field without being in contact with a defensive lineman, he’s considered an ineligible receiver. Five-yard penalty.
- **Chop block.** When an offensive lineman hits a defender at the thigh or lower while another offensive player is engaging the defender. Fifteen-yard penalty.
- **Clipping.** Hitting a defensive player in the back of the legs. (There is a legal clipping zone—called *close-line play*. This is the area between where the offensive tackles line up and extends three yards in each direction from the line of scrimmage.) Fifteen-yard penalty.

Of course, the other way that offensive linemen get noticed is when they give up sacks. Then everyone knows their names.



Joe’s Gridiron Talk

Prior to the snap, all offensive linemen must assume a **set position** without moving their feet, head, or arms, and without swaying their body.



Joe's Record Book

John Elway of the Denver Broncos was sacked the most times in his career—516. Randall Cunningham of the Philadelphia Eagles was sacked the most times in one season—72 times in 1986. Bert Jones of the Baltimore Colts and Warren Moon of the Houston Oilers were sacked the most times in one game—12.

Holding Is Only Holding If You Keep Holding

The NFL likes to protect its quarterbacks because there are only so many good ones to go around. So linemen, in a sort of unwritten code that started in the late 1990s, have been allowed to grab around the outside of a defender on *initial contact*. Holding will not be called if that happens, but, based on the judgement of the line judge, referees, and umpire, it will be called if the lineman doesn't quickly move his hands back inside. Bear hugs are not allowed.

Blocking Schemes

There are a lot of different ways for five big guys to act as a unit and push the big guys on defense out of the way. The first part to understand is the math. Usually, the five guys on the offensive line are blocking four guys on the defensive line, or they may *swoop* by the guys up front to get to the players behind them. Almost as often, there are three guys on the defensive line. But wait—there could be only two guys on the defensive line, or there could be as many as eight. It can make for some complicated, quick-thinking math. That's why they rely on Coach Einstein to develop good blocking schemes.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **swoop** block is a block where a lineman goes by (swoops by) the defensive line to get to the next level of the defense, the linebackers.

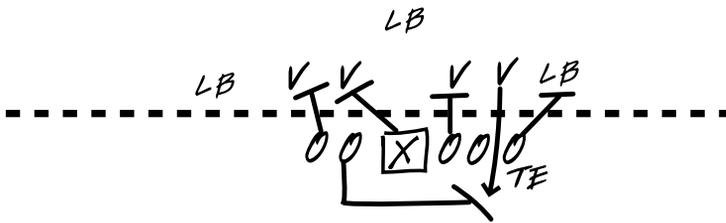
Okay, it's not really so complicated that coaches need a theoretical physicist to design schemes. In fact, usually it's as simple as big guys hitting big guys. But the math is a factor. The offense must have five offensive linemen. The defense, however, can do whatever it wants. And it doesn't have to tell the offense.

Of course, the way a defense lines up on the field or the particular players it puts on the field does tell the offense quite a bit about its approach. However, as I’ve explained throughout, football is a head game. The defensive players may not do what they look like they’re going to do.

Nevertheless, the offensive line has a few basic blocking schemes it uses to attack the defense.

Trap Block

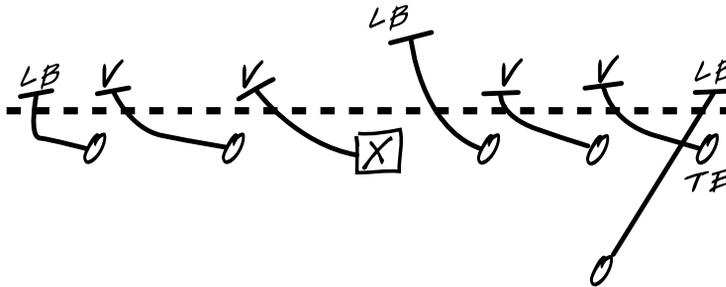
The *trap* block is used on a sweep (see Chapter 10, “The Running Backs: Great Ones Control Games,” for a more detailed explanation of the sweep). The idea is to get the guard to back away from the line and then run outside to lead the way for a running back carrying the ball. For instance, if a play is designed to go right, the center would hit the man in front of the left guard. Simultaneously, the left guard backs away from the line, runs behind the center and off to the right where he traps the end man on the line. (Trap is another term for “kickout block.”) The guard who does this is called the *pulling guard*.



In a trap block, the left guard drops back, runs to the right, and blocks to clear a path for the running back.

Reach Block

The *reach* block occurs when an offensive lineman doesn’t hit the player directly in front of him, but rather reaches to hit the player in front of the lineman next to him. This block is usually for running plays.



The reach block is when each of the offensive linemen reaches forward and to one side to try and block the man diagonally across from him.

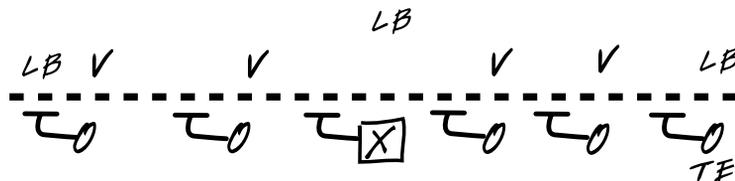
Double Team

The *double team* really is as simple as it sounds. A double team occurs when two offensive linemen take on one defensive player. Quite simply, it's two against one. This could be used on running plays in which both offensive linemen attack the defender, or it could occur on passing plays in which two offensive linemen get in the way of a defender.

Slide Block

The *slide block* is a coordinated effort by the entire line to *slide* down the line. Basically, at the snap, each lineman slides in one direction. Either they all go right, or they all go left. This blocking scheme is used mostly in passing plays. For instance, if the quarterback is planning to run a few steps to the right before he passes the ball, the offensive line may slide to the right. When this happens, there has to be great coordination. For instance, on a slide block to the right, the running back may need to block back to the left.

The slide block is when the offensive linemen slide laterally—to stop penetration expected from a particular side.



Cutoff Block

A *cutoff block* requires an offensive lineman to get in the way of a defensive player and cut off his angle of pursuit. This technique is most often used for running plays.

Zone Block

Zone-blocking requires an offensive lineman to protect a *zone*, or an area of the field. No matter who comes into that area, the offensive lineman is responsible for that zone. If the player across from a lineman goes into another zone, the offensive lineman still stays in his zone. If the zone gets “flooded,” meaning more than one player comes into it, the lineman’s teammates (whether a running back or the extra lineman who does not have a zone) have to come and help. If not, the quarterback is not going to be happy.

Man-on-Man Blocking

This means exactly what it sounds like—one man is responsible for one man. No matter where the defensive man goes, the offensive lineman is responsible for blocking him. But, if the defensive lineman runs to the other side of the field, the offensive

lineman responsible for him won't be too worried. By the time the defensive lineman reaches the other side of the field, the chances are that the play has run its course.

The Push Off of the Line

Television announcers, like me, like to talk about who is *controlling the line of scrimmage*. They usually mean that if one team's big guys are pushing the other team's big guys forward, the pushing team has a better chance (on offense or defense) to do well on any particular play. If a pattern develops and one team continually controls the line of scrimmage, chances are you'll see a pattern develop on the scoreboard as well.

On the line, different players have different stances, and the stance can affect which player gets the advantage of movement. Some linemen drop one foot back, others have their feet parallel. Usually, players on the left have their left (the outside) hand down, while players on the right have their right hand down. The idea always is to gain any advantage possible.

As far as technique, a key for linemen is not so much speed as it is quick feet and balance. Quick feet enable him to drive more quickly at the defender and engage the defender in the best position, while good balance allows him to remain standing and not get bowled over by the other guy.



Joe's Tips

When an offensive lineman and a defensive lineman meet, someone is going to be in a lower body position. Whoever is lower has better leverage and can push the player back. So watch for who is lower off the line.

Joe's Top Five Offensive Linemen

Although offensive linemen have gotten bigger over the years, these players had such determination and skill that they would have been stars in any era. These are the top five offensive linemen to play in the NFL, in no particular order.

- **John Hannah**, guard with the New England Patriots. Great leverage player who played low and hit like a Mack truck.
- **Tony Bosselli**, All-Pro left tackle of the Jacksonville Jaguars. He has the look of a choir boy and the on-field demeanor of a trapped rattler.
- **Anthony Munoz**, tackle with the Cincinnati Bengals. He had a combination of great size and quickness.
- **Jackie Slater**, tackle with the Los Angeles Rams. He used his body and hands better than anyone.
- **Jonathan Ogden**, left tackle for the Baltimore Ravens. Tremendous size and power, he is a mountain to run around.

The Least You Need to Know

- The 1982 Washington Redskins offensive line was the first to bring public acclaim to the offensive lineman position. They did it with the glamorous nickname, "The Hogs."
- The offensive line's job is to block defenders to keep them away from the quarterback so he has time to pass, and to block defenders out of the way of the running back.
- Run-blocking is usually aggressive, and pass-blocking is usually reactive.
- If an offensive line pushes a defensive line more often than vice versa, that team has a much better chance to win.
- Teams use a number of different blocking schemes, including trap blocks, slide blocks, reach blocks, and zone blocks.



The Receivers: Glue on Their Fingers and Rockets in Their Shoes

In This Chapter

- ▶ What receivers do: catch the ball and run like heck
- ▶ The difference between a split end, flanker, and tight end
- ▶ Pass patterns and the passing tree
- ▶ A look at YAC and end-arounds

Receivers are the acrobats of football. No, that doesn't mean they fly on a trapeze. They don't *need* a trapeze.

What they do need is great hands and a ton of courage. Oh, and did I mention speed? Receivers have one of the most glamorous jobs in the game, and perhaps the most dangerous. They catch passes.

When they do, their pure athleticism, body control, speed, and agility are on display at such a high level, fans cannot help but be amazed that human beings can actually do this stuff and still hold a football. They look really pretty doing it, but what's really on display is their focus.

It's a dangerous position for the same reason. Think of it this way: Receivers are trying to catch something in the middle of a group of guys who don't want them to catch it. I mean the other team's members *really* don't want them to catch it.

This chapter covers the position of receiver, the various roles receivers have, and the different types of receivers a team uses. It describes speed guys, possession guys, and tight ends. It also details different pass patterns, the importance of running after making the catch, and how and why to use the end-around. All that, and no flying trapeze!

Who Are They?

Receivers catch the ball. They *receive* passes. In a standard offense, there are usually three receivers. Two are *wide receivers*, so called because they line up away from the offensive line, or “wide” of the line. The third receiver is a *tight end*, who usually lines up next to one of the offensive tackles at the end of the line.

Wide receivers come in two types—*speed guys* and *possession guys*. The truth is, they both do the same things, only to different degrees. Speed guys, known for their speed, can also catch. Possession guys, known for their ability to catch, can also run—especially *between* defenders. Each one plays a different role.



Joe’s Gridiron Talk

Wide receivers also go under the name of **flanker** and **split end**.



Joe’s Gridiron Talk

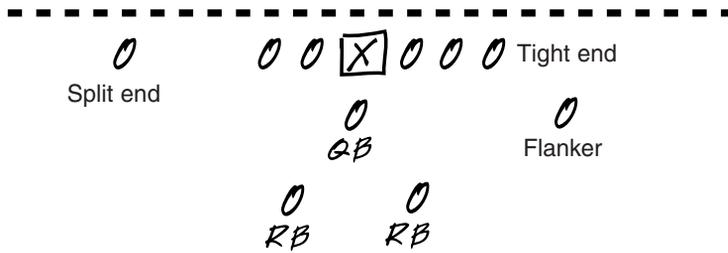
The two outside offensive players on the line of scrimmage are **eligible receivers**.

How Receivers Line Up

Remember that only seven offensive men are allowed on the line of scrimmage. Automatically, five of those men are linemen. If you have a tight end, that leaves only one more player who can go on the line of scrimmage—the wide receiver, who’s also called the *split end* because he’s “split” out from the line. He lines up on the line of scrimmage on the side away from the tight end—so called because he’s “tight” to the offensive line. The split end is on the side away from the tight end because only the outside players on the line of scrimmage are eligible to receive a pass.

The other wide receiver, who usually lines up on the same side as the tight end, is called the *flanker*. The flanker lines up *one* yard off the line of scrimmage.

What if the flanker were to line up on the line of scrimmage? First of all, he wouldn’t be called the flanker. Secondly, the tight end would become ineligible to catch a pass because he would no longer be one of the two outside men on the line of scrimmage. The following illustration shows the correct line-up for the three receivers: tight end, split end (wide receiver), and flanker (wide receiver).



Standard offense showing the split end, tight end, and flanker.

Speed Guys

A receiver's job is to catch the football and advance it toward the end zone, preferably in large chunks of yardage. The best chance to advance it quickly is with speed.

Nobody in football is really slow. But some guys are *fast*. I don't mean sort of fast. I mean blistering fast, like a jaguar—and no, not a Jacksonville Jaguar. I mean a real jaguar—you know, one of the fastest animals on earth. These are usually the guys with the best *40 time* on the field. Speed guys are the guys who can *clear it out*.

When a team has a receiver who can run like the wind during hurricane season, it has a high-caliber weapon. From a quarterback's perspective, speed is a beautiful thing. There is nothing in the world like seeing one of your guys blazing down the field past the defense.

Of course, the defense is aware of the weapon and won't often let the speed guy shoot right by them. In football, perception is reality. If they think a receiver is fast, they will back up some so the speed guy just doesn't have enough time to run past them.

As great as speed is to a team, it's not the most important thing. A lot of people have speed, particularly track guys who play football. There have been a few. Some track guys are successful, but most are not.

Renaldo Nehemiah, who once held the world record for the 100-meter hurdles, played in the mid-1980s for the San Francisco 49ers. He couldn't make it for long. Part of the problem was that he had trained as a track athlete—but football is a team game. It's a different mentality. One of his bigger problems was that he didn't have good hands. Nehemiah had all the speed in the world, but he learned that even if you're a speed guy you still have to catch the ball. You can't just run down



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **40 time** is how long it takes for a player to run 40 yards. It's the standard measurement of speed in football. It also seems to be the distance most guys run on any given play since everything is run in short bursts. The fastest times are now about 4.1 seconds; 4.5 is average for the NFL, and 5.2 is average for big linemen.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Clearing it out is what a speed guy is often asked to do. This means he is asked to take off down the field in an attempt to get open for a long pass. Even if he doesn't get open, he clears out some defensive players from where a shorter pass or run might go. This is also called **stretching the defense** or **stretching the field**.

the field and expect people to worry about you. The quarterback has to throw the ball to each receiver sometimes, just to let the defense know that the receiver is a legitimate threat. Nehemiah never became a legitimate threat.

Two decades earlier, Bob Hayes of the Dallas Cowboys, who was the world's fastest man in the 100-meter dash in the 1964 Olympics, became a very legitimate threat. Bullet Bob Hayes. The name says it all—and he could catch.

There are two main reasons why some track runners fail in football. One is that they bounce their heads when they run. I've seen speed guys who looked like one of those dolls with the bobbing head you see in the backs of cars. It's very difficult to run like this and lock a football into your hands. They often drop the ball.

Another big reason fast guys fail is they don't know how to stop. Really. They can run fast, but football is a game of running fast and *stopping* fast as well.

Two more things differ between football and track: 1) football players need the ability to turn quickly, and 2) in track, people don't hit you.

Good speed guys serve a few functions on offense. Like all wide receivers, they are first called upon to catch passes. They're also called upon to do some blocking. In fact, whenever you see a big running play in football, there's a good chance it happened because the wide receiver did a good job of blocking.

Here is what speed guys do:

- Go deep to catch bombs (long passes), usually 30 to 50 yards downfield.
- Go deep to be a decoy for runs or short passes.
- Run short patterns and outs (patterns to the outside of the field).
- Go for passes over the middle.
- Block.
- Participate in trick plays (such as an end-around, which I'll describe later in this chapter).

Possession Guys

Possession guys are the good-hands people. They're also blockers, but they're known for their ability to catch. Put a dot on their chest and draw a big circle around the dot

at the width of their outstretched hands, and that's the kind of catching range they have—that's the margin of error that you have when you throw a possession guy a football.

For other guys (including some speed guys), you have to throw the ball right at the numbers on their jersey to make it easy to catch. But for possession guys, it's like throwing a dart at a dartboard. You don't have to hit the bull's-eye, just the dartboard. As long as you keep it within that dartboard, they should catch it. You throw it real high and they catch it; real low, same thing. A quarterback can gain a lot of confidence throwing to possession receivers.

Possession men sometimes enhance their catching abilities with gloves. These gloves usually have sticky palms so that on a dry day, a leather ball sticks on the glove, making it easier to catch. In the past, players used to use a substance called *Stick-Em*, a sappy substance so sticky that a player could literally catch the ball one-handed. It is now illegal.

Possession receivers do everything speed guys do, but mostly they work the field from the line of scrimmage to 15 yards down the field. They are basically used to get first downs. Possession guys also help the offense maintain possession of the ball, because a guy who catches the ball keeps a drive going for you.

Even though they may not be the fastest guys on the field, possession receivers have the ability to get away from defensive backs and linebackers and find holes in the defense. Finding those holes is hard to teach. In possession guys it's a natural instinct, a knack.

But not every pass is catchable, even by possession receivers. Some quarterbacks throw the ball so hard that a receiver needs a catcher's mitt to catch it. Some guys throw it so hard, *two* catcher's mitts won't do the job.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **drive** is when a team keeps getting first downs and moves the ball methodically down the field.



Joe's Rules

For a catch to be a legal reception, the receiver must have control of the ball and land both of his feet in bounds. If even a toe lands out of bounds, the catch is ruled incomplete. This means the down is over and the next play begins at the previous line of scrimmage.

Tight Ends—Like Hogs with Hands

Although tight ends aren't as big as offensive linemen, they can be pretty darn close. They generally range from about 6'2", 235 pounds to 6'5", 285 pounds. They have similar responsibilities as wide receivers, except their priorities are reversed.

Whereas wide receivers are mostly responsible for catching passes, but also blocking tight ends are mostly responsible for blocking, but also catching some passes—usually shorter passes than those caught by wide receivers. It's also a little different workplace for the tight end. They aren't out on the outside running and rambling with 200-pound defensive backs. Tight ends live at the mouth of the trenches. Three hundred-pound guys are his neighbors. It's a mean neighborhood right from the get-go. And then when the tight end leaves there, he enters the middle of the field. Read on to find out about the middle of the field—talk about mean neighborhoods!



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **strong side** of a formation is the side that has the tight end. Usually, the strong side is the right, meaning the tight end lines up next to the right tackle.

Different teams have different types of tight ends. Which type depends on the offensive philosophy. Some teams want a really big tight end who is a tremendous blocker. Other teams use their tight end more in the passing scheme, so the blocking skills aren't as important. Still, blocking skills are always important for a tight end by the simple nature of where they line up.

Some teams use two tight ends, one on each side of the offensive line. The second tight end, taking the place of the second running back, lines up a yard behind the line of scrimmage and is known as the *h-back*. His job is more of a pass catcher than a blocker. But anyone in close to the line had better know how to block.

The Patterns

Comedian Bill Cosby used to have a bit that he did about playing football as a kid on the street. In it, he talked about sending receivers out past something like the blue Chevy, or around the fire hydrant, or past the third telephone pole on the right. In the NFL, it's even more complex.

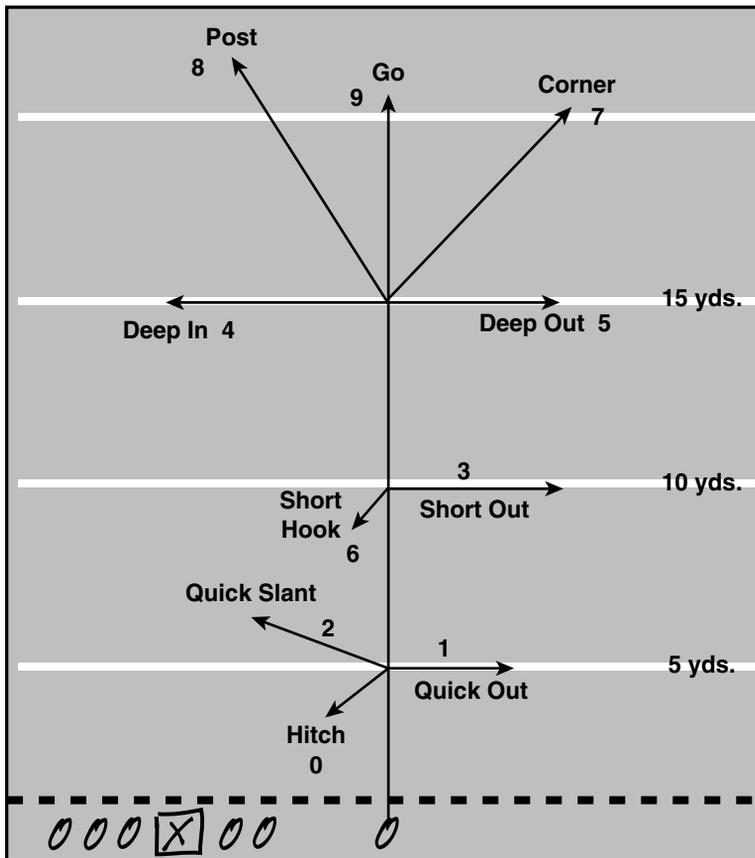
Actually, a better word than complex is precise. For instance, wide receivers know on every play where they're supposed to go. A receiver's running course on a play is called a *route* or *pattern*. Each different pattern is given a number, and the receiver has to know, for instance, what a seven pattern, a four pattern, or a nine pattern is. Wide receivers memorize what's known as a *passing tree*.

Tight ends and running backs (see Chapter 10, "The Running Backs: Great Ones Control Games") also have a passing tree, shown in the following figure.

The point of sending receivers to different areas of the field is to take defenders away from places you want to throw the football to. Different receivers run different routes (covered in depth in Chapters 11, "Strategies: A Lot of Ways to Go Eighty Yards or

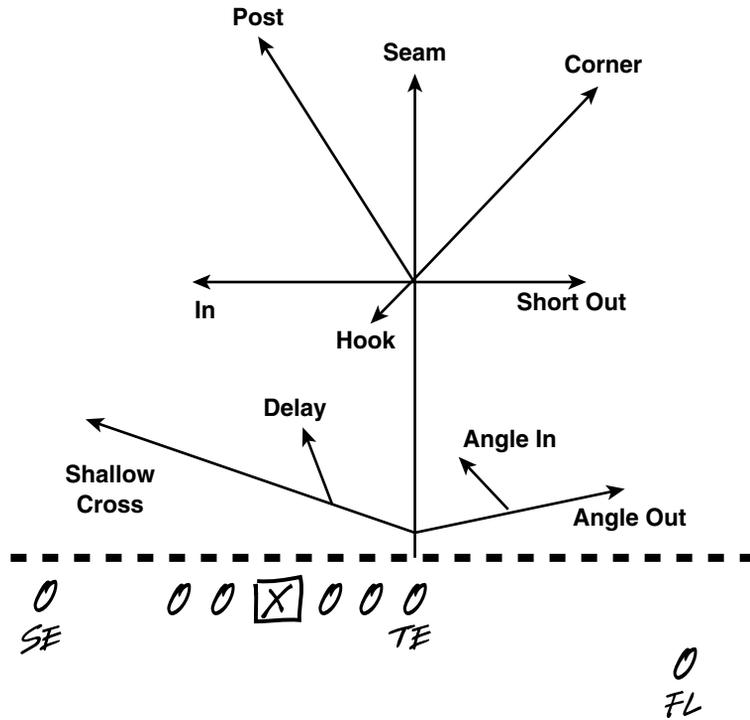
One,” and 12, “Advanced Offensive Strategies: Like Rocket Science”). The best situation you can get in football is when none of the receivers is covered by a defender who’s trying to keep the receiver from catching the ball. Obviously that doesn’t happen very often. The next best thing is one-on-one coverage—one defensive guy trying to cover your one offensive guy.

The idea is to run *complimentary routes* to give the *primary receiver* a chance to get open. This means that you want one player to pull defenders with him so that another player will be open. (You’ll learn more about this in Chapter 12.) Of course, the defense knows this is what the offense is trying to do, so it can get tricky, and both the offense and defense make continual adjustments as the game evolves. The thing to remember is that patterns are set up for all the players to give the quarterback the best chance to complete a pass.



This passing tree shows patterns for the right wide receiver (split end).

This passing tree shows patterns for tight ends. They're an integral part of a pass offense.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Interference is when a defender hits a receiver as the ball is on its way to him. Interference brings an automatic first down at the point of the penalty. **Offensive interference** is when the receiver hits the defender in an effort to not allow him to intercept the pass. This results in a 10-yard penalty against the offense.

The First Five Yards off the Line

Defensive backs are not allowed to touch wide receivers when receivers are running their pattern. However, that rule doesn't apply in the first five yards from the line of scrimmage.

From the line of scrimmage to five yards down the field, the defense *is* allowed to make physical contact with the receiver. This is usually called a bump-and-run technique. As a matter of fact, they can downright mug him. But after those five yards, they have to eliminate all contact. Thus, those first five yards are often the key to the pass pattern.

The passing game is all about timing. Receivers are expected to be at a specific part of the field at a specific time. That's why you see receivers do an assortment of tricky moves in those first five yards. They have to get past the possible contact. Some guys use quick little

stutter steps to try to fake out the defender. Other guys use what is called a *swim-over move*. This means they run to the defender and then as the defender tries to initiate contact, the receiver rolls his arm over the back of the defender (as in a swimming stroke) and takes off running.

But defenders don't always attack in those first five yards for a very simple reason—if they miss, they're in big trouble.

Going over the Middle: Leave Your Sanity on the Bench

The receiver who goes to the outside of the field deals with two defenders—a cornerback and a safety. But if the receiver runs to the middle of the field, he has to deal with a lot more defenders. In addition to the cornerback and the safety, suddenly there are two, maybe three linebackers in the area. And there may be the other safety to deal with as well.

The middle is crazy. Think of it this way: Is it easier to get something that only two people want, or to try and get the same thing when six others want it? Now, think about it in terms of the physical nature of professional football, where the best athletes in the world can see millions of dollars stuffed inside that ball.

The middle of the field is an exciting place, to put it mildly. It's where some of the best acrobatics occur. Going across the middle takes great discipline, focus, and body control. The receiver tries to find a hole, an area on the field where there are no apparent defenders. Although he may have a general idea, he doesn't really know where those defenders are located. Even if the receiver gets open and catches the ball, he knows that that ball is instantly going to attract a crowd. Once he catches the ball, he's in the middle of at least five guys—and they're all going to try to hit him. But from where?

Using the Clock

The passing game can be used very effectively to control the clock. Remember, when a pass is incomplete (not legally caught) the clock stops. Sometimes, teams deliberately throw incomplete passes to stop the clock. Also, if a receiver (or any ball carrier) catches the ball and runs out of bounds, the clock stops. Thus, sideline patterns are popular when time is winding down.



Joe's Record Book

On December 17, 2000, Terrell Owens of the San Francisco 49ers broke a 50-year-old record when he caught 20 passes in a game against the Chicago Bears. Tom Fears of the Los Angeles Rams held the previous record of 18, set on December 3, 1950.

Yards After Catch—Also Called YAC

There is a statistic that football people like to know about receivers: How many yards do they gain after they catch the ball? The acronym for this is *YAC*. For instance, if the quarterback throws a 10-yard pass to a receiver and then the receiver gains an additional 7 yards before being tackled, his *YAC* yardage is 7.

Other statistics to keep an eye on include average receptions per game, touchdown receptions, and yards per reception.



Joe's Tips

Watch how a receiver catches the ball. The most exciting receivers use only their hands to catch it because they control the ball immediately and have a bit more time to figure out where to go next. Receivers who trap the ball in their hands, forearms, and chest usually take a little longer to get the ball in position to run with it.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **front side** of the play is the direction the ball carrier runs to start. The **back side** is opposite where he is going.

Some guys are so concerned with catching the football that they can't do anything else and don't end up with much *YAC* yardage. Other guys have the ability to run with the ball once they get it. These are special *YACers*.

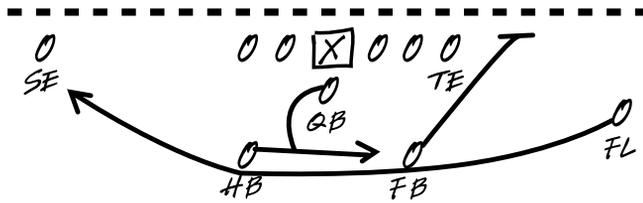
End-Around—It's a Trick Play

Wide receivers (and even tight ends on occasion) are sometimes called upon to take a hand-off. It isn't part of their job description, and that's why when it happens it's considered a *trick play*. This means that the offense wants to trick the defense. For a trick play to work, the stage has to be set up over a period of time.

An end-around is a running play for a receiver. It works by having the receiver run from one side of the field behind the offensive line, where he takes a hand-off and then runs around the other side, circling the entire defense.

The offense leads up to an end-around by first running a few plays in one direction, say the right. This gets the defense moving that way, flowing that way. If you can get a whole defense to begin flowing one direction, you've set up an end-around.

So if you have the defense flowing toward your right, the end around works this way: The quarterback hands the ball to the running back, who heads toward the right. Then, the receiver on the right, probably the flanker, heads left and takes a hand-off from the running back. Hopefully, the entire defense is chasing the running back and the wide receiver can run around the back of the defense for a big gain. This play has recently been dubbed the *reverse*, because the receiver reverses the direction of the play suddenly.



The standard end-around.

Sometimes, the quarterback himself gives the hand-off to the wide receiver, or sometimes there will be a double end-around wherein one receiver hands the ball to another receiver (running backs can also be involved in these) going back the other way. But the more hand-offs there are, the more interesting it gets.

Joe's Top Five Receivers, Starting with Jerry Rice

In the history of football, there are two players who have dominated their position like no others. One of those is running back Jim Brown, and you'll read about him in Chapter 10. The other is Jerry Rice.

Jerry Rice, who played for years for the San Francisco 49ers, is the greatest receiver of all time. He holds many receiving records, including most seasons with 1,000 or more yards pass receiving, most pass receptions in a career, and most yards gained in a career. He also holds the record for most yards gained in a season. And—get this—he holds the record for all players, not just wide receivers, for most touchdowns scored in a career. His has been and remains some career. There are five main reasons for Jerry Rice's success:

1. He was both a speed receiver and a possession receiver.
2. He played in a system that uses the West-Coast offense, an offense that relies on a short passing attack.
3. Jerry has great ability to get open.
4. He catches *everything*.
5. Nobody has ever been able to run after making the catch like Jerry Rice. Check the record book under *touchdowns*.

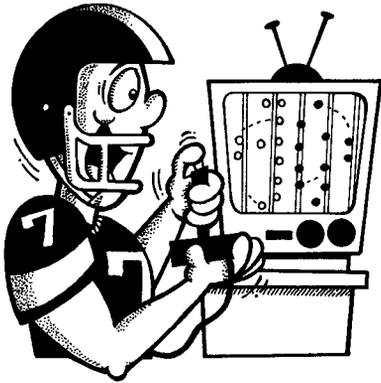
Here is the rest of my top five, in no particular order:

- **Raymond Berry**, sure-handed, precise receiver for the Baltimore Colts, had 12 catches for 178 yards in the NFL title game in 1958.
- **Mike Ditka**, a tight end with the Chicago Bears, Philadelphia Eagles, and Dallas Cowboys. He not only had great hands but was real nasty as a runner. He would just as soon run over someone as try to run away.
- **Paul Warfield**, a wide receiver for the Cleveland Browns and the Miami Dolphins, was an amazing athlete who could catch anything at any angle, and a key member of the 1972 perfect-season 17–0 Dolphins.

- **Art Monk**, a wide receiver for the Washington Redskins, could do it all. He never missed a day of work, he could run right by defensive backs, run over them, or take their heads off with devastating blocks.

The Least You Need to Know

- Receivers catch passes using a combination of speed and great hands.
- Receivers run patterns that test their ability to stop and turn. The three receivers on the field run complimentary patterns that help draw defenders off one receiver, who is then free to catch the ball.
- There are two types of receivers: speed receivers, known for their speed, and possession receivers, known for their ability to catch *everything*.
- The tight end lines up on the LOS next to the offensive line, usually on the right side. The flanker is on the same side (usually right) as the tight end but is lined up off the LOS. The split end lines up on the LOS on the side (usually left) opposite the tight end.
- Jerry Rice is the best receiver to ever play the game.



The Running Backs: Great Ones Control Games

In This Chapter

- ▶ Why great teams run
- ▶ The role of the fullback and the halfback
- ▶ Some guys are powerful, some elusive—the great ones are both
- ▶ How they line up

Behind the quarterback are the play-by-play heroes, the man or men who are counted on to bring the ball forward a few yards at a time. They're expected to do it over and over again. Bang, get up, do it again. A running back takes the ball and sees how far he can get before the guys wearing the other colors stop him. His job is simple: Take the ball and bang into the defensive line.

This is a chapter about running backs, the running game, and how and why a great running back is able to take over a game. I'll discuss the various types of running backs—fullbacks, halfbacks, and R backs (remaining backs)—as well as different formations; a few select plays, such as the sweep and the draw play; and the importance of vision. Finally, I list my top five running backs of all time.

The Importance of the Running Game

Great teams do what they want. They will not be denied, and that is painful to a defense. More important, it's painful to the defense's psyche.

Great teams run the ball. A running team pushes and punishes a defense with a ball-control offense, meaning that they run the ball and then let the play clock tick down to almost zero before starting a new play. The entire time the play clock is ticking, so is the game clock. In a running play, which is also called a rushing play (and a run is also called a rush), if the ball stays inbounds, the game clock continues to run. The play is over when the ball is *down*, which means the ball carrier has been tackled or has gone out of bounds. The play is also over in a passing play if the ball is not caught. When the ball is not caught, the play is incomplete, and the game clock stops until the next play starts.



Joe's Record Book

Jim Brown of the Cleveland Browns led the league in rushing eight years. Four players are tied for second place with four league-leading years.

Ball control wears down a defense as it runs down the clock. When a team has a good offensive line and a top-flight running back, chances are that at some point it will call upon its running game to take over—especially if it already has the lead.

If you can average 4 yards per running play, you will get 12 yards every 3 downs, and you need only 10 to earn a new set of downs. A good series of running plays eats up time on the clock by grinding out yards down the field. In theory, a good drive ends with a three-yard touchdown run. It is football at its most primitive. *Here we come—stop us.*

Fullbacks: Leading the Way

The fullback position is a job for a titan, a warrior, a *Moose*. The fullback's primary job is to lead the way on running plays. The fullback is the lead blocker.

Although a fullback does run the ball and catch passes, his main job is to lead the way for the halfback. An example of the optimal fullback-halfback relationship in recent years was that of Daryl Johnston and Emmitt Smith of the Dallas Cowboys. Nicknamed "Moose," fullback Johnston primarily blocked for running back Smith. Smith is generally considered one of the top running backs in the NFL, and the Cowboys won three Super Bowls with him as the running back and Johnston as fullback.



Joe's Record Book

Earl Campbell, a fullback for the Houston Oilers, holds the record for the most 200-yard games in one season—four in 1980.

When fullbacks do run with the ball, there is usually not much in the way of finesse. The normal NFL fullback is a straight-ahead, I-dare-you-to-stop-me type of runner. Big backs normally are about as subtle as a bulldozer. However, Jerome Bettis of the Pittsburgh Steelers is a big back who has great feet. I mean quick,

not pretty. So there are exceptions to the rule. But the rule is that fullbacks are mostly straight-ahead power runners and blockers. And it helps to have a fullback named Moose.

Halfbacks: Ball Carriers

More than a ton of weight meets at the line of scrimmage on each play in the form of offensive and defensive linemen. On running plays, halfbacks carry the ball through the middle of all of that. The ball attracts attention; thus, halfbacks attract attention. Running with the ball is a guaranteed way to get noticed—by the fans, by the coaches, and especially by the other team.

Runners make their living by getting hit. They get hit because the defense notices them with the ball. Everybody notices. Just watch. Carrying the football is like putting a sign on one's uniform that reads "Hit me!"

Playing running back means living with the pain. In fact, coaches even talk about the wear and tear on a runner's body as he goes through a season.

Ball carriers are tough. They must be in such a profession. Although all football players are tough, ball carriers are asked to prove their readiness for battle on every play. Ball carriers carry what everyone else on the field wants.

Halfbacks are generally smaller than fullbacks, but not by much. Halfbacks also catch passes and block. Although the halfback position relies heavily on natural skill, it's not an easily measurable skill like running 40 yards faster than anyone else or lifting more weight than anyone else. The important measurables for running backs, whether they are halfbacks, fullbacks, or R backs, are yards gained and touchdowns scored.

The R Back

The R back is used by teams that play only one running back. They can call their back a halfback or a fullback, but the real name for the lone back in a one-back offense is the R back, which stands for "remaining."



Joe's Record Book

Emmitt Smith of the Dallas Cowboys holds the record for most rushing touchdowns in one season—25 in 1995.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

You may wonder about the names **fullback** and **halfback**—especially since the halfback usually lines up farther back than the fullback. Here's my guess: Consider the fullback a full-sized football player, and the halfback less than that—maybe even half-sized.

Halfbacks and Fullbacks, a Great Tag-Team

The philosophy behind a running play is simple: Give the ball carrier the best possible chance to advance the football.

That best chance for the halfback to advance the football comes when his fullback is leading the way. Football is a game of great choreography. Everything must work together, and the fullback's and halfback's work must complement each other. When a halfback knows the way a fullback blocks, it helps the halfback run more effectively. For example, if the halfback is following the fullback, and the halfback knows that the fullback likes to hit a defender's outside shoulder, the halfback can get ready to run outside. The knowledge of the fullback's habits gives the halfback a little bit of an edge. Likewise, fullbacks know how their halfbacks like to run, and they make adjustments.

Great choreography is often also improvised. But improvisation only works if it ends up looking choreographed. That's why it's so important for a fullback and halfback to work together and learn each other.

The two positions have the same roles, but with different priorities:

Fullback	Halfback
Block	Run
Run	Catch
Catch	Block

Vision and Quickness

Great running backs have vision and quickness. Speed is not as important as quickness. There is beauty to the short burst in football. Sometimes, it's the difference between 9 inches and 99 yards. A short burst of speed can break through the very first hole, past the first group of would-be tacklers. At worst, running backs need to get through an area with five to seven defensive linemen and linebackers and avoid getting piled on every time. From there, anything can happen.

Speed and quickness can come from many areas, but one area that should not be overlooked in pro football is the game surface. Remember, artificial turf is "faster," and that especially affects running backs who can cut and grip much better on turf than they can on grass.

Finding a hole and getting through it requires vision and instincts. Some backs have great instincts. I think some of it can come from playing the game at a young age and being exposed to good coaching early. Learning where to look and what to look for are key skills necessary for a ball carrier. But still, in the end, it comes down to the fact that some guys have it, and some guys never will.

A back looks at a defense and has an idea where the defense is going to go. But it happens fast. In two tenths of a second, decisions are made that make or break a run. A lot of things in football hinge on an idea or anticipated movement. If a runner *thinks* the defense is going to do something, he will do something to counteract it. It's a game of actions and reactions. It's not hard science; there isn't a thought process that a runner goes through as he approaches the line with the ball under his arm. The coaches have done the thinking and the teaching. The players do the reacting.

The runner sees the defense and envisions the way the offensive line is going to block that defense. As he gets the ball, he makes his adjustments accordingly. He doesn't think about putting his left foot in front of his right; he just sees where he wants to go and he gets there.

North-South Runners and East-West Runners

Take out your compass. The offense is always going North or South on the field—toward the end zone. That is just the way it works. Once you know that, you can understand the term *North-South runner*. A North-South runner goes straight ahead.

Emmitt Smith of the Dallas Cowboys is an example of a North-South runner. He doesn't waste a lot of time trying to make people miss. He heads right to the hole. He has subtle moves. The slightest shifting of foot, just a slide of three or four inches where you can't hit him really solid. Emmitt Smith is elusive like all North-South runners. He just makes his moves in a very confined area, and then he dares the defense to bring him down.

An *East-West runner* is always trying to juke his way out of trouble, back and forth. It is not a compliment to be called an East-West runner. Watch any football game and you'll see one of these guys tap-dancing outside the hashmarks. That's where they usually end up—outside, away from the heavy traffic of the trenches.

And although these guys have the potential to turn a short run into a long run, they're just as likely to get caught behind the line of scrimmage.

But that elusiveness is exciting to watch. There is a term that goes back to the days of Elvis Presley in



Joe's Tips

The runners who end up with the most yards are usually the ones who run straight ahead—the North-South runners.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **scatback** is a small, swift running back with elusive moves. They are used a lot in third-down situations where they're counted on for their ability to scat here and there, making tacklers miss.

rock-n-roll—*swivel hips*. That’s an apt term to describe some running backs. It also explains the elusiveness because defensive players are taught to focus on the hips as they go for the tackle. A good set of swivel hips can really throw them off.

There was one player of recent years who had the ultimate swivel hips, and yet he defied description on the compass. That player was Barry Sanders, running back with the Detroit Lions. He was a North-South-East-West runner.

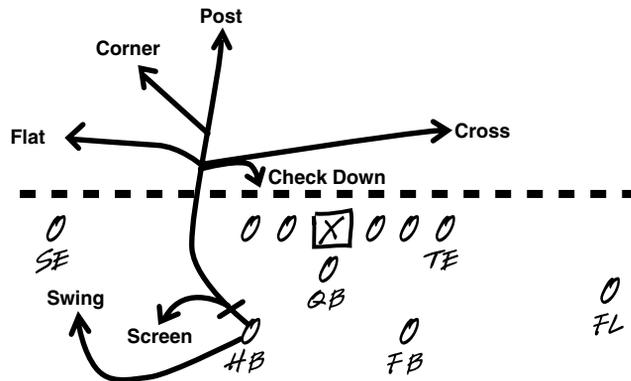
Sanders ran in every direction on the compass, but he always ended up going toward the goal line. He just took a circuitous route. When Sanders played, he made ballet-like moves—leaps, turns, things that you wouldn’t think are physically possible. Barry Sanders made the kind of moves that were made for slow motion, to watch over again in awe.

Catching Passes: A Safety Valve and More

Running backs catch passes. They are usually, but not always, a *safety valve* receiver, meaning they are a last-resort type of receiver. If the first and second choice of the quarterback are covered, he may start to look at his running backs. If the offense hasn’t thought of him first, in all likelihood neither has the defense. A safety valve is like a spout on a tea kettle—when it whistles, it lets the steam out. A safety valve receiver gives the quarterback a chance to escape a situation that may be overheating.

A running back is not always a mere safety valve receiver. Sometimes, as shown in the accompanying passing tree of patterns for running backs, he’s the primary receiver (note that in this tree, the patterns are called by names, not numbers).

The passing tree for running backs is a descriptive way to tell the running back exactly what pattern he should run.



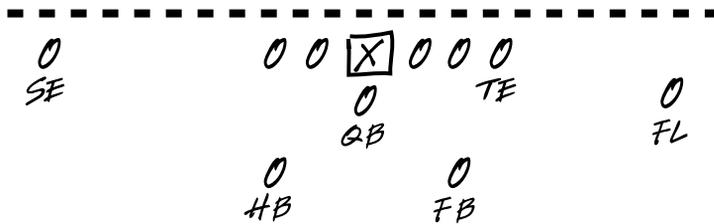
Formations for Running Backs

There are several basic ways to line up running backs. The idea is to give the running backs a chance to get to the line, see the blocks on the line, run through the line, or go out for pass patterns. Oh, and of course, to also be ready to block defenders at

every turn. Each lineup is called a formation and the coach chooses different formations based on the strengths and weaknesses of his offensive players, plus the strengths and weaknesses of the defensive opponent for the week. Let's take a look at each formation.

Split "T"

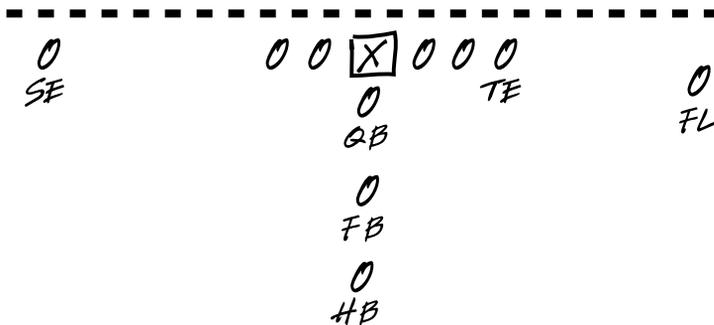
The split "T" formation is when both backs are split behind the quarterback. Neither one is directly behind the quarterback. This is more of a passing formation than a running formation because the backs are closer to the line of scrimmage. Each is behind the tackle or in the gap behind the tackle and guard.



The split "T" formation is a passing formation that features the fullback and halfback split evenly behind the quarterback.

"I" Formation

In the "I" formation, so called because it looks like an "I," the quarterback is behind the center and the running backs are in a line behind the quarterback. The fullback is about five yards from the line of scrimmage. The halfback is seven yards deep. The fullback lines up in a three-point stance, meaning both of his feet and one of his hands are on the ground. The reason is simple. The halfback needs to see over the fullback to the line and to the defense. The halfback takes a two-point stance, meaning only his feet are on the ground. His hands are on the front of his thighs and his eyes look over the back of his fullback. In the time it takes for the halfback to get to the line, the blocks should have developed.

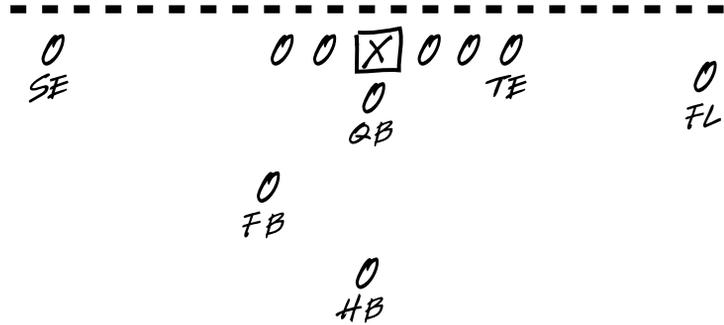


The "I" formation sets the running backs in a line behind the quarterback.

Offset "I" Formation

This is almost like the "I," except the fullback is moved over slightly to one side. He is lined up behind the tackle. The halfback, however, remains directly behind the quarterback.

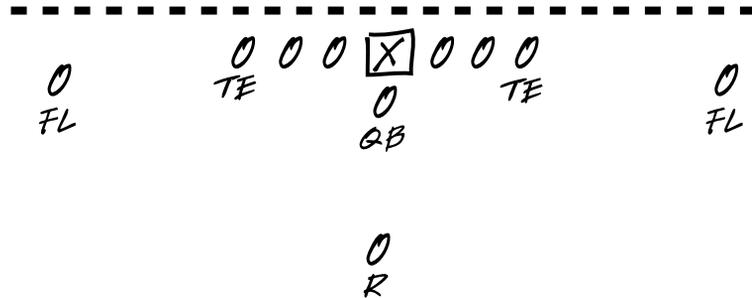
The offset "I" formation sets the running backs so that one is behind the quarterback and the other is off to one side.



Two Tight Ends with an R Back (Ace Formation)

This is a power formation because you're lining up an extra huge body closer to the offensive line.

Two tight ends with an R back (also called an Ace formation). There is only one back in the backfield.



Between the Tackles: The Meat and Potatoes of the Running Game

When an offensive team can run at the gut of a defense and find success, it has made a statement. It has said, "You can't stop us."

There are different ways to run the ball, but the most demoralizing way to hurt a defense is to stuff the ball right down its throat. A common name for this type of play is an *off-tackle*. When teams run off-tackle consistently, they show that they can control the ball with a power running game.

The Sweep

There is an old, rare art form in football that is still pulled out from time to time. It's called the *sweep*, and it's one of the most basic—and classic—plays in the game. The idea is simple—to run the ball to the outside of the field.

In a sweep, the halfback takes the hand-off and heads outside. When it works right, he has blockers in front of him, leading the way. On the classic sweep, both guards back up a step and then *pull* behind the line and lead the way. The fullback also leads the way. The center and tackle try to cut off the pursuit at the line, and then it all swings around the end.

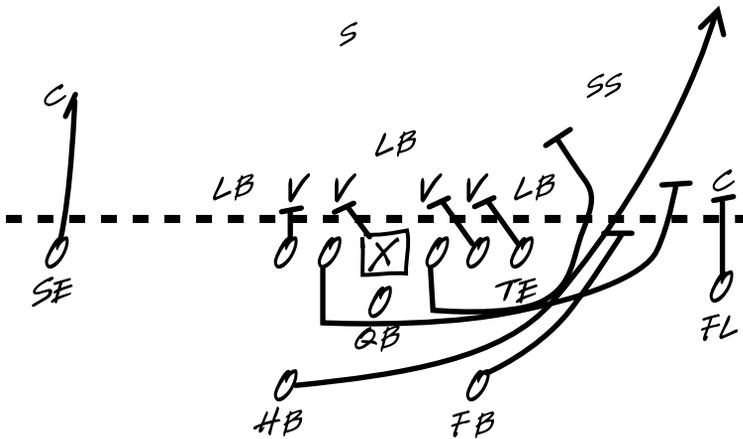
Vince Lombardi built a dynasty in Green Bay in the 1960s using this play as his primary weapon. It was one of those macho things—“*You know what we're going to do, so stop us.*”

In recent years, the sweep has not been used as much. One reason is simply that the athletes on defense are much faster now. Even if the blockers get out front, there are often defensive players fast enough to get to the play from the opposite side of the field. So, like everything else, the sweep often must be set up.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

When a lineman **pulls**, he pulls away from his place on the LOS and runs toward the side to block for a running back who's running the ball outside on a sweep.



The sweep is when the ball carrier runs parallel to the line of scrimmage until he gets outside, where he turns upfield.

The Draw Play

The draw play is a trick play that isn't. Say what? It's designed to trick the defense, so technically it could be called a trick play. Except it's used a lot in games, so that automatically disqualifies it from “trick” play status.



Joe's Tips

Some key statistics to look for when evaluating running backs include average yards per carry (4.5 is a good average), total yards per game (100 is a benchmark), and yards per season (1,300 is a benchmark—it used to be 1,000 yards but that was when the season was 14 games).

The draw play is designed to make the defense think that a pass is coming. The quarterback drops back from the line as if dropping back to pass. But when he gets a few steps back, he gives the ball to the running back, who was standing there waiting.

The offense wants the defense to commit to come after the quarterback. When they do, spacing is created between linemen. Spacing means holes—holes for the back to run through.

There's a bonus when a draw play works well. The linebackers drop back into pass coverage. So, if the running back gets past the linemen, he should have a cushion before he reaches the next level of defense, the linebackers.

There is yet one more layer to the strategy of the draw play—the *fake draw play*. Yes, teams can—and do—fake that they are faking a pass, and then really pass. Anytime an offense can create hesitation in a defense, it has an advantage.

Joe's Top Five Running Backs, Starting with Jim Brown

Some running backs have speed. Some have power. Some are elusive, and some run right over people. Jim Brown of the Cleveland Browns could do it all.

In eight of his nine years in the NFL, Brown led the league in rushing. He averaged an astonishing 5.22 yards per carry. Although many of Brown's records have since been eclipsed by the great Walter Payton of the Chicago Bears, Brown is still considered the best of all time by the mere fact of his rushing average. And anyone who ever saw Jim Brown carrying defenders down the field as if he were giving them rides in an amusement park knows for a fact that there will never be another Jim Brown.

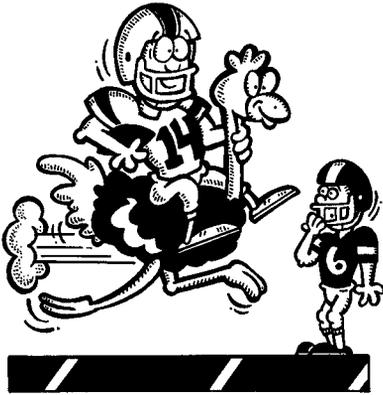
Here is the rest of my top five, in no particular order:

- **Walter Payton** of the Chicago Bears in the 1970s and 1980s. He holds the record for most yards in a career—16,726. Nicknamed “Sweetness” because he had such a sweet running style.
- **Gale Sayers** of the Chicago Bears in the 1960s. He was the most exciting open field runner of all time. Once, he scored six touchdowns in a game. His career was cut short by a knee injury.
- **Emmitt Smith**, a halfback with the Dallas Cowboys who holds the record for the most rushing touchdowns scored in a season—25.

- **John Riggins**, an R back with the Washington Redskins in the 1970s and 1980s. He was a combination halfback and fullback who ran with overwhelming power and tremendous speed. John was my teammate; the MVP of Super Bowl XVII, which we won; and one of the most powerful runners to ever play in the NFL.

The Least You Need to Know

- Great teams run the ball because ball control is directly related to clock control, and clock control is directly related to game control.
- Fullbacks usually lead the way for halfbacks, who must be quick, elusive, and powerful.
- There are a number of backfield formations (split "T," "I," offset "I") that running backs line up in for different reasons.
- The sweep is a classic old-time running play that is built on the concept of power around the end of the formation.
- Jim Brown was the best running back of all time, and he quit at the top of his game.



Strategies: A Lot of Ways to Go Eighty Yards or One

In This Chapter

- ▶ Different philosophies, running or throwing
- ▶ Learn the standard formations
- ▶ Smashmouth, air-it-out, and other funny names
- ▶ Making the most of the two-minute drill
- ▶ The DNA of offense

The strategy of the offense is to move the ball down the field and score touchdowns. See, it's an easy game.

Okay, it's not really *that* easy. In fact, the game offers almost unlimited possibilities for how to move the ball down the field. Of course, there are only two major possibilities—pass or run.

But there are different ways—philosophies, really—to approach putting together an offense. A basic rule that most teams, not all, follow is that teams must be able to run the ball on offense and stop the run on defense. From there, things get complicated.

Some teams like to throw the ball more. Some like to run. Some like to run to set up the passing game, and some like to pass to set up the running game. Nothing is etched in stone, except that all these philosophies have as their main goal putting points on the scoreboard.

This chapter covers basic offensive philosophies and presents some of the basic formations. It also covers the difference between smashmouth football, air-it-out football, the West-Coast offense, and the run-and-shoot. There are a lot of ways to go 80 yards or 1 yard. This chapter shows you a few of them.

Run, Throw, or Mix It Up

What to do with the ball? That's the question and there's no easy answer. Look around at the end of any NFL season and ask all the fired coaches if there's an easy answer. If you can get past the colorful language, they will surely tell you that there are no easy answers. Instead, there are great athletes and an 11-inch-long football that bounces funny.

Each coach comes to a team with a philosophy. Some coaches like to run, some like to pass, some like a good mix. The truth is, all would prefer a good mix because they all know that champions are the ones that can do everything.

Still, the question comes: Should coaches force their players to conform to their philosophy, or should coaches conform their philosophy to the talents of the players? It's tough to say. But generally, unsuccessful coaches try to force their system on their people, while successful coaches adapt to the personnel.

All offensive strategy starts with the question: *What do we do best?* Essentially, teams want to do what they do best because clearly that gives them the best chance to score and win.

A lot of factors dictate what a team does best. The first factor is always the talent of the players. All good offenses have two main factors—a great quarterback and a great halfback. Look at the last few Super Bowl champions. The Dallas Cowboys had quarterback Troy Aikman and halfback Emmitt Smith. The Green Bay Packers had quarterback Brett Farve and a combination of running backs, Edgar Bennett and Dorsey Levens. And the San Francisco 49ers had a combination of quarterback Steve Young and running back Rickey Watters. More recently, the St. Louis Rams had a combination of Kurt Warner and Marshall Faulk.

The success of these teams is not a coincidence. Teams need to run and pass. Teams that can do both, win.

There's more to figuring an offense than taking personnel into account. There's location. In what city is a team located? What's the weather like in November and December? Who are the opponents in their division? In the NFL, each team plays teams that are in its division twice a year—once at home and once away. Divisions tend to take on personalities, and coaches need to be aware of the personalities of their opponents before trying to put together a philosophy.

There are other considerations. Teams that play in colder weather, for instance, will need to rely on the running game more because it's much more difficult to have a

passing attack in brutal weather. Teams that play in a dome, on artificial turf, will want faster players.

Don't Make Mistakes

Discipline is a big word in football. Disciplined teams win much more often than undisciplined, mistake-prone teams.

So, the most basic philosophy in the game is *don't make mistakes*. Not committing penalties is part of a winning strategy. No team can be good if it's constantly being punished by the officials and made to work harder. The game is already hard enough.

But the biggest mistake and the hardest to overcome is the turnover. A turnover is an interception (a pass stolen by the defense) or fumble (the offense drops the ball and the defense recovers it). When a turnover occurs, it gives the other team an opportunity it wouldn't have had, and it gives them the ball much closer than they would have had it if they had waited for a punt.

Sometimes a turnover can be thought of as accounting for a two-touchdown turnaround. Suppose the offense is near the end zone when they turn the ball over. That's seven points it didn't get. Then, if the other team capitalizes on that fumble and scores, that's seven points the first team gave up. It all adds up to a 14-point turnaround.

Turnovers change momentum, and they change the mental approach of both teams. For the team that gets the ball, a turnover is called a *takeaway*—and it's like suddenly being given a gift. The team that loses the ball suddenly gets coal in their Christmas stocking.

The statistics on the effect of turnovers on winning are amazing. Check out the following statistics from the 2000 season. The more takeaways a team has, the better its chances of winning.



Joe's Record Book

The Chicago Bears of 1938 and the San Francisco 49ers of 1978 share the record for the most fumbles in a season—56.

How Takeaways Affected the Records of Football Teams, 2000

Teams with 0 takeaways: 18–26

Teams with 1 takeaway: 50–97

Teams with 2 takaways: 59–57

Teams with 3+ takeaways: 121–28

Teams with a +2 or more turnover margin: 121–15

Teams with a +3 or more turnover margin: 62–9

Formations: Playing Chess with Giants

A football game is a continual fact-finding mission, and a lot of the strategy has to do with formations. Sure, the game has some general rules about where the players line up. There have to be seven offensive men on the line of scrimmage, and five of them must be linemen who are ineligible to catch passes, for example. After that, there's a lot of leeway.

Each play is a fact-finding mission because the other team always does things for a reason—but the reason may not always be as it first seems. In fact, a failed play is sometimes as good as a successful one because that failure can tell you something about the other team.

The first goal of a formation is to enable a team to do what it does best. The next goal is to find out how the opposition lines up when it sees a particular formation. The first time the offense uses a particular formation is a test run. Sure, the offense wants the play to work, but if it doesn't, that's okay as long as they learned something. If the defense does the same thing the next time the offense comes out with the same formation, the offense has learned about a *tendency* of the defense. The next step is the important one—taking advantage of the tendency.

Everything in a football game is built upon what came before. What teams learn in the first quarter helps them decide what to do in the fourth. But it all starts with formations.

The Split “T” Formation

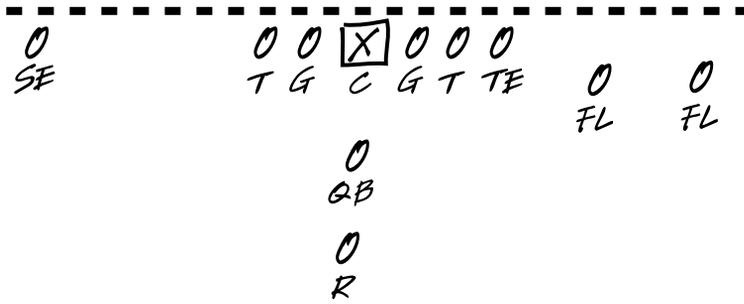
This formation, illustrated in Chapter 10, “The Running Backs: Great Ones Control Games,” is primarily a passing formation. There is a back on either side of the quarterback who can get out into pass patterns fast. But it can also be used for runs. The split “T” is balanced; it allows for runs or passes to both sides of the field.

Two-Tight-End Formation

This formation, also illustrated in Chapter 10, is primarily a running formation that allows for power runs to either side of the line.

Three Wide Receivers

This is a passing formation. Having three wide receivers gives the quarterback more options to throw the ball, and, just as important, it forces the defense to react. When a team has three wide receivers and a tight end, it can do a number of things, including put two of the wide receivers on one side with the tight end, or put only one on the same side as the tight end. In one possible three-wide-receiver offense, *trips right*, two of the wide receivers and the tight end all line up on the same side.

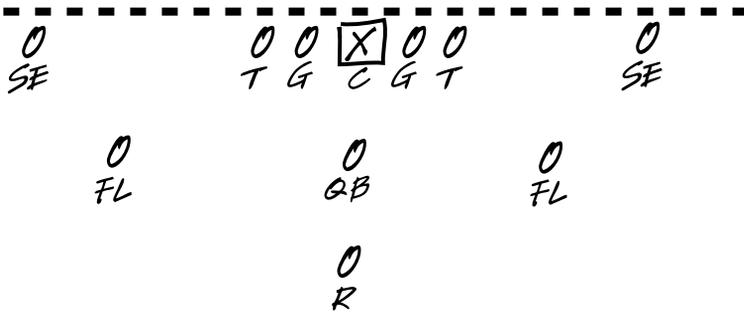


This is the three-wide-receiver, trips right formation. Two of the wide receivers and the tight end all line up on the same side.

Four Wide Receivers

Sometimes teams need to pass. It can be because time is running out or you need to score, but it's usually a combination of both. In those situations, teams like to line up with four wide receivers, like the St. Louis Rams do. This is where they may use a shotgun formation—in which the quarterback does not line up directly underneath the center, but instead lines up five yards back.

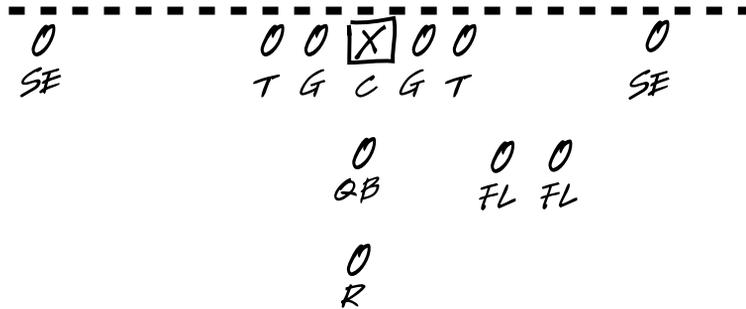
There are two ways to line up with four wide receivers. One way is to line up balanced, with two wide receivers on each side.



This is the four-wide-receiver, balanced formation. This is when there are four wide receivers on the field—with two on either side of the formation.

But sometimes, teams will want to line up three of the wide receivers on one side, called trips right. The idea is two-fold. First, to try to make the defense react to the formation. For instance, a team may want to put three wide receivers on the right in order to get the one receiver on the left room to work. By pulling the defense to the right, the formation frees up the receiver on the left to hopefully work one-on-one. The second part of this reasoning is that, if the defense doesn't bite and react to the formation, you have an automatic advantage by putting so many people on the right. The key is to make the right decision.

This is the four-wide-receiver, trips right formation, in which three receivers line up on the right side.



The Shotgun

Sometimes, the quarterback will line up five yards behind the center and wait for the snap through the air. This is called the *shotgun*. The name only refers to the placement of the quarterback. It does not refer to the placement of any receivers. The shotgun is used primarily in passing situations to give the quarterback a better perspective of the field; it also gives him an advantage in not having to backpeddle before throwing.

Smashmouth Football

Smashmouth football is a simple philosophy—run the ball and then run it again. And then after that, run it again. (Sounds like the Tennessee Titans.) There are usually about 65 offensive plays in a football game. If 40 of them are runs, the team is playing *smashmouth* football.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Taking the air out of the football means running the ball to an extreme—run after run after run. The idea is to **eat the clock** in order to get the game to end while your team is in the lead. By avoiding risky passes, teams take the air out of the football.

Smashmouth football is pure power. Woody Hayes, the legendary coach of Ohio State, compared power football to getting “three yards and a cloud of dust.” It is a challenge to the defense that says, “*You can’t stop us. We’ll get those three yards. Maybe more.*”

When a team has a lead, smashmouth football is beautiful because it demoralizes its opponent while taking time off the clock.

Another reason to play smashmouth football is to hide a quarterback who may not be the most gifted. If you run and run and run, the quarterback obviously doesn’t have to throw. If a team can get away with just running the ball, it makes the quarterback’s job easy. Hand off the ball and get out of the way. Hey, I could do that—even today.

And a final reason to play this way would be because your defense is so good no one could score on them.

This philosophy worked so well for the Baltimore Ravens, they won Super Bowl XXXV with it.

Air-It-Out Football

Sometimes teams have such a good quarterback that they can't resist letting him take charge of a game. This is certainly the most exciting brand of football. Again, there are usually 65 offensive plays in football. If a team passes 40 times, they're playing *air-it-out* football.

Give a gunslinger (like Brett Favre of the Packers) the ball and see what he can do with it. The passing game is fun to watch. It produces quick results. The ball flies through the air, receivers are asked to do great things, and the defense is ultimately challenged. The only problem is that things can go wrong. When an air-it-out offense plays a great defense, the defense can usually stop it because they really only need to focus on stopping the pass. But if the offense also has a running game that it can make the defense think about, it has a much better chance of succeeding. Balance is always the best policy because it forces the defense to be prepared for everything.

Big-Play Football

The Pittsburgh Steelers of the 1970s played mostly smashmouth football. They banged their big running back, Franco Harris, into the line over and over. Of course, the signature of the Steelers was their great Steel Curtain defense, but you don't win Super Bowls on defense alone. The Steelers won four Super Bowls. Clearly, they had a great offense, too.

And the thing about that Steelers offense was that despite its ability to pound the ball into the heart of any defense, it had something more. That Steelers team could strike big at any moment. It had a great, strong-armed quarterback in Terry Bradshaw and two big-play wide receivers in John Stallworth and Lynn Swann. Defenses knew that if they worried too much about the run, bombs would be flying over their heads.

More recently, big-play football has become the style of the Minnesota Vikings with Dante Culpepper throwing to the great young receiver, Randy Moss. But the Vikings defense is no steel curtain—they look more like vertical blinds.

Big-play football is simply a willingness to go for it all at any given time in a game. I believe teams need to call at least six long passes in every game.



Joe's Record Book

Eight players in NFL history have caught a 99-yard pass (the longest ever). The most recent was Robert Brooks (from Brett Favre) of the Green Bay Packers on September 11, 1995, against the Chicago Bears.

You need the long passes to keep the defense from crowding the line of scrimmage. And most important, you need to complete at least half of those long throws. If you throw six bombs and none of them is complete, you don't have a big-play offense. You have a busy punter.

The West-Coast Offense

Your football team does not have to be on the West Coast to play this offense. It doesn't even necessarily work better on the West Coast. In fact, the Green Bay Packers, playing in a place that no one will ever mistake for the West Coast, won Super Bowl XXXI using the West-Coast offense.

The West-Coast offense requires a good quarterback and receivers and relies on a number of short passes to advance the ball. Usually the quarterback drops back 3 to 5 steps and the receiver runs 5 to 10 yards. The purpose is to incorporate a quick-release, accurate passing game on first and second down in substitution for running plays. In this offense, there aren't a lot of big throws down the field. Instead, there are a lot of quick throws to the backs coming out of the backfield. The success of this offense depends a lot on what the receivers do after the catch.

The entire offense is based on timing. And it has been quite successful in recent years. But there are a couple of drawbacks. First, because the quarterback takes such a short drop, he gets hit a lot. And the other thing is the passes are so short a lot of balls get batted into the air or down at the line of scrimmage.

The Run-and-Shoot

There are trends in football. Everyone wants to be an innovator and folks follow success. When things don't succeed, they become dinosaurs. A dinosaur of recent vintage is an offense called the *run-and-shoot*.

The setup is a basic four-receiver formation. The only difference that the run-and-shoot brings to the equation is that on every play the quarterback does a slight *roll out*, meaning that he takes the snap and instead of dropping straight back a few steps, he runs back and to one side—usually the side of his throwing arm. So, if the quarterback is right-handed, he rolls a few steps to the right before setting and throwing. The run-and-shoot replaces the run with a short pass.

One of the biggest problems with the run-and-shoot was that it actually was too successful. Here's why. If a team took eight minutes to drive down the field and score a touchdown, the defense that gave up that touchdown was tired. Then, if the other offense—a run-and-shoot offense, let's say—scored in 30 seconds, the score was tied. But the problem was that the run-and-shoot team's defense ended up playing a lot more time. And for some reason, defenses get more tired than offenses. In the course of a game, those quick scores by an offense began to hurt their own defense.

The run-and-shoot offense sometimes had trouble scoring in the red zone (inside the opponent's 20). Without a tight end, it was difficult to run the ball with power, and the smaller field made it easier for defenses to cover receivers.

But for a while, the run-and-shoot had great regular-season success. The Houston Oilers, before they became the Tennessee Titans, made the playoffs a number of times using this offense but were unable to win big games. Over time, coaches figured out how to stop it, or at least slow it down. Every year, the average yards per play went down for the Oilers. A number of teams used to use the run-and-shoot. Although it has become a part of football's past, the St. Louis Rams run an offense very similar to the old run-and-shoot.

The DNA of Offense

To the best of my recollection (and because this is my book), all of the above strategies essentially started in two places—Cleveland, Ohio, and San Diego, California under the tutelage of two football geniuses: Paul Brown and Sid Gillman. Even now, there is a bit of crossover between the two systems, but in essence these philosophies remain quite pure.

One philosophy, called the West-Coast offense, involves a short passing game, while the other philosophy doesn't really have a name, just a style—power running and deeper passes. Although this second style doesn't have a specific name, it's only because it didn't become famous in any one particular part of the country.

When Paul Brown ran the Cleveland Browns in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, his teams were known for having powerful running backs like Marion Motley and Jim Brown. And yet, Paul Brown developed a sort of finesse passing game that actually evolved later under Bill Walsh in San Francisco into the West-Coast offense. That's right—the origins of the West-Coast offense are in the Midwest.

So follow the lineage from Paul Brown of the Browns to Bill Walsh of the 49ers. After Walsh, there have been a number of protégés who refined it even further—Mike Holmgren of the Packers and Seahawks, Steve Mariucci of the 49ers, Andy Reid of the Eagles, and Mike Sherman of the Packers. These are the disciples of a system, now called the West-Coast offense, dreamed up by Paul Brown decades ago. In the West-Coast offense, the running backs must be powerful and very good receivers.



Joe's Record Book

When Brian Billick took over as offensive coordinator of the Minnesota Vikings, head coach Dennis Green told him in a meeting that he wanted the best of both worlds—a Bill Walsh offense and a Joe Gibbs offense. That's all he said and then he walked out of the room. Amazingly, Brian pulled it off.

Meanwhile, in the 1960s, in the then-new American Football League, Sid Gillman was developing a different system that relied on power running and long passes. This is an offense built on power.

So follow this lineage from Sid Gillman to Ernie Zamezi (who was with the Rams, Chargers, Cowboys, and Patriots) to Tom Moore (offensive coordinator of the great 1970s Steelers' teams) to my Redskins's coach Joe Gibbs to Norv Turner, now the offensive coordinator of the San Diego Chargers. All followed the philosophy of power and big plays thought up decades before in San Diego by Sid Gillman.

And the lesson of both of these systems is the cardinal rule of all NFL strategy—if it works, copy it.

The Two-Minute Drill

At the end of each half, there is an automatic time-out with two minutes left on the clock. And then, everything changes. It looks like panic sets in. Teams go into a quicker mode because they know that there are only two minutes left.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **hurry-up offense** is one that is usually used with two minutes to go in the half. Almost all plays are passing plays designed to get as much yardage as possible and still stop the clock by having the receiver go out of bounds. Short passes to the sidelines work best. Runs, because the clock continues to tick, are not used often in the hurry-up offense.

In the final two minutes, teams try to score quickly. Everything is accelerated. Teams almost always pass and the clock is the major consideration. Seconds become treasures to hoard. Sometimes, teams call more than one play at a time so that everybody can regroup and line up without a huddle. The idea is to run plays quickly, get the ball out of bounds to stop the clock, and move the ball down the field fast.

Often it works. The reason is odd. Defenses, knowing what teams are trying to do in the final two minutes, play a *prevent defense*, meaning that it puts more defensive backs on the field and it pulls them far back. The last thing in the world the defense wants to do is give up a big play like a bomb. So instead, it is willing to give up shorter plays. The thing is, most two-minute offenses are quite happy to take the

shorter plays. At least at first. But in the end, it usually comes down to a showdown where one team or the other makes a stand.

The Size of the Field

Play-calling is also influenced by the length of the field within which teams have to work. Sure, all football fields are the same length. But field position changes continually, and that directly affects the offensive strategy. If a team is on its own 5-yard line, it has 95 yards to cross to get to the end zone.

There are dangers there; if you throw a short pass you run the risk that the other team could intercept it and return it for a touchdown (I know, I did this in Super Bowl XVIII). But there are also opportunities. Ninety-five yards gives the offense a lot of field to cover.

On the other hand, if a team reaches the red zone (inside the 20-yard line of the defense), the field becomes shorter. There's much less room to work. This brings a new meaning to the term accuracy. Normally, a quarterback may have about a three-yard window to throw the ball into in the middle of the field. But in the red zone, that window is usually reduced to about one yard. That's why quarterbacks make their money in the red zone. A shorter field requires more accuracy.



Joe's Tips

All football games inevitably come down to around five plays. Those plays could consist of any combination of a fumble, an interception, a big run, or a big pass. You never know *which* five plays, so pay attention.

When to Go on Fourth Down

Teams almost always try to get 10 yards and a first down in three plays. If they don't get that far in three plays, they usually punt, because if they don't make it on the fourth down, the other team takes over the ball right there.

However, there are times that teams use their offense on fourth down rather than punt it. The usual rule for going on fourth down is that they don't have a choice—in other words, time is running out and they need to score, so they are willing to take their last chance *right now*. But sometimes, coaches decide to go for it on fourth down early in the game. They may think they have a great opportunity *right now*, and they also may think that if they fail, they still have time to recover.

But going for it on fourth down is always a risky proposition.

The Least You Need to Know

- Good teams do what they do best and try to build their strategy around their players' abilities.
- Mistakes (such as fumbles and interceptions) can be deadly and are a key indicator of who wins and who loses.
- Good teams can do everything, and do, because sometime in the season they will need everything.
- Teams need a huge arsenal of weapons no matter what kind of offense they run—West Coast, air-it-out, big play, smashmouth, or something else. They need guts and smarts in deciding when to take risks, and they need to be efficient when time is running out.



Advanced Offensive Strategies: Like Rocket Science

In This Chapter

- ▶ How football teams communicate
- ▶ How audibles work
- ▶ The joy of creating mismatches

Sometimes, you'd swear that some Silicon Valley software firm was designing NFL offenses. But it really isn't being done by nerds with pocket protectors (no offense intended). This stuff is being designed by *football guys*, and these guys are smart. Let me tell you, if these football guys had gone into software instead of the NFL, they'd be kicking butt in Silicon Valley.

I admit it. This stuff *is* complex. But, as you'll see, a lot of it is also common sense. Some things in football aren't logical, they just *are*. But most of football, even the complex stuff, makes sense. After all, folks have been winning football games for a long time—and every one of them understood the game. So can you.

This chapter covers the advanced stuff that NFL players must deal with, including the communication system among the players and with the coach during the game, the rules and strategies regarding motion and shifting, the role of mismatches, and why intelligence is so important for a football team. The best part is that I'm going to simplify it. No downloading required.

The Communication System—Say What?

I speak two languages—English and *football*. The two languages are not similar. Whereas one language, English, has nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and the like, football has abbreviations.

The language of football is one of quick communication—because on the field there just isn't time to say, *“All right, Jerry, I think you should run an out pattern, and Michael, you should run a post, and Ben, I'd like you to run a slant, and gosh, Emmitt, maybe you could run a little swing pattern off to the right, and Daryl, if you could hang out near me and block any of those big defensive linemen, I would really appreciate it. Oh, and you offensive linemen, could you please do a slide block to the right because I think I might move a little to the right before I pass the ball.”*

Instead of all that, the quarterback might just say, *“Boomerang.”*

In football, you have to communicate very quickly, very succinctly. Teams use one word or one number or a combination of them to describe what the plan is for any particular play. Every team has a different communication system.

Think back to the passing trees illustrated in Chapter 9, “The Receivers: Glue on Their Fingers and Rockets in Their Shoes,” for wide receivers and Chapter 10, “The Running Backs: Great Ones Control Games,” for running backs. Each tree has nine numbers or names of patterns. Each number or name stands for a specific pattern. For instance, a 9 route on a wide receiver passing tree is a Go route. A 1 route is a Quick Out.

All teams run essentially the same routes. The key to understand is that every route has a number and that every receiver and quarterback knows those numbers.

Got that? Good. Okay, next step.

What's in a Name?

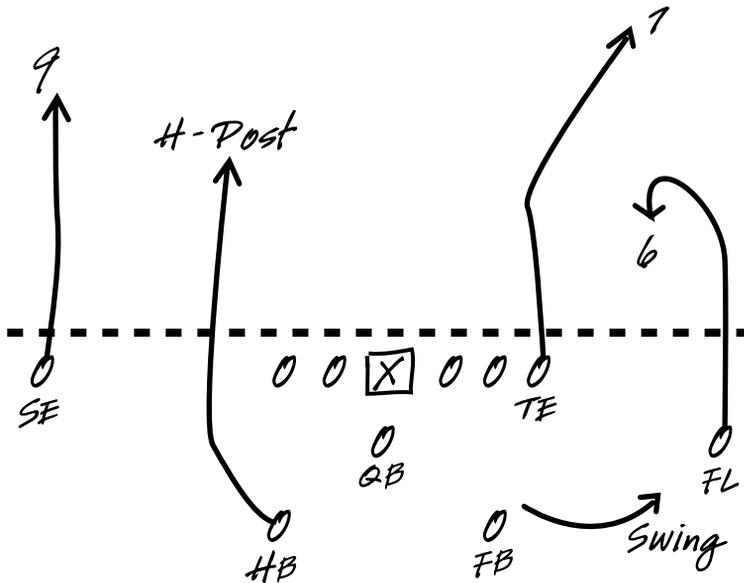
There are usually three receivers—a split end, a tight end, and a flanker. The play is called with a pattern for each player, starting on the single receiver (split end) side. Each runs a pattern that is described by one of the patterns in the passing tree. So, let's say the split end runs a 9 route, the tight end runs a 7 route, and the flanker runs a 6 route. (Remember, you can flip back to Chapters 9 and 10 to refresh your memory of what each route looks like.) Then, let's say that the halfback runs an H-post route, and the fullback runs a swing.

Let's review:

- Split end: 9 route
- Tight end: 7 route
- Flanker: 6 route
- Halfback: H-post
- Fullback: Swing

All of this taken together is a play. And, if it were called by the numbering system, the quarterback would set the formation by saying, “Split right,” and then, “9-7-6 H-post, Swing.” And everyone would know what to do. See, it’s a foreign language.

Following is what that play looks like:



The play is 9-7-6 H-post, Swing, in which five players are given specific pass routes to run.

Many teams run the same play. But every team calls it something different. The numbers for the patterns could be different in some systems. In another system, the entire play could be called by words instead of numbers—say, “Ohio pass.” Not only is football a different language, but clearly there are many dialects.

But Wait, There’s More

There is a difference in philosophy, though, between naming every pattern for every player and simply calling one name that stands for everything. For instance, the 9-7-6 H-post, Swing tells every player specifically what to do; each player listens for his verbal signal—the one that tells him the pattern he should run. Calling the same play *Ohio pass* requires more memorization on the part of each player. A lot more. Here’s why. When the quarterback says, “9-7-6, H-post, Swing,” each player listens for his number—the one that tells him the pattern he should run. But, if the quarterback says, “Ohio pass,” each player must automatically know their pattern. Sure, it sounds the same. But wait.

Let’s say the quarterback calls a slightly different play: 3-7-6, H-post, Swing. It’s nearly identical except that the single-side receiver runs a 3 pattern instead of a 9 pattern. The other players run the same pattern. This is easy to figure out if the name of the

play is 3-7-6, H-post, Swing. But what if another team calls that play *Utah pass*? Instead of a slightly different name, you have an entirely different name, even though only one player does something different. So again, more memorization is required on the part of the players.



Joe's Tips

It would be good if every player on the field knew where every other player was going on every play. It would be good, but it isn't absolutely necessary—except in the quarterback's case. The quarterback has to know what everyone is going to do. That's just another reason being a quarterback is such a difficult job, and why quarterbacks get the big bucks.



Joe's Tips

When Joe Gibbs, my coach with the Washington Redskins, talked about putting a football team together, he had three criteria: character, intelligence, and ability. He ranked them in that order. Gibbs, a coach that took four teams to the Super Bowl, ranked intelligence above ability. That should tell you a lot.

Now, take it a step further. You can even run a 9-7-6 *H-post, Swing* from a different formation. This is easy to do if the quarterback calls the formation in the huddle. But some teams actually use the formation as part of the play call. So, the same play, which is called an *Omaha pass* from one formation, is suddenly a *Boomerang pass* from another formation. Same play, same patterns—different formation and different name.

It is a foreign language. Really. The best analogy I can give for why some systems are easier to learn than others is from when I was in high school. Back then, many of my friends and I took Spanish instead of Latin because we thought it was easier to learn.

Some offensive systems are easier to learn than others. This doesn't make any one system better than any other, but it does make some systems better suited to certain players than others. In Chapter 1, "So You Want to Be a Monday Morning Quarterback," I said that football is 85 percent mental and 15 percent physical. The truth is that a team with smart players can really win games with smarts and deception. And football is a game of smarts and deception.

Where Do the Runners Run?

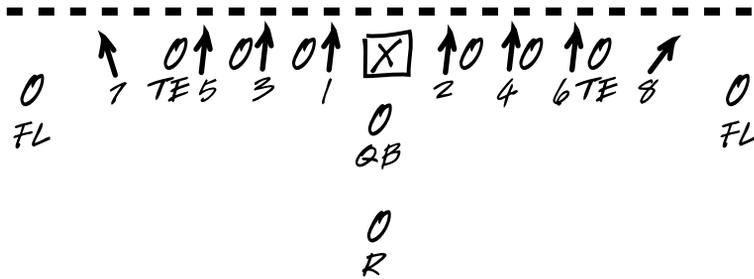
You know about the numbering system for the passing tree. But the holes in the line where the running backs are supposed to run are numbered as well, and the quarterback directs the running game as much as the passing game.

Teams usually use odd numbers for the holes left of the center and even numbers for the running patterns on the right.

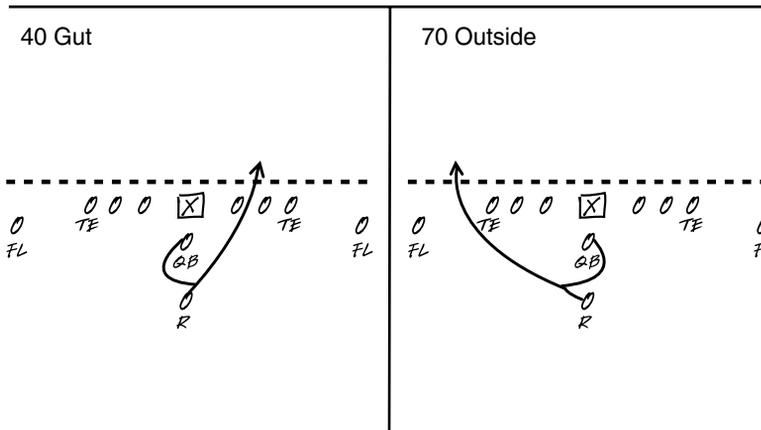
If you wanted to run the play 40 Gut, in the huddle, you would say "Trips Right, 40 Gut." This gives the formation and the play. The line has memorized the

blocking scheme for a Gut run. The 40 tells them that the running back will run at the 4 hole—on the right side of the center.

How do the players know the difference between a running play and a passing play? Again, through memorization. When players hear a play called, they know what to do.



Running holes for a two-tight-end offense, and two examples of plays: The 40 Gut and the 70 Outside.



The Quarterback Isn't Listening to Elvis

In the old days—the early part of my career, for instance—quarterbacks used to call their own plays. When I played under George Allen, I called my own plays. But offenses continue to get more and more sophisticated, and today quarterbacks are only allowed to call audibles (you'll learn about audibles in the next section of this chapter). Otherwise, coaches call plays. That is, the offensive coordinator sends a message to the quarterback in the huddle telling the quarterback which play to run.

This play-calling is now done with a radio signal beamed into the quarterback's helmet. That's right, quarterbacks wear a sort of Walkman—speakers inside his helmet. He's not listening to Elvis, The Beatles, or Celine Dion. Instead, he's listening to his offensive coordinator tell him which play to run.



Joe's Rules

The radio communication is shut off 10 seconds before a play is run. The coach can't keep talking to the quarterback as he walks to the line of scrimmage. And believe me, from a quarterback's perspective, they don't shut them off soon enough. A quarterback has his own thoughts—but the coach always seems to have something more to say.

On occasion, technology breaks down and the radio doesn't work. In those cases, plays are still called from the sidelines but with baseball-type signals such as you would see a third-base coach use to communicate with the batter. This was how it was done when I played and was one of the fun parts of the game for me. Players got a chance to make up their own signals.

If the person giving the signal on the sidelines touched the top of his head, that meant a certain number. If he grabbed his nose, that meant a different number. If he put his hands in a "V," that meant a certain formation. If he made a muscle like a muscleman, showing me his bicep, that meant strength—where the tight end should go. So, if he showed me his right bicep, that meant the strength of the formation was to the right.

Following is an example of how a team might use the numbering system with signals.

If technology breaks down, coaches can call plays with specific signals.



Hands next to thighs = 1



Hands on front of thigh = 2



Hand on front of belt = 3



Hand on side of belt = 4



Hand on stomach = 5



Hand grabbing neck = 6



Grabbing the nose = 7



Hand on shoulders = 8



Hand on head = 9

Usually, at least two and often three people give signals from the sidelines at once. The reason is that teams don't want the defense to be able to steal the signals, and if only one person were giving them, they'd have a chance of doing that. With three signalers, only one is giving the real signals, and the quarterback knows which one.

Audibles: Changing the Play

Sometimes, the quarterback, looking at the defensive formation prior to the snap, realizes that the play called into the huddle by the coach was not a good idea. It could be because the defense has anticipated the play and is loaded up to stop it. Or it could be because the defense has lined up in a vulnerable alignment and the offense could take advantage of it with a different play. In either case, the offense wants a chance to change the play.

But clearly, the offense doesn't want to tell the defense what they're going to do. So, they have to have a system of communicating at the line of scrimmage. That system is the audible.

Audible plays are usually called with colors as the code. The offense has a *live color* that signals that an audible is coming. For instance, that live color could be *black*. This means that if the quarterback comes to the line of scrimmage and sees a reason to change the play, he could first yell the color of the live audible—"Black!"

By yelling "Black," he tells the offense that he wants to change the play. Whatever he yells after yelling black, he is telling the team the new play. If he yells, "Black Utah," he is switching to the Utah play. If he yells, "Black boomerang," he is switching to the boomerang play.

But there are other colors in the rainbow besides black (okay, black isn't in the rainbow, but bear with me). For instance, there is yellow, my personal favorite. So, if black is the live color but the quarterback comes to the line and yells, "Yellow 31," the defense may think he's calling an audible to change to play 31. But in reality, yellow means nothing, nothing at all. Yellow 31 was called to confuse the defense.

And, as you recall from Chapter 7, "The Quarterback Is the Movie Star," there is such a thing as a dummy audible. If the live color is black, the quarterback will call a play in the huddle and then tell everyone that he is going to call a dummy audible. The reason for this is obvious. The quarterback does not want the defense to know what the live color is. He is, in effect, fooling the defense into thinking that the live color audible is actually a dummy color. So,



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Almost every team snaps the ball **on two**, meaning the snap will come when the quarterback says, "Hut one, hut two." When he says, "hut two," the ball is snapped. Sometimes, to fool the other team, the offense will try snapping on "hut three." However, when an audible is called, the offense automatically reverts to snapping the ball at "hut two."



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **check-with-me** is where the quarterback gets in the huddle and calls, "Check with me." What he's saying is, "I'm not going to call a play now. I'll call it at the line." He sets the formation, and then when he gets to the line of scrimmage, he looks at the defense and calls the play based on what the defense looks like.

the quarterback calls the play and then he says, "No matter what I say, we are running this play."

At the line, he yells, "Black." The defense, in the game, has already sort of noticed that black appears to be the live audible. But this time, there is now a dummy audible. Black is called but the play doesn't change.

Remember, football's a head game. It's one of those, *I want you to think I'm going to do this, but I'll do something else instead.*

Audibles are called about 10 percent of the time. If they are used much more, that means the offensive team did not do a very good job of preparing a game plan.

The quarterback can also call a *check-with-me*. The check-with-me is called in the huddle and tells the team that the quarterback will wait and call the play at the line of scrimmage (LOS). A check-with-me works the same as an audible, except that it doesn't change the play, it sets it at the LOS.

Shifting

When the quarterback comes to the LOS, the first thing he yells is, "Set." That tells everyone to get into their set position. At that point, the offensive line cannot move. However, the other players on offense are allowed to release from their set position, move to another place on the field, and then get set again. This is called *shifting*.

An example of shifting would be if the tight end lined up on the right side of the formation and then, after the quarterback yelled "Set," jogged to the other side of the line to reestablish himself before the ball is snapped.

When players shift, they have to come to a stop before the play begins. Five players can shift at one time as long as they all come to a stop. Defensive players can move all they want before the snap of the ball.

Motion

Motion is different from shifting. Motion cannot begin until all shifting has ended. Motion is when a player is still moving when the ball is snapped.

Motion is used for a number of reasons. For one thing, motion helps tell an offense what the defense is planning for that play. If the offense sends a man in motion (a running back, tight end, or a wide receiver—these are the only three positions that can go in motion), and a defensive player mirrors him, it probably means the defense is in a man-to-man coverage rather than zone coverage. If the defense doesn't send a

man with him, but instead just slides in the direction of the motion, it usually means zone coverage.



Joe's Rules

When the ball is snapped, a player in motion must be moving parallel to or away from the line of scrimmage. Players in motion can move in any direction before the ball is snapped but cannot be moving toward the line of scrimmage when the ball is snapped. If the player is moving toward the line of scrimmage when the ball is snapped, that is *illegal motion*—a five-yard penalty.

Motion can also give certain receivers an advantage in getting out into routes. For instance, Art Monk, whom I played with and who was one of the greatest receivers of all time, was not very good at getting away from the *press* early in his career. However, when he got past the press and into his route, he was incredible. So quite often, we would send him in motion. After all, it's harder to hit a moving target, and Art was very good at getting away from the press when he had a chance to be moving first. Also, he was smart enough to handle motion, and we clearly wanted to get him the ball. When you have a guy who is that good, you want the ball in his hands as much as possible.

Mismatches

Motion can also be used to create *mismatches*—when a particular defensive player doesn't have the necessary skills to cover a particular offensive player. For instance, motion can be used to get a running back covered by a linebacker instead of a safety. Defenses don't want a linebacker covering a running back because running backs are usually faster than linebackers.

Teams can also get mismatches in the running game. That was part of the philosophy of the two-tight-end offense. Normally, a defense plays two safeties—a free safety and a strong safety (see Chapter 16, “The Secondary: The Last Best Hope”).



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **press** is when a defensive back lines up within one yard of the receiver and tries to stop him from getting off the line.

The free safety usually lines up in the middle of the field, and the strong safety lines up on the tight-end side of the field. The free safety is responsible for protecting the deep middle, and the strong safety provides pass coverage against the tight end or running back and helps stop the running game.

The problem for the defense in defending against a two-tight-end offense is that when there are two tight ends, there aren't enough safeties to cover them. The defense certainly doesn't want to take the free safety out of the middle of the field to cover the other tight end, because that leaves the middle of the field vulnerable. So the offense, running to the side without the safety, can create a mismatch because there should be enough blockers to cover all the defensive people. This gives the running back room because the defense doesn't have any *support*, or defensive backs, to come up and help stop the run.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

When the defense **rushes** the quarterback, it is charging at him in an effort to tackle or disrupt him.

The running game also provides a mismatch opportunity. If the offense has a 300-pound guard and wants to run a sweep to the right, it would like to force a cornerback to come up and support that run. The cornerback may be about 185 pounds. If that 300-pound guard is going to block that 185-pound defensive back, the offense has created a mismatch. When there is a 300-pound mass of body that is agile and quick, and in all likelihood quite nasty, going up against a smaller individual who really doesn't look forward to contact anyway, that is a mismatch.

Blitzes

Sometimes, the defense tries to bring more people at the quarterback than the offense has people to block. This is called a *blitz*. (You'll learn more about blitzes in Chapter 17, "Strategies: Attack or React.") For now, though, you should know that normally, the defense will *rush* three or four linemen on every single play.

When the defense also rushes a linebacker, it is called a *dog*. When the defense brings more than one linebacker, or rushes more than five people, it's called a blitz. The idea is to attack *so fast* that the offense is hurried into making a mistake.

The offense knows that the defense might blitz. So, it tries to figure a way to beat it. So remember:

- Blitz = More than five rushing
- Dog = Five rushing

Recognizing the blitz is the job of everyone, but especially the quarterback and wide receivers. The quarterback and wide receivers need to make a very quick adjustment. The wide receiver must run a shorter route, and the quarterback has to throw the ball quickly to avoid being tackled with it. The quarterback has about 1.5 seconds to throw the ball. In a blitz, the quarterback takes three steps back and then throws the

ball to the receiver, who should be running a quick slant at a 45 degree angle up the field. The receiver can also go up the field five yards, and then turn and face the quarter-back. This is called a hitch and is also a way of beating the blitz when the corner plays off the wide receiver.

Blitzes can really hurt the offense, but if the offense knows they're coming, they can backfire on the defense.

Tackle Eligible to Catch a Pass

Remember that only the two outside men on the line of scrimmage are eligible to catch a pass; all others on the line of scrimmage cannot.

But this rule does not automatically apply to the tackle. Normally, a guy wearing a 70s number on his jersey is ineligible, but the tackle can report to the official as an eligible receiver. The tackle must actually go to the official and say something like, "Mr. Official, I am reporting as an eligible receiver." The official will then allow him to be eligible and will also inform the defense.

Having an extra eligible receiver can be important in short-yardage situations. A short-yardage situation is one in which the offense needs two yards or less for a first down or for a touchdown. In these situations, the offense will sometimes put lots of big bodies right on the line of scrimmage and try to simply use a power run to get the little bit of real estate it needs. Thus, it may line up an extra tackle—because he is big—on the outside of the formation.

And sometimes, the offense won't run the ball but instead will actually throw the ball to the tackle, who is now an eligible receiver. Everybody on offense, especially the tackle, gets a kick out of that. The defense usually is not amused.

Trick Plays

Speaking of amusing the defense, there is nothing like a good trick play—one designed to trick the defense into thinking one thing is happening when, in fact, something completely different is happening. When they work, trick plays are wonderful. When they don't, they can really backfire.

An example of trick play is a *flea flicker*, in which the quarterback takes the snap and hands the ball to the running back as if it's a running play. But just before the running back gets to the LOS, he turns and pitches the ball (throws it underhand with both hands) back to the quarterback. If the fake run worked, the defense is all geared up to stop the runner. And the split end should be wide open downfield to catch a bomb from the quarterback, who should have time to throw.



Joe's Tips

The offense wants to recognize the blitz in order to take advantage of it. If the defensive backs line up closer than normal to the line of scrimmage, it could mean a blitz is coming.

The Game Plan

Every team has a game plan—a choice of plays that it wants to use in specific situations. The game plan is usually on one sheet of paper and has several different situations such as *first down and 10 yards*, *second down less than 7*, *2-minute*, *goal line/short-yardage (GL/SY)*, and so on. Under each situation, there are several plays the team can choose from. The example game plan that I've created here won't show you every play a team might have, and you might not understand what all the play abbreviations mean (after all, each team has its own play names), but it will give you an idea of the complexity of a game plan.

OFFENSE			GAME PLAN		
1st & 10			+20 RED ZONE		
RUN	FORMATIONS	PASS	RUN	FORMATIONS	PASS
1. 40/50 Gut	(Split, I, 2TE)	1. 585	1. 20/30 AOI	(Split, Trips)	1. 976 HP Swing
2. 60/70 Outside	(R, I, Trips)	2. Scram 3/7	2. 40/50 Gut	(Trips, Over, I)	2. Ch. 10 212
3. 60/70 Counter	(R, Trips)	3. Ch. 10	3. 60/70 Counter	(2TE, Pop I)	3. RunPass 40/50 Gun
4. 20/30 AOI	(I, Stag, I)	4. Flash/Lightning	4. 40 Gut/Around	(Spread, Trips)	4. 333 Pump
				(Gun, Trips)	5. QB Draw
2nd & 7—			2 MINUTE		
RUN	FORMATIONS	PASS	RUN	FORMATIONS	PASS
1. 20/30 Reach	(I, Trips)	1. Ch.20/30 18 Pass	1. 20/30 Draw	(Trips-Double)	1. Dash 875
2. 40/50 Sprint Draw	(Trips)	2. Scram 3/7	2. 80/90 Quick Sweep	(Trips)	2. Dash Pump
3. 60/70 Outside	(R, Br.)	3. Scat Dodge	3. 20/30 T. Trap	(Trips, Double)	3. 428 ycs
4. 80/90 Toss	(Trips, Double)	4. 989 ycs	4. 60/70 Over Draw	(Trips Rk. Whiz)	4. Scram 3
				(Whiz, Trip W)	5. 44/76
2nd & 7+			GL/SY		
RUN	FORMATIONS	PASS	RUN	FORMATIONS	PASS
1. 40/50 Gut	(R, I, Open)	1. Hi/Lo 63	1. 60/70 Chip	(IRTW, F mo.)	1. RollPass (Z)
2. 60/70 Outside	(R, Trips)	2. 79 R Wide	2. 60/70 Blast	(IRTW, St. I)	2. Juke 97 "o"
3. 20/30 Lead Draw	(I, Sh.mo)	3. 33 Run it	3. 20/30 Pop Trap	(Brown, F mo.)	3. Spring Draw
4. 40/50 Dive	(Split, R)	4. 363 Pump (all)		(IRTW-Y mo.)	4. Ch. 50 Yove
3rd+7 (3-7)			TRICK PLAYS		
RUN	FORMATIONS	PASS	FORMATIONS		
1. 20/30 T-Trap	(Trips, F.mo)	1. Scram 3 (pump)	1. Flea Flicker	(Trips mo.)	
2. 40/50 Speed Draw	(R, Sh.mo)	2. Utah Pass	2. Run-Pass 60/70 Outside	(2 TE)	
3. 40/50 Lead Nose	(I, Wham)	3. "O" 88 Roll Rt.	3. Hook & Ladder	(Trips Fake mo.)	
		4. Speed 3			
3rd+7 (3-7)			2 PT.		
RUN	FORMATIONS	PASS	RUN	FORMATIONS	PASS
1. 20/30 Trap	(Trips, Gun)	1. 989 ycs	1. 70 Chip	(I Tight Wing)	1. Speed
2. 40/50 Stutter	(Trips, 4w, G)	2. Dash 39 CB	2. 60/70 Blast	(I F mo., Trips)	2. Punt
3. 80/90 Q Sweep	(Trips Gun)	3. 933 Under Sc.		(I Tight Wing)	3. Run/Pass
		4. 428 Wide Swing			

This is what a game plan looks like.

Building the Perfect Offense

All the strategy in the world doesn't work without players. And there are dream personnel for all offenses. This is mine:

- ▶ The center should be about 6'3" and about 300 pounds.
- ▶ The guards should be 6'4" and about 310 pounds. These guys should be athletic enough to pull out and lead a sweep but strong enough to take on the big butts in the middle of the defense.
- ▶ The tackles should be 340 pounds or more and at least 6'5". They need strength and quickness to take on the speed rushers coming from the corners.
- ▶ The team should have two tight ends—not necessarily on the field at the same time, but rather, interchangeable for different situations. One tight end should be about 250 pounds, strong enough to block a linebacker, but able to get out and catch passes. The other should be about 275 pounds, also able to catch passes, and really act like an extra tackle to block on running plays.
- ▶ One running back should be big—230 pounds and able to pound the ball up between the tackles. He needs to be able to run through the big guys, take punishment, and be willing to come back for more.
- ▶ One running back should be about 180 pounds with great shake-and-bake moves to stop guys from even touching him. This back should have great hands to catch passes.
- ▶ One wide receiver should be 6' and tough enough to consistently go over the middle.
- ▶ One wide receiver should be about 6'3" and able to jump over defensive backs for balls thrown that only he can catch.
- ▶ The quarterback should be about 6'3", quick on his feet, able to make good decisions, with a rocket for an arm. Above all, he should be accurate and smart.

The Least You Need to Know

- ▶ Play-calling is a foreign language that relies on colors, numbers, and abbreviations.
- ▶ There is one live color that the quarterback yells to the offense to tell them an audible is coming.
- ▶ The offense wants to create mismatches to take advantage of the defense. Offenses want to get their best guy on the defense's worst guy.
- ▶ Football is a microcosm of society. Just as you need a plan to be successful in anything in life, you need a game plan to be successful in a football game.



The Guys Who Control the Chaos

In This Chapter

- ▶ What each official does
- ▶ Learning the penalties you'll see during a game
- ▶ Those funky referee signals and what they mean

They call them *zebras* because they wear black-and-white striped shirts, but their real title is *officials*, and they have very difficult jobs. They stand in the middle of these huge people wearing armor, and they decide when someone has broken the rules, when someone has caught the ball, or when someone goes out of bounds.

Think about it. No two people ever see something exactly the same way, but officials are supposed to see things exactly as they *really* occurred. They have the unenviable task of trying to make a split-second decision in a game that is played in fractions of inches. They have to make a decision based on something that happens literally in the blink of an eye.

Officials are put under a microscope. The players are looking at them and their decisions. The coaches are looking, too, so are the fans in the stadiums, and so is that big eye in the sky called television.

This chapter covers the officials, who they are, what each one's responsibility is, and where they are on the field. It lists the various penalties, what each one costs the offending team, and what the signal is that tells you which penalty occurred.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

When a player is tackled by an opponent, or looks like he is tackled, an official will blow his whistle, stopping play. The player is considered **down by contact**.

Who Are These Guys and Where Are They?

Officials are part-time employees of the National Football League. Some work full-time as teachers, some as insurance salesmen, some as principals. All are dedicated to football.

All have whistles. A whistle, when blown, signifies the end of a play because of either a tackle or a penalty. It also signals the play clock to start for the next play.

But who are they when they're on the field? There are seven of them, and each has a distinct responsibility.

Referee

The *referee* is in charge of the game. He's the one you see on television making those funky signals, and he's also the one who makes the final decision for all rules interpretations. He is also the one who wears the white hat. (All other officials wear black hats with thin white stripes.) He stands in the backfield behind the quarterback, on the side of the quarterback's throwing arm. So if the quarterback is right-handed, the referee stands behind the quarterback's right side.

The referee is responsible for determining whether the snap is legal and whether the backs have been in legal motion. The referee is also the quarterback's best friend (maybe even more so than the offensive line) because he is responsible for looking for any fouls on the quarterback, such as roughing the passer. In fact, even on running plays, the referee stays near the quarterback before, during, and after the hand-off. After the action has cleared away from the quarterback, the referee follows him downfield looking at the contact that follows behind him.

He also makes decisions about possession of the ball, such as whether the ball is free on a fumble or dead on an incomplete pass.

Umpire

The *umpire* is concerned with actions near the LOS during the play. He stands about four or five yards on the defensive side of the ball, between where the guards line up. He is on the lookout for any false starts by the offense, and he is also checking on the legality of the contact between the linemen. The umpire checks to make sure offensive linemen do not move illegally downfield on pass plays, and he is also responsible for ruling on players' equipment.

Head Linesman

The *head linesman* is responsible for what happens at the LOS prior to or at the snap. He calls offside and encroachment. He straddles the LOS and focuses on the closest back to his side of the field. He also makes rulings concerning illegal action by defenders to prevent receivers from moving downfield, and he must make rulings concerning the sideline on his side of the field—in other words, whether a ball carrier or receiver is out of bounds. He helps determine forward progress by a runner on his side of the field. He also makes calls regarding the legality of action of receivers and defenders on his side of the field, including pass interference.

Also, along with the referee, the head linesman keeps track of the number of downs. The head linesman sometimes wraps a string around his finger to keep track of downs. For example, a string around his index finger means it is first down. A string around the middle finger equals second down, a string around the ring finger equals third down, and a string around his pinky means it is fourth down.

Line Judge

The *line judge* keeps time as a backup in case the official clock operator's clock stops working. He straddles the LOS on the side of the field opposite the head linesman. Like the head linesman, he judges actions just prior to or at the snap, such as encroachment and offside. He focuses on the closest back to his side of the field and rules on any passes thrown to him—whether they are forward or backward passes. He also judges whether the quarterback is behind or beyond the LOS when a pass is thrown and assists in observing contact between linemen on his side of the field. The line judge tells the referee when time has expired at the end of each quarter.

Back Judge

The *back judge* is in a deep position in the defense. He is on the same side of the field as the line judge, but is 20 yards deep on the defensive side. His focus is the wide receiver on his side. He observes the legality of actions surrounding that receiver and those defending that receiver. He makes decisions regarding his sideline—whether a ball carrier or receiver is out of bounds. He also makes decisions about catching, recovery, or illegal possession of a loose ball beyond the line of scrimmage and rules on interference calls.

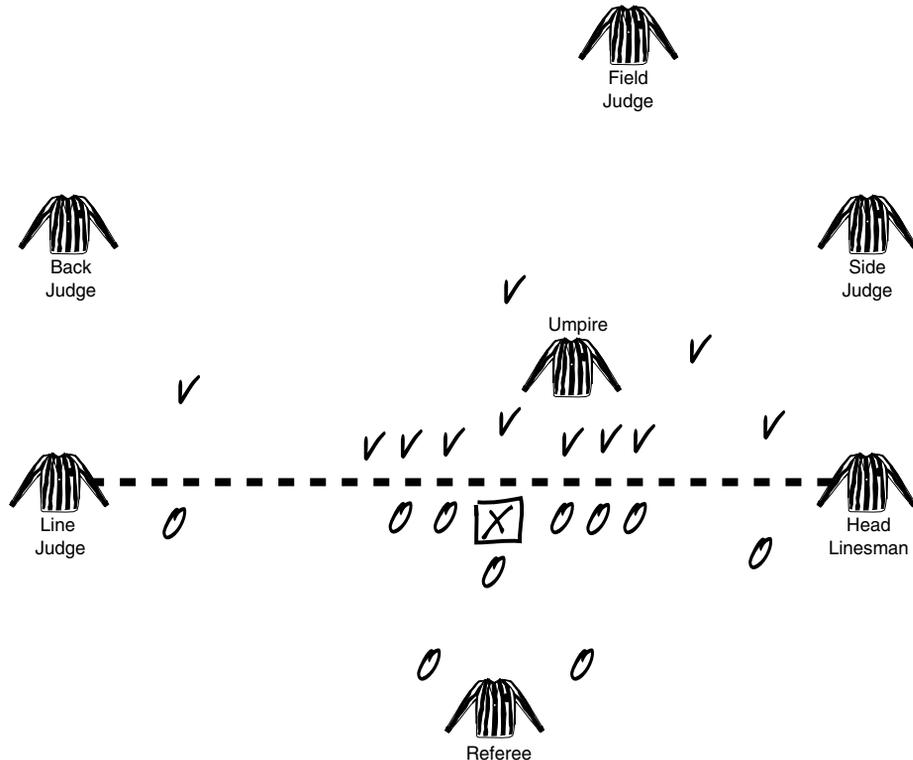
Side Judge

The *side judge* is in a deep position in the defense. He is on the same side of the field as the head linesman, 20 yards deep on the defensive side. He focuses on the legality of action between the offensive end and back and those guarding the end and back. He also has responsibility for making decisions regarding the sideline—whether a ball

carrier or receiver is out of bounds. He makes decisions about catching, recovery, or illegal possession of a loose ball beyond the line of scrimmage. And he rules on interference calls.

Field Judge

The *field judge* keeps the 40/25 second clock (see Chapter 3, “You Get Six Points to Do What?”). He is located 25 yards down the field, generally on the tight-end side of the ball. The field judge focuses on the tight end and observes the legality of the tight end’s actions and the actions that defenders take against the tight end. He rules on holding or illegal use of the hands by the end or the back or on the defensive player guarding the end or the back. He makes decisions about catching, recovering, or illegal touching of a loose ball beyond the line of scrimmage. He makes calls on pass interference.

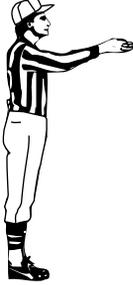


Where officials line up.

A Few Basic Referee Signals

When there is a score, a completion, or an incompletion, an official uses hand and body signals to communicate. The following table shows some of the basic signals that you're likely to see.

General Signals You Should Know

Signal	Description
	<p>A scoring attempt isn't good until you see this signal, which signifies a TOUCHDOWN, a FIELD GOAL, or a successful EXTRA POINT or TWO-POINT CONVERSION.</p>
	<p>This signal means a team has earned a FIRST DOWN. The referee points his hand toward the defense.</p>
	<p>The signal here has many meanings. It's used if a PENALTY IS REFUSED. It also signifies a PASS IS INCOMPLETE, a PLAY IS OVER, or a FIELD GOAL OR EXTRA POINT ATTEMPT HAS BEEN MISSED.</p>

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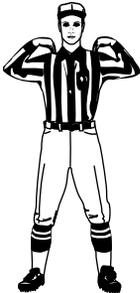
General Signals You Should Know (continued)

Signal	Description
	This signifies a SAFETY has been scored.
	This signal means a TIME OUT has been called. If the referee uses the same signal and then follows it by putting one hand on top of the cap, it signifies a REFEREE'S TIME OUT . The same signal followed by an arm swung at the side means TOUCHBACK .
	This signal, in which the referee blows the whistle while spinning his arm in a circle to simulate a moving clock, means TIME IN .

Controlling the Chaos

There sometimes appears to be chaos on the field, but there really isn't. There are a lot of rules that govern the game, and sometimes those rules are broken. When there is a penalty, the referee uses hand and body signals to tell the crowd and both teams what went wrong. Here are some of the basic penalty signals you're likely to run across.

Penalty Signals You Should Know

Penalty Signal	Description
	<p>This is the signal for the CROWD NOISE penalty—loss of team time-out, or a five-yard penalty on the defense for excessive crowd noise. This signal also can mean DEAD BALL. Excessive crowd noise is when crowd noise makes it virtually impossible for the visiting offense to communicate. A dead ball is a ball that is on the field but is no longer live. It describes the football after a play has ended.</p>
	<p>This signal means a BALL HAS BEEN ILLEGALLY TOUCHED, KICKED, OR BATTED. The penalty is a loss of down.</p>
	<p>This signal means DELAY OF GAME or EXCESSIVE TIME-OUTS. A team is only given three time-outs in a half. If it tries to call more, or if it takes too long to get a play off, this is a penalty of five yards. Teams are given 45 seconds from the end of a play to start a new play. If an official becomes involved, teams are given 25 seconds to start a play once the administrative stoppage is finished.</p>
	<p>This signal, when the referee rotates his forearms over and over, means FALSE START, ILLEGAL FORMATION, or KICKOFF or SAFETY KICK OUT OF BOUNDS. These are five-yard penalties.</p>

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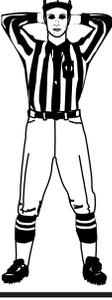
Penalty Signals You Should Know (continued)

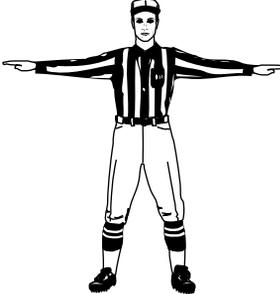
Penalty Signal	Description
	This signal means PERSONAL FOUL . It is often, though not always, followed by a signal that describes the type of personal foul. For instance, if it is followed by a swinging leg, it means ROUGHING THE KICKER . If it is followed by a raised arm swinging forward, it means ROUGHING THE PASSER . And the same signal followed by a simulated grasp of the face mask means it is a MAJOR FACE MASK , which is considered intentional. The penalty for a personal foul is 15 yards and sometimes an automatic first down.
	This is the signal for HOLDING , which is a 10-yard penalty. For more information on holding, see Chapter 8, "The Offensive Line: They Called Mine 'The Hogs.'"
	This signal means ILLEGAL USE OF THE HANDS . This is a 10-yard penalty. It occurs when an offensive player uses his hands in the face of a defensive player or pushes him from behind. There are many other interpretations of this rule.
	This is a signal that is used as an explanation for the incomplete pass signal that will follow. This signal means a PASS WAS JUGGLED IN BOUNDS AND CAUGHT OUT OF BOUNDS . The referee moves his hands up and down in front of his chest.

Penalty Signal	Description
	This is a signal for INTENTIONAL GROUNDING , which means that the quarterback threw a pass that he had no intention of trying to complete. This is a 10-yard penalty and loss of down.
	This signal means ILLEGAL FORWARD PASS . One hand is waved behind the back, and then it is followed by the loss of down signal. An illegal forward pass is one that is thrown after the quarterback has gone past the LOS, or if it is the second forward pass thrown (since only one is allowed).
	This signal means INTERFERENCE . Interference is when a player illegally disrupts an opposing player's ability to catch the ball. The ball is placed at the site of the infraction.
	This signal is used to signify an INVALID FAIR-CATCH signal. This is a five-yard penalty.

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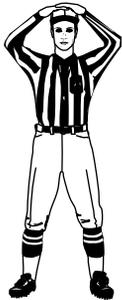
Penalty Signals You Should Know (continued)

Penalty Signal	Description
	This is a signal that means an INELIGIBLE RECEIVER OR INELIGIBLE MEMBER OF THE KICKING TEAM IS DOWNFIELD . This is a five-yard penalty.
	This is the signal for OFFSIDE . See Chapter 8 for more information on the offside penalty.
	This is the signal for ILLEGAL MOTION AT THE SNAP . The penalty is five yards.
	This signals LOSS OF DOWN , coming from any of a number of penalties.

Penalty Signal	Description
	<p>This is the signal for UNSPORTSMANLIKE CONDUCT, which is a 15-yard penalty. Roughing the kicker or roughing the passer are examples of unsportsmanlike conduct.</p>
	<p>This is the signal for CHOP BLOCK or CLIPPING. (See Chapter 8 for a further description.) If the referee uses both hands to strike his thighs, followed by the personal-foul signal, it is a chop block signal. If he uses only one hand striking the back of his calf, followed by the personal-foul signal, it is a clipping signal. Both are 15-yard penalties.</p>
	<p>This is the signal for a PLAYER BEING DISQUALIFIED.</p>
	<p>The signal for TRIPPING is when the referee repeatedly bangs his right foot into the back of his left heel. This is a 10-yard penalty.</p>

continues

Penalty Signals You Should Know (continued)

Penalty Signal	Description
	This is the signal for an ILLEGAL SUBSTITUTION or for TOO MANY MEN ON THE FIELD . These are five-yard penalties.
	This is the signal for ILLEGALLY GRASPING THE FACE MASK , which is a five-yard penalty if it is not considered deliberate.
	When a referee moves his hands in horizontal arcs as in this illustration, it means ILLEGAL SHIFT . This is a five-yard penalty. An illegal shift occurs after an offensive lineman has assumed his stance and then lifts his hand up prior to the snap.

Instant Replay

The officials are amazing. They see things that normal folks really do miss. Part of it is training, but part of it is talent. Just like the rest of the NFL, these guys are very good at what they do.

However, sometimes officials make mistakes. Unfortunately, those mistakes can change the outcome of games. And the mistakes are visible for all to see because every game is televised and every television broadcast replays controversial plays. Announcers have been known to say something like, *“It looks like they blew that call.”* (Of course, *I’ve* never said that.)

The NFL tried from 1986 to 1991 to remedy this problem by allowing calls to be reviewed by replay. There were problems with this remedy, and it was cancelled, tried again twice in preseason, and then cancelled again.

The problem with replays was that game action stopped when officials needed to look again and again at a play. So in order to stop every play from being reviewed, the league finally came up with a “challenge” system so a replay can occur. The challenge system appears to work where the old system did not.

In each game, coaches are permitted only two challenges (that is, they can challenge an official’s call two times during the game). A challenge forces the official to review the play that has been challenged. Challenging a play costs the coach’s team a time-out if the officials are proven right. If the challenge is upheld (meaning the coach was right and the officials were wrong), there is no loss of a time-out, and the officials reverse their call.

Some teams now have an ex-official or ex-coach actually watching the game on television, just like you. But they are up in the coaching booth—not like you. The job of this person is to help the coach decide whether to challenge a play. The key to a challenge is that it must be issued before the ball is snapped on the next play. Once the ball is snapped, there cannot be a challenge of the previous play.

In the last two minutes of each half, and in overtime, video reviews are initiated by a replay assistant. In other words, there are no challenges by coaches in the last two minutes or in overtime.

Finally, only certain plays can be challenged. A judgment call such as whether there was interference on a pass play cannot be challenged.

So basically, what can be reviewed are calls that a camera can catch. Among these are ...

- Whether a ball carrier crossed the goal line and scored.
- Whether a pass was complete or incomplete.
- Whether a receiver was in or out of bounds on the catch.
- Whether a ball was a forward pass or a fumble.
- Whether a forward or backward pass has been thrown.
- Whether a loose ball was recovered in or out of bounds.
- Whether there were too many men on the field.



Joe’s Rules

Coaches are equipped with a beeper that contacts officials to notify them of a challenge. But sometimes coaches inadvertently hit the beeper or it doesn’t work. The backup system, used more often than not, is for the coach to throw a red flag onto the field.



Joe's Record Book

On January 8, 2000, the Buffalo Bills looked like they were going to win a playoff game if they could just kick off and stop the Tennessee Titans's return. The Bills were up 16–15, and there were only 3 seconds left in the game. The Titans's Frank Wycheck caught Steve Christie's kickoff and, before he could be tackled by the Bills, threw the ball across the field to teammate Kevin Dyson, who raced 75 yards for a touchdown. After numerous reviews, the play was ruled a lateral (and not an illegal forward pass), and the touchdown counted. That play has since come to be called "The Music City Miracle."

The Least You Need to Know

- Different officials have different responsibilities and different parts of the field to cover.
- Penalties can cost a team yardage, downs, or a combination of both.
- The referee signals with his hands and body to indicate the type of penalty or other action that happened.
- The instant replay sometimes catches mistakes that officials make, but the truth is that the NFL officials are amazingly accurate.

Part 3

Learning the Defense and Special Teams

The most important part of a football team is its defense. Ask any quarterback. Despite everything I might have said in Part 2, the best friend of a quarterback isn't a good running back, or a good line, or even a good arm or brain. It's a good defense. A quarterback loves when his defense is dominant. I once played for George Allen, a defensive guru. I swear, George's dream game would have been 2-0. His offense didn't score but didn't make any mistakes, and his defense was perfect while actually scoring points. George understood that if the other team scored zero points, it was easier to win.

Part 3 teaches you about the defense—the different positions and what they do and the strategies players at each position use to outsmart the offense. It also covers the overall defensive strategies that teams implement to try to stop the offense. Finally, it touches on the third unit in football—the special teams.





The Defensive Line: Get the Ball, Hit the Quarterback

In This Chapter

- How defenses can be successful even when they don't make tackles
- The different techniques defensive linemen use
- Stopping the runner and passer
- Why stunts aren't only in the movies

Line play on defense is not that different from line play on offense. On the line of scrimmage, big men hit big men. For instance, on running plays, the offensive line tries to move the defensive people so that the running back can find holes and move through it. Defensive linemen try to move the offensive linemen so that the linebackers can get into the holes and hit the running back.

The chess game continues.

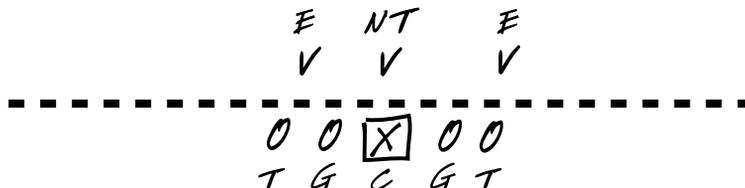
This chapter deals with the defensive line—the different positions, their job in stopping the run and the pass, and a few of the techniques linemen use in their attempt to control the line of scrimmage. It ends with my personal list of the five best defensive linemen of all time.

Who Are These Guys?

Defensive linemen play on the defensive side of the line of scrimmage. They are huge, agile, and powerful. They have to be because they're playing against offensive linemen who are, well, huge, agile, and powerful. It certainly makes for some interesting matchups.

Some teams use three defensive linemen, others use four. In either case, they line up in a lot of different places on the line. The following illustration shows a basic three-man line.

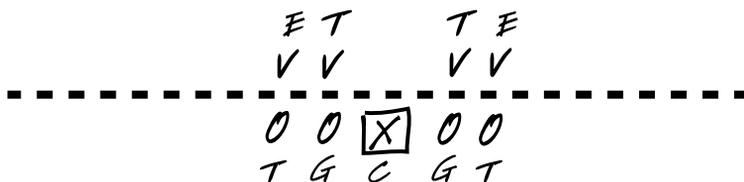
A three-man defensive line has a numbers disadvantage against the five-man offensive line.



The most interesting of these positions—or maybe the most brutal—is that of the nose tackle. He is so named because he lines up right on the nose of the center, literally in his face. Talk about a rough day at the office. Sheesh. This is a man who could get hit on every play from the front, the left, and the right by 300-pound linemen—three of them, all within hitting distance of one nose tackle. Imagine getting hit by 900 pounds of fury. Now imagine it again, and again, and again. Imagine a three-hour football game in which your job is to stand your ground no matter what hits you. If you can imagine it, you can imagine being a nose tackle.

A four-man line, shown in the following illustration, has two tackles instead of one nose tackle.

A four-man defensive line.



Generally, tackles are bigger than ends and serve a little different purpose. The prototype NFL tackle of the 2000s is Tony Siragusa, the 350-pound behemoth who plays for the Baltimore Ravens. He dared people to move him out of the way. They didn't. Tackles are supposed to stand their ground, occupy blockers, and capture any ballcarrier who comes within reaching distance. A defensive tackle wants to be like a stubborn mule. If you push, pull, tug, or do anything to him, he's not moving. He may go forward, but as far as he's concerned no one is pushing him anywhere.

Ends, on the other hand, are a little bit smaller and quicker. "Smaller" is relative—300 pounds is less than 350, so they're smaller. Because ends are quicker, they have a tendency to get into the *backfield* more often than tackles. The backfield is the area behind the offensive line. Getting into the backfield is good. It means that the defensive player has pushed beyond where the offensive line started. When defensive players get into the backfield, they have a good chance to sack the quarterback.



Joe's Record Book

Records for sacks have been kept only since 1982. Since then, the record for the most sacks in a season is 22 by Mark Gastineau of the New York Jets in 1984. The most sacks in one game is seven, by Derrick Thomas of the Kansas City Chiefs against the Seattle Seahawks on November 11, 1990. Reggie White of the Philadelphia Eagles, Green Bay Packers, and Carolina Panthers is the career leader for sacks with 198 sacks through the 2000 season.

Breaking through the offensive line and penetrating into the backfield is the primary objective of defensive linemen. By doing that, they create holes in the offensive line so that linebackers and other defensive players can have a free shot at the ball carrier or quarterback. Also, if they have an opportunity to make a play on the quarterback or the ballcarrier, they certainly won't pass it up.

Stopping the Run

Quite often, defensive linemen are like sacrificial lambs being offered forth in the *tackle box*. When there is a running play, they want to get to the runner, but their job is more than that. Frankly, they want to get hit by offensive linemen. If a defensive lineman can tie up two offensive linemen, that means there is one less offensive player to block the rest of the defensive players.

Defensive linemen don't go out of their way not to make tackles. Consider a guy like the aforementioned Gilbert Brown. He'll make an effort to tackle a runner, but on some plays his primary role is to occupy two linemen and allow the linebackers to pursue and make the play. If the runner heads toward him, he'll try to tackle him. But if he can get two linemen to block him, he has done his job.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **tackle box** is the area along the line of scrimmage between where the two offensive tackles line up. It includes about three yards on either side of the line of scrimmage and features some interesting battles.

Pass Rushing

Linemen start out closer to the quarterback than anybody on the defense. Sometimes, as a quarterback, defensive linemen can make you feel like an item on a menu. They just want to order you up.

They want to hit you, smack you, and knock you to the ground. You can tell they get an adrenaline rush from drilling you. Defensive guys get a thrill from making a tackle. It's like a first kiss—they get a tingle all through their body. It's a real sense of accomplishment. The idea is not just to bring the offensive player to the ground. They want to try to, not just deflate, but *destroy* the confidence of the people with the ball. They want them to remember what it feels like to be hit.

Now, I don't think this is a good way for anyone to get their jollies, but that's just one man's opinion. Let me tell you how I got that opinion—from being tackled. Tackling hurts.

In my career, I had five concussions. I have post-concussion syndrome. I can remember things from 20 years ago, but sometimes I can't remember what I did yesterday. The concussions are just the start of my list. Here's the rest:

- Broken collarbone (1)
- Broken ribs (3)
- Broken nose (7)
- Broken thumb (1)
- Broken leg (2—one really bad)
- Torn up knee (left)
- Dislocated elbow (left)

And my three front teeth—well, just don't look close. They really aren't mine, but I have a great dentist. In fact, I'll bet the NFL has brought business to more than a few dentists over the years. Interestingly enough, the most painful injury I ever had was called a hip pointer—when the muscles around the hip are literally torn away. The last thing you want to do when you are suffering from a hip pointer is sneeze. That's right, sneeze.

Before pass rushers can get to the quarterback, they have to get past the guys trying to block them. Defensive linemen rush the quarterback and linebackers blitz the quarterback, but the only difference is where they come from—the hits all hurt the same. (See Chapter 17, “Strategies: Attack or React,” for a further discussion of blitzing.)

When defensive linemen take on offensive linemen, it's an interesting confrontation. Because both men are approximately the same size—that is, the size of a small truck—there aren't many times either one is going to overpower the other. That's not to say it's unheard of, but usually defensive linemen rely on technique and smarts to get past their opponent. Many techniques are used and allowed, but one, the *head slap*, has been outlawed.

Techniques are only good if they work. And they work if they accomplish the main agenda of the defensive line, which is to attack. The defensive line doesn't even need to get to the quarterback to disrupt him. Sometimes they can just *push the pocket* into his face. When a quarterback throws, he steps forward. It's very hard for a quarterback to even *want* to step forward when there is a mass of bodies coming at him. He may end up throwing off his back foot, which gives him a lot less accuracy and a lot less arm strength. When the pocket is pushed back into his face, it messes up his rhythm, blocks his vision, and reduces his ability to throw with confidence. When that happens, he may make a mistake. And when a quarterback makes a mistake, it usually costs the offense.

Pass rushers want to get the blocker they're facing off balance—physically *and* mentally. If they can, they have a distinct advantage. Football is *always* a chess game, and defensive linemen play it just like everybody else.

For instance, a defensive lineman might go outside on an offensive lineman for a pass rush and may do it again and again. Everybody has an agenda in football, and this defensive guy is trying to get the offensive guy to get comfortable with blocking him to the outside. The defensive player may go outside five or six or more times in a row. He's establishing a pattern, a tendency, but what he's really doing is setting up the offensive lineman. He's playing chess.

In Super Bowl XXXI, that's exactly what Reggie White of the Green Bay Packers did to Max Lane of the New England Patriots. For a while, it appeared Lane was having a fairly good game against White. Then, in a critical situation, White came inside and Lane ended up watching as White smashed Patriots quarterback Drew Bledsoe to the ground. When White got up and walked past Lane, he didn't say anything, but he could have said, "Checkmate."

Defensive linemen try to figure out what offensive linemen are planning. Film study is essential, and so is experience.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **head slap** is not allowed. Deacon Jones, who played for the Los Angeles Rams in the 1960s, used it a lot. Old offensive linemen still have headaches from Deacon. Imagine putting a helmet on and having somebody take a baseball bat and bang it upside your head about a dozen times—you just played against Deacon Jones.

Ouch.



Joe's Tips

If a defensive lineman can get one sack a game, just one, he'll get 16 in a season. If he can get 16 in a season, he'll go to the Pro Bowl, which is the name of the NFL All-Star game. Heck, he may get a lifetime pass. That's right—get one sack a game and you are a superstar.

For example, consider an offensive lineman in a three-point stance with his hand on the ground in front of him. Clearly, he's either going to go forward to run block or backward to pass block. If he's going forward, he's probably leaning a little onto his hand, getting ready to push forward. If he's going backward, his weight distribution is slightly different. How does a defensive lineman know? He looks at the offensive lineman's fingertips and knuckles. If the offensive lineman's fingertips and knuckles turn white, that means he's putting a lot of pressure on his hand and is probably leaning a bit forward.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

When a defensive lineman **shades a guy's shoulder**, he moves slightly off the center of his opposing lineman. If he shades the right shoulder, he points his helmet over the offensive lineman's right shoulder. It's a move of only about eight inches, but it allows him to work on one side of the body.

Linemen also line up in various places along the LOS to gain an angle advantage on their offensive line opponents. Sometimes they go straight at them, sometimes they line up in the gap between them, or sometimes they *shade their shoulder*.

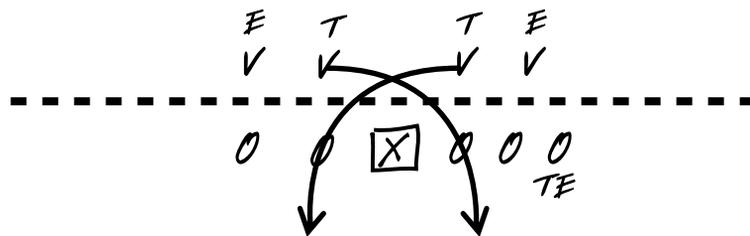
Also, defensive linemen look at the eyes of offensive linemen. Often, offensive linemen look in the direction where they're going to go. If a guard is going to pull right, he might be looking right. Everybody is trying to climb inside everybody else's head.

Stunts

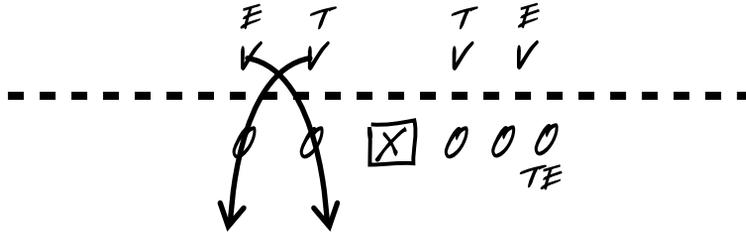
There are other ways to get to the quarterback. Defensive linemen sometimes use *stunts* to rush the passer. This means that two men on the line switch positions as the ball is snapped.

There are lots of stunts. Here are two—a TT and an ET. A TT is simply when the two tackles switch positions. When a TT stunt occurs, one tackle goes first in front of the other and then the other tackle comes around and goes into the line where the first tackle was lined up—just like a criss-cross.

A TT stunt is when the two tackles switch positions during their rush.



An ET stunt works the same way, only the end and the tackle switch the position of their rush lanes.



An ET stunt is when the defensive end and tackle switch positions during their rush.

In a stunt, the second guy always hesitates for a half second. It's all part of the head game—trying to make the offensive line worry about what the defensive line might do.

Bull Rushing

Sometimes, defensive linemen don't want to be cute or fancy. They just want to go straight forward. When they do, it's called a *bull rush*. The only thing missing from the bull rush is a pair of horns on the defensive lineman as he digs his feet into the ground, because it's just like a bull charging. When it works, the offensive lineman ends up flat on his back because the defensive lineman just ran him over. It looks like somebody breaking down a door and walking over it.

The bull rush should only be used occasionally, when the defensive lineman catches the offensive lineman off balance. Otherwise it's not going to work. After all, a 300-pound man is not going to overpower another 300-pound man very often. But it does happen.

Joe's Top Five Defensive Linemen

In the history of the NFL, there have been some great defensive linemen. I've picked five that I think are the best of all time and listed them here in no particular order:

- **Bob Lilly**, tackle for the Dallas Cowboys, was the cornerstone of the Dallas Doomsday Defense. He had the strength and quickness to control the line from tackle to tackle.
- **Deacon Jones**, end for the Los Angeles Rams, San Diego Chargers, and Washington Redskins, is considered the grandfather of the sack. He actually invented the name *sack*. If statistics were kept at the time he played, he would probably be the all-time sack leader.
- **Bruce Smith**, end for the Buffalo Bills and Washington Redskins. Although not a big defensive end, he plays with tremendous quickness, incredible upper body strength, and a tenacity that makes every offensive lineman have to play their best game against him.
- **Reggie White**, end for the Philadelphia Eagles, Green Bay Packers, and Carolina Panthers, is an unstoppable force. No one in the game of football has ever

possessed the sheer power and strength of this one man. He is affectionately called “The Reverend.”

- **Randy White**, tackle for the Dallas Cowboys. His nickname was “Manster,” meaning he was half man, half monster. This man could make you feel like a football game was a nightmare. It didn’t matter whether you played offensive line, running back, or quarterback, he would definitely be a part of your dreams the night after you played him.

The Least You Need to Know

- Defensive linemen often occupy blockers to let others make tackles.
- A stunt is when defensive linemen switch positions as a play starts.
- A bull rush is when a defensive lineman overpowers an offensive lineman.
- When the defensive line tries to tackle the quarterback, it’s called a rush.
- The stunt and bull rush are two main pass-rushing techniques.



Linebackers Do Everything

In This Chapter

- ▶ Lining up the linebackers
- ▶ The different roles of inside and outside linebackers
- ▶ How a linebacker reads and responds to the offense

There's something about a linebacker standing a few yards from the ball, staring down a quarterback. Think of Ray Nitschke, the middle linebacker of the Green Bay Packers in the 1960s, with the missing teeth and the furious glare that told you how insulted he was that you would even dare try to move the ball against him. Or Lawrence Taylor, who was like a hungry predator as he readied to roar off the line.

Linebackers can control a game—both stopping a run and thwarting a pass. They are the best athletes on the football field because they have to do everything (plus they seem to glare better than anybody else). They have to be able to run with wide receivers and running backs, yet they have to be strong enough to take on 300-plus-pound offensive linemen. Linebackers also have to be smart enough to recognize what's going on on the other side of the field. By being able to do everything, they get to be stars.

Just as offenses are set up to make quarterbacks into stars, defenses are set up for the linebackers to become the stars. Linebackers should be the playmakers, and playmakers are always stars.

When you think of the greats in the game of football, the first thing you think of is the quarterback. Having been one, I am partial. But certainly, the next group that comes to mind even before the great running backs are the linebackers. Dick Butkus, Ray Nitschke, Sam Huff, Mike Singletary, Lawrence Taylor, and now, Ray Lewis.

Those are *names*.

This chapter is about the stars of the defense, the linebackers. It covers who they are, where they line up, what they do, and when they do it. It examines inside linebackers and outside linebackers, and the differences between run stopping, pass coverage, and pass rushing. Finally, this chapter concludes with those *names* and why they are my top five.

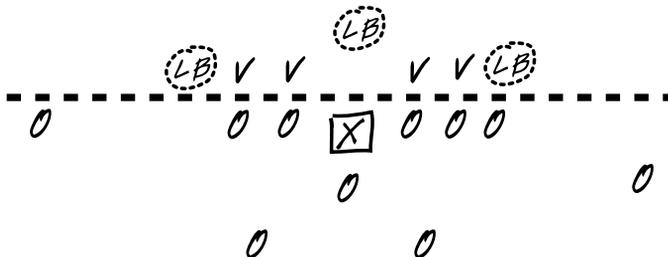
The Menu: Three Linebackers or Four?

Every team has a linebacker on each side of the tackle box. Those are the *outside linebackers* because, yes, they line up on the outside. Inside the tackle box, teams usually use either one linebacker or two. If a team uses one linebacker in the middle, he's called a *middle linebacker*. Two linebackers who line up inside the tackle box are called *inside linebackers*.

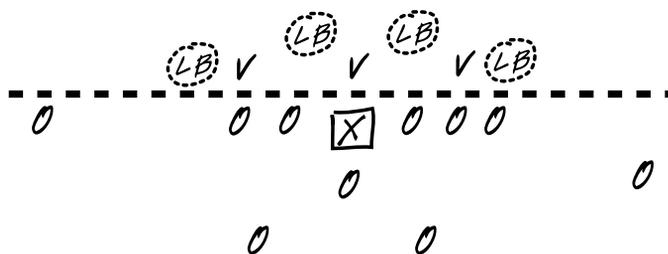
There are always either three or four linebackers, and their job is to be playmakers. Their job is *not* to occupy offensive blockers. Remember, blocking is when offensive players try to push or knock defensive players in a certain direction.

When football people refer to a 3-4 defense or a 4-3 defense, the first number always refers to how many defensive linemen a team is using and the second number to how many linebackers it is using.

The front seven of a 4-3 defense features four down linemen and three linebackers.



The front seven of a 3-4 defense features three down linemen and four linebackers.



In the Middle

The role of linebackers in the middle of the alignment is the same whether there are two inside linebackers or one middle linebacker. When there are two inside linebackers, the role is shared. There is also more flexibility to rush the passer from inside.

The Different Jobs in the Middle

In any linebacker configuration, the inside linebackers or the middle linebacker are not asked to go into pass coverage as much as the outside linebackers. The inside guys are usually bigger and more suited to stop the run. They may not be as fast as the outside guys, but they are ready to hit running backs and fight off guards and centers and tackles and tight ends and fullbacks and an occasional wide receiver. Their main job is to get to running backs, who run between the tackles.

However, they can also drop back into pass coverage—man-to-man on a tight end or running back, or zone coverage in which they have an area of the field to cover. When there are two inside linebackers, they can sometimes fool the offensive line into thinking that they're dropping into pass coverage. They can hesitate. They can make believe that they are going into a pass drop and then rush—sort of give the offensive line a false look and hope to get them off balance. An extra inside linebacker gives a defense less power but more versatility.

The inside linebackers are usually lined up at Level 2 of the defense, meaning they are a few yards off of the line of scrimmage.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The defense is divided into three levels. Those players on the line of scrimmage (LOS), including the outside linebackers, are on **Level 1**. Those lined up about five yards off of the LOS, including the inside linebackers, are at **Level 2**. The defensive backs who line up behind the linebackers are at **Level 3**.

The Quarterback of the Defense

The middle linebacker is like the quarterback on defense. He doesn't throw passes, but he does call plays. When the offense huddles up, so does the defense, and it is the middle linebacker who calls the defense in the huddle. When the offensive huddle breaks, the middle linebacker will start yelling to his teammates the things that he sees. For instance, if the offense comes out in a one-back formation, he will start yelling, "Ace! Ace!" Or, in another situation, he could shout, "Naked! Naked!" No, that doesn't mean he has seen someone with no clothes on running through the stands. It means the offense came out with no backs in the backfield.

He could yell where the tight end is lined up—"Strength right!" or "Strength left!" Or, he could be alerting his teammates about the number of wide receivers. Perhaps he'll yell, "Four wides! Four wides!"

As quickly and succinctly as possible, he is trying to communicate with his teammates what he sees from the offense. When the play begins, he uses his smarts, instincts, will, and physical ability to try to react to the play.

The middle linebacker was once, and is now again, the most glamorous position on the defense. Most of the linebackers I mentioned early in the chapter were middle

linebackers. The middle linebacker has the advantage of his position on the field and can literally make plays from sideline to sideline. He sees it all. Since offenses have gone to a power running game in recent years, teams like to have two big tackles in the middle backed up by a tremendous athlete at middle linebacker. He needs to be big, strong, fast, and able to do a million things including stop the run *and* drop back into pass coverage.

The middle linebacker may not be as important as in the Nitschke/Butkus days of the 1960s, but he is still at the center of everything. Still, there are more complex offenses and, therefore, more complex defenses. Part of it just has to do with playing time. In the old days, all of the greats played on every down. Very few middle linebackers play on every down anymore. Some do, and those good enough now are able to dominate play, just as in the old days.



Joe's Tips

If the linebackers are close to the LOS, they are usually anticipating a run. If they are backed away from the LOS, they are usually anticipating a pass.



Joe's Tips

Left is right and right is left when you compare offenses and defenses. The right wide receiver is guarded by the left cornerback. The left tackle faces the right outside linebacker. Just remember, both sides are looking at it from their perspective, facing each other.

Everything in football has become specialized. If you've got a linebacker who's good against the run, he's probably not going to be in the game on third down and long. Not only that, but a lot of teams play a 3-4 alignment, meaning that there are two inside linebackers instead of just one big mean one.

The Outside: A Place to Raise Havoc

Linebackers are the most athletic football players, and outside linebackers are the most athletic of the linebackers. The best of the best is the outside linebacker who plays on the side away from the tight end (the open side)—usually the right linebacker. (Remember, the defense's left is the offense's right.) Outside linebackers have to be able to run, they have to be strong, and they have to be able to use their hands.

The *outside linebackers* are the ones who operate out in *space*, which is the area outside of the tackle box. There is room to move around out there, room to maneuver and to attack. Outside linebackers are now so athletic that they can move from sideline to sideline just like middle linebackers. Outside linebackers can cover a lot of area, but mostly they cover their own area.

They have a very flexible role. They have to cover people on pass patterns who are fast and quick. They have to defend against the run just like the inside

linebackers. And normally they wind up getting people with a bigger head of steam—such as a 300-pound guard—heading their way.

When that guard goes at an inside linebacker, he only has a step or two before they collide. But by the time he reaches the outside linebacker, the big guy is really moving. The outside linebacker has to have the agility to make the guard miss and then make a play on the running back.

Normally, a linebacker doesn't want to be hit by a blocker. Linebackers exist to make plays, not to take on blockers. The blockers are supposed to be taken up by others so that linebackers can be stars. But inevitably, linebackers have to shed blocks.

The one thing that linebackers fear most is *staying* blocked. That means exactly what it says—that the blocker controlled the linebacker. It's a sin for a linebacker to get knocked to the ground, but it's a bigger sin for a linebacker to stay on the ground. He has to bounce back up like a rubber ball. Linebackers use different techniques to avoid staying blocked. But the best is not getting knocked to the ground in the first place.

Outside linebackers certainly can't be ostriches at the linebacker position. They need to keep their heads up to see what's going on. There is action all around them. If somebody comes at them and they get locked up, everything is gone. They're dead meat. If a linebacker loses vision, he loses everything.

The outside linebacker position requires not only vision, but hands, agility, speed, and strength. If an outside linebacker is facing a back coming outside, he has to match his quickness with somebody who could be quicker than him, his strength with a running back who may be stronger than him, his wits with an offensive lineman who is surely bigger than him. Linebackers do everything, but they are smaller than defensive linemen and slower than defensive backs.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Despite not wanting to get hit, linebackers do get hit. The idea for linebackers is to **play off** (or **shed**) a block and then make a play. Get one hand free—that's all that is needed to start to get free of a block. Some players use a forearm, others shoulders, while they try to focus on the ball.



Joe's Tips

If a linebacker is able to keep one arm free while he is fighting off a block, he has a much better chance of making the play.

Two Different Outside Linebackers

There is a *strong side* and a *weak side* of an offensive formation. The strong side is the side that has the tight end. There is a strong-side-outside linebacker, and a

weak-side-outside linebacker. The strong-side-outside linebacker lines up over the tight end.

The linebacker who plays over the tight end is as involved in stopping the pass as in stopping the run. After all, the tight end can be a receiver or a run blocker. The linebacker on the tight end side must be a little more physical than the linebacker away from the tight end.

The weak-side linebacker is more concerned with passes—whether he is in coverage on a running back, in a zone, or rushing the passer.

If the tight end switches sides, usually the outside linebackers will switch places, too, but not always. Sometimes they will just let the tight end switch, which is why the outside linebackers must be nearly equal in skill level. It doesn't always work out that way. The offense would love to get a big, physical tight end blocking a smaller, quicker, more athletic linebacker.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **open side** and **closed side** of a formation are directly related to the placement of the tight end. The open side is the side without the tight end. The closed side has the tight end.



Joe's Record Book

Only two linebackers have ever been the MVP of the Super Bowl—Chuck Howley of the Dallas Cowboys was MVP of Super Bowl V, and Ray Lewis of the Baltimore Ravens was MVP of Super Bowl XXXV.

But the weak-side-outside linebacker now is in the position to be the star of the defense. He has the positioning to disrupt things in the most chaotic manner. This phenomenal athlete is standing a few steps away from the quarterback and there is no tight end in his way. Thus, offenses are forced to pay special attention to a weak-side linebacker.

In the Mind of a Linebacker

Linebackers think they know what the offense is thinking. As the play begins to set itself up, the linebacker is running a checklist through his mind at Pentium speed.

He is pre-reading the formation. He is thinking down and distance. If it's first down and 10, the offense will maybe run or maybe throw. But if it's third down and 15, there's a pretty good chance that the offense is going to pass. The linebacker has thought of that. He is a smart guy.

Next, he looks at the formation. If, for instance, the offense has three receivers on his side and only one on the other side, he knows that there is a strong likelihood a pass is coming to his side of the field.

Then he thinks through what he remembers from film study of what the other team liked to run out of that particular formation. He remembers a specific pass route.

Then he thinks about the defense that has been called and where he is expected to be in that defense.

And then the play starts and he reacts—fast.

First, he keeps one eye on the quarterback and another on the receiver in front of him. If he is entering a zone coverage, he just wants to get to his area of responsibility. He is not necessarily covering any particular receiver.

The quarterback's actions tell the linebacker what to do next. The number of steps a quarterback takes is usually related to the depth of the pass route. The linebacker knows this. If a quarterback drops and stops at three steps, the linebacker has to stop his drop at the same time and look around his area.

Also, linebackers are more than willing to use the *five-yard chuck rule*, which allows them to hit a receiver within five yards of the LOS. If a running back is starting five yards behind the LOS, he must travel 10 yards before the linebacker isn't allowed to hit him. In those 10 yards, maulings have been known to occur. And it doesn't have to be a mauling to be effective. If the linebacker can disrupt the pass pattern of a running back or tight end by even one step, it could disrupt the timing of the entire play. And timing, as you know, is everything.

The linebacker also has an advantage in giving a chuck in the legal five-yard zone. He knows that there is someone behind him to help on the receiver. The linebacker just makes it harder for the receiver to get there, and then he moves on to his next assignment.



Joe's Rules

Defensive holding is a penalty that linebackers have to be careful to avoid. It is illegal to grab and hold a receiver who is trying to run a pattern, and the penalty is five yards. However, linebackers can run into a gray area of interpretation because the linebacker may just be trying to protect himself from being blocked.

The Spy

Football is full of espionage. On the field, sometimes teams ask a linebacker to keep an eye on a particularly mobile quarterback in obvious passing situations. There are certain quarterbacks—Daunte Culpepper, Donovan McNabb, and Mark Brunell come to mind—who have such great athletic ability that they are almost as much of a threat to run as they are to throw. Therefore, the number-one consideration of the spy is the ability to run as fast as or faster than the guy he is spying on—the quarterback.

The spy could be a linebacker or a defensive back. In either case, the spy pretends to go about his business, but really his actions are mirroring those of the quarterback.

If the quarterback slides to the right, the spy slides with him. If the quarterback slides to the left, same thing. When a team uses a spy, it is showing great respect for the running ability of the quarterback.

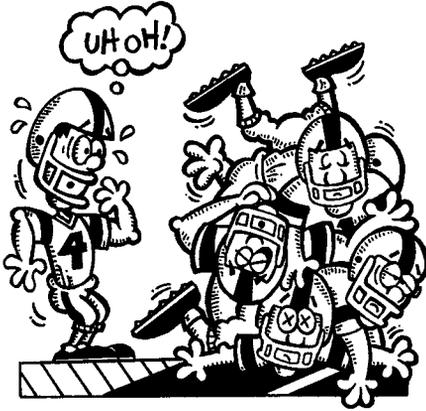
Joe's Top Five Linebackers

In the history of the NFL, some of the greatest names in football played at linebacker. This is my personal list of the top five of all time in no particular order.

- **Ray Nitschke**, middle linebacker of the great Green Bay Packers teams of the 1960s. He brought new meaning to the phrase *No pain, no gain*.
- **Dick Butkus**, middle linebacker of the Chicago Bears. Dick wasn't interested in making friends, just in leaving a lasting impression on people's bodies.
- **Ray Lewis**, middle linebacker of the Baltimore Ravens. Watching Ray play is like watching Butkus and Nitschke all over again. Yes, he really is that good.
- **Mike Singletary**, middle linebacker of the Chicago Bears in the 1980s and 1990s. Mike wasn't very big by football standards, but he was a great student of the game and often knew where you were going before you got there.
- **Lawrence Taylor**, right-side linebacker for the New York Giants in the 1980s, is credited with revolutionizing the game and the position of outside linebacker. On one fateful day in November 1985, he ended my career. I figure, if you've got to go, it may as well be by a hit from the best.

The Least You Need to Know

- There are two outside linebackers and either one middle linebacker or two inside linebackers. The guys in the middle are more responsible for stopping the run than the pass. And one of the guys in the middle calls the plays for the defense.
- The outside linebacker away from the tight end is usually the most athletic and is often known to cause the most havoc.
- A *spy* is a defensive player, often a linebacker, who is responsible for mirroring a particularly athletic quarterback.



The Secondary: The Last Best Hope

In This Chapter

- A look at the skills that secondary players need
- The difference between cornerbacks and safeties
- Understanding zone coverage
- When man-on-man coverage is used

Defensive backs, the guys who cover the receivers, have to have short memories and thick skins. Inevitably, they're going to give up a big play. It's the nature of the job. Someone will make an incredible catch or a perfect throw, or the defensive back will slip. It *will* happen, sometime. But then what? What happens next?

More than anything, the short memory is what I think of when I think of a defensive back. I admire the way they react, with the cockiness of a heavyweight boxer who has just taken a left hook to the head. It doesn't matter what just happened. The only thing that matters is what is going to happen next. They stare down the receiver. They stare down the quarterback. "*So bring it on.*" There is no give at all.

This chapter is about the last line of defense, the *secondary*—players who are also called *defensive backs*. The secondary usually consists of four guys—two cornerbacks and two safeties—who live away from the trenches. This chapter deals with the skills defensive backs need, the duties of the cornerbacks and safeties, the difference between zone and man-to-man coverage, and my top five defensive backs in no particular order. All of them had short memories.

Small, Quick, and Fearless

It can seem an impossible job: Stop wide receivers, who are usually the fastest players on the football field, from catching the ball. The receivers know where they're going. The defensive backs don't, but they have to stay with the receivers anyway. A wide receiver can start, stop, come in, and go out. Or he can go left, right, or just head straight downfield. A good defensive back, in man-on-man coverage, has to stay with him no matter what he does.

It's not an impossible job. There are men who are capable of being an actual shadow on a wide receiver. Speed is important, but much more important is quickness.



Joe's Record Book

Seventeen players share the record for most interceptions in one game—four.



Joe's Tips

Different skills are needed for a defensive back than for a wide receiver. If a defensive back has 10 balls thrown in his direction and he knocks all 10 down but doesn't catch 1, he's had a great day. But if a receiver has 10 balls thrown to him and he drops 1, he's had a bad day.

The ability to change direction and burst is what sets the good defensive backs apart. Defensive backs must have the ability to turn their hips, because they have to make instantaneous adjustments that require contortionist-type turns in a fraction of a second.

They must also have quick feet to be able to get into a proper defensive position—usually between the quarterback and the receiver or right next to the defender, but sometimes behind the receiver, or to one side.

They must always be in proper defensive position. The definition of “proper defensive position” could change from play to play. But defensive backs always need to be able to turn from backward to forward quickly. And they have to be fast enough to stay with speedy wide receivers.

Although a defensive back is most often playing against a wide receiver, each has different skills. The most important skill of a wide receiver is his ability to catch the ball. If a defensive back has good hands and can catch the ball, it's a real plus. Nothing is sweeter than an interception, and turnovers help win games. But still, the ability to catch is not the most important thing. The defensive back needs to cover and tackle. Specifically, he needs to be able to cover, and that requires quickness.

One skill is needed in both positions—the ability to run without bobbing the head. As you learned in the section on speed guys as wide receivers in Chapter 9, “The Receivers: Glue on Their Fingers and Rockets in Their Shoes,” if their heads bob while they run, it's hard to focus on the ball. The same principle applies to defensive backs.

Defensive backs are usually smaller by football standards. There are two sizes of defensive backs—cornerbacks and safeties. By weight, I would say they (and their fellow defensive players) average:

- Cornerbacks: 195 pounds
- Safeties: 215 pounds
- Linebackers: 245 pounds
- Tackles: 325 pounds
- Defensive ends: 270 pounds

Cornerbacks: Life on an Island

Cornerbacks are usually the smallest defensive players. These are the guys who make their living away from the trenches, out on islands. They hang out in the tropics, away from the cold fury of the tackle box. But their island sometimes gets invaded by wide receivers, and they must run the length of the island just to stop those receivers from catching the ball. Island life can be difficult.

Cornerbacks have quickness and great reaction time to the ball. They also have an excellent ability to read wide receivers—to read routes. They can sense where receivers are going. Cornerbacks tend to be short as well as light. Some cornerbacks are as short as 5'9", and even though they could be covering a wide receiver as tall as 6'5", their height doesn't really hurt them. Their vertical leap isn't that important. Instead, playing defense against receivers is all about body position and getting the *long arm* on the ball.

The only time that the defensive back's size is a factor is when the offense runs short, 5-yard slant patterns. But the defense's thinking is that a cornerback's main job is to prevent bombs, not five-yard slants. After all, it takes a lot of 5-yard slants to go 80 yards. In that time, the defense is thinking that the offense is bound to make a mistake. It's much more important to defend against the long bomb, and the best guys to do that tend to be short, quick, and fast.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **long arm** is the arm of the defensive player that is closest to the quarterback and furthest from the receiver. In a jump, because of angles, that hand should be able to raise a little higher than the hand nearer the receiver, or **short arm**. The long arm is normally the one used to knock the ball away.



Joe's Rules

If a receiver runs out of bounds, he is no longer eligible to catch a pass. However, if he was forced out of bounds because of a foul by a defender, he is legally eligible to catch a pass as soon he gets back inbounds.



Joe's Tips

If a defensive back gives up a bomb and walks back to his team pointing at his chest and mouthing some words, he is probably saying, "My bad. My bad." That's jock talk for "my mistake." Whenever I see that, I laugh. It's like, gee, no kidding. There was no one else within 30 yards. Yeah, your bad. We saw. We saw.

Cornerbacks have an ally on the island. That ally is the sideline—built-in help on one side of the field. A cornerback will try to favor the open side of the field, making the receiver run near the sideline.

Stopping a bomb, which is a primary concern of cornerbacks, is an interesting job. In some ways, the job is much the same as a centerfielder in baseball. The ball may not be hit to the centerfielder for seven innings. But then in the eighth inning, the bases are loaded and there is a line shot into the gap and the centerfielder is expected to go get it. It's the same in football. Sometime, usually at a key time, the offense is going to test the cornerback, and the whole team expects him to make the play.

Quite often, cornerbacks are spectators, located way out on their island looking at everything as if they were a spectator with a hot dog. But when they participate, they are always big participants. Even for little guys.

Safeties Are Enforcers

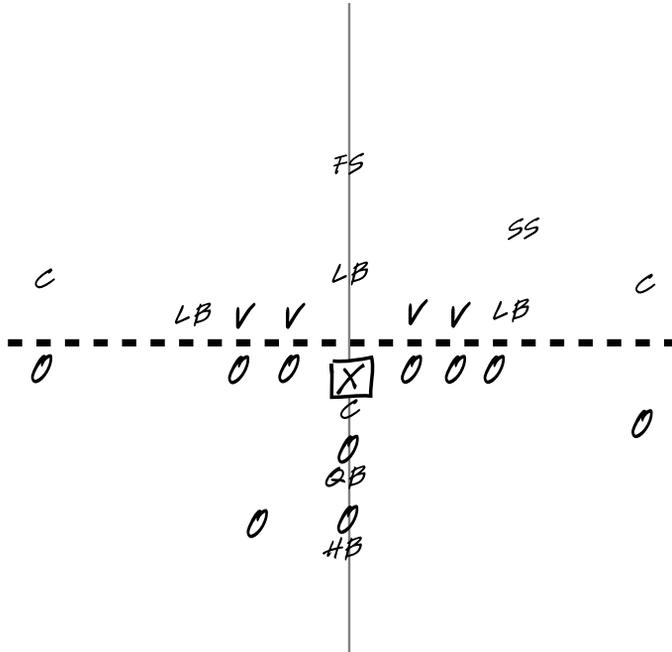
Safeties are smallish-type linebackers who can run. A lot of college linebackers become pro safeties. Safeties need to have good cover skills but they are also depended on to stop the run—especially big runs. They are the last line of defense. "Safety"—the name fits.

There are two safeties—the *strong safety* and the *free safety*. The skill levels required for the two positions are close to the same because formations change so much that their roles could switch from play to play.

Basically, the strong safety plays behind the linebackers but in a little closer to the LOS than the free safety. The strong safety plays on the same side of the field as the tight end. He could cover the tight end or he could be asked to play in a zone, but he usually begins a play on the tight-end side. His basic role is to be there to provide pass coverage against the tight end or running back and also to support in stopping the run game. He assists the linebackers.

The free safety is lined up right down the middle of the field. A line could be drawn from the halfback through the quarterback through the center through the middle linebacker to the free safety—right down the middle, as in the following illustration.

The free safety is the farthest player back on defense, and his primary responsibility is to stop the big play, pass, or run. His job is to roam, to be free to go from sideline to sideline to do what he thinks is right. He should always be as deep as or deeper than the deepest receiver. He has to keep everything in front of him.



The heart of the offense and defense includes all the players in the middle of the offensive formation and defensive alignment.

And, like everyone else, he plays head games. In fact, a free safety knows that most quarterbacks are looking at him (see Chapters 7, 11, and 12) as they try to read the defense. It isn't unusual for a free safety who is supposed to be in the middle of the field for a particular defense to line up 10 yards away from the middle. And then, just before the snap, he runs to the middle to play his role in the called defense. And the quarterback is supposed to figure that out. Everybody is playing head games. The whole game is a head game, and those free safeties can be quite a nuisance.

Free safeties know they can be a nuisance. I think they love it. And they're smart, too. They communicate, just like everyone else on a football field. Because of crowd noise, a safety will use a hand signal to call a defense and get people into position. He could use a clenched fist to mean a zone, or an open palm could mean man-to-man coverage. Signals need to be easily seen and easily understood, but not easily stolen.

Zone or Man-to-Man Coverage

A *zone* is a defensive coverage scheme in which certain players cover certain parts of the field. Each covers an area, or a zone. It is not illegal to leave your zone; it just won't help your team. Essentially,



Joe's Tips

If both safeties are within eight yards of the LOS, it probably means there is some kind of blitz coming and the safeties will end up having to cover a tight end or a running back.

linebackers, cornerbacks, and safeties are all assigned to specific areas of the field. Draw a circle, about eight yards in diameter, around each of these players, and you will see the zone that he is assigned.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

When a team **rotates the zone**, it moves players toward one side of the field to be near a group of receivers who have gone into that area.

If you are a defensive back and someone comes into your zone, you're supposed to prevent them from catching the ball. If no one is in your area, you can shade toward one side of your zone where you see receivers. You can slide to help out your buddies, but your team will be in big trouble if you leave your area. If you do, there is a wide open hole for the offense to attack. That spot? Your area. So, if the receiver leaves your area, just pass him on to your buddy.

On the other hand, *man-to-man* coverage requires a defensive back to stay with a wide receiver no matter where that receiver goes. If he starts on one side of the field and then goes in motion all the way to the other side, the defensive back must stay with him.

As the following illustrations show, the position of a cornerback often tells an offense whether the team is playing zone or man-to-man coverage.



Joe's Tips

If a cornerback is shaded to the inside of the wide receiver, the coverage is probably man-to-man. If the cornerback is lined up outside the wide receiver, the coverage is probably some kind of zone.

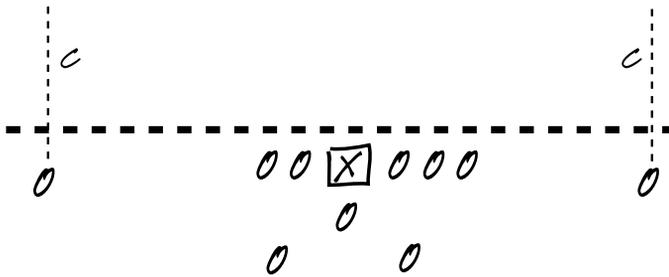
Although the theory of defenses is for players to provide help to each other, the idea of man-to-man coverage is to rely on the cover people to do the job. They are not given a lot of help.

One other thing to know about zone and man-to-man coverage is that the two can be combined on one play. If, for instance, a team plays a zone on one side of the field and a man-to-man coverage on the other side, they're playing combination coverage. See Chapter 18, "Advanced Defensive Strategies," for more information on combination coverage.

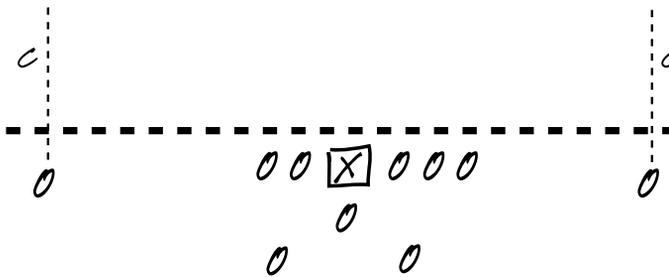
Bump and Run

In the first five yards off the LOS, defensive players can legally hit receivers. This is the *five-yard chuck rule*. The bump-and-run strategy takes advantage of the five-yard chuck rule. Essentially, cornerbacks get up in the face of wide receivers and bump them as they come off the line. The idea is to disrupt the timing of the pass play.

Cornerbacks like to get a hand on the receiver's chest and get it away quick. He only needs to mess up the receiver by one step. One step in a five-step route is quite a bit.

Man to Man

Cornerback positions in man-to-man and zone coverage.

Zone

Joe's Top Five Defensive Backs

In the history of the NFL, there have been some amazing performers in the defensive backfield—players who can dominate half of the field, or the middle of the field, or all of the field all by themselves. In my opinion, these are the top five defensive backs in NFL history (in no particular order):

- **Larry Wilson**, a safety for the St. Louis Cardinals. He was involved in so many hits that he was missing many teeth. It was quite a sight to see the toothless wonder staring at you.
- **Ken Houston**, a safety for the Houston Oilers and Washington Redskins. He was big for his time and had the strongest grip I have ever seen. When Ken grabbed you, you were stopped.
- **Mike Haynes**, cornerback for the New England Patriots and Oakland Raiders. His long arms made it hard to get away, and he was a master of the bump-and-run.
- **Ronnie Lott**, safety for the San Francisco 49ers, Oakland Raiders, and New York Jets, was known as a ferocious hitter.
- **Darrell Green**, cornerback for the Washington Redskins. He is a little guy with all the tools. He is quick, fast, and had a very short memory.

The Least You Need to Know

- The most important trait of a defensive back is a short memory. They will give up big plays from time to time but they cannot let it bother them.
- Defensive backs cover receivers by trying to be like a shadow, staying with them step for step and getting in the way of passes before receivers have a chance to catch them.
- Cornerbacks cover wide receivers and are the smallest players on the defense.
- The strong safety lines up on the side of the tight end and is very involved in stopping the run. The free safety is always supposed to be deeper or as deep as the deepest receiver, and stops the big play, pass or run.
- In zone coverage, players cover an area of the field. In man-to-man coverage, players stay with a specific receiver.



Strategies: Attack or React

In This Chapter

- The difference between an attacking or reacting defense
- The advantages of zone and man-to-man coverage
- Why football is in the age of specialization, and when teams use situation substitutions
- Blitzing: a really aggressive defense
- Defending when an offense only needs short yardage

Defenses win championships. In the game of football, offenses get the glory, but that only means that the offense causes the most excitement. The defense will more than likely get you the wins. It's simple. If you can stop the other team from scoring, it's easy to win. After all, it's easier to outscore zero than any other number. Any idiot knows that.

Defense is a simple proposition. It really is, as I said in Chapter 1, "So You Want to Be a Monday Morning Quarterback," merely a matter of "I don't want you to go across the street." It is macho and physical, yet it is very logical and intellectual. At its core, the defense is always at a disadvantage because it is essentially trying to stop someone from doing something.

Defenses know what offenses are trying to do—put the ball into the end zone. They don't know how the offense is going to do it, but they do know that the offense wants to get to paydirt. And it really ticks the defense off. Heck, everything the offense does ticks them off. How could the offense even show up? How dare they?

There are two basic philosophies of playing defense. You can go after the ball, or you can wait and make sure the ball doesn't get past you. There are risks and rewards to both approaches.

There are also a couple of basic alignments, and a couple of different pass coverage styles. In this chapter, I'll discuss all of that, plus the purpose of situational substitutions. So don't go across the street. Stay here and read this chapter.

Attacking vs. Reacting

If a defense attacks the offense, it does so to dictate the tempo of the game. It wants to make the offense react to what the defense is doing. The defense essentially makes the statement, *"I'm not worried about what you're going to do; I'm going to make you worry about what I'm going to do."* The idea is to stop the other team from even being able to attempt what they want to do.

If a defense instead reacts to an offense, it waits and lets the offense dictate the tempo. The idea is to force the offense to be perfect. The reacting style of defense lets the offense run a play and then gets people to where the ball goes. It's a bend-don't-break defense, just like a rubber band—which is why it's also called the *rubber-band defense*.

I've never been a big fan of a reacting-type defense. I think you have to set the tempo on the offensive and defensive side of the ball. If you have a bend-don't-break defense, you're counting on the offense to screw up. Although a reactive defense will work against many offensive teams, an efficient offense can pick it apart.

I believe in an attacking defense because it sets the tempo. But it carries risks. If the offense guesses right and finds all the people to block, it has time to get the ball off. If it does, it can usually exploit the back of the defense. Also, against an attacking defense, the offense can usually only get two receivers out into their patterns. Because the defense usually has two defensive backs attacking, the two other defensive backs must cover half the field (the other two receivers), and that's more than most defensive backs can handle.

An attacking defense is clearly a gamble if you do it too much. But then, you can't do anything too much in football.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **rubber-band defense** is a bend-don't-break defense that allows short plays down the field. If the offense has to run a lot of short plays, they are sooner or later going to make a mistake—or so the rubber-band defense hopes.

Basic Alignments: The 4-3 and the 3-4 Defenses

There are two basic defensive alignments—4 linemen and 3 linebackers (a 4-3 defense) or 3 linemen and 4 linebackers (a 3-4 defense). The usual secondary would include two cornerbacks and two safeties.

In both defenses, a lineman's job is to penetrate the LOS and occupy some offensive linemen. The most important thing for defensive linemen is to not allow themselves to be moved.

In a basic defense, linebackers have a certain area in which to cover the run or the pass. The secondary can play either zone coverage or man-to-man coverage.

The key is that it is all coordinated. The guys up front are involved in putting pressure on the quarterback, stopping the running game, and occupying blockers.

The guys behind the defensive line, the linebackers and defensive backs, usually work in coordination and rotation opposite one another. In a 4-3 alignment, because there are only seven men in the defensive backfield, there will always be an odd number. There will always be a hole in the defense somewhere. For instance, if the linebackers drop toward the right, the defensive backs will be asked to rotate toward the left. The void is there because you cannot have two defensive levels with four players each. One level only has three men. Therefore, a team cannot have even distribution of coverage on a football field. You just can't give the offense time to find that void.

The idea of bringing four people on the rush (using a 4-3 alignment) is to put as much pressure on the offense as possible while still giving yourself opportunities to protect the areas of the defensive backfield. Like everything in life, there is a trade-off. If you bring more people at the quarterback, there is less protection in the defensive backfield. If you add protection there, the quarterback could have all day to throw.

When a team plays a 3-4 defense, the philosophy is nearly the same. It actually still brings four men on the rush. It just so happens that one of the men lines up a few yards back and usually wears a 50 number on his jersey. You are still committing seven men close to the line of scrimmage with a 3-4 defense, it's just that you've replaced a bigger defensive lineman with a linebacker who can give you more versatility and speed.

In either formation, the idea is to contain the offense. The defense lines up in a certain way and tries to force the offense to do certain things. The defense wants to dictate to the offense what it can and cannot do.

Stopping the Run

Football is a macho game (I know, I said that already), and there is nothing more satisfying than stopping the run. Stopping the run means keeping running plays to three yards or less—on average. Three three-yard gains in a row would make it fourth down and one—resulting in a punt situation for most teams. So, the team that played defense on that drive stopped the run, because the other team could not run for a first down in three plays.

Stopping the run is the way a defense stands up to an offense and says, "*I don't think so.*" The offense would like nothing more than to stuff the ball down the defense's throat. The defense, knowing this, would equally like nothing more than to stop the offense cold in its tracks.

One of the most important and telling statistics from a football game is the number of yards per run (or yards per carry). If a team can stop the opponent from running the ball and keep the offense's yards per run low (3.0 yards or less per carry), they can stop the offense from controlling the game. It still all comes down to who controls the tempo of the game.

By stopping the run, the defense forces the offense to throw the ball. That takes away half of the options of an offense, making it one-dimensional. Clearly, a lot of things can happen when the ball goes in the air, and two of them are bad—an incomplete pass or an interception. By stopping the run, the chance that the defense will succeed has gone up tremendously. And not only that, but the offense will leave the field sooner because pass plays often stop the clock.



Joe's Record Book

In Super Bowl XXV, the New York Giants proved the importance of time of possession. Against a high-powered Buffalo Bills offense that scored 95 points in two playoff games leading to the Super Bowl, the Giants kept the ball 40 minutes and 33 seconds, a Super Bowl record. The Giants won the game 20–19 by keeping Buffalo's offense off the field.

Stopping the run always starts with the defensive linemen, who must get the offensive linemen tied up. And then the linebackers are supposed to make plays.

Remember, there is an average of about 65 offensive plays a game. If the defense forces the offense to throw 45 of those times, it means a few things. It means that the offense only ran the ball 20 times, and probably 12 of those were unsuccessful. It also means that the team that is throwing the ball all those times probably will not have the ball as much time as a team with a balanced attack. Time of possession is another very telling statistic of which team is most likely winning (if your team has the ball longer, it has more opportunities to score).

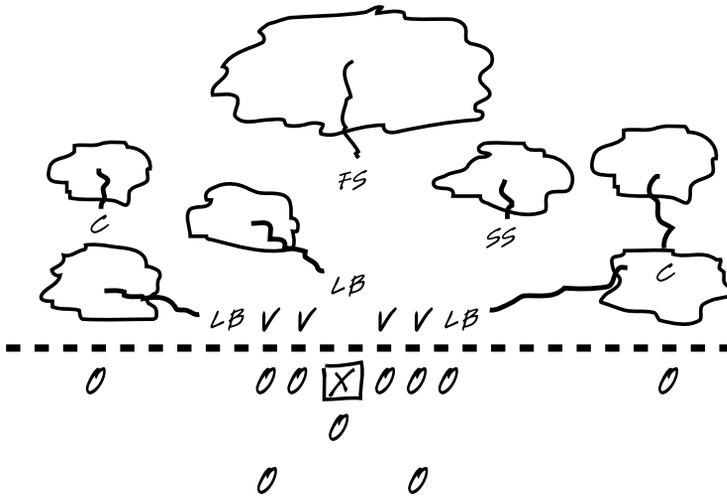
Stopping the run is also extremely important as a game nears the end. If the team with the ball is trying to protect a lead, it wants to run the ball because running the ball can eat up the clock. But if the defense can stop the running game, it forces the offense to either turn over the ball with a punt after three runs or to take the riskier course of putting the ball in the air.

Stopping the Pass: Zone or Man-to-Man Coverage

The way the defense tries to stop the pass reveals something about the personality of the team. If it uses man-to-man coverage, it has an aggressive personality. A zone coverage is more reactive.

A *zone* defense, in which the linebackers and defensive backs each cover a specific area on the field, is a statement that the defense doesn't want to get beaten deep by a long pass. The zone coverage approach allows the offense a chance to get short gains and counts on the fact that somewhere in a drive the offense is going to make a

mistake. A defensive team using zone coverage believes the offense cannot go 80 yards without making a mistake.



A basic zone coverage has each player behind the defensive line responsible for covering an area (zone) on the field.

A zone defense is patient. It is also careful. Zone defense is often played when a team does not have enough talented defensive backs to run an efficient man-to-man defense. It takes fewer chances and forces the offense to be perfect. A team playing zone defense believes the offense can't just march down the field mistake free. In all likelihood, they are right. The offense probably will make a mistake. A zone defense waits for that mistake and plans to capitalize on it.

But if an offense is efficient and doesn't make a mistake, it can take advantage of a zone defense by throwing to *soft spots* where the offense can make play after play.

When the defensive line rushes the quarterback and the linebackers drop back into coverage, there is a soft spot of about 10 yards in between them. If the linebackers keep dropping back and the quarterback keeps dumping the ball over the top of the line to a running back, the offense can get 8 or 10 yards on every play. If the linebackers come up a little closer, a soft spot opens up between the linebackers and the free safety, who, as you remember, is the last line of defense.



Joe's Tips

A goal of any football team is that in every game it wants two drives of 60 yards or more for a touchdown. That says a lot about the game of football and how hard it is to go down the field. If a head coach wants only two drives of 60 yards for a score, what are the chances of a team going 80 yards even once? A zone philosophy has math on its side.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **soft spot** is an area in a zone defense between defensive players.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **pick** occurs when receivers criss-cross and two defensive players run into each other. If an offensive player runs into a defensive player who is covering someone else, it is an illegal pick (if he is caught). If two defensive players run into each other, they're just not very smart.

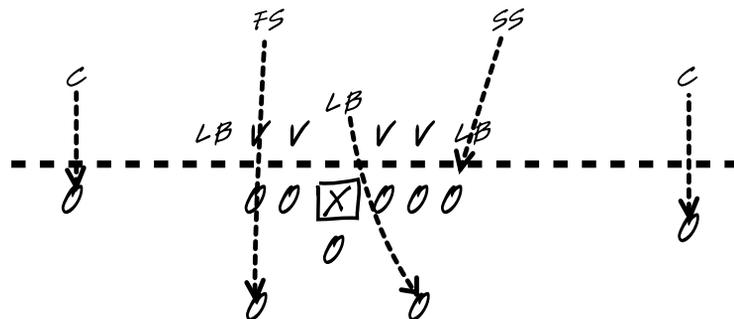
On the other hand, *man-to-man* defense, in which the linebackers and defensive backs each cover a particular offensive player, is pure guts and confidence. The defense puts its faith in its defensive backs and uses the extra players who would normally be in coverage on a zone defense to attack the quarterback. The idea of playing man-to-man coverage is that the defense doesn't want to wait for the offense to make a mistake. It wants to force mistakes.

Man-to-man coverage is simply man-to-man coverage—one defensive guy follows one offensive guy all over the football field. Think of your shadow on a sunny day, and you will have a good understanding of the complexity of man-to-man coverage. That is, it's not complex. Your shadow simply follows you everywhere.

Good man-to-man coverage is really an amazing skill—one of the most amazing in all of athletics. Think about it. You have a great athlete following another great athlete. Only the receiver knows where he wants to go. The defensive back tries to stay with him. Even more amazing is a defensive back's attitude when he does happen to give up a big play. A cornerback will never say he was beaten by a receiver. Instead, according to a cornerback, he made a mistake. Nobody ever *beats* them.

One thing that defensive coaches worry about is having their players get picked. A *pick* occurs when receivers criss-cross and two defensive players run into each other.

Basic man-to-man coverage involves one defensive player covering one offensive player all over the field.



Coaches worry about offensive players making defensive players change direction or hesitate as they try to cover a different offensive player. Offensive players try to not look like they are getting in someone's way when they really are because if they can make a defensive back fall one or two steps behind his receiver, there is big play potential.

Situation Substitutions: Welcome to the Age of Specialization

Every player who lines up on a football field has a very specific set of skills suited to his position. Some guys have even more specific skills—suited to their position for specific situations. Thus, football is a game of many situation substitutions—bringing in players with specific skills for specific situations.

For instance, if a defense has two big linemen who are very good against the run, but it's an obvious passing situation, say third down and 12 yards to go, the defense may very well replace those run stoppers with a couple of men who are a little bit lighter and quicker. They probably have slightly better pass-rush skills.

Late in a game, when the offense might line up in a four-receiver set, the defense might take out a safety and substitute a cornerback who has slightly better pass-coverage skills. The defense will not take out both safeties. It will usually leave its best pass-coverage safety in because it still wants a good tackler deep in its secondary in case there is a big run.

Linebackers are also subject to situation substitutions—especially the middle linebacker. The defense still wants a guy who is a good run stopper, but in certain situations it may not necessarily need the best run stopper hammering up the middle. The guy who comes in to replace the middle linebacker will still be a good run stopper, but he is needed more for pass coverage so he is probably a little bit faster and more agile. On third down and long, if he stops the run six or seven yards down the field instead of at the LOS, it is okay. It is more important to have someone in who can cover a running back or a tight end. (To learn more, see Chapter 18, “Advanced Defensive Strategies.”)

The key to substitutions is to get a better matchup on the field for what the offense is expected to do. This is the age of specialization. Some guys make football teams these days because they have an ability to do just one thing. On the other hand, there are guys who make the team because they have an ability to do many things. The guys who are multi-dimensional give a team the flexibility to carry the specialists.

For instance, maybe a team has an older defensive lineman who cannot play 65 plays a game anymore. Maybe he can only give a team 20 plays a game. But in those 20 plays, he may be able to put pressure on the quarterback a couple times, and maybe get one sack. Every team wants a guy like that—he could determine the outcome of the game. It only takes one play to determine the outcome, and this guy could be the guy to make it.

But in order to carry him, a defense needs other guys with versatility. For instance, a team would love to have a 300-pound defensive end who can also play defensive tackle. This allows the team to carry the older guy who is the pass-rush specialist. That way, the versatile guy can play when the older guy isn't in, and is also available to substitute at tackle and give the starting tackles a breather. Versatility is on the roster to save a spot for specialization.

Another example of a situation substitution is the man who is known as the long snapper. He has the skill to snap the ball between his legs 15 yards back on punts.

Despite the continual evolution of the game, I believe it has reached the level of saturation for specialization. After all, the size of the rosters is still the same.

As much as the game has evolved, it still involves blocking, tackling, throwing, catching, and running. Those five elements have not changed one bit. It may be a different game because of the size and speed of the players, but if you've got two big guys going up against two other big guys, it's still the same game. It's just bigger.

Blitzing

The idea of *blitzing* (bringing more than five defensive players on a rush at the quarterback and forcing a bad throw or getting a sack) is to dictate the tempo of the play. Blitzing is aggressive. It is, quite simply, an attack mode.

It is one of the few times the defense actually can dictate to the offense where they want the offense to throw the ball. It works because defenses know how offenses think.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **hot** receiver is one who is supposed to get the ball when the defense blitzes. As soon as the receiver realizes he is hot, he must turn and look for the ball, because the quarterback will have limited time to get it to him. There are different hot receivers for different blitzes.

Defenses know that how they rush on a blitz determines who the *hot* receiver is and where that receiver will be as the play develops.

Defenses are always trying to get the numbers game on their side when they blitz. They understand the blocking scheme of the offensive line and then overload one side in order to have more people coming than the offense has people to block. It serves two purposes. First of all, obviously, it puts an extreme amount of pressure on the quarterback. Second, and just as important, it forces the quarterback to make a decision that the defense presumes is beneficial to its cause—go to the hot receiver.

Defenses know that when they blitz, the quarterback doesn't have a lot of time to throw the football. They know he has to hurry, and he probably won't be very accurate. Now, of course, most offenses have *blitz adjustments*, but defenses know those as well. (How? you might ask. From film study.) And, frankly, the purpose of a blitz is to force those adjustments.

For instance, if the defense blitzes from the side of the tight end on a specific team, it may know that the blitz adjustment is to throw a five-yard quick post to that tight end. If it is third down and 12 yards to go, a 5-yard post is not much of a worry. The defense still has a seven-yard cushion to bring that tight end down. By blitzing from that side, the defense knows the quarterback has to throw that specific pass. Unless he's an idiot, he'll throw it. And if he's an NFL quarterback, he's not an idiot.

I think the blitz is just not used enough. Being the aggressive individual that I am, and being a believer that football is a game that rewards aggressive individuals and teams, I think the blitz can cause all sorts of havoc for the offense.

That said, I also know that there are ways to beat the blitz. Remember, offensive lines can slide. They can pick up the blitz. Quarterbacks can call audibles. If an offense gets a hot pass off and the defense doesn't make a tackle, the hot receiver can go for a lot of yards.

When I played, I was burned by the blitz on more than one occasion. I also burned the blitz more than once. I know I've said this a million times in this book already, but a million times is not enough, so I'll say it again—football is a head game. The concept of blitzing fits perfectly into that head game.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **blitz adjustment** is an automatic decision a quarterback must make when he sees a blitz coming from a certain area. The blitz adjustment requires the quarterback to go to the hot receiver.

Short Yardage and Goal Line Situations

Sometimes, the offense only needs to get a tiny chunk of real estate—say, two yards or less—to get a first down. In such situations, it brings in a *short-yardage* offense. Simply put, it lines up in a close formation and tries to bully its way past the defense. Power versus power.

The same situation exists when the offense is close to the goal line. But the difference between a goal-line situation and a short-yardage situation is that the offense may run a power offense on four consecutive plays. If they get those two yards or less, they get six points. A lot is on the line.

Defenses know what offenses want to do—they want to advance the ball a short distance. In these situations, defenses can be quite stubborn—or at least they'd like to be. There is some attitude going on when the ball only needs to go a couple of yards or less. (Often, it is less—a matter of inches. Heck, it could be a fraction of an inch. And if the defense is good, that fraction of an inch can be equal to a mile or more.) So what happens?

There are eight basic *gaps* along the LOS—one on either side of the center, one to the outside of each guard, one to the outside of each tackle, and one on the outside of the tight end (depending on which side the tight end is lined up on). The defense wants to plug those gaps. The offense wants to push the ball through one of them. Power versus power. Big guys against big guys.

These situations almost always call for running plays, and often the running back will leap into the air to try to get the little bit of yardage needed for a first down or the touchdown. The defense expects this, so they have their middle linebacker ready as a *jumper*.

In these situations, everybody on defense is within three or four yards of the LOS. The defense does *not* want to get pushed back. These are usually critical situations, and the defense has every intention of being as stubborn as a mule. Of course, the offense feels the exact same way and is not in a cooperative mood. Thus, there are some fabulous collisions.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The area between two offensive players is considered a **gap**.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **jumper** is a linebacker who starts a few yards back from the LOS and tries to time his leap in the air to coincide with the leap of the running back. Short yardage plays often come down to which player, the running back or the jumper, wins the collision.

The Prevent Defense

At the end of a game or the end of a half, when the defense is worried about a big play, it often employs what is called a *prevent defense*. The idea is to prevent a big pass play, but in reality it often gives up many small pass plays that are just as damaging.

This is not one of my favorite strategies. First of all, if your team is winning, and it got to that point in the game by using one defensive strategy, it makes little sense to change it at the end of the game. Why change what has worked all along?

But because they fear the big play so much, coaches employ the prevent defense. Essentially, the prevent defense uses only three men to rush the quarterback and puts eight men in coverage. The eight men are set up like a big umbrella, deployed to make sure the offense cannot complete a long pass and also to make sure the offense cannot get a pass near the sideline so it can stop the clock. Remember, a ticking clock is the ally of a winning team. So, the strategy sort of makes sense. But it only makes sense if the team on defense is winning by more than one score and the other team is out of time-outs.

A prevent defense is a zone defense that tries to force every pass into the middle of the field. Sure, the soft spots in the zone are small because there are so many

men in the defensive backfield. But on the other hand, the defense is giving the quarterback lots of time to throw the ball. And any NFL quarterback, if given time, can complete most of his passes. If he couldn't, he wouldn't be in the NFL.

The Least You Need to Know

- An attacking defense wants to set the tempo of a game and force the offense to make a mistake, while a reacting defense waits for the offense to make a mistake.
- Some players are on teams because they have specific skills that are useful in certain situations. When they are brought in, it is a situation substitution.
- Teams blitz in order to put pressure on the quarterback and to force the offense to throw to a specific receiver.
- The prevent defense is willing to give the offense short passes in order to prevent one long pass, but those short passes can be just as damaging.



Advanced Defensive Strategies

In This Chapter

- ▶ The evolution of defensive philosophies
- ▶ A few coverage packages to defend against the pass
- ▶ The latest wrinkle, the zone blitz

The game of football has evolved. Great strategists have encountered other great strategists, and although at its core football will always be a confrontation between athletes, it has become much more than that.

The chess match aspect of the game that I have referred to so often in this book really has developed into a battle of masters. Offensive innovations are followed by defensive innovations. Sometimes, defensive innovations come first. There is no rule. The chicken? The egg? Hey, who knows? All I know is that this game has spawned strategies that have spawned strategies, and every time something new comes along, I can only shake my head in amazement.

This chapter covers the evolution of some advanced defensive philosophies, the different coverage packages that are commonly used, and the newest wrinkle in the evolution of the game, the zone blitz. Defenses want nothing more than to confuse the offense. That is the purpose of advanced strategies. Although football really is about athletes, strategy has become increasingly more important over the years. Who knows what's coming next?

How Defensive Philosophies Became Important

Once upon a time, say a few decades ago, defenses were just a bunch of tough guys with no teeth, trying to stop the run and pressure the quarterback. They wanted to tackle the guy with the ball. They didn't want passes to be caught by receivers.

The tough guys with no teeth are still around, but the philosophy of how to tackle the guy with the ball and how to stop passes from being caught has evolved into a science. The game has become, in many ways, a battle of wits between coaches. But still, if a team doesn't have capable athletes, it cannot run the defensive schemes.

Schemes are very important now. Imagine taking four defensive linemen and three linebackers and lining them up in every conceivable way opposite an offensive line. Whatever configuration your imagination can come up with, it exists in football today.

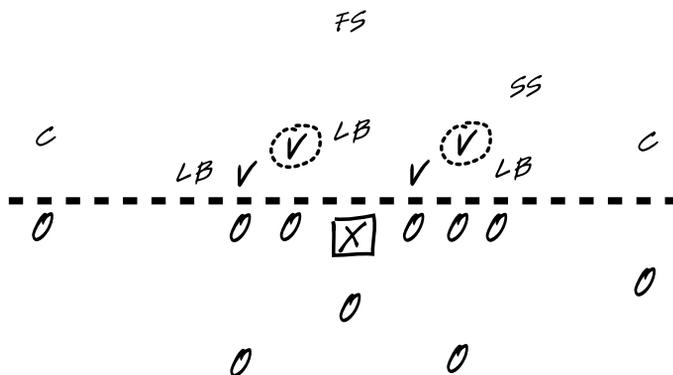
Through film study, coaches examine what other coaches have already figured out and then they build on it. The number of things each side can do with 11 people seems almost infinite to me. It is fascinating, as one thing leads to another.

The Flex Defense

One of the first stages of defensive evolution came in the late 1960s and early 1970s with Coach Tom Landry's Dallas Cowboys. Landry and his staff developed what was called a *flex defense*, in which not all the defensive linemen lined up right on the line of scrimmage—two of them lined up a couple feet away. Because two men were off the ball, it became harder for the offensive line to block them. Remember, the offensive line must work in perfect coordination, almost like a chorus line. But when two of the defensive linemen lined up off the ball, the offensive line had difficulties moving in synch and, therefore, spacing was created. When the gaps opened, people could fire through them and attack the ball or the quarterback. It was the beginning of the evolutionary process.

The flex defense isn't used anymore, but for a while it totally confused offenses, especially offensive lines.

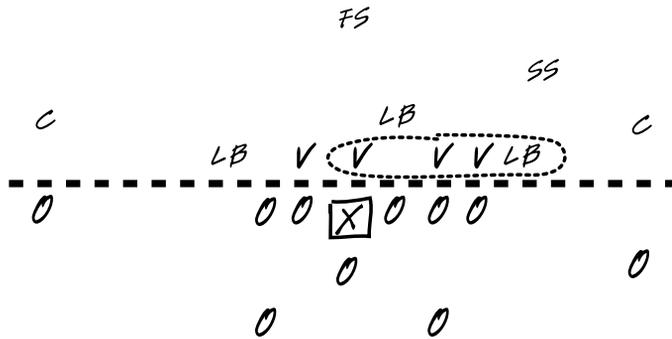
The flex defense was made popular by Tom Landry, coach of the Dallas Cowboys. The idea was to disrupt the blocking schemes of the offensive line.



The Over Defense and the Under Defense

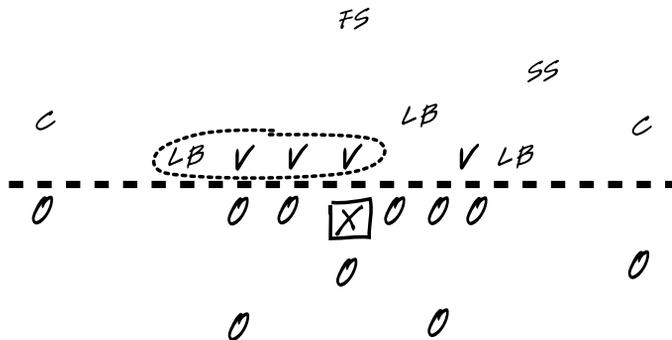
The great Pittsburgh Steelers “Steel Curtain” defense of the 1970s used the *over defense* and the *under defense*. The over defense meant that the defensive line shifted over toward the tight end, and the middle linebacker also shifted from the middle of the defense to one player over. The under defense meant that the shift was made to the weak side. The strength of these two defenses was that they always had someone over the center, which made it difficult for the center to help block any other player.

THE OVER DEFENSE:



The over defense and the under defense were popularized by the great Pittsburgh Steelers of the 1970s as a way to put pressure on certain areas of the offense—such as the center.

THE UNDER DEFENSE:



The 3-4 Defense

The next step in the evolution came when teams decided to use four linebackers instead of three—the *3-4 defense* (see Chapter 15, “Linebackers Do Everything,” for an illustration). This defensive scheme was created so teams could have linebackers pursue the ball carrier. However, because the linebackers were actually backed off the

ball, the 3-4 defense created a natural “bubble”; offenses thought it gave them a chance to run at the “bubble.” The 3-4 defense did give offenses a slight advantage in trying to stuff the ball up the middle. But it also gave defenses an advantage in pursuit across the entire field, and made it difficult for offensive lines to both run-block and pass-block.



Joe’s Gridiron Talk

When an offensive lineman has a **double response**, he is responsible for a linebacker in front of him and off the ball and also for an outside linebacker on that side. Normally, only one will rush. The question for the offensive lineman is, which one? He first checks the man in front of him, then checks the outside rusher. And he had better do it fast.



Joe’s Gridiron Talk

A **hurry** is when a quarterback is forced to throw the ball quicker than he would like. It may just be the defense pushing the pocket back in his face, or it could be a rush that disrupts his timing. It isn’t a sack, but it can be just as valuable.

Another advantage the defense gained was that the 3-4 defense created a lot of possible ways to blitz. The defense could bring both inside linebackers on a blitz. It could bring two from one side. It could bring all four. It made an offensive line coach’s life miserable.

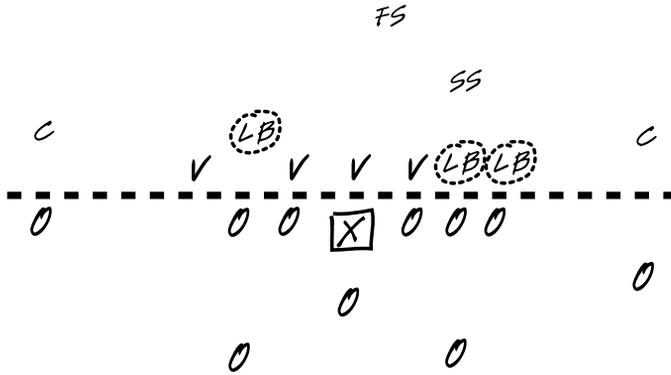
An offensive line usually relies on one of the three inside guys—the center or two guards—to help out on a pass rush. But the 3-4 defense makes, for instance, a left guard have a *double response* when considering who he is supposed to block.

The 46 Defense

In the mid-1980s, Buddy Ryan, defensive coordinator of the Chicago Bears, developed what was for one season one of the most dominating defenses in the history of the NFL—the *46 defense*. That defense wanted offenses to do everything in a hurry. The defense lined up with linemen over all three middle offensive linemen, who, as I said, are usually the helping linemen. Thus, these middle offensive linemen couldn’t help anyone. They were busy fighting off 300 pounds coming at their face. Having played against it and having been beaten up by it, I know the 46 defense as an attacking, man-to-man style.

The 46 defense also relied upon having two great outside pass-rushing linebackers. And those linebackers were both put on the same side, right over the tight end. This created a dilemma for the tight end. Who should he block? Both might come at the quarterback. Or maybe only one will. Or maybe neither will. Should he just go out for a pass?

The key to that defense was to have these great outside pass rushers. If they weren’t top-notch, the 46 defense was not as effective. The Chicago Bears of the mid-1980s happened to have some of the best linebackers in football—Mike Singletary in the middle and Wilbur Marshall and Otis Wilson on the outside.



The 46 defense was played by the 1985 Chicago Bears. The distinguishing feature of this defense was that it covered the three interior linemen (center and both guards) with defensive linemen.

The 46 defense put tremendous pressure on the quarterback. If you were the quarterback, it seemed you had to hurry every play. And then, just when you thought you knew how to quickly get rid of the ball, the Bears would rush only three linemen. You would be standing in the pocket expecting extreme pressure and wanting to get rid of the ball quickly, and they would have eight players in coverage. So, you now had all this time with nowhere to throw the ball. This was the original head-game defense.

The Eagle Defense

An *eagle defense* is one where the outside linebacker, who is normally on the left outside the LOS, is moved inside and a couple feet off the ball. The defensive end on that side is then moved slightly to the outside. This gives the linebacker some room to pursue plays on the side of the field farthest from him. It moves him one player closer to the middle of the field.

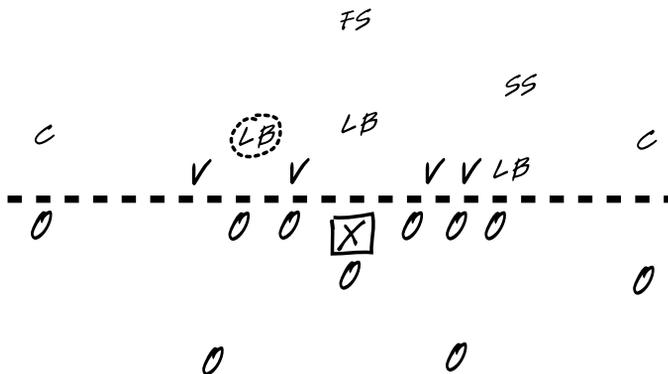
The idea of the eagle defense is to funnel the play to the linebacker by putting the big lineman on the outside.



Joe's Record Book

The Chicago Bears defense was so dominating in the 1985 season that it actually held both of its opponents in the playoffs to zero points. The team beat the New York Giants 21–0 in the divisional playoffs, and it beat the Los Angeles Rams 24–0 in the NFC Championship Game. The Bears beat the New England Patriots 46–10 in Super Bowl XX.

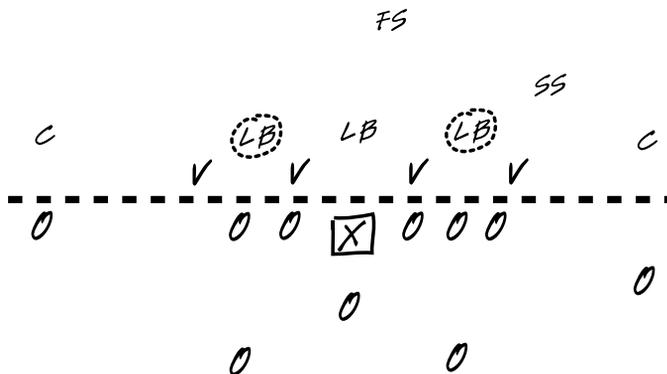
The eagle defense uses a linebacker on the inside of the tackle box and puts a lineman on the outside.



The Double Eagle Defense

The *double eagle* is a 4-3 defense in which both outside linebackers are moved inside the perimeter of the defensive line. Again, the idea is to use the big people on the line to funnel the ball to the linebackers. This defense does give the offense a chance to attack the bubbles, and the defense has to be strong at the point of attack in order to stop runs. However, it gives the linebackers more latitude to pursue plays across the entire field.

The double eagle defense uses two linebackers on the inside of the tackle box and moves two linemen outside.



Pass-Coverage Packages

You learned about zones and man-on-man coverages in Chapter 17, “Strategies: Attack or React.” That was basic stuff. It is now time to graduate to some more advanced pass-coverage packages.

A pass-coverage package is the way a defensive team positions its players on the field to defend against the pass. These are called by various names. So reach into your pocket and grab a nickel, a dime, and a quarter. These are your reference materials. (Not really, but remember those names.)

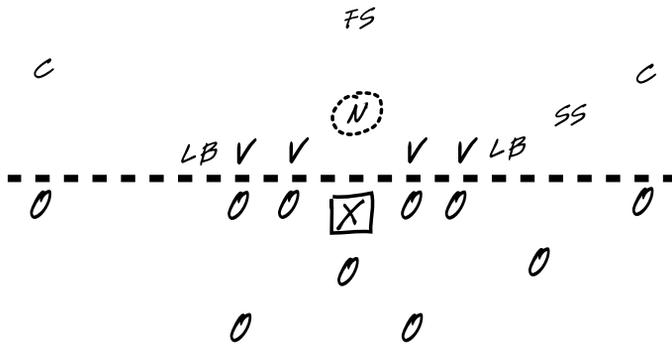
The Nickel Package

Normally, there are four defensive backs. In a *nickel package*, there are five defensive backs. Five cents in a nickel, five defensive backs in a nickel defense. Easy. (This simple memorization trick won't work for the dime or the quarter, but it works for the nickel.)

A nickel back is brought in as a situation substitution on passing plays to help with pass coverage. Defenses normally bring in the nickel back when the offense is using three or four wide receivers, or in an obvious passing situation such as second down and 15 yards to go or third down and 12 yards plus to go. He is usually brought in in place of the middle linebacker.

By going to the nickel, the defense sacrifices a bit of its run coverage by playing percentages—that is, by playing the odds that the offense will pass rather than run. It expects a pass, and it wants to give itself the best chance to stop it.

The extra defensive back, the nickel back, is usually there to cover the extra wide receiver, although he could also be in to play a zone. All basic coverages are used with a nickel package.



The nickel package is usually used in passing situations. One linebacker is removed and a defensive back (nickel back) is added.

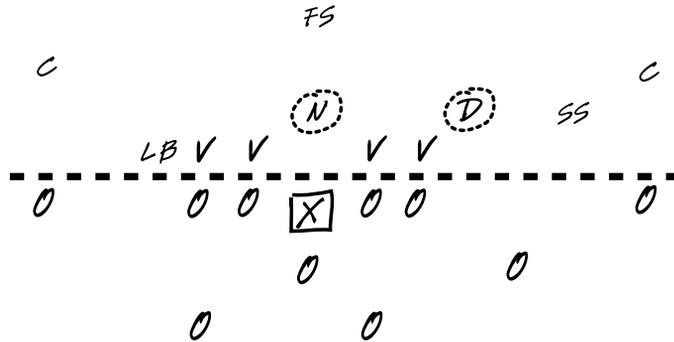
The Dime Package

A *dime package* involves bringing in yet another defensive back in place of a linebacker. By using a dime, the defense is only leaving in one linebacker, usually the team's best coverage linebacker.

The dime package is mostly used when the offense brings in four wide receivers. It is used to match up coverage men against receivers. Again, as with a nickel package, the dime can be played man-to-man or zone.

Why is it called a dime? It's bigger than a nickel, I suppose. Here is my honest answer: I really don't know.

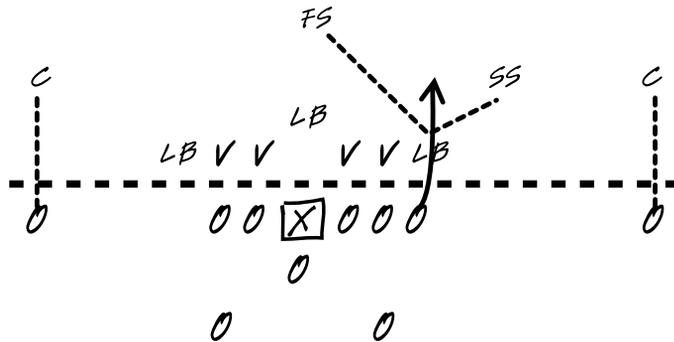
The dime package is usually used in obvious passing situations. Two defensive players (linebackers or defensive linemen) are removed and replaced with two defensive backs.



Combination Coverages

Sometimes, a team has a tremendous cornerback who they believe can cover any wide receiver in the world. But the offense may have two great receivers. In this situation, the defensive coach may choose to use a *combination coverage*, in which the one tremendous cornerback covers a receiver man-to-man, and the other receiver is double-teamed.

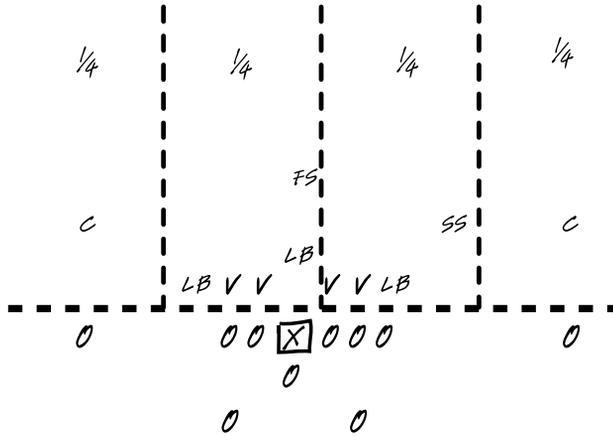
Combination coverage uses some man-to-man coverage along with some zone coverage.



Quarter Coverage

Yet another coin word with a new kind of meaning, *quarter coverage* is one of the more deceptive coverage packages. Quarter coverage means the secondary divides the field into four long strips from the LOS to the end zone, with each defensive back covering a quarter of the field.

In quarter coverage, the cornerbacks and safeties line up in essentially a row—a flat line across the field. The cornerbacks are off the wide receivers and the safeties are in at the same depth as the cornerbacks. The advantage of this type of coverage is that, to a quarterback, it looks like man-to-man coverage. But it isn't. If the quarterback reads man-to-man coverage and thinks that the receiver will run away from one of the defensive backs into an open area, he's in for a big surprise and so is the receiver—who is running into another man's quadrant.



Quarter coverage divides the field into four quadrants and assigns one player to cover each quadrant.

Each of the cornerbacks and safeties is responsible for his quadrant of the field. In his quadrant, he is in man-to-man coverage. But when a receiver leaves his quadrant, the defensive back passes him along to the next defensive back. For instance, a cornerback will chase a receiver through his quadrant and then the safety will pick him up in the next quadrant. The cornerback will then lay back in the zone to see if someone else is coming into his quadrant. The nickel back is in the game to help in any of the quadrants. Receivers are passed along by *cut calls*.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **cut call** is how receivers are passed from quadrant to quadrant. One defensive back will yell "Cut! Cut!" to the other, meaning he is cutting in on coverage. It is very well coordinated.

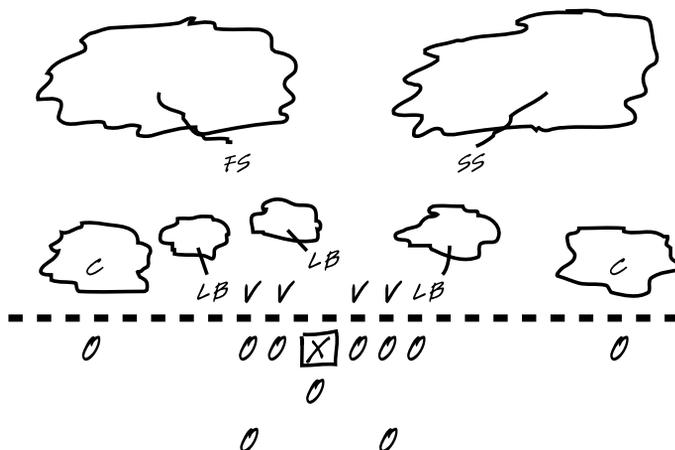
Nickel Combination Coverage

When there are three wide receivers and the defense has its nickel package in, it can double-cover two of the three wide receivers. In double coverage, one defensive back is usually to the inside of the receiver and the other defensive back is to the outside.

Two-Deep Zone

In a *two-deep zone*, the safeties each cover a zone deep, and the cornerbacks and linebackers cover zones closer to the left outside. This defense tries to prevent passes that are thrown to the outside receivers in the 10 to 12 yard area. Because the defensive back (cornerback) knows he has backup help in the deep zone behind him, he can cover his receiver more closely.

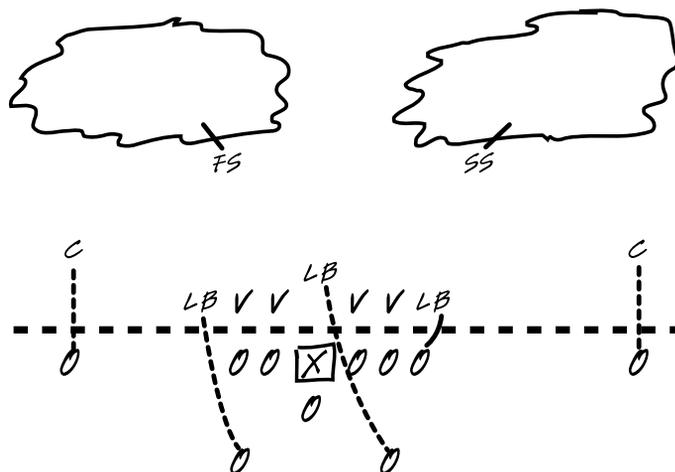
In a two-deep zone coverage, the two safeties back up the cornerbacks, who play aggressive defense.



Two-Deep Man-Under

In *two-deep man-under*, the safeties play the same role as in the two-deep zone—each covers a deep zone that encompasses half of the field. But the cornerbacks play man-to-man coverage—in which they are more than a wide receiver's shadow, they're stuck to him like Velcro—all over the field. This type of defense allows the man-to-man cover people the opportunity to take risks because they have friends in deep places. But the trade-off is that the center of the field becomes vulnerable.

The *two-deep man-under* is a combination of zone and man-to-man coverage in which the safeties play zone and the underneath cover men play man-to-man.



Zone Blitz

Defensive and coverage schemes can only work if teams have the athletes to execute them. When teams have the athletes, coaching imaginations seem to be unlimited. It is from that endless wealth of imagination that arose the newest NFL defensive craze—the *zone blitz*.

As with all defensive concepts, the zone blitz starts with film study. A team needs to understand the other team's offensive blitz adjustment for a specific kind of blitz.

Let's say the defense knows from film study that the quarterback coach has probably been telling the quarterback all year that if a safety and a linebacker blitz from the same side, he has to throw to the receiver on that side for a five-yard quick post. It is clear from film study that this is the rule.

The zone blitz anticipates the blitz adjustment perfectly. It brings the linebacker and safety, but it drops a defensive lineman (yes, a 300-pound defensive lineman) into zone coverage. It's not a far-back zone—he's only protecting against a five-yard pattern. And the defensive lineman doesn't have to cover anyone. He just has to be in between the quarterback and the spot film study has revealed to be the target of the five-yard quick post.

The zone blitz. What will they think of next?



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Defensive linemen have gotten a lot smarter. When they realize they can't get to the quarterback, many of them just stop and try to bat the ball down—and they don't need to be 6'7" to do it. So if you see a defensive lineman bat a pass down, he has reached the advanced stages of rushing the passer.

Building the Perfect Defense

Strategy is great, but personnel win football games. And there are dream personnel for every defense. These are mine:

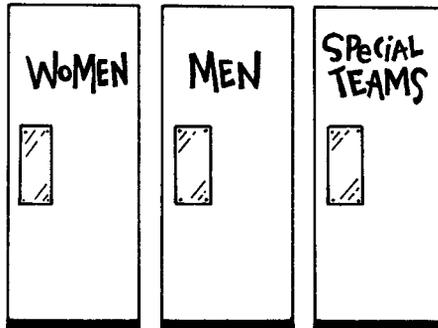
- Two cover corners should be about 6'1" and 205 pounds with a bit longer arms than a man buying suits off the rack. And both should be able to run 40 yards in about 4.4 seconds.
- Both safeties should be between 200 and 215 pounds and about 6'2". These guys need to be able to help linebackers in run support, and one should be a veteran who can get everybody lined up in the proper position.
- The middle linebacker should be about 250 pounds of run-stuffing meanness who can also drop back into pass coverage and run sideline to sideline.
- The outside right linebacker should be a 240-pound guy who can run. He must be able to drop into pass coverage as well as stop the run and maybe blitz the quarterback.
- The outside left linebacker can also be about 230 pounds but he must be a superior athlete who can cover the tight end as well as blitz the quarterback.

- The defensive tackles should be huge—“big butts” I call them. These guys should be between 320 and 350 pounds and able to take on and tie up the three middle offensive linemen to free the middle linebacker to attack running plays.
- The defensive ends need to be 280 or so pounds and really quick off the corner to attack the quarterback.

Give me this lineup and I'll see you in the Super Bowl.

The Least You Need to Know

- Defensive strategies have evolved and continue to evolve as teams take successful schemes and innovate further.
- A nickel package features five defensive backs. A dime package features six defensive backs. A quarter package divides the field into four quadrants, each covered by one defensive back. The quarter package has five defensive backs. The fifth back, the nickel back, can roam through all the quadrants.
- Combination coverage is a combination of zone coverage with man-to-man on a particular receiver.
- The zone blitz brings linebackers on the rush and drops a defensive lineman into zone coverage.



Special Teams Really Are Special

In This Chapter

- Why special teams are so important
- Strategies for kickoff and kickoff returns
- Punt and punt return practices

There have always been different parts of the military, but the Special Forces have been the ones that come across as a little crazier than all the rest. Their training is a lot more rigorous. Their missions are a lot more dangerous. It is no different in football.

The *special teams* in football are the Special Forces. These are the madmen. When a team kicks off, for instance, it sends men running 40 yards at full speed into a wall of 300-pound men. These are human bowling balls aimed at some very big pins. But yet, on another part of the special teams, there are technical experts. On a field goal, a team of three work out a precision drill of a snap, a hold, and a kick in less than two seconds. Yet other times, some of the biggest hits and most memorable plays occur when the game involves special teams.

I believe Desmond Howard and his 10 kick-return teammates won Super Bowl XXXI for the Green Bay Packers when Howard returned a kickoff 99 yards for a touchdown. It swung the momentum in a spectacular fashion. In some games, one special teams' play can be worth dozens of regular offensive and defensive plays. In Super Bowl XXXI, special teams brought the world championship to the Green Bay Packers.

This chapter covers the importance of special teams, the mentality of special teams players, and the various skills and strategies of the units involved in kickoffs, punts, field goals, and extra points. This is a special chapter.

Games Can Turn on Special Teams Play

It can be easy to overlook the importance of special teams. After all, special teams only handle about 17 percent of all plays in a game. Offense and defense play the rest. But any coach will tell you that special teams are as important as offense or defense—the full $33\frac{1}{3}$ percent.

I use the word “special” a lot. It’s true. These guys are special. Special teams plays involve a direct attempt to get either points or a large chunk of yards. In either case, they take on more significance than a normal play from scrimmage.

You can almost always count on special teams to provide a big play—whether it’s a blocked punt, a great punt return, or a last-second field goal. There is a high probability that a special teams play will be exciting.

First of all, games always begin with special teams—a kickoff and return. Therefore, special teams are the guys on the field first. Because of this, coaches are constantly preaching that these are the guys who set the tempo of the game. It’s true. A big hit to open the game establishes a completely different tone than a big runback. Just as offenses and defenses from the same team can feed off each other, both units are also directly affected by the performance of special teams.



Joe’s Record Book

George Allen, coach of the Los Angeles Rams and then the Washington Redskins, was the first coach in the NFL to recognize how important special teams are by hiring a coach just for them. Now, all football teams understand. Many print up T-shirts just for the special teams.

If a team charges down the field and knocks someone into snot-bubble land, everybody gets fired up. Guys jump around like maniacs when somebody knocks the snot out of someone. It sends a message to the other team: “All afternoon you are going to be in for a real battle.”

Now, if I’m the quarterback and my guy just got the heck kicked out of him, I’m thinking that these guys came to play today. The first words I would say in huddle would be, “Listen, these guys came to play, we better strap it up and get our butts in gear.”

But if my guy just had a good runback, I’d say, “We’ve got them going; we’ve got them on the ropes. Let’s not waste this opportunity.”

Two Ways to Be Special

Special teams can be divided into essentially two categories—*change-of-possession plays* (punts and kickoffs) and *plays for points* (field goals and extra points).

The plays for points often involve a good portion of the players from the regular starting offense and the regular starting defense. The biggest wildcard in those plays is the *place-kicker*, a solitary man who must have the make-up of an individual-sport athlete, such as a golfer.

On the other hand, the change-of-possession plays involve maniacs. They involve players who may not be regulars on offense or defense. Some of the players on special teams (although certainly not all) are those who are on the fringes of the roster. Coaches like to put players on special teams to evaluate them. They can check the size of a guy's heart, his toughness, and his level of intelligence. Yet other guys are on special teams because they are experts at the art of flying down the field. Many of the guys on a special teams unit are specialists. This includes almost all *kick returners*.

Although change-of-possession plays are high-velocity, collision-type plays, they are also very organized. It may not look that way on television or from the stands, but there is great coordination on both sides. Coaches quickly learn about the intelligence level of a player by putting him on special teams. As for his toughness and his heart—just watch a kickoff sometime. Maniacs, I'm telling you, maniacs.

Kickoffs: Rolling Thunder

Games begin with kickoffs. Second halves begin with kickoffs. There is a kickoff after every score. Kickoffs are very important plays that go a long way in determining field position and momentum. They can set the energy level. I believe the opening kickoff is the most important kickoff in a game because it sets the tone for how the game begins.



Joe's Rules

If the ball is kicked out of bounds on a kickoff, the return team gets the ball 30 yards from the spot of the kick, or at the out-of-bounds spot, whichever it chooses. But if the ball went out of bounds the first time an onside kick (see "The Onside Kick" later in this chapter) was attempted, and did not travel 20 yards, the kicking team is penalized 5 yards and the ball must be kicked again.

You should first know a few words:

- The *kicking team* is the team that kicks the ball.
- The *receiving team* is the team that receives the kick.
- The *kick returner* is the player who catches the ball and runs it back. His runback is called, yes, a *runback*. Cool, huh?

Coaches always talk about wanting to hold the opponent inside their own 20-yard line on a kickoff. If a team tackles a kickoff returner on the 10- or 15-yard line, the defense is given a huge advantage. First of all, it puts the offense 85 or 90 yards away from a score. That gives it bad field position. Second, it sends a message to the offense that the team that just kicked off has come to play hard that day. As you know by now, football is a very mental and emotional game. The emotion of early success or failure can go a long way in determining what happens next.

On the other hand, if a runback gets to the 35-yard line, it's a positive for the receiving team. Even if that team only gains five yards in the next three plays and then punts on fourth down, it's punting from good field position and a good punt will pin the other team deep on its own end. There is always psychology at work in a football game, but maybe never more so than in special teams play.

Anatomy of a Kickoff

The ball is always kicked off from the center of the 30-yard line. On the kicking team, usually five players line up on each side of the kicker. Each player is given a number and an assignment. On the left side of the kicker, players are numbered L1, L2, L3, L4, and L5. On the right side of the kicker, players are numbered R1, R2, R3, R4, and R5.

The rule is that no one can run past the 30-yard line until the ball is kicked. Some guys will line up on the 15-yard line just to get a head of steam. They don't need all 15 yards. They start that far back because ... well, because they're wacko. They want

to be roaring down the field, and the 15-yard head start gives them a boost of adrenaline that makes them actually gain momentum. They start running before the kicker starts. They are about two or three steps behind the kicker when the kicker begins to move forward. They have it timed perfectly, just like a dragster coming out with lights. The ball is kicked and they roar and roll toward the *wedge* and soon there is the sound of thunder.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **wedge** is a wall of big players who are supposed to form a blocking wall in front of the kick returner. The players get into a formation that resembles a V, or a wedge. The idea is to throw blocks on the kickoff coverage team in order to spring the kick returner loose for a big return.

The two guys closest to the kicker are L1 and R1. Their job is to be the craziest on the field. They are usually extremely fast and without a care at all for their own bodies. They take off straight down the field toward the wedge.

These guys, L1 and R1, literally want to blow the wedge up and are more than willing to sacrifice their bodies in order to accomplish their task. These are the guys that want to get down the field the fastest.

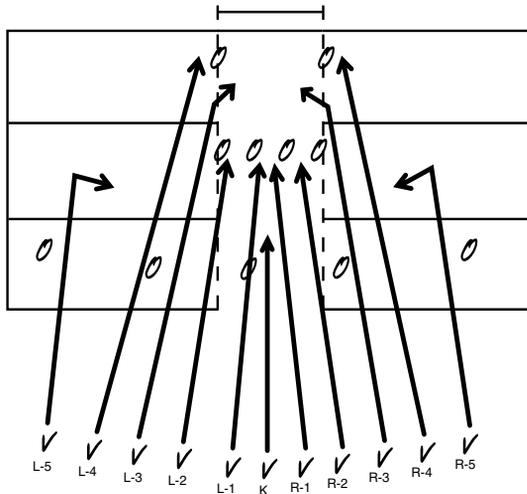
The next guys, L2 and R2, are trying to keep the kick returner near the middle of the field. Then L3 and R3 come in from a little bit further outside. This continues all the way out to L5 and R5, who are supposed to make absolutely sure that the kick returner does not get outside.

Often, though, a kicking team designates one of the outside men, L5 or R5, to stay back with the kicker. Usually, when the team does this, the man who stays back with the kicker is one of the fastest players on the team. His role is to be a safety—to make sure that even if the kick returner does break out for a big return, he does not score a touchdown. The kicking team wants someone as a safety who is fast enough to catch the kick returner. The thinking is that even if the kick returner is tackled on the kicking team's 15-yard line, at least he has not scored a touchdown. At least you give your defense a chance.



Joe's Tips

Often, the kicking team will want the kick returner to have his ball-carrying arm to the side facing them. They know his ball-carrying arm from film study. So, a kicking team would kick the ball to a right-handed return man's right side. He would return to the left, and his right arm would thus be exposed to their hits.



This is a snapshot in time of a kicking team covering a kickoff.

The Five Parts of Kicking Team Coverage

These are the instructions for a typical kicking team coverage:

1. Go down as fast as possible, maintaining proper lateral spacing. Be ready to react to the ball.
2. R1, R2, L1, L2: Landmark inside shoulders of wedge men.

3. R3, L3: Spring around the wedge, force the play. Make the tackle.
4. R4, L4: Contain the play. Be alert for the ball carrier “bouncing” outside, and be alert for reverse.
5. R5, L5, K: Act as safeties. Keep everything in front and inside of you.

There is a whole philosophy and strategy to a kickoff. Despite the look of chaos, every player really does have a different assignment, and it is very specific. Each covers a specific lane. Lanes are like passing lanes—about a six-foot strip all the way down the field. Players are supposed to stay in their lanes. If one gets knocked to one side of a two-yard area and the player next to him gets knocked to the other side of his two-yard area, there is a four-yard hole for a return man to pass through—and he can get through it in the blink of an eye. Go ahead, blink. That’s all it takes. Two players get out of lanes and the score changes.

There are different approaches to a kickoff as well. One strategy is to kick the ball to the returner’s right. In this strategy, the coverage men on that side of the field (their left) move down the field a little faster than the guys on the right side—creating a cup-like effect as they attempt to surround and swarm the returner and pin him to that side.

Another strategy is to kick the ball high down the middle to land at about the 10-yard line. The idea is that by the time the ball is caught, the coverage team has already run into the wedge, been blocked, and shed the blocks. They know they are going to be blocked. The key is to get up and get away.

Kickoff Returns: A Flash of Lightning

If the ball is kicked 70 yards down the field, it will probably land in the kick returner’s arms at the goal line. The kick returner is a man with a flair for the dramatic. He has great opportunity, a wide open field, and 10 blockers in front of him. He has the ball and maybe a 15-yard head start before he starts to run into different-colored jerseys. He needs vision, he needs speed, and he needs quickness. He needs one more thing, too—luck. If the right guy gets blocked at just the right time, he could go all the way.

The return team sets up two waves of blockers. The first group begins 10 yards from the kicking team. These are smaller, faster players with good hands who are near the kick in case the kicking team tries an *onside kick* (keep reading for information on onside kicks). Usually, though, these guys will begin running backward as soon as the ball is kicked. Their job is to time their blocks to coincide with the immediate needs of the return man. So they get back to help him.

Farther back are the men who form the wedge. These are big guys who choreograph their blocks so they hit simultaneously. Again, they want to be hitting the other team at just the right time. If they get on their blocks too soon, the other team can get up and still make a play. In a wedge, everybody has a guy to hit. The worst thing that

can happen is for somebody to hit your guy. If a man in a wedge is supposed to hit L3 and somebody else hits him, the timing of the blocking is thrown off.

And then behind the wedge is the man who catches the ball.

Kick returners are the guys who can make you miss. They have great quickness, great speed, and move like ballet performers in gladiator gear. Their strategy is simple. They have time for one move. Otherwise, their entire job is to get the ball forward—fast. The longer they wait, the more men who are wearing the wrong color show up. They eye the field, look for lanes, watch how blocks are being set up, and then, boom, they're gone.

Some teams have one return man back. Some have two. When there are two, the one who doesn't catch the ball automatically assumes the role of *personal protector* for the return man.

As for strategies, teams can call the following:

- Left return
- Right return
- Middle return

These strategies determine which direction the return man runs. This is called by the special teams coach. The wedge slides in the direction called, just like an offensive line.

In addition, teams can run trick plays on a kickoff return in which they execute a reverse with a wing man coming around behind a return man. Or they could have the return man start up field and then stop and throw it backward to another player. A forward pass on a kickoff is illegal, but a backward pass is just a long hand-off (also called a *lateral*), and it is legal. It's also dangerous. It has a big risk/reward factor.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **personal protector** runs right in front of the return man and throws what is hoped to be a key block to bust the return man loose for a long run. The return man follows the personal protector and reads his block as he plans his cuts.

The Onside Kick

An *onside kick* is a strategy that a kicking team uses when it is behind in the game and it needs to get the ball back. The kicking team attempts to gain possession of the ball with a short kick that has a predictable bounce. It is an all-or-nothing play.

When the ball is kicked, it must go 10 yards before it can be recovered by the kicking team. The receiving team can recover the ball before that. On an onside kick, the kicking team wants the ball to start out low, bouncing end over end, and then hopes that it takes a high bounce just before it reaches 10 yards. Then the kicking team tries to recover it.

Usually, the kicking team lines up nine of its men on one side of the field and then kicks the ball to that side. Both sides use what they call their *hands team*. The most important skill for both teams in an onside kick is the ability to grab and hold on to the ball.

Punts: Your Turn

When an offense is unable to advance the ball 10 yards in three plays, it often elects to punt on fourth down. A *punt* is a kick from the offensive team to the other team to change ball possession. The team that receives the kick becomes the offensive team.

Remember, there is a difference between a kick and a punt. A kick is kicked from a tee, while the punter drops the ball to kick it. The kicker and punter are usually two different players because the types of kicks are very different, requiring different skills.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **hands team** are guys who normally handle the ball—wide receivers, running backs, and defensive backs.

The *punter* (the guy kicking the ball) lines up 15 yards behind the center. Halfway between him and the offensive line is a *personal protector* for the punter, who is there to block anyone who might get past someone else and have a shot at blocking the punt.

A punt is measured from the LOS, not from where it is kicked. Therefore, a punt of 40 yards actually traveled almost 55 yards. There are two ways punts are measured—gross yards (how far it travels from the LOS), and net yards (gross yards minus the number of return yards).

On the outside of the line are the only two people who can leave the LOS at the snap. These two, who are legal receivers (remember, it is usually fourth down and the offense has the ball), are known as *headhunters*. Their job is to get down the field at the same time as the ball in order to tackle the punt returner.

The punting team has two concerns. The first is protecting the punter, and the second is to get the return man. The line blocks for the punter. The punter can help his line, depending on how many steps he takes. Some punters only take one step and then kick the ball. Those guys don't have many of their punts blocked. (A blocked punt occurs when a defensive player hits the ball with his hands or some part of his body just as it is punted—thus stopping it from flying through the air.) But some guys take two or even three steps. For one thing, extra steps take the punter closer to the LOS. For another, extra steps take time. Both can make punts easier to block.

Ideally, the punter wants to kick the ball far and high. A far kick pins the other team back. A high kick gives the punter's team time to get down to cover the return. A punter almost always wants good *hang time*.

In certain situations, a punter may try to aim his kicks. For instance, if his team is too far away to kick a field goal, but too close to really boom a long punt, he may try a *pooch punt*.

The punting team could also try a *coffin corner kick*, in which the ball is kicked out of bounds near the end zone. The receiving team gets the ball at the yard line at which the ball went out of bounds.

Another strategy for long punts is a *directional punt*, in which the ball is kicked to one side of the field to try to pin a returner in and make it harder for him to return the ball.

Finally, you should be aware that a punt is really an offensive play. The team could fake a punt and throw a pass, or run the ball in a last-ditch effort for a first down.

Punt Returns: Life on the Edge

There was nothing I enjoyed more in football than returning punts. It was the most macho, adrenaline-filled challenge that the game offered. First of all, you have to catch the ball. If you drop one, you probably won't return many more punts. If you don't drop it, you provide tremendous highlights—and most are at your expense.

But it's fun, the ultimate rush. It takes nerve, guts, and a logical approach to insanity. This is *not* craziness. There is a method to the madness. The punt returner (the guy who must catch the punt and run it back) stands under the ball, eyes the defense, and then makes a split-second decision whether to *fair catch*.

His decision is based on a quick glance at the approaching headhunters. If they have made it past the first wave of blockers, who stand across the LOS from the headhunters and try to hit them as soon as the ball is snapped, the returner knows he will have to fair catch. If not, he begins eyeing lanes to run up. And then he starts running. He doesn't have time to build a head of steam. He is working in a more compact area than a kickoff returner—the



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Hang time is the length of time a ball is in the air after being punted. It is the time from when the ball leaves the punter's foot until it lands on the ground or in the returner's arms. If you have great hang time (4.0 seconds or longer), the chances of someone returning a punt very far aren't good.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **pooch punt** is a short, high kick designed to land around the 10-yard line in order to give the punting team a chance to down the ball. As long as the receiving team doesn't touch the ball, the punting team can touch it and down it—making it first down and 10 yards to go for the receiving team at the spot where the ball was downed.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

When a punt returner signals for a **fair catch**, he waves an arm over his head. When he does this, it means he plans to catch the ball and promises not to advance it. When he signals a fair catch, the punting team is not allowed to hit the returner or interfere with his ability to catch the ball.

hang time of a punt ensures that. Thus, he actually needs to be a guy with a few more moves than a kick returner. He may need to juke and dart to get past the headhunters.

The headhunters are on overdrive by the time they get to him. One little elusive move sends them flying past.

But before the punt returner ever touches the ball, the punt return team may want to try to block the punt. They figure how to do this, once again, from film study. They learn how the punter punts, which way he steps, and how many steps he takes. They go into each punt knowing exactly where to dive.

For instance, if a punter steps to the right, the defense may want to overload that side with more players. The defense may want to bring two people from the corner. The idea may not even be to block the punt. It may be just to disrupt the timing of the punter. They could just push the personal protector near the punter, and that would certainly disrupt his timing.

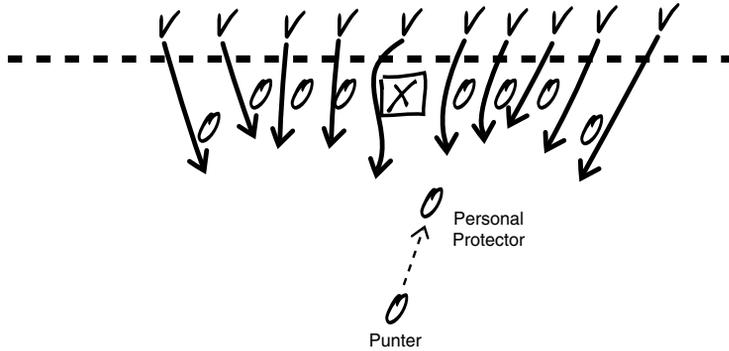


Joe's Rules

Running into the kicker is a five-yard penalty and not an automatic first down. But *roughing the kicker* (tackling or knocking down the kicker) is a 15-yard penalty and is an automatic first down. The difference, in theory, is about the intention of the man running into the kicker. The reality is that it is about the acting ability of the kicker. They all want to win an Oscar.

When players dive to block a punt, they should not try to swat at the ball. Instead, players have a better chance if they just lay their hands out. In the time it takes them to swat at the ball, it could be kicked away.

To set up for the return, the receiving team is most concerned about the headhunters. First of all, the receiving team recognizes that a punt is really an offensive play, so it's on the lookout for a fake punt. And it has at least one man on each headhunter. Sometimes, teams put two men on the headhunters, trying to stop them from getting down the field.



Trying to block a punt with a 10-man rush left.

Field Goals and Extra Points

Field goals and extra points work on the same principle—kick the ball through the goal posts. In each case, the ball is snapped seven yards back from the LOS to a kneeling holder, who places the ball on the ground. A kicker then kicks the ball.

A field goal, as you know, is worth three points. An extra point is worth one point.

As you can see from the following table, kickers are more accurate when they are closer to the goal posts.

Field Goal Percentages from Various Distances, 2000

Distance (Yards)	Attempted	Made	Percentage
1–19	29	29	100%
20–29	240	224	93.3%
30–39	283	232	79.9%
40–49	297	208	70.0%
50 or longer	68	38	55.9%

Kickers are a strange breed. They each have their own idiosyncrasies. Some want the ball tilted toward them. Some want it tilted away. Most, but not all, want the laces pointed away from them. There is a chemistry that must develop between a snapper, holder, and kicker or else the kicker will not be confident. And kicking is all about confidence.

The Least You Need to Know

- Special teams participate in about 17 percent of all plays, but coaches look upon them as being equal in value to offense and defense. Special teams plays involve either potential points or a large exchange of yardage.
- Kickoff teams try to keep the runner contained in the middle of the field. Kickoff return teams want to spring the return man loose with well-timed blocks.
- Punters try for lots of hang time to give the coverage team time to get to the returner. Punt returners are slightly crazy.
- A field goal requires great coordination between a snapper, holder, and kicker.

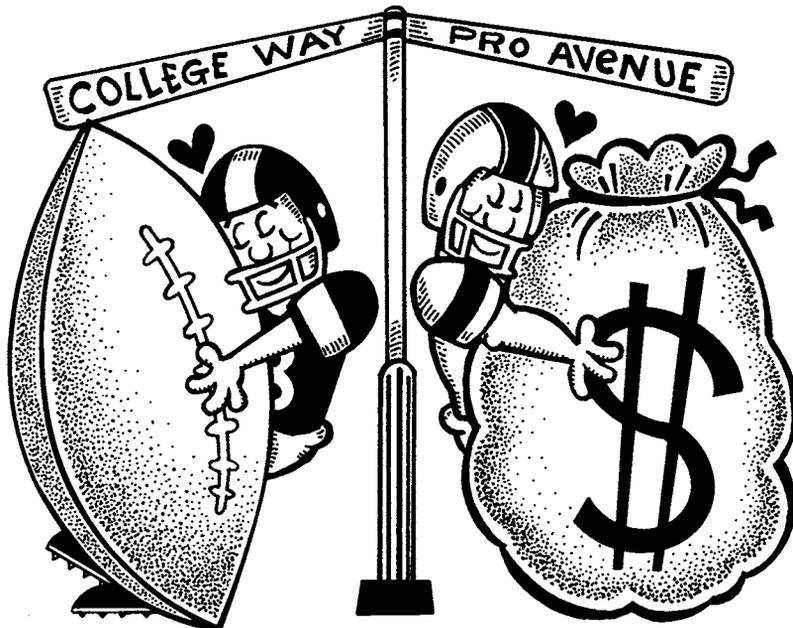
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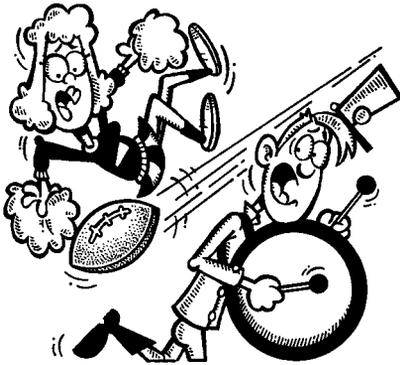
College and Pro

Football comes in levels. Young men play Pop Warner (Little League football) to learn to compete. Some of those young men and little boys move on to play high school football, and then the lucky ones get to the higher levels.

College football is the beginning of the spotlight, when the big eye called television begins to take account of the skills of young men. But professional football is “The Show.”

This part examines college and pro ball. It explains the relationship of the college game to the professional game and explores the NFL—why the league is the best in the world, how teams advance to the Super Bowl, and how money continues to take on greater importance for everyone involved.





College Football: More Than Marching Bands and Cheerleaders

In This Chapter

- ▶ How college football is different from the NFL
- ▶ Why there is such pageantry
- ▶ The divisions and the conferences
- ▶ The relationship between the colleges and the pros

College football is full of pageantry, pom-poms, cheerleaders, and big brass marching bands that play tuba-waving fight songs. College football is also where the NFL gets its players.

Unlike pro baseball, pro football doesn't have a minor league. So the feeder for the NFL is college football. Thus, if you want to be a professional football fan, you can't ignore the college game.

The relationship between college and the pros is very close, although at times the colleges would not like it to be quite so close. One recent problem is the tendency of underclassmen to leave school early for the lucrative paychecks of the National Football League. Many colleges, who count on the senior season for a player to be his most productive, aren't happy when players skip their senior season for the pros.

College players go to the pros. Some college coaches go to the pros. And some pro coaches leave the pros and end up coaching in college.

But for all the similarities and closeness, college football is a different game. This chapter examines the college game, its relationship to the pros, and the similarities

and differences between the two games. This chapter also briefly discusses the various collegiate divisions, the importance of competition in college, and why all those New Year's Day bowl games are important to fans of the pro game.

The Pageantry

College football *sounds* different. It's younger—a vibrant atmosphere of exuberance and joyous noise. There are horns, honest-to-goodness brass, and big pounding drums mixed in with chants that echo like an instant memory. You've got to go to a game!

There are acrobatic cheerleaders and squads of young men who live for Saturday afternoons in the fall—and who dream of playing on Sunday afternoons. They want to be drafted into the NFL. And they step toward those dreams in the world of holy-mackerel euphoria that is college football.

What Is the NCAA?

The NCAA is the National Collegiate Athletic Association, which is the governing body of college athletics that was formed in 1906. As a fan, you don't need to know a lot about the NCAA, but you should be aware that it exists, and that it can make rulings on whether players are eligible to play and whether teams have violated any recruiting rules.



Joe's Rules

There are a few rules differences on the field between college football and pro football:

- In college ball, a receiver is ruled inbounds if he catches the ball and lands with one foot inbounds before going out-of-bounds. In the pros, a receiver must land with both feet inbounds.
- In college ball, if a ball carrier falls to the ground, he is automatically down. In the pros, if a ball carrier falls to the ground and a defensive player does not touch him, he may get up and continue to advance the ball. In the pros, he is down only if a defensive player touches him while he is on the ground.
- In college ball, the hashmarks are closer to the sidelines.

The NCAA has specific rules against college players getting any money besides scholarship money. And that's about all you need to know. College players are supposed to be amateurs.

This can create a dilemma for a college player, especially one from a poor family. That player may find the lure of big money too hard to pass up even if an extra year of college would help him grow as both a player and a person.

Divisions I-A, I-AA, II, III

There are big schools and there are small schools, and the NCAA divides them into divisions to ensure a level playing field. That is, the NCAA assumes that schools with more resources should play each other, while schools with less to invest in football should play each other.

Big schools have big football programs and are on television a lot. These are the schools whose teams you see on Saturday afternoons. The big schools are in Division I-A—which simply means that the school is at the top level of collegiate athletics. Smaller schools, which normally would not have much of a chance competing against the really big schools, compete against each other. The next level is Division I-AA. The one after that is Division II, and finally there is Division III.

The following table lists how many schools and players are in each division.

Schools and Players in Each Division, 1998 Season

Division	Number of Schools	Number of Players
I-A	114	12,930
I-AA	117	10,845
II	157	14,263
III	217	18,321
Total	605	56,528

Which division a player comes from is important because, as I said, almost all professional football players come from college programs. If a player comes from a Division I-A school, the competition he faced will be of a higher caliber than that of players who came from Division I-AA, II, or III schools. This doesn't mean that players coming from smaller schools can't make it in the NFL. In fact, some of the greatest players ever came from small schools. However, the majority of players come from bigger schools, where the competition more closely resembles that of the NFL.

The following table gives a list of the seven schools that had the most former players on NFL rosters at the beginning of the 2000 season.

Schools with the Most Players on NFL Rosters in 2000

School	Number of Players
Notre Dame	44
Florida State	44
Ohio State	38
Michigan	38
Tennessee	37
Florida	37
Miami (Florida)	37
Penn State	35
Texas A&M	35
North Carolina	33

These schools are all big schools. The level of competition between these schools is very high. In other words, if a kid is a 6'4", 300-pound lineman playing at a Division II school, he is not facing many guys his size. Therefore, his chances of success against NFL-level competition is completely unknown. Sure, a player's success can't really be evaluated until he reaches the league and competes. But success in a big conference greatly increases his probability of success in the NFL. Success in a small conference does not.



Joe's Record Book

At least two of the greatest players in the history of the game, wide receiver Jerry Rice of the San Francisco 49ers and running back Walter Payton of the Chicago Bears, both attended Division I-AA schools. Rice went to Mississippi Valley State and Payton to Jackson State.

There are other advantages to coming from a big school. Big schools are now huge entertainment corporations, and the players on these teams are unpaid stars. They know how to deal with media. They have walked into a stadium of 80,000 or 100,000 hostile fans (as in the case of the Michigan Wolverines in Ann Arbor, Michigan). They have, in essence, played on a stage.

Nevertheless, a player from a big school still takes a huge step in reaching the NFL. In the NFL, they become freshmen again. Some make it. Most, though, can only dream it.

The question is always there, no matter where a player went to school. Every step of the way, they ask again, "Do I belong here? "

The Conferences

Although college football is separated into divisions based on the size of the school, it is further divided by geography. There are conferences.

For instance, there is the Pacific 10 (PAC 10)—which includes 10 teams from the far western states. Then there is the Big 10, which has (really) 11 teams from the midwest. There is the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the Western Athletic Conference (WAC), the Mid-American Conference (MAC), the Southeastern Conference (SEC), the Big East, the Big West, and Conference USA. There are also conferences from the smaller divisions.

College football has a rich potpourri of talent levels at all different schools. Usually, but not always, the top talent goes to the top schools. But there are so many schools and there are so many players.

And then, there is one major school that is not in a conference for football. That's Notre Dame, and it exists on its own plane.

Notre Dame and Everybody Else

Almost every college in the country has a football team, but in the annals of history, there is really only one football team. Granted, I am an alumnus of that school and I played quarterback when I was there, but even without my bias, it must be clear to anyone who follows football that there is Notre Dame University and then, well Now, I'm not saying everybody likes Notre Dame. Far from it. But if you're going to follow college football even a little, you must either love or hate Notre Dame. You can't be ambivalent.

Notre Dame itself is small, with only about 7,000 full-time students. But the following of the university is tremendous, no matter which side of the fence you're on.

Although I'm not Catholic, I know that a big part of the appeal is that Notre Dame is a Catholic school. But I think it goes back to the legendary Notre Dame teams that Knute Rockne coached early in the twentieth century. Notre Dame has tradition, a storied past full of heroes and gold helmets.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **subway alumni** are folks who, though they did not attend the University of Notre Dame, for one reason or another have grown to identify with the school. I'm sure there are other subway alumni out there, but none have gotten the national attention like the ones of Notre Dame.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Touchdown Jesus is the painting of Jesus that overlooks the stadium in South Bend, Indiana, home of Notre Dame. In the painting, Jesus has his arms upraised to the heavens (as if, some football fanatics have said, signaling a touchdown).

For myself, I looked upon a Notre Dame football career as a stepping stone to the NFL. At Notre Dame, the competition is always intense. There aren't many games expected to be easy. I used to use the annual game against the University of Southern California (USC) as a measuring stick for whether I was ready for the NFL. I knew that USC had produced a number of players who went on to not only play in, but star in, the NFL. I figured that if I could do well against USC, I could compete at the pro level.

So I found plenty of reasons to love the school. And so have many others. But just the same, many have found lots of reasons not to like the school. For one thing, if you went to another school, I suppose you could be jealous of the success and exposure Notre Dame has enjoyed. Notre Dame is the only school in the country with its own television contract—all its games are aired on NBC. Even decades ago, Notre Dame games used to be aired in condensed form on Sunday mornings. I can still recall the announcer's calm voice saying, "And now, we move to further action in the third quarter ..."



Joe's Tips

If you're looking for a college team to root for, look in your part of the country—or better yet, root for Notre Dame.



Joe's Record Book

If you think there are a lot of bowls, consider that 27 bowl games have gone away. Yes, there are 27 extinct bowl games that once were played. From the Bacardi Bowl, which was played once in 1937 in Havana, Cuba, to the Bluebonnet Bowl, which was played in Houston, Texas, from 1959 to 1987, a lot of games have disappeared from the calendar.

The Bowl Games

There are no real playoffs in college; there are just too many teams for everyone to play everyone else. Instead, there are big games called bowls. At the end of the regular season, various conference champions (and some second- or third-place finishers from the powerhouse conferences like the Big 10 or PAC 10) are given a chance to compete in bowl games. All told, there are 25 bowl games.

Bowls are great events, big games between teams that have been good that year. The NCAA tries to get the number-one ranked team to play the number-two ranked team in the final bowl.

But the championship of college football is never completely decided on the field. Instead, it's decided by something called the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) rating system. This series of four bowl games—the Rose Bowl presented by AT&T, the Nokia Sugar Bowl, the FedEx Orange Bowl, and the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl—invites teams to compete based on the BCS rating system. The system rates teams based on computer rankings, their standing in the polls, strength of schedule, and number of losses.

Each year, one of those four major bowls hosts a championship game between the number-one and number-two teams in the BCS ratings.

Although this is a good attempt to bring some order to finding a college champion, it still does not bring absolute closure because an argument can often still be made for a team that doesn't play in the championship game.

The significance of all these bowl games to the professional fan should be obvious. You see, pro football players come from college. The college bowl games usually feature the best college teams. It would stand to reason that some of the best college players would be on the best college teams. If you want to see who will be the next star of your pro team, watch a bowl game.

The All-Star Games

After the bowl games, the best seniors in the country are invited to play in all-star games. These are almost a direct showcase for the NFL. In fact, the Senior Bowl is actually coached by NFL coaches.

The four all-star games are the Hula Bowl, the Senior Bowl, the Blue-Gray Game, and the East-West Shrine Game.

These games are where players first start to get a feel for what it's like to be an NFL player. It is also where players, especially those from smaller schools, can show that they can play against top-level talent. It is an all-star game, and that means something.

The all-star games can give players a chance to showcase their talents outside their own college systems. For instance, a quarterback from a school that didn't throw the ball a lot may be a bit of an unknown to NFL scouts. But in an all-star game, he will be asked to do pro football-type things. A good day could really help his chances of getting picked higher in the draft. It could be his one chance, and that's all he needs.

A bad day could hurt him some. I had a bad day at the Hula Bowl. Earlier in the week, in practice, I hit my funny bone and I lost the feeling in my ring finger and my pinkie that week. I couldn't throw. I couldn't feel the ball. The ball flew end over end all week. I threw *ducks*. It was my audition for professional football, and all I could do was throw ducks—no spirals. Luckily, I had a pretty good college career behind me, so my poor performance in the all-star game was somewhat overlooked by scouts.

The Heisman Trophy

The Heisman Trophy is the most prestigious award in college football, given annually to the best college player in the country. It was named after legendary coach John Heisman and is given out by the Downtown Athletic Club of New York City. It is not necessarily given to someone who is expected to be the best pro. The two games are different. Some Heisman winners have succeeded magnificently in college but were unable to achieve the same success in pro football. Some were just as good in the NFL.

The Heisman is a very political award that has a lot to do with the previous reputation of the player and his school, the publicity department of his school, his position on the field, and also his year on the field. Sometimes, however, it has a lot to do with his name. When I went to Notre Dame, my last name was pronounced “*Thees*”-*man*. Our public relations director changed the pronunciation of my name to rhyme with Heisman my senior year because he believed it would give me a better chance to win the trophy. Just so you know, I finished second to Jim Plunkett that year (1970).

Regardless of the massive amounts of public relations that occur, you still have to deliver on the field. It isn’t always a name that counts. But even though I didn’t win the Heisman Trophy, my name still rhymes with Heisman.

The College Passer Rating System

The collegiate passer rating system is different than the one used in the NFL.

1. In college, these three factors are added:

Completion percentage

Yards per attempted pass (multiply by 4.84)

Percent of passes for touchdowns (multiply by 3.3)

2. Then subtract this factor:

Percent of passes intercepted (multiply by 2)

3. Round off the final number and you have the passer rating.



Joe’s Gridiron Talk

Redshirt means a player doesn’t play a certain year when he is in school and he is granted another year of eligibility to play later. This can happen, for instance, if a player gets hurt. He still attends classes and practices, but doesn’t play and, thus, is still eligible to play four years.

The system is not as complicated as the pro level and the ratings tend to be higher. These numbers, when examined by NFL scouts, gives teams a pretty good idea of what they’re going to get at the quarterback position.

So What’s All This Got to Do with the Pros?

Other than a few players, most notably Eric Swann, defensive lineman for the Arizona Cardinals, the NFL is loaded with ex-college players. Not all of them are graduates. But almost all played some college ball.

The two games are related. The interests of the two games are related, although not always parallel.

Colleges want their players to stay in school for four years and get a diploma. The pros say the same thing,

yet when a great junior running back declares that he wants to be eligible for the draft, every team in the league would love to have him.

One problem is that colleges now allow freshmen to play varsity ball. This increases their worth to the pros early and also increases the chance that an underclassman will leave school before their senior year. And even though many underclassmen have gone on to great success in the NFL, there are even more who missed their last two years of college and didn't make the NFL. For the schools, a player's senior year is usually when they are going to be able to reap the benefits of having a mature football player—athletically, academically, emotionally, and socially. And the NFL would get a more fully developed player if the player went through that senior experience.

It would be better for all involved if the students stayed in school an extra year. Notice, I said *students*. That's their job in college. They are students. Like many of today's juniors who leave school early, I only played three years of college ball. But they happened to be my last three years of school. When I was in college, freshmen were ineligible to play. I think that was a good rule.

Professional football is very different than college ball. The game is a lot simpler in college, where teams are only allowed to practice 20 hours a week—and that includes meeting time.

By contrast, in the pros, a player typically will arrive at the practice facility at 8 A.M. Normally, he won't leave until 6 P.M. And then some players, especially quarterbacks, will still do a few hours of film study a couple of nights each week at home. There is a short practice on Saturday and a game on Sunday. Professionals put in about 60 hours a week. It's their job.

The Draft

College players get to the pros by the *draft* (see Chapter 21). Each team picks players, one at a time, seven times. There are seven rounds.

Usually players are then paid based upon what round they were picked in. The higher they are picked (with earlier rounds considered "higher"),



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **draft** is the way college players are picked for the pros. Every year in the spring, all the NFL teams take turns picking players at the annual draft. The worst team from the previous year picks first. The best team picks last. (See Chapter 21, "The Draft: The Best Day for the Worst Teams," for more information.)



Joe's Rules

In the draft, each team is given 15 minutes to make a pick in the first round. In the second round, teams are given 10 minutes to make the pick. And in each round after that, teams are given five minutes per pick.

the more they will be paid. Occasionally, a player drafted a slot or two below another player ends up with more money. After all, contracts are negotiated. But still, each position in the draft is generally slotted a certain amount to be paid. Thus, from a college player's perspective, the draft rules.

The Least You Need to Know

- College football sounds different, looks different, and is different. There are even a couple of different rules. It's the same game as professional football, but there is more pageantry.
- Division I-A schools are the biggest, then Division I-AA, then Division II, then Division III.
- Divisions are divided into conferences like the PAC 10 and Big 10.
- Notre Dame is a successful independent team—like 'em or hate 'em.
- The bowls try to be championship games (but aren't quite). The Heisman Trophy winner is the best college player in the country, but that doesn't mean he will be a good pro.
- Pro teams follow college teams because pro players are drafted (picked) from the college ranks.



The Draft: The Best Day for the Worst Teams

In This Chapter

- Why the draft is so popular
- How players are tested and why tests are important
- Some draft lore

For some football fans, the best weekend of the football year doesn't even have a game. It has a draft. On the third weekend in April, off the field, dreams come true for everybody in football—fans, teams, and especially young players. On this televised weekend of expensive suits, highlight film, and perfect hair, everybody is right, every player is great, and all teams imagine that they're getting better with each trip to the podium to announce a new name. The NFL draft, when teams pick their new players, is fun and full of dreams.

Three years later, reality sets in. But for one magic weekend in April, everyone wins.

Every organization hopes to find a fair-priced player who will enable the team to win a championship. Young players look to be selected to play in the NFL, and all these professional dreams involve lots of money. The fan imagines these new players performing their college heroics in the home team's uniform. And the owners hope that these are the guys who can help them get a Super Bowl trophy for their office. Yes, the NFL draft is dreamland.

How the Draft Works

Football teams are composed of a lot of players. Each year, guys get older and young guys come along to try to take their place. The draft is one way the young guys enter the league.

The team with the worst record in the NFL in the previous season picks first in the April draft. The worst team gets the first pick in order to bring talent balance to the league. Over time, it generally works. But bad picks can ruin teams for years.

The picking goes in order from the previous season's worst-performing team to the best—the Super Bowl champion gets the last pick. Then all 31 teams (32 in 2002) start again—a new *round*. Before trades, each team is given seven draft picks each year—one per round for seven rounds.

To understand the draft you must realize that each team is always in a state of self-evaluation. This is especially true when the football season has ended and there are tangible results to examine. Although coaching and facilities and other factors are considered, the real x-factor in everything is talent. There's an old saying: "You can't teach talent." So you draft it.

As the April draft approaches, each organization examines its roster from top to bottom and makes a list of strengths, weaknesses, and needs. For instance, if you have a need at wide receiver, you focus on this position in the draft. If you have three offensive linemen who are coming off surgery, you will certainly be interested in drafting healthy young offensive linemen. Teams continually evaluate themselves and their needs.

Teams with number-one draft picks that have made good choices find talents to help them win championships. Top picks are essential to success. Because of this, organizations spend enormous amounts of money trying to decide who to pick each April.

Because the worst team picks first, the chances are that that team needs a lot of help and more players. And even the good teams need new, young players. The draft is the lifeline of all the teams.



Joe's Rules

All graduating seniors are eligible to be drafted. In addition, underclassmen can declare themselves eligible to be drafted. To be considered eligible, they must declare by the middle of January.

Finding the Players

The best college players in the country are the ones who get drafted. The problem for professional teams is that there are a lot of colleges playing at many different levels—from Division I-A to Division III—and none of the levels are close to the level of talent in the NFL. (See Chapter 20, "College Football: More Than Marching Bands and Cheerleaders," for an explanation of collegiate levels.) So, projecting how a player will play against superior talent is the key to success in the draft. But first, you have to find players to evaluate.

Some teams have scouting departments and others rely on their coaches to travel across the country. Scouts usually concentrate on a certain region of the country and then write reports on kids of interest.

They also make notes on underclassmen who may come out for the draft. If the underclassmen opt not to come out for the draft, these notes will help for the next year's draft.

The 2001 Draft Calendar

Dates change slightly from year to year, but the calendar prior to the 2001 draft is indicative of days to remember:

- December 25: Blue-Gray All-Star Classic in Birmingham, AL
- January 12: Last day for juniors to apply for entry in 2001 NFL Draft
- January 13: East-West Shrine Game in San Francisco, CA
- January 13: All-Star Gridiron Classic in Orlando, FL
- January 15–19: Senior Bowl practice week
- January 20: Senior Bowl in Mobile, AL
- January 20: Hula Bowl All-Star Football Classic in Maui, HA
- February 22–26: Combine timing and testing in Indianapolis, IN
- April 21 and 22: 2001 NFL Draft in New York, NY

Evaluating the Players: Welcome to the War Room

At the headquarters of each team, there is an actual room dedicated to the draft. This is the “War Room.” In this room, hundreds of players’ names are on the wall, ranked by their ability. Prior to the April draft, these rankings change depending on new information the teams get. And there is always new information.



Joe's Record Book

Maybe the greatest draft of all time was the 1974 draft by the Pittsburgh Steelers. Pittsburgh landed four stars in its first four picks, arguably the four best players of the entire draft. These players were wide receivers Lynn Swann and John Stallworth, linebacker Jack Lambert, and center Mike Webster. All were starters on four Super Bowl championship teams, and Swann, Lambert, and Webster are in the Hall of Fame.

When the season is over, certain players are invited to play in all-star games. In one game, the Senior Bowl, two NFL coaching staffs get to coach the players, and many think this is a big advantage. They get firsthand information about players—their sleep habits, their study habits, their practice habits. They see their personalities and how they interact with other players. This advantage helps in the evaluation process.

The young men who are to be drafted by the NFL are subject to more scrutiny than a politician. Once they prove themselves on the field, they are evaluated in every way possible.

Testing and Testing

When players finish their college season, it's time to figure out if they can play football on the NFL level. Incredibly, some of the most important evaluation takes place off the field in controlled testing environments.

The most important place of all, though, is in Indianapolis at an event called “the Combine.” Each year in February, the top 300 players are invited to Indianapolis for a series of interviews, physical tests, and mental tests as well as background checks. The Combine is called, euphemistically, a “meat market.”

Here are the criteria used to evaluate players during the Combine:

- **Character.** One thing NFL teams like to know is what kind of a person they're hiring and agreeing to pay millions of dollars. Basically, the young player is interviewed as if he were going to hang out with the coach's son or daughter. The question is, what is this person like? The truth is that the coach has 53 sons on a football team, and adding this person to the mix will change both the team and the player. The coach has to figure out if the combination works for his team.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **workout warrior** is a player who, by the basis of his ability to perform at a high level in a controlled testing atmosphere, is rising up the charts and is suspected to be a better football player than he showed in college.

- **Background.** The NFL has a detective agency looking into the backgrounds of all potential NFL players. There is an actual rap sheet the league gives to teams about his past run-ins with the law—all the way back to high school.
- **Speed.** Players run a 40-yard dash. One-tenth of a second in the world of professional football is worth millions of dollars.
- **Strength and agility.** Players are put through a series of tests. Players run through cones and bench press 225 pounds as many times as possible.
- **Size.** Players are measured and appraised like cattle at an auction.

- **Intelligence.** Players are given a 50-question test, called the Wonderlic Personnel Test, which must be completed in 12 minutes. The test is basically a reading aptitude test with a full helping of math thrown in. The early questions on the test are relatively easy but by the end of the test, the players are probably glad they went to college.

Players understand the importance of all of these tests. Today, they can even hire people to help them get better at taking any of them, including the speed and intelligence tests.

Money, Dreams, Money, Jobs, Money—and Did I Mention Money?

The NFL draft is a science and a gamble involving huge sums of money based on some people's opinions of other people's ability to play the game of football.

The pressure is truly on those picking at the top. They are charged with finding players to turn the franchise around. In other words, they must turn a loser into a winner. The higher the expectation for the player, the higher the pay he will get. Millions of dollars for the highest picks make players want to get picked as high in the draft as possible.

The lower a player is drafted, the less money he gets. But sometimes that disappointment, for a player, turns out to be a bonus for teams and fans. If the player turns out to be great, then that team got a steal. Since everyone in the NFL is now concerned about the effects of the salary cap (see Chapter 25, "The Business of the Game"), no discussion of football is complete anymore without a discussion of money.

And the truth is that a player's dreams come true no matter what round he's picked in. Draft day is the day that a player gets offered his first professional job with a specific company—an NFL football team. If he turns out to be great, the money will come.



Joe's Record Book

The top player picked in the 2000 draft, Courtney Brown of the Cleveland Browns, was paid a \$10,031,000 signing bonus. Not bad for a first job out of college, huh?



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Mr. Irrelevant is a title given to the last player taken in the draft each year. That player is given a trip to Disneyland and a parade for the honor of being the last pick.

But some players demand the money right away and they can end up hurting their career. If a young player holds out of training camp for extra money now, he may hurt his chances for success and more money down the road. Players should understand the importance of showing up for their first training camp on time. Imagine what would happen if you missed your first day of work because you wanted more money. You could lose that opportunity before it even starts—and it's the same in our business.

That's why money, and representation, are important for a player. These issues do transfer to the field. Having an agent who can establish a good relationship with the team is in the player's best interest.



Joe's Tips

There are two strategies with which teams like to approach the draft:

- **Draft for needs.** In other words, if a team needs a linebacker, it drafts a linebacker no matter what other player is still available.
- **Draft the best player available.** In this strategy, a team ignores its needs and goes after the best football players, no matter the position.

The Pressure to Be Good NOW

Players who are drafted in the first round are expected to come in and play immediately. It has always been that way. These top players are perceived as the stars of the stars in college, and they are given big money based on their potential to be great in the pros.

Just 5 or 10 years ago when a team drafted a guy in the lower rounds, he was brought along and developed slowly by the organization. He might start his rookie year as a special teams player, develop into a part-time role player in his second year, become a starter in his third year, and maybe blossom into a star by his fourth year. In today's game, there's no time for long-term development.

There is pressure for coaches to win now or look for work. And it's the same for players. There is too much money involved. No team now has four years to wait for a player to blossom. If a coach waits four years, he's probably watching someone else see his flower bloom. That's why players often begin to excel on different teams than the ones that drafted them.

Decision-Making: The Role of Free Agency

Success in drafting leads to success on the field, but there is more to finding players than merely drafting them. One consideration in any draft is what your team stands to lose and gain in free agency.

Since players at the end of their contracts (with exceptions—see Chapter 25) are free to move to other teams, a lot of players in the league now move from team to team.

This player movement, along with the draft, has created what longtime commissioner Pete Rozelle dreamed of—*parity* in which no team remains dominant for a long period of time. Gone, apparently, are the great dynasties of the past. In their place are great one-year-wonder teams that seem to be strong only on one side of the ball—such as the 1999 Rams with a great offense or the 2000 Ravens with a superior defense. Both teams, prior to winning, made key pickups from within the NFL as well as finding their own young stars in the draft.

Mocking the Draft

Everybody's got opinions. I sure do. As you may have noticed throughout this book, I'm not shy about voicing them. When it comes to the draft, there are plenty of people in the world who have opinions as to what is going to happen. In other words, people like to guess.

Starting on the day after one draft ends and building for an entire year until the next draft, self-proclaimed experts give their opinions as to what team will pick which college star.

The great game of *Guess What's Going to Happen* is matched only by the conjecture surrounding college basketball's season-ending "March Madness" tournament. The draft really is one of the most enjoyable things to try to figure out in all of sports. And now that the world of the Internet is upon us, there are more than 20 mock drafts available in cyberspace by early February of each year.

Some Great Bits of Draft Lore

There is a reason why the draft is so popular with football fans. Not only does no one lose on draft day, but there is plenty of drama including the organizations changing their minds and players being traded—all within a 15-minute window.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Parity is a term for what former commissioner Pete Rozelle always dreamed of—a state of the NFL in which all teams in a few-years span have a chance to get to the Super Bowl, and most teams are neither great nor horrible.



Joe's Tips

Two great places to find draft information online are ESPN.com and Sportstalk.com.

With the first pick of the first draft ever (in 1936), Philadelphia drafted Jay Berwanger of the University of Chicago and then traded him to the Chicago Bears. Berwanger never played one down in the NFL.

In 1971, these four quarterbacks were drafted: Jim Plunkett, Archie Manning, Dan Pastorini, and Joe Theismann. This was a high-profile QB class.

In 1983, these five quarterbacks were drafted in the first round: John Elway, Dan Marino, Jim Kelly, Tony Eason, and Ken O'Brien. This was one of the greatest QB classes ever.

In 1999, these five quarterbacks were drafted in the first round: Tim Couch, Donovan McNabb, Akili Smith, Daunte Culpepper, and Cade McNown. This group is the hope of the future.

In 1999, Mike Ditka, who ran the New Orleans Saints, traded all of his draft picks, plus a number-one and number-three pick the next year to the Washington Redskins for the rights to draft running back Ricky Williams. Ditka subsequently lost his job, but Williams looks like he just might have been close to worth it.

On October 13, 1989, Minnesota and Dallas made a trade that included numerous draft picks. Dallas traded to Minnesota:

- Running back Herschel Walker
- A third-round pick in 1990
- A tenth-round pick in 1990
- A third-round pick in 1991

Minnesota traded to Dallas:

- LB Jesse Solomon
- LB David Howard
- CB Issaic Holt
- DE Alex Stewart
- A first-round pick in 1990
- A second-round pick in 1990
- A sixth-round pick in 1990
- A first-round pick in 1991
- A second-round pick in 1991
- A first-round pick in 1992
- A second-round pick in 1992
- A third-round pick in 1992

This trade helped turn Dallas into a dynasty for almost a decade.

Beware the Bursting Bubble

Draft day really is a great day for a young player. But from the second he hears his name called, he feels pressure to be a star and not a bust. There are plenty of players who turned out to not be as good as some had hoped. Here are some draft mistakes from the past:

- In 1995, the Cincinnati Bengals drafted Ki-Jana Carter. They could have drafted Tony Bosselli, Steve McNair, Joey Galloway, Warren Sapp, Hugh Douglas, Ty Law, Tyrone Wheatley, James Stewart, Curtis Martin, or Terrell Davis.
- Warren Sapp and Randy Moss both fell in the draft based on rumors of past personal behavior. Since entering the NFL, both have been solid citizens—and great players.
- In 1991, the Seattle Seahawks drafted Dan McGwire in the first round. They, like the rest of the league, could have had Brett Favre, who wasn't picked until the second round.
- Joe Montana was a third-round pick in 1979.
- Heck, Joe Theismann was a fourth-round pick in 1971.

Players fail for a number of reasons. Some players just aren't good enough. But others fail because of inadequate coaching, or because of constant coaching changes, or because of the lack of strong, complementary players around them. If a player never gets comfortable with a team, he will spend time *thinking* on the field rather than *reacting*. Since bad teams get to draft the top college players, the team is their test tube. Some, like Peyton Manning with the Indianapolis Colts, are able to come in and help turn a team around. Others, like Ryan Leaf did in San Diego, get eaten up by the situation. Why? I wish I knew—and so does everybody else.

Draft Day: When They Call Out Your Name

The draft is a television show—hosted by, among others, me, Joe Theismann. That's right, I love the draft because I get to bring it to you. We have fun all day long watching the film and debating who should have been picked where.

The draft is fun on so many levels. For fans, watching the subterfuge of teams talking big about one player when they really want another one is fun. The draft is fun because team representatives don't always tell you the truth but they want other teams to believe their tall tales. And, as we've shown you, a lot of trades happen on draft day.

But most of all, draft day is a day for the fans, a day to watch the faces of the young men and their families as their names are called by the commissioner at the podium. It's a day on which dreams come true. It's a day to watch those highlight films and imagine those moves in the hometown uniform because all fans know that the draft

is where championships are born. So come April, those of us waiting on the draft can't wait for the commissioner to step to the podium and tell us that our team is on the clock.

The Least You Need to Know

- In the draft, there are seven rounds in which each team gets a pick. The order goes from the team with the worst record in the previous season to the team with the best, so that the worst team picks first and the Super Bowl champion picks last.
- In college, there are many levels of competition, so players are tested off the field to enable teams to better gauge how a player will compete against superior NFL competition.
- There is a lot of money gambled that drafted players will become stars.
- The draft is a great day to dream.



Alternative Football Leagues

In This Chapter

- ▶ A history lesson on other leagues
- ▶ A look at the companion leagues
- ▶ A quick examination of the XFL

Throughout its history, the NFL has been challenged by rival leagues because professional football is a lucrative business.

Only two challenges were successful, in a sense, in that the All-American Football Conference in the 1940s, and the American Football League, in the 1960s, were able to get franchises into the NFL. Three teams from the AAFC—the Baltimore Colts, Cleveland Browns, and San Francisco 49ers—joined the NFL in 1950. In the case of the AFL in the 1960s, the league was so successful that it forced a merger—creating, in essence, the American Football Conference and the National Football Conference. The Super Bowl was born of this merger.

Other leagues, before and after, were not successful. And as of this writing, there is another league challenging the NFL: the XFL.

The NFL: A History Lesson

The quintessential business lesson in all of this is simply that people love to watch football. Start with that.

Folks in business started noticing this around 1892 when former Yale All-America Guard William “Pudge” Heffelfinger was paid \$500 to play in a game—becoming the first professional football player. When players started making money, leagues organized.

Here are some highlights of early NFL history:

- There was a National Football League that organized in 1902. It is not related to the current NFL.
- By 1905, the Ohio League was the best league in the land. It remained the best league for more than a decade.
- In 1920, the American Professional Football Conference was formed. The name was then changed to the American Professional Football Association (APFA). Jim Thorpe was elected president.
- In 1921, the APFA had 22 teams.
- On June 24, 1922, the APFA changed its name to the National Football League. Only 18 teams remained.

The American Football League, Version One

In 1926, Red Grange's manager, C. C. Pyle, could not get a deal with the Chicago Bears for his client. Pyle wanted, among other things, part ownership of the team. When the Bears refused, Pyle formed the American Football League, which lasted one season. Grange played for the New York Yankees.

The American Football League, Version Two

For two years, in 1936 and 1937, the American Football League was back as another incarnation. The first year, the champions were the Boston Shamrocks; the second year the champions were the Los Angeles Bulldogs. Then the league folded.

The All-America Football Conference

In 1946, an eight-team league called the All-America Football Conference began play. It was dominated by Paul Brown's Cleveland Browns, who won the first championship 41–9 over the New York Yankees. The Browns won four consecutive AAFC championships. In 1950, the Browns, San Francisco 49ers, and Baltimore Colts joined the NFL. And right away, the Browns proved the old league was no fluke. In the first game in the NFL, AAFC champion Cleveland beat NFL champion Philadelphia 35–10. The Browns defeated the Los Angeles Rams, formerly the Cleveland Rams, 30–28 in the NFL championship game that first year in the league.

No other league has ever expanded so successfully on the field.

The American Football League, Version 3

This is part of the lore (see Chapter 6, "Understanding the Lore"). In November 1959, the AFL held a 33-round draft followed, 10 days later, by an additional 20-round draft. The AFL, it seemed, was going to succeed if for no other reason than that it was determined to find players.

But the AFL was more than just a hard-working league. It was a business that capitalized on an instance of business karma—a perfect challenge at a magic moment in time when the whole world was changing and folks were ready for a challenge. Plus, and this is key, the league found big cities that wanted professional football.



Joe's Record Book

What's in a name? Plenty. The Tennessee Titans are not the first Titans in professional football. The first Titans were the New York Titans of the AFL-version 3; the team changed its name to the New York Jets. And the new Houston Texans (replacing the Oilers, who moved to Tennessee to become the Titans) are not the first Texans to play professional football. The Dallas Texans played in the AFL-version 3 before they moved to Kansas City and became the Chiefs. And another Texans franchise played in Houston in the World Football League.

The AFL in the 1960s was a business that thrived on the personality and talent of some great players along with a need at the time for new franchises. The league at the time was able to afford to bid with the NFL for some of the best young players coming into the game.

Because of its success, some of the greatest lore from the NFL (including how an upstart AFL team, the Jets, was able to beat an NFL giant, the Colts) comes from this league.

The NFL took its medicine, merged with the AFL, and then was ready the next time any league dared to venture into the high-priced world of professional football.

The World Football League

In 1974, the World Football League announced its arrival with the creation of 12 franchises from New York to Honolulu. In 1975, the new league raided the NFL, stealing away Miami Dolphins' stars Larry Csonka, Jim Kiick, and Paul Warfield as well as Cowboys' star Calvin Hill. But the league couldn't get a TV deal and thus could not survive. The WFL folded after two years.

The United States Football League

On the heels of an NFL strike in 1982, the USFL joined the sports calendar with a spring season in 1983. The league had some money to spend and a TV contract to

help support it, so at first there was some success—attendance averaged more than 39,000 in the first week. Four weeks later attendance dipped to an average of below 20,000. But the league endured.

With high-profile owners like Donald Trump signing some high-quality talent such as Herschel Walker, Steve Young, Jim Kelly, Reggie White, and Doug Flutie, the USFL put itself on the map even if it did end up folding three years into the experiment. In 1986, after an 11-week trial, a jury in U.S. District Court in New York awarded the USFL \$1 in its \$1.7 billion anti-trust suit against the NFL.

The Baltimore Stars won the championship in 1985, and 14 players from that team signed with NFL teams. The USFL did have some talent in it.

The Modern Companion Leagues

There are a number of professional football leagues, even down to the regional level. But there are three leagues in particular that are able to co-exist with the NFL in a complementary fashion. These are the Arena Football League, the Canadian Football League, and NFL Europe.



Joe's Rules

The Arena League, like most leagues, tries to differentiate itself from the NFL with some rule changes. These include a 50-yard field with 8-yard end zones and 8 players per team on the field. There are nets in the end zones, and if a ball is passed and bounces off the net, it remains in play until it hits the playing surface.

The Arena Football League

In 1981, James Foster, an executive with NFL properties, was attending an indoor soccer game when he drew an outline of a miniature football field on a hockey rink. After all, reasoned Foster, if they can play soccer indoors, why not football?

But Foster had to wait for the rise and fall of the USFL before he could make his dream a reality. Five years later, in 1986, a “test game” was held in Rockford, Illinois.

Since then, the league has grown in stature, gaining fans and franchises across the country. Now, it bills itself as the “50-Yard Indoor War.” It has reached an agreement with the NFL so that NFL team owners can also own Arena League teams. And, oh yeah, the Arena League has a famous NFL alumni, 1999 NFL MVP (and Super Bowl MVP) Kurt Warner, who previously played for the Iowa Barnstormers. (The Barnstormers have since moved and become the New York Dragons.)

Here are the teams of the Arena Football League:

American Conference

West	Central
Arizona Rattlers	Grand Rapids Rampage
Houston ThunderBears	Indiana Firebirds
San Jose SaberCats	Milwaukee Mustangs
Los Angeles Avengers	Detroit Fury
Oklahoma Wranglers	Chicago Rush

National Conference

Southern	Eastern
Florida Bobcats	Buffalo Destroyers
Nashville Kats	Toronto Phantoms
Orlando Predators	Carolina Cobras
Tampa Bay Storm	New Jersey Gladiators
	New York Dragons

Championship game: The ArenaBowl

The Canadian Football League

In 1861, a football game was played at the University of Toronto and football in Canada was born. Although many in America think the league's differences might be a response to American football, the truth is that Canadian football has its own rich heritage. In fact, teams began playing with 12 players in 1903.

In 1954, the Canadian Football League actually made a mark by raiding NFL rosters of players, including quarterback Eddie LeBaron and defensive tackle Arnie Weinmeister.

The CFL has been by far the most complementary league to the NFL. Although for a three-year period in the early 1990s, the CFL fielded teams in the United States, it has mostly remained a distinctly Canadian game with slightly different rules that opened things up quite a bit. And, as I know very well, it has provided an opportunity for some players to prove themselves. There have been a number of us—Doug Flutie, Warren Moon, and, yes, Joe Theismann—who got our first, good professional opportunity in Canada.

And the NFL has entered into an alliance with the CFL, promoting football across Canada and co-sponsoring high school coach's awards and flag football competitions.

Here are the teams of the Canadian Football League:

West Division	East Division
British Columbia Lions	Hamilton Tiger-Cats
Calgary Stampeders	Montreal Alouettes
Edmonton Eskimos	Toronto Argonauts
Saskatchewan Roughriders	Winnipeg Blue Bombers

Championship game: The Grey Cup

NFL Europe

For 17 days in February 1991, a gathering occurred in Orlando, Florida, and at the end of those two and a half weeks, a new league complete with teams full of players had been formed. Incredibly, the league was to play far from the birthplace of football. It was to play in Europe.



Joe's Record Book

Teams in Europe are required to carry four players who are not American. Among the early finds of those in charge of scouting was a Russian javelin thrower who, naturally, quickly learned to play quarterback.

The best part of all, for the league, was that the World League of American Football (which evolved into NFL Europe) was associated with the NFL. When it was formed, the new league received more than 4,000 applications from players hoping for a chance at a springboard league to the NFL. It was another place for dreams to come true. And it was a way to spread the word about American football.

The league, now called NFL Europe, is a place for teams to send young players who need playing experience but who probably won't get much on their current team. So, the NFL sends them to Europe for development, and along the way the NFL builds a fan base around the world.

Here are the teams of NFL Europe:

NFL Europe	
Amsterdam Admirals	Barcelona Dragons
Berlin Thunder	Frankfurt Galaxy
Rhein Fire	Scotland Claymores

Championship game: The World Bowl

The XFL: Definitely NOT the NFL

Evolution doesn't always mean progress. Sometimes, as in the case of the newest football league, the XFL, it means something other than the best football in the world.

My point is not to judge but to help you understand. The XFL defies explanation. It is not wrestling, although WWF president (and XFL founder) Vince McMahon would like it to look like wrestling. And it is not high-level football. But the XFL does one thing I like. It provides opportunities for football players to show the NFL what they've got.

The NFL may miss on a few players, but with the XFL and the television contract, maybe some of these guys will get their chance to be seen.

The XFL is something else entirely. Started in 2001 by McMahon and NBC TV, the XFL has claimed to be "smashmouth" football. But compared to the NFL, it's merely "loudmouth" football.

The XFL has created tons of hype about its announcers (Minnesota governor and former wrestler Jesse Ventura), its pay scale (\$45,000 base with incentives to win), and rule changes (for example, no fair catches), but the truth is that football will always be football. And no amount of hype can hide the fact that some players are not as good as others.

Here are the teams in the XFL:

Eastern Division	Western Division
Birmingham Bolts	Las Vegas Outlaws
Chicago Enforcers	Los Angeles Extreme
New York/New Jersey Hitmen	Memphis Maniax
Orlando Rage	San Francisco Demons

Championship game: The Big Game at the end

The NFL is where the best go to play. Any idiot can see that.

The Least You Need to Know

- The NFL gets challenged because football is a lucrative business.
- The AAFC and AFL (version 3) were the most successful alternative leagues because they got teams into the NFL.
- The Arena Football League, Canadian Football League, and NFL Europe complement the NFL and sometimes send players to the NFL.
- The XFL will need more than hype to succeed.



The NFL: The Best in the World

In This Chapter

- ▶ Thoughts on the show, the business, and the culture of the NFL
- ▶ Why the NFL is a superstar league
- ▶ Strategies for building champions

In playgrounds across America, there are dreamers—little boys who imagine themselves to be Peyton Manning, or Marshall Faulk, or Randy Moss. Once upon a time, Manning, Faulk, and Moss imagined themselves to be Dan Marino, Emmitt Smith, or Jerry Rice—who probably imagined themselves to be Joe Namath, Jimmy Brown, or Paul Warfield. It's a wonderful cycle that is fueled because boys have heroes and the heroes of football play in only one place—the NFL. And sometimes heroes at the beginning of their careers get to play with heroes at the end of theirs.

The National Football League is a professional league composed of, for now, 31 teams that have the best football players in the world. It is the pinnacle of the game. A player can go no higher than the NFL. When a player is a boy, he plays Pop Warner (Little League football) and hopes to play high school ball. When a young man is in high school, he hopes to play college ball. After college, the player hopes to play in the NFL. Once a player is in the NFL, there are no other worlds to conquer. Of course, conquering the NFL is no small feat.

This chapter is about the greatest professional sports league in the world. It touches on how the league is the pinnacle of the sport, and that although it is a sport it is also a business. The NFL is full of grown men playing a boy's game for a tycoon's fortune. This chapter also covers the culture of the league and the different philosophies that teams use to build a winner.

The NFL Is “The Show”

The pinnacle of the stage is Broadway. The pinnacle for a screen actor is Hollywood. In football, there is only one place for a player to see if his talent is among the best in the world—the NFL. It can be overwhelming for a player first walking into the league. Wow. The NFL. Imagine that! Players can all remember watching games on television. Suddenly, the camera angle is reversed and the watchers become the watched.

Even if a player is the worst in the NFL, he is still among the best players in the world. There really is no higher mountain.

The NFL Is a Business

The NFL is a *professional* football league, meaning that players get paid to play. This means that although football is a game, in the NFL, football is also a business. And it is *big* business.

Big business, of course, means big money for the players and the owners. It means that the boy's game played on the field often takes second place to the high-finance game played off the field. The game that once saw players begin and end their careers in the same uniform has given way to a new world order in which players bounce from team to team in search of the highest offer. Players have become, in effect, hired guns.

Teams used to have older players groom younger players. It was like a passing of a baton. A player would play in a particular city for 10 years and, as his career was winding down, he would help his successor get ready to take over the job. And then, a decade later, the cycle would continue. No more. Now, there is basically an all-for-one and one-for-me type of attitude. It's like a free-for-all, and despite the fact that players do jump from team to team, I don't believe that there is anything more than human nature involved. Think of your job. If someone besides your employer offers you the same job at a huge pay hike, are you sticking around because of loyalty? Not likely. In the NFL, some players do still stick with a team out of loyalty. Sure, it's rare. But it happens.



Joe's Record Book

The average career in the NFL is 3.3 years.

There is another aspect to take into consideration. Players' careers do not last a long time. If a player is in the league for 10 years, he has had a very long career.

Therefore, even though players do make exorbitant amounts of money, the window of time in which to make this money is small. I actually believe players are loyal to their teams. But frankly, I think they are more loyal to their families. Who wouldn't be?

There is one final point I'd like to make on the player loyalty subject. I've heard fans say that a player should stay with their team even if their team offers

less money. The argument typically goes, “What is the difference between \$3 million and \$3.5 million?” Well, let me answer that. The difference is \$500,000.

As you can see by all those zeros in that number, the NFL is a big business. And really, that’s a small number by NFL standards. The NFL is not about hundreds of thousands of dollars. It’s about billions of dollars—that’s with a “B” and nine zeros.

It’s not just the players who are making money. Football is a cash cow for the folks who pay the players, too. After all, they wouldn’t be paying the players millions if they weren’t making *more* millions. The numbers are almost bizarre. A new franchise costs about \$600 million. Then, a stadium costs at least \$300 million. Owners spend all that money, so they can have the right to pay players \$7 million a year—even though they know those players are only going to be around for three or four years before they sell their services to the highest bidder. It’s a big Monopoly game, and everybody owns Boardwalk.

You know those tickets you buy? The money goes to the owners. You know all the beer, chips, and the cars—the products that are advertised on NFL broadcasts? Well, those companies all pay big money to sell their products on TV during NFL games. The broadcast networks sell the time, but only after paying the NFL exorbitant amounts of money. And guess who gets that money? Yes, the owners. Also, almost every stadium has *luxury suites*.



Joe’s Gridiron Talk

A **luxury suite** is an enclosed room with a glass front that is inside of many stadiums. These are usually rented to corporations and are located in some of the prime areas of stadiums. They are rented for tens of thousands of dollars or more per year. Television revenue is shared among all teams, but a portion of luxury suite revenue is kept by the home team.

There was a time when some owners were just in it to make money. They are still in it for the money, but the initial investment is so huge now that all owners are more committed to winning. Not only is it more fun to win, but the owners finally figured out that there is money to be made from being successful. It’s now about selling hats. It’s about selling shirts and images and logos and dreams and jerseys and shoes. Money. Business is about money. Professional football is a business, and therefore football is about money. (See Chapter 25, “The Business of the Game,” for more details.)

The Superstar League

The pinnacle itself has a pinnacle. Yes, in a league that is filled with the best football players in the world, there are, indeed, the *very best* players. Superstars. It's an over-used word in the age of hype, but a true superstar has way more value to a team than any team ever pays him. Superstars sell tickets and T-shirts because there is one thing that superstars can be counted on for—winning. Superstars win.

It's impossible to win in the NFL if a team doesn't have at least some of the best players in the league. Hard work and character and even smarts can go a long way, but it has to be accompanied by talent because football is a physical game.

And superstars demand top dollar. The economics of football are governed by the simple rule of supply and demand. If there is a short supply of superstars at a particular position, and you are a superstar at that position, you will be one of the highest-paid players in the game.



Joe's Tips

The standards of excellence have changed in the NFL. Compare the old standards of excellence with the new.

	Old	New
Rushing	1,000 yards	1,300 yards in a season
QB completion percent	60 percent	62 percent
QB TD passes	20	25
QB yards	3,000	4,000
Receiver catches	80	100

Some guys even have a clause written into their contract that says they must be, say, one of the top three paid players at their position. In other words, if player A has that clause but later four players come along and sign contracts bigger than his, player A will get his salary accelerated so that it equals the average of the top three players. Hey, it's good work if you can get it!

By the same token, if you've been a superstar for a team for 10 years and then you get hurt, the team may want to keep you, but it has to use your roster position for someone who can be productive *now*. Emotions and feelings have to be removed from the picture.

The superstar system has, in effect, created a sort of caste system in football. The superstars make exorbitant multimillion dollar salaries, and the average players make a few hundred thousand a year.

Sure, a few hundred thousand may sound like a lot to most people. And it is. But remember, these are mostly short careers. And the difference in salaries is huge. The middle-class football player (go with me on this, it's a relative term) does not exist. There is the top of the mountain, and then there is everybody else. And that's just the way it is. It's not bad. Money hasn't ruined the game. The game is as popular as ever. Money has changed the game, but football on the field is still football.

But money creates a bit of pressure in locker rooms. Players know what other players make. If a player is making a ton of money and isn't getting the job done, his teammates will make sure he hears about it. Football is a microcosm of society. Families fight over money. So do football teams. Guys say things. There are spats. Superstars get pressure from everywhere. They better produce because fans know what players make. Owners obviously know. *Put up or shut up*. Superstars must put up.

Although the world of professional football is obviously very competitive, superstars like it when other superstars receive an enormous contract. The bar goes up. The next contract negotiation will be even more mind-boggling. The NFL has found the end of the rainbow, and sure enough, there is a pot of gold. Just ask a superstar.



Joe's Record Book

The Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, is where the best of the best go. There is nothing more that can be accomplished than being elected to the Hall of Fame. And there is no greater honor than that. Players cannot be elected to the Hall of Fame until five years after they have retired. Coaches can go in immediately.

The Culture of the Game

I started playing football at 12 years old. When I left the game at 35, I was doing the same thing I did at 12.

And, as a father, when I was 34, for instance, I could come home from work and talk to my 13-year-old son about his day on the practice field and compare it to mine. My son, Joey, would say, "Dad, I threw a couple of interceptions in practice today."

And I'd say, "So did I, son. So did I. But I'll do better tomorrow."

"Me too, Dad," he'd answer.

The culture of the NFL is many things, but in many ways it is encompassed in that conversation I had with my son. Grown men playing a boys' game. There's your culture.

Of course, it is a culture of violence, of rare opportunity, and of money and fame. Every player is different. Although the culture is all male, it is also full of many races, religions, and nationalities. Just people. Happy-go-lucky guys have lockers next to whiners, who are next to practical jokers, who are next to born-again Christians, who are next to aspiring rap artists. It's just people who are judged on their athletic ability and on their ability to fit into a group. Character is important. By character, I mean, "*Can I count on you?*" Character is about work ethic, reliability, and accountability. Football players are highly talented and motivated individuals who have a healthy amount of ego and confidence. The culture of the NFL, especially on a winning team, is one of excellence. There is nothing more invigorating.

The culture also includes some of that history and lore that I spoke of earlier in the book (see Chapter 6, "Understanding the Lore"). Some players know more than others. The players who understand the traditions of the game have more of a tendency to go into coaching.

The culture of the NFL does pass from one generation to the next. When I went up to Joe Namath and offered to carry his helmet to his locker room (see Chapter 1, "So You Want to Be a Monday Morning Quarterback"), it was ridiculous. I know that. But I wasn't embarrassed. Heck, no. He was my hero. And then I think about our careers. He won a world championship. I won a world championship. Holy mackerel!

Professional football is like a fraternity. We, as football players, are criticized by people who have never done what we've done. We are under a microscope because of how much money we make. Our families are looked upon in a certain way because of what happened on a Sunday afternoon. We rely on each other for our own existence, our own success, and, to some degree, our own failures.

How Teams Are Built

Like Rome, championship teams are not built in a day. The strategies and philosophies of successful football teams (as you learned in Chapter 11 on offensive strategies and Chapter 17 on defensive strategies) are not clearly defined in black-and-white terms. There are different ways to do it.

But it all starts with organization. There must be a coherent philosophy, the contents of which are less important than the cohesiveness of the plan. It all has to fit together—people, philosophy, and talent.

There are really five aspects to a football team's organization, in addition to the players—the owner, the general manager, the coach, the assistant coaches, and the medical and equipment staff.

The owner typically pays the bills, makes the money, and hires the general manager.

The general manager, most often, picks the players. He is in charge of drafting players, acquiring free agents by outbidding other teams, and making player trades with other teams. Sometimes the head coach is also the general manager. It is the rare individual such as Jimmy Johnson, the coach of the Miami Dolphins who built the Dallas Cowboys and then coached them to two Super Bowl championships, who can handle both jobs. More typically, there is a matching of general manager and coach, such as Ron Wolf and Mike Holmgren, who together built the Green Bay Packers into the champions of Super Bowl XXXI. And Ozzie Newsome, as general manager of the Baltimore Ravens, built a great team for Brian Billick to coach to a championship.

The coach is the field general, planning overall strategy for the game and the season on the field. He devises strategies, motivates players, and makes decisions on playing time. He also decides who makes the roster.

Assistant coaches, I believe, have the greatest impact on a team. They work directly with the players. They teach specific on-the-field skills. They motivate. They are wired into a core group of players.

The medical staff makes sure the players stay healthy. The equipment staff makes sure the players have the proper equipment so that they can perform their jobs. It's just like any other business. The team is looking for good productivity from its people, who, after all, are a major investment.

It all has to fit together. Coaches and assistant coaches spend a lot of time together. Much of the time, they are tired, and the relationship can sometimes be a difficult one. Think about it. If you're around friends or family and you're tired and they're tired, at times it isn't a really happy place to be. If you are a coach, you need people around you who know you and know your moods and can put up with you, and who you can put up with. You want smart people—people who think like you.

Finally, there are the players. You know about them. Or do you?



Joe's Tips

Occasionally, owners get involved in the football operations of their team. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's not, and sometimes it's inevitable. If two football men, say a coach and a general manager, are feuding about a personnel decision, the owner may need to step between them. Read your local newspapers to follow this kind of action in your home team.



Joe's Tips

Some coaches are teachers. Some are yellers. Some give pats on the back. Some give kicks in the butt. No one style works all the time, but usually all the coaches on one team are on the same page. They don't have to use the same style, but the styles of coaches must work together.

The Players

Rosters are set at 53 men—that's the most players that can be signed to any team. Of these, 45 dress for any one game. I have my own theory on the quality of players you need to compete for the championship. I call it the 8-14-23 Rule.

First, you need eight Pro Bowl players. Joe Gibbs, former coach of the Washington Redskins, used to say this. Get eight Pro Bowl players and you can compete for a title.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **Pro Bowl** is the All-Star Game of the National Football League. It is played every year, after the season, in Honolulu, Hawaii. This is different than All-Star games in other sports. Those are held during the season.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **blue-chip player** is considered by scouts to be one who can't miss becoming a starter in the league, if not a superstar.

A **sleeper** is a player drafted in the later rounds of the draft who turns out to be something special.

You then need 14 top-flight players who are borderline Pro Bowl players in any given year.

And then you need 23 quality NFL players.

The 8-14-23 Rule. That's a starting philosophy. The next question is, where do you find the players?

Finding the Players

Every year, as you've learned, there is an annual draft in which the top college players who are eligible are picked. There are seven rounds, and each of the 31 teams picks in each round—unless there are trades. Sometimes teams trade draft picks for players or for other draft picks, or for a combination of both. Teams hope to get *blue-chip players* in the early rounds, and *sleepers* in the later rounds.

Unlike other sports, trades are rarely made during the season. Football is too much of a team game. A player needs time to learn to work with his teammates and vice versa.

Even without team concerns, the league has a specific calendar for when certain personnel moves can be made and when roster sizes must be set.

Nowadays, teams build through free agency as well. (See Chapter 25 for more details.) This is the area that may have the most impact on a team, because it almost always involves the most dollars. When a free agent superstar lands in a new city, he will most likely be making one of the highest salaries on his new team. Because of something called the *salary cap*, teams are only allowed to spend a certain amount each year.

Young Guys or Grizzled Veterans

A grand experiment was conducted in the NFL in 1995. Two new teams joined the league—the Carolina Panthers and the Jacksonville Jaguars. And the interesting thing was that they decided to build their teams completely differently. One team, the Jacksonville Jaguars, put together a team of mostly young players surrounded by a few key free-agent players. The Carolina Panthers, on the other hand, pursued a number of free agents from other teams and put them together into a team with a few key young players. These were two completely different philosophies, and they both were successful.

In their second season, the Jaguars were amazingly successful. They made it to AFC championship game. If they had won that game, they would have gone to the Super Bowl.

In their second season, the Panthers were just as successful. They made it to the NFC championship game. If they had won that game, they would have made it to the Super Bowl as well.

It would've been a heck of a Super Bowl.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **salary cap** is the amount of money the NFL designates that each team may spend for players. The salary cap for 2001 is \$67.4 million per team.

Start with a Quarterback

Sure, I'm biased about the importance of quarterbacks, but that doesn't mean I'm wrong. As a former quarterback, I know what's involved in the job.

Just look at how much quarterbacks get paid and you'll see that I'm right. An average NFL starting quarterback makes about \$5 million per year. The better they are, the more they make. At any given time, there are about eight quarterbacks in the league who are superstars in the true sense of the word. Yet a quarterback who doesn't have superstar ability can do very well on a good team. Neal O'Donnell went with the Pittsburgh Steelers to Super Bowl XXX, a game they probably should have won but didn't. After that Super Bowl season, O'Donnell was rewarded by the New York Jets with what was at the time a huge contract—\$25 million for 5 years.

Every team must have at least a decent quarterback. Most teams have to settle for just that.

After quarterback, there are a few other key positions, starting with the offensive line, most specifically the left tackle, who protects a right-handed quarterback from hits from his blind side. Teams must also have a good defensive lineman, a halfback, a cornerback, a pass rushing linebacker, and a quality wide receiver. If you take all those Pro Bowl players and throw in one more, you'll have eight. Now, you should be able to compete for a championship.

The Least You Need to Know

- The best players in the world play in the NFL, and the best of those are superstars.
- The NFL is a *professional* football league and money is the driving force.
- Owners pay for players and pick the general manager. The general manager picks the players. But sometimes, the owner wants to be both the owner and the general manager.
- Teams are put together in a number of ways. There is a college draft in which each team takes turns picking players, there are trades, and there is free agency, in which teams bid for a player's services.
- A team must have a good quarterback and follow the 8-14-23 Rule to contend for championships.



The Road to the Super Bowl

In This Chapter

- ▶ How the league is sliced up
- ▶ How the intensity level goes up in the playoffs
- ▶ What's so super about the Super Bowl?

There is only one true prize in professional football—the Vince Lombardi Trophy—given to the team that wins the Super Bowl. Nothing else matters.

If your team goes 15–1 in the regular season but loses in the first round of the playoffs, you've accomplished nothing. You are nobody. I know that winning the Super Bowl validated my career and that it validated the careers of all the players who ever played on winning teams. There are players who don't win the Super Bowl who say it isn't the end of the world. If they had won it, they'd feel differently. They'd feel like if they *hadn't* won it, it *would* have been the end of the world.

It is not easy to get there. This chapter is about what it takes for a team to reach the Super Bowl and how a team's performance in the regular season affects its chances in the playoffs. It describes the conferences and divisions that make up the NFL, home-field advantage, scheduling, and a round-by-round look at how the playoffs develop. Finally, it contains a description of what's so super about the Super Bowl.

Slice Up the League

As the following table shows, the NFL is divided into two conferences—the American Football Conference (AFC) and the National Football Conference (NFC). Each of these conferences is further divided into three divisions—the East, Central, and West

Division. (In 2002, this will radically change. As of press time, there are plans to realign into eight divisions—although the specific makeup is not yet known.)

The National Football League

American Football Conference (AFC)	National Football Conference (NFC)
East	East
Buffalo Bills	Arizona Cardinals
Indianapolis Colts	Dallas Cowboys
Miami Dolphins	New York Giants
New England Patriots	Philadelphia Eagles
New York Jets	Washington Redskins
Central	Central
Baltimore Ravens	Chicago Bears
Cincinnati Bengals	Detroit Lions
Cleveland Browns	Green Bay Packers
Tennessee Titans	Minnesota Vikings
Jacksonville Jaguars	Tampa Bay Buccaneers
Pittsburgh Steelers	
West	West
Denver Broncos	Atlanta Falcons
Kansas City Chiefs	Carolina Panthers
Oakland Raiders	New Orleans Saints
San Diego Chargers	St. Louis Rams
Seattle Seahawks	San Francisco 49ers

You may think, judging by the names of the divisions, that teams are divided up by regions of the country. You may think that, but you'd be wrong. Just look again. For instance, Atlanta is in the NFC West, and Arizona is in the NFC East. The NFL is the only place I know of that thinks Atlanta is west of Arizona!

The Regular Season Is Too Exciting to Be “Regular”

The NFL season is 16 games long. Each team plays the teams in its own division twice—once at home and once at the other team's stadium.

Teams want to win enough games in the regular season to qualify for the playoffs. Most teams just concentrate on making the playoffs and then figure that anything can happen once they get there. There is some truth to this, although it's also true that most champions would have considered the season a complete failure if they didn't win the Super Bowl. Champions have strong minds.

The regular season is important because, obviously, a team must first qualify for the playoffs in order to advance in the playoffs. But there is one other aspect, too—home field advantage. Teams that have the best regular season record get to play their playoff games at home. They also get to take the first week of the playoffs off.

Cheer Loud, Your Team Needs You

What's so good about playing at home? Oh, gosh. Everything. Football fields are different. The wind, shadows, and weather all make a difference, and it's always nice to play on a field where those things are familiar. It's good not to travel and wake up in a hotel. But mostly, the reason home field is such an advantage is the fans.

Remember, football is an emotional game. There is nothing that can toy with your emotions more than the difference between 70,000 fans cheering your every move versus 70,000 fans jeering your every move. Sure, it's a challenge to go into a foreign stadium and turn screaming maniacs into sullen spectators. But frankly, it's a lot easier to play in front of folks who are cheering for you. So go wild for your team. It really does help—more than you can imagine.

Scheduling

Most games are played on Sunday afternoons and start at 1 P.M. or 4 P.M. Eastern Time. Professional football and Sunday afternoons are a perfect fit.

But one game a week is played on Sunday night at 8:00, and one game a week is played on Monday night at 9:00. On rare occasions, the NFL gives you a Thursday or Saturday game as a bonus.

When the game is played in prime time, the television audience is bigger. The Monday night game is special—usually with the atmosphere of a playoff game. Players know that the biggest audience of the week is watching as well as their peers. Although professional football is show business anyway, the Monday night game has taken on a special glitz.

Monday Night Football was originally as popular for its three announcers—Don Meredith, Frank Gifford, and Howard Cosell—as it was for the game itself. Now, the ABC broadcast opens with a rockin' Hank Williams Jr. song, and the nation focuses in on two football teams. They are always good teams because the NFL only schedules teams that did well the previous year for Monday night games. If you're scheduled for



Joe's Record Book

In the 2000 season, home teams won 138 of 248 games—55.6 percent.



Joe's Record Book

In the first Monday night game in 1970, the Cleveland Browns beat the New York Jets 31–21.

Monday night, you've already been rewarded for being a good team. If you win on Monday night, America sees. Players are very aware of that.

Sixteen Games, Then What?

When the season is over, there is a playoff tournament in which the teams that qualify are matched up against each other in a series of games. Whichever team wins gets to play again. When a team loses in the playoffs, its season is over.

Six teams in each conference (AFC and NFC) make the playoffs. The winner of each division (East, Central, and West) makes the playoffs, and then three *wild-card teams* also play. Teams with the best win-loss record in their division win their division.

The first week of the playoffs is called the wild-card round, and it features the three wild-card teams plus the division winner that had the worst record of the three division winners. The two division winners that had the best records in each conference get a *bye*, meaning they do not have to play that first week of the playoffs. They are rewarded for a superb regular season by not having to risk elimination in the first round of the playoffs. And they are further rewarded by getting to play their first game at home—each against the winner of one of the games from the wild-card round.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **wild-card team** is one that qualifies for the playoffs without winning its division. The three best nondivision winners in each conference qualify as wild-card teams.

Teams continue playing each other until there are only two teams left—a champion of the NFC and a champion of the AFC—and these two champions meet in the Super Bowl. There are two weeks between the conference championship game and the Super Bowl. Check out the following figure to see how teams get to the Super Bowl.

If there are ties at the end of the regular season (and this is possible because it is only a 16-week season), there is an elaborate system of tie-breaking rules. For instance, if two teams tied for the championship of a division, nine factors would be taken into consideration in determining a champion. Those nine factors are:

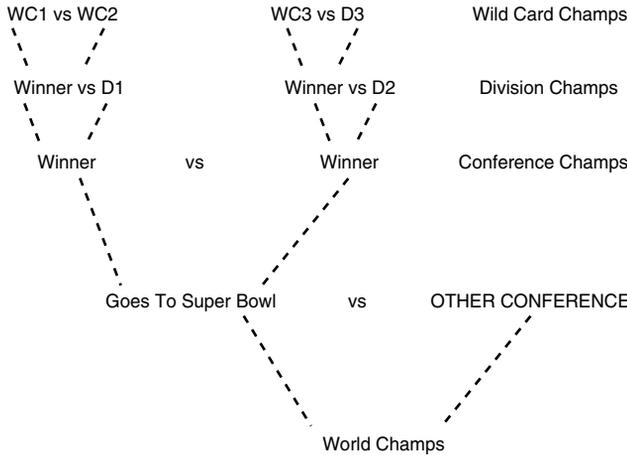
1. Head-to-head record (best win-loss percentage in games between the clubs)
2. Best win-loss-tie percentage within games played in the division
3. Best win-loss-tie percentage in games played within the conference
4. Best win-loss-tie percentage in common games, if applicable
5. Best net points in division games
6. Best net points in all games
7. *Strength of schedule*
8. Best net touchdowns in all games
9. Coin toss

WILD CARD ROUND

WC# = ranked wild card team...i.e. WC2 = second best wild card team

D# = ranked division winner ...i.e. D2 = second best division winner

Getting to the Super Bowl—both conferences send one team. This is how each conference does it.



There are similar rules for breaking a three-way tie within a division, for breaking a tie for a wild-card spot, and for breaking a tie between three or more clubs for a wild-card spot. The rules are not exactly the same, but they are close. If your team finds itself tied at the end of the season, any local sports page will detail the entire procedure.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Strength of schedule refers to how tough a schedule a team faced compared to other teams' schedules by looking at the record from the previous year of the current year's opponents. For instance, a team whose schedule included games against six opponents that made the playoffs the previous year probably had a tougher schedule than a team that faced only two teams that made the playoffs the previous year. It is based on the win-loss record of all opponents.

Jack Up the Intensity Level for the Playoffs

Now you know the math of how a team gets to the playoffs and the Super Bowl. But football ain't math. Football is passion, and that becomes increasingly clear as each week of the playoffs goes on.

Players and coaches like to talk about *intensity level* and how it goes up in the playoffs. Intensity level? Well, it's sort of "How hard do you try?" but it's more surreal. Every player (well, almost every player) already tries as hard as he can on every play of every game. So intensity level isn't really how hard you try. The best way to describe intensity level is not the level of effort, but rather the level of desire—"How bad



Joe's Tips

The key to the playoffs is trying to secure home field advantage. And this is done by having a great regular season. Playing before the home fans is always an advantage.



Joe's Record Book

The NFL gives Super Bowl champion teams an allotment of \$5,000 for each Super Bowl ring produced.

do you want it?" No matter how bad you think you want it in week one of the season ("it" being the Super Bowl championship—there is no other "it"), you want it more when the season is ending and the playoffs are starting. The closer you get, the more you can taste it. The intensity level goes up.

On the field, this means the holes a quarterback is throwing into are a little smaller. The holes a running back is trying to run through close a little more quickly, and the tackling is a little harder. Everything is a bit more ferocious. "How bad do I want it? Watch this."

I think the best week of the season is the week of the AFC championship game and the NFC championship game. I think those games are even better than the Super Bowl. All year, every team aims to get to the Super Bowl. That's why the week of the conference championships is so intense. One more game. One more win. So close, yet your opponent is guaranteed to be a strong team on a good run. It's almost crazy that you could get this far and end up with nothing. But it happens—happens to half the teams that get there. There is finality to every game. Losers go home.

You want the world to know that, this year, there was no one better than your team. Want it? By the time you get to the conference championship games, you ache for it. Winners of conference championships go to the Super Bowl. Winners of the Super Bowl have nothing more to do except sit at the summit in perfect bliss. Gimme a ring—a ring that goes to champions.

The Super Bowl

At the end of it all, it comes down to one game. It isn't like other sports that play a best-of-seven championship series. In football's championship, there are no second chances. There is one game—one super game.

The AFC champs play the NFC champs at a neutral site—usually in a warm-weather city, but occasionally in a dome in cold weather. The Super Bowl is supposed to be played in perfect conditions.

It's a surreal event—bigger than the imagination. There is nothing to compare it to—it's the standard for big events. The Super Bowl is a moniker that is used for other events. The Super Bowl is, in fact, the Super Bowl of football games. Get it? It's *that* big.

Each player on the winning team receives a ring. And the team gets the best trophy in the world, the Vince Lombardi Trophy—a regulation silver football mounted in a kicking position on a pyramid-like stand of three concave sides. It weighs 6.7 pounds and stands 20³/₄ inches tall. When it's yours, it's even more beautiful.

For 14 straight years, the NFC won the Super Bowl. For that time period, NFC teams seemed to usually come in with a more physical team, better at running the football and stopping the run. AFC teams usually seemed to arrive at the Super Bowl with a marquee quarterback but not as much balance. But parity has struck, and now the championship in the last three years has gone AFC (Broncos) to NFC (Rams) to AFC (Ravens).



Joe's Record Book

The name *Super Bowl* was invented by Kansas City Chief's owner Lamar Hunt, who saw his daughter bouncing a hard rubber ball called a "Super Ball." Hunt thought the name was fascinating and could be changed slightly to represent the greatest game in football. He was right.



A Super Bowl ring and the Vince Lombardi Trophy.

The game is bizarre even to the two teams playing in it. Professional football has a show business aspect to it anyway, but the Super Bowl is off the charts. Players who normally talk to a dozen or so members of the media from their hometown are suddenly besieged by 1,500 or so reporters. Every one of them wants to ask the same questions, and it can wear on them. But it's also exciting, tremendously exciting.



Joe's Record Book

Between 1984 and 1998, the NFC won the Super Bowl every year. For 14 years, the last NFC quarterback to lose a Super Bowl before that streak began was some guy named Joe Theismann, who lost Super Bowl XVIII in January 1984. The AFC didn't win again until the Broncos beat the Packers in 1998, and Brett Favre shared my misery.

In the middle of the two weeks leading to the Super Bowl, it can be hard to remember that you're there to play a football game. Coaches basically say to players, "Enjoy it, it's a special time in your life, but don't lose focus on why you're here." They know the temptations are great. All the world is watching, and everybody is in love with you. It can be hard to keep a clear head. But at the end of those two weeks, there is a game, the biggest game. The results of it can change your life. That's not a small thing.

The Least You Need to Know

- The NFL is divided into two conferences and three divisions in each conference. One team from each conference meets in the Super Bowl.
- Each team plays 16 games per season, 2 against each team in its division. Most games are played on Sundays, but there is one game a week on Monday night, which has a playoff-type atmosphere because the television audience is so big.
- The intensity level of playoff games goes up because the closer a team gets to the Super Bowl, the more they want to get there.
- The Super Bowl is so big that lives can change based on what happens for three hours in January.



The Business of the Game

In This Chapter

- The collective bargaining agreement, free agency, and the salary cap
- Show me the money: where it comes from and its impact on the game
- Point spreads and pools

There's more than sports in the sports pages these days. There's money—a king's ransom that can warp perspective and has turned the boys' game known as football into a high-finance venture for everyone involved. Money hasn't ruined football. It has only changed it, and the changes have been, and continue to be, significant.

Professional football is a business. Although the fans don't see their money after they spend it on football, they hear about where the money goes. It's almost impossible not to know how much money players—and owners—are making. This chapter examines the business of the game, from the collective bargaining agreement between players and owners, to the salary cap and how it works, to free agency and its effect on teams, to defined gross revenues. In addition, it touches on the recent trend of team free agency, in which teams actually move from one city to another in search of more dollars. You won't get paid to read this chapter, but you shouldn't skip it, because it contains critical perspective to the modern game.

The Collective Bargaining Agreement: To Know It Is to Love It

There's a big pie of football money out there. Tickets, luxury boxes, television, souvenirs—a big pie. When there is a big pie, everybody wants a piece, and there can and

will be arguments about money. Thus, there must be a way to split the money that satisfies everyone. Okay, I'm not an idiot. I know that no agreement can satisfy everyone. But the idea is to at least come as close as possible to satisfying everyone in order to play the games and increase the size of the pie.

The way the NFL splits the pie is with a *collective bargaining agreement (CBA)*, which is essentially a union contract between the NFL and the players that gives the players a certain amount of the revenue from the game. The revenue is distributed via a salary cap (keep reading to learn more about the salary cap). The length of every CBA is different. The length of the contract is just one of many things that are negotiated. The CBA sets minimum salary levels for players.



Joe's Rules

The 2001 minimum salary scale:

Less than one credited season	\$212,000
One credited season	\$303,000
Two credited seasons	\$394,000
Three credited seasons	\$424,000
Four credited seasons	\$454,000
Five or more credited seasons	\$484,000

There are so many different elements covered in the CBA that we would need at least two or three more books to give you a complete picture. And just so you know, each year an agent or a team comes up with a new way to try to beat the cap. This stuff would be as boring to players as it is to fans, except that it involves their financial futures. Would you be bored by matters concerning your financial future?

How Many Superstars Fit in the Salary Cap? It's a Riddle

Every team is given a certain amount of money to spend every year on player salaries. The amount for 2001 is \$67.4 million. Nowadays, the salary cap rules the NFL. If a team is good and is full of good players, it won't be able to keep all of them because they will simply demand salaries that are too high.

The idea of the salary cap is to prevent teams with greater financial resources (such as income from numerous luxury suites) from spending exorbitant amounts of money and getting all the best players. The salary cap, in theory, evens the playing field. If one team spends \$70 million for player salaries, and another only spends \$20 million, goes the thinking, chances are that the team with the high payroll will have much higher-quality players.

Teams must be selective. They can't spend as much as they want, even if they have it and are willing to spend it, because the NFL legislates how much teams may spend for players.

If a team wants to be stupid with its money (and many are), it can't spend more than a team that wants to be smart. The key nowadays is to spend smart: deciding which superstar you can afford and which can be shown the door. Every team faces the same questions. Smart ones win, and those that aren't as smart find themselves with a few overpriced players that they thought were superstars but really weren't. The key for any team in managing the salary cap is the *capologist*.

The salary cap is a complicated matter that could be the subject of an entire book. I believe there are about four people in the world who completely understand it. I'm not one of them and, trust me, you don't want to be one of them either. The salary cap is not really about sports. This is accounting stuff that, unfortunately, matters.

But you should realize that there are loopholes that the good teams have figured out how to exploit. Consider a team that signs a star player to a contract for 5 years at \$40 million. As part of the contract, the team could give that player a \$12 million signing bonus. That player receives the bonus money on the day he signs the contract. Now, you would think that a \$12 million chunk would put quite a dent in the \$67.4 million cap. One player simply cannot take up that big a percentage of a team's total salary. But the rules allow teams to spread the bonus over the length of the contract. So, a player who is given a \$12 million bonus in a 5-year contract would only count \$2.4 million per year against the salary cap.

That's a simple loophole, and there are more that I won't go into here. If you want to know more about the loopholes in the cap, you should talk to one of those four people who know it. Then again, it may be more fun to watch grass grow.

The capologist today is more important than the coach or the general manager. He tells the team which players it can and can't afford. The capologist is a magician, able to do infinite things with a finite number. Like any good accountant, he studies his documentation and looks for loopholes.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **capologist** is the person on an NFL team who is in charge of managing the salary cap. This person is a math whiz who helps the team figure what it can spend on players. Every team knows that one player could make a difference. In the 2000s, the capologist is as important as the general manager or coach.

Look. The cap doesn't work. Like everything else in football, there are creative people who have figured out a way to get around it. Someone is always going to find a way to circumvent it because there are people who are paid good money to figure exactly that. Teams find ways. They seem to always find ways.

Free Agency Isn't Free

If someone offers you more money to stay in the same job but switch companies, you would probably do it. If you did, you would be a free agent.

Free agency simply means that a player can offer his services to any team in the league. Usually, but not always, a player will sell his services to the highest bidder. Under the current CBA, there are two different types of free agents—restricted and unrestricted.

A restricted free agent is a player who has completed three seasons in the NFL and whose contract has expired. He may offer his services to any team. If he signs an offer sheet with a new club, his former club can match the offer and he remains with his former club. If the old club does not match the offer, he becomes a member of the new club, but the old club may receive draft choice compensation.

An unrestricted free agent is a player who has played four or more seasons in the NFL and his contract has expired. He is free to sign with any club, and his former club does not have the right to match the offer. The former club bids for him just like every other team.

Clubs can protect themselves from losing their superstars by designating three *transition players* and one *franchise player* over the course of the current CBA.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **transition player** is a player who is one of the best at his position. He must receive a salary equal to or greater than the average salary of the top 10 players at his position from the past season. When he becomes a free agent, his old club may match any offer given by another club. If the club doesn't offer that money, he loses his transition status and becomes a free agent.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **franchise player** is one the team designates as its most important player. Teams get only one slot for a franchise player but can choose to use either of two designations. An **exclusive franchise player** cannot sign with another club. He must be offered a minimum of the average of the top five salaries at his position as of April 14 or 120 percent of his previous salary—whichever is greater. If, however, a player is only offered at least the average of the top five salaries *from last season*, he is a mere franchise player and can negotiate with other clubs. If he receives a higher offer, the old club can either match the offer or receive two first-round draft choices as compensation.

Clubs may elect to forgo using the franchise player. In that case, they are awarded one extra transition player slot.

The slots can only be used during the term of the CBA. In other words, if a team decides to release a transition player, it is not given another one. It can only name three during the term of the current CBA.

Different Kinds of Money: Defined Gross Revenue

Players receive, through the salary cap system, 62 percent of the NFL's *defined gross revenue (DGR)*. DGR includes all gate receipts from the games, the money from the television contract, 75 percent of luxury box money, and 75 percent of money from NFL Properties. That money equals the salary cap of \$67.4 million that each of the 31 teams spends. Some money, such as 25 percent of luxury suite money, is not counted toward the cap.

Television is the largest chunk of money going into defined gross revenue. Football is the perfect television sport and absolutely everyone associated with the game understands that television is a large fountain of money for the NFL. You know why? Because you and I and everyone we know loves football. We all watch and the folks who want to sell us stuff understand this.



Joe's Record Book

In Super Bowl XXXV (2001), an average 30-second commercial cost \$2.2 million.



Joe's Record Book

The most recent set of television contracts with all the networks broadcasting games (ESPN, ABC, CBS, and Fox) is more than \$1 billion per year. When Fox purchased the NFC package of games in 1993, it ended 38 consecutive years that CBS had carried NFC or NFL games. Since then, CBS has taken over the AFC package from NBC. Football is obviously very valuable to a network's overall programming schedule.

How Money Has Changed the Game

Athletes are commodities. They are not human beings any more, and there is no way to treat a \$4 million player the same as a \$400,000 player. The investment is different. Despite every intention to treat everyone on a team the same, it's inevitable that a team will have a star system. Stars win. Wins bring in money. Therefore, stars are treated differently.



Joe's Rules

Superstars make millions of dollars per year, equaling hundreds of thousands per week. But their pay actually goes down come playoff time. In 2000, the division winner in the wild-card round received \$16,000 per player. Players from the three wild-card teams received \$10,000. Players on teams that played in the next round (the divisional round) each received \$16,000, and for the conference championship they received \$34,500. The champions of the Super Bowl each received \$58,000. Playoffs are about pride and desire. After all the money, it still comes down to, "How good are you, and how bad do you want it?"

If a \$4-million-a-year player bangs up his knee a little, the team will take precautionary measures to make sure that he's okay. The investment will be protected. He may rest. But if a \$400,000-a-year player bangs up his knee, the team will tape it, shoot it

up with some cortisone, and send him back on the field. “Go earn your money, kid.” Teams want to know they can get their pound of flesh for the money that has been paid.

It’s not unfair that stars are treated differently. Sure, coaches want to have rules for everyone, but stars know that if they produce on the field they can break a rule and there isn’t anything anyone can do about it. That’s the way of football. Usually, stars don’t cause problems. They understand what it takes to produce at the highest possible levels. It’s the marginal players who typically cause teams trouble. They struggle sometimes with discipline because they just don’t understand the price that must be paid in order to be great.

A classic example of money making a difference occurred during the off-season between 1996 and 1997 when the Houston Oilers traded Chris Chandler to the Atlanta Falcons for a couple of 1997 draft picks. In 1996, Chandler had his best year as a pro, throwing for 16 touchdown passes and 11 interceptions, but he was let go because the Oilers wanted to have a hotshot young quarterback, Steve McNair, who was drafted very high. Even though McNair could probably have benefited from watching Chandler play one more year, he was forced into service in 1997 because the Oilers simply couldn’t justify paying him hotshot money (a lot) and having him sit on the bench. He was making too much money. They had to get him into the game.

Another example of how money has changed the game happened in New England in the 1996 draft. At the time, Patriots owner Robert Kraft had just signed young hotshot quarterback Drew Bledsoe to a 7-year, \$42 million contract. At the time of the draft, the Patriots held the seventh pick. There was a disagreement as to who to pick. Patriots coach Bill Parcells wanted to draft a defensive lineman. Patriots general manager Bobby Grier wanted to draft a wide receiver, specifically the speedy Terry Glenn of Ohio State. The owner stepped in. Kraft sided with his general manager, because, among other reasons, his \$42 million quarterback needed a superstar receiver to catch his passes.

It proved to be a brilliant move. The Patriots, who were 6–10 in 1995 without Glenn, went to the Super Bowl in 1996 with him. Nevertheless, money played a part in the move.



Joe’s Record Book

One player can make a difference. Cornerback Deion Sanders signed a free-agent contract with the San Francisco 49ers for the 1994–1995 season, and that year the 49ers won Super Bowl XXIX. The next season, Sanders signed a free-agent contract with the Dallas Cowboys, and that year the Cowboys won Super Bowl XXX.

The Story of a Team Called the Cleveland Browns

These days, you need a program not only to keep track of the players and coaches but to keep track of the teams. The culprit, of course, is money. The astronomical sums of money that the players and, now, the owners can get by moving to a different city has made professional football a different kind of game. It's still exciting, but a bit of the long-term sentiment has disappeared. It's sad, because the fans are still loyal.

Here are the teams that have moved since 1983 (one team, the Raiders, moved twice):

- The Baltimore Colts became the Indianapolis Colts.
- The Oakland Raiders became the Los Angeles Raiders.
- The St. Louis Cardinals became the Phoenix Cardinals, and later, the Arizona Cardinals.
- The Los Angeles Raiders became the Oakland Raiders.
- The Los Angeles Rams became the St. Louis Rams.
- The Cleveland Browns became the Baltimore Ravens.
- The Houston Oilers became the Tennessee Titans.

The most shocking move was when the Browns announced that they were relocating to Baltimore. Art Modell, the owner of the team, needed a new stadium (with luxury suites) to compete for players. The city of Cleveland didn't provide one fast enough, and Baltimore came in with a great offer.



Joe's Record Book

On October 13, 1996, there was a game that could have been called the Identity Crisis Bowl. That day, the Baltimore Ravens (formerly the Cleveland Browns) played the Indianapolis Colts (formerly the Baltimore Colts). The coach of the Ravens was Ted Marchibroda, who the previous year coached the Indianapolis Colts. Previously, Marchibroda also coached the Baltimore Colts.

The Indianapolis Colts beat the Baltimore Ravens 26–21. And that made fans in Cleveland happy.

Browns fans were very loyal and very upset. Cleveland had consistently had the highest television ratings of any NFL city. Just 40 miles from the birthplace of professional football (Canton, Ohio), Cleveland looked upon its football team as a sort of religion. Rabid cannot begin to describe what fans there were like on Sundays. And heartbroken cannot begin to describe how they felt when the team moved.

But maybe something good came from the move. It brought some economic stability to the league, and a number of teams have found stadium deals that can keep them financially sound. The NFL even cut a deal with the city of Cleveland. The city built a new stadium (with luxury suites), and the NFL put a new team in Cleveland in 1999—the Cleveland Browns. And so to all the folks in Cleveland who dressed up in dog masks and barked like maniacs at me when I played, I say to them, glad to have you back. From me to you, *woof!*

And now, Houston also has been awarded an expansion franchise. The new Houston Texans will begin play in the 2002 season.

Money on the Outside: Gambling

Let's see. How can I put this? You can bet some folks are gambling.

Look in almost any newspaper every week and you'll find the *latest line*, which is a compilation of what Las Vegas oddsmakers have guessed will be the winning margin of each game. One team is favored to win by a certain number of points. The number of points that one team is favored to win by is called the *point spread*. So if Dallas is favored to beat Tampa Bay by 11 points, the point spread is 11. If they win by more than 11—also called covering the spread—they not only win the game, but they win the bet as well. If they win by less than 11, or actually lose the game, they lose the bet.

The NFL does not condone gambling. Professional football players are not allowed to gamble. Period. But other folks gamble. The Super Bowl is the biggest gambling day of the year, and on that day you can bet on virtually anything. You can obviously bet who will win the game, how many points will be scored by each team in a quarter, or even who will win the coin toss. You can bet the over/under on how many catches a certain person will have. In other words, if the over/under is five, you are betting the player will either catch more than five passes or less than five.

Some of the bets that Las Vegas casinos take are funny:

- In Super Bowl XXXI, bettors could bet that Brett Favre (minus 115 yards) would have more passing yards than Tiger Woods had total strokes in the Phoenix Open. In other words, you could take Brett Favre's total passing yardage, subtract 115, and bet that it would exceed Woods' total strokes.
- Also in Super Bowl XXXI, bettors could wager on whether the Green Bay Packers (plus three points) would score more points than the Packers scored in the first Super Bowl, when they beat the Kansas City Chiefs 35–10.

- In Super Bowl XXX, bettors could bet whether Michael Jordan would score more points against the Phoenix Suns than the Dallas Cowboys would score against the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Gambling is interesting and it heightens the interest in the game of football. There's no denying it. Fans even follow games that don't involve their favorite team if they have a little wager on the game. It's not a secret. Although the NFL wants nothing to do with gambling, it grudgingly acknowledges that it exists.

How expert are these *bookmakers* (gambling statisticians)? You'd be surprised. They study football the way astronomers study the sky. They perform in-depth statistical analyses of everything possible (like home wins on cold-weather days versus West Coast teams with left-handed quarterbacks) and then somehow come up with a number for the point spread. I'm amazed at how good they are. A great example of this was Super Bowl XXXI, when the Green Bay Packers were favored to beat the New England Patriots by 14 points. The Packers beat the Patriots 35–21.

Bookmakers are usually close to the score, but not always. They are wrong often enough to make it interesting. Their most famous wrong guess was Super Bowl III, when the powerhouse Baltimore Colts were favored by 19 points to beat Joe Namath's New York Jets. Namath was insulted and guaranteed victory. Then he delivered, and the Jets won 16–7, costing a lot of bettors a lot of money, and making a lot for a bunch of others.

Pools

Your place of work may have a *pool* from week to week, in which everyone who wants to bets a dollar and picks every game against the point spread. Whoever has the most games right wins all the money entered. The tie-breaker is usually picking the score of the Monday night game.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

Fantasy leagues do not involve supermodels, but rather fantasy rosters. These are leagues for fans in which groups of "owners" draft offensive players and defensive units and then keep track of statistics. The owner who has the players with the best statistics (touchdowns, yards, and so on) wins. These leagues are a good way for fans to follow players not on the hometown team.

These pools can be fun, and you don't need to know a lot to make guesses. Football outcomes are not hard science. The ball is shaped weirdly, and anything can happen. Folks have been known to win pools based on theories such as *"I'd rather live in this city than that one,"* or *"I like the colors of this team's uniforms more than the color of the other team's uniforms."*

There are also pools at Super Bowl time. These can get complex and innovative. One of the most usual ones is when folks pick the final score. Another type has people picking the scores by quarter. These give fans like you an extra reason to watch the game.

900 Lines

On television, you'll see shows in which professional gamblers tell you their sure-fire way to win at betting football games. I'm a bit skeptical, but these guys are amusing. *"This is the deal of the century, and you've gotta call right now."* There is always a charge to make the call.

I've seen cats pick games on television. Horses, too. And dogs. I've seen games picked by fish who "decide" who they think is going to win by swimming through a hole labeled for a team. I figure, if that fish had a 900 line, it would get some people to think it was an expert, too.

If you need to gamble so much that you'll call a 900 line for advice, you may want to think about whether gambling is really having a good effect on your life. But then, I've never called a 900 line. What do I know?

The Least You Need to Know

- The collective bargaining agreement (CBA) is a union contract between the players and the League. The CBA has instituted a salary cap that allows each team to spend \$67.4 million per year on players' salaries.
- Television provides the biggest piece of the financial pie (NFL revenue). The NFL uses 62 percent of its revenues to pay players.
- Teams can be free agents just like players. Both move for the same reason—someone or some city is offering them more money to go there.
- NFL players can't gamble, but fans can.
- A point spread is the amount of points an oddsmaker in Las Vegas has determined that one team should beat another by.



Television and the Media: The Show About the Show

In This Chapter

- ▶ The show business of football
- ▶ The folks on TV
- ▶ The difference between local and national media

Some folks say the 1950s were the Golden Age of television. I say football is the Golden Event of television. The role of television is to entertain, and there is nothing more entertaining than the colorful clash that is football.

But, gosh, football is everywhere! It's not just on television. Look around. It's on this network, that network, this cable station, that magazine, the local newspaper, and talk radio. Everyone everywhere has something to say about the game. Even I (yes, shy old me) have been known to throw an opinion around from time to time. Television and football? Heck, just like Mom and apple pie.

This chapter is about the relationship of media to football and how television especially is a force bigger than any quarterback, coach, or game plan. This chapter covers the various characters on a broadcast and their jobs, the pregame and postgame shows, the print media, talk radio, and the changing relationship of players to the media. This chapter is just another part of the media about football. There's no escape, so you may as well enjoy it.

Made for Television

Imagine what it would be like to be a professional football player. That's television's role. It serves as your imagination. The camera is so intimate that it can take you

inside a player's world, which most people don't get to experience. It gives you the opportunity through pictures and sound to be able to hear the power and see the speed and sense all the things that make up the game: the intense hits, the leaping acrobatics, and the moves that defy physiology. Television is up close, immediate. You feel the emotions, the momentum swings, the ebb and flow of the game. And in between, you watch commercials.



Joe's Record Book

Fifty-six 30-second commercials air during every 60-minute football game.



Joe's Tips

Players are media savvy. My friend Chris Berman, who is known for making up nicknames that play on a player's real name, actually receives letters from players suggesting a good nickname for themselves. For instance (and this is fictitious), a player named Lionel Train may write suggesting he be called "Choo Choo." Everyone wants more notoriety.

And you stick around because you know that at the snap of the ball, 22 people will be clashing in a perfect moment of television. Football works on the screen because of what it is—a competitive battle of power, speed, and intelligence. The colors, motion, and athleticism really do work like poetry. The snap of the ball. It all starts. You should see it!

There's No Business Like Show Business

The hype of football is a full-time, year-round event. Even in April, there is the draft, a marathon session that occurs three months after the Super Bowl and four months before the beginning of the new season. And folks watch. As the season gets closer, the media likes to take you into the world of the football players. Who are these people? What is their personality? What makes them tick? Society in general is becoming more celebrity-oriented, and the NFL is no different. We in the media have a job, and that job is to make sure that the players who have been busting butt to make themselves stars actually become stars. They perform on the field. We let you meet them. The machine churns out stars.

When their acts and actions are exemplary, announcers bring light to it. If a guy makes a catch and the announcer says, "Let's look at that again because I want to show you how good a catch that really was," he has just given that player a higher profile. Soon, a fan turns to his friend and says, "Did you see what a great catch that receiver made?"

We in the media can influence phrases. For instance, in 1997, it was impossible to go very long without hearing the phrase, "Show me the money!" from the movie *Jerry Maguire*.

The Other Side of “Up”

Today, the media is in great competition and football players have to deal with it because that competition directly affects their lives. The cult of personality that surrounds superstar football players is a double-edged sword. The rewards of fame are great. But the machine that builds players into icons is equally happy to tell the world when they drive five miles over the speed limit. Everything is scrutinized. The essential rule of fame is, *“Don’t have a bad day.”*

For this reason, many players have become less cooperative with the media. They don’t need the media as much as players from the past did; they want their privacy. Just as the media wants more from the players, the players want to give them less. It used to be that players used the media in order to get their names known. Players wanted to become celebrities because they wanted endorsements to make more money. But players make so much money now that they’re more interested in maintaining their privacy. Many players tire of repetitive questions from the media.



Joe’s Tips

A stupid question isn’t always a stupid question. For instance, a reporter may ask an older player, who is an incredible physical specimen, what he had for breakfast. The player may wonder what his breakfast has to do with football. The reporter may just be wondering if his diet has anything to do with his longevity and physical shape. Sometimes stupid questions don’t seem as stupid when you stop and think about them.

Further, not all players understand the media or its role. Some players think the media is just there to serve them. And although, in large part, the media is there to make players stars, its job is also to inform people about the players, the teams, and the games. Sometimes, players like the information that the media shares with the public. Sometimes, players don’t like it. And that’s the truth.

The Pregame Show: Get Ready, Get Set ...

The hype peaks about an hour before the first games on Sunday. That’s when the pregame shows start. There are, at last count, four pregame shows on national television, and those don’t count all the local ones across the country. The idea of the pregame show is to get you ready to watch football—to get the fans information

about their favorite team, their favorite player, and other players and teams from across the country.

Pregame shows analyze the matchups, too: player versus player, team versus team. A wide receiver against a specific cornerback. The analysts on the show tell you why they think one player will have a good game. They back up their opinion with videotape. And then they let you draw your own conclusions.

The analysts can draw up the favorite play of a team or give fans a checklist of things to watch for during the game. The pregame show will probably include weather reports from around the country, and it will focus on any key injuries. The pregame show is the time for some of the best journalism in football. Reporters are given time to develop stories, and yet it is all put in the perspective of the immediacy of today's game.

Sure, I admit a bias here. I've worked on a pregame show, and I think it's great. But then, I like anytime anyone is talking about football. I especially like it when I get to talk about football. So pull up a stool. Let me tell you about today's game.

The Game Is On!

Televised football works because television makes you feel like you're there. You become so emotionally involved in watching these players, who are themselves emotionally involved, that you sometimes forget you're merely watching television.

Your man takes the kickoff, heads up the middle, and suddenly the wedge springs him loose at just the right moment as he heads up the sideline in a race with the other team's kicker. *C'mon*, this is better than *Wheel of Fortune*. Right up the sideline, legs churning—daring that little kicker to try to tackle him. How cool is this?

The announcer tells you "*He ... could ... go ... all ... the ... way!*" (Credit that to my good friend, Chris Berman.)



Joe's Record Book

One of the networks tried broadcasting a game with no announcers. It was generally regarded as unwatchable.

The Postgame Show: What Happened

The postgame show is not about personalities. It's about highlights and scores. Performances. The postgame show means it's time to wrap up with a quick analysis—"*Here is what happened*" and "*You've got to see this play.*"

Who Are Those Folks on TV?

Journalists, ex-athletes, and ex-coaches get together on all the shows I just described and talk football.

Each brings a different perspective, and the perspective changes from year to year. An ex-athlete can offer a new perspective as a member of the media.

I believe ex-athletes have a good perspective to add because we've been there. We know the tolerance an athlete has for questions. We know the ecstasy and the pain. Yet we are all different. One ex-player is not necessarily going to have the same opinion as another. We offer our insights. And you can agree or disagree. That's why football is so much fun. At the water cooler on Monday, you can turn to your friend and say, "Can you believe what Joe Theismann said yesterday?"

Play-by-Play: The Meat and Potatoes

A game broadcast usually has either two or three broadcasters, and one of them will be the *play-by-play broadcaster*. His job (it's almost always a man) is to describe the action. That's all. He tells you the situation (down and distance), keeps you apprised of the time, and mentions other key statistics that arise as the game goes on. He is supposed to do this in a conversational tone because the idea of football commentary is for it to feel like the announcers are in your living room, sharing their thoughts with you.

The Color Analysts: Why That Happened and Not Something Else

There are many factors that go into every play, and it's the color analyst's job to explain those factors. The *color analyst* is usually someone who was associated with the game as a player or a coach. I am a color analyst, and when I do the job, I think it's my role to help teach the game. The idea is to do it in a conversational, fun manner. Analysts also get to draw on a *telestrator* to demonstrate what just happened.

With or without a telestrator, analysts try to explain what happened and why. For instance, if a pass was just completed, the analyst examines it and quickly explains his take on what happened. Was it a good drop by the quarterback? Was it good blocking by the offensive line or a poor rush by the defensive line? Was there a good move by the wide receiver? Did he have his hands out, or did he catch the ball with his body? With every single pass, there is all that to analyze and more. The analyst helps the fan understand the action better.

A good color analyst has knowledge of the game, knowledge of the players, and the ability to communicate in a succinct manner. There are times when an analyst just has to shut up. I know when



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **telestrator** is a tool with which an announcer can draw right over the action on a replay. If a receiver runs a post pattern, for instance, the announcer can draw out the direction of the post pattern on the telestrator.

I've talked too much. Hey, it happens. When it does, I take a play or two off and let the action catch up. Unless there's a big play, I'll be quiet for a while. Sometimes color analysts say a lot by saying nothing.

Sideline Reporters: Eyewitness News

Sideline reporters take you behind the scenes, as close to the team as possible. They're called sideline reporters because they are physically closer to the game, usually on a team's sideline.

Although many cut-aways to sideline reporters are for trivial information, the sideline reporter serves an essential role in key situations. Every once in a while, something will happen that requires instantaneous information. It's during those times that the sideline reporter is crucial. If there is an injury, the sideline reporter can find out about it right away. If there is an argument between a coach and a player, the sideline reporter may even hear it. The sideline reporter is there for quick information. Usually, a broadcast will have a sideline reporter with each team.



Joe's Record Book

A typical NFL broadcast features between 15 and 21 cameras.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

A **slow-motion instant replay** is a video replay of game action that is slowed down so that every instant can be analyzed. A slow-motion instant replay can make football appear to have the grace of ballet—or the impact of a demolition derby.

The Camera Takes You There

Hey, I can talk all I want, but if you can't see what I see then you're not going to care. Television is pictures. You have to see the plays, and a network broadcast of an NFL game gives you many different camera angles.

The different camera angles allow the director to orchestrate the game like a concert, letting the action dictate which cameras are used. Games have rhythms, as television broadcasters are acutely aware. A cut-in with a *slow-motion instant replay* of sure-handed acrobatics in the midst of a giant hit can work like a violin solo. Just sit back and enjoy.

Another trick is to use a *reverse angle view*. Let's say the game camera is behind the home team's bench. A reverse angle view would show you the action from across the field behind the visiting team's bench. So, if you would normally see a running back running a sweep away from you, the reverse angle would show you the running back coming toward you. The new angle could show you how the linebacker pursued on the play in a way that the normal angle couldn't show. A reverse angle is special when it shows something different.

Newspapers and Magazines

What's better than the Monday sports page after your team wins? C'mon, how good is a winning Monday sports page? Big photographs and blaring headlines—it just doesn't get any better than that.

The hype of football is a round-the-clock, across-all-stages show, and the print media is part of it. People are interested. Football sells. Newspapers serve a different role than television. Newspapers try to be analytical, amusing us with twists of phrases about our favorite or least-favorite players. Columnists, who are paid to have opinions, are the juice of the sports pages. They love you when you're winning, but I think they might have more fun ripping you when you lose.

Talk Radio

Sports-talk radio has become huge. Just a few years ago, only the major markets had any sports talk. Now there is at least one sports-talk station, and sometimes more, in almost every city. It's a barstool conversation on the radio.

Fans call in and talk to a host or two. Often, fans vent frustrations about a team. Radio can be the most powerful medium for fans. It is so immediate that all your concentration is focused on the sound. Even if you're driving, talk radio hosts (like my friend Tony Bruno in Los Angeles) get you involved. Athletes know the power of talk radio, and many players have become more defensive. Some refuse to appear on these shows, and many more are afraid to say anything for risk of becoming fodder for someone who has to fill four hours of air time.

Callers also see talk radio as their chance in the sun. When they reach the hosts, they have the ear of the city, and they try to become celebrity callers with their wit and wisdom. Some callers at some stations inevitably do become celebrity callers.

The Internet

Through technology, fans have become more involved than ever. For instance, fans can now find information that only coaches used to see. There are good scouting reports available at a mouse click. There are sites that update information all day long. What didn't used to be news is now news simply because it is, well, new.

The Internet has greatly affected the flow of information about the league and the players. Now, fans from across the country are linked and each can find out about the other's team from the hometown media of any team.



Joe's Tips

I occasionally write a column called "Cup of Joe" for ESPN.com. My co-author, Brian Tarcy, writes a column called "What's Gonna Happen" for Sportstalk.com. We may be idiots, but we're Internet-ready idiots.

Even coaches can learn online about what is happening with another team. When Al Groh, coach of the Jets in the 2000 season, read in an online Chicago newspaper that Bears running back James Allen had a hand injury that required stitches, he told his team to go after the ball when he held it in that hand. Allen fumbled twice in that game. Information is power, and the hometown media always knows a lot about the hometown team—if you know how to pay attention.

The Internet has also broadened fan participation. Now, you can be an active member of the unofficial officiating crew by voting about a replay in an in-game poll. Games are even broadcast on your computer.

But the biggest change is clearly the flow of information. More is known and available about everything in the world of football. Fans are now more knowledgeable than ever. In fact, fans run some of the best Web sites. And players have gotten into the act as well. Jamal Anderson of the Atlanta Falcons chats quite frequently with fans on his own Web site.

Local and National

Your local media has a tendency to be *homers*, meaning that they root for their home team and show it in their reporting. Either they throw softball questions to the hometown heroes they interview or else they're too hardball in trying to show that they *aren't* homers. At the same time, local media is probably the most fun for a fan to read because these are the folks who think the way you do. They *do* want the team to win. They *do* think these guys are bums when they lose. And they zing great.

The national media, big magazines, and television try to deliver football to the entire country. Their role is different. There is no rooting interest.

Players find that the local media pays attention to them no matter what they do. Win or lose, the local folks are around. But the national media only notices if they're good. When a team is good, a player can actually get to the point of almost wishing they weren't quite so good so they wouldn't have to deal with so many members of the media.



Joe's Tips

A 9–7 team has probably the easiest time of any dealing with the media. A 9–7 team is successful enough to keep the wolves away, but not successful enough to raise anyone's expectations.

When a team is bad, the national media may only mention it, but the local media will be in a feeding frenzy. They have to write, and there is nothing to write about but this crummy team, this crummy quarterback, this crummy coach, this crummy stadium ...

At the same time, the national media can seem to brand an entire team to be troublemakers if one or two high-profile players gets in trouble. Never mind that 45 of 47 players have been model citizens. Sometimes, it only takes a couple of players to tarnish the reputation of a team.

The Least You Need to Know

- Football is a great television event in which a play-by-play broadcaster describes the action, a color analyst tells you why it happened, and a sideline reporter brings you breaking news from the sideline.
- Different camera angles can give you different perspectives on the same play.
- Print media have a longer time to analyze things, and columnists are paid to spout opinions.
- While the local media devotes as much attention to a bad team as they would a good one, the national media focuses only on the really good teams.

Part 5

The Essentials of Fandom

This final part of the book is about your job as a fan. I know, it's really not a job. Yet cheering for some teams in some years can put a strain on your life in ways that only a bad boss can. But most teams and most games are nothing but pure joy.

Part 5 covers the fun of being a fan, starting with a look at different types of game gear—from officially licensed merchandise to homemade paraphernalia. This part also covers the joy of being a fan, including the art of tailgating and the fun of cheering for a team in a distant city. Finally, we'll look at rivalries, which are the essence of football—trying to beat that one team because ... well, just because.





Game Gear: What to Wear

In This Chapter

- ▶ The ritual of getting dressed
- ▶ Official gear versus homemade stuff
- ▶ Joe's top five fan outfits in no particular order

If you're a fan, you're a fan of *a particular team*. So if you're going to the game or to a party or club where people are going to watch the game, or even if you're just sitting in your living room, you can't help but be a fan of your team. You may, I suppose, wear work clothes if you have no choice (like, let's say, you left work to head directly to the game). Otherwise, you really have to wear clothes that somehow or other identify you with your team. You can even wear a tie—as long as the tie has your team's logo on it. But you have to go in uniform. It's not part of the NFL bylaws (and I hired a crack research team to check), but every good fan abides by it anyway because it's fun.

You've got a special shirt, jersey, hat, socks, earrings, bandana, jacket, something. It can be anything, but it's gotta be something. Every fan knows. Something with your team's colors and logo. Something lucky. It's gotta be something lucky because, after all, victory is in your hands. You dress right, your team wins. No question. No question at all.

And that's why you have to read this chapter, which teaches you how to dress to win even if, heaven forbid, your team happens to lose. You always want to look like a winner. This chapter will help.

Here I cover official game gear, like jerseys and hats and shirts and jackets, and the art of getting ready. I also cover the various logos in the NFL and why some change and why some will never change. And I finish by discussing the psychology (as if it needs to be analyzed) of taking off your shirt in Buffalo in mid-December, homemade outfits, and my top five original fan outfits in no particular order.



Joe's Record Book

Superstitions differ. I used to ride to games with Redskins defensive tackle Dave Butts. On the ride, he *needed* to drive over road kill. Inevitably, we would swerve and I would hear "thump, thump" as the tires rode over a dead animal. "Gonna be a good game," Dave would say. On the other hand, I only needed a banana split on Saturday night for luck.



Joe's Tips

If you find someone selling T-shirts from the trunk of a car, the chances are good that the stuff is not officially licensed NFL merchandise.

Getting Ready to Watch: The Ritual

You fans think that we players don't know what you go through. You think we're ignorant of your Sunday ritual, that we don't care and don't understand and don't believe, but that's only what you think. *I know*. It's the same for the players, only they're a little closer to the action.

This is like religion to some, like some sort of sacrament or trek up the mountain to the anointed land of NFL action. Sure, it may sound silly if you were talking about one of those *other* teams, but when it comes to *your* team, nothing is silly. There is a plan. Victory is in sight.

Superstitions live. Things must be done in order. There is no explaining it, it's just the way it has to be. Alarm goes off. Socks, underwear, pants, shirt, all in a neat pile. You pass the pile and get into the shower. Then you dress. It's a ritual, everything in the same order, left sock, then right, and on and on, feeling the momentum of the day riding on your every move. When your shoes are tied, your hat is on, and you've played the obligatory get-me-ready song of the day, you appear in public. *And you think we don't know. Oh, the things we know.*

Official Game Gear

The NFL licenses *stuff*. All sorts of stuff. Hats and jackets and jerseys and shirts and socks and more. But the best is the jersey—the real thing. You want to be part of the team. You have to feel like you are part of it. The NFL wants you to be part of it.

One sure way to do that is to wear the jersey of your favorite player. Put on that number and suddenly you're in there with him every time he carries the ball. If you have a number 22 Emmitt Smith Dallas Cowboys jersey, you bounce off tacklers when he does. You move between holes, spin around ends, and fall into the end zone right along with him. If you're wearing a number 2 Tim Couch Cleveland Browns jersey, you walk with a swagger because your man throws the ball better than anybody in history. That's you throwing for all those yards and touchdowns. Just look at the number on your chest!

Hats are cool, too. There is no other way to put it—hats are big business because every male and half the females in America seem to have a hat collection. The NFL understands this, and licenses companies to put out a number of different kinds of hats per year.

Players get it. The superstars, especially, understand. The ones whose jerseys you wear understand why you wear their number, and they feel pride carrying the ball for you. You're with them when they throw passes, catch passes, and sack the quarterback. They understand.

You want to be part of it. You want the players to see that you feel part of it, and the players never miss that. Players love to see fans in team jackets. The support, the *team* feeling is immense, and the connection of colors is very direct. It is pride—our colors.



Joe's Record Book

The NFL has licensed six companies to manufacture hats with NFL logos.



Joe's Record Book

The top five clubs in terms of sales of merchandise are:

1. Dallas Cowboys
2. Tennessee Titans
3. Green Bay Packers
4. Minnesota Vikings
5. St. Louis Rams

You want your team to be good enough so you can be proud to wear the jacket. Even if they aren't good enough, you wear it anyway because they were good enough once, and they will be again. So you wear it when you travel somewhere. Yes, you do. You wear your Bears jacket in Wisconsin or your Cowboys coat in Washington. You let people know who you are, where you're from, and what football team represents you. Da Bears? That's right, *da Bears*.

Merchandising—promoting the team through a variety of products—is a big part of the game. The NFL is a fashion show because the NFL moves merchandise. The NFL licenses its stuff (companies pay fees to the NFL for the right to manufacture and sell the stuff) to make sure that it gets its fair share. Industry newspapers have reported that the NFL moves \$3 billion of merchandise a year.

Logos and hats and color combinations are all researched. Certain colors (like black) always sell well. If you put black in a team uniform, you increase the chances of the merchandise being successful. Of course, the thing that sells merchandise more than anything is a winning team. Good teams are popular. Folks like to be associated with winning.

Some Logos Never Change, Some Do

How am I supposed to explain love? That's what fans feel when they see a sacred logo—and some of them have that ancient sacred feel, even though they're really not that old. Before 1950 or so, players wore leather helmets without any logo at all.



Joe's Record Book

Five teams have made major changes to their uniforms since 1987. Those teams are:

- Denver Broncos
- New England Patriots
- New York Jets
- Tampa Bay Buccaneers
- Atlanta Falcons

Several other teams have made minor changes.

Still, the logos from the older, traditional teams (two examples are the Chicago Bears and the Green Bay Packers) are things that just seem like they will never change, and hopefully they never will. Yet other logos (recently the Patriots and the Broncos) have changed. Success helps sell a logo. But sometimes, a new logo represents a turning point in the history of the organization. The New England Patriots changed logos the same year they changed owners and coaches. Their timing was good—the start of a new era. On the other hand, a change in logo could simply be a way to sell merchandise. After all, who wants to be caught in last year's logo?

Modern logos tend to have a “fast” back to signify motion. This means the part that faces toward the back has a curving swoopy back that narrows to a point. Hey, this is science. It's important to understand that this is *not* small business. This is *big*. *Very big*. How many people do you know who own merchandise from a sports team? Sports is business, and you, as a fan, are worth money.

Teams change their logos as a marketing tool. If you already have a hat of my team, you are not likely going to buy a new hat every six months. But if I change the logo and you still want to feel associated with my team, well guess what? I sell a lot of hats.

It's just business, and frankly, it's good business. Besides, some of these new logos look pretty good. A new logo gives a team a new identity, a fresh start. It's a symbolic move made by the owners. To the best of my knowledge, owners don't ask players if they should change logos—nor should they ask. They don't ask fans, either. But maybe they should.



Joe's Record Book

When a new logo or uniform is introduced, teams have a fashion show to introduce it. A player will usually be the model.

Protect Yourself Against the Elements

Unless your team plays in a dome, you'll have to give some thought to the weather. Hot weather requires sunglasses, sun screen, hats or visors, and cool, loose clothes. Cold weather requires layers of clothes and special attention to your extremities. Cover your feet and hands.

Do a little scouting. Which side of the field are you sitting on—the sunny side or the shady side? How do conditions differ between 1 P.M. games and 4 P.M. games? If you can, make sure you can see over the person in front of you. If you're short and somebody nicknamed “Stretch” is sitting in front of you, you may want to consider moving (good luck getting someone to trade with you).

Oh, and maybe I don't need to remind you, but be sure to drink plenty of (nonalcoholic) liquids, especially in warm weather. You don't want to become dehydrated.

Homemade Gear

True story: In 1983, a Cleveland Browns fan who transplanted to New England had no Browns gear for the upcoming Browns–Patriots game in New England. So he did what any enterprising fan would do—he went to the hardware store and bought a can of orange spray paint. He painted an old, white T-shirt, wrapped it around his head like a bandana, and went to the game. The Browns beat the Patriots 30–0 and this fan ran through the parking lot yelling, “Can you say zero?”

Incredibly, this idiot is still alive. He helped me write this book. He still has an orange forehead.

But what this story proves (besides the fact that everyone gets lucky once in life) is that you can have just as much fun in homemade gear as you can in the expensive stuff. Remember what I taught you throughout this entire book: Football is a head game. If you believe you’re having fun, well, you are!

Who Are These People?

Explaining the folks in the stands is as complex as explaining a 9-7-6 H-post swing (see Chapter 12, “Advanced Offensive Strategies: Like Rocket Science”). Perhaps it’s *more* complex. Everybody wears *something* team-related. That’s established. But sometimes that *something* is a blue “O” painted on a bare chest. Yeah, those folks who seem to show up at every cold weather game. There is never just one of them. They travel in packs. For example, our friend with the “O” on his chest could simply be the “O” in a pack that spells B-U-F-F-A-L-O B-I-L-L-S.



Joe’s Record Book

Jerry Glanville, when he was coach of the Atlanta Falcons in the 1980s, left tickets at the gate for Elvis Presley, in the hope that the King would use them. It was never determined if Elvis used them, but it is nice to know that Jerry kept the legend alive.

The guys without shirts. There are herds of them at every game. Wandering, howling, pretending to be warm. They must migrate every Sunday from chest-painting salons. We laugh. They laugh. We laugh more.

On an Arctic-cold day, you have to be insane to take your shirt off. But some folks do, and if they aren’t insane, they must have some excuse. My guess is they have a lot of antifreeze in their body. I would hope they have some excuse, because this is not a smart thing to do.

Who *are* these people? Many are just folks who want to get on TV. When Andy Warhol said that everyone would get 15 minutes of fame in America, I think he had NFL fans in mind. But I bet Andy understood that if you wear an “O” on your chest in December in Buffalo, a camera will probably find you. (See, this book includes football, zaniness, *and* the perspective of a dead icon from the world of modern art. What more

could you want? Elvis? Heck, Elvis goes to lots of games. Elvis imitators, many singing off-key, are just part of the festival that is NFL football.)

These people are more than Elvis imitators or nuts without shirts. *These people are you people—me, too.* They include us all. We're all fans, and we're all nuts in our own way because the one thing that we all have in common is our love of the game. Whether you wear an official jersey or something homemade, the experience is essentially the same.



Joe's Record Book

Airhorns are in every stadium. It seems there are always only two airhorns (no more, no less), as if there were a law that two and only two airhorns are allowed in any stadium. Whenever John Riggins ran the ball for the Washington Redskins, a fan would blow an airhorn. Every time. It was a moment. I'd take the snap, give John the hand-off, and hear the horn. It meshed beautifully.

Joe's Top Five Original Fan Outfits

I've told you my favorite players—those who I thought were the greatest of all time. Well, I've looked in the stands, too. And here are my favorite fan outfits.

- **The Hogettes.** The Hogettes are a group of a half-dozen or so large men who cheer for the Washington Redskins and identify with the offensive line, which was known as The Hogs (see Chapter 8, "The Offensive Line: They Called Mine 'The Hogs'"). These men, who I believe work at the Pentagon, wear dresses, flowered hats, and pig noses, and they smoke fat cigars. It gives me a sense of calm to know that these men in dresses and pig noses spend their days trying to preserve world peace.
- **The Dawg Pound.** The Dawgs of the Dawg Pound are a vivacious, untamed bunch. The Dawg Pound originated in the 1980s when defensive backs Hanford Dixon and Frank Minnifield barked at receivers after they broke up a pass. The fans joined in the barking, and soon dog masks began appearing in the end zone section of the old Cleveland Stadium. This became known as the Dawg Pound. The Dawg Pound is a mythical place that has been reconstructed in Cleveland with the rebirth of the Browns.

- **The insane cold-weather Bears Fans.** When it's zero degrees outside, five of them spell "BEARS" with their bare chests, one letter per chest. Now that's fan dedication.
- **Raiders fans.** They come with shoulder pads with spikes sticking out of them. And then, my favorite, Darth Raider—dressed like *Star Wars* villain Darth Vader except his face is silver and black and his helmet has the Raiders logo. Opposing players have compared playing in Oakland with playing in front of a bunch of angry prisoners. Nah, just Raiders' fans.
- **The Saints of New Orleans.** For years, the New Orleans Saints were so bad that some fans would show up with paper bags over their heads. It made a strong statement, and you couldn't help (unless you were on the Saints's team) but laugh. Now, it seems, Saints fans can put the bags away for a while. The future looks promising.

The Least You Need to Know

- If you think that your every action on Sunday morning directly affects the way your team plays on Sunday afternoon, you should know that it's true. Just kidding. But it's still fun to be superstitious.
- Football is a fashion show, and logos are designed to sell.
- You can make your own outfit and have lots of fun.
- The guys who take their shirts off at games travel in packs and often end up on TV.



The Joy of Being a Fan

In This Chapter

- Tailgating requires a plan
- Fans from other cities may cross your path
- A story that tells you what you mean to players

One year when I played, we went on a losing streak, and the fans who once loved the Redskins seemed not to like us as much. One Sunday, after we had lost to the Philadelphia Eagles, I pulled into a full-service gas station on my way home from the stadium. It was raining. I wasn't in a good mood, but I was in public so I had to be friendly. The gas station attendant came up to the window. He immediately recognized me. "Hey, you're Joe Theismann."

"Yes, I am."

"Hey, you guys are doing pretty bad these days."

"Yes, we are."

"Didn't you guys lose to the Eagles today?"

"Yes."

"Pump your own gas," he said, and he walked away.

That's the passion of the fans that I have come to respect. Should fans diss players? No, of course not. But that guy at the gas station reminded me in a very personal way that my work had an emotional effect on people's lives. You folks, you fans, have a great time watching and cheering. It really is joy.

That's what this chapter is about—the joy of being a fan, from the tailgating to the challenge of rooting for your hometown team from a foreign city. It also covers how to greet fans of visiting teams, and it features a story about how much fans really matter to the players.

Tailgating Is a Profession, a Craft, and an Art

Show me the food. Show me the beverages. Show me the back of your car and a hibachi grill, and then tell me what you think of that other team's quarterback. As any football fan knows, the finest American dining can only be found in the fall in parking lots of football stadiums across the country. Talk about atmosphere.

Close your eyes for a moment. I want you to smell the rest of this chapter. Hot Italian sausage sizzling on a grill. In New England, Portuguese sausage, called *chorico* (delicious, spicy, and reddish), is served on Portuguese bread with hot mustard and crisp garden vegetables, alongside some clam chowder. You can smell the ribs cooking within hundreds of miles of Chicago's Soldier Field, and bratwurst in Green Bay was ordained by ancient prophecies (someone once told me this), sort of like steak in Dallas. But this is America, and America is the land of the cheeseburger. In every stadium parking lot, there are cheeseburgers.

It's almost a science, this party in the parking lot. First of all, the choice of food is obviously a function of region. Although there is the common bond of the humble cheeseburger, each parking lot is different. That's the beauty of America and football.



Joe's Tips

Cheeseburgers are a delicacy served from coast to coast, from border to border, and if you aren't sure what's the right thing to cook, you can hardly ever go wrong cooking cheeseburgers. But, if you brought along a vegetarian, you should probably plan an alternate to cheeseburgers. See, always be ready to call an audible.

It is no coincidence that the ritual of football is associated with Sunday afternoon. Sunday, after all, is a religious day. I don't mean to be disrespectful; I do know that it's not the same. But football is, in many respects, to a lot of people, a sort of religious experience. It is spiritual. It is emotional. It is pure.

And there is ritual. A ritual in the parking lot, where you had better be set up by a certain time. Everything must happen in a certain order. Your team's performance is a function of so many things—and you cannot at all discount the parking lot performance of any random group of fans. Hey, who's to say that's not what determines which way the ball bounces? It's gotta be something. I say, it's much safer to stick to your favorite beverage, your favorite food, your favorite people, your favorite jersey, and hope that nothing you did will cause a voodoo-like pain in a certain quarterback's arm. I'm not saying this happens, it's just that I remember a few games when ... (I'm just kidding!)

Even if there is nothing to this superstition stuff (I didn't say that), your friends will blame you if you commit any sin of not sticking with tradition and the team loses. You don't have to really believe in superstition. You can blame someone for the loss just for the fun of it. If you want to be around football fans, you don't mess with luck. You just don't—'cause there's *something* to it.

Consumption

I love walking through it. I usually get to a game two hours before broadcast and park in a place where I can walk through the crowd. I love watching the fathers and sons, the guys out throwing the ball around. I love watching them become players from the NFL. You hear the conversation. The ball goes through the air, "Oh, Jerry Rice! What a great catch." And then, *foomp*, they run into a fender. Just like going over the middle, only in the NFL that fender has an attitude.

A tailgate party is Americana, with the same glow as the Ferris wheel at the state fair. It shines. The whole experience is terrific. There are guys smoking cigars, women smoking cigars, and women with earrings shaped like little football helmets. The person in the parking lot, whom you've never met and whom you will probably never see again after today, becomes your best friend for the next hour and a half.

And then there are the poor lounge chairs. Oh man. We've all seen them. There's this guy—this big guy—squeezed into this poor little lounge chair. And you feel so sorry for the darn thing as it seems to strain (giving, yes, 110 percent) to hold together and keep this guy comfortable. And is this guy comfortable? Oh, man. He is leaned back, and his shirt is so small we all see his belly button, upon which rests a can of beer. In his mouth is a fat, smoking cigar, and in one hand is a dripping cheeseburger. On his head is a hat of his team—and your team. Your new friend. "Sure," you say, "I'll have a cheeseburger." You look down at the lounge chair. "But don't get up. I'll get it myself."

Music resonates over the aroma of thousands of barbecues. Footballs fly. There is loud laughter, and



Joe's Tips

Tailgating is pure when it is clean. Be sure to put out your barbecue, throw out your trash, and be careful with your glass containers. After all, part of keeping the stadium parking lot clean is keeping America beautiful. And what's a better part of America than a parking lot at a football stadium. It's *your* parking lot. Show some pride and consideration.



Joe's Tips

Be alert to weather reports and have a plan as to how to eat if you can't cook in rain. Also be ready with wet-weather gear or whatever you may need. Again, always be ready to call an audible.

inevitably some player's name comes up preceded by one of those adjectives that your Mom told you never to use. You know, *that* quarterback. Conversations roll, and I love to listen. This game coming up, and that matchup, and I swear half of you people could be on television. Well, maybe not half. But you all know what you're talking about, and I love to listen. Even if you *don't* know what you're talking about, I still love to listen. It's football. Who doesn't like talking football?

But at its essence, a tailgate party is a festival of consumption. How much can you consume before the game? This may not be healthy, but it is what I have observed. And if this one day of feasting has a health effect, well, who am I to say? I say happiness has a health effect, too. Hey, cheers! Hope your team wins.

Greeting Fans from a Foreign City

Oh, this is fun. Someone wearing the other team's jacket comes into *your* parking lot. Oh, this is too much fun. C'mon, this almost isn't fair. Actually, it *isn't* fair. That's the beauty. These folks come wandering into your stadium, your city, your parking lot, your piece of turf in the world, and they have the nerve to wear the jacket of the opposing team. Who are these people? They should go back to ... wherever.

These relationships always change. It takes three hours, but by the end of the game someone has the upper hand. So you go into it knowing that even though the numbers are behind you now (70,000 of you to a few hundred of them), the *other* numbers could end up changing things—those numbers being the score and other game statistics.



Joe's Tips

If an opposing fan becomes obnoxious in your stadium, politely ask him or her to calm down. Point out to the person the circumstance that they really are in. Show the person the wisdom of mathematics. But if the person insists on being obnoxious, don't do the obvious.

But still—70,000 to a few hundred is awfully tempting. So you do a bit of ribbing. "*You're not really going to wear that jacket here, are you?*"

How to Visit Another City

You grew up here, you landed a job there. You like living *there*, but you cheer for *here's* team. *Here's* team is visiting *there*. Oh boy.

So how do you get tickets to an away game? There are usually a limited number of tickets available to a visiting team. The best thing to do is to call your local team's ticket office to find out how you can get them.

Try walking into a stadium of fans wearing the colors of the wrong team, and you will understand courage. Okay, I exaggerate—but not too much. To go into another stadium and cheer for your team takes a bit of moxie. It takes guts to declare, in the face of adversity, that you like a certain team, and you don't care what

these local yokels from *around here* think. If they knew what you knew, if they grew up where you grew up, they'd understand. But they don't. Hey, their loss.

We're Number One!

It's like being in the sea, the sea of fans. When you and everyone around you is cheering in unison. You all are wearing essentially the same colors, you grew up in towns and cities in the vicinity of this stadium, and you live and work here now. You feel a sort of football karma. "*Look at us. Ha! Loooooook at usssssssss.*"

And then the music starts. That thumpin', bumpin', bring-it-on-home kinda stuff that gets you clapping and gets you screaming in the aisles. "C'mon!" (You yell the quarterback's name.) "You bum!" (You mean this in the nicest possible way because you really do think this guy is great and you'll be the very first to say so as soon as the guy throws a darn touchdown pass.) "How come they pay you all that money, anyway?" (You've gotta say that because fans these days start all complaints with the subject of money.)

When you shout something out, everyone around you laughs because they all were thinking the same thing. How come they pay that guy all that money? And then, that very play, that guy does a deep drop and finds that your favorite wide receiver has beaten the cornerback by one step on a post route. And the pass is perfect. And maybe, for a moment, you've experienced heaven. Perfect fan bliss. "Yeah, that's my guy!" you yell as you high-five the entire row behind you. "Heckuva throw, man! I knew you could do it! Yeeeeeeeeeeeah!" You raise your arms like Rocky Balboa. And the entire sea of fans does the same thing. It is a moment of Zen.

Do Fans Matter? Consider This Story

In the early 1990s, John Riggins and I were inducted into the *Ring of Honor* in RFK stadium in Washington. We were teammates on the Redskins; we won the Super Bowl together.

The game was against the Philadelphia Eagles. John and I had both been retired for about five years, so this was a planned halftime event. I went



Joe's Tips

Don't wear all your gear at first if you're in a foreign city. Start with just your hat and move on from there. No need to be obnoxious. Let the score dictate your behavior.



Joe's Gridiron Talk

The **Ring of Honor** is an area inside most stadiums in which certain players from the past are honored. This recognizes a player for having reached a certain level of accomplishment for that team.

in a suit and tie, and I was brought to the 50-yard line. I was standing there, full of anticipation, waiting to be honored. But I looked around and John was nowhere—nowhere to be seen.

All of a sudden, out by the Redskins tunnel, you could hear a few fans begin to clap and cheer. And then, like a conquering hero through the streets of Paris, John Riggins ran onto the field in full battle regalia. He was in all of his pads and his 44 jersey, with his helmet under his arm.

The place went crazy. I mean bonkers. I hadn't heard that kind of cheering there in, heck, five years. It was nuts. John ran out into this mass hysteria and he smiled. Yes, he smiled.

He stood next to me and I had to ask, "John, why?"

And he said, "Joe, I needed to hear it one more time."

You want to know if you matter? Yes, you do.

The Least You Need to Know

- You're always safe cooking cheeseburgers when tailgating, but regional fare makes it even better.
- If you exercise every day of the week for five years, you can justify one tailgate party. But then, happiness is a healthy thing. You decide on limits. Have fun.
- Fans of opposing teams visiting your stadium are fools. On the other hand, if you visit a foreign stadium, you have great courage.
- Players appreciate fans. You have no idea how much.



Rivalries: The Essence of It All

In This Chapter

- Rivalries are macho, neighborhood things
- Rivalries are about success
- Only George Allen could create a rivalry

Rivalries are about hate, of course—in the friendliest sense of the word. There is one team that you have to beat, and you would *hate it* if you didn't beat them. You cheer for your team and somehow or other there is this one other team that just about makes you nuts wanting to beat them. Rivalries are about good versus evil, and your team is good. Your team wears those great colors, and it has the coolest insignia ever invented. And it's incredible how, of all the teams in all the world, they put *your* team in *your* hometown. C'mon. What are the odds?

I don't know how to say this except to tell the truth. Not all of you know what a real rivalry is. It's something special, and not every team in the NFL is good enough or has a rich enough history against one other franchise to have developed a rivalry. But when rivalries are good, they are downright bloody—in the nicest sense of the word. What can I say? The word “fan” is a root of the word *fanatic*. Think about the word *fanatic*, and you will understand the essence of rivalry. I sure would *hate it* if we lost to *that team*.

This final chapter is about the essence of the game, where all the clawing and scratching and fighting and pushing 'til you can't breathe comes to a summit—when you play *that team*. I cover the various types of rivalries—those based on geography, those based on success, and those based on both. I explain how George Allen invented a rivalry and list my five favorite rivalries in no particular order.

You and Me, Outside—Right Now!

“Look, she’s mine! Stay away, just stay the [expletive deleted—hey, I learned this phrase living in Washington] away!”

See, that’s a rivalry. Two guys in the same hometown chasing the same girl. A rivalry is bitter, angry, and full of boasts and vengeful thoughts. It’s a street fight between two thugs who are usually (but not always) from the same neighborhood. A rivalry is when somebody says, “*You and me outside, now!*”

And the other guy says, “*I can’t wait.*”



Joe’s Record Book

After the New England Patriots beat the Miami Dolphins in New England in 1996, a Miami fan stood over a peculiar barbecue in the parking lot. “See, I hate the Patriots like he hates the Dolphins,” he explained. The Miami fan pointed to his friend, wearing Patriots paraphernalia. “I lost the bet.” He looked down. “That’s my hat. I had to burn my hat.”

Anytime, Anywhere

If you put tickets on sale right now for a game between the Green Bay Packers and the Chicago Bears to take place say, 25 years from now, it would sell out in a heartbeat. I’m convinced of it. If someone will get me a ticket right now for that game, I’ll be there, too. C’mon. Bears–Packers, Packers–Bears. Listen, that’s something to live for, let me tell you! Or how about a Cowboys–Redskins game. Oh, baby! They really don’t get any better than that.

Sure, I’m an old Redskin. No, I didn’t like the Cowboys. But really, who could? Who would? C’mon, the Cowboys? Yeah, *right*. Well, maybe a *little*. *Now*.

Rivalries are fun because you can get riled in half a second, just thinking of the other team. Bring ‘em on ... anytime, anywhere.

The Toughest Guy in the Neighborhood

It’s often a neighborhood thing. Green Bay and Chicago—same neighborhood. Cleveland and Pittsburgh—two Midwest factory towns. When the other team is from the same part of the country as you, you feel something extra when you beat them. It sort of says, “*We rule around here.*”

Playing a geographic rival from within your same division can be like facing Armageddon twice a year. It’s a matter of municipal *chutzpah*, mutual respect. Which city is better? Why, ours of course. So we rally around the flag of our football team, and we brace for every confrontation with *that other* team, from *that other* city that is (in our quiet, reflective moments we admit) a lot like us. Egads! It’s true. They *are* like us. That’s why we want to beat them more than anyone else.

When the terrain looks pretty much the same in your city and my city, but there is just enough cultural difference to make us each a bit condescending toward the other (in a playful way, of course), that's when you get a good regional rivalry. There must be a long history of competing for the same prize, and there must be epic games and profound moments in that history. If all of those ingredients are present, the rivalry will flourish even when most real meaning (like playoff hopes) has been washed from the game. Even if one team is bad, there are still two games that mean a lot to both the good and bad team in a rivalry.

The only problem with all rivalries now is, once again, free agency. Franchise free agency has, in effect, killed a great rivalry between the Pittsburgh Steelers and Cleveland Browns. But free agency as a whole, for players, makes fans identify with teams a little less. It even hurts in identifying the villains. Heck, last year's villain from the other team could be this year's wide receiver on your team.

In 1997, defensive tackle Neal Smith, longtime star for the Kansas City Chiefs, signed a contract to play with the Chiefs' division rival, the Denver Broncos. It even happens with coaches, as New England's coach, Bill Parcells, who brought the Patriots to Super Bowl XXXI in 1997, signed a contract to coach the New York Jets, a division rival of the Patriots. In fact, Parcells formerly coached the cross-town team in New York, the Giants, to two Super Bowl championships. The only thing you can root for is *this year*.

A Good Way to Start a Rivalry Is to Meet in the Playoffs

You don't start a rivalry with some team that stinks. A 3–13 team isn't scaring anybody. Beating them doesn't get you a prize. Who cares? If you can almost beat someone or they can almost beat you, that's when it's good. If you stink and they stink and your game is a comedy of errors, there's not much chance for you to get fired up about wanting to beat this team. But if there is a history



Joe's Record Book

In 1995, when the Cleveland Browns announced that the franchise was moving to Baltimore, Browns fans traveled to Pittsburgh for one final Steelers–Browns game. Steelers fans felt sorry for their Cleveland rivals, so they baptized the Browns fans as Steeler fans until Cleveland got a new team. They were baptized with Iron City Beer. (I couldn't make this stuff up.)



Joe's Record Book

The Green Bay Packers have been playing the Chicago Bears since 1921, when the Bears were known as the Chicago Staleys. The Bears lead the series 81–65–6.

of playing each other when a season is on the line, and, better yet, the season *is* on the line, there's a good chance you aren't going to like the team you're playing. Because if they beat you, you go home, and you'll remember that.



Joe's Record Book

In the 1990s, the Dallas Cowboys and the San Francisco 49ers were engaged in a rivalry for supremacy of the NFC (and thus, the NFL since the NFC won 14 straight Super Bowls). Then, the Green Bay Packers joined the duo in a battle for supremacy of the NFC. And for a while, the rivalry was really a *trivalry*.

Thus, the next time you play you'll want your team to put a hurt on them even more. See, rivalries occur when you're good and they're good and *winning matters*. It has to have impact in order for the rivalry to flourish. The game doesn't always have to matter in the season for it to matter as a rivalry game. But it has to matter sometimes, or it won't matter at all. Got it?

In the 1970s, the Pittsburgh Steelers, whose natural rival was the Cleveland Browns, acquired another rival when Bum Phillips built a powerhouse team in Houston. Coach Phillips used the power running of fullback Earl Campbell to try to take on the Steelers. Unfortunately for Phillips, he was right when he declared, "The road to the Super Bowl goes through Pittsburgh." The Oilers never could quite beat the Steelers, who went on to win four Super Bowls. The Oilers never made it past a certain stop on the road. And that's how a rivalry was built. It's not as strong now as it used to be, but it has been replaced by other competitive rivalries.

The Braggin' Bowls

Maybe nobody else in the country cares. There's a bunch of games every week. Who's going to care about your little rivalry when they're not involved? You will, and so will the folks cheering for that other team. Yes, that's right. They care as much as you do. They see it as you see it, which is as a battle of honor. A neighborhood thing, most likely, or a battle for supremacy, or—best-case scenario—a neighborhood thing that turns into a battle for supremacy.

When it's Joe Frazier against Muhammed Ali, both claiming with great legitimacy to be the best in the world, the contest itself becomes a tale for the ages. Fans remember stories. Athletes remember stories. Oh heavens, do we remember.

How to Create a Rivalry

My first NFL coach, George Allen, was a master at all things. He was, in fact, a magician who could do things that shouldn't be possible. His career accomplishments are many, and much has been made of how good a coach he was. But there is another part to George that not many know. He personally created the rivalry between the Dallas Cowboys and the Washington Redskins.

George coached the Redskins from 1971 to 1978. His first couple years there, he knew that he had a good football team. He also knew that the Cowboys were a good football team. So, being a master at public relations, George decided to spice up the NFL.

He asked certain players to incite other certain players. Specifically, he asked my teammates (who will remain nameless) to call Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach names (I won't tell you those either, in fairness). Well, the idea was to get Roger ticked off. It worked, and some Cowboys began calling names back, and well, people were suddenly *very interested* in the game between the Redskins and Cowboys. And every year this continued, and George built the myth right then and there. It was fun to be a part of.

I never participated. Well, not knowingly, although George told me that one year I caused a bit of a stir. I guess he was right. You see, one year, we were beating the Cowboys 9–3 with only seconds left on the clock. We had the ball on our own two-yard line. George told me to take the snap from center, run into the end zone, let the clock run out, and then go out of the end zone. The idea was to let the clock run out, go out of the end zone, give up a safety, and the Cowboys wouldn't get the ball back. Thus, we would win 9–5. Simple. Right? Sure, Einstein.

I backpeddled into the end zone. I was standing in the end zone watching the clock when it hit :00. Zero. No more time. The game was over. I was ecstatic. I raised my hands. We had won. Except ...

Except, the game *wasn't* over. The game doesn't end until the final play is over, even if the clock is at zero. I hadn't run out of the end zone. It was a live ball, and I was a live target. The Cowboys thought I was taunting them. Nobody was too pleased by my display, but somebody sure wanted to make me fumble. I mean, when I was hit, I knew for absolute certain that they wanted me to drop the ball. But I held on, and we still won, 9–5. But wow.

George came up to me afterward and asked, "Why did you do that?"

"I made a mistake, Coach. I thought the game was over."

"Oh, man. Now how am I gonna explain that."

And the rivalry grew some more.



Joe's Tips

Watch the newspapers for what your rival's players say about your team. Newspaper quotes are often used as motivation.

Joe's Top Five Rivalries

I love rivalries. I love when two teams hate each other. The more they despise each other, the more I like to watch. Here are my five favorite rivalries, in no particular order:

- **Washington–Dallas.** Credit for this rivalry goes to George Allen, as I just mentioned, who created it from thin air with a few well-placed comments from a few of his players. It thrived because both teams were good for a long time.
- **Kansas City–Oakland.** A nongeographical rivalry that began in the old American Football League, these were the first two AFL teams to go to the Super Bowl, and for many years they battled for AFL or AFC supremacy.
- **Green Bay–Chicago.** A rivalry for the ages that began in the era of Curley Lambeau in Green Bay and George Halas in Chicago. This is a cold-weather rivalry built on the frozen tundra and by a wind off the lake. Brrrrrr.
- **Cleveland–Pittsburgh.** Two blue-collar union towns near the birthplace of professional football have battled in rancor for years. Now, the area is affectionately called *the Rust Belt*, and the fans' dedication is industrial strength. There have been many epic battles between these two teams.
- **Baltimore–Tennessee.** These are two rugged football teams that like to run the ball and play great defense. And they both win a lot.

The Least You Need to Know

- There is nothing more fun than beating your rival, just because.
- Most rivalries are based on geography because it's often more fun to go after someone just like you.
- Some rivalries are based purely on the success of both teams. If two teams are good and meet in a series of meaningful games, a rivalry can soon develop.
- The Redskins–Cowboys rivalry was created single-handedly by George Allen—and his legacy lives on.



Gridiron Talk Glossary

beaver When Pete Carroll was the defensive coordinator of the New York Jets, a stuffed beaver was given to the player who made a play that led to a fumble. The beaver, described by many as “the hardest-working animal in the animal kingdom,” symbolized a great play. Despite playing for millions of dollars, players took great pride in having possession of the beaver for a week.

blitz adjustment A blitz adjustment is an automatic decision a quarterback must make when he sees a blitz coming from a certain area. The blitz adjustment requires the quarterback to go to the hot receiver.

blitzing The idea of blitzing (bringing more than five defensive players on a rush at the quarterback) is to dictate the tempo of the play. Blitzing is aggressive. It is, quite simply, an attack mode.

blue-chip player One who is considered by scouts to be a player who cannot miss becoming a starter in the league, if not a superstar.

bomb A bomb is one of the most explosive plays in football. A bomb is a long pass, and it can be an unparalleled work of sports art.

capologist The person on an NFL team who is in charge of managing the salary cap. This person is a math whiz who helps the team figure what it can spend on players. Every team knows that one player could make a difference. In the 2000s, the capologist is as important as the general manager or coach.

check-with-me When the quarterback gets in the huddle and calls, “Check with me,” he’s saying, “I’m not going to call a play now. I’ll call it at the line of scrimmage.” He sets the formation, and then when he gets to the line of scrimmage, he looks at the defense and calls the play.

clearing it out What a speed guy is often asked to do. This means he is asked to take off down the field in an attempt to get open for a long pass. Even if he doesn’t

get open, he clears out some defensive players from where a shorter pass or run might go. This is also called *stretching the defense* or *stretching the field*.

collective bargaining agreement (CBA) The way the NFL splits the revenue pie is with a collective bargaining agreement, which is essentially a contract between the league and the players that gives the players a certain amount of the revenue from the game.

color commentator An announcer on a television broadcast of a game who offers expert analysis of the action on the field. Color commentators are often ex-coaches or ex-players.

cornerback A defensive player whose job is primarily to cover receivers and prevent them from catching passes.

defensive line The big guys facing the offensive line. Their job is to stop the run, get the quarterback, and occupy offensive linemen so that linebackers can make plays.

double response When an offensive lineman has a double response, he is responsible for a linebacker in front of him and off the ball and also for an outside linebacker to that side. Normally, only one linebacker will rush. The question for the offensive lineman is, which one? He first checks the man in front of him, then checks the outside rusher. And he'd better do it fast.

draft How college players are picked for the pros. Every year in the spring, all 31 teams take turns picking players at the annual draft. The worst team from the previous year picks first. The best team, the Super Bowl winner, picks last.

dummy audibles Signals called by the quarterback at the line of scrimmage that sound like an audible but are really meaningless. The idea is to not let the other team know what you're using as your audible signal, so you call a number of signals that are known by your team to be meaningless. Just more head games.

end zone The 10-yard area at the end of the field that teams try to reach. You score touchdowns by getting the ball into the end zone.

fair catch When a punt returner signals for a fair catch, he waves an arm over his head. When he does this it means he plans to catch the ball and promises not to advance it. When he does this, the punting team is not allowed to hit him or interfere with his ability to catch the ball.

field goal A kick from the field of play that is worth three points. The ball is snapped back seven yards to a player who kneels waiting for it. That player places the ball, pointy end down, on the ground while holding the other pointy end with a finger. The kicker kicks the ball. If it goes through the goal posts, the kicker's team gets three points. Field goals are usually kicked on fourth down.

first down Occurs with change of possession of the ball, or when a team moves forward 10 yards from where it began. A team is then given four more plays to move

forward another 10 yards. If it does not do so (each play is numbered consecutively) in four downs, the other team is given the ball, and it becomes first down for them.

flanker A receiver who usually lines up on the side with the tight end, one yard behind the line of scrimmage.

40 time How long it takes a player to run 40 yards. It is the standard measurement of speed in football. It also seems to be the distance most guys run on any given play because everything is run in short bursts. The fastest times are now about 4.1 seconds; 4.5 is average for the NFL, and 5.2 is average for big linemen.

franchise player A player the team designates as its most important player. Teams only get one slot for a franchise player, and they can choose either of two designations. An “exclusive” franchise player cannot sign with another club. An exclusive franchise player must be offered a minimum of the top five salaries at his position as of April 14, or 120 percent of his previous salary—whichever is greater. If, however, a player is only offered a minimum of the top five salaries *from last season*, he is a franchise player and can negotiate with other clubs. If he receives a higher offer, the old club can match the offer or it can receive two first-round draft choices as compensation.

front side The direction the ball carrier runs to start the play. The *back side* is opposite of where he is going.

goal posts The goal posts are the bar-like contraptions at each end of the field. The ball must be kicked over and through the goal posts for extra points and field goals. The goal post consists of a base pole; a *crossbar*, which is the bar perpendicular to the ground that the ball must travel over; and an upright pole on either side of the crossbar, which together are called *uprights*. A successful kick goes over the crossbar and through the uprights.

hands team Includes the guys who normally handle the ball—wide receivers, running backs, and defensive backs. The most important skill for both teams in an on-side kick is the ability to grab and hold on to the ball.

hang time The amount of time a ball is in the air during a punt. It is the time from when the ball leaves the punter’s foot until it lands on the ground or in the returner’s arms. If you have great hang time (4.0 seconds), the chances of someone returning a punt very far aren’t good.

hard count When the quarterback yells a signal louder than the other signals he yells in an attempt to fool the defense into thinking the play is beginning. The idea is to get the defense to jump offsides, which is a penalty, since the defense cannot cross the line of scrimmage before the play begins.

hashmarks The lines running along each side of the center of the field signifying one yard on the field. After each play, the ball is always placed between the hashmarks as the starting point for the next play.

head slap A head slap is a move that's no longer allowed, where one player slaps or bangs around the head of another player. Deacon Jones, who played for the Los Angeles Rams in the 1960s, used it a lot. A lot of old offensive linemen still have headaches from Deacon. Imagine putting a helmet on and having somebody take a baseball bat and bang it upside your head about a dozen times. You just played against Deacon Jones. Ouch.

Heidi Game The *Heidi* Game took place on November 17, 1968. The New York Jets were leading the Oakland Raiders 32–29 with 50 seconds to go when the time became 7 P.M. NBC put on the scheduled children's movie, *Heidi*, right on time. In the remaining 50 seconds, the Raiders scored two touchdowns. But no one saw it because *Heidi* was on TV.

homefield advantage What teams have when they play their games in their city. Teams playing before hometown fans win more often.

hot receiver The receiver who is supposed to get the ball when the defense is blitzing. As soon as the receiver realizes he is hot, he must turn and look for the ball because the quarterback will have limited time to get it to him. There are different hot receivers for different blitzes.

huddle The meeting on the field that is held by the 11 players before the play begins. On offense, the huddle is run by the quarterback. Huddles can be set up many ways, in a semi-circle or perhaps with the quarterback facing all of his teammates. Most quarterbacks like to have the huddle so they are facing forward to make it easier to visualize the play.

hurry-up offense An offense teams usually use with two minutes to go in the half. Almost all plays are passing plays designed to get as much yardage as possible and still stop the clock by going out of bounds. Short passes to the sidelines work best. Runs, because the clock continues to tick, are not used often in the hurry-up offense.

I formation In the I formation, so called because it looks like an I, the quarterback is behind the center and the running backs are in a line behind the quarterback.

immaculate reception The immaculate reception occurred at the end of the first playoff game that the 1970s Steelers team ever won. The Steelers were losing to the Oakland Raiders by one point with five seconds to play. Steelers quarterback Terry Bradshaw threw a pass that bounced off of a Raider into the outstretched fingertips of running back Franco Harris. Harris ran the ball in for a touchdown.

inadvertent whistle When an official blows a whistle by mistake. When this happens, the play stops. Whatever happens after the whistle is insignificant.

interception An interception is a pass that is stolen by the defense.

interference When a defender hits a receiver as the ball is on its way to him. It's an automatic first down at the point of the penalty.

jumper A linebacker who starts a few yards back from the LOS and tries to time his leap in the air to coincide with the leap of the running back. Short yardage plays often come down to which player, the running back or the jumper, wins the collision.

linebackers The best athletes on the team. They line up a few yards behind the defensive line and do everything on defense: get the quarterback, stop the run, and cover receivers.

long arm The arm of the defensive player that is closest to the quarterback and farthest away from the receiver. In a jump, because of angles, that hand should be able to rise a little higher than the short arm, the hand nearer the receiver. The long arm is normally the one used to knock the ball away.

luxury suite An enclosed room with a glass front that is inside many stadiums. These are usually rented to corporations, and are located in some of the prime areas of stadiums. They are rented for tens of thousands of dollars or more per year.

Mr. Irrelevant A title given to the last player taken in the draft each year. That player is given a trip to Disneyland and a parade for the honor of being the last pick.

neutral zone The area between the offensive and defensive lines. It is the length of the ball in width. No player except the center may enter the neutral zone until the ball is snapped.

offensive interference Occurs when the receiver hits the defender in an effort to keep him from intercepting the pass. It is a 10-yard penalty against the offense.

offensive line A human wall of five large men between the quarterback and the defense. They block the defense in order to create holes for the running backs to run through or a pocket for the quarterback to pass from.

officials The guys in the striped shirts who control the chaos. They judge the game and their decision is law.

open side The open side and closed side of a formation are directly related to the placement of the tight end. The open side is the side without the tight end. The closed side has the tight end.

over the crossbar and between the uprights A ball kicked over the crossbar and between the uprights is worth points (the number depends on the situation—see Chapter 3, “You Get Six Points to Do What?”). If the kick is *wide left*, it flew to the left of the left upright. *Wide right* means it went to the right of the right upright. If a kick is short, it didn’t make it over the crossbar.

personal protector On the kickoff, the personal protector is a player who runs right in front of the return man and throws what is hoped to be a key block to bust the return man loose for a long run. The return man follows the personal protector and reads his block as he plans his cuts. When a team is punting, the personal protector lines up between the punter and line, acting as a last line of defense for the punter.

pick Occurs when receivers criss cross and two defensive players run into each other. If an offensive player runs into a defensive player who is covering someone else, it is an illegal pick (if he is caught). If two defensive players run into each other, they're just not very smart.

place kicker The player who kicks kickoffs, field goals, and extra points.

play-by-play announcer A television announcer whose primary job is to give information about what is happening on a particular play—including who has the ball and the current situation, such as down and distance.

pooch punt A short, high kick designed to land around the 10-yard line in order to give the punting team a chance to down the ball. As long as the receiving team doesn't touch the ball, the punting team can touch it and down it—making it first down and 10 yards to go for the receiving team at the spot where the ball was downed.

prevent defense At the end of a game or the end of a half, when the defense is worried about a big play, it often employs what is called a prevent defense. The idea is to prevent a big play, but in reality it often prevents the team from winning.

Pro Bowl The All-Star Game of the National Football League. It is played every year in Honolulu, Hawaii.

punter A player who holds the ball himself, drops it, and kicks it, toward the other end of the field.

quarterback The player who starts the action. He is the man with the golden arm whose claim to fame is his ability to throw. The quarterback is John Wayne, Babe Ruth, and James Bond, with a few more characters thrown in, too.

R back The real name for the one back in a one-back offense, whether a halfback, a fullback, or whatever. The *R* stands for "remaining."

red zone The red zone is the area between the 20-yard line and the end zone. You're considered to be in the red zone if you're within 20 yards of scoring a touchdown. The red zone is not marked on the field. It's simply a figurative area that coaches and players refer to as critical. Don Shula, longtime NFL coach, called it the green zone because that was where the money was made.

redshirt Means a player doesn't play a certain year when he is in school and is granted another year of eligibility to play later. This can happen, for instance, if a player gets hurt. He still attends classes and practices, but doesn't play and thus is still eligible to play four years.

Ring of Honor An area inside most stadiums in which certain players from the past are honored. This recognizes a player for having reached a certain level of accomplishment for that team.

rivalry A series of games between two teams that don't like each other.

rubber-band defense A bend-don't-break defense that allows short plays down the field. If the offense has to run a lot of short plays they are sooner or later going to make a mistake—or so the rubber-band defense hopes.

running back A player who is primarily a ball carrier. The best ones can control games all by themselves.

sack A sack occurs when a quarterback is tackled behind the line of scrimmage while trying to pass.

safety When a player is tackled in his own end zone with the football it is a safety, which means it is worth two points for the team without the ball. The team that was tackled in its own end zone (running out of bounds in your own end zone is also a safety) must then kick the ball to the other team. The kick (it can be a punt or kickoff type kick) is from its own 20-yard line.

safety A player in the back of the defensive backfield. There are two safeties, a free safety and strong safety. The free safety is usually the farthest player back, lined up in the middle of the field. The strong safety is also usually far back, but is lined up on the same side as the tight end.

salary cap The amount of money the NFL designates that each team may spend for players. The salary cap for 2000 was \$67.4 million per team.

scatback A small, swift running back with elusive moves. Scatbacks are used a lot in third down situations where they are counted on for their ability to scat here and there, making tacklers miss.

scripting the plays The San Francisco 49ers, under former Coach Bill Walsh, began every game by knowing which 15 plays the team would run first. This was known as scripting the plays. The goal was to have a good idea how they would begin and then make changes as the game warranted. It was quite successful. Walsh won three Super Bowls, and now many teams script their opening plays.

secondary The last line of defense. The secondary consists of defensive backs, which includes cornerbacks and safeties. Their primary job is to cover receivers.

set position Prior to the snap, all offensive linemen must assume a set position without moving their feet, head, or arms, and without swaying their body.

shotgun A formation in which the quarterback stands five yards behind the center and the center, instead of snapping the ball hand-to-hand, snaps it through the air to the waiting quarterback. This is used primarily in passing downs, and it gives the quarterback the advantage of not having to backpedal before throwing.

sleeper A player drafted in the later rounds of the draft who turns out to be something special.

slow-motion instant replay A video replay of a play that is slowed down so that every instant can be analyzed. A slow-motion instant replay can make football appear to have the grace of ballet—or the impact of a demolition derby.

smashmouth football A simple philosophy—run the ball and then run it again. And then after that, run it again.

snot bubbles A sensation created by a big hit. When you have bubbles coming out of your nose after you've been hit, you know you've been hit hard. It's a good thing to give another player a case of snot bubbles.

soft spot An area in a zone defense between defensive players.

spiral A tight spin on the ball.

split end A receiver who lines up on the line of scrimmage on the side away from the tight end.

split T formation A formation where both backs are split behind the quarterback. Neither one is directly behind the quarterback.

strength of schedule Refers to the records from the previous year of the current year's opponents. For instance, a team with six opponents who made the playoffs the previous year probably has had a tougher schedule than a team facing only two teams that were in the playoffs the previous year. It is based on the win-loss record of all opponents.

strong side The strong side of a formation is the side that has the tight end. Usually, the strong side is the right, meaning the tight end lines up next to the right tackle.

subway alumni Folks who, though they didn't attend Notre Dame, for one reason or another have grown to identify with the school. Subway alumni exist for every school.

swoop A block where a lineman goes by (swoops by) the defensive line to get to the next level of the defense, the linebackers.

tackle box The area along the line of scrimmage between where the two offensive tackles line up. It includes about three yards on either side of the line of scrimmage and features some interesting battles.

tailgating A party and cookout in the parking lot of the stadium. It is pure atmosphere and it happens before and after the game.

taking the air out of the football Running the ball to an extreme. Run after run after run. The idea is to eat the clock in order to get the game to end while your team is in the lead. By avoiding risky passes, teams take the air out of the football.

telestrator A tool in which an announcer can draw right over the action on a replay. It works like a high-tech Etch-A-Sketch. If a receiver runs a post pattern, for instance, the announcer can draw out the direction of the post pattern on the telestrator.

throwing lanes The areas between linemen that the quarterback can throw the ball through. There is a misconception about quarterbacks that they must be tall to throw

the ball over linemen. In fact, offensive linemen design blocking schemes to create throwing lanes for quarterbacks to throw.

tight end A big receiver who lines up next to the offensive line. His job is to catch passes and to block like an offensive lineman.

touchdown When a player has possession of the ball in the opposing team's end zone. It is worth six points.

touchdown dance A celebration players do in the end zone after scoring a touchdown. There is a fine line between spontaneous joy and arrogant showmanship. A little of both makes for a heck of a dance.

touchdown Jesus The painting of Jesus that overlooks the Notre Dame Stadium in South Bend, Indiana. In the painting, Jesus has his arms upraised to the heavens (as if, some football fanatics have said, signaling a touchdown).

transition player A player who is one of the best at his position. He must receive an average salary of the top 10 players at his position from the past season. When he becomes a free agent, his old club may match any offer given by another club. Every season, he must receive the average salary of the top 10 players at his position. If the club doesn't offer that money, he loses his transition status and becomes a free agent.

trenches Think of the term "trench warfare" and you'll get a sense of what the announcer means when he talks of the *trenches* in football. The trenches are where the big guys do battle.

turf toe The footing on artificial turf is so sure that there is actually an injury called turf toe, in which the big toe is jammed into the ground because you have stopped too abruptly. It's like a stubbed toe except you're wearing a shoe.

wedge A wall of big players who are supposed to form a blocking wall in front of the kick returner. The players get into a formation that resembles a "V," or a wedge. The idea is to throw blocks on the kickoff coverage team in order to spring the kick returner loose for a big return.

wide receiver A high-glamour job subject to some of the biggest hits in the game. A wide receiver's job is primarily to catch passes.

wild-card team A team that qualifies for the playoffs without winning its division. The three best nondivision winners in each conference qualify as wild-card teams.

workout warrior A player who, by the basis of his ability to perform at a high level in a controlled testing atmosphere, is suspected to be a better football player than he showed in college.



National Football League Team Addresses

NFL Web site: nfl.com

Arizona Cardinals
PO Box 888
Phoenix, AZ 85001-0888
602-379-0101

Atlanta Falcons
4400 Falcon Parkway
Flowery Beach, GA 30542
770-965-3115

Baltimore Ravens
11001 Owings Mills Road
Owings Mills, MD 21117
410-654-6200

Buffalo Bills
One Bills Drive
Orchard Park, NY 14127-2296
716-648-1800

Carolina Panthers
800 South Mint Street
Charlotte, NC 28202-1502
704-358-7000

Chicago Bears
Halas Hall at Conway Park
1000 Football Drive
Lake Forest, IL 60045
847-295-6600

Cincinnati Bengals
One Bengals Drive
Cincinnati, OH 45024
513-621-3550

Cleveland Browns
76 Lou Groza Boulevard
Berea, OH 44017
440-891-5000

Dallas Cowboys
One Cowboys Parkway
Irving, TX 75063
972-556-9900

Denver Broncos
13655 Broncos Parkway
Englewood, CO 80112
303-649-9000

Detroit Lions
1200 Featherstone Road
Pontiac, MI 48342
248-335-4131

Green Bay Packers
1265 Lombardi Avenue
Green Bay, WI 54304
920-496-5700

Houston Texans

711 Louisiana Street
Houston, TX 77002
713-336-7700

Indianapolis Colts

PO Box 535000
Indianapolis, IN 46253
317-297-2658

Jacksonville Jaguars

One ALLTEL Stadium Place
Jacksonville, FL 32202
904-633-6000

Kansas City Chiefs

One Arrowhead Drive
Kansas City, MO 64129
816-920-9300

Miami Dolphins

7500 SW 30th Street
Davie, FL 33314
954-452-7000

Minnesota Vikings

9520 Viking Drive
Eden Prairie, MN 55344
612-828-6500

New England Patriots

60 Washington Street
Foxboro, MA 02035
508-543-8200

New Orleans Saints

5800 Airline Highway
Metairie, LA 70003
504-733-0255

New York Giants

Giants Stadium
East Rutherford, NJ 07073
201-935-8111

New York Jets

1000 Fulton Avenue
Hempstead, NY 11550
516-560-8100

Oakland Raiders

1220 Harbor Bay Parkway
Alameda, CA 94502
510-864-5000

Philadelphia Eagles

3501 South Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19148
215-463-2500

Pittsburgh Steelers

300 Stadium Circle
Pittsburgh, PA 15212
412-323-0300

San Diego Chargers

Qualcomm Stadium
PO Box 609609
San Diego, CA 92160-9609
858-874-4500

San Francisco 49ers

4949 Centennial Boulevard
Santa Clara, CA 95054
408-562-4949

Seattle Seahawks

11220 NE 53rd Street
Kirkland, WA 98033
425-827-9777

St. Louis Rams

1 Rams Way
St. Louis, MO 63045
314-982-7267

Tampa Bay Buccaneers

1 Buccaneer Place
Tampa, FL 33607
813-870-2700

Tennessee Titans

460 Great Circle Road
Nashville, TN 37228
615-565-4000

Washington Redskins

Redskin Park
PO Box 17247
Washington, DC 20041
703-478-8900

Index

Symbols

3-4 defensive formation, 166, 190-191, 203-204
4-3 defensive formation, 166, 190-191
40 time, 101
46 defense, 204-205
49ers, San Francisco, 70
 Lott, Ronnie, 187
 Owens, Terrell, 107
 Rice, Jerry, 109
 team address, 328
 Walsh, Bill, 53
900 lines, 283

A

AAFC (All-America Football Conference), 248
ACC (Atlantic Coast Conference), 231
ace formation, 118
addresses, teams, 327-328
AFC (American Football Conference), 265
AFL (American Football League), 66
 merger, 64
 version one, 248
 version three, 248-249
 version two, 248
AFPA (American Professional Football Association), 248
Aikman, Troy, 49, 71, 77
"Ain'ts," 304
air-attack offenses, 60

air-it-out football, 129
airhorns, 303
alignments, defense, 190-191
All-America Football Conference (AAFC), 248
all-star games (college football), 233
Allegheny Athletic Association, 4
Allen, George
 Dallas Cowboy rivalry, 314
 motivational techniques, 56
 special teams, 214
Ameche, Alan, 67
American Football Conference. *See* AFC
American Football League. *See* AFL League
American Professional Football Association. *See* AFPA
Anderson, Jamal, 29
apparel, 298-299
Arena Football League, 250
Arizona Cardinals, team address, 327
 See also Cardinals
artificial turf, 22-24
assistant coaches, 261
Astrodome (Houston), 22
Atlanta Falcons
 Anderson, Jamal, 29
 team address, 327
Atlantic Coast Conference. *See* ACC
attacking defenses, 190

attendance, NFL, 6
audibles, 82-83, 141
average career length, 256

B

Bacardi Bowl, 232
back judges, 151
back side (plays), 108
ball carriers, 15
Baltimore Ravens, team address, 327
Baltimore Stars, 250
Baugh, Sammy, 66
BCS (Bowl Championship Series), 232
Bears, Chicago, 70
 founding of, 66
 team address, 327
Bengals, Cincinnati, team address, 327
Berman, Chris, nicknames, 286
Berry, Raymond, 109
Berwanger, Jay, 244
betting, 281
Bettis, Jerome, 112
Big East, 231
Big 10, 231
Big West, 231
Billick, Brian, 57, 131, 261
Bills, Buffalo, team address, 327
Blanda, George, kicking record, 30
Bledsoe, Drew, 49, 169, 279
blind side, 92

blitz adjustments, 197
blitzing, 144, 196-197
 zone blitzes, 210-211
blocking, 90
 controlling the line of
 scrimmage, 97
 cutoff blocks, 96
 double teams, 96
 man-on-man blocking, 96
 pass-blocking, 92
 reach blocks, 95
 run-blocking, 92
 schemes, 94
 slide blocks, 96
 swoop blocks, 94
 trap blocks, 95
 zone-blocking, 96
blocking schemes, 94
blue-chip players, 262
Blue-Gray Game, 233
Bluebonnet Bowl, 232
bombs, 84
bookmakers, 282
Bosselli, Tony, 97
Bostic, Jeff, 91
Bowl Championship Series
 (BCS) rating system (college
 football), 232
bowl games (college football),
 232-233
Bradshaw, Terry, 70, 76
 throwing style, 80
Broncos, Denver, team
 address, 327
Brooks, Robert, 129
Brown, Jim, 68, 112, 120, 131
Brown, Paul, 66, 68, 131
Browns, Cleveland
 team address, 327
 founding of, 66
Brunell, Mark, Hail Mary
 passes, 84
Bruno, Tony, 291
Buccaneers, Tampa Bay, team
 address, 328

Buffalo Bills, team address,
 327
bull rushing, 171
Bulldogs, Canton, 65
bullet passes, 80
bump-and-run coverage, 186
Burns, Jerry, 56
Butkus, Dick, 180
Butts, Dave, 298
byes (playoffs), 268

C

camera angles (television),
 290
Camp, Walter, 65
 invention of modern foot-
 ball, 6
Campbell, Earl, 112
Canadian Football League. *See*
 CFL
Canton Bulldogs, 65
capologists, 275
Cardinals, Arizona/Phoenix,
 team address, 327
Carolina Panthers
 1996 playoffs, 11
 team address, 327
Carroll, Pete, 58
CBA (collective bargaining
 agreement), 273-274
centers, 44-45
CFL (Canadian Football
 League), 251-252
chains, 20-21
champions, divisions, deter-
 mining, 268
championship teams, build-
 ing, 260-261
Chandler, Chris, 279
Chandler, Wes, 60
Chargers, San Diego, team
 address, 328
charities, players and league,
 9
check-with-mes, 142
Chicago Bears, 70
 founding of, 66
 team address, 327
Chiefs, Kansas City, team
 address, 328
chop blocks, 93
Christie, Steve, 162
Cincinnati Bengals, team
 address, 327
clearing it out (speed
 receivers), 102
cleats, 41-42
Cleveland Browns
 founding of, 66
 team address, 327
clipping, 92-93
clock management, 107
closed side, formations, 178
coaches
 coordinators, 57-58
 media relations, 56
 personalities, 61
 TV personalities, 58-59
coaching
 defensive philosophies,
 189-199, 202-211
 3-4 defense, 203-204
 46 defense, 204-205
 combo coverages, 208
 dime defense, 207-208
 double eagle defense,
 206
 eagle defense, 205-206
 flex defense, 202
 nickel combination cov-
 erage, 209
 nickel defense, 207
 over/under defense, 203
 pass-coverage packages,
 206
 quarter coverage,
 208-209

- two-deep man-under zone coverage, 210
- two-deep zone coverage, 209-210
- zone blitzes, 210-211
- film study, 54-55
- motivation, 55-57
- offensive strategies, 123-125
- air-it-out football, 129
- big-play football, 129-130
- formations, 126-128
- run-and-shoot offense, 130-131
- smashmouth football, 128
- West-Coast offense, 130
- philosophies, 59-61
- play diagrams, 52
- styles, 261
- coffin corner kicks, 221
- coin tosses, 37
- collective bargaining agreement. *See* CBA
- college football, 227-235
- all-star games, 233
- bowl games, 232-233
- collegiate passer rating system, 234
- conferences, 231
- divisions, 229-230
- Heisman Trophy, 233-234
- NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association), 228-229
- NFL draft, 235-246
- NFL players, 230
- Notre Dame, 231-232
- redshirt players, 234
- collegiate passer rating system, 234
- color analysts, 289-290
- Colts, Indianapolis, team address, 328
- combination coverages, 208
- commercials, 35, 286
- cost, Super Bowl, 277
- communication system, offense, 136-142
- community relations, 9-11
- companion leagues, 250
- complementary routes, 105
- Conference USA, 231
- conferences
- college football, 231
- NFL, 265
- controlling the line of scrimmage, 97
- coordinators, 57-58
- cornerbacks, 46, 183
- uniform numbers, 45
- Coryell, Don, 60
- Cosell, Howard, 267
- Couch, Tim, 244
- Coughlin, Tom, 56
- Cowboys, Dallas, 71
- team address, 327
- Csonka, Larry, 69
- Culpepper, Daunte, 87, 244
- culture (NFL), 259-260
- Cunningham, Randall, sack record, 94
- cut calls, 209
- cutoff blocks, 96

D

- Dallas Cowboys, 71
- team address, 327
- Dallas Texans, 249
- Darth Raider, 304
- Dawg Pound, 303
- Decatur Staleys, 66
- defense
- building, 211
- defensive backs, 181-187
- linebackers, 173-180
- linemen, 165-171

- philosophies, 202-211
- 3-4 defense, 203-204
- 46 defense, 204-205
- combo coverages, 208
- dime defense, 207-208
- double eagle defense, 206
- eagle defense, 205-206
- flex defense, 202
- nickel combination coverage, 209
- nickel defense, 207
- over/under defense, 203
- pass-coverage packages, 206
- quarter coverage, 208-209
- two-deep man-under coverage, 210
- two-deep zone coverage, 209-210
- zone blitzes, 210-211
- players, 45-46
- punters, 220
- reading, 81
- safeties, 184
- strategies, 189-199
- alignments, 190-191
- attacking vs. reacting, 190
- blitzing, 196-197
- pass-stopping, 192-195
- prevent defense, 198-199
- run stopping, 191-192
- short-yardage, 197-198
- situational substitutions, 195-196
- weights, 183
- defensive backs, 46, 181-187
- uniform numbers, 45
- defensive coordinators, 57-58
- defensive end zones, 17
- defensive ends, 46
- uniform numbers, 45
- defensive holding, 179

defensive linemen, 7, 46, 165-171
 uniform numbers, 45
defensive tackles, 46
 uniform numbers, 45
defined gross revenue. *See* DGR
Dempsey, Tom, kicking record, 33
Denver Broncos, team
 address, 327
Detroit Lions, team address, 327
DGR (defined gross revenue), 277
dime defense, 207-208
Ditka, Mike, 57, 109, 244
divisions (NFL conferences), 266
 champions, determining, 268
 college football, 229-230
Dixon, Hanford, 303
Dolphins, Miami, 69
 team addresses, 328
domed stadiums, 24-25
Dorsett, Tony, rushing record, 43
double eagle defense, 206
double responses, 204
double teams, 96
down by contact, 150
downs, 21
draft (NFL), 235-246
 2001 schedule, 239
 busts, 245
 free agency, 243
 history, 243-244
 mock drafts, 243
 money, 241-242
 players, finding, 238-239
 pressure, 242
 rounds, 238
 strategies, 242
 testings, 240-241
 War Rooms, 239-240

draw plays, 119
drives, 103
dummy audibles, 82
Dyson, Kevin, 162

E

eagle defense, 205-206
Eagles, Philadelphia
 NeXturf, 22
 team address, 328
earnings
 playoffs, 278
 quarterbacks, 46
Eason, Tony, 244
East-West runners, 115
East-West Shrine Game, 233
eating the clock, 128
Elam, Jason, 33
eligible receivers, 100
Elway, John, 87, 244
 sack record, 94
encroachment, 93
end zones, 15
 defensive end zones, 17
end-arounds, 108
ESPN.com, 291
Europe (NFL), 252
Evans, Vince, throwing style, 80
ex-athlete journalists, 289
exclusive franchise players, 277
extra points, 29-31, 223
Extreme Football League (XFL), 253

F

facemasks (helmets), 40
Facenda, John, 65
fair catch, 222
Falcons, Atlanta, team
 address, 327
false starts, 93

fans, 302-306
 Ain'ts, 304
 cheering, 309
 Dawg Pound, 303
 Hogettes, 303
 out-of-towners, 308-309
 rituals, 298-303
 tailgating, 306-308
fantasy leagues, 282
Favre, Brett, 129, 281
Fears, Tom, receiving record, 107
FedEx Orange Bowl, 232
field goals, 33-34, 223
field judges, 152
field position, 48
fields
 defensive end zones, 17
 dimensions, 15, 17-18
 end zones, 15
 fifty-yard line, 17
 five-yard markers, 16
 goal lines, 17
 goal posts, 17-18
 green zones, 25
 hashmarks, 19-20
 red zones, 25
 surfaces, 22-24
FieldTurf, 22
fifty-yard line, 17
film study, 54-55
first down, 21, 37
first down line, 21
five-yard chuck rule, 179
five-yard markers, 16
flak jackets, 41
flankers, 100
flex defense, 202
Florida State, NFL players, 230
Flutie, Doug, 86-87, 250-251
folklore, 64
football
 evolution of, 65-67
 invention of, 6
 origin, 65

footballs
 dimensions, 14
 material, 14
 forty-six defense. *See* 46
 defense
 forward pass, invention of, 65
 Foster, James, 250
 four-wide receiver sets, 127
 fourth down, going on, 133
 Fouts, Dan, 60
 franchise players, 277
 free agency, 276
 NFL draft, 243
 free kicks, 34
 free safeties, 184
 front seven, 174
 front side (plays), 108
 fullbacks, 112
 fumbles, team season record,
 125

G

gambling, 281-282
 game clock, 36
 game gear, 298-299
 game plans, 52, 146
 game time, 35
 gaps, 198
 Gastineau, Mark, sack record,
 167
 George, Jeff, throwing style,
 80
 Giants, New York, team
 address, 328
 Gibbs, Joe, 70, 131-132, 262
 team philosophy, 138
 Gibson, Aaron, helmet size,
 41
 Gifford, Frank, 67, 267
 Gillman, Sid, 131-132
 Glanville, Jerry, 302
 Glenn, Terry, 279
 goal line defenses, 197-198
 goal lines, 17

goal posts, 17-18
 Gogolak, Charlie, kicking
 record, 30
 going on fourth down, 133
 going over the middle
 (receivers), 107
 Graham, Otto, 67
 Grange, Red, 66, 248
 Grant, Bud, 56
 grass turfs, 22-24
 Green Bay Packers
 founding of, 66
 Lambeau Field, re-sodding,
 16
 team address, 327
 green zones, 25
 Green, Dennis, 131
 Green, Trent, 71
 Grier, Bobby, 279
 Grimm, Russ, 91
 grind-it-out offenses, 59
 guards, 44
 uniform numbers, 45

H

Hail Mary passes, 85
 Halas, George, 66, 68
 halfbacks, 113
 Hall of Fame, Pro Football,
 259
 halves, 34-35
 hands teams, 220
 hang time (punts and kick-
 offs), 220
 Hannah, John, 97
 hard counts, 81
 Hardy, Jim, interception
 records, 77
 Harris, Franco, 70
 hashmarks, 19-20
 Hayes, Bob, 102
 Haynes, Michael, 187
 head linesman, 151
 head slaps, 169

headhunters (kickoffs), 220
 Heffelfinger, William "Pudge,"
 4, 65, 247
Heidi Game, 69
 Heisman Trophy, 233-234
 helmets, 40
 institution of, 67
 hip pads, 41
 Hogettes, 303
 Hogs, The, 91
 holding, 92-93
 Holmgren, Mike, 261
 Holt, Issaic, 244
 home field advantage, 267,
 270
 homemade apparel, 302
 hot receivers, 196
 Houston Astrodome, 22
 Houston Texans, 5, 249
 team address, 328
 Houston, Ken, 187
 Howard, David, 244
 Howard, Desmond, 213
 Super Bowl MVP Award, 47
 Howley, Chuck, Super Bowl
 MVP Award, 178
 huddles, 78
 Huff, Sam, 67
 Hula Bowl, 233
 Hunt, Lamar, 271
 hurry-up offense, 132
 hurrying the quarterback, 204

I

"I" formation, 117
 Ickey Shuffle, 29
 immaculate reception, 70
 Indianapolis Colts, team
 address, 328
 ineligible receiver downfield,
 93
 inside linebackers, 174
 instant replay, 160, 290
 intentional grounding, 84

interceptions, 79
interference, 106
Internet, media, 291-292

J

Jackson State, Payton, Walter, 230

Jacksonville Jaguars
1996 playoffs, 11
team address, 328

Jacoby, Joe, 91

Jaguars, Jacksonville
1996 playoffs, 11
team address, 328

Jefferson, John "J. J.," 60

jerseys, 42-43, 298-299
numbers, 45

Jets, New York, team address, 328

Johnson, Jimmy, 71, 261

Johnston, Daryl, 112

Joiner, Charlie, 60

Jones, Bert, sack record, 94

Jones, Deacon, 171
head slaps, 169

Jones, Dub, touchdown
record, 28

Jones, Jerry, 71

Jordan, Henry, 55

journalists, 288-291

jumpers, 198

K

Kansas City Chiefs, team
address, 328

Karras, Alex, 33

Kelly, Jim, 244, 250

kick returners, 48, 215

kickers, 30, 48

uniform numbers, 45

kicking teams, 215

kickoffs, 215-218
onside kicks, 218-220
wedges, 216

Kiick, Jim, 69

knee pads, 41

Kosar, Bernie, 76

Kraft, Robert, 279

Kramer, Jerry, 65

L

Lambeau Field (Green Bay),
re-sodding, 16

Lambeau, Earl "Curley," 66

Lambert, Jack, 239

Landry, Tom, 61, 71

flex defense, 202

Lane, Max, 169

latest line, 281

Layne, Bobby, 67

LeBaron, Eddie, 251

levels, linebackers, 175

Lewis, Ray, 71, 180
Super Bowl MVP, 178

Lilly, Bob, 64, 171

line judges, 151

line of scrimmage (LOS), 6,
44, 142

linebackers, 46, 173-180

inside linebackers, 174

jumpers, 198

levels, 175

middle linebackers,
174-175

outside linebackers, 174,
176

spies, 179

uniform numbers, 45

linemen (defensive), 46,
165-171

uniform numbers, 45

linemen (offensive), 7, 44,
89-92

blind side, 92

blocking, 90
evolution of, 91

Lions, Detroit, team address,
327

live colors, 141

local media, 292

logos, changes, 300-301

Lombardi, Vince, 68, 119
motivational talents, 55
Vince Lombardi Trophy,
265

looking off defenses, 83

LOS (line of scrimmage), 6,
44, 142

Lott, Ronnie, 187

luxury suites, 257

M

MAC (Mid-American
Conference), 231

magazine journalists, 291

man-on-man blocking, 96

man-to-man coverages,
185-186, 192-195

Manning, Archie, 244

Manning, Peyton, 86-87

Marino, Dan, 87, 244
touchdown record, 77

Marshall, Wilbur, 204

May, Mark, 91

McMahon, Jim, 70

Super Bowl XX, 42

McMahon, Vince, 253

McNabb, Donovan, 244

McNair, Steve, 279

McNown, Cade, 244

media, 285-287

color analysts, 289-290

games, 288

Internet, 291-292

journalists, 288-289

local, 292

national, 292

play-by-play broadcasters, 289
 postgame shows, 288
 pregame shows, 287-288
 print media, 291
 sideline reporters, 290
 talk radio, 291
 media relations, coaches, 56
 merchandise (NFL), 298
 top teams, 299
 Meredith, Don, 267
 Miami Dolphins, 69
 team address, 328
 Mid-American Conference. *See* MAC
 middle linebackers, 174-175
 Midwest, early football, 11
 minimum salary scale, 274
 Minnesota Vikings, team
 address, 328
 Minnifield, Frank, 303
 mismatches, 143
 Mississippi Valley State, Rice,
 Jerry, 230
 Mr. Irrelevant, 241
 mock drafts, 243
 Modell, Art, 280
 modern football, invention
 of, 6
Monday Night Football, 267
 money, quarterbacks, 46
 Monk, Art, 110
 Montana, Joe, 70, 76
 Moon, Warren, 251
 sack record, 94
 Moore, Tom, 132
 Morris, Mercury, 69
 motion, 142
 motivation, coaching, 55-57
 Motley, Marion, 131
 Munoz, Anthony, 97
 Music City Miracle, 162

N

Nagurski, Bronco, 66
 Namath, Joe, 4, 68-69, 76, 87,
 282
 National Collegiate Athletic
 Association. *See* NCAA
 National Football Conference.
 See NFC
 National Football League. *See*
 NFL
 national media, 292
 natural grass turfs, 22-24
 NCAA (National Collegiate
 Athletic Association),
 228-229
 Nehemiah, Renaldo, 101
 neutral zone, 91
 Nevers, Ernie, 66
 touchdown record, 28
 New England Patriots, team
 address, 328
 New Orleans Saints, team
 address, 328
 New York Giants, team
 address, 328
 New York Jets, team address,
 328
 New York Titans, 249
 Newsome, Ozzie, 261
 newspaper journalists, 291
 NeXturf, 22
 NFC (National Football
 Conference), 265
 NFL (National Football
 League)
 AFL merger, 64
 founding of, 66
 history of, 247-248
 popularity, 6
 NFL charities, 9
 NFL draft, 235-246
 2001 schedule, 239
 busts, 245

free agency, 243
 history, 243-244
 mock drafts, 243
 money, 241-242
 players, finding, 238-239
 pressure, 242
 strategies, 242
 testings, 240-241
 War Rooms, 239-240
 NFL Europe, 252
 NFL merchandise, 298
 nickel combination coverage,
 209
 nickel defense, 207
 nicknames, 286
 Nitschke, Ray, 180
 Nokia Sugar Bowl, 232
 North Carolina University,
 NFL players, 230
 North-South runners, 115
 Notre Dame, 231-232
 NFL players, 230
 subway alumni, 231
 Touchdown Jesus, 231
 numbering system, running
 holes, 138
 numbers (uniform), 45

O

O'Brien, Ken, 244
 O's (play diagrams), 52-54
 Oakland Raiders, team
 address, 328
 oddsmakers, 281
 offense, 38
 building, 147
 communication system,
 136-142
 linemen, 44, 89-92
 players, 44-45
 positions, 44
 quarterbacks, 75-82
 receivers, 99-109

running backs, 111-120
skill players, 46
strategies, 123-125
 air-it-out football, 129
 big-play football, 129-130
 formations, 126-128
 run-and-shoot offense, 130-131
 smashmouth football, 128
 West-Coast offense, 130
offensive coordinators, 57-58
offensive interference, 106
offensive linemen, 7, 44, 89-92
 blind side, 92
 blocking, 90
 evolution of, 91
 pocket, 79
 strong side, 104
 throwing lanes, 79
offensive tackles, 44
 uniform numbers, 45
office pools, 282
officials, 149-161
offset "I" formation, 118
Ogden, Jonathan, 97
Ohio, early football, 11
Ohio League, 248
Ohio State, NFL players, 230
onside kicks, 218-220
open side, formations, 178
outdoor stadiums, 24-25
outside linebackers, 174-176
over/under defense, 203
overtime, 36
Owens, Terrell, receiving record, 107
owners, football operations, 261

P

Packers, Green Bay
 founding of, 66
 Lambeau Field (re-sodding), 16
 team address, 327
Panthers, Carolina
 1996 playoffs, 11
 team address, 327
pants, 42-43
Parcells, Bill, 53, 279
parity, 243
Parratt, George "Peggy," 65
pass-coverage packages, 206
 combination coverages, 208
 dime package, 207-208
 nickel combination coverage, 209
 nickel package, 207
 quarter coverage, 208-209
 two-deep man-under zone coverage, 210
 two-deep zone coverage, 209-210
pass rushing, 168
pass-stopping defenses, 192-195
pass-blocking, 92
passer rating system, 85-86
passing trees, 104
 running backs, 116
Pastorini, Dan, 244
PAT (points after touchdown), 29-31, 223
Patriots, New England, team address, 328
patterns, receivers, 104
Payton, Walter, 70, 120, 230
 Super Bowl XX, 37

penalties, 8, 43
 chop blocks, 93
 clipping, 92-93
 defensive holding, 179
 encroachment, 93
 false starts, 93
 holding, 92-93
 illegal forward pass, 76
 ineligible receiver downfield, 93
 instant replay, 160
 intentional grounding, 84
 interference, 106
 kickoffs out of bounds, 215
 punting, 222
Penn State, NFL players, 230
personal protectors (punters), 219
Philadelphia Eagles
 NeXturf, 22
 team address, 328
philosophies, coaching, 59-61
picks, 194
Pittsburgh Athletic Association, 4
Pittsburgh Steelers, 69
 team address, 328
placekickers. *See* kickers
play action, 93
play clock, 36
play diagrams, 52-54
play-by-play broadcasters, 289
play-calling, field size, 133
players
 defense, 45-46
 kickers, 30
 number on the field, 43
 offense, 44-45
 rituals, 298-303
 rookies, 48-49
 substitutions, 43
 veterans, 48-49

playing fields
 defensive end zones, 17
 dimensions, 15, 17-18
 end zones, 15
 fifty-yard line, 17
 five-yard markers, 16
 goal lines, 17
 goal posts, 17-18
 green zones, 25
 hashmarks, 19-20
 red zones, 25
 surfaces, 22-24
 playing off blockers, 177
 playoffs, 268
 earnings, 278
 home field advantage, 270
 intensity level, 270
 rivalries, 313
 plays, 15, 38
 audibles, 82-83
 Plunkett, Jim, 234
 pocket, 79
 point spreads, 281
 points
 extra points, 29-31
 field goals, 33-34
 safeties, 34
 touchdowns, 27, 29
 two-point conversions,
 31-32
 points after touchdown (PAT),
 29-31, 223
 pooch punts, 221
 pools, 282-283
 popularity, NFL, 6
 positions
 centers, 44
 cornerbacks, 183
 defense, 45-46
 defensive backs, 46,
 181-187
 defensive linemen, 46,
 165-171
 guards, 44
 kick returners, 215
 kickers, 30, 48
 linebackers, 46, 173-180
 numbers (uniform), 45
 offense, 44
 punters, 48, 220
 quarterbacks, 44, 75-82
 receivers, 99-109
 running backs, 44, 111-120
 safeties, 184
 special teams, 47
 tight ends, 44
 wide receivers, 44
 possession receivers, 102
 postgame shows, 288
 pregame shows, 287-288
 Presley, Elvis, 302
 pressing, defensive backs, 143
 prevent defenses, 132,
 198-199
 primary receivers, 105
 print media, 291
 Pro Bowl, 262
 Pro Football Hall of Fame, 259
 prolate spheroids, 14
 protective wear
 flak jackets, 41
 helmets, 40
 pads, 41
 shoes, 41-42
 Pugh, Jethro, 64
 pulling guards, 95
 pump fakes, 83
 punt returners, 48
 punt returns, 221-222
 punters, 48, 220
 uniform numbers, 45
 punts, 38, 220-221
 penalties, 222
 Pyle, C. C., 248

Q

quarter coverage, 208-209
 quarterback sneaks, 85
 quarterbacks, 44, 75-82, 263
 audibles, 82-83, 141
 bombs, 84
 bullet passes, 80
 characteristics, 78
 earnings, 46
 evolution of, 86-87
 Hail Mary passes, 85
 hard counts, 81
 interceptions, 79
 looking off defenses, 83
 passer rating system, 85-86
 pocket, 79
 pump fakes, 83
 quarterback sneaks, 85
 reading defenses, 81
 spirals, 80
 statistics, 87
 throwing the ball away, 83
 touch passes, 80
 uniform numbers, 45
 quarters, 34-35

R

R backs, 113
 radio, sports-talk radio, 291
 radios (helmets), 139
 Raiders, Oakland, team
 address, 328
 Rams, St. Louis, team address,
 328
 Ravens, Baltimore, team
 address, 327
 reach blocks, 95
 reactionary defenses, 190
 reading defenses, 81

receivers, 44, 99-109
 catching styles, 108
 clock management, 107
 end-arounds, 108
 flankers, 100
 going over the middle, 107
 lining up, 100
 passing trees, 104
 patterns, 104
 possession receivers, 102
 primary receivers, 105
 speed receivers, 101
 split ends, 100
 tight ends, 103
 uniform numbers, 45
 YAC (yards after catch), 108
receiving teams, 215
red zones, 25
redshirt players (college), 234
Redskins, Washington, 5, 70
 Hogs, The, 91
 team address, 328
referees, 149-161
regular season, 266
 scheduling, 267
 strength of schedule, 269
relocations, 71
reverses, 108
Rice, Jerry, 70, 109, 230
 keys to success, 109
Riggins, John, 60, 91, 121, 309
Riley, Dan "Bullet," 65
Rings of Honor, 309
rituals, 298-303
rivalries, 311-316
 creating, 314
 playoffs, 313
 trivalries, 314
Rockne, Knute, 231

rookies, 48-49
Rose Bowl, 232
rosters, 262
rotating the zones, 186
rotisserie leagues, 282
rounds, NFL draft, 238
routes, receivers, 104
Rozelle, Pete, 42, 67, 243
rubber-band defenses, 190
rugby, 6
rules, 8. *See also* penalties
 sidelines, 18
run stopping defenses, 191-192
run-and-shoot offenses, 60, 130-131
run-blocking, 92
running backs, 44, 111-120, 215
 East-West runners, 115
 formations, 116
 fullbacks, 112
 halfbacks, 113
 North-South runners, 115
 pass catching, 116
 passing trees, 116
 R backs, 113
 scatbacks, 115
 statistics, 120
 sweeps, 119
 uniform numbers, 45
 up-the-middle runs, 118
running holes, numbering system, 138
Ryan, Buddy, 57
 46 defense, 204
Rypien, Mark, 70

S

sacks, 92
safeties (scoring), 184
safeties (position), 34, 46
 uniform numbers, 45

safety valve receivers, 116
Saints, New Orleans, team address, 328
salaries, 257
salary cap, 262, 274-276
salary scale, minimum, 274
San Diego Chargers, team address, 328
San Francisco 49ers, 70
 team address, 328
Sanders, Barry, running style, 116
Sanders, Deion, 279
Sayers, Gayle, 120
 touchdown record, 28
scatbacks, 115
scheduling (regular season), 267
scoring
 extra points, 29-31
 field goals, 33-34
 safeties, 34
 touchdowns, 27, 29
 two-point conversions, 31-32
scrambling quarterbacks, 85
scripting the plays, 52
Seahawks, Seattle
 team address, 328
 FieldTurf, 22
SEC (Southeastern Conference), 231
secondary, 46, 181-187
Seifert, George, 70
Senior Bowl, 233
set position, 38, 93
shading a guy's shoulder, 170
shedding blockers, 177
shifting (LOS), 142
shoes, 41-42
short-yardage defenses, 197-198
shotgun formation, 128
shoulder pads, 41

- side judges, 151
sideline reporters, 290
sidelines, rules, 18
signals, referees, 153
Singletary, Mike, 180, 204
Siragusa, Tony, 166
situational substitutions,
 defense, 195-196
skill players, 46
Slater, Jackie, 97
sleepers, 262
slide blocks, 96
slow-motion instant replay,
 290
smashmouth football, 128
Smith, Akili, 244
Smith, Bruce, 171
Smith, Emmitt, 71, 112, 120
 running style, 115
 rushing touchdown record,
 113
snap counts, 141
snapping the football, 15
snot bubbles, 8
socks, 42-43
soft spots, defenses, 194
Solomon, Jesse, 244
Southeastern Conference. *See*
 SEC
special teams, 47, 213-214
 categories, 214
 extra points, 223
 field goals, 223
 kick returners, 215
 kickers, 48
 kickoffs, 215-218
 punt returns, 221-222
 punters, 48
 punts, 220-221
speed receivers, 101
spies, linebackers, 179
spirals, 80
split ends, 100
split "T" formation, 117, 126
sports-talk radio, 291
Sportstalk.com, 291
St. Louis Rams, team address,
 328
stadiums, 24-25
 domes, 22
 surfaces, 22
Stagg, Amos Alonzo, 7
Staleys, Decatur, 66
Stallworth, John, 239
standards of excellence, 258
Stark, George, 90
Starr, Bart, 64
statistics
 passer rating system, 85-86
 quarterbacks, 87
 running backs, 120
 standards of excellence,
 258
 YAC (yards after catch),
 108
Staubach, Roger, 71, 77
Steel Curtain (Steelers), 69
Steelers, Pittsburgh, 69
 team address, 328
Stewart, Alex, 244
sticks, 20-21
strategies
 defense, 189-199
 3-4 defense, 203-204
 46 defense, 204-205
 alignments, 190-191
 attacking vs. reacting,
 190
 blitzing, 196-197
 combo coverages, 208
 dime defense, 207-208
 double eagle defense,
 206
 eagle defense, 205-206
 flex defense, 202
 nickel combination
 coverage, 209
 nickel defense, 207
 over/under defense, 203
 pass-coverage packages,
 206
 pass-stopping, 192-195
 philosophies, 202-211
 prevent defense,
 198-199
 quarter coverage,
 208-209
 run stopping, 191-192
 short-yardage, 197-198
 situational substitutions,
 195-196
 two-deep man-under
 zone coverage, 210
 two-deep zone coverage,
 209-210
 zone blitzes, 210-211
offense, 123-125
 air-it-out football, 129
 big-play football,
 129-130
 formations, 126-128
 run-and-shoot offense,
 130-131
 smashmouth football,
 128
 West-Coast offense, 130
strength of schedule, 269
stretching the defenses, 102
strong safeties, 184
strong side (offensive line),
 104
strong side linebackers, 177
stunts, defensive linemen,
 170
stupid questions (media), 287
substitutions, 43
subway alumni, 231
sudden death, 36
Super Bowl, 268, 271-272
 commercial cost, 277
 creation of, 271
 origin, 64
 rings, 270
 Vince Lombardi Trophy, 265

superstars, 258
superstitions, 298-303
surfaces, playing fields, 22-24
Swann, Eric, 234
Swann, Lynn, 239
sweeps, 119
swim-over moves, 107
swoop blocks, 94

T

tackle boxes, 167
tackle eligible receiver, 145
tackles
 defensive, 46
 offensive, 44
 uniform numbers, 45
tackling, 15, 90
tailgating, 306-308
takeaways, 125
taking the air out of the football, 128
talk radio, 291
Tampa Bay Buccaneers, team address, 328
Tarcy, Brian, 291
Tarkenton, Fran, 85
Taylor, Lawrence, 180
team addresses, 327-328
team relocations, 71, 280-281
teams, choosing who to root for, 5
telestrators, 289
television, 285-287
 camera angles, 290
 color analysts, 289-290
 commercials, 286
 contracts, 278
 games, 288
 journalists, 288-289
 personalities, coaches, 58-59
 play-by-play broadcasters, 289

 postgame shows, 288
 pregame shows, 287-288
 sideline reporters, 290
Tennessee Titans, team address, 328
Texans, Dallas, 249
Texans, Houston, 5, 249
 team address, 328
Texas A&M, NFL players, 230
Theisman, Joe, 9, 11, 244, 251, 272
Thomas, Derrick, sack record, 167
Thorpe, Jim, 65
three-four defense. *See* 3-4 defensive formation
three-wide receiver sets, 126
throwing lanes, 79, 92
throwing the ball away, 83
tie-breakers, divisional champions, 268
tight ends, 44, 103
 uniform numbers, 45
time
 commercials, 35
 game clock, 36
 game time, 35
 halves, 34-35
 overtime, 36
 play clock, 36
 quarters, 34-35
 time-outs, 36
 two-minute warnings, 35-36
time-outs, 36
Titans, Tennessee, team address, 328
Titans, New York, 249
Tittle, Y. A., last game, 5
touch passes, 80
touchdown dances, 29
Touchdown Jesus (Notre Dame), 231

touchdowns, 27, 29
 original point value, 28
 points, 16
 ways to score, 28
transition players, 276
trap blocks, 95
trench warfare, 47
trick plays, 145
 draw plays, 119
 end arounds, 108
trivalries, 314
Trump, Donald, 250
turf toe, 23
Turner, Norv, 132
two-deep man-under zone coverage, 210
two-deep zone coverage, 209-210
two-minute drill, 132
two-minute warnings, 35-36
two-point conversions, 31-32
 chart, 31
two-tight-end formation, 126

U

umpires, 150
under defense, 203
uniforms, 39-40
 changes, 300-301
 flak jackets, 41
 helmets, 40
 jerseys, 42-43
 logos, 42
 numbers, 45
 pads, 41
 pants, 42-43
 shoes, 41-42
 socks, 42-43
Unitas, Johnny, 67
United States Football League. *See* USFL
United Way Hometown Huddle, 9

University of Florida, NFL players, 230
 University of Miami (Florida), NFL players, 230
 University of Michigan, NFL players, 230
 University of Tennessee, NFL players, 230
 up-the-middle runs, 118
 USFL (United States Football League), 249-250
 using the clock, 107

V

Ventura, Jesse, 253
 veterans, 48-49
 Veterans Stadium, NeXturf, 22
 Vikings, Minnesota, team address, 328
 Vince Lombardi Trophy, 265
 violence, 8-9
Violent World of Sam Huff, The, 67
 von Schamann, Uwe, kicking record, 30

W

WAC (Western Athletic Conference), 231
 Walker, Herschel, 71, 244, 250
 Walsh, Bill, 60, 70, 131
 play scripting, 53
 War Rooms (NFL draft), 239
 Warfield, Paul, 109
 Warner, Kurt, 60, 71, 250
 Washington Redskins, 5, 70
 Hogs, The, 91
 team address, 328
 Waterfield, Bob, kicking record, 30
 weak side linebackers, 177
 Web sites, NFL, 327

Webster, Mike, 239
 wedges, 216
 weights, defense, 183
 Weinmeister, Arnie, 251
 West-Coast offenses, 60, 130
 Western Athletic Conference.
 See WAC
 WFL (World Football League), 249
 White, Randy, 172
 White, Reggie, 171, 250
 sack record, 167
 wide receivers. *See* receivers
 wild-card teams (playoffs), 268
 Williams, Doug, 70
 Williams, Hank, Jr., 267
 Williams, Ricky, 244
 Wilson, Larry, 187
 Wilson, Otis, 204
 Winslow, Kellen, 60
 Wolf, Ron, 261
 Woods, Ickey, Ickey Shuffle, 29
 workout warriors, 240
 World Football League. *See* WFL
 Wycheck, Frank, 162

X-Y-Z

X's (play diagrams), 52-54
 XFL (Extreme Football League), 253
 YAC (yards after catch), 108
 Young, Steve, 250
 Zampezi, Ernie, 132
 zone blitzes, 210-211
 zone-blocking, 96
 zone coverages, 185-186, 192-195



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