

## DEFENSING THE WISHBONE

I think most of us will want to know if you want to run some form of option or not and, if so, what kind of option you're familiar with.

Because the wishbone doesn't have any wings or flankers for down blocking, if you don't use option you're going to have a rough time getting outside unless you can teach your backs to load a DE.

That said, the wishbone is a marvelous formation. Genius abounds in its design. I would truly hate to play a good wishbone coach. Here are some points that a coach like me has to consider when defending the wishbone.

**Vertical Passing Game:** Although the horizontal passing game (from sideline to sideline) is one of the worst in football, the vertical passing game (from LOS to endzone) is outstanding. On most of your wishbone running plays the playside end is assigned to block the safety and the playside HB is assigned to block the corner. If you use these vertical blocking routes as their pass routes, the defender must make a critical decision. Is the offensive player coming towards him executing a block or a pass route? If the defender reads block, he'll try and avoid the offensive player. If he reads pass, he'll try and stay with him. This is where the offensive player can play games with the defender's head. On a run play, instead of blocking the defender, he may blow right past him. The defender may take the bait and go with him, which is better than any block. Then, on a pass play, the offensive receiver may come right at the defender, lower his shoulder to block him, and then deliberately miss him by an inch and take off downfield. The defender reads the attempted block as a run and sucks up to stop it, leaving the receiver wide open behind him. The completion of a vertical pass, while admittedly a difficult throw, is almost always a touchdown.

Yet another receiving threat is the FB. He is often the first handoff read for the defense and he can hit either of the "A" and "B" gaps. If a handoff is faked to him (and it often is), the FB is usually quickly forgotten as the defense pursues the other run options (keep, pitch, counter handoff, etc). The FB can run straight down the middle of the field from his "A" or "B" gap release and very likely have no one on him as the safeties have other assignments. Again, the vertical pass is difficult to complete but the chances are the FB will be wide open.

Wishbone teams can often increase their chances of completing a vertical pass by precise timing of their patterns. The QB counts his steps while the receiver counts seconds before looking back. The receiver also does not run vertical at full speed (He may run full speed to get past his defender but he'll slow down a bit as he gets open). The QB times his release to the receiver being at 85-90% speed. The receiver can now adjust his speed to the flight of the ball, speeding up if the QB overthrew him or slowing down if the pass is underthrown and thereby increase the chances of a completion. So good fakes by the receiver coupled with a timed release by the QB to a receiver who can adjust to the ball will produce touchdowns.

**Stalk Blocks:** Due to the vertical pass threat the defensive backs are very conscious of getting "beat deep". They seldom crowd the LOS and, instead, sit back and read. This makes them easy targets for stalk blocks. Stalk blocks are a marvelous downfield block. Unlike drive blocks, they don't stop the defender or drive him back. They simply delay and impede the defensive backs movement and a good stalk blocker can stay on his man quite awhile. If the blocker can stay on his man for 4 seconds, that's enough time for the runner to gain 30 yards. Stalk blocks are easy to

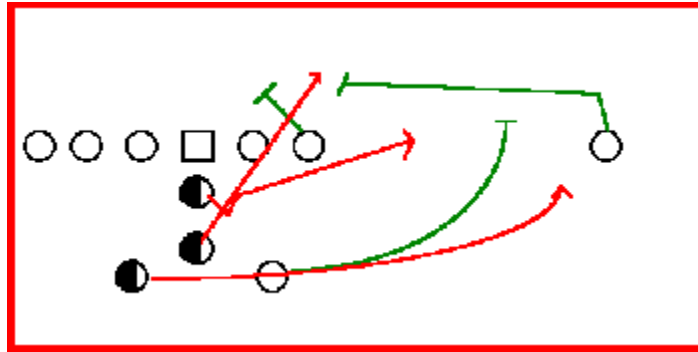
teach and frustrating to youth defenders who have not seen them and who are quite apt to throw a punch at their stalker and net the offense another 15 yards for a personal foul. Due to stalk blocks, sit and read techniques, and head games by the receiver on the defender, about 3-4 defenders on every play are not involved in stopping the running game until the gain is already past 5 yards (And probably more). This means that it's up to the down linemen and the linebackers to stop the run early - And since one of those defenders is a DE playing the backside of the play, there's really only 6-7 defenders that can be put on the ball. Against them the wishbone has five linemen and three backs, so they outnumber the defense 8 to 6 or 7 at the point of the attack (POA).

Lines of Force: Since the wishbone outnumbers the defense at the POA, it only has to get one lead blocking back out in front of the ballcarrier to create as many blockers on the play as there are defenders in those first 5 yards. If you look at the alignment of the backs in the backfield and draw a straight line between every combination of two backs, you'll find all the directions that the wishbone can run with one back lead blocking for another. It's virtually every direction possible. If you draw from the HB through the FB, you'll get a line that passes through the "B" and "C" gaps which means you can power inside or off tackle to either side of the formation. If you draw a line from HB to HB you can see where the offense can run power sweep to either side of the field. There are even combinations possible where two backs can lead block for the third or all three backs can block for the QB. Opportunities to run power abound in this formation.

Misdirection: Because one back following another creates such power at the POA the defense must react by getting bodies to the POA as quickly as possible. Thus, when two backs take off in one direction, everybody on the defense follows them. Unfortunately, this leaves the third back unaccounted for. He can actually take the handoff and run in the opposite direction of the first two backs (called a counter) and the whole defense will be chasing the play the wrong way. Defending the wishbone's misdirection plays are very, very difficult at the youth level.

At any rate, I know you requested a list of specific plays (And I have several in mind) and I've given none, but I thought I would give you the defense's view of the wishbone. Knowing what gives the defense fits can help you in selecting plays for your offense. I'm sure a few coaches will speak up with their suggestions and you can compare them to what I've described here. I hope it helps because it sure took me a long time to type this up.

## WISHBONE OPTION



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### ANSWER:By Brian Terry

1. The Will linebacker knocks the hell out of the fullback 2. The 5 Tech. knocks the hell out of the QB, because he correctly read the downblock by the Offensive tackle. 3. Thus the outside linebacker and the corner back will kill the halfback.

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### ANSWER:By C.C. Law

I run the 27 defense with a monster concept(only now we call him the strong safety). It lets us work out both 3 deep and 4 deep secondary concepts. To defend the inside veer, we line our 2 techniques head up and tell them to attack the guards head on. The objective is to drive the guard backward. We are trying to disrupt the path of the dive back. On the split end side, the end moves to a 5 technique and attacks the QB right now forcing a quick pitch. On the tight end side, the end plays a 7 technique. He wrong arms the TE and steps down for where the tackle has left from attacking the QB if flow is his way. The Will linebacker is stacked on the 5tech and responsible for the dive back(B gap). The Sam linebacker is lined up on the outside eye of the Tackle and is responsible for the dive back. The Mike reads flow and fills the B gap to either side working from inside out on dive back to QB to pitch. The Corners read their respective end. If the end blocks down they come. If he arc blocks they play contain forcing the pitch back inside and making all tackles from outside in. The FS rolls with flow looking for a receiver coming deep. If the receiver blocks he comes on and takes the pitch. Over the years our corners have had very good luck defeating the arc block and frequently making the tackle. Since we attack the arc block aggressively, they have been able to force the pitch man back into the pursuit when they cannot. Our basic rule that we drill home is not to let them beat you outside.

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### **ANSWER: By Craig Barton**

The best defense to use against your option would be a Split 6 that Penn State has used for many years. I believe this for the same reasons Jerry Sandusky explains in his book "Coaching Linebackers". -The defense presents a look not often seen. -It is a balanced defense. -The defense is strong against the outside running game because the defensive ends are aligned in a good position to immediately contain running plays in their direction. -In addition, the defensive ends are in an advantageous to contain the sprint out pass game. -It is relatively easy to stunt with any of the linebackers from this defensive look. If you need any more info, don't hesitate to e-mail me back with questions. Good Luck! Craig Barton

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### **ANSWER: By Daryl Daye**

We have been fortunate to have success over the years vs. the wishbone playing the 4-3. We feel that if you keep your Defense balanced 3x3 dive, pitch, Qb Then back up the mike to 6yds and by tightening the 5 tech and playing a stand up 6 tech on the TE to squeeze the veer allows the mike to get out both sides and create our 4x4. Then we have a chance to play with out getting out numbered. Vs. the play diagramed we often sent our S/S to the split side or clouded the corner this gave us the extra guy. What defense do you feel gives the wishbone the most trouble ? I am the D-coord. here at Liberty Univ. in Va. and would enjoy your insight. DD

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### **ANSWER: By Gary Shaw**

I run a 5-2. I would gap the weakside tackle inside. Pinch the weakside d-end qback responsibilities. Contain responsibilities to weakside corner. Cheat weak safety up to POA. Strong side lb to scrape down keying on 2 back. Strong safety comes up quickly w/3 back responsibilities.

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### **ANSWER: By GSmithvike**

Your corner reads 1 crack , he plays pitch. End takes dive willie plays qb. olb also playing pitch he cant get cracked.

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### **ANSWER: By Jay Shannon**

hey coach...man this is a tough one. We run a 62 standard defence with the backers either in the A or B gap. Our will line backer and week guard (outside shade of your gaurd, take the dive. Our tackle lines up outside shade of your week tackle and if your tackle crunches down, our tackle is

taught to take qb. We are in 3 deep so corner has hash to side responsibility, responsible for outside in attack and has deepest man to side. Safety and strong backer are slow drag read and stalk back on strong side (ball carrier). Our end has to shoot across and stuff D gap responsibility to buy more time for backside pursuit. Again, against 60 your wishbone option can sting for many points, so we have to have studs at every position. Write back and share with me. I love to get advice!!! Coach Shannon

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**ANSWER: By Jay Downey**

What I do here in Crandon, Wisconsin is we run a 4-4. Our MLB's and two DT's are responsible for FB, where he goes they go. Our DE is reading dive to QB and takes dive only when dive is a threat to his inside shoulder, otherwise he has QB and make him pay. Our OLB's are responsible for QB to pitch reading the back opposite where they are lined up. When that back comes my way I come. I put my best cover corner on their split end and he will pound on him all game paying close attention to not allowing him to crack inside. Our FS is an alley player, he stalks, and spies on the QB. We see a lot of option football here and we have had success in defeating the wishbone especially, using this defense. Sincerely Jay Downey

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**ANSWER: By Jeff Woolery**

I would run a 4-3 with man coverage, have the corners flip and cover the double wide outs, leave the free on top have the strong line up and cover the TE that started the game or was the better receiver. Then have the linebackers match up with the remaining TE and the lone running back. Mix it up with stunts from all over the field, as well as line stunts and keep the offense off balance.

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**ANSWER: By JMITCH5962**

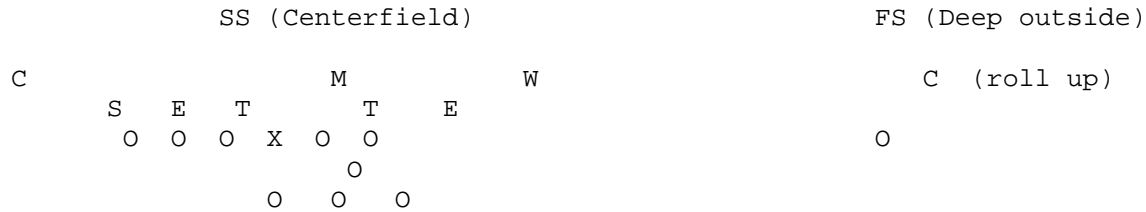
I use a 44 defense, the tackle takes the full back. The end takes the quarterback, the outside linebacker and corner back take the pitch man. Inside linebacker will help in pursuit down the line in case the tackle or end miss their man.

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## **ANSWER: By Lew Pytel**

My standard Defense is a 4-3; we like to play 5 under 2 deep zone. We also play 3 deep and roll up the corner.

My suggestion to defense this play is the following.



My DE are on a free rush off the OT butt with no contain responsibility.

My WLB plays the QB & Pitch man; in other words he does not commit, he lets the QB come to him (this takes some discipline). If the QB pitches the ball he turns and runs down the LOS (not across the LOS). By not committing the WLB forces the QB to come to him.

The Corner that has "rolled up" is in perfect position to contain the pitch while the WLB pursues from inside out.

This technique of the WLB playing the QB was taught to me (or I should say used against me at practice) at the Univ. of Miami by Coach Walt Kichefski (who taught it to Ted Hendricks).

Lew Pytel

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## **ANSWER: By Brent Reidenbach**

First question I have: what are the blocking responsibilities of the play side guard and center? We ran the 5-3 last year against a team that played a wishbone set most of the game. I defended it this way: my noseguard and MLB were responsible for the dive back ... my DT and DE were responsible for the QB ... and my WOLB and the QB were responsible for the pitch man.

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## **ANSWER: By Tony Theriault**

Just found your site. First thing I saw was your diagram of the triple option. I run a base 4-3, and defend the option this way. DE has first threat. Should be the dive in your example. Would also get help from the sam backer. The DE has put hands on the TE to slow his progress inside. The DE is playing what I call a 7 technique, or outside shade of the TE. The next threat is handled by the SS. His key is the TE. When the TE releases inside on the down block, the SS is coming NOW. In your example the SS would have the QB. Yes there is a crack coming, but if the SS

reacts quickly enough to the TE, he will be out of the way of a legal crack. Also, the corner would be coming down with the crack, so he could help with the QB. The pitch is handled by the FS. I am in a 3 deep coverage here, with FS 10 yards off of the ball head up the center. The FS keys the QB. Ball down the line he is coming to the pitch. What about the dump? As the FS is coming down the line, he intersects the TE path off of the ball, and is in position to defend the dump. Can also play this with hard corners. Strong corner has the pitch, SS still has second threat, DE has dive with help from interior line. We have used this technique successfully at Cisco Junior College and Cisco High School, both of which are in Cisco, Texas, for at least the past 12 years. The same technique is now being used at Navarro, Texas College in Corsicana. oops...Misread your diagram and question. You want to stop the triple option to the WEAK side. O.K. here goes.. Everything is basically the same. Just switch it over. The DE is going to be responsible for the dive. He squeezes the hole down on the OT's down block. The Will linebacker is responsible for the QB. Will's alignment is 4 and 4 off of the OT. When he reads the OT's down block, he steps up next to the DE, and waits for the QB. He waits because that makes the QB wait a little longer to make the pitch/keep decision, and that enables the FS to get to the pitch. If you want to be real technical about, the FS is playing dive to QB to pitch. The DE and Will should keep their shoulders and hips square to the LOS, this way if the Qb pitches, and they are SURE about it, they can redirect to the pitch quicker. This can be played from cover two pretty much the same way. The only change would be that the CB would take the pitch. Hope this is helpful to you. Once again, even with the crack involved, this is effective because the CB should be coming in on the crack with the WR. Tony Theriault Covington High School Covington, Texas

**This article deals with defending a triple option out of the wishbone with an eight man front defense. But since the adjustments concerns mostly linemen and secondary it is easy to use the same things with a seven men front. In this case usually the strong safety is given the responsibilities of the strongside outside LB. The picture (Fig.1) shows a typical 5-3 Defense and wishbone offense with a single TE. The numbers on offense indicate the options the offense has on the triple option.**

- 1. Dive*
- 2. QB Keep*
- 3. Pitch to tailback*

**The aim is to take away all options but one. On an Option play the outside man is usually called the option man and is the key for the QB.**

### *Strong side rush*

**There is an automatic adjustment we use whenever the offense aligns with three RBs. The strongside CB moves up to the line of scrimmage and the strongside shifts one**





create uncertainty on the defensive side where the ball is going to. By rushing the CB on every down, having the end following him and Mike stopping the dive we take away all options but one, so everyone will know where the ball is. If either the FB gets it or the QB keeps it, the play will be over early. If the QB is hit and the play continues, TB has to have the ball.

### *Weakside Rush*

This scheme (rushing the CB, End headup) also works on the weakside. Then FS has to move over to the strongside to cover the TE.

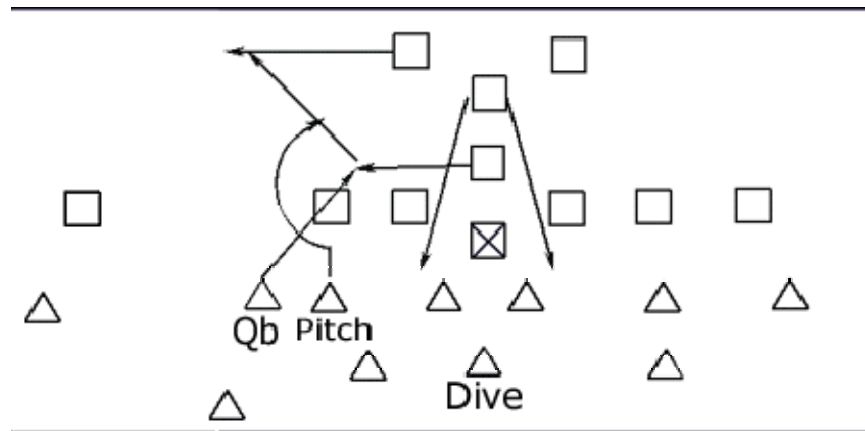


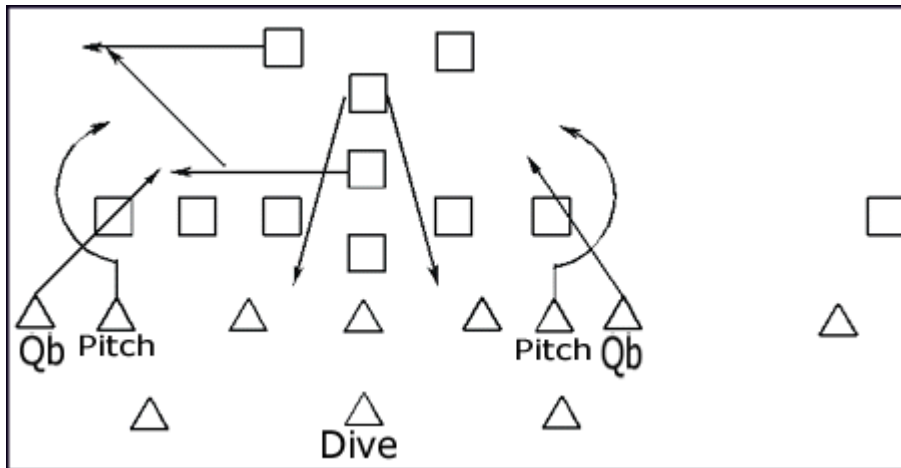
Fig. 2: Weakside rush against triple option out of the wishbone



### *Double Rush*

In cases where the defense has an advantage in team speed or an exceptional athletic outside Linebacker (Sam), it is possible to have both the Free Safety and the Cornerback rush to the inside. This scheme is also advisable when the QB has a poor arm, and or the offense is keying the defense (rushing CB) for the direction of their play.

This one is exceptionally effective in short yardage situations where a run option is almost certain.



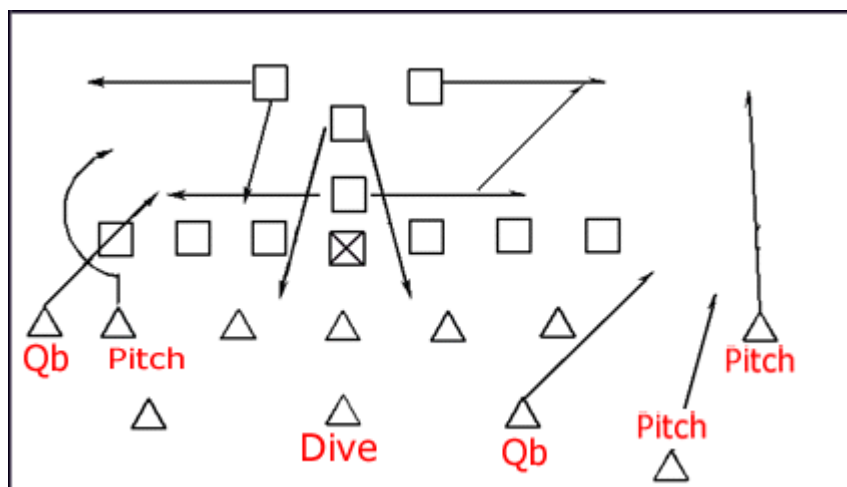
**Fig. 3: Double rush with CB and FS against the triple option**

The problem there is the TE and the read on him. On a pass option the TE has to block first, then he releases on a post or out route behind the LBs.

Sam has to make the read on his keys (Guard/Tackle and TE) correctly to recognize the pass and cover the TE. With two men blitzing (CB and FS) there should not be much time for the QB to throw.

The weak/split CB should be aligned to the inside of his receiver to prevent the easy completion on a slant route. The one who is trailing the play is responsible for reverse (Chase contain).

*Double Tight Adjustment*



**Fig. 4: Double tight adjustment with two different techniques to defend the triple option.**

**When the offense lines up with two Tight Ends we play a different tactic to each side. We determine the side to which the option is preferably run, as the strongside (mostly left, due to right handed QBs). On this side we play the usual scheme with the rushing CB, attacking the option and forcing the QB to pitch as soon as possible. We take away his decision and make him pay on every down. On the ,weak' side we take away the pitchman forcing the QB to keep the ball and chase him down with FS and Will.**

***Alignment changes vs Double Tight***

**The additional TE on the side, we consider the weakside, is ignored when finding the correct lineup. Instead we move the CB to a position 3 to 4 yds outside the TE and half a yard back (he is responsible for the pitchman on run and covers the TE short and to the outside on pass). The FS moves up to about 7 yds deep and on the TE outside shoulder (on run he is responsible for alley support, attacking the ball. On pass he covers the TE deep and to the inside) Will is responsible for the QB on the option to his side.**

**On our chosen strongside nothing changes. See the single rush for details.**

**The double rush also works against the double tight, but it should be used only occasionally and on sure running downs, because it puts enormous pressure on FS and Will. They can't misread or the play will end in a TD.**

**Have the CB rush from the outside right behind the TE. Then FS has pitch on run and TE on pass. Will has to chase down the QB on both run and pass.**

**These adjustments worked well for us whenever we played option teams. The system is not foolproof and there are some ways to block against this but it is still good enough to stop any option team.**

***The keys to success are:***

- Mike has to stop the dive!**
- Sam should be the best athlete on the team**
- Do not get caught off balance with the pass option.**