

Before discussing alignments, fronts, or coverages, one thing must be clear:

**Your players must understand what you believe in defensively.**

When players know why they are doing something, they play faster and with more confidence. Over the years, my defensive philosophy has always been to stop the run first and foremost. Majority of High School football teams, yes there are some outliers, will not throw the ball 50 times a game, they want to run the ball and shorten the game. So it only makes sense that the first thing as a defense you need to be able to do is stop the opposing offense from running the football. You might be in a completely different circumstance where most of your opponents are Air Raid teams that sling the ball around – whatever the case though, make a determination on what your focus as a defense will be.

### **Our Defensive Identity**

Our 4-2-5 defense is built on four pillars:

1. Alignment
2. Assignment
3. Responsibility
4. Effort

If we align correctly and understand what our assignments are based on the situation (down, distance, time, etc.), then do our job - the effort usually takes care of itself.

We want to be:

- Sound first - *Know your responsibility based on the situation*
- Fast second - *Play with confidence and get to the ball quickly*
- Aggressive third – *Arrive at the ball with bad intentions*

- Creative last – *After we have mastered the first three, we can start to tweak*

## **Alignment over Movement**

Alignment is the foundation of everything we do.

Rather than relying on constant pre-snap movement, our defense prioritizes:

- Proper spacing
- Leverage
- Consistent landmarks

Once you get everyone lined up in the right spot and understanding their assignments, you can start to add movement into the equation, but alignment must be mastered first.

Poor alignment which in many instances results from not understanding your assignment causes more explosive plays than poor technique.

## **Rules Over Calls**

High school players do not need more calls—they need better rules. We discussed earlier how many players play two ways and have to master an offensive playbook which in many cases is complex, there is no need to put more calls on their plate if you can avoid it.

Instead of asking players to memorize:

- Multiple checks
- Formation-specific calls

- Situational adjustments

We teach:

- If/then rules
- Read-based responses
- Consistent responsibilities

For example:

- “If the OT blocks down, I squeeze and look for pullers to spill.”
- “If the OT tries to reach block me, I maintain my gap integrity and fight to keep outside leverage.”

Rules reduce thinking and at the end of the day, increase speed.

### **Fast, Physical and Sound**

I read this somewhere and it resonates completely with my philosophy on defense:

- Speed without soundness is chaos.
- Soundness without speed is passive.

We want to play fast, but under control and within the scheme of the defense. But if we are too worried about doing everything right, that means we are overthinking and not playing fast.

The 4-2-5 defense demands:

- Fast keys
- Physical tackling
- Relentless pursuit

We are not reckless. We play with controlled aggression.

### **What we Refuse to Compromise On**

Every defensive system must have non-negotiables.

For our 4-2-5, those things are:

- Correct alignment every snap
- Knowing your job
- No free runners in the box
- Clear coverage communication
- Tackling with leverage

If something violates these principles, we will remove it from our system.

### **Teaching One System and Teaching it Well**

Rather than installing multiple fronts and every coverage under the sun, we commit to:

- One base structure
- Some complementary answers & adjustments – after we have mastered the base
- Repetition over variation

When all else fails and the game is on the line – we need to be able to trust that the system we have in place and have been working on all year will come through for us. It's like asking an Offensive Coordinator – "It's 4th & 1, two minutes left in the State

Championship game. You have the ball and the opposing team is out of timeouts. You get the 1st down, the game is over and you win. What play are you running?" A good OC should be able to ramble off a bread & butter play you have been using all season and know what to do and how to do it. If they answer "Well, depends...". Then you don't have an identity.

We want our players to master a defense and be able to play fast - not have to think when the ball is snapped, regardless of the situation.

### **Accountability and Communication**

The defense belongs to the players, not the call sheet.

That means:

- Safeties own coverage communication
- Linebackers own fits and front alignment
- Overhangs own leverage

When players are empowered, mistakes get corrected faster. I track tendencies of offenses and spend the week during practice aligning our fronts and secondary to the top 5 offensive formations that we see on film. (We will show additional ones as well, just so we know how to align, but you will be amazed how the kids start picking it up themselves as the season moves along).

I designate one of our ILB's to set the front based on what we practice all week and our safeties know a base coverage or two we could always run based on formation. The key to adjusting is talking to your players during the game and understand what is and is not working. This gives your players ownership in the game plan in real time and ensures they stay in the moment and don't just become robots on the field.

## **Set the Standard**

Set the standard with your team at the beginning of the season. Make sure they understand that perfection is unattainable – but if you let them know that the standard is consistent execution, they will strive to make sure they understand their roles on the team and how it fits as part of the bigger picture on defense.

If our players can:

- Line up correctly
- Know their responsibility
- Play fast and physical

Then the defense will be successful—regardless of opponent more times than not.

## **Moving Forward**

With the philosophy and foundation now established, we can now build the defense piece by piece:

- Personnel roles
- Base alignments
- Run fits
- Coverage structure

Everything that follows will tie back to these principles.

If it doesn't, it doesn't belong.