

A good defensive system gives you answers. A good game plan tells you which answers to use.

At the High School level, game planning is not about out-scheming an opponent—rather it's about eliminating uncertainty for your players. That's why I like the 4-2-5 at the High School level so much, it allows you to do this by keeping the structure of the defense intact while adjusting emphasis.

The goal each week should be very simple: Play fast, reduce mistakes, and force the offense to earn everything.

Game Planning Philosophy

Every weekly plan must answer three questions:

1. What does the offense want to do and how do they want to do it?
2. What are we willing to give up?
3. What do we refuse to allow?

You do not need to – nor can you - stop everything. What you need to stop is what they rely on.

Scouting the Offense

Start with tendencies, then go to formations.

Run Game

- Primary run (inside zone, power, counter, veer, option, etc.)
- Directional preference or preference by down/distance or field location, etc.
- QB involvement in run game – does he run or does he not want to?

Pass Game

- Dropback vs RPO (And is it a true RPO? Or is he just throwing regardless of how you play it?)
- Who are the vertical and main threats
- Favorite concepts on 3rd down

Tempo

- Base tempo
- Situational tempo
- Check-with-me or no-huddle

Identify the Stress Points

Every offense tries to stress the defense somewhere.

Common stress points:

- Overhang defenders
- Inside linebackers
- Safeties vs RPO
- Corners in space

Once identified, build rules around those points, don't just create new calls.

Base First, Adjustments Second

The foundation of every game plan is going to be our base defense.

Our weekly call sheet typically looks like:

- 60–70% base coverage (Cover 3, Quarters or maybe man)
- 20–30% complementary answers
- 5–10% change-ups

If you can't stop an offense with your base, pressure won't fix it, it might just make it worse.

Choosing Your Base Coverage

Start with your “go-to” coverage. The best defenses I have ever coached had 2 CB's who were shut down which allowed me to play single high man coverage. This allowed me to use my overhangs and linebackers to put pressure on the QB while stacking the box against the run. If you can play man coverage consistently because you have the horses, you are in a good position to be successful.

But back to our ebook about using cover 3 and quarters...

When to Lean Cover 3

- Run-heavy teams – allows the overhangs and FS to help more vs the run
- Limited vertical threats
- Strong play-action game

When to Lean Quarters

- Spread teams
- Vertical slot receivers
- Heavy RPO usage
- Down and Distance if you can change up in game

Along with everything else, choose what coverage is your primary. Then which ones become situational.

Run Game Emphasis Planning

Do not change fits—change what and where you are going to emphasize.

Examples:

- Power team → Overhangs need to help and will be a point of emphasis
- Inside Zone team → Linebacker read/scrape discipline
- Zone Read w/running QB run team → LB reads, gap exchange focus

Need to make sure our players understand from Monday's first scout:

“This is the run we must stop.”

Planning vs Tempo

Tempo defeats communication—not structure.

Rules vs Tempo

- Let LB's call fronts from week of practice – make changes between possessions
- Let FS call coverage – use hand signals
- No late movement

The defense must be comfortable being uncomfortable. This is something we stress during the summer practice period. There are times when we will just start firing plays off at our defense and make the players get uncomfortable and start getting frustrated. They need to feel what this will be like in games and how important it is to make calls and communicate to get people in the right spot.

I will always tell our LB (who calls the front) and our FS (who calls the coverage) – I would rather have the entire team be in the wrong front/coverage than half the team doing one thing and the other half doing something different. If the entire team is playing the wrong front and coverage, we should avoid breakdowns and can probably still make a play. It's when some kids are doing one thing and others something different that the defense breaks down.

Third Down Planning

Third down is where clarity matters most. As part of your call sheet for Friday night and also your game planning during the week – you need to understand what you want to do on 3rd downs. The goal is to get your defense off the field.

Know what you want to do in different scenarios:

Third-and-Short

- Base front
- Tight coverage leverage
- Aggressive fits

Third-and-Medium

- Best coverage
- Minimal pressure
- Force checkdowns

Third-and-Long

- Protect sticks
- Make the QB throw underneath

Do not over-pressure on third down, but do pressure. Coverage usually wins here.

Red Zone Planning

Space shrinks. Rules must tighten.

Red Zone Emphasis

- Safeties play closer to the line of scrimmage
- Corners need to focus on their leverage
- Linebackers read downhill
- Put in special coverages in the red zone if needed

The goal is not necessarily to get turnovers—the goal is ultimately to hold your opponent to field goals.

Scripted Adjustments

Have answers ready before the game starts. This is what you need to work on during practice all week.

Examples:

- If they motion to empty → adjust overhangs and coverage
- If they isolate the boundary → safety cheats
- If they show trips → widen the linebacker to that side

Script these responses so you're kids do them automatically come Friday nights.

Friday Night Call Structure

Keep it simple for yourself and easy to read. Too much just causes confusion on your part.

Recommended sections:

- Base calls
- Run emphasis reminders
- Down/Distance ideas
- Red zone
- Tempo defense
- Pressure packages

If it doesn't fit on one sheet, it's too much.

Communicating the Plan to the Players

Players don't need the entire plan.

They need:

- The base
- The emphasis
- The non-negotiables

In meetings, say:

“Here's what we're stopping, here's what we're okay with, and here's what can't happen.”

Final Thoughts on Game Planning

The best game plans don't feel clever, they feel comfortable. You aren't reinventing the wheel on Friday nights. You should be playing the same defense in your state championship game that you played in your scrimmage pre-season. With the same

fronts, coverages and pressures. Yes, you might have made some tweaks and adjustments along the way, but the base defense is the same defense you've been working with all season.

If your players:

- Know what's coming
- Understand their role
- Trust the system

Then the 4-2-5 becomes more than a defense—it becomes an advantage.