

The best defensive system that players cannot easily learn and digest is useless.

The difference between a defense that looks good on paper or YouTube and one that works on Friday night has a lot to do with how it is taught. This chapter outlines a teaching and installation plan built for real High School football: meaning limited practice time, mixed ability levels, and constant roster change.

The goal should not be to install everything. The goal should be to install what matters first and get good at it, then add to it as you go.

Teaching Philosophy

We teach defense using four priorities:

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

If players line up correctly and understand their assignment and responsibility, effort will follow.

Don't move to the next concept until alignment is clean.

Language & Terminology

You can use whatever terminology you want, as long as it remains:

- Consistent
- Simple
- Shared across positions

Avoid teaching different words for the same concept to different position groups.

Examples:

- “Apex” should always mean the same alignment
- “Force” always means force the ball back inside
- “Alley” always refers to safety support

Players should hear the same words in meetings, walkthroughs, practices and games.

Installation Progression Overview

How you install the defense is up to you, but we usually start to teach the basic concepts in indy’s by position group and then start to bring together position groups to put it all together.

For instance – we’ll teach the DL the different front alignments while teaching the linebackers the same fronts and what they are called. Then, after a few days, we will bring those two groups together and line up against trash cans and have the linebackers call out the different fronts so both groups can now start to see how they fit together. We will do the same thing with our coverages.

If I lay out how we install our defense, over time, it would look something like:

Section 1

- Base alignment – whole team
- Base front – DL/LB’s
- Base run fits – DL/LB’s to start then add overhangs
- Cover 3 – our base coverage we use from day one

Section 2 (Only after we are comfortable with Section 1 being learned)

- Quarters coverage
- Motion rules
- Basic adjustments vs 3x1
- Continue with fronts and run fits with DL and LB's - Teach spill (wrong arm), gap exchange, proper leverage, etc.

Section 3

- Pressure packages
- Situational calls
- Man coverage & tweaks to cover 3 and quarters

Again, you can teach it however you want, but our goal is to make sure we have the basics covered before we move on to the next section. By our first game, if we are solid in our run fits and stopping the run and sit in cover 3 the whole game, we will be in good shape. (Usually we'll start to call other coverages every few possessions just to start getting the secondary more comfortable)

Pre-Season Installation Plan - Possibly Spring Ball (10 Day Plan)

This plan assumes:

One defensive practice period per day (Whether it is a long or short period doesn't matter)

Day 1

- Defensive alignment done in indy's
- Base front walkthrough done in indy's

- Cover 3 shell with secondary only

Day 2

- Defensive alignment done in indy's
- Linebackers start to understand reads
- Overhang alignments & teach force
- Secondary continue working on cover-3 concepts

Day 3

- Front alignment (Under the umbrella) done with front six vs trash cans
- Secondary continue with cover-3 against routes
- Begin to introduce linebackers into coverage

Day 4

- Run fits – runs vs trash cans and see fits and how umbrella works together
- Secondary continue with cover-3 against routes – 7v7 work

Day 5

- Inside run for umbrella
- Secondary – 7v7

Day 6

- Inside run
- Introduce Quarters to secondary

Day 7

- Inside run – incorporate overhangs
- Continue with cover-3 and quarters

Day 8

- Inside run session w/overhangs
- Quarters and cover-3 with secondary
- 1st Team session

Day 9

- Quarters and cover-3 review with secondary including LB's
- DL review fronts
- 2nd Team session

Day 10

- Team Session #3

By the end of the pre-season 10-day period, you should be able to have a full team session vs a scout offense and run your basic fronts and coverages. This will set you up for any summer sessions or 7v7 sessions you might have come up.

Summer Session Practices

Many teams nowadays do a lot of 7v7 work during the summertime and it allows you to get work in on your coverages. But not every day is taken up by these tournaments, so it does leave some time for practices as well where you can start to introduce some additional tweaks to your coverages and fronts.

Coverage work during summer:

- Work on man coverage early and often throughout the summer
- Teach man off, press, catch, etc.
- Introduce trap and other concepts into quarters coverage based on how much your team can handle.
- Continue to work through cover-3 and quarters

Add any special coverage you want to run for trips or empty sets and make sure to review motion pickup

- Spend every 7x7 period working on communication within the secondary
 - I'm not a big fan of the 7v7 tournaments. Some schools in our area hold 3 or 4 team "practice" 7v7's where coaches can be on the field and coach up while playing against other competition – I prefer these much better than the hoopla of all these 7v7 tournaments.
 - To me, it's not about winning in the summer – one of my coaches once said to a player who got all hyped up in a 7's game "They don't give rings away in June son.." It's about teaching in the summer and running the same defense over the summer that I will run on Friday nights.
- Spend the time with your DL during these tournaments getting better at technique – attacking pressure, wrong-arm (spill), pash rush, reading blocks, etc.

Once you get through the "dog days of summer", it's time to get ready for the season and now you need a whole new plan to put in place for in season work..

Many teams have a "summer camp" that they either go to or hold at their school where they hold multiple practices per day for a couple of days to get ready for the season. At this point I tend to run a lot of team sessions and put in our pressure packages since

we have most of our base defense in and the kids have been running it for a few months now.

Weekly In-Season Install Plan

Again, customize these plans to suit your needs, but with limited time to prepare for Friday nights, its important to have a solid plan in place for the week and what you want to accomplish to be best prepared for Friday night.

Saturday/Sunday

- Opponent film breakdown
 - Should split this up among your coaches to each take a game to review and tag within applications like HUDL or whatever you use.
 - Need to put together tendencies and review top 5 run and top 5 pass plays and out of what formations they like to run them.
 - Have an initial plan together for how you want to attack the opponent

Monday

- Scout review of the opponent
 - Top formations, are they a run/pass heavy team and what %'s, what do they like to do out of each formation, top players, etc.
 - Found its best to take the first 15-20 minutes of my defensive practice time on Monday and actually review this with the entire defense on the field. (In small schools, many kids don't read scouting reports)
 - Discuss any adjustments we will make to formations or coverages at this point

- Inside run period – work with the adjustments
- 7v7 period – work with the adjustments
- If time, do a team session – but not as important on Monday to do full team. I'd rather make sure we are prepared for run and pass and a quick scout review.

Tuesday

- Coverage emphasis – 7v7
- Inside run
- Full-speed team with adjustments

Wednesday

- Adjust anything that needs adjusting after first team session on Tuesday
- Inside run (again, my philosophy is stop the run, so I do a lot of this)
- Situational football (3rd downs, goal line, red zone, coming out, end of half, etc.)
- Team session

Thursday

- Walkthrough only
 - At minimal top 3-5 formations and top 3-5 plays (run & pass) out of those formations.
 - Make sure alignment and assignment are on target
 - Ensure communication

Practice Structure

Each defensive practice should include:

- Indy (technique)
- Group (fits and coverage)
- Team (execution)
- Early season we do a lot of tackling

Nowadays you can practice tackling even without pads if you are doing hawk tackling or some derivative of that.

Indy Period Focus

Defensive Line

- Block recognition
- Hand placement
- Gap discipline & assignment

Linebackers

- Read steps & footwork
- Scrape technique
- Block destruct

Overhangs

- Apex alignment
- Run-pass recognition

- Open-field tackling
- Leverage

Secondary

- Eye discipline
- Leverage
- Communication
- Responsibility

Handling Mistakes

Mistakes are part of learning.

When errors occur:

1. Slow the rep down, walk thru
2. Re-teach the rule
3. Rep it multiple times

Keeping it Simple on Friday Nights

Friday night should be the easiest part of the week for the defense. A coach once told me the hardest job between Mon and Thurs is being a defensive coordinator and the hardest job on Friday night is being an offensive coordinator. There's a lot of truth in there to some extent.

On game night:

- You should know your alignment by formation without even having to call it – let your LBs make the call

- Talk to your players to see what is happening and what is and is not working. Give your players some say in what you are doing – having them have ownership is huge to keeping them locked in
- Above all - trust the process and rules that got you to that point.

The defense, along with the opposing offense, should feel familiar on Friday night, not new.

Final Thoughts on Teaching

The best defenses are not overloaded — they are well-trained.

If players:

- Understand & trust the system
- Understand their assignment and alignment
- Do their job

Your defense will play fast, confident, and physical.

That is the ultimate goal.