

**THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO**

# **FOOTBALL DEFENSE**

**A 250-PAGE BOOKLET  
FEATURING  
15 FANTASTIC DEFENSIVE  
STRATEGIES**



**FootballAdvantage.com**



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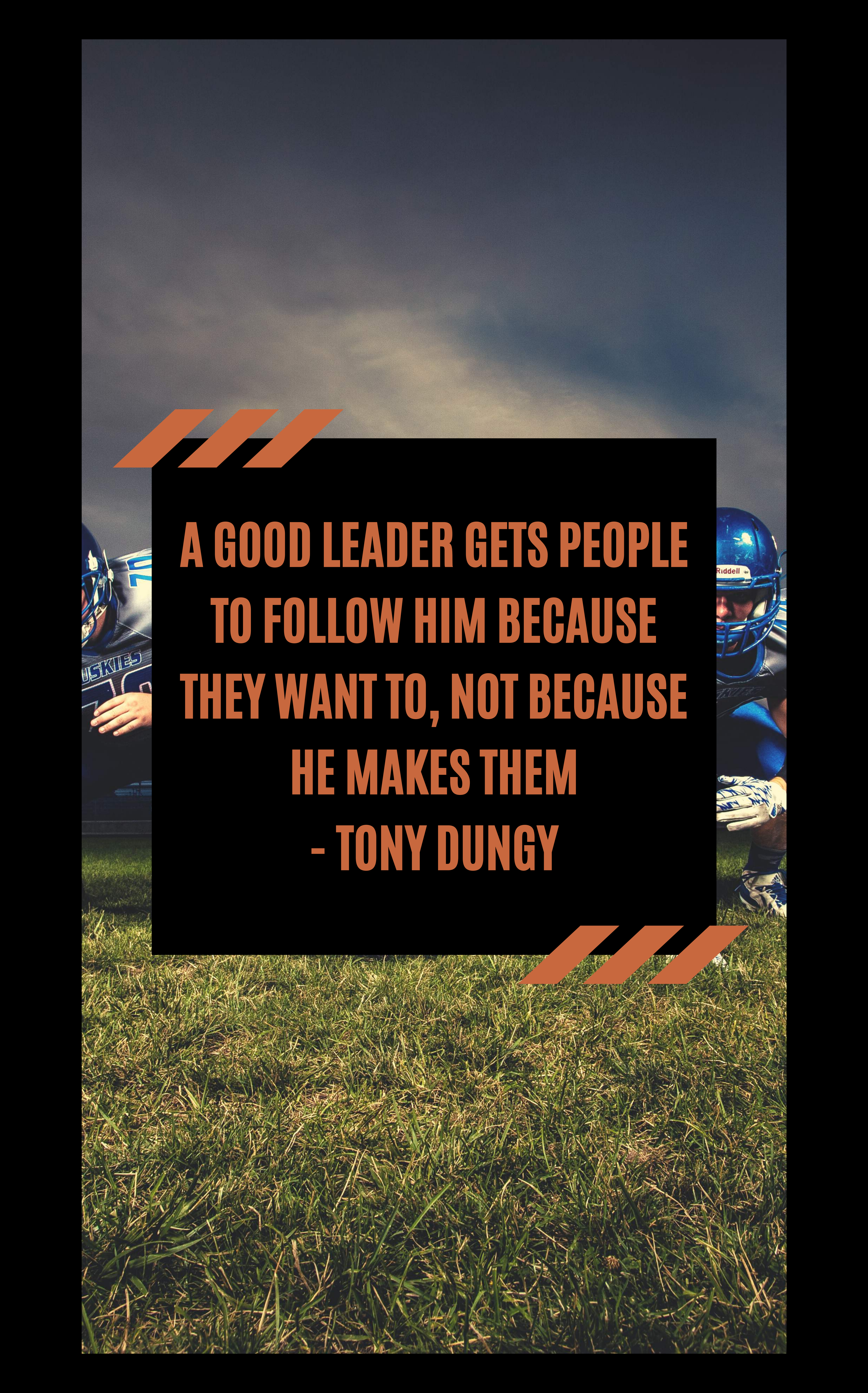
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A photograph of a football player in a blue helmet and jersey on a grass field. The player is wearing a blue helmet with a white face mask and a blue jersey with white accents. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds. The text is overlaid on a black rectangular background with orange diagonal stripes at the top and bottom.

**A GOOD LEADER GETS PEOPLE  
TO FOLLOW HIM BECAUSE  
THEY WANT TO, NOT BECAUSE  
HE MAKES THEM  
- TONY DUNGY**



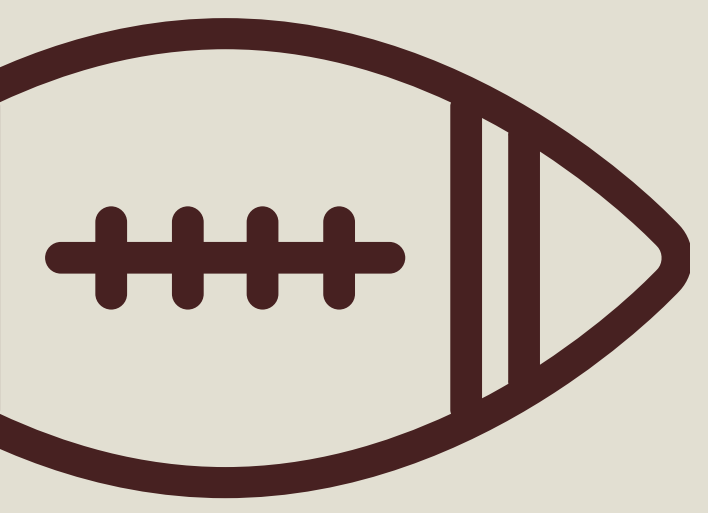


**THE**

# **COVER 1**

**DEFENSE**





# COVER 1

The Cover 1 defense is often the first defensive philosophy youth players are taught. Because in its simplest form, a 'Cover 1 defense' is just a fancy term for man-to-man defense.

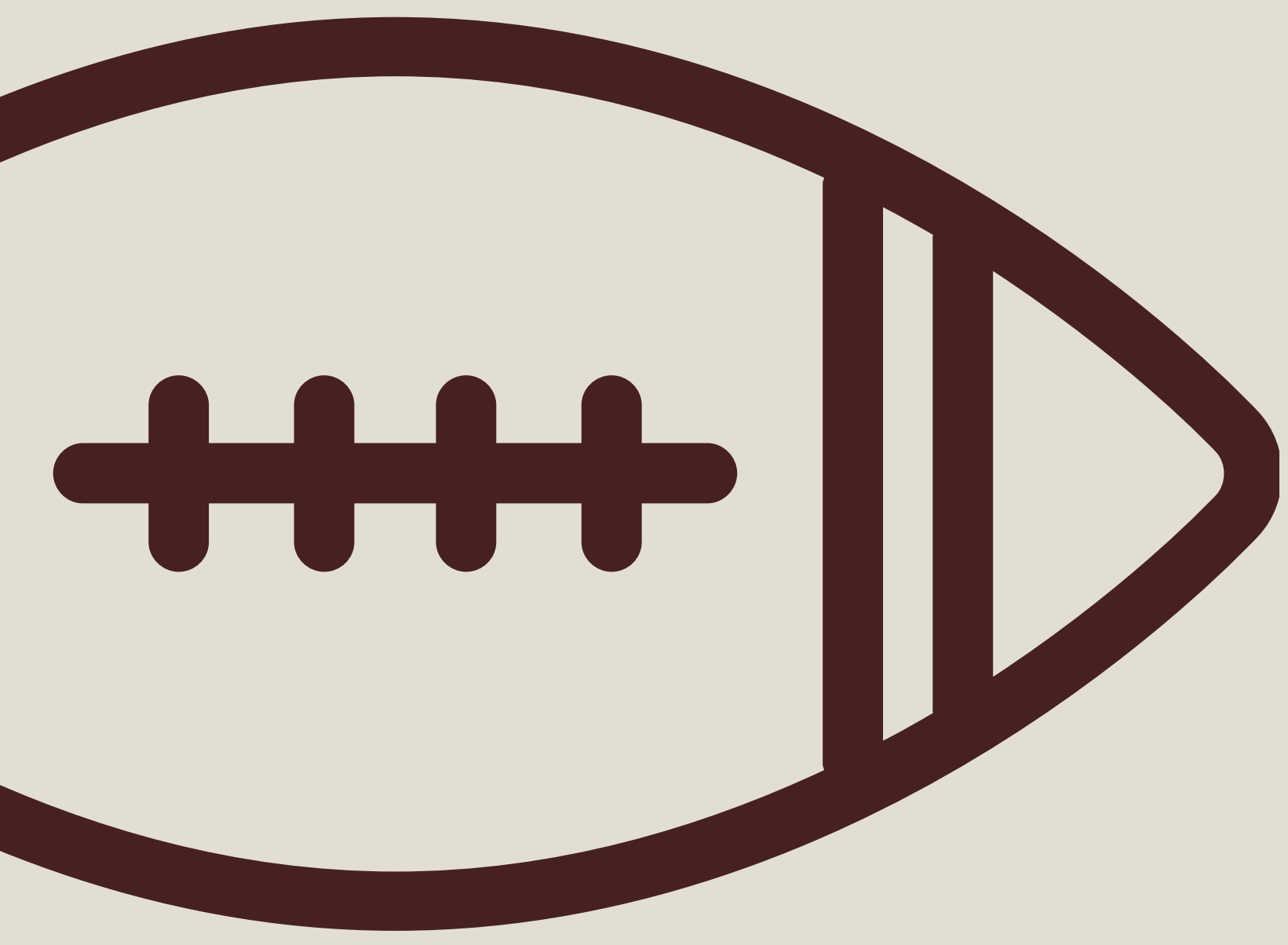
Is there anything easier than having each player in your defense responsible for covering another player on offense? Probably not.

In slightly more advanced forms, the Cover 1 defense can be like a match-up zone defense in basketball.

Players are responsible for covering specific players on the other team, but there are also some players who roam free to provide extra support where it is needed on the field.

Because of its flexibility and the potential options it provides in terms of coverage and pressure, the Cover 1 defense has long-lasting power as an effective defensive formation no matter what age and experience level a coach may be dealing with.





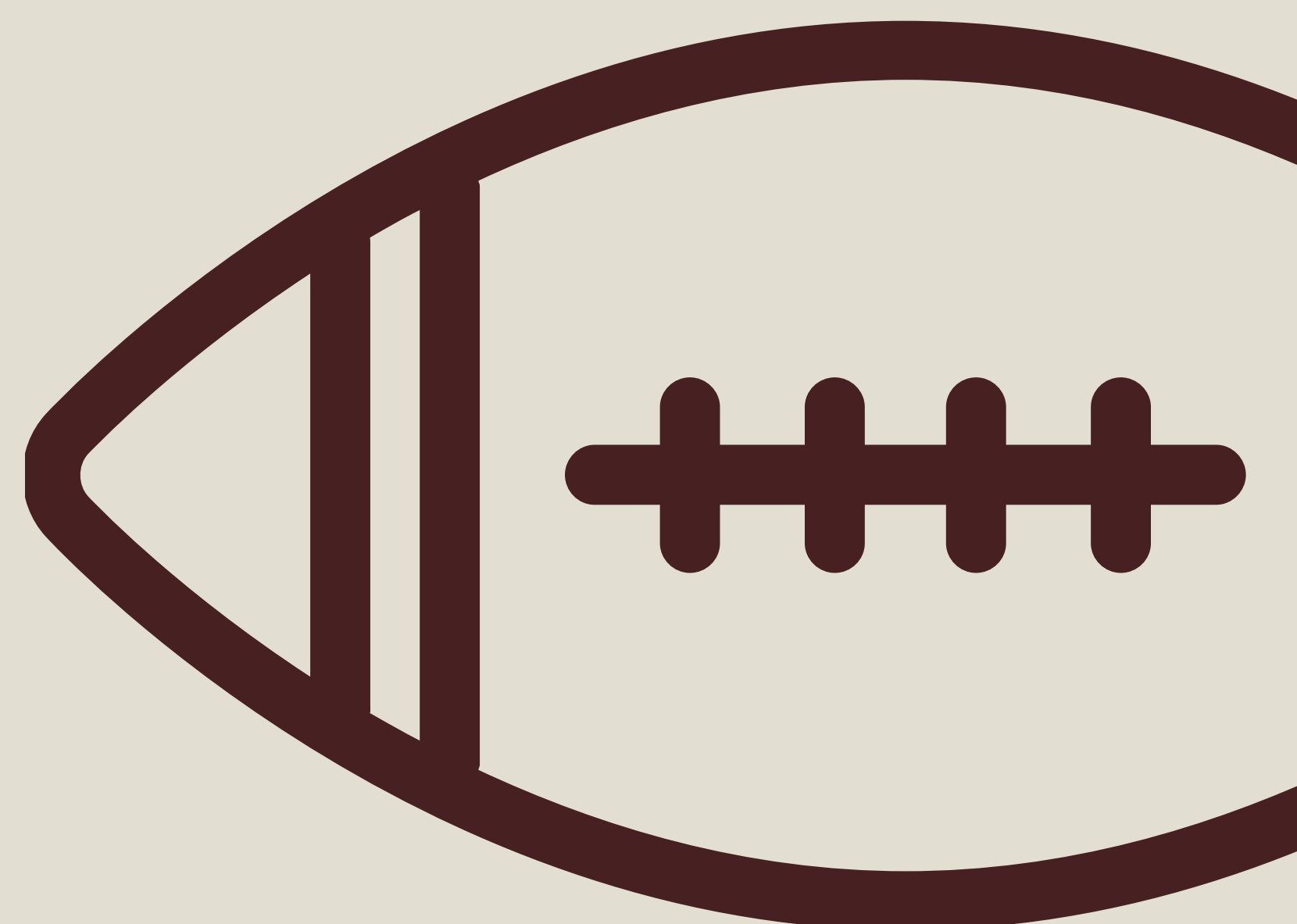
# COVER 1

## Who Should Use It?

### Cover 1 Defense



The Cover 1 defense can be used by any team, no matter what the makeup of the players on it and their specific skills and experience. That's because the Cover 1 is very simply a man-to-man style of defensive alignment. It doesn't require any special skill sets such as faster or stronger players.







Instead, because of the flexibility of the system, it can be deployed in different fashions to cater toward a speedier team, a bigger team, or even in passing or running situations.

Every football team should have some form of a Cover 1 defensive alignment in their arsenal. Exactly how the Cover 1 is deployed, in what situations it's deployed, and how much pressure is applied out of it can be adjusted on the fly as the game goes on.

Or it can be determined before the game even starts based on the makeup of the offense the team is facing that game.





# STRENGTHS

1

## IT'S SIMPLE

The Cover 1 defense is easy to teach, learn, and execute at any level of play, because it is what everyone can understand – a man-to-man, match-up defense.

2

## NOT RELIANT ON PERSONNEL

The Cover 1 defense is popular because it can be run by just about any team, no matter the physical makeup and skillset of the players on a specific team.

3

## CAN BE GOOD AGAINST THE RUN OR PASS

Because it's a match-up defense, the Cover 1 can be used against both running plays and passing plays. There aren't any inherent weaknesses of the alignment against either the run or the pass.

4

## IT'S FLEXIBLE

Wrinkles to the Cover 1 defense can be put in all over the field. Pressure can come from both linebackers and players in the secondary. Or you can utilize the Cover 1 defense to not apply pressure and make sure every offensive player on the field is accounted for.

5

## IT CAN BE DECEPTIVE

Because of the fact that so many wrinkles can be added to it, the Cover 1 defense can be deceptive. The pressure doesn't always come from the same players, the same levels of defense, or the same side of the field.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## SUSCEPTIBLE TO SPREAD FORMATIONS

The Cover 1 defense works best against an offense that has two wide receivers, one tight end, and two running backs on the field. Offenses can take advantage by altering their personnel and bringing more wide receivers onto the field.

2

## EASY TO SCHEME AGAINST

Since a lot of teams run a Cover 1 defense, it's a familiar look for offenses. That means they don't have to prepare for a defensive scheme that is completely new to them.

3

## CAN RUN OR THROW AGAINST IT

Because it's used in both passing and running downs, the offense can potentially have big plays against it no matter what play they run. In other words, a Cover 1 defense doesn't force an offense to either run the ball or pass it.

4

## LINEBACKERS HAVE TO COVER

One of the biggest keys to running a successful Cover 1 defense is having a set of linebackers who are not only able to cover receivers, but also are able to identify when they're supposed to go out in coverage versus filling holes against the run



# HOW TO RUN THE COVER 1 DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**



## Cover 1 Defensive Linemen



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





The defensive line in a Cover 1 defense employs two defensive tackles and two defensive ends. One of the tackles will be a nose tackle - most often the bigger, stronger of the two – who will line up more toward the ball.

The nose tackle's pre-snap alignment has a larger range than in other defensive alignments. He can line up anywhere between head up on the offensive guard to head up on the center.

Because of this, the nose tackle could have responsibilities of either the A gap or the B gap, depending on his pre-snap alignment and specific play call.

The other defensive tackle will line up almost exclusively over the offensive guard on the other side of the field. This player also could have responsibilities to attack the A gap or the B gap, once again depending on his specific alignment before the ball is snapped and what defensive play is called.

The other defensive tackle will line up almost exclusively over the offensive guard on the other side of the field.

This player also could have responsibilities to attack the A gap or the B gap, once again depending on his specific alignment before the ball is snapped and what defensive play is called. The two defensive ends will split out wider in the alignment, over the inside shoulder, head up or outside shoulder of the offensive tackles.





If the offense employs a tight end on a specific play, the defensive end on that side of the field may even line up as wide as over top him.

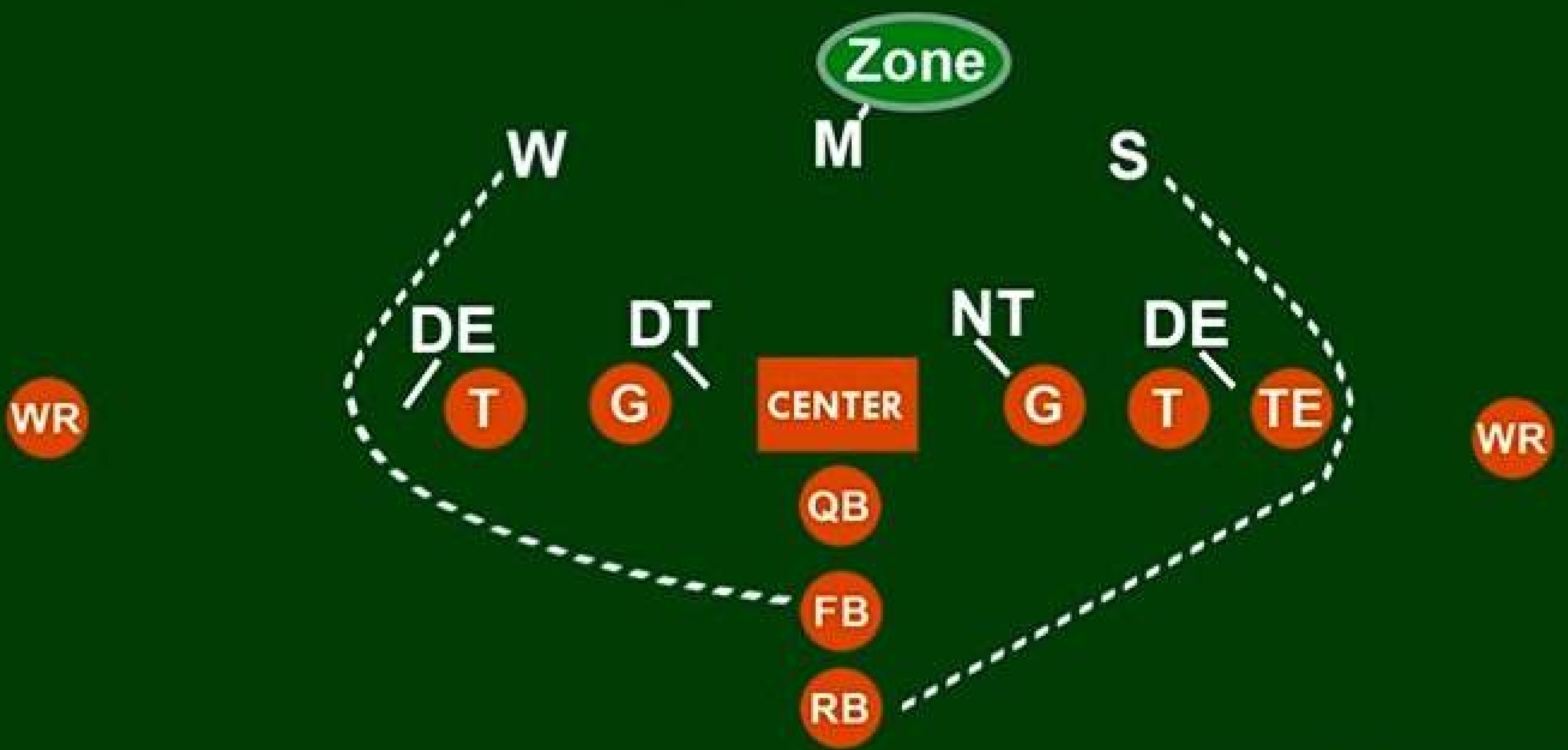
In a Cover 1 alignment, the defensive line will most often be tasked with doing one thing: Plugging the gaps for which they are responsible.

While there are certainly wrinkles that can be put into this alignment, more often than not, a defensive lineman in a Cover 1 defense will just be asked to attack straight forward or slant to his left or right.

A defensive coach can employ stunts with a defensive tackle and end on the same side of the field, and can even drop a defensive end into coverage on plays when a linebacker is blitzing. However, Cover 1 defenses often do not integrate these types of changes to the system, unless it's being done at a higher level of experience like in college or the professional ranks.



## Cover 1 Defensive Linemen and Linebackers



# STAGE 2 THE LINEBACKERS





The three linebackers in a 5-3 defensive alignment are made up of the traditional middle linebacker (the Mike), strong-side linebacker (the Sam) and weak-side linebacker (the Will).

The positioning on the field of each linebacker will be in the same zone no matter which play is called and no matter which offensive personnel is on the field. However, there is a little bit of variability when it comes to their exact positioning.

The Mike linebacker has a wider range of coverage potential in a Cover 1 defense. He will line up in the middle of the field, and be responsible for the A and B gaps on either side of the center against run plays. That means he could line up over top of either guard and anywhere in between.

Against passing plays, there are a few options for the Mike:

- He can drop back into a zone-like coverage to fill the hole between where the line of scrimmage and a depth close to where he lines up before the snap.
- He could be responsible for covering the tight end, if the strong safety on that play is blitzing.
- He could be asked to pick up a running back in coverage if one of the outside linebackers is blitzing.
- He could be asked to blitz himself.





The Sam linebacker will be on the side of the field where the tight end lines up, or where the extra wide receiver is if there is no tight end. On running plays, he will have primary run-stopping responsibilities in the B or C gaps on his side of the field, depending on what the players in front of him are doing and where the offense is running the ball.

Against the pass with no blitz, the Sam will most often be responsible for covering the first running back that runs a route. If no running back ends up running a route, then the Sam will drop into a zone-like coverage on his side of the field.

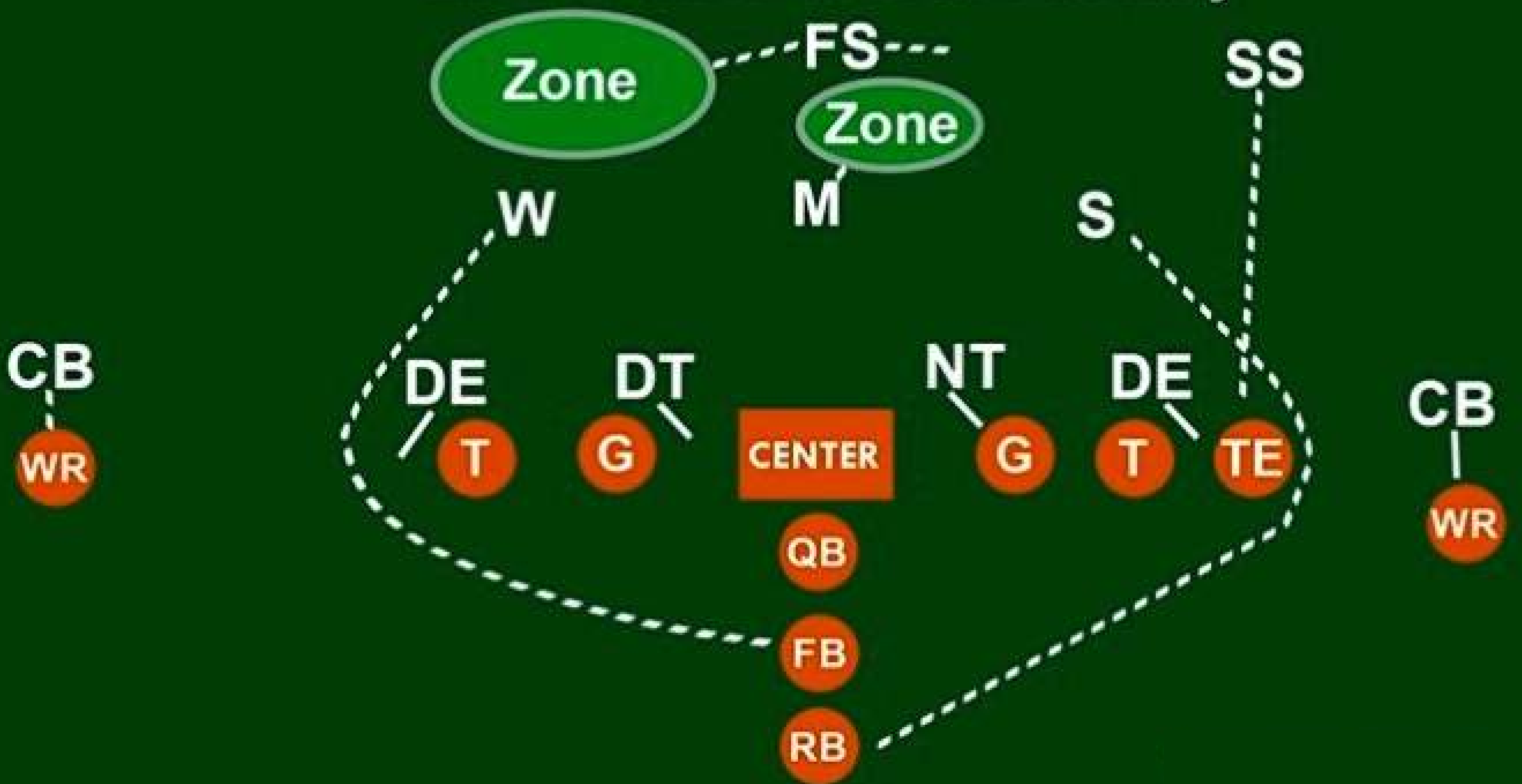
The Sam linebacker could also be asked to blitz on a given play, or slide into the middle of the field to cover the void the Mike linebacker left if he blitzes.

The Will linebacker is on the weak side of the field, and is similarly responsible for the B or C gaps on that side against the run. Against the pass, the Will's primary responsibility would be the second running back that runs a route.

The Will can also be asked to perform a regular or delayed blitz, especially if that second running back stays into block. Similar to the Sam, the Will could be asked to slide over into coverage in the middle of the field on plays where the Mike blitzes.

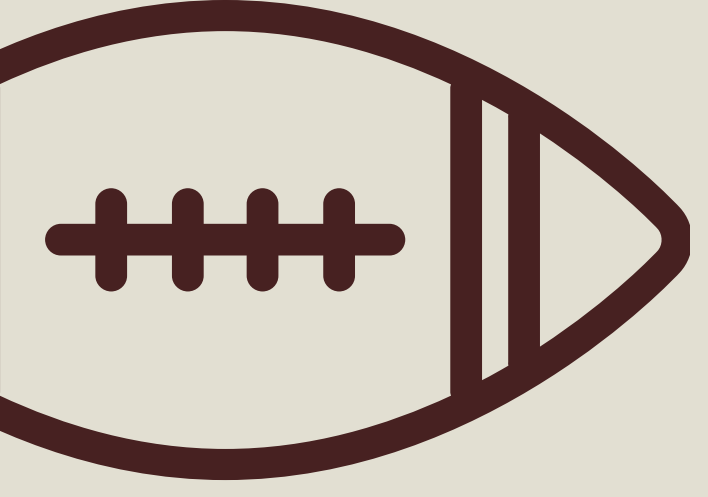


Cover 1 Defensive Linemen,  
Linebackers and Secondary



# STAGE 3 THE SECONDARY





The secondary is made up of two cornerbacks and two safeties in a Cover 1 defense.

The alignment and objectives for the two cornerbacks is pretty simple. On every play, they line up over the wide receivers in either an outside or inside technique, meaning they line up over either the wide receiver's outside shoulder or his inside shoulder.

On running plays, the cornerbacks' job is to funnel the play to the inside of the field for tackling support. On passing plays, they match up man-to-man with the wide receiver and follow him wherever he runs his route.

Things are a little more complicated for the safeties in a Cover 1 defense. There is both a strong safety and a free safety on the field at all times in this defensive alignment.

The strong safety will line up over the tight end, at a depth somewhere between the linebackers and the free safety. The strong safety could also approach the line of scrimmage if he expects the play to be a run, or if he is asked to blitz on that particular play.

Against the pass, the strong safety's primary responsibility is to cover the tight end. On paper, he has the best combination of makeup and skillset to do so, as the strong safety has the speed to keep up with a tight end and is also normally the biggest and strongest member of the secondary.





The free safety, meanwhile, will serve as over-the-top protection for the defense. He will align himself in the middle of the field, back about five to seven yards behind where the Mike linebacker lines up.

The free safety usually will shade to one side of the field, most of the times against the opposing offenses most dangerous receiver.

On running plays, the free safety is asked to step up and fill against a ball carrier, making sure that no one gets behind him. On passing plays, his role is similar--to provide extra support to the cornerbacks and linebackers and ensuring that a receiver doesn't get behind him, as he is literally the last line of defense.

Free safeties can also be asked to blitz at time in the Cover 1 defense, as they are the only position that doesn't have a specific man-to-man responsibility against the pass.



# TAKEAWAY

A Cover 1 defense is an excellent defensive alignment to run, and just about every team should have some form of it in their playbook, no matter what level of football the team is.

That's because the Cover 1 defense is the simplest and most straightforward defense that a team can run.

But don't think of the Cover 1 defense as just a boring alignment that can only be used in certain situations and that can be taken advantage of easily. Contrary to that thinking, a coach can implement a lot of wrinkles to a Cover 1 defense to make it less predictable, to keep offenses guessing, and to hide where potential pressure is coming from.





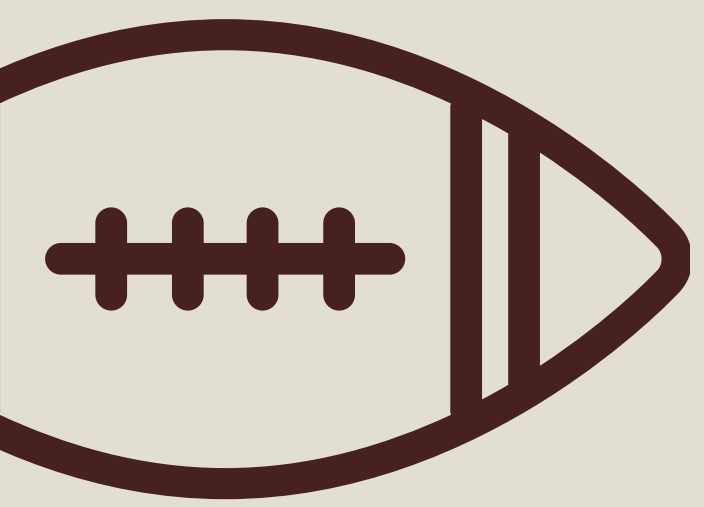


**THE**

# **COVER 2**

**DEFENSE**





## COVER 2

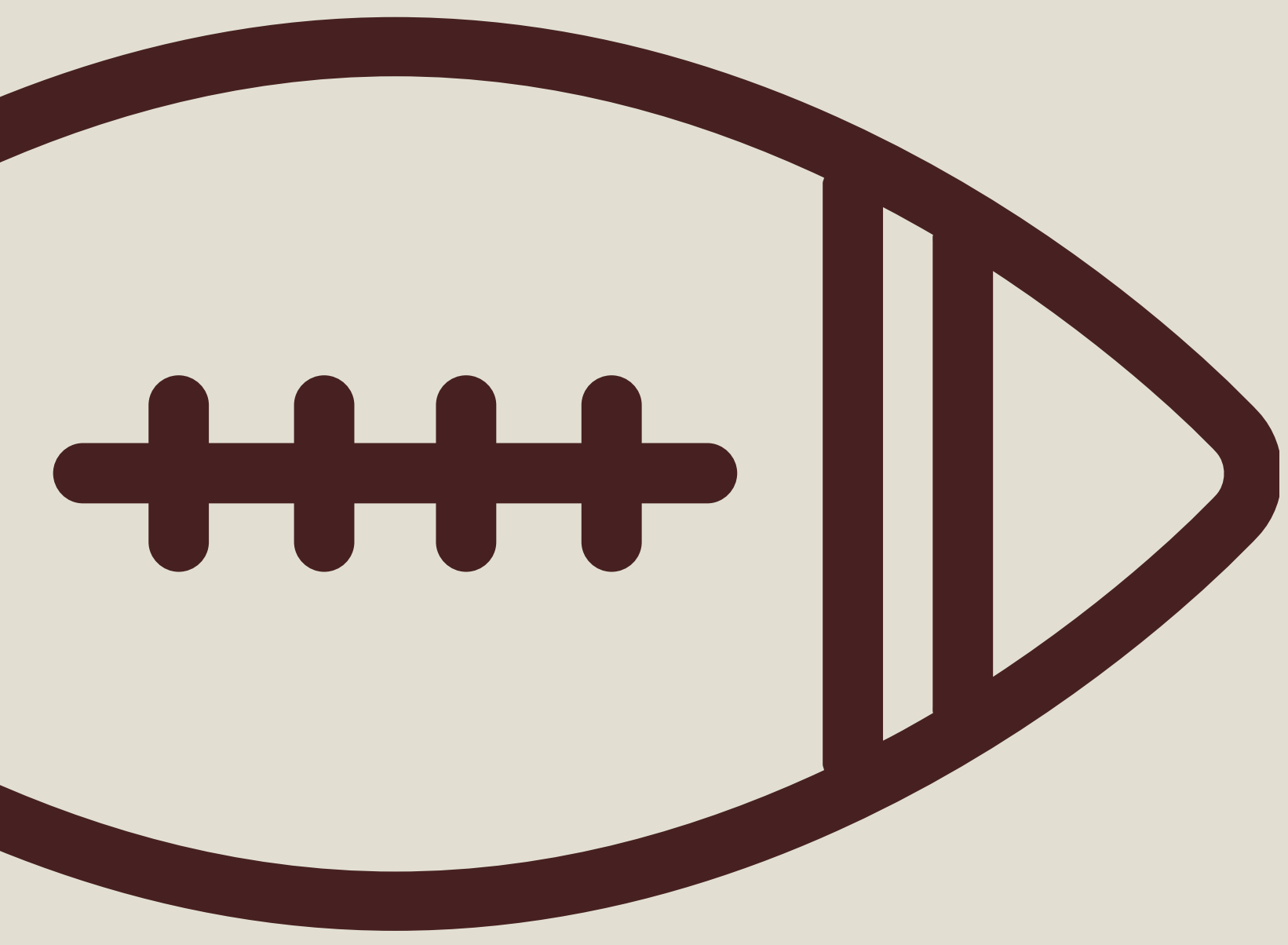
The Cover 2 defense is a zone-based defense in football. Which means no player has a defensive assignment for a specific offensive player.

Each level of defense has a zone on the field for which they're responsible for covering, and whatever receiver enters that zone on a passing route is that player's responsibility.

The Cover 2 defense gets its name from the two safeties who play deep over the top, serving as the last line of defense between the offense and the end zone.

With seven players dropping back in coverage, the pressure on the offense is generated only by the defensive line, and blitzes are rare out of the Cover 2 formation. As such, it's a defense that is used most predominantly when the offense is in an obvious passing situation.





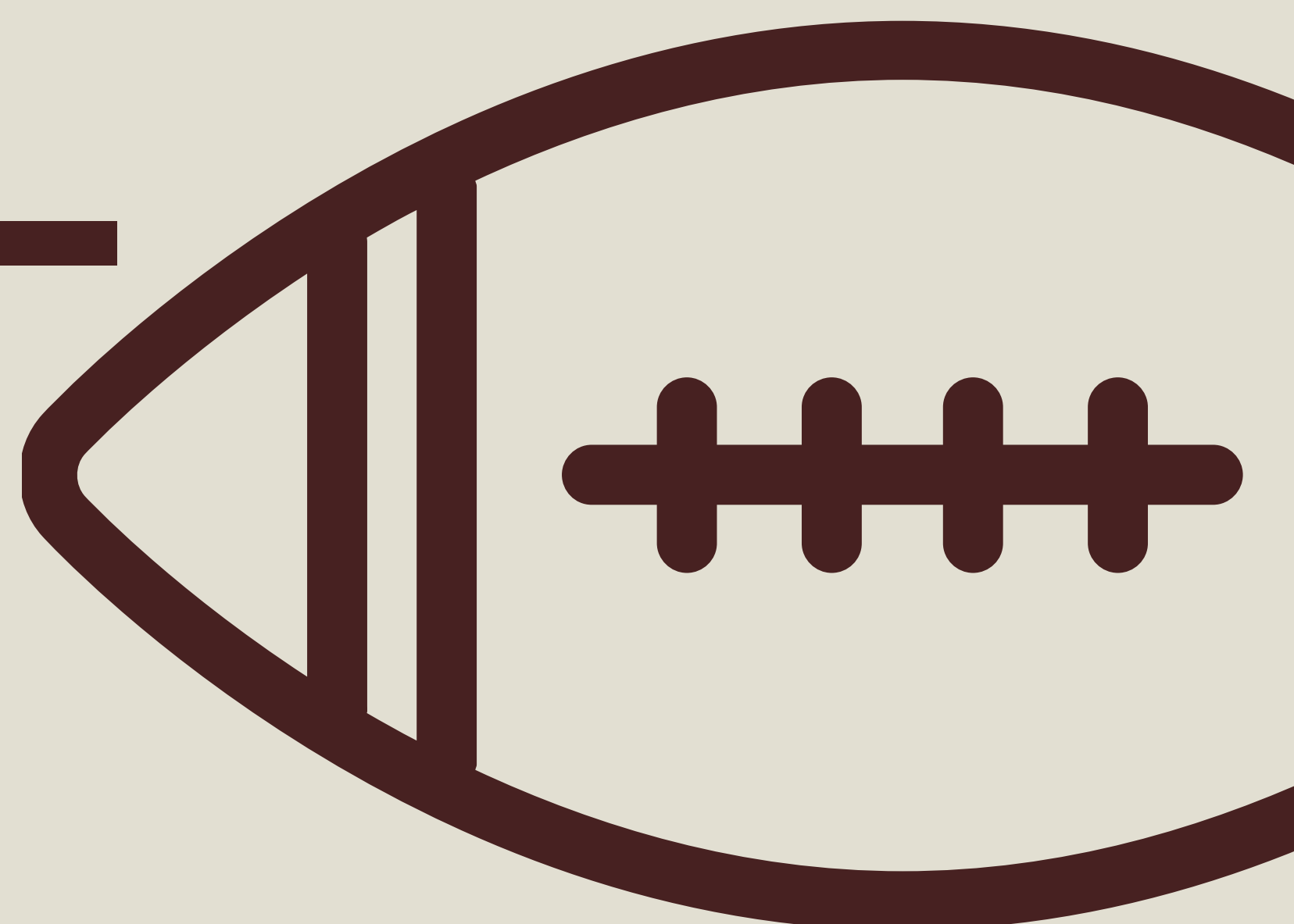
# COVER 2

## Who Should Use It?

### Cover 2 Defense



The Cover 2 defense can be used by just about any team. It's a simple concept for defensive players to understand, because instead of having to follow a receiver all over the field, each defensive player is responsible for covering just a small area of the field.







The idea is that if each player sticks to his zone in coverage, it will be hard for the offense to find a lot of room for a play that could gain considerable yardage.

Defenses will often utilize the Cover 2 scheme in third-down-and-long situations for the offense, where they need to gain close to 10 yards or more to get a first down.

The Cover 2 defense can be especially good for defenses that can create a lot of pressure on offenses with just the four down defensive linemen. With the four linemen creating enough pressure on the quarterback on their own, this then allows the other seven players to cover the rest of the field like a blanket.





# STRENGTHS

1

## IT'S SIMPLE

The Cover 2 defense is easy for players to understand because most players are only responsible for covering a specific zone of the field instead of trying to remember multiple responsibilities with intricate schemes.

2

## KEEPS THE BALL UNDERNEATH

The Cover 2 defense was designed to prevent big yardage plays on offense. That's because the coverage funnels receivers to routes underneath and makes it hard for receivers to gain big yardage.

3

## COVERS RECEIVERS BEAUTIFULLY

Because seven defensive players are dropping into coverage, there isn't a lot of available space on the field for receivers to find an opening.

4

## ALLOWS LINEMEN TO ATTACK

The defensive linemen in a Cover 2 defense are asked to do what they love to do best – attack straight ahead. They're tasked with putting as much pressure on the offense straight up the field as they're able to do.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## COULD BE SUSCEPTIBLE TO THE RUN

Since the Cover 2 defense has every linebacker drop into zone coverage, it can be susceptible to running plays. That's because the linebackers' first step is often away from the line of scrimmage, instead of up toward the line of scrimmage to plug a hole along the line.

2

## UNDERNEATH PASSES CAN WORK

Because both safeties drop deep into coverage, and because the linebackers can do the same too, short crossing routes can often find available space against a Cover 2 defense.

3

## CAN'T BE RUN ALL THE TIME

Because it's susceptible to underneath passes and running plays, it's difficult to run the Cover 2 defense on every play unless the defensive line can create some serious pressure up front on every play.



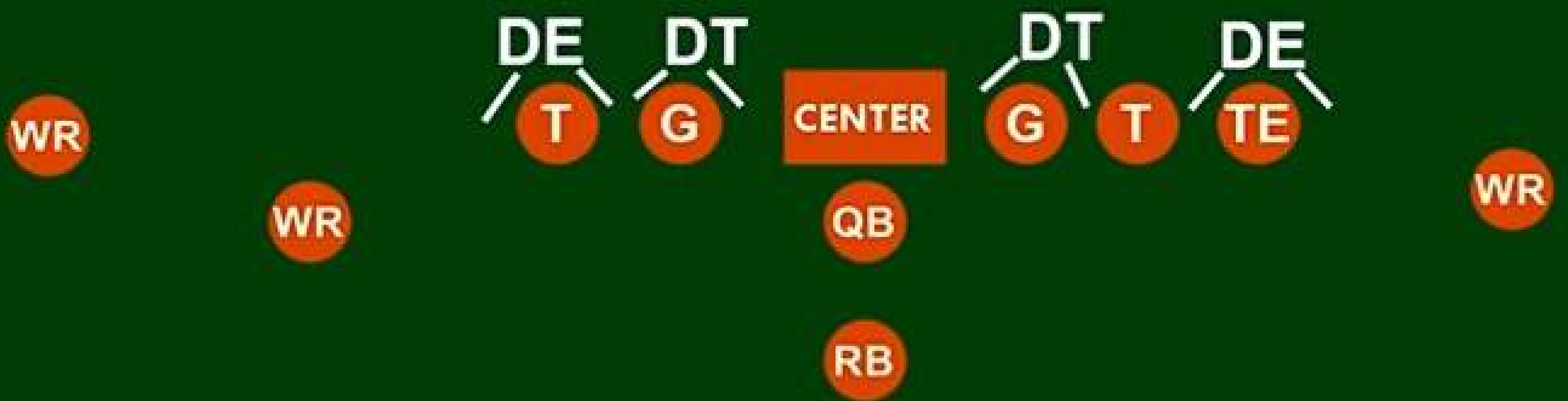
# HOW TO RUN THE COVER 2 DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**



## Cover 2 Defensive Linemen



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





The defensive line in a Cover 2 defense has perhaps the simplest and watered-down assignment of any defensive alignment.

Defensive linemen in a Cover 2 scheme are tasked with putting as much pressure in the backfield as they possibly can. They're asked to run straightforward, blowing up as many offensive linemen as possible and causing as much disruption as possible on every single play. That's because the linebackers, cornerbacks, and safeties don't often blitz in a Cover 2 defense. It can't get much simpler than that.

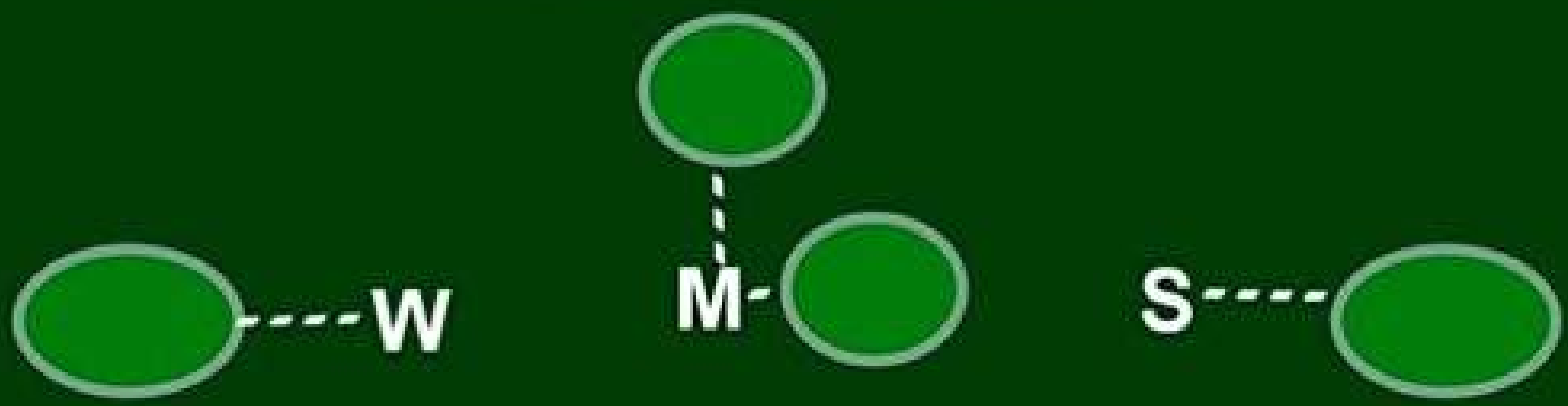
The two defensive tackles in a Cover 2 defense will line up anywhere between the offensive tackle and the center. The bigger player of the two, who could be considered the nose tackle, will line up most of the time between the center and the guard, either on the center's shoulder or the guard's shoulder. The other defensive tackle will then often shade between either the other guard's shoulder and the other offensive tackle's shoulder on his side of the field.

There are also two defensive ends on the field in a Cover 2 defense. They are lined up either on the offensive tackle's outside shoulder or over the tight end if there's one on the field.

While the defensive linemen may use curls or stunts between the defensive tackle and defensive end on the same side of the field to cause some confusion, the primary duty of the position is to cause as much disruption as possible at the line of scrimmage.



## Cover 2 Defensive Linemen and Linebackers



# STAGE 2 THE LINEBACKERS





The middle (Mike), strong-side (Sam) and weak-side (Will) linebackers in a Cover 2 defense need to all have good lateral movement skills and the ability to read and run with receivers.

The linebackers can be tasked with their zone coverage in one of two ways:

**The first option** is to keep all three linebackers in a zone depth of about five to seven yards, starting from the backs of the defensive linemen and ending at where they initially line up at the snap of the ball.

In this scenario, the linebackers would split the width of the field into threes, so that each linebacker has a third of the field to cover width-wise, from a depth of five to seven yards in front of where they initially position themselves.

The second option is to drop the Mike linebacker straight back into coverage as almost a third safety. This scheme would most often be used when the offense is facing a longer distance to gain a first down, such as possibly a third-and-15 situation.

In this scenario, the Sam and Will would split the field in half widthwise from a depth of five to seven yards in front of them. Then, the Mike and the two safeties would split the field in thirds width wise for roughly the same depth yardage, but at a much deeper position on the field.





No matter which way the Cover 2 defense is deployed with regard to the position, the linebackers are primarily responsible for covering their zone on the field. They are only responsible for receivers or ball carriers who enter their zone, and it is essential that they not wander outside their zone, otherwise a big opening could develop for the offense to take advantage of.



Cover 2 Defensive Linemen,  
Linebackers and Secondary



# STAGE 3 THE SECONDARY





Similarly, the two cornerbacks and two safeties are responsible for covering a specific zone near where they line up on the field.

The cornerbacks will line up to start the play anywhere from directly over the wide receiver to a depth of about five yards behind the receiver. At the snap of the ball, both cornerbacks (no matter what side of the field) are asked to cover the zone of the field that goes from the last offensive lineman on their side to the out-of-bounds sideline.

Depth wise, the cornerbacks are asked to cover players from the backfield (if a running back runs a passing route) to about five to seven yards off the line of scrimmage. Anything behind that depth will be covered by either an outside linebacker or a safety. The important thing for the cornerbacks to remember is that they have help with defenders behind them.

Therefore, they can be aggressive attacking the ball and ball carriers in front of them, because if they miss, another defender will be able to step in and help.

The free safety and strong safety in a Cover 2 defense will line up at a depth of about five yards behind the linebackers. What the safeties do on any given play will depend on what the Mike linebacker's responsibility is on that play.

If the Mike drops back deep into coverage, then the free safety and strong safety will split the field in thirds with the Mike at their level





of coverage. If the Mike does not drop back but stays at his original depth, then the free safety and strong safety will split the field in half widthwise and be responsible for the over-the-top coverage for their half of the field.

The important thing for the safeties to remember in a Cover 2 defense is that they are the literal last line of defense. Their primary responsibility is to make sure no one gets behind them. If they miss a tackle or if a receiver gets behind them running a route, there is no one else to help them, and a big play is almost assuredly in store for the offense.



# TAKEAWAY

The Cover 2 defense is a great defense to run in obvious passing situations for the offense. It's especially good at preventing passing and running plays from gaining too many yards. That's why a lot of defenses will run the Cover 2 scheme in situations in which the offense would need to gain a lot of yards to make a first down.

At the same time, the Cover 2 isn't a defensive scheme that's good to run on every down, because a smart and good offense will be able to take advantage of the defensive scheme by running the ball effectively and also running shorter passing plays over the middle of the field.

Still, the Cover 2 is a defensive alignment that's used by a large number of teams at all levels of experience and skill level because it's simple and because it can be effective in various situations. As such, it's a defensive scheme that should be in almost every defensive team's repertoire in some fashion.





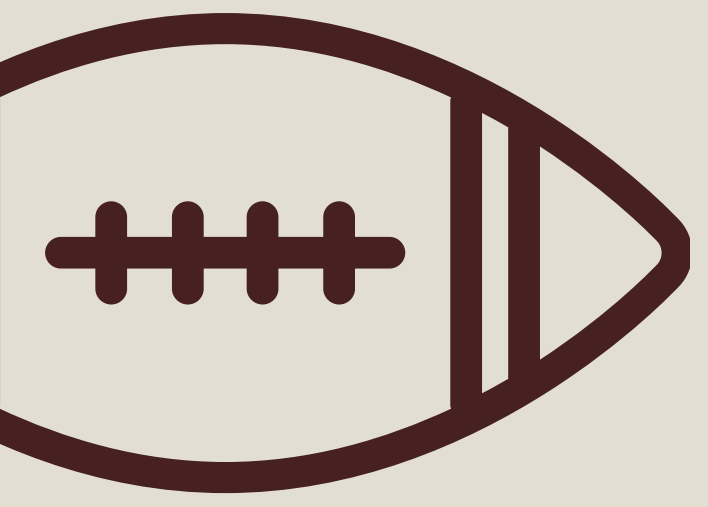


**THE**

# **COVER 3**

**DEFENSE**





## COVER 3

At one time, it was thought of as only a defense that youth football teams and teams at the high school level would utilize often in a game. However, that idea has changed dramatically over recent years. Especially with the Seattle Seahawks' "Legion of Boom" defense utilizing it all the way to a Super Bowl title recently.

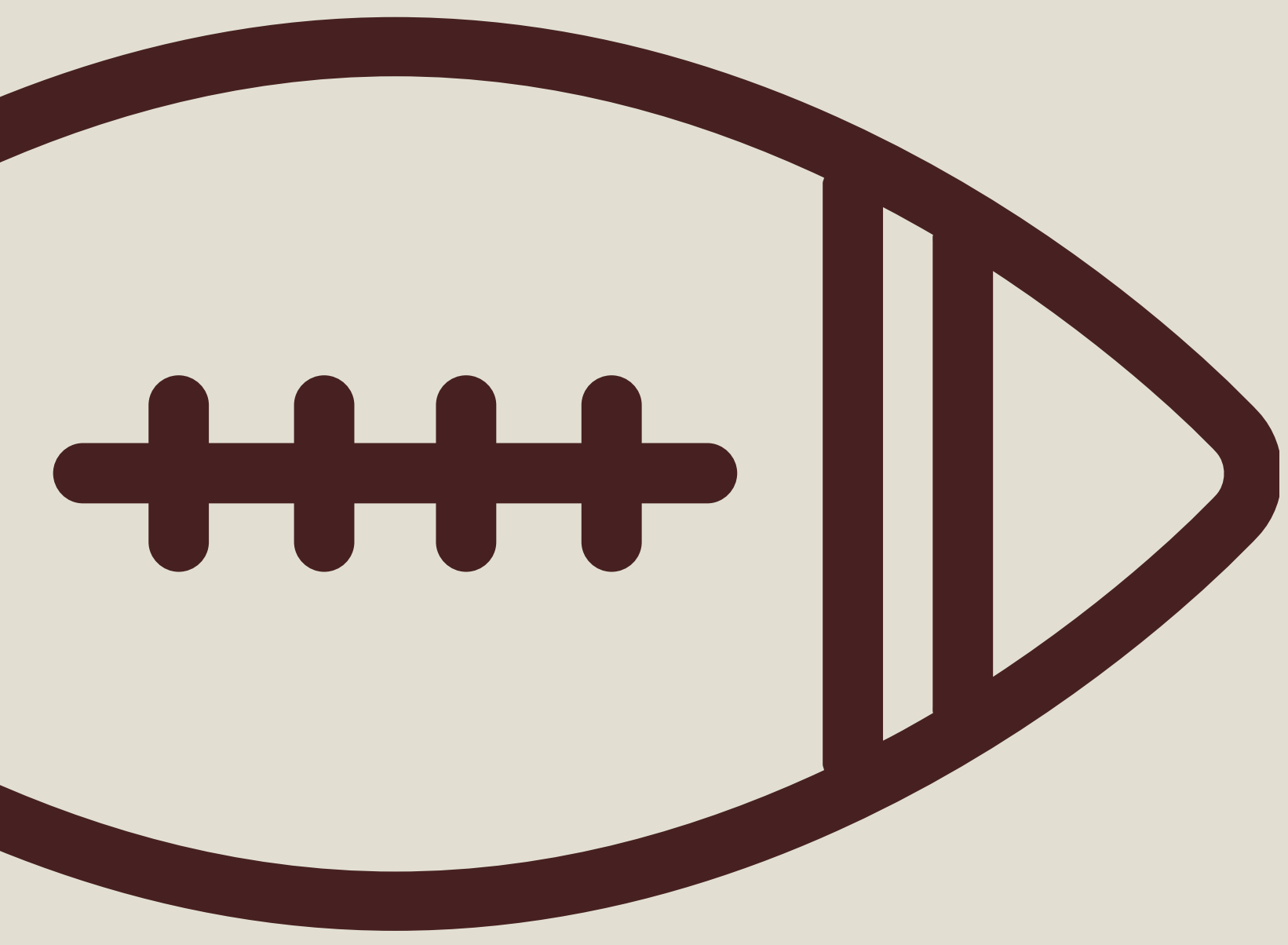
The concept of the Cover 3 defense is that seven defenders drop back into coverage in two distinct zones:

- Four players covering the short and middle zone.
- Three players covering the deep zone.

This defense protects against the deep passing plays quite well, but it's also good against the run because the strong safety lines up near the linebackers and closer the line of scrimmage than he normally does (as we'll see later).

This idea of being a solid defensive alignment against both the pass and the run is why many youth football teams have often incorporated it in their game plans. And it's why more and more teams at advanced levels like at the college and professional ranks are starting to do so as well.





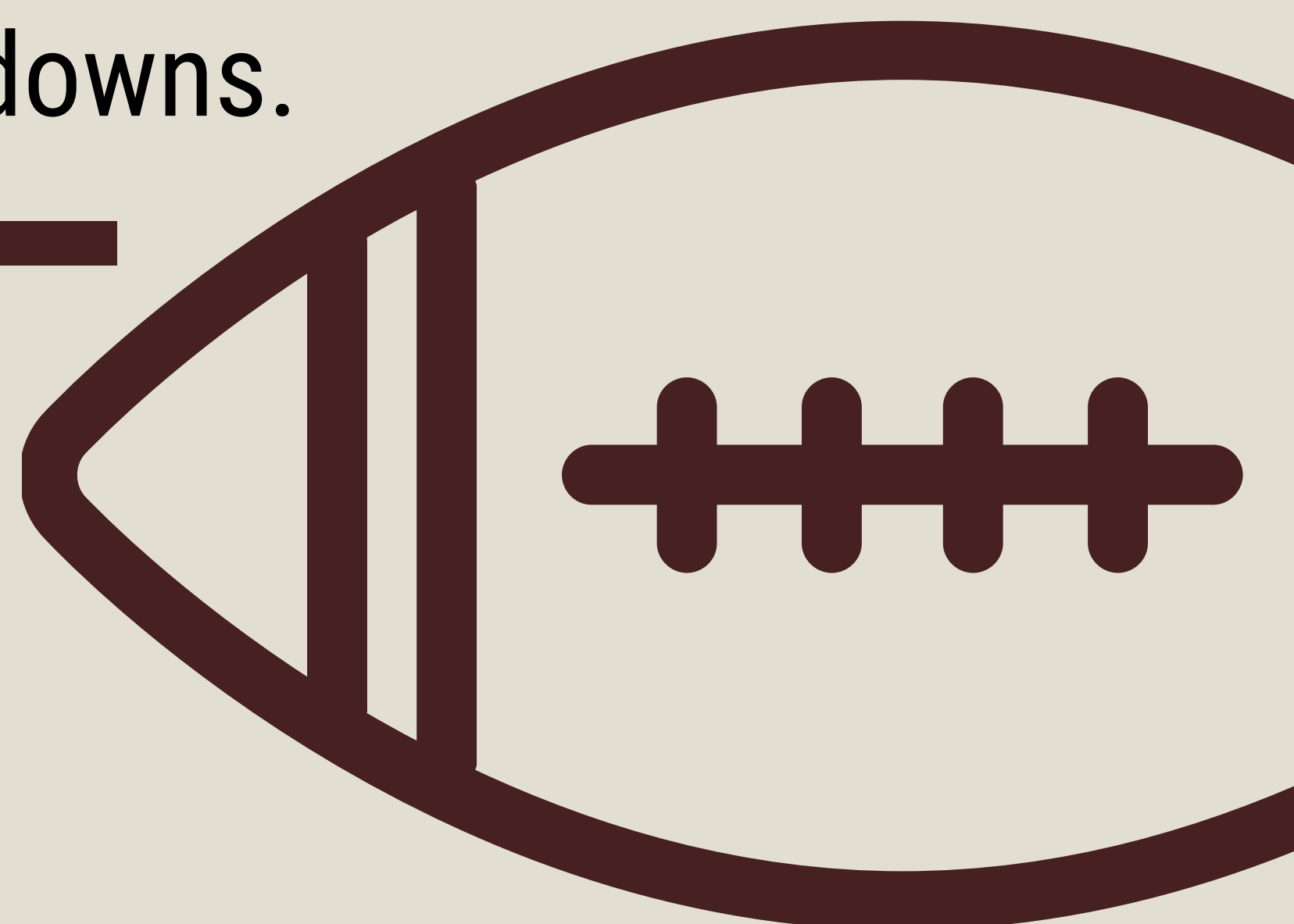
# COVER 3

## Who Should Use It?

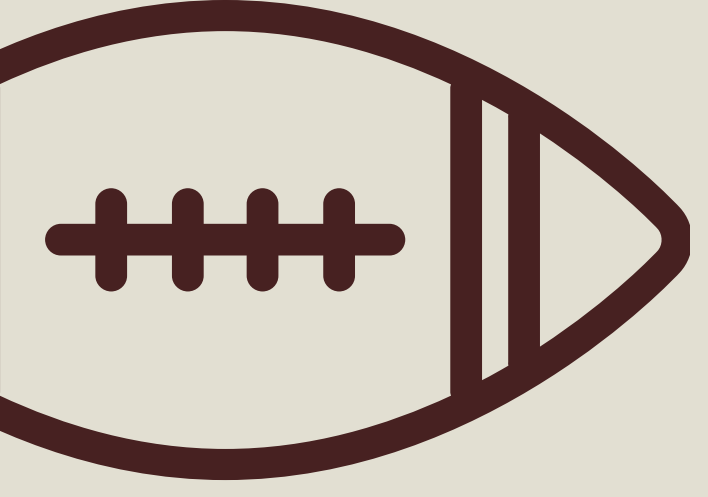
### Cover 3 Defense



The Cover 3 defense is one of those alignments that can be used in some fashion by just about any team. It's a defense that is often used in early downs on a drive because it's good against both the pass and the run, and offenses are often less predictable on first and second downs than they are on third downs.







The Cover 3 relies on the pressure up front to be generated by the four down defensive linemen, while the other seven players on the field are asked to drop back into coverage on pass plays or be responsible for a specific zone on the field against run plays.

The alignment can be implemented out of a base formation with not a lot of wrinkles, blitzes, or changes, or it can be tinkered with to confuse offenses even more.

This is done a lot at the more advanced skill levels with players who have an intricate knowledge of the game and have been playing for a long time.





# STRENGTHS

1

## IT'S SIMPLE

The Cover 3 defense gives each player a responsibility for a zone on the field. It doesn't ask any defender to do too much, no matter whether the offense ends up choosing a pass play or a run play.

2

## IT'S VERSATILE

The Cover 3 defense is good against both the pass and the run. That means you don't need multiple players available to shift on and off the field when your team is either running, or not running, a play out of the Cover 3 alignment.

3

## IT'S GREAT AGAINST THE DEEP BALL

With three defenders dropping back to cover the deep zone, the Cover 3 defensive alignment is great at protecting against the big passing play over the top.

4

## IT'S EASY TO ADJUST

Because of the way the strong safety lines up at the same depth as the linebackers, it's easier to adjust to a running play than other forms of zone defense. More players lined up at a medium depth doesn't leave nearly as much room to run or for shorter passing plays than, for example, the Cover 2 defense.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## COULD BE SUSCEPTIBLE TO PLAY ACTION

If the offense is able to trick defenders into thinking they're a running play, and makes a defender or two take a step forward instead of steps back, then there could be opportunities for big plays over the top.

2

## COULD BE SUSCEPTIBLE TO SPREAD FORMATIONS

Offenses that run the spread formation with multiple speedy running backs and multiple wide receivers might be able to take advantage of the fact that all three linebackers will be asked to go out in coverage.

3

## MIGHT BE OPEN FOR CHUNKS OF YARDS AT A TIME

Since the cornerbacks' first steps will be back away from the line of scrimmage, the wide receivers will have a few yards of cushion to roam free. These shorter completions aren't much in any one particular play, but they can add up here and there to be enough to sustain a long drive for the offense.



# HOW TO RUN THE COVER 3 DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**



## Cover 3 Defensive Linemen



# ***STAGE 1*** ***THE DEFENSIVE*** ***LINE***





The defensive line in a Cover 3 defense is very similar to how the defensive line is aligned in other base zone defenses.

Defensive linemen in a Cover 3 scheme are tasked with putting as much pressure in the backfield as they possibly can. They're asked to run straight forward, blowing up as many offensive linemen as possible and causing as much disruption as possible on every single play.

While blitzes can happen more frequently in a base Cover 3 alignment than they will in a Cover 2 base alignment for example, the four defensive linemen are often the only players on the field who are tasked with applying pressure on the offensive line. That's why it's imperative that these four players have the speed and strength to clog up the line of scrimmage and break through to create pressure in the backfield.

The two defensive tackles in a Cover 3 defense will line up anywhere between the offensive tackle and the center. The bigger player of the two, who could be considered the nose tackle, will line up most of the time between the center and the guard, either on the center's shoulder or the guard's shoulder. The other defensive tackle will then often shade between either the other guard's shoulder and the other offensive tackle's shoulder on his side of the field.

There are two defensive ends on the field in a Cover 3 defense. They are lined up either on the offensive tackle's outside shoulder or over

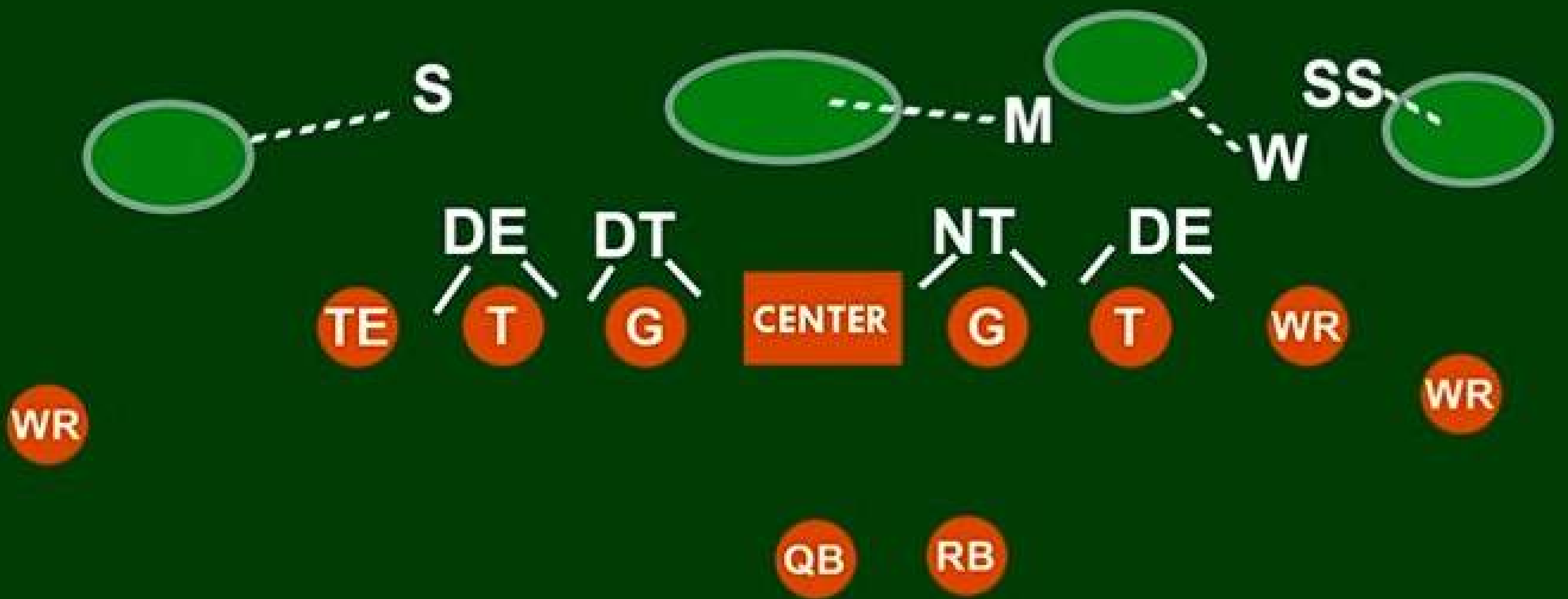




the tight end if there is one on the field. While the defensive linemen may use curls or stunts between the defensive tackle and defensive end on the same side of the field to cause some confusion, the primary duty of the position is to cause as much disruption as possible at the line of scrimmage.

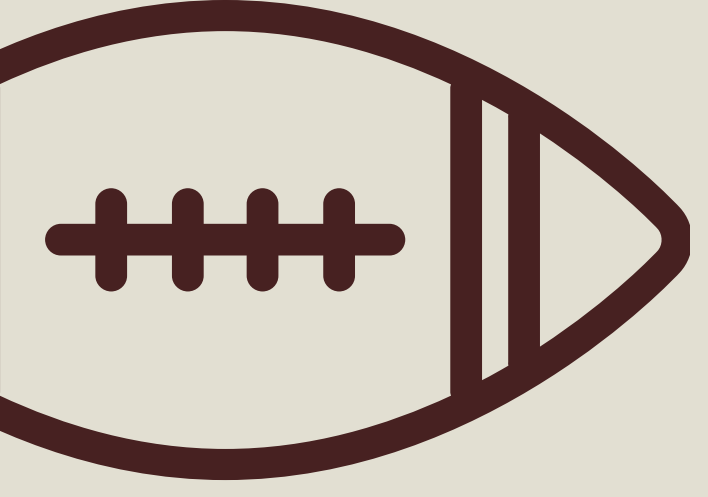


## Cover 3 Defensive Linemen and Linebackers



# STAGE 2 THE LINEBACKERS





The middle (Mike), strong-side (Sam) and weak-side (Will) linebackers in a Cover 3 defense will all be tasked with covering a quarter of the field width wise. The area they're responsible for stretches from the line of scrimmage to about five yards or so behind where they line up. They will be joined at this level – both in terms of where they line up pre-snap and where they go post-snap – by the strong safety. (We'll discuss the strong safety in this section soon instead of the secondary)

The Mike linebacker will often line up a little closer to the line of scrimmage, as will the Will. This is to help with coverage against run plays that the offense might run. They have the ability to do this in a Cover 3 defense because the strong safety will be lining up at a depth similar to where the linebackers are normally positioned at the snap of the ball.

This is a great nuance to the Cover 3 defense, why it's good against the pass and the run. It's also a reason why both the Mike and the Will are the ones most often asked to blitz, if the defensive coach decides to bring extra pressure on any given play.

The Sam linebacker will most often line up a little bit deeper than the Mike and the Will on his side of the field, at a depth equal to that of the strong safety on the field opposite him.

The strong safety will line up wide of the Sam but inside the cornerback on that side of the field, at a depth similar to that of the Will. At the snap of the ball, the Will and the strong safety will split



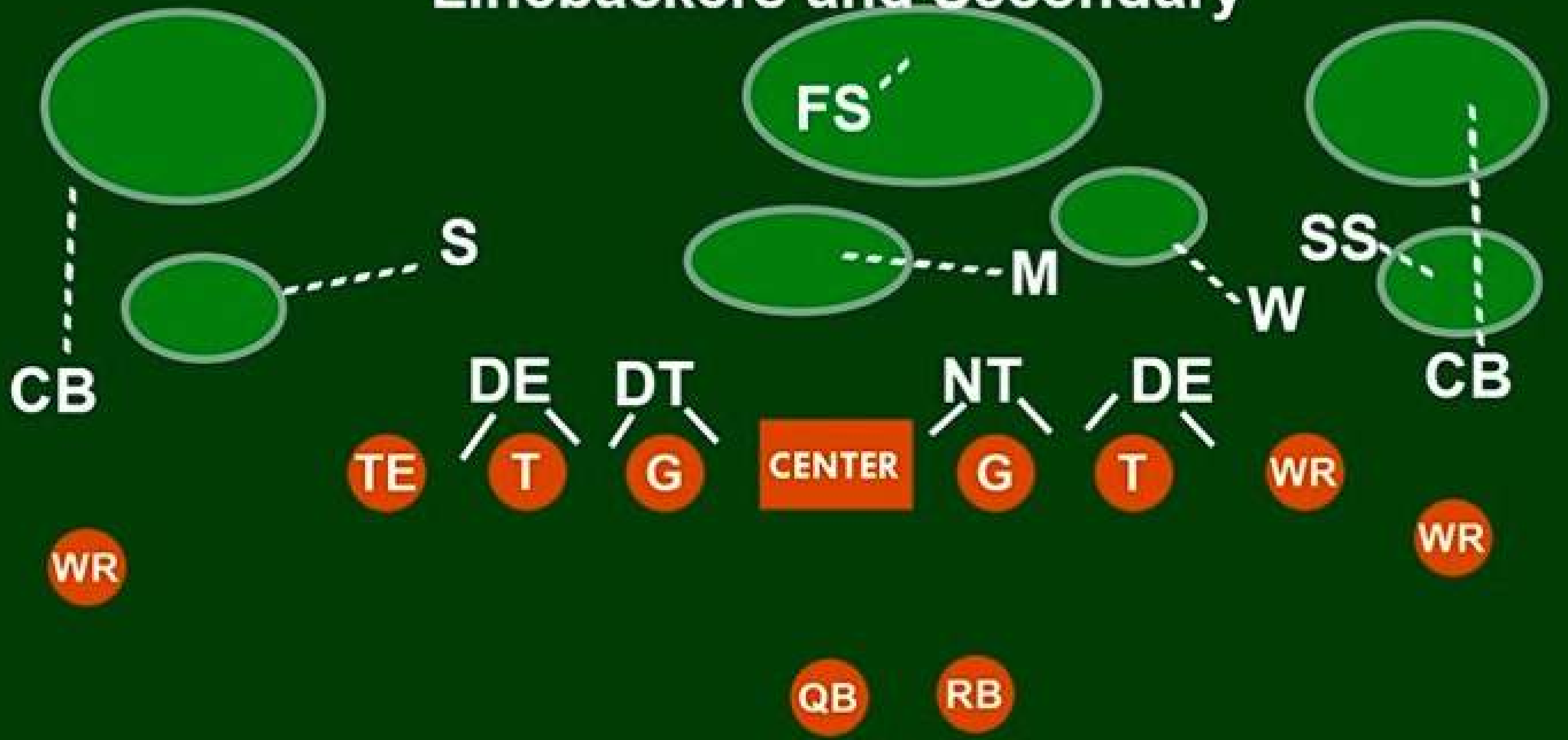


out wide to cover the area that's left void by the two cornerbacks, who are responsible for deep zone coverage. The Mike and the Sam will drop back into the middle of the field to cover their respective "quarter."

Against a run play, the three linebackers and the strong safety will have primary responsibility for plugging open holes, funneling ball carriers to the middle of the field, and making most of the tackles on plays in front of them.



Cover 3 Defensive Linemen,  
Linebackers and Secondary



# STAGE 3 THE SECONDARY





Since we've already discussed the strong safety as a linebacker in this system, that leaves only the two cornerbacks and the free safety.

The free safety in a Cover 3 defense will be lined up in center field, behind the Mike linebacker and the only player at his depth. His responsibility will be coverage of the middle deep zone on the field.

He can also either shade to the third of the field to his left or his right if a deep pass is thrown near either sideline.

The two cornerbacks can line up either in a press coverage near the line of scrimmage in the wide receiver's face or at a depth about five to seven yards off the line of scrimmage. The cornerbacks' often take their first few steps back in a sideways, shuffle form in a Cover 3 defense, so they can identify whether the play is a pass or a run at the snap of the ball. They need to do this because their coverage responsibility is the deep zone on their side of the field. Because of this, they're tasked with dropping back pretty deep into coverage, so it's important that they don't mis-read a play as either a run or a pass, otherwise the defense could end up surrendering a big gain.

The entire secondary's responsibility is to cover this deep zone and keep every play in front of them. While the free safety does provide some extra support in coverage to the two cornerbacks, that possibility won't be there if an offense runs three or four deep routes on a play. In that case, the free safety will be forced to cover the middle deep zone himself and won't be able to chip in and help the cornerbacks.



# TAKEAWAY

A Cover 3 defense is an alignment that should be in every defensive coach's repertoire, no matter what level of experience you're coaching. That's because it is one of the most basic zone formations around and one that's good against both the pass and the run. Which means a coach doesn't have to run on and off the field different personnel depending on whether he thinks the offense will run a pass or a run.

The Cover 3 defense can also be installed with many variations, including different blitzes and various forms of the zone coverage that can keep the offense guessing.

However, the Cover 3 defense isn't without its shortfalls. Like any defensive formation, there are intricacies that an offense could exploit. It's very important that each linebacker and player in the secondary stays disciplined, reads plays well, and doesn't give into play-action passes or other misdirection plays. Otherwise it could open up significant holes for the offense to exploit.





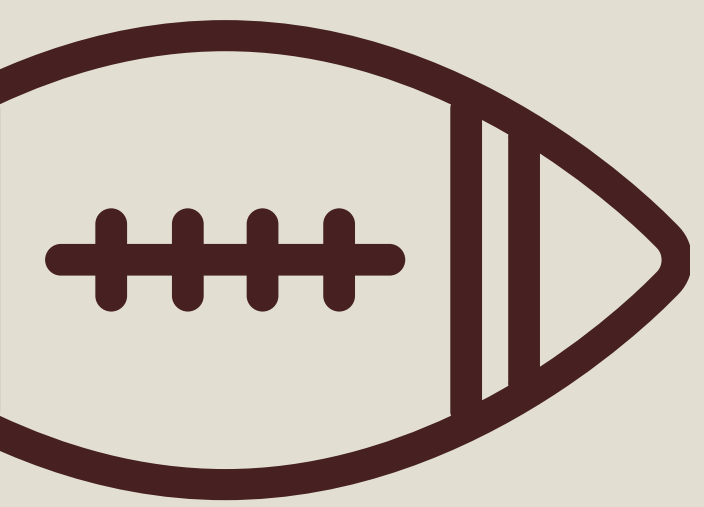


**THE**

# **COVER 4**

**DEFENSE**





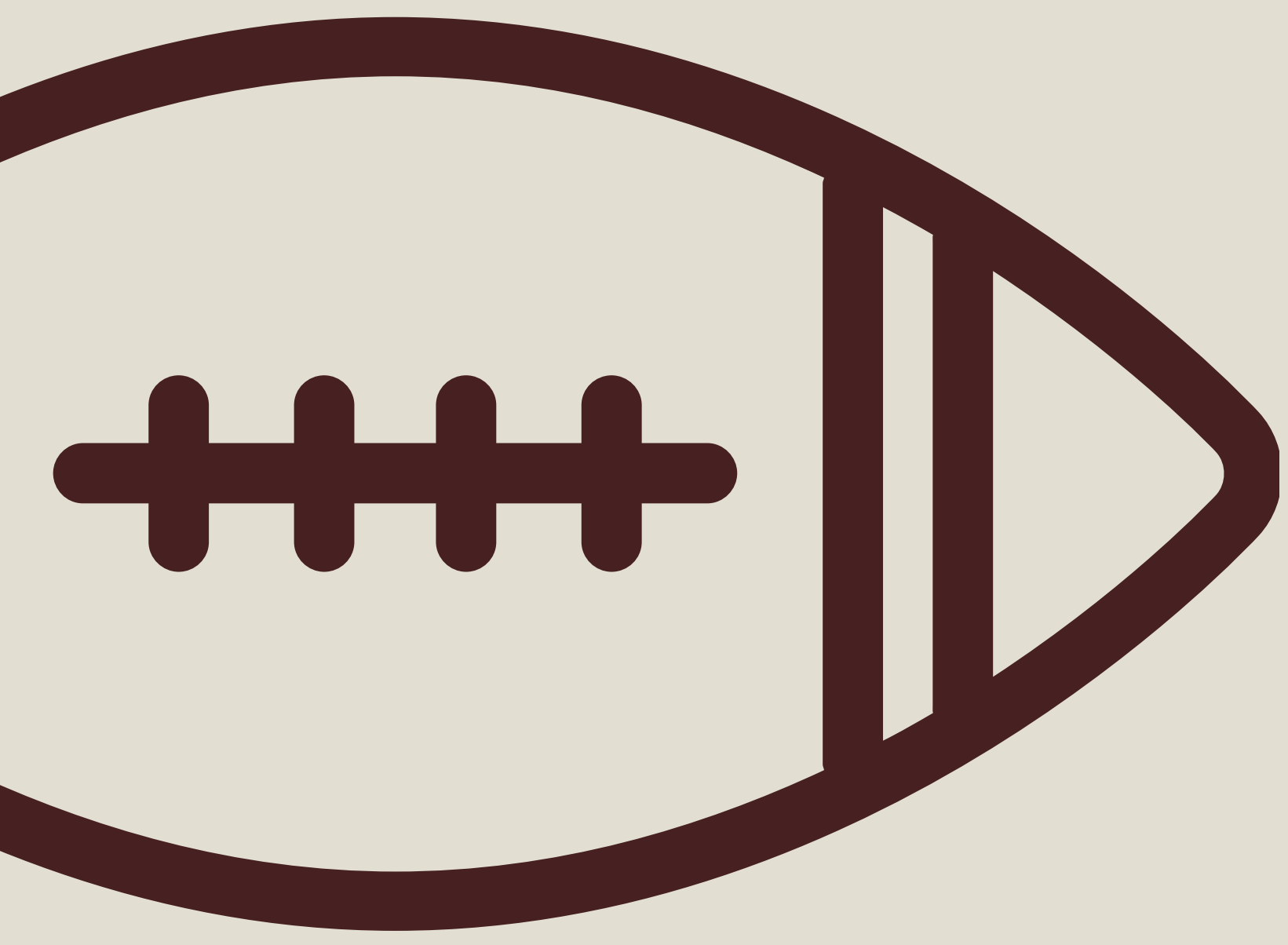
## COVER 4

The Cover 4 defense is often referred to as the “Quarters” alignment, because each member of the secondary is responsible for a quarter of the field on the deep section. It’s a four-deep, three-under zone defense in which the three linebackers are responsible for splitting the underneath section of the field into threes. While the cornerbacks and safeties are responsible for splitting the field into fours on the deep section of the field, from sideline to sideline.

It has been used for many years by defenses at all levels to protect against the deep passing plays, but also as a read-and-react alignment against shorter passes and running plays. There are plenty of wrinkles that can be deployed out of the Cover 4 alignment, but the zone principles remain the same no matter what personnel is on the field.

As with other zone defensive alignments, the Cover 4 defense relies on four down linemen rushing the line of scrimmage, with either three traditional linebackers or two linebackers and a nickelback, along with two cornerbacks and two safeties.





# COVER 4

## Who Should Use It?

### Cover 4 Defense



The Cover 4 defense can be run by just about any team, no matter what level of experience. Like other zone defenses, the Cover 4 is great to implement as a teaching tool of zone responsibilities to new players. However, it's also a defense that has staying power. As you go higher up the experience ladder to high school, collegiate, and even the professional ranks, the Cover 4 defense can be very effective as coaches begin to implement new wrinkles and play calls to keep offenses on their toes.







# STRENGTHS

1

## IT'S SIMPLE

The Cover 4 defense doesn't require any one defender to have multiple responsibilities or to have too much to worry about. On any given play, each player is responsible for a zone on the field, and whoever enters that zone is their responsibility.

2

## IT'S VERSATILE

The Cover 4 defense can also be modified for any experience level to implement extra wrinkles, blitzes, and even different personnel depending on the game situation or the team a defense might be facing.

3

## IT COVERS ALL ZONES WELL

While it is considered a four-deep defense, the Cover 4 defense can also provide a blanket across the shorter passes, as long as the defensive personnel has the ability to read, react, and provide help.

4

## NO ONE'S ON THEIR OWN

One of the best parts about a Cover 4 defense is that while each player has his own zone of coverage, each position can also provide support to another position once the ball is snapped.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## COULD BE SUSCEPTIBLE TO PLAY ACTION

Since the safeties are tasked with reading the play first and then reacting in coverage, offenses could find some room deep on the field by using play-action passes.

2

## COULD BE SUSCEPTIBLE TO SHORTER PASSES

Offenses that can effectively run stop routes, curls, or short crossing routes over the middle could find some available space. That's because the cornerbacks in a Cover 4 defense line up off the line of scrimmage most of the time, leaving a lot of space in underneath routes.

3

## COULD BE SUSCEPTIBLE TO SPEED

Offenses that have speedy wide receivers, running backs, and even tight ends could find mismatches against this alignment that relies heavily on its linebackers to quickly cover the outside zones of the field.



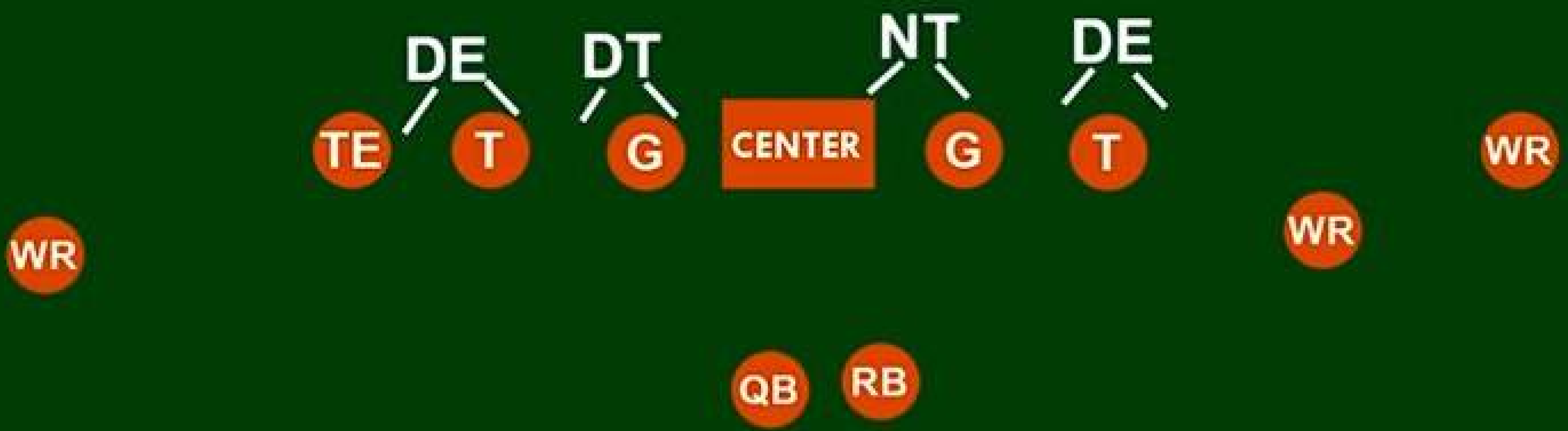
# HOW TO RUN THE COVER 4 DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**

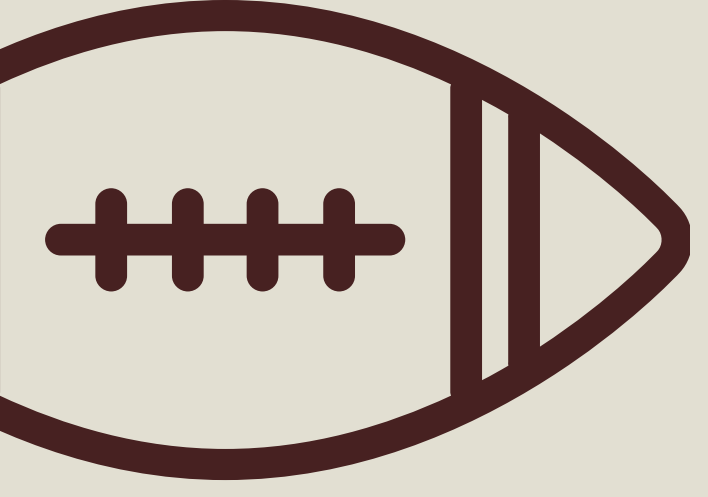


## Cover 4 Defensive Linemen



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





The defensive line in a Cover 4 defense is very similar to how the defensive line is aligned in other base zone defenses.

Defensive linemen in a Cover 4 scheme are tasked with putting as much pressure in the backfield as they possibly can. They're asked to run straightforward, blowing up as many offensive linemen as possible and causing as much disruption as possible on every single play.

Blitzes are utilized more frequently in a Cover 4 defense than a Cover 3 or a Cover 2 zone defense because some wrinkles in the alignment could include subbing out one of the outside linebackers for a nickelback, as we'll discuss in a bit. However, the four defensive linemen in this formation are often the only players tasked with putting pressure on the line of scrimmage. That makes it imperative that the defensive linemen are able to make a strong push at the snap of the ball.

The two defensive tackles in a Cover 4 defense will line up anywhere between the offensive tackle and the center. The bigger player of the two, who could be considered the nose tackle, will line up most of the time between the center and the guard, either on the center's shoulder or the guard's shoulder. The other defensive tackle will then often shade between either the other guard's shoulder and the other offensive tackle's shoulder on his side of the field.

There are two defensive ends on the field in a Cover 4 defense.





They're lined up either on the offensive tackle's outside shoulder or over the tight end if there is one on the field. While the defensive linemen may use curls or stunts between the defensive tackle and defensive end on the same side of the field to cause some confusion for the offensive linemen. The primary duty of the position is to cause as much disruption as possible, as fast as possible, at the line of scrimmage.



Cover 4 Defensive Linemen,  
and Linebackers



# STAGE 2 THE LINEBACKERS





There are three linebackers on the field in a base Cover 4 defense:

- Middle (Mike)
- Strong-side (Sam)
- Weak-side (Will)

The primary duty of each of these players is to cover the underneath zone on the field, which stretches sideline to sideline from the line of scrimmage to a depth of about 10 yards back. Each linebacker is responsible for a third of the field width wise. The Mike linebacker is responsible for the middle third of the field, often called the middle hook. While the two outside linebackers are responsible for the outside thirds of the field, often called the flat.

The Mike will often encounter wide receivers running crossing routes or tight ends releasing from their stance on the line of scrimmage to run crossing routes, stop routes, or hook routes over the middle third of the field.

The two outside linebackers each have responsibilities for the flat – the area where the two cornerbacks will leave void at the snap of the ball. Both the Sam and the Will also often encounter running backs running routes out of the backfield in their zones, or even wide receivers flanked outside who run shorter routes toward the outside of the field.

One of the more popular wrinkles to a Cover 4 defense happens with the linebackers, especially in obvious passing downs. Some

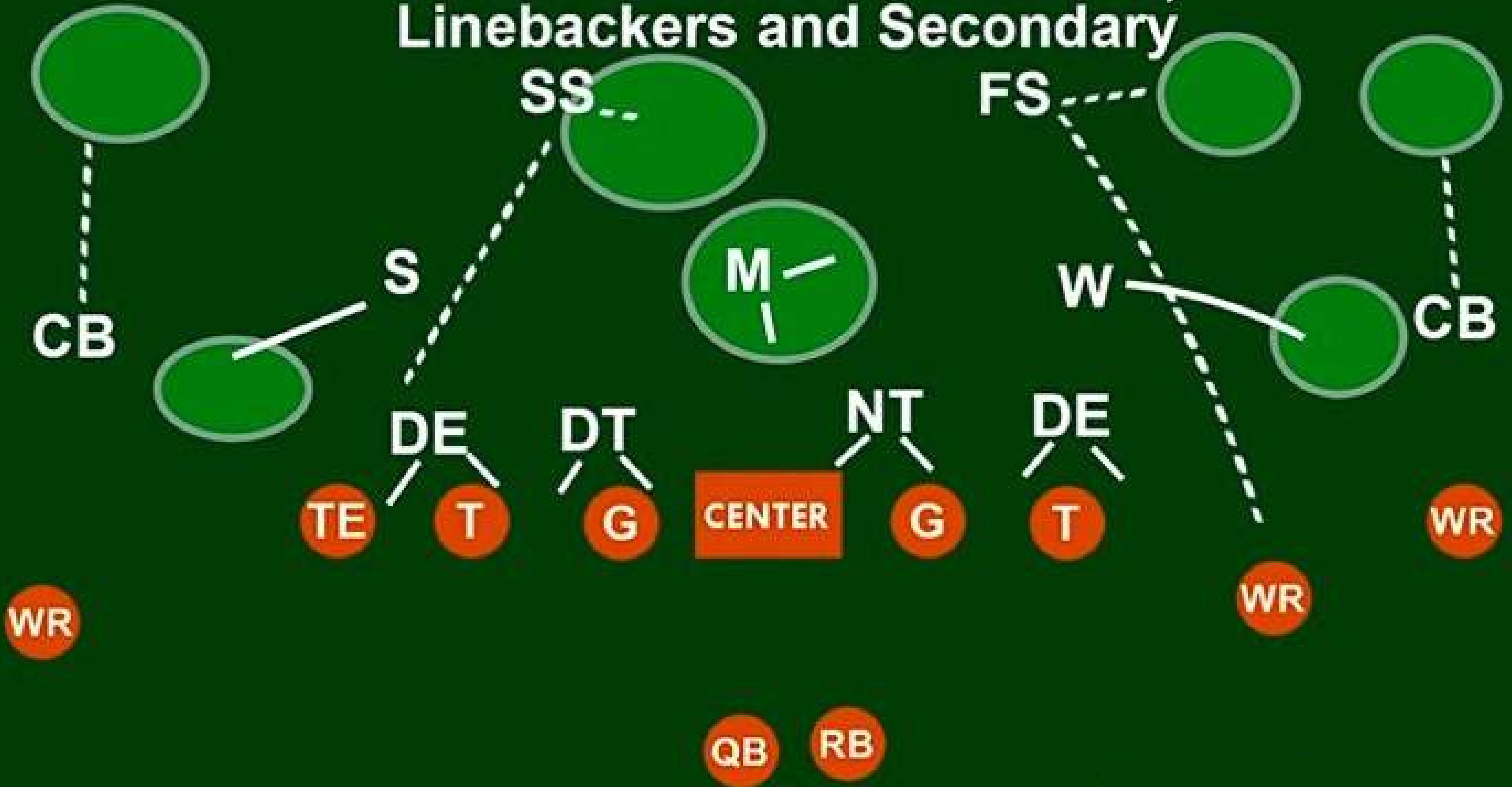




defenses will substitute the Sam linebacker for an extra cornerback, or nickelback in this case, to help with the coverage of the outside underneath zone when offenses bring four wide receivers onto the field. That extra speed and extra routes run make it difficult from a Sam linebacker to cover, and so defensive coaches may adjust by bringing this nickelback onto the field in place of a third linebacker.



Cover 4 Defensive Linemen,  
Linebackers and Secondary



# STAGE 3 THE SECONDARY





The four defenders in a Cover 4 alignment are responsible for covering the deep zone, split into quarters from sideline to sideline. This zone starts about 10 yards off the line of scrimmage and continues from there until the end zone they're defending. It's extremely important in a Cover 4 defense that no defender allows a receiver to get behind.

Because of the need to drop deep into coverage at the snap of the ball, a lot of Cover 4 plays will have the cornerbacks line up off the line of scrimmage about five to seven yards back. This gives them a head start on backpedaling to their deep zone on the field.

While some Cover 4 plays will utilize more of a press coverage, where the cornerbacks line up closer to the line of scrimmage, this is mostly done at more advanced levels that have cornerbacks who are experienced running stride for stride with receivers.

The free safety and strong safety in a Cover 4 defense begin the play about 10-15 yards off the line of scrimmage. Because they're already lined up at the depth of the deep zone, the safeties' first step is more than not a "flat step." Instead of taking a step back or a step up at the snap of the ball, the safeties are told to just get out of their stance and read whether it's a run play or pass play before making a move.

If the offense runs less than four deep routes on any play – and this happens a lot – one or both of the safeties can shade their zone coverage to the side of the field to provide extra support for





the cornerbacks. Or they can shade forward to provide extra help in coverage for the linebackers at the underneath zone. When this happens it's especially important that the safeties don't misread a play, because if they do and a receiver gets behind them, a big play could be there for the taking for the offense.



# TAKEAWAY

A Cover 4 defensive alignment should be in just about every team's playbook in some fashion. It's a simple defense to teach and roll out and it protects against deep passes and big plays. Each player on the team is responsible for a zone on the field which means they don't have to worry about making too many reads at the snap of the ball before they know what their responsibilities are.

Teams at more advanced levels, especially in college or the professional ranks, can also deploy a lot of wrinkles to the Cover 4 defense. This includes substituting the Sam linebacker for a nickelback in situations where the offense might have more wide receivers on the field, to having cornerbacks play press coverage on receivers to make it harder for them to separate at the line of scrimmage and run their routes effectively.

No matter what version of the defense is run, the Cover 4 is an excellent option for any team looking to keep the ball in front of them and limit the number of yards an offense has the ability to gain on any one play.





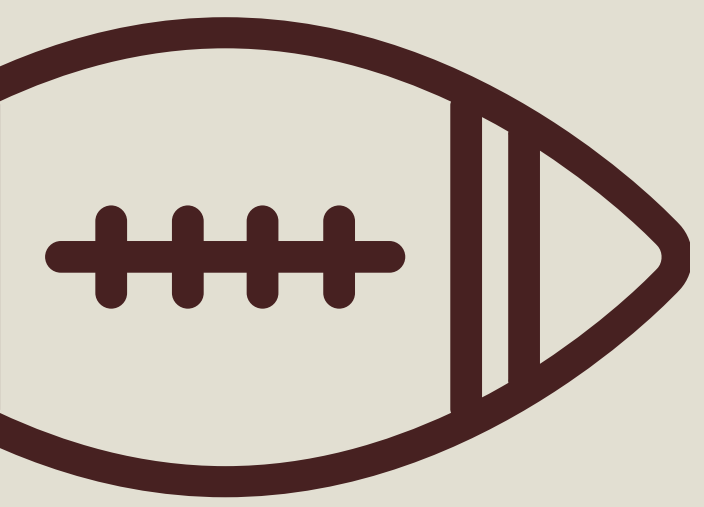


THE

3-3-5

DEFENSE





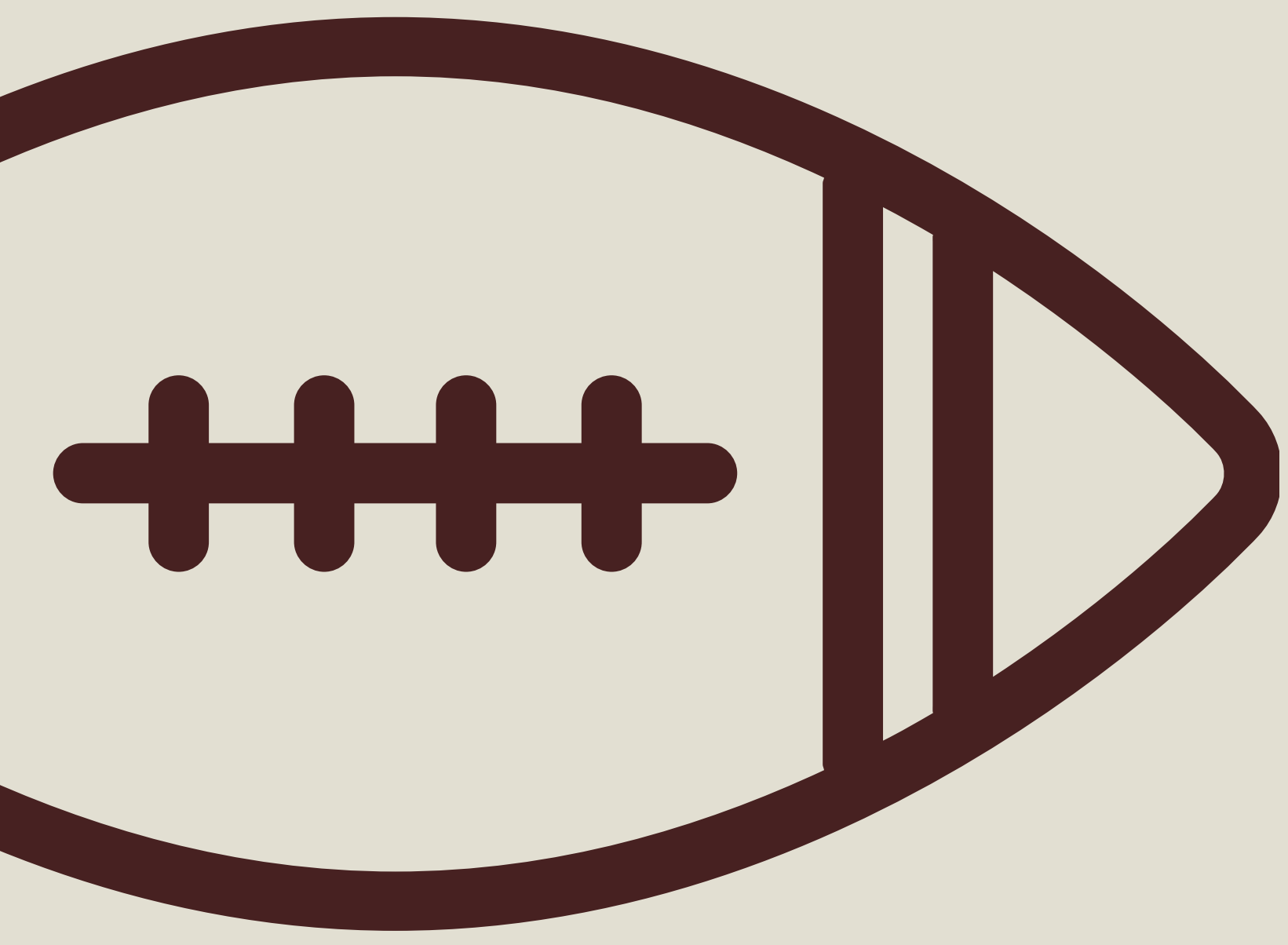
## 3-3-5

Defenses in football have recently progressed as offenses have changed.

With passing becoming more and more a focal point of the offensive game, and with more teams running normal offensive sets out of the shotgun formation, defensive alignments have begun to shift, too.

Over the years, defenses have changed from 5-2-4 formations, to 4-3-4 formations, to some more progressive defenses utilizing at 3-4-4 formation. Now, though, the 3-3-5 defensive formation is becoming more common as defenses look to keep up with the changing approach of offenses in football.





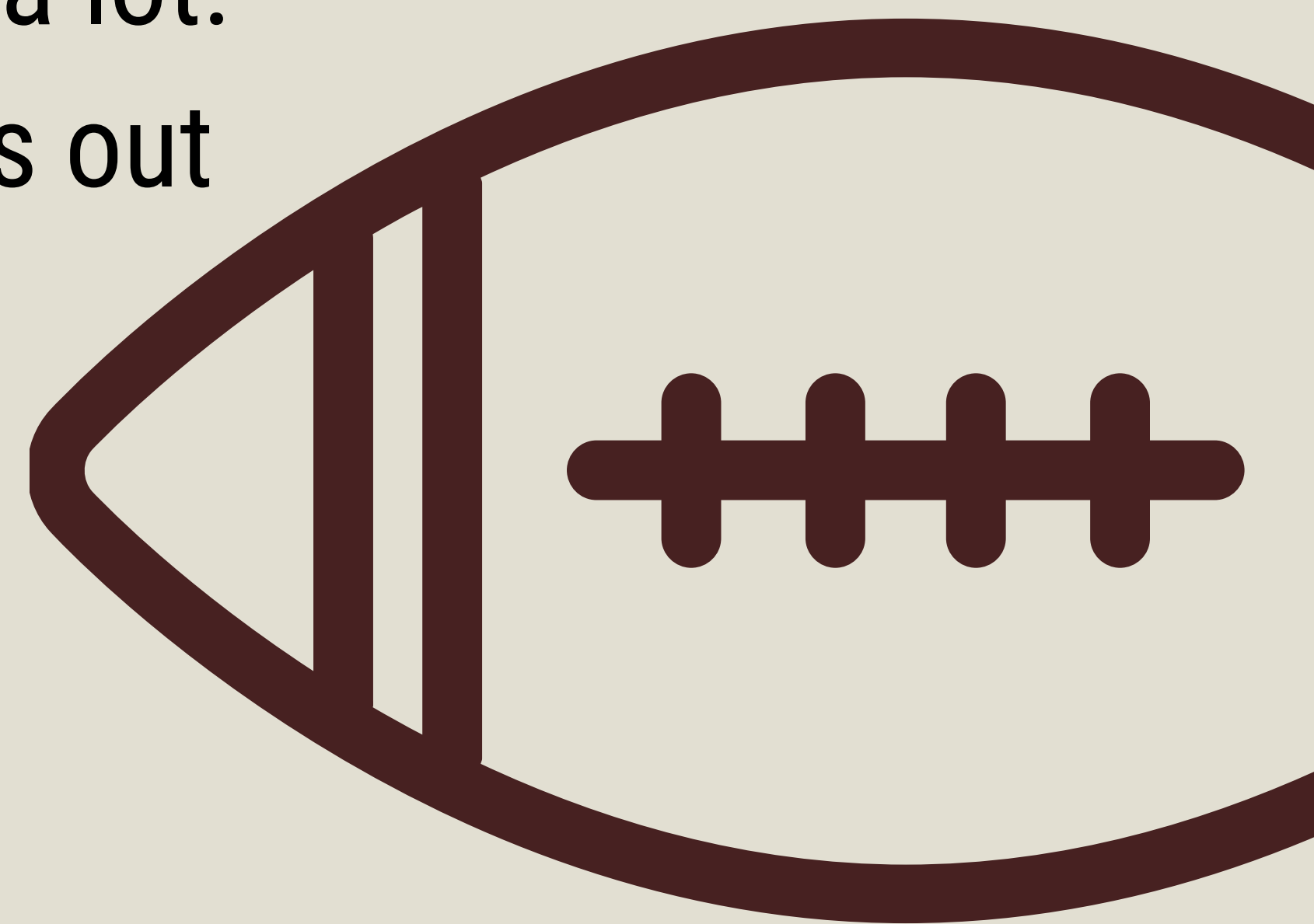
# 3-3-5

## Who Should Use It?

### 3-3-5 Defense



A 3-3-5 formation is great for defenses that have players with a nice combination of speed, power, and coverage abilities to keep up with an opposing offense that passes the ball a lot. Especially with multiple wide receiver sets out of the shotgun formation.







## 3-3-5

The 3-3-5 defense is also great for a football team comprised of more skilled players in the secondary, rather than a team with a lot of big, beefy, powerful defensive linemen.

The formation utilizes only three down linemen and five defensive backs. This is to emphasize players who are solid in pass coverage and players in the secondary who can approach the line of scrimmage, make tackles in space, and also contribute to stopping the run.

It's essential that coaches who utilize this formation are able to effectively communicate each player's defensive responsibility on the field as there are a lot more players running around in coverage with responsibilities outside of simple gap techniques at the line of scrimmage.

A 3-3-5 defensive formation is also great to use in specific situations against offensive teams that pass a lot and use a lot of multiple wide receiver formations, or in specific game situations such as third down and long to go to get a first down.





# STRENGTHS

1

## ALLOWS FOR A FASTER DEFENSE

Using more defensive backs than defensive linemen allows your defense to have more speed on the field to keep up with today's faster game.

2

## CREATES CONFUSION

Offenses are not as familiar with the 3-3-5 defensive format, so quarterbacks and offensive linemen are tasked with identifying matchups from a formation they're not used to seeing.

3

## ALLOWS FOR FLEXIBILITY

Having only three down linemen and five defensive backs allows outside linebackers the freedom to blitz more often, or serve as another type of defensive lineman who doesn't start the play in a three-point stance at the line of scrimmage.

4

## CAN BE USED IN MULTIPLE FORMATS

A 3-3-5 defense is not only good for protecting against a passing offense. A good combination of personnel will be solid against the run game as well, allowing safeties to play near the line of scrimmage more in run support.

5

## CLOGS UP SPACE

Extra defensive backs and roaming linebackers clog up space in the middle of the field, where offenses today love to take advantage with shorter crossing routes for their receivers.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## TOUGH TO GET AT THE QUARTERBACK

Having only three down linemen frees up more offensive linemen at the snap of the ball to have vision downfield. This allows them to recognize and potentially pick up a blitz or a stunting defender before they have a chance to put pressure on the quarterback.

2

## MORE SPACE FOR OFFENSIVE LINEMEN

A bigger, more athletic offensive line might be able to get off the line of scrimmage better as they're not faced with an opposing down linemen opposite them at the start of the play.

3

## MORE TIME TO THROW

Defensive pressure from a 3-3-5 defense takes longer, as linebackers, safeties, and cornerbacks are further from the line of scrimmage and face more free blockers to avoid since there are fewer down linemen at the line of scrimmage.

4

## REQUIRES SPEED

A slower, bigger defensive team might have trouble keeping up with speedier wide receivers, athletic tight ends, and running backs who are running routes.

5

## REQUIRES ATHLETICISM

A 3-3-5 defense cannot succeed without bigger, more powerful defensive backs who are solid at tackling. Fewer down linemen means more ball handlers will need to be tackled by players in the secondary who often are the last line of defense between the ball carrier and the end zone.



# HOW TO RUN THE 3-3-5 DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**



## 3-3-5 Defensive Linemen



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





A 3-3-5 defense, like all other defensive formations in football, starts with the big guys up front, the defensive linemen at the line of scrimmage.

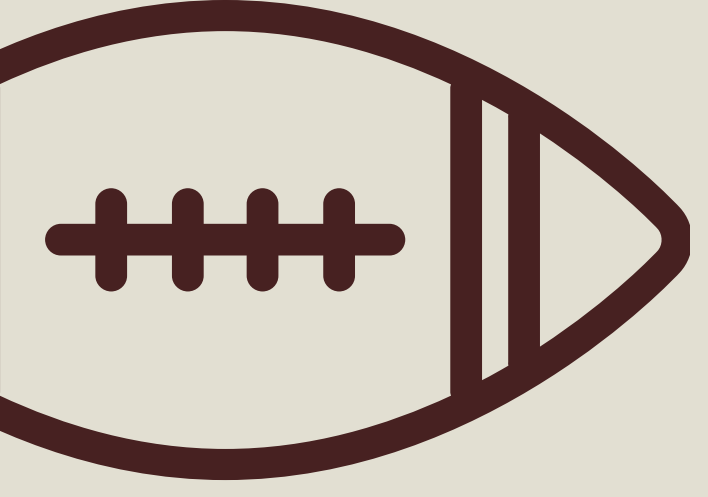
This formation utilizes one defensive tackle and two defensive ends. One option up front is to have a traditional nose tackle line up directly over the center's head, in what's called the 0 technique. The tackle's head, in this case, will be lined up directly over the football. Using the player as a nose tackle in this case, the player can also line up in a 1 technique on either side of the center between the two guards.

The tackle's responsibility is to clog up one of the A gaps, depending on the specific play. His main responsibility is to force the offensive line to double team him, clogging up both the center and a guard, which then frees up an inside linebacker to roam in the middle to stop the run or get to the quarterback.

Another option is to shade the defensive tackle into a more traditional role that he would take on in a 4-3-4 defense, where he is lined up over the guard's inside shoulder. This would allow for more stunts with defensive ends and blitzes by inside linebackers, but could also free up more space for offensive linemen if the tackle isn't quick on his feet off the line of scrimmage with the snap of the ball.

The strong side defensive end would line up on the side of the field where the tight end is lined up, or the "strong" side of the offense.



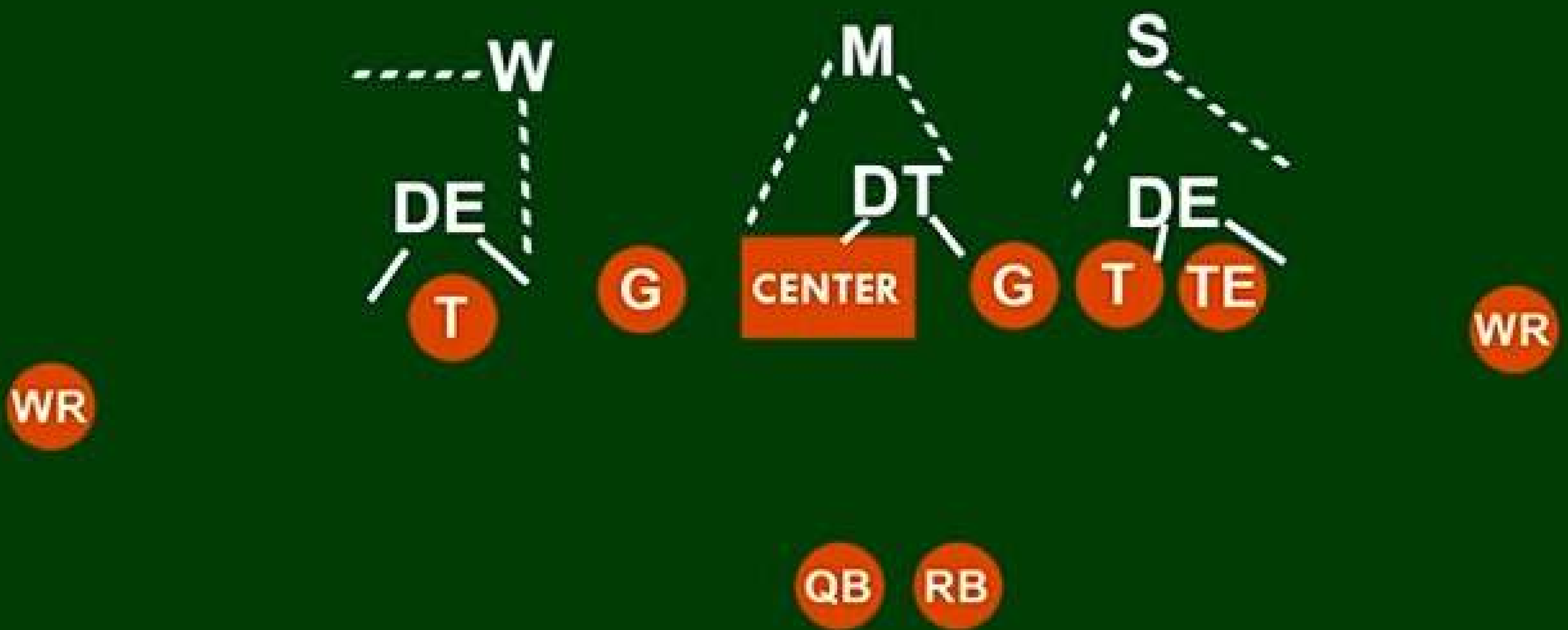


This player's responsibility is to keep containment of the play inside of him, as it always is with defensive ends, but then also to push the offensive line back as much as possible and force defenses into double teams. This would allow for more blitzes and stunts from linebackers, safeties, and cornerbacks.

The weakside defensive lineman can either be a traditional down lineman who starts the play in a three-point stance, or it can actually be a fourth linebacker brought in on a specific play to cause more confusion. This player's responsibility would be outside containment as well as more stunts and pressures on the quarterback from the weak side. This player is often freed up to be blocked by a running back in the backfield, so a player with speed and strength could thrive in this role.

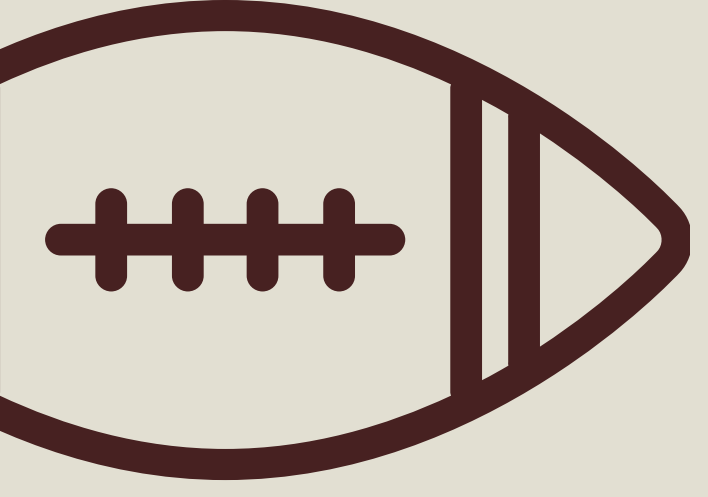


## 3-3-5 Defensive Linemen and Linebackers



# STAGE 2 THE LINEBACKERS





Let's start with the middle linebacker, more commonly referred to as the Mike.

The Mike is the quarterback of the defense, responsible for recognizing the formation that an offense is in and calling it out to the rest of the defense, as well as making sure all the defensive players are lined up in their appropriate positions.

The Mike linebacker in this formation should typically line up about five to seven yards off the line of scrimmage. This gives him more time to read and react to the offense, and also gives him more space to go out in pass coverage or to plug up holes against the run. They can also become a blitzer, since there is a lot of other support in the passing game with the extra defensive back.

The strongside linebacker, or the Sam, is who lines up on the strong side of the defense, toward the tight end. The Sam linebacker has three primary duties in a 3-3-5 defense. The first is to be the primary blitzing player on your defense. He should often be used to blitz inside in the gap that the nose tackle is clogging up, or on the outside to a gap that your strongside defensive end is handling.

A second possible responsibility on pass plays for the Sam linebacker is to cover the tight end when he runs a route. On running plays, it is the Sam's responsibility to plug holes both inside and outside the tight end. Since the Sam will often be paired with a tight end during both pass and run plays, he needs to be strong. And because he will often be asked to blitz, he needs to be quick as





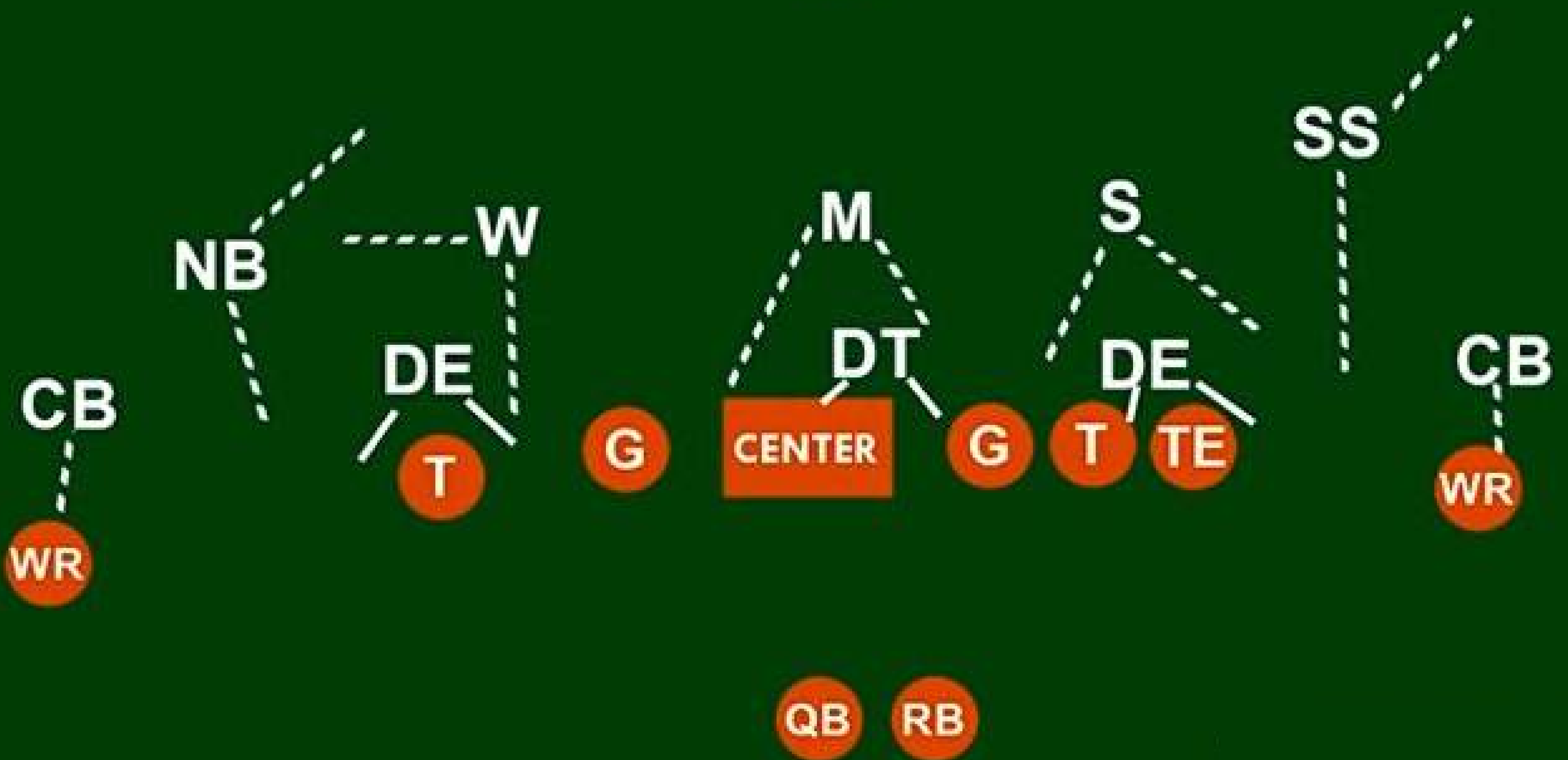
well.

The final linebacker spot is called the Will, or the weakside linebacker. This position in a 3-3-5 defense is sort of a hybrid position. This player will blitz a lot, both against the pass and the run, and can be used as a fourth defensive linemen at times to cause confusion at the line of scrimmage. This position will sometimes drop in pass coverage as well, and could even act as the Mike linebacker on plays where the Mike is the player who is blitzing.



## 3-3-5 Defensive Linemen, Linebackers and Secondary

-----FS-----



# STAGE 3 THE SECONDARY





The secondary in a 3-3-5 defense will employ the typical two cornerbacks and two safeties and then add a third nickelback who has some of the skills of a typical corner and some of the skills of a typical safety.

One of the most important attributes of all secondary positions in this formation is speed, since they'll be running all over the field against potentially more receiving options and plugging up what could be extra holes created by having one fewer down defensive lineman.

First, let's talk about the safeties. Both the free safety and strong safety have similar assignments to when a defense is lined up in other traditional formations that have only four defensive backs. The safeties are asked to provide support coverage against the pass like they are in more typical zone defensive formations, they're asked to provide gap coverage near the line of scrimmage on passing plays, and they're asked to blitz on both the inside and the outside.

The two cornerbacks are tasked with similar responsibilities to what they're used to in other defensive formations as well. In a 3-3-5 defense, it is essential that the cornerbacks keep containment and not get beat over the top by a receiver. There isn't as much freedom for a cornerback to lose that containment, since there might not be a safety behind them for support on a deep passing play.





## 3-3-5

Perhaps the key to the entire 3-3-5 defense, though, is the nickelback position. The nickelback will often be tasked with covering a receiver who lines up in the slot. In addition, he may be asked to blitz at times, and be one of the first members of the secondary to support against the running game, especially on run plays that go to the outside of the tackles and tight ends.

Offenses will oftentimes key in on the nickelback and try to throw his way, since they think he is the fifth most talented player in the secondary, otherwise he would be a starting cornerback or starting safety. That's why it's essential that a nickelback in a 3-3-5 defense keep contain, and to do so, he must be very quick and be able to read defenses to run in space and make adjustments on the fly based off what offense is being run.



# TAKEAWAY

The 3-3-5 defense is a great option for coaches to run in today's game of football. It allows for great flexibility to defend against both the pass and the run, especially when more and more offenses are running more multiple wide receiver sets and out of more shotgun formations.

Perhaps the best thing about a 3-3-5 defense is its ability to cause confusion to opposing offenses. Nearly every position at the second level (the linebackers) and the third level (the secondary) of the defense can be a potential blitzer, which means that pressure from a 3-3-5 defense can come from anywhere at any time. This not only creates confusion with receivers running passing routes and offensive linemen trying to identify blitzing players, but it also causes confusion for offensive players when they're trying to identify their blocking responsibilities in the run game.

However, in order to effectively run a 3-3-5 defense, a coach must first know whether he has the defensive personnel capable of the task. Almost all players on the





defense in a 3-3-5 formation must possess speed and quickness, along with strength up front and vision and adjustment ability in the linebackers and secondary. The secondary must also have players capable of keeping contain and covering receivers one-on-one without extra support over the top at times as safeties and linebackers blitz.

Overall, if a coach has the right personnel that can understand and run the formation, a 3-3-5 defense is a great option for keeping opposing offenses on their toes. It's also a great way to teach players a different approach to defense and give them multiple tools they need to read offenses and react by either dropping into coverage against the pass, or blitzing and filling gaps against both the pass and the run.





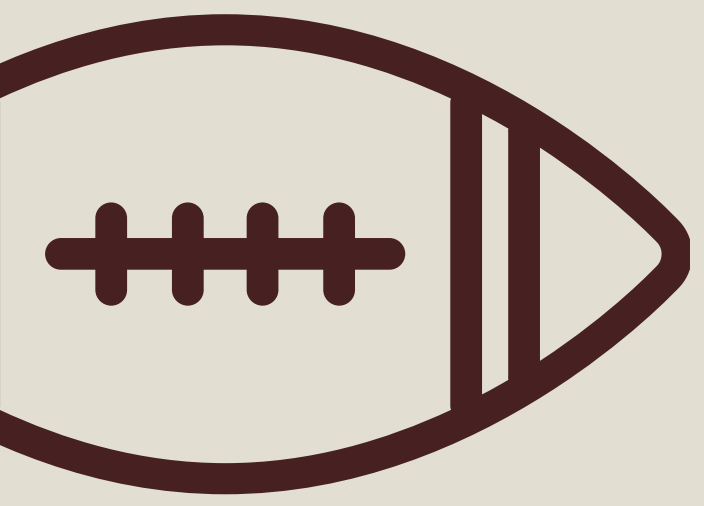


**THE**

**5-3**

**DEFENSE**



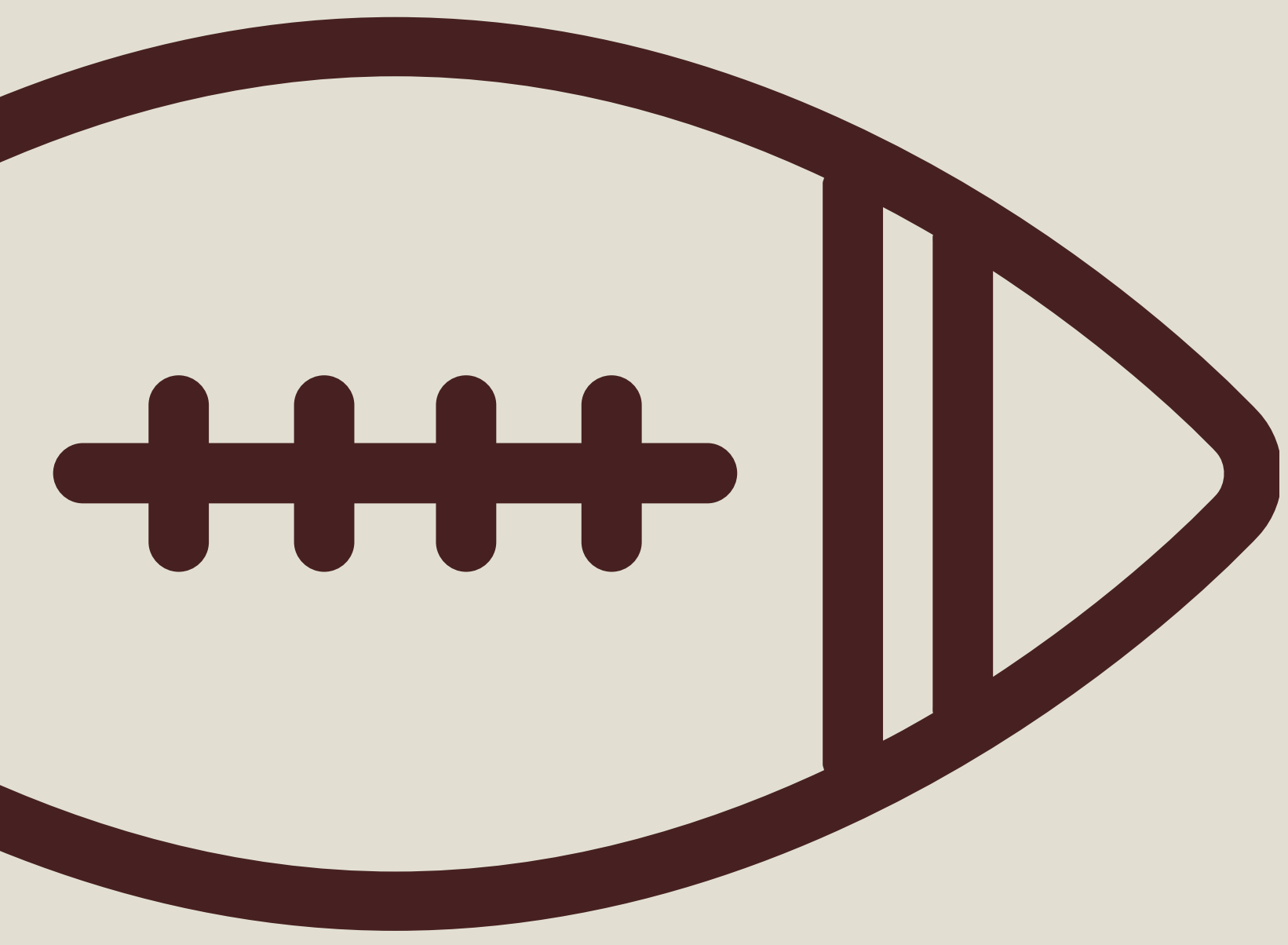


## 5-3

Many youth football coaches are looking for simplified schemes they can run to teach players who don't have a lot of experience playing football. These coaches are looking to teach the basic principles of both offense and defense first, so that their players can get a handle on the fundamental strategies of the sport.

Defensive coaches are often looking for simple one-gap schemes or defenses which don't require their players to have multiple responsibilities. That's why the 5-3 defense is one of the more popular alignments for youth football teams. It's a defense that stacks the line of scrimmage with defenders to stop the running game while also allowing some flexibility in blitzing and coverage packages.





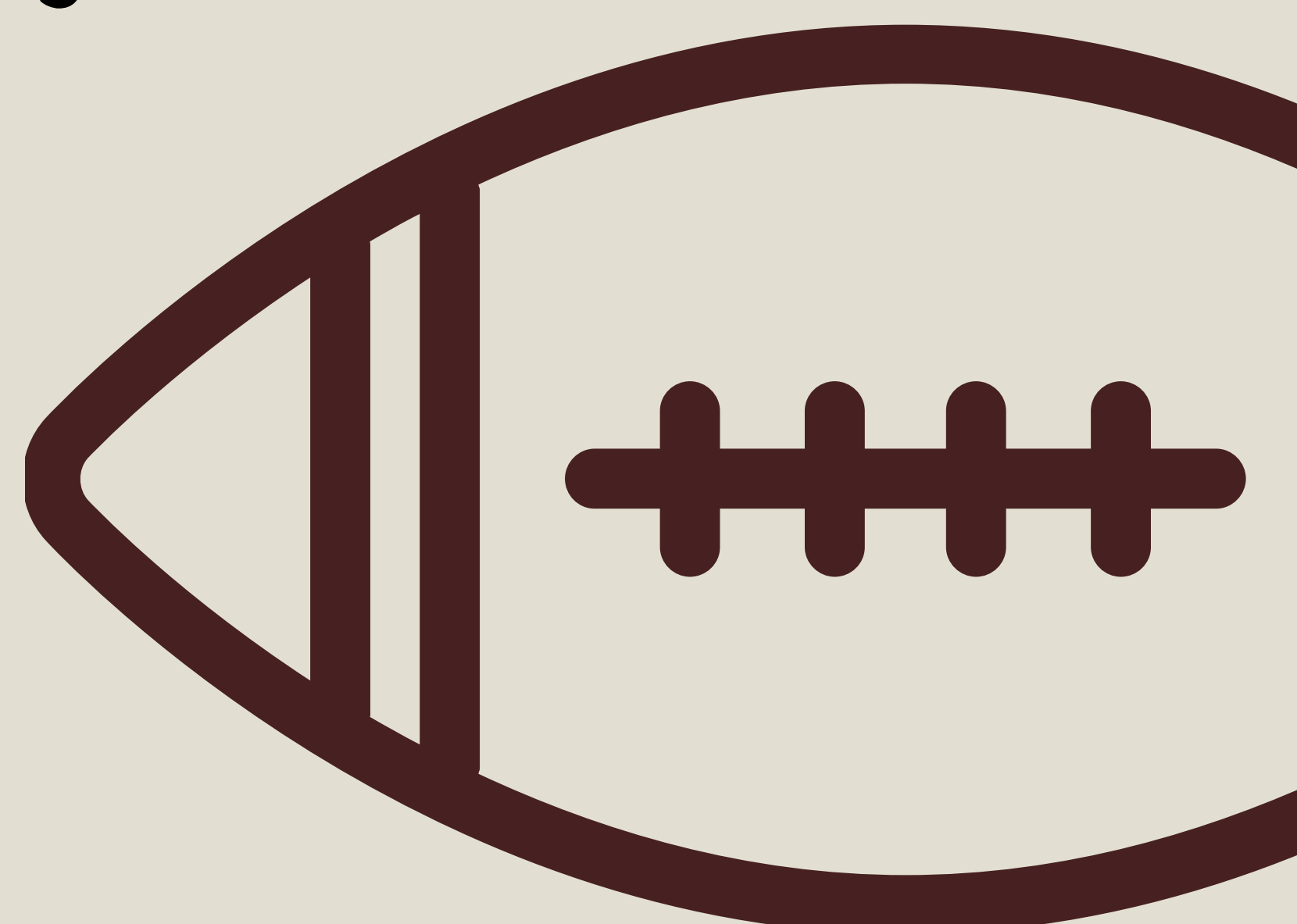
# 5-3

## Who Should Use It?

### 5-3 Defense



The 5-3 defensive formation is great for youth football teams because it's a simplified defense that doesn't require any player to have too many responsibilities. It's a great defense to teach containment, gap coverage, and primary duties on the field.







But the 5-3 defense isn't just for the young, inexperienced team of football newbies. It's also an alignment that can be used as players get older and are more experienced, because it provides flexibility and adaptability in look, coverage and pressure.

The 5-3 defense is focused primarily on stacking the line of scrimmage with a lot of bodies, exchanging a defender in the secondary for another defender up front. It's often used against "jumbo" offense packages that utilize at least two tight ends and maybe even a fullback.

It's a great option for stopping the run, by making it harder for the offensive line to block all the defenders who are lined up near the ball. And it's also good for zone coverage in the passing game and for applying pressure to the quarterback.





# STRENGTHS

1

## STACKS THE LINE

The 5-3 defense utilizes five down linemen at the snap of the ball, making it hard for offensive linemen to have vision downfield.

2

## EXTRA PRESSURE AT POINT OF ATTACK

This clogging at the line of scrimmage allows linebackers to stay hidden behind the defensive linemen, providing opportunities to create pressure with a blitz.

3

## GREAT AGAINST THE RUN

Having eight defenders in the box makes it very hard to establish a consistent running game on offense, as there isn't a lot of room for running backs to go with the football even if the offensive line does a good job blocking.

4

## CAN ALSO BE GOOD AGAINST THE PASS

The three linebackers can provide coverage against receivers over the middle of the field, and one of the defensive ends can even drop back in coverage, since there's a glut of linemen in this formation.

5

## REDUCES REACTION TIME

Quarterbacks and running backs have less time to make a play against the 5-3 defense because there are so many defenders close to the line of scrimmage at the snap of the ball.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## SUSCEPTIBLE TO SHORT PASSES

Offenses will often try to attack a 5-3 defense with short passing routes. That's because with one fewer defender in the secondary, there is a lot of room outside the hash marks for speedier receivers to take advantage of.

2

## HARD TO RUN IF UNDERSIZED

If your team doesn't have a lot of big bodies to play along the line of scrimmage, then the 5-3 defense might not be good for you. This alignment requires bigger bodies up front more than anything, otherwise your defenders could get pushed around.

3

## SIMPLIFIES THINGS FOR THE OFFENSE, TOO

While there are wrinkles you can run in your 5-3 defense, it's often tough to disguise blitzes from the quarterback. That could allow the offense to take advantage by sticking to simple routes for receivers and runs toward the outside.

4

## SECONDARY NEEDS DISCIPLINE

It's essential that the secondary plays disciplined and sticks to their responsibilities, especially with one fewer defender at that level.



# HOW TO RUN THE 5-3 DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**



## 5-3 Defensive Linemen



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





The defensive line in a 5-3 defense is stacked up front. The line will consist of a big-bodied nose tackle, two defensive tackles, and two defensive ends.

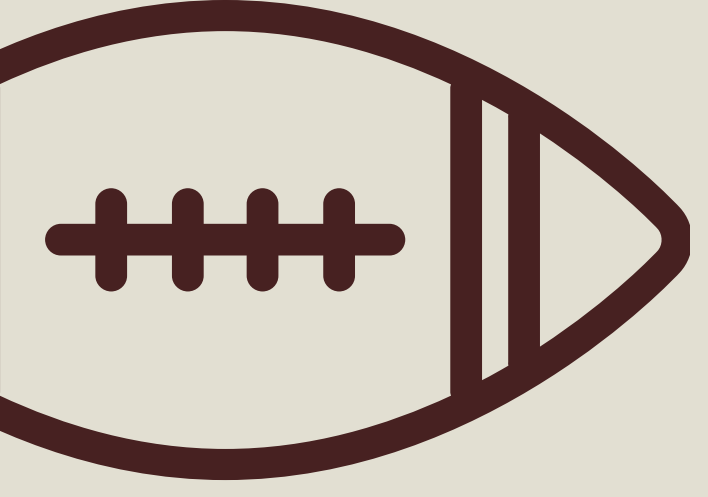
The nose tackle in this defense will line up in three possible positions: Either directly over the head of the center or shaded toward his left or right shoulder. And the nose tackle has one primary responsibility -- to attack either A gap and clog up as much space as possible in the middle of the field.

The other two defensive tackles will most often line up over the offensive guards' head or outside shoulder. The defensive tackles will either have responsibility to fill the B gap on base defensive plays, or they could even stunt out wide to the C gap on blitzing plays (more on this later).

The two defensive ends in a 5-3 defense will line up in what's known as a wide 9 technique, meaning on the outside shoulder of the last man on the line of scrimmage. This player will be a tight end on both sides of the field if the offense is running a jumbo package, or it could be an offensive tackle if the offense has one tight end, a running back, and a fullback on the field.

While the nose tackle has almost the same responsibility on every play (either one of the A gaps), the defensive tackles and ends could have varying responsibilities. On base plays, the tackles will be responsible for the B gap while the ends will be responsible for the C gap and outside containment.



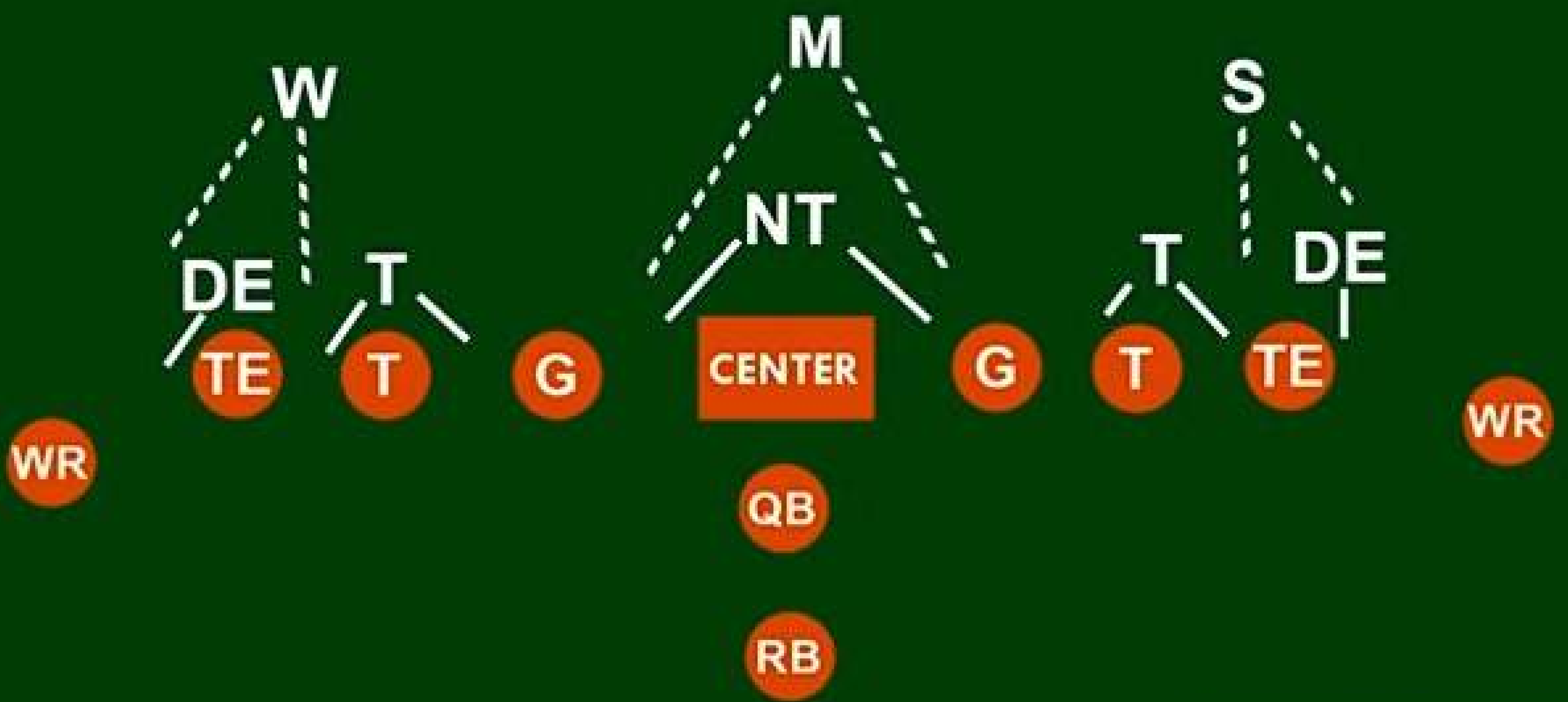


However, the 5-3 defense also allows for the possibility of stunts and curls along the line of scrimmage. In either of these situations, the defensive ends might drop back in coverage as either of the outside linebackers rush the line on a blitz.

The ends might also run a stunt, where they curl around the back of the defensive tackle and attack the B gap to surprise the offensive line. In both of these cases, the defensive tackles would stunt outside to the C gap with outside containment responsibilities, filling the void the ends left when they curled or dropped into pass coverage.



## 5-3 Defensive Linemen and Linebackers



# STAGE 2 THE LINEBACKERS





The three linebackers in a 5-3 defensive alignment are made up of the traditional middle linebacker (the Mike), strong-side linebacker (the Sam) and weak-side linebacker (the Will). The positioning on the field pre-snap is the same every play for all three players at this level of the defense, and their responsibilities in a base defense are the same as well.

The Mike will line up almost directly behind the nose tackle or shaded over either one of his shoulders. On run plays, the Mike is responsible to fill the A gap that the nose tackle doesn't. So, if the nose tackle is filling the A gap to the center's left side, then the Mike will fill the A gap to the center's right side.

On passing plays, the Mike is most often responsible for dropping into cover over the middle of the field. The Mike will sometimes, but rarely, blitz on a passing play.

The Will and Sam will line up in similar positions and have similar responsibilities on their side of the field. Both outside linebackers will line up somewhere between the defensive tackle and defensive end on their side of the field.

In a base defense against a running play, the outside linebackers have primary responsibility over the B and C gaps. These responsibilities will shift based on where both the defensive tackle and defensive end on their side of the field is going at the snap of the ball. In a base, man-to-man defense against a passing play, both outside linebackers will have coverage responsibilities on the tight



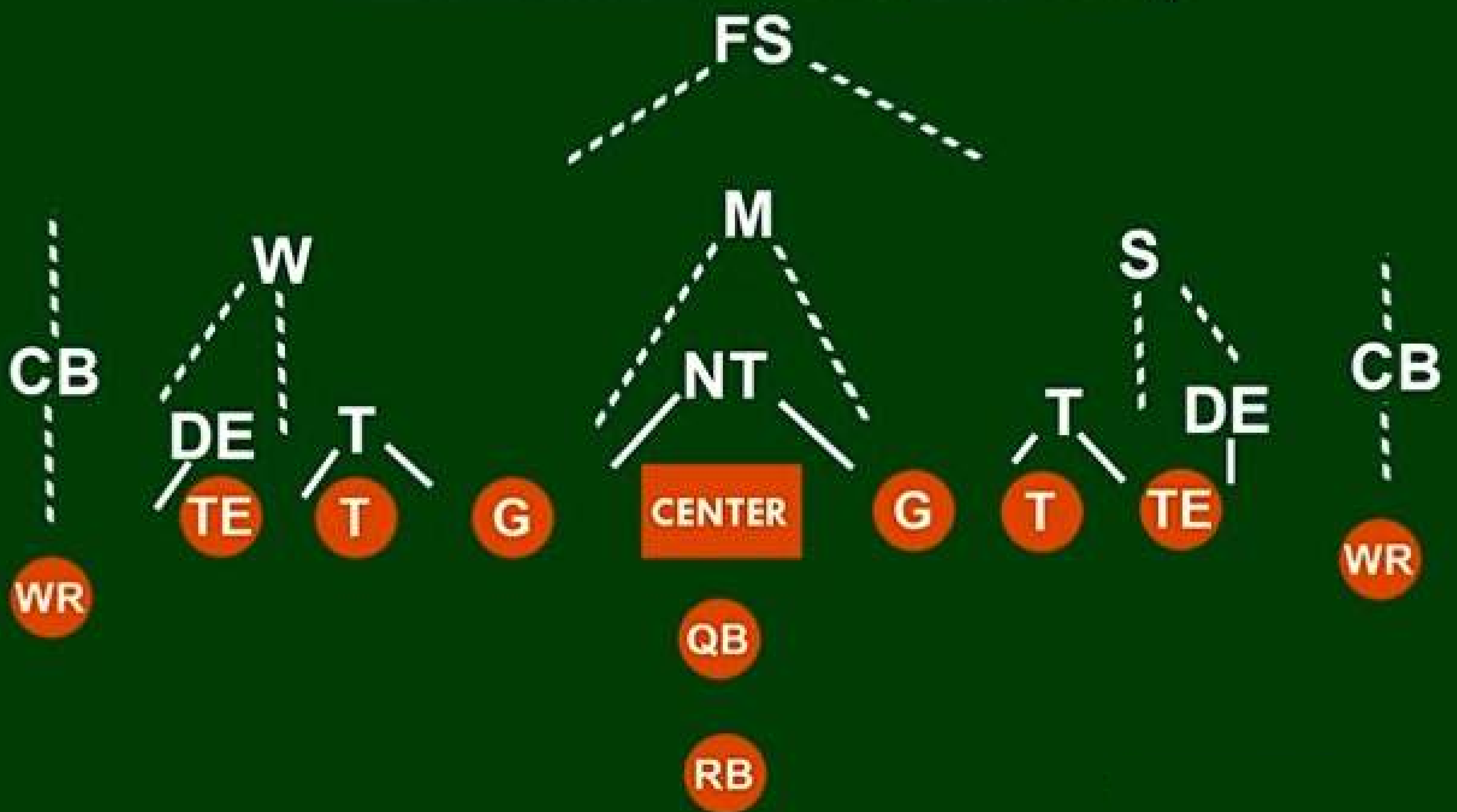


end on their side of the field, if that player ends up running a route. In a base zone defense against a passing play, the outside linebackers will be responsible for covering any player who runs a route inside an imaginary box that covers an area from the line of scrimmage to a few yards behind where they line up initially.

The Sam and Will are also the two players who will most often blitz out of a 5-3 defensive alignment. This is because they are the players who can be hidden the most behind the stacked defensive line. With stunts of the tackle and end up front, the Sam or Will linebacker (or both) could both be asked to blitz through either the B or C gaps on their side of the field on any given play, with the defensive end on that side dropping back into pass coverage if need be.



## 5-3 Defensive Linemen, Linebackers and Secondary



# STAGE 3 THE SECONDARY





The secondary in a 5-3 defense has only three players as the back line of the defense. There are two cornerbacks and a free safety in this formation, which foregoes the traditional strong safety for an extra player along the defensive line.

Because there are only three players in the secondary, the cornerbacks and free safety must provide superior coverage on pass plays and try to funnel all ball carriers to the middle of the field where the linebackers can help to tackle. As usual, the cornerbacks will line up on the outside of the field opposite the wide receivers. The free safety will line up most often in the middle of the field, a few yards behind the Mike linebacker.

If the defense is running a man-to-man scheme against a pass play, the cornerbacks will stay with the wide receivers in single coverage, while the free safety will have coverage responsibilities over either a running back or tight end. In this scenario, it is essential that the secondary not let any of the opposing route runners get behind them, as there is no help over the top.

In zone coverage schemes out of a 5-3 defense, each player will take coverage responsibilities for a section of the field. The cornerbacks will cover from the hash marks to the sideline back to a certain depth on the field, while the free safety will have over-the-top coverage responsibility on both sides of the field. The free safety will obviously shade to wherever the ball ends up getting thrown, and will help close and tackle if a completion has been made.



# TAKEAWAY

Running a 5-3 defense is a great way to teach youth football players the basics of the game because its principles are simple and straightforward.

While there can be plenty of wrinkles added to this scheme, a defense can run mainly base plays every time on the field and still be very successful. This is especially true in youth football, because most offenses are run heavy, as they haven't developed enough strength to throw the football far downfield.

However, as players get older and their bodies grow as well, the 5-3 defense doesn't have to go by the wayside. This is where the flexibility of the alignment can come into play full force. With stunts along the defensive line and blitzes coming from the outside linebackers, a 5-3 defense can cause the offensive line all sorts of fits as they try to recognize where the pressure is going to be coming from on any given play.

The one potential downside to running a





5-3 defense would be against an offense that has the ability to throw the ball often. This alignment would not be good against a spread offense, for example, because the extra speed the offense has on the field would easily be able to take advantage of the defense's lack of speed. Plus, with only three players in the secondary, there could be a big play waiting to happen at any turn.





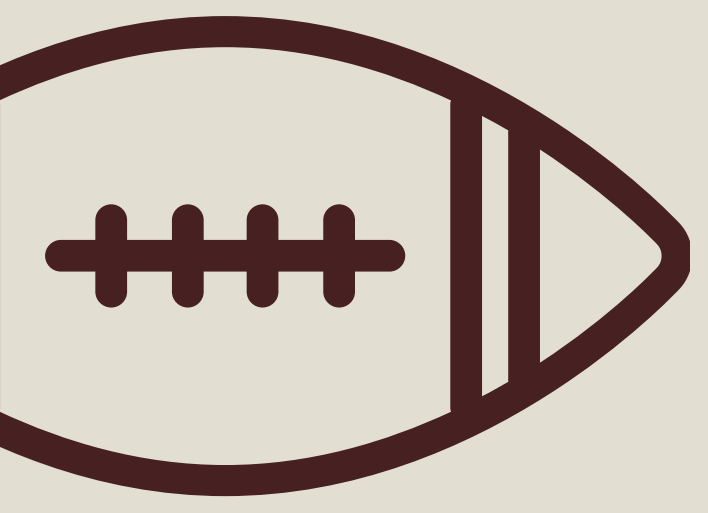


**THE**

**3-4**

**DEFENSE**





## 3-4

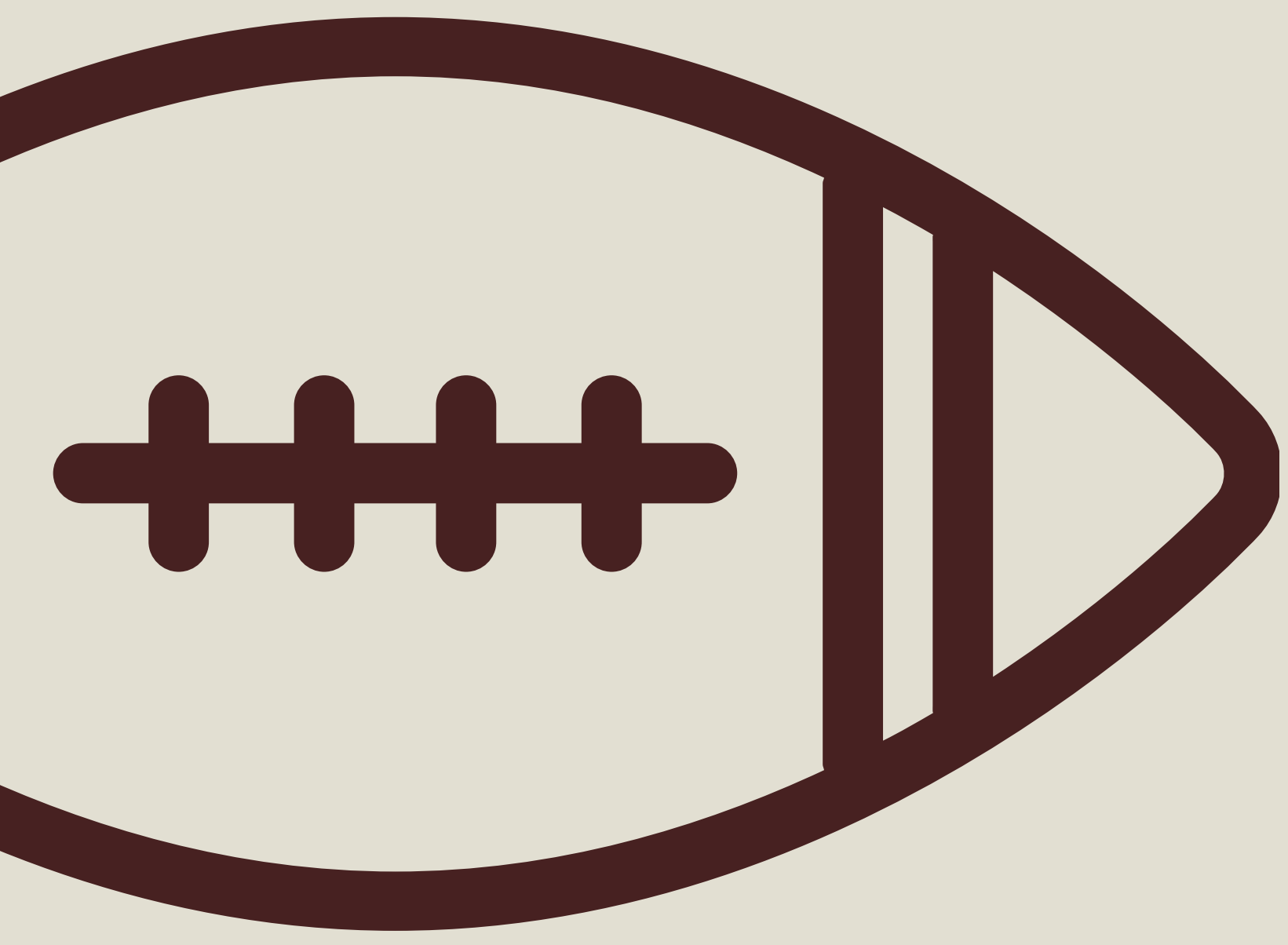
There was a time in football where defenses would run a “base” formation on most plays, with wrinkles on the base system mostly performed in the secondary. Almost all defenses would have a base formation that included either:

- Four down linemen and three linebackers.
- Five down linemen and two linebackers (on obvious running situations).

The wrinkles would occur with how the secondary would cover opposing receivers. However, sometime in the 1990s and 2000s, that base system got flipped on its head. More defenses began running a base defense known as the 3-4 defense, with three down linemen and four linebackers to go with the traditional four defensive backs. They did this to confuse opposing offenses and keep them guessing at all times.

With only three down linemen, a defense could switch who the fourth rushing defender was on each down. Either one of the outside linebackers or one of the inside linebackers could rush the line of scrimmage on any play. It was a new base defensive alignment that was created and one that's stuck around because of its effectiveness.

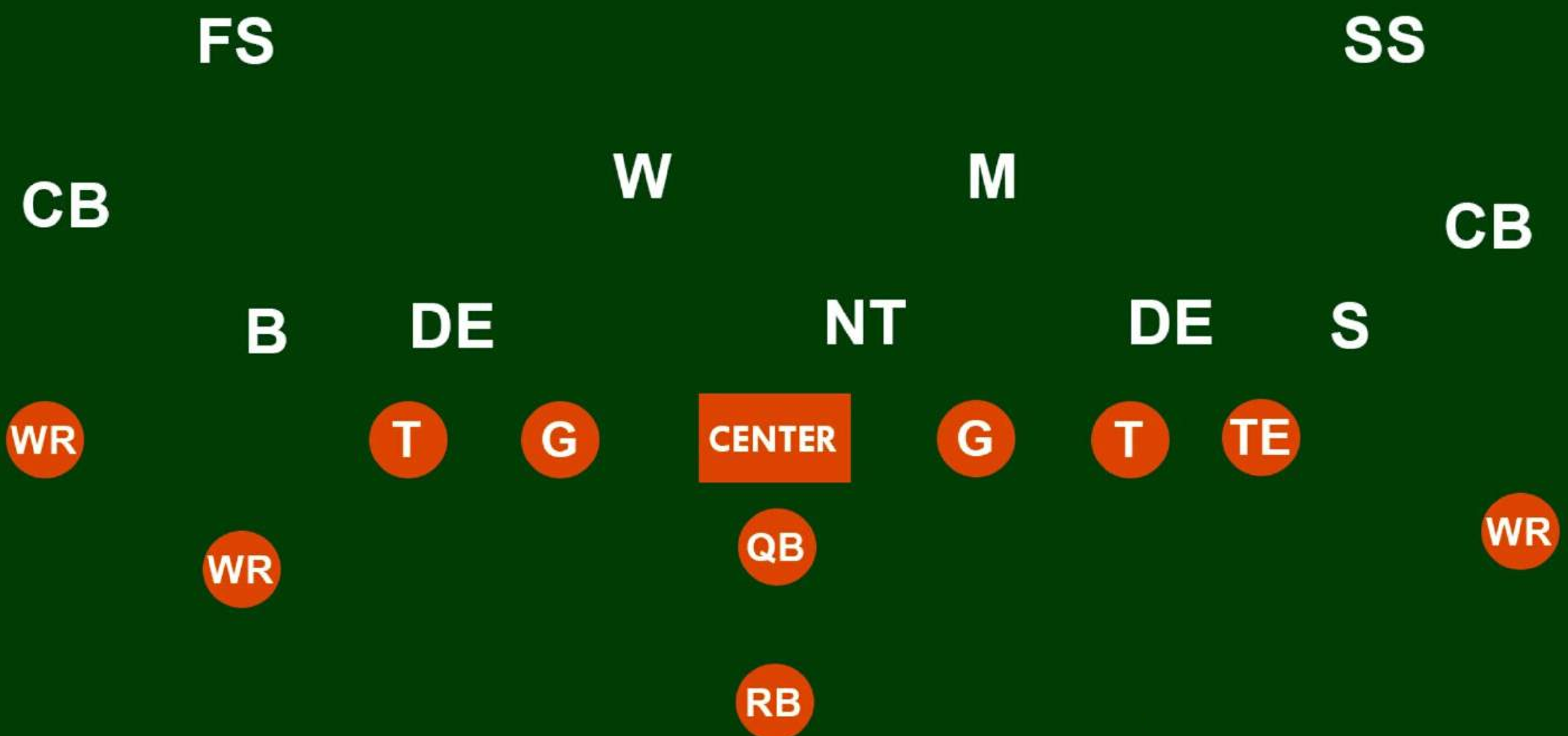




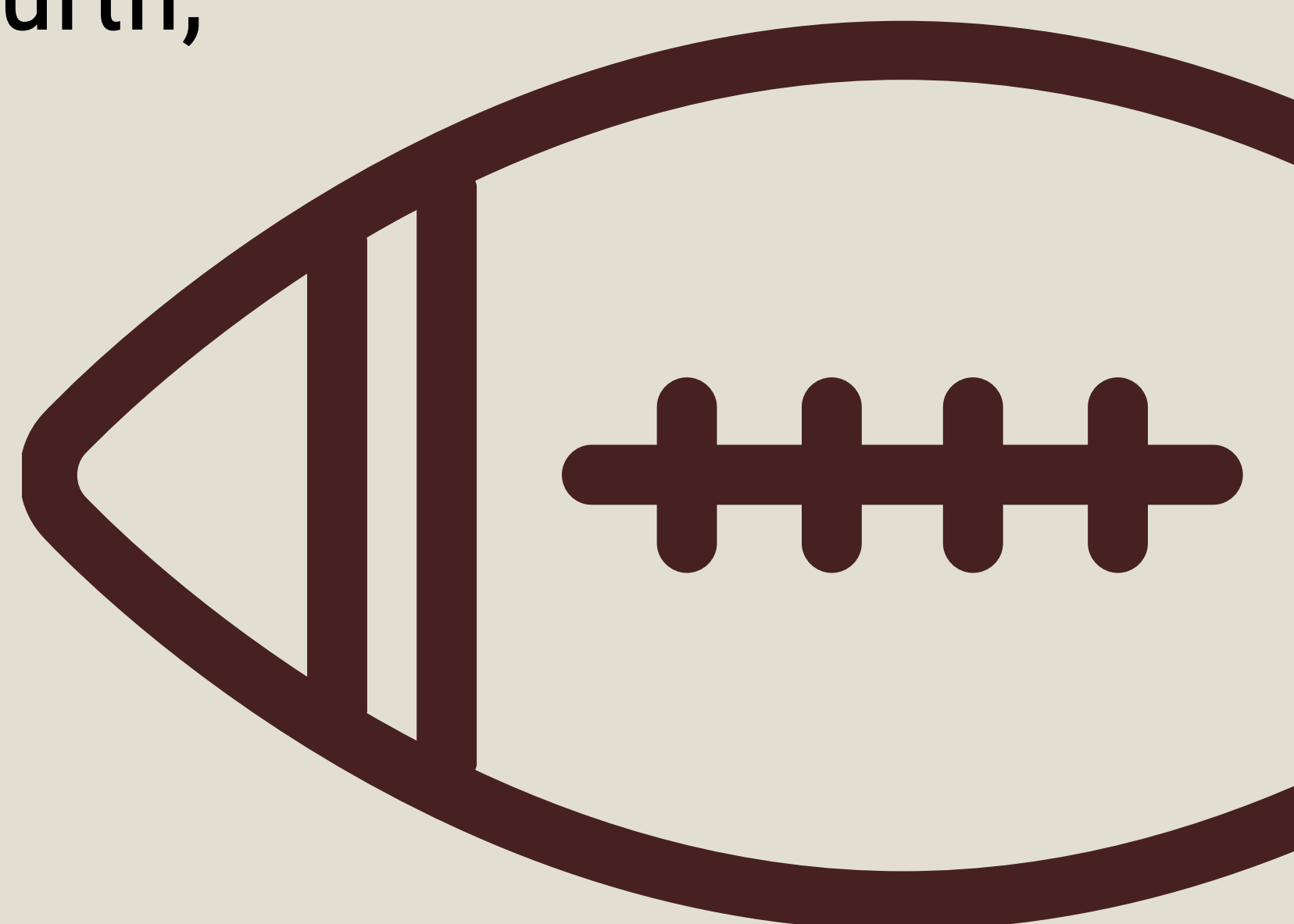
# 3-4

## Who Should Use It?

### 3-4 Defense Setup



A 3-4 formation is great for a defense that has a glut of linebackers who have the ability to both rush the line of scrimmage and also read a play and then react to it on the fly. Teams with at least three big-bodied defensive linemen, but not a fourth, would do well to adopt this defensive system as well.







The key to the success of a 3-4 defensive alignment is the linebackers. The formation is known as a one-gap defense, because each of the front seven defenders are responsible for one gap of protection along the line of scrimmage.

This simplifies the game for these defenders who only need to be keyed in on only one responsibility on every play. Because of this, a 3-4 defense can be very effective against almost any offensive alignment, whether it be a more traditional base offense or a shotgun spread formation.

At the same time, however, the linebackers in a 3-4 defense are tasked with reading the play at the snap of the ball and then reacting based on what they see. The position is tasked less with playing with their true instincts, and instead relying on their ability to understand what's happening based on what specific players on the offense are doing. This is especially true of the insider linebackers, as we'll explain more in depth later.





# STRENGTHS

1

## HIDES THE FOURTH RUSHER

With only three down linemen and four linebackers, the fourth rushing defender on every play is hidden. This rusher can be either of the four linebackers on any given play, keeping the offense confused.

2

## IS GOOD IN ANY SITUATION

A 3-4 defense can be effective against both the run and the pass. Since it is a defense run with one-gap responsibilities, there aren't a lot of inherent weaknesses to the formation against any offensive alignment.

3

## SIMPLIFIES THE GAME

The 3-4 alignment can simplify the game for defenders, especially the front seven. The defensive linemen and linebackers are tasked with one gap on the offensive line and are asked to attack that gap only.

4

## GOOD AGAINST COVERAGE

Defensive coaches have the option of dropping all four linebackers into coverage on any play, clogging up the middle of the field for receivers.

5

## ALLOWS SAFETIES TO ROAM FREE

With less space in the middle of the field for receivers, safeties have more of an opportunity to give support at the line of scrimmage against the run, blitz the quarterback or provide insurance coverage for cornerbacks over the top.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## REQUIRES LINEBACKERS TO READ THE PLAY

Linebackers are tasked with playing a read-and-react game on every play in a 3-4 system. That means that they must pay attention to what certain offensive players are doing at the snap of the ball and then handle their assignment based on what that player is doing.

2

## EASIER FOR OFFENSIVE LINEMEN TO GET TO SECOND LEVEL

Because there are only three down defensive linemen, that could make it easier for offensive linemen to get a running start at blocking linebackers on a run play, or give them more vision to pick up a blitz on a pass play.

3

## CAN CREATE MISMATCHES

Offenses that have speedy wide receivers could potentially take advantage of the one-on-one matchups they could have against linebackers. This is why offenses that have the speed and versatility to run a spread against a 3-4 defense will often do so.

4

## YOU NEED SIZE

It's important that the three down defensive linemen are big and bulky, able to clog holes along the offensive line on every play with relentless force. This is essential since this alignment is giving up one lineman in exchange for an extra linebacker.



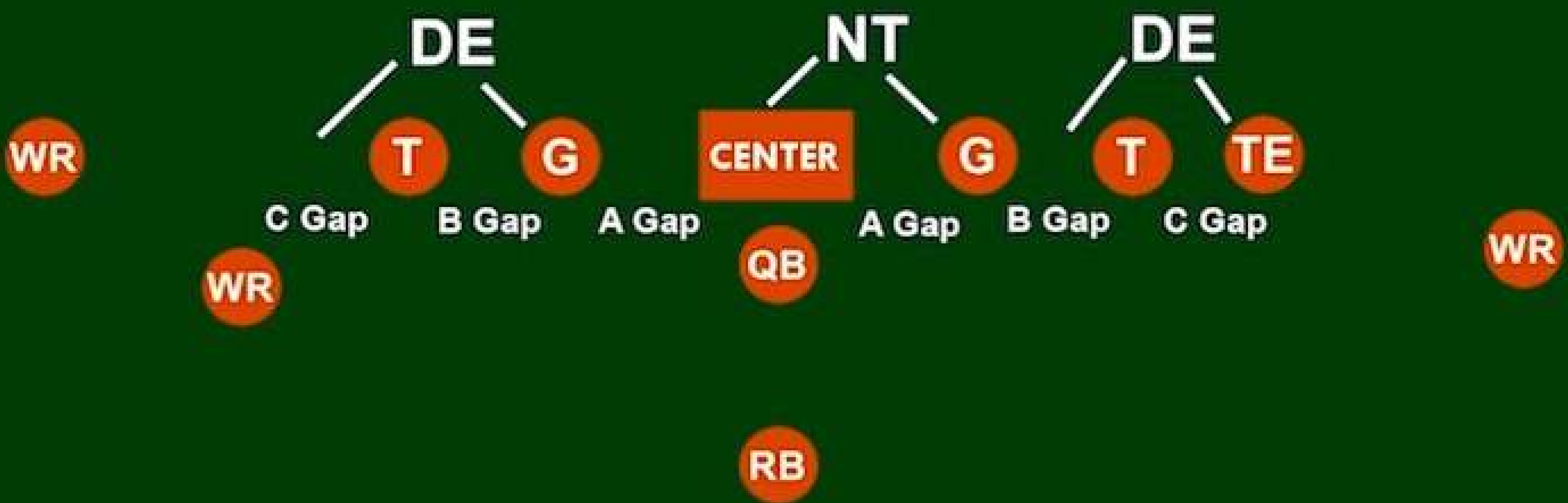
# HOW TO RUN THE 3-4 DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**



## 3-4 Defensive Lineman



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





The defensive line in a 3-4 defense is made up of a nose tackle and two defensive ends.

- **Nose Tackle** - The biggest body of the three linemen and must be able to clog the interior of the offensive line.
- **Defensive Ends** - Can either be classified as a strong-side and weak-side end, or they can stay on the same side of the field no matter where the strong side of the offense is on any given play.

The alignment of the defensive line in a 3-4 formation is determined by the strength of the offense. The defensive line can be either shaded toward the strong side – where the tight end of extra wide receiver lines up – or toward the weak side, meaning away from the tight end or extra wide receiver.

In a strong side shade, the nose tackle will line up either directly over the head of the center or over his shoulder toward the strong side. The defensive ends will line up over the offensive tackles, either head-on-head or over one of the tackle's shoulders.

The responsibility for each player on the defensive line is simple: **Attack your assigned gap.**

What gap exactly it will be is determined by the play that's called. In most cases, the assignments for defensive linemen are to slant to either his left or right side and attack the gap that is in front of him.





### **Strong-Side Slant Play:**

The nose tackle will attack the A gap on the strong side between the center and the guard, the strong-side end will attack the C gap between the offensive tackle and tight end, and the weak-side end will attack the B gap between the offensive tackle and guard on the other side of the field.

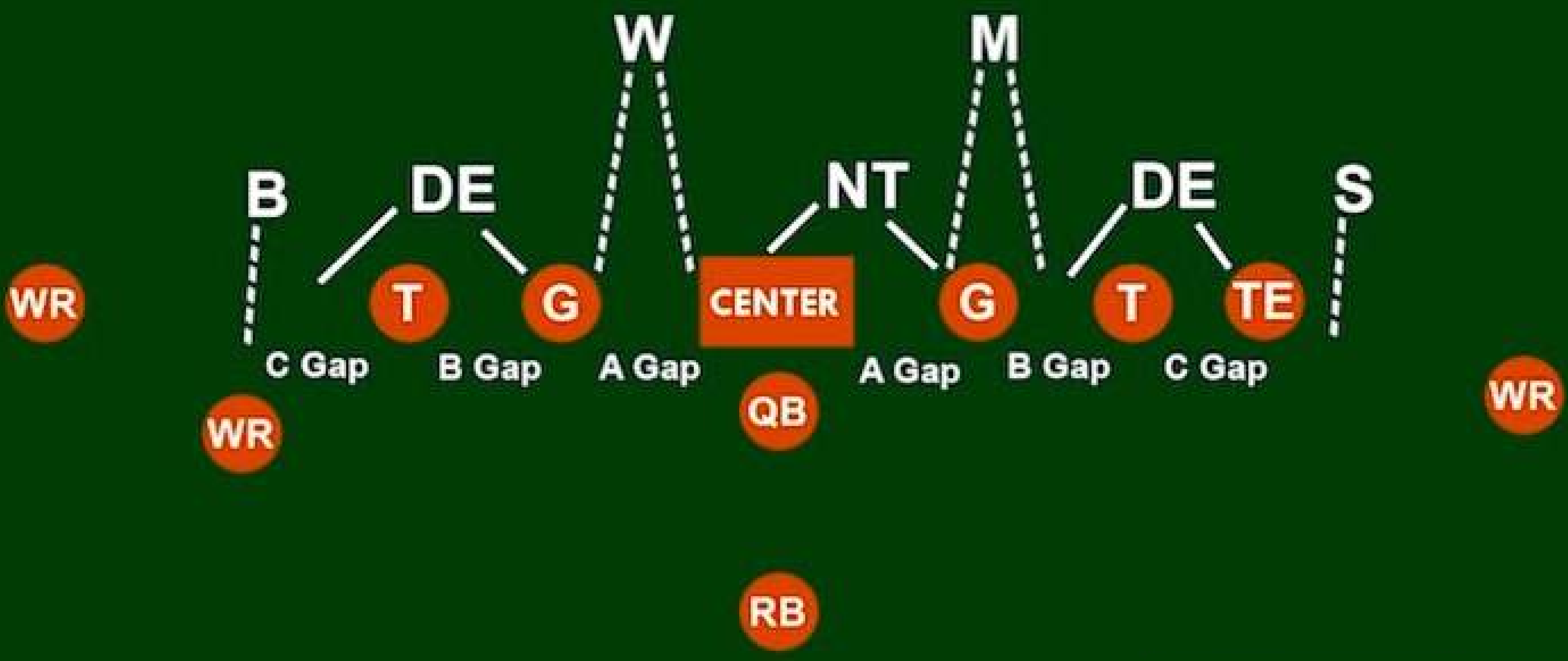
### **Weak-Side Slant Play:**

The nose tackle attacks the A gap between the center and guard on the weak side, the strong-side end attacks the B gap between the offensive tackle and guard, and the weak-side end attacks the C gap outside the offensive tackle.

This simplification of responsibilities makes it easier for defensive linemen to focus on just plugging up their holes and creating pressure on ball carriers on the quarterback. While also forcing offensive linemen to always be on the lookout for where that fourth rusher is coming from in the linebacker corps.



3-4 Defensive Lineman  
and Linebackers



**STAGE 2**  
**THE**  
**LINEBACKERS**





There are four linebackers in a 3-4 defensive alignment.

- The middle or Mike linebacker.
- The strong-side or Sam linebacker.
- The weak-side or Will linebacker
- Plus what's known as a "Bandit"

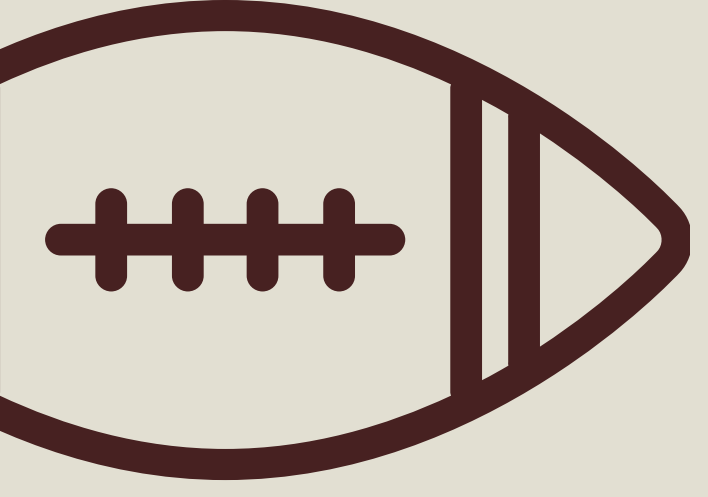
The Mike and Will are considered the inside linebackers in this formation, while the Sam and Bandit are the outside linebackers.

The alignment of the linebackers is determined by the strong side of the offense. The Sam and Mike line up on the strong side of the field, while the Will and Bandit line up on the weak side.

The inside linebackers' primary responsibilities are the A gap and the B gap, depending on what play is called and which gaps the defensive linemen in front of them are attacking. Both the Mike and the Will are tasked with reading the play at the snap of the ball and then either plugging a hole at the line of scrimmage on a running play, blitzing the quarterback on a passing play, or dropping back into coverage. The Sam and the Will read the play based primarily on what the offensive guard on their side of the field does at the snap of the ball.

On plays in which they are not blitzing, the inside linebackers need to recognize quickly if the offensive guard is dropping back into pass blocking coverage, blocking on a run play straight ahead, or pulling around either the offensive tackle or center in a trap play. If





they recognize a pass play, the inside linebackers will either attack the quarterback or drop back into coverage, depending on the play call.

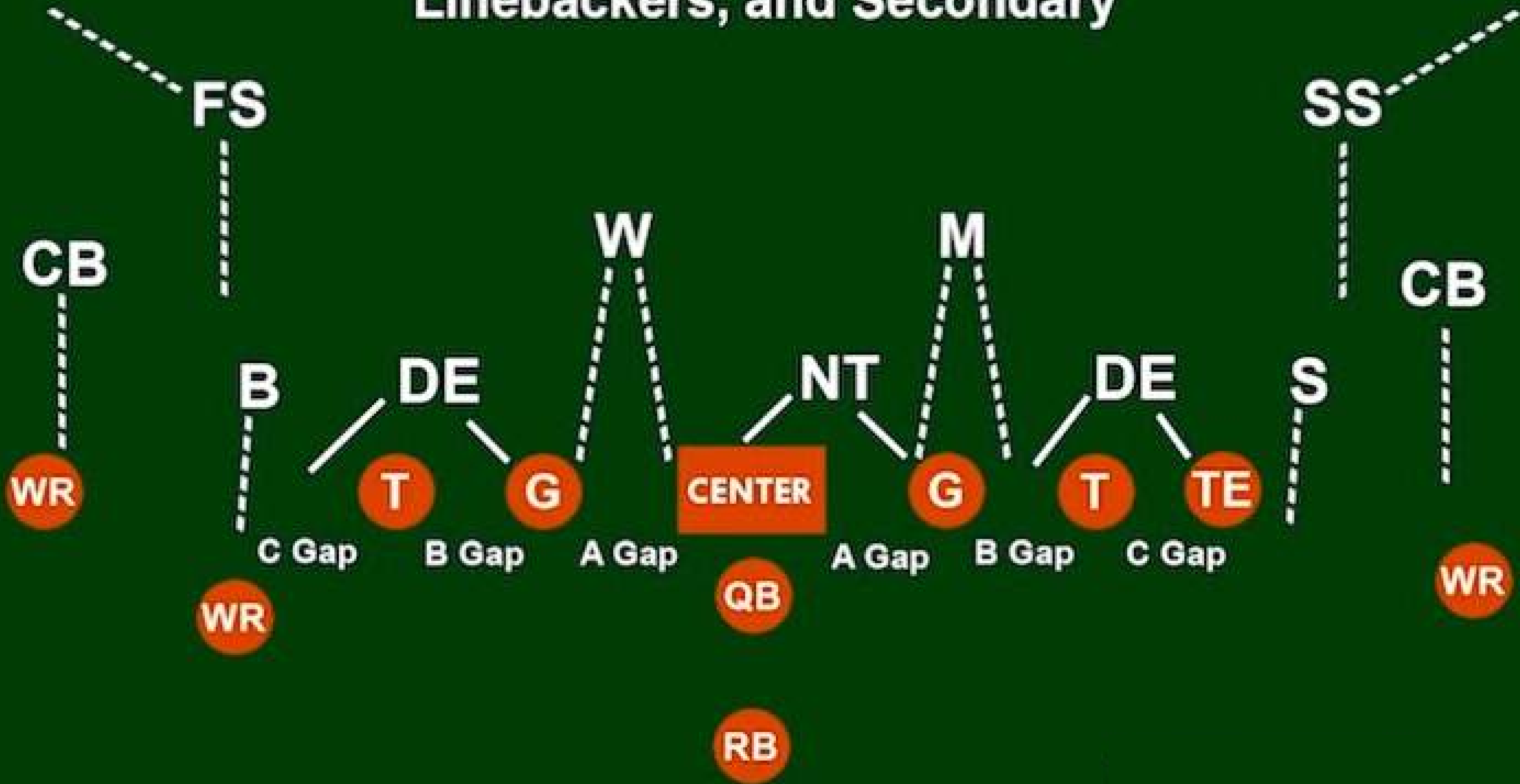
On a run play where the guard stays in his position, the inside backers must attack either the A gap or B gap on his side of the field, depending on the nose tackle's responsibility. On a run play where the guard pulls, the inside linebackers need to slant in the direction the guard is pulling and plug the hole that he leaves behind.

The outside linebackers play much closer to the line of scrimmage than the inside linebackers, aligned somewhere between the down defensive lineman and the standing middle linebackers. The Sam linebacker will align himself most often either head up with the tight end or on his outside shoulder. The Bandit will line up outside the weak-side offensive tackle. Both outside linebackers can have the responsibility to rush the line of scrimmage or drop back into coverage depending on the defensive play call and what play the offense runs.

If the tight end runs a route on a pass play, the Sam linebacker will have primary coverage responsibility on him, unless the Sam is blitzing on that particular play. The Bandit will have coverage responsibilities on the running back on pass plays in which he runs a route and doesn't stay in to block. The Sam and Bandit could also be responsible for dropping into pass coverage in the middle of the field on plays in which either the Mike (for the Sam) or the Will (for the Bandit) is asked to blitz.



3-4 Defensive Lineman,  
Linebackers, and Secondary



# STAGE 3 THE SECONDARY





The secondary in a 3-4 defense is made up of the traditional two cornerbacks and two safeties. Having this set of personnel on the field allows the defense to run multiple zone defenses or even man-to-man coverage.

In this defensive alignment, the strong safety and strong-side cornerback play on the strong side of the defense almost every play, with the free safety and weak-side corner playing on the weakside of the offense.

The cornerbacks will often align themselves deeper off the line of scrimmage in a 3-4 defense, but could also approach the face of the wide receivers during press coverage plays or when the cornerbacks are asked to blitz. The strong safety will often play closer to the inside linebackers, depth wise, and line up on the inside shoulder of the Sam linebacker. The free safety will align himself deep and have over-the-top responsibilities on zone defense against pass plays.

If the defense is running a man-to-man coverage on a pass play, the cornerbacks will be asked to cover a specific receiver for the entire play, no matter where he goes. In this scenario, the strong safety could either blitz or cover the tight end, if the Sam is blitzing. The free safety might have coverage responsibilities of the running back if the Bandit is blitzing, or the free safety could be asked to blitz himself.

In zone defensive coverage, the cornerbacks will be asked to cover





the receivers up to a certain number of yards from the line of scrimmage. They are tasked with trying to keep the receivers in front of them, and funneling any ball carrier to the middle of the field, where help can be found to tackle.

However, if a receiver does get beyond the corner running a route, the safeties are there to provide extra coverage on deeper passing plays.



# TAKEAWAY

The 3-4 defense is a great base defense to run for just about any team with any make-up of defenders.

While it's important to have four linebackers who are quick, smart, strong, and read plays well, the 3-4 defense can be adapted for just about any type of personnel. Unlike a base defensive alignment with either four down linemen and three linebackers, or five down lineman and two linebackers, having a 3-4 defense disguises the fourth rushing player on every single play which keeps offenses on their toes.

At the snap of the ball, it's nearly impossible for the offensive linemen to know exactly who that fourth rusher is going to be. This now requires even more read-and-recognition from the offensive linemen, who must now identify the fourth rusher on every play, plus potentially a fifth or sixth rusher on blitzing plays.

That's the main difference between a 3-4 and other base defensive systems. The 3-4 is designed to cause confusion and a slight delay at the point of attack for offenses.





Even only that split-second difference in reaction time could allow for the defensive pressure to explode through the offensive line and cause fits in the offensive backfield.

In addition, the quarterback must read and recognize on every passing play who that fourth rusher is, and which players on defense are dropping into coverage, instead of simply reading each play exactly the same way.





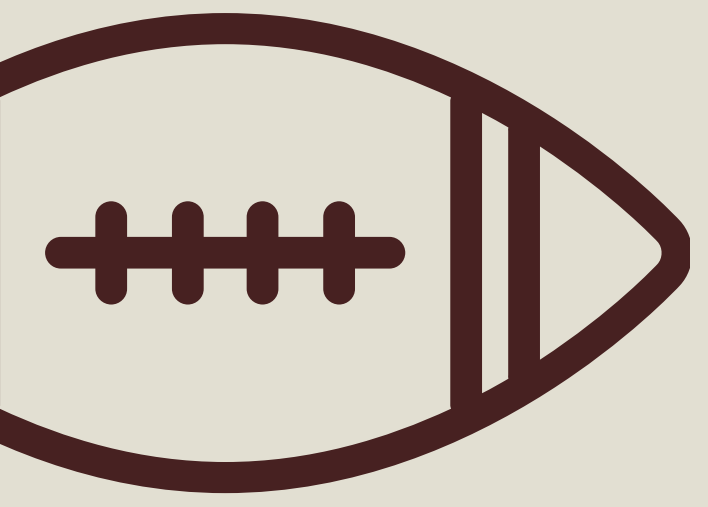


**THE**

**4-3**

**DEFENSE**





## 4-3

The 4-3 defense is one of the most basic formations a coach can run.

From youth football all the way up to the professional ranks, just about every team has some plays that are run out of the 4-3 formation.

Many coaches choose to use this alignment because there are quite a few wrinkles and adjustments that can be made from the base formation.

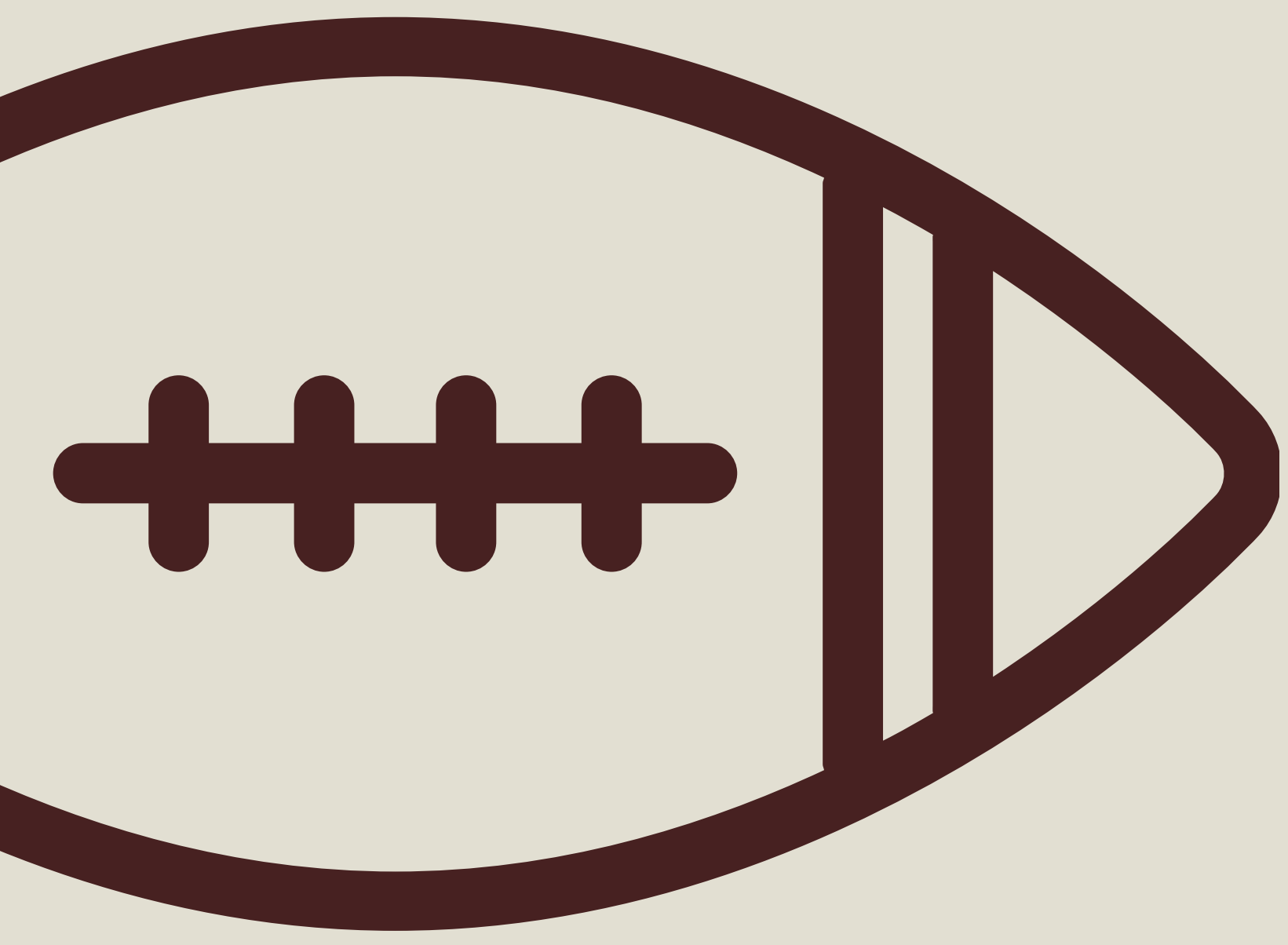
Most of the popular zone coverages such as Cover 2, Cover 3, and Cover 4 will run out of a baseline 4-3 formation.

But even man-to-man coverage against the pass is effective out of the 4-3.

All told, the 4-3 defensive alignment is something every coach should have in his or her defensive playbook.

It's a formation that teaches basic philosophies and responsibilities of playing defense, and can take advantage of various blitz and coverage packages to keep offenses on their toes.





# 4-3

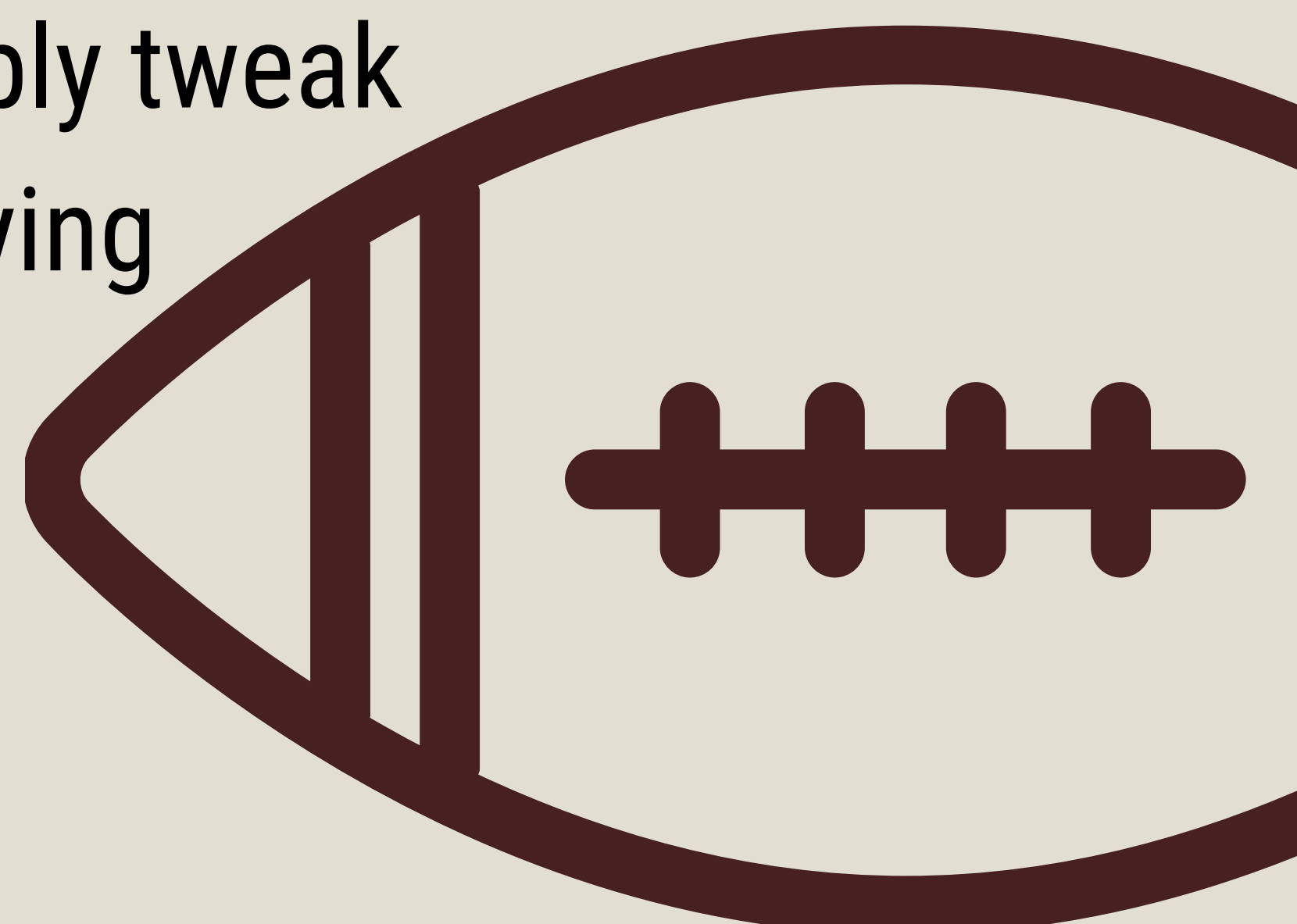
## Who Should Use It?

### 4-3 Defense



A 4-3 defense can be used at any level of football, no matter what the physical and skillset makeup of the team is.

Instead of changing the entire alignment to best suit the attributes of the players, a defensive coach can simply tweak the type of 4-3 defense he or she is deploying to suit those needs.







The 4-3 defense is great against the running game because it is a one-gap defense.

That means the front seven players on the field – the four defensive linemen and three linebackers – all have a responsibility for one of the gaps along the offensive line.

This makes it harder for ball carriers to find space to run freely.

In addition, the 4-3 defense provides the support over the top of two safeties who can both help in run coverage, plus in pass coverage, no matter whether a zone defense or man-to-man defense is deployed.





# STRENGTHS

1

## CAN TEACH THE GAME

As a one-gap defense, a 4-3 alignment can be a very simple formation from which to teach the basics of football. The assignments for each player are easy and straightforward, allowing them to focus on getting used to playing the game.

2

## GREAT AGAINST BOTH THE RUN AND PASS

A 4-3 defense provides strengths against both the passing game and the running game. The one-gap responsibilities make it hard for offenses to run the ball, and the two-deep safeties provide a lot of extra support over the top.

3

## WRINKLES CAN BE ADDED

Defenses at all skill levels can utilize the 4-3 defense because it's so easy to add in different looks, different coverages, and different pressure packages to keep offenses guessing.

4

## CAN DEPLOY ZONE OR MAN-TO-MAN COVERAGE

The most popular types of zone coverage are run out of the 4-3 formation. That's because there are four defensive backs and three linebackers on the field who can be responsible for different coverage zones on the field.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## IT'S VERY COMMON

Because so many defenses run some form of the 4-3 defense, it's not something that offenses are unfamiliar with. This makes it a little easier for offenses to recognize the coverage and also the blocking responsibilities along the line of scrimmage.

2

## PLAY-ACTION PASSES CAN WORK

The one-gap responsibilities are great for the linebackers, but it can force them to take their first step toward the line of scrimmage. That means play-action passes could have some success by taking advantage of the linebackers being out of position.

3

## MISDIRECTION RUNS COULD WORK

For the very same reason, misdirection running plays could find a lot of daylight, too. Linebackers have responsibility over just one gap along the offensive line, but it's very easy for them to lose that responsibility when they see a running back moving a certain way.



# HOW TO RUN THE 4-3 DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**



## 4-3 Defensive Line



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





A 4-3 defense has four down defensive linemen:

- A nose tackle
- A defensive tackle
- And two defensive ends.

The nose tackle will align himself over the center, the defensive tackle will align over the other guard, and the two defensive ends will line up over the offensive tackle or tight end(s), if there are any on the field.

In a base 4-3 play against an offense with one tight end on the field (which happens in most cases), the defense can either shade the line toward the tight end or away from it.

When the defense shades toward the tight end, the nose tackle will be on his right side of the center, and if the defense shades away from the tight end, the nose tackle will be on his left side of the center.

The nose tackle is always responsible for the A gap, no matter which side of the field he is on.

His job is to clog up that gap in any way possible, first and foremost by stuffing the center in his tracks.

The other defensive tackle will be responsible for the B gap on his side of the field, which is the gap between the offensive guard and





offensive tackle.

The two defensive ends will also have different gap responsibilities.

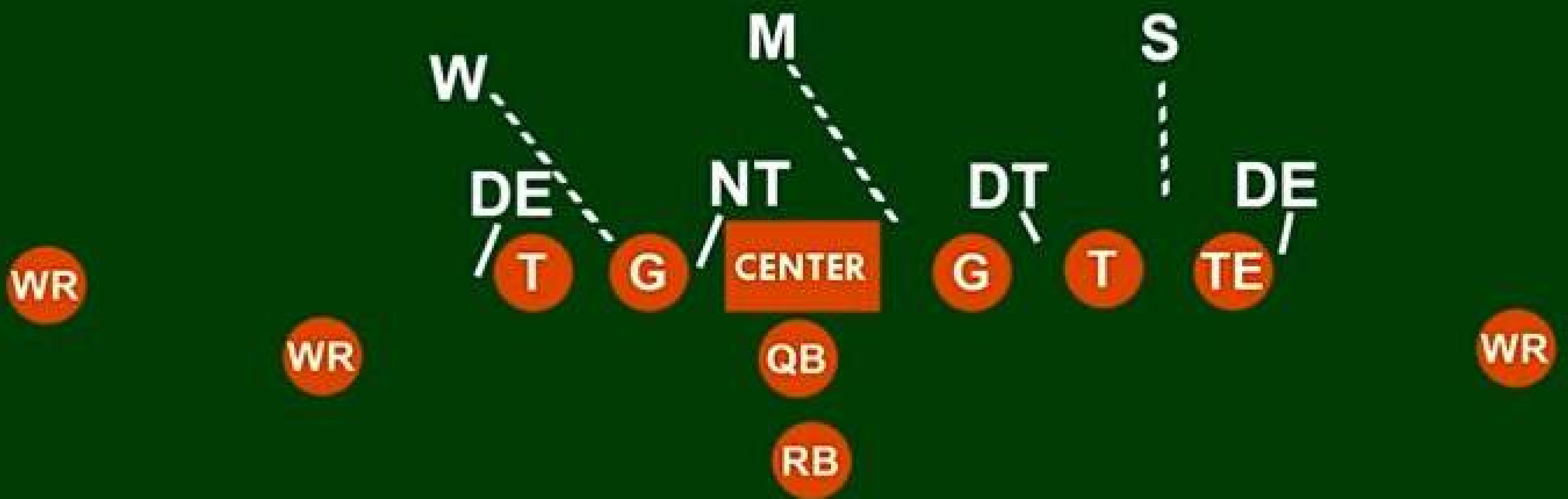
The defensive end on the same side of the field as the nose tackle will line up either right over the offensive tackle or over his outside shoulder and will have responsibility for the C gap.

The defensive end on the same side as the other defensive tackle will line up either over the tight end or over his outside shoulder.

They will have responsibilities for either the C gap or outside contain, with the strong safety filling that other responsibility, as we'll soon see.



## 4-3 Defensive Linemen and Linebackers



# STAGE 2 THE LINEBACKERS





Similar to the defensive line, the linebackers in a 4-3 defense all have single gap responsibilities against running plays.

The Mike linebacker will line up directly behind the nose tackle or shaded over either one of his shoulders.

His main responsibility is the A gap on the other side of the center.

The Will, or weak-side linebacker, will line up on the side of the center opposite the tight end.

His main responsibility will be the B gap on that side of the field.

The Sam, or strong-side linebacker, will line up on the same side of the tight end, and his responsibility will be C gap on that side of the field.

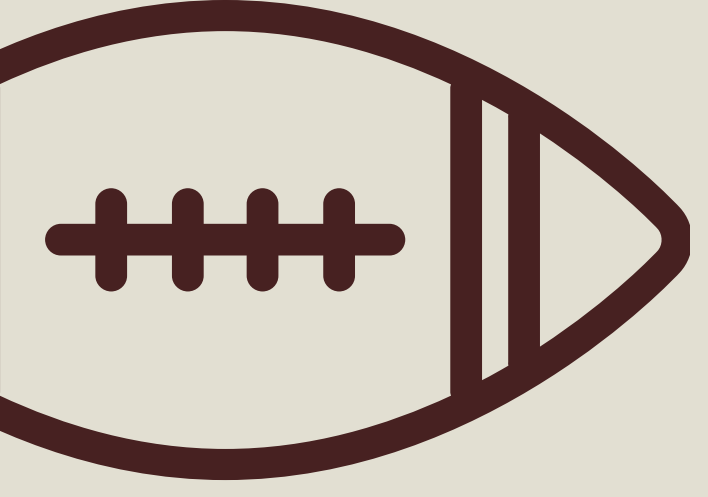
At the snap of the ball, all linebackers must read the play and recognize it as a run or pass.

If it is a running play, their responsibility will be to rush toward the line of scrimmage to stop the ball carrier, primarily through those gaps just mentioned.

On passing plays, the defensive coach will either call a man-to-man coverage scheme or a zone coverage scheme.

If it is man-to-man, then each linebacker must pick up the player he





is responsible for covering.

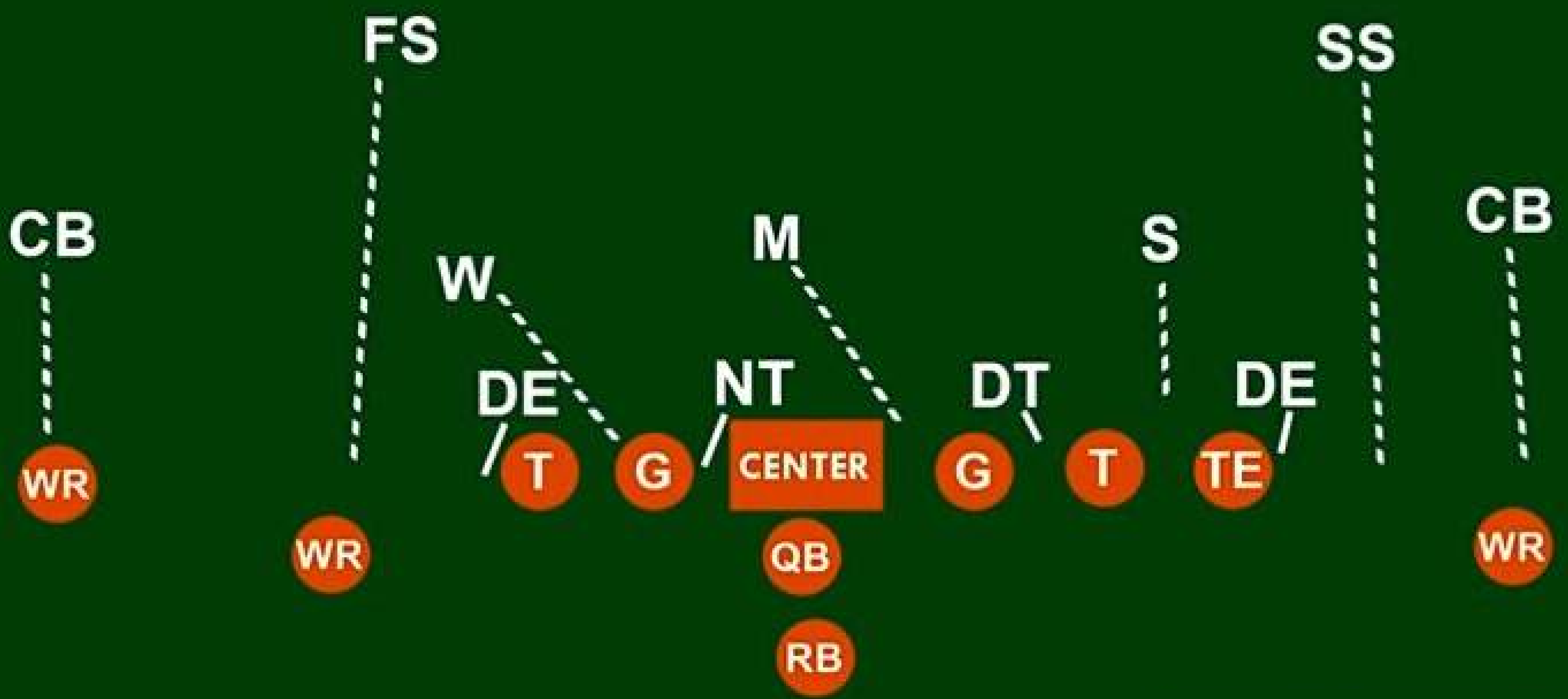
The Mike will most often be responsible for the running back, the Sam for the tight end, and the Will for help on a wide receiver or the other running back, if there are two in the backfield.

If a zone coverage is called, then the linebackers will split the field in thirds from sideline to sideline.

Each linebacker in a zone coverage out of a 4-3 formation will be responsible for covering any offensive receiver who enters his zone of the field.

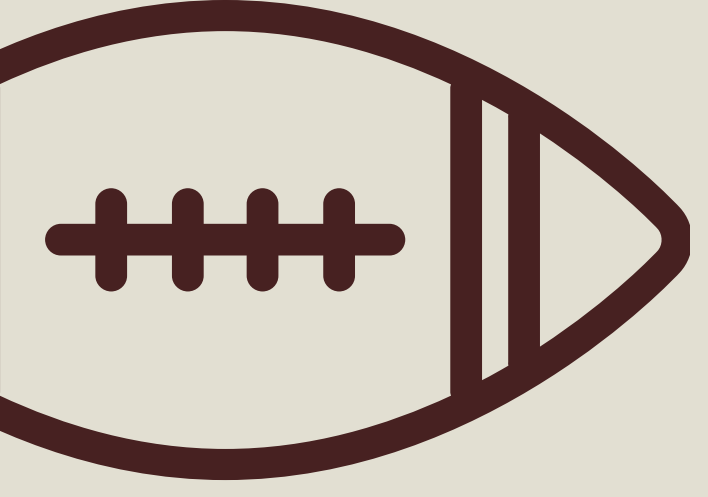


## 4-3 Defensive Linemen, Linebackers and Secondary



# STAGE 3 THE SECONDARY





Two cornerbacks, a free safety and a strong safety will be on the field at all times in a 4-3 defense.

The two cornerbacks will line up over the wide receivers, the free safety lining up deep over the Will, and the strong safety lining up deep over the Sam or defensive end on that side of the field.

On certain blitz or run-heavy packages, either the free safety or strong safety might also line up much closer to the line of scrimmage.

On a run play, each player's responsibility is quite simple...

The cornerbacks' job is to shed blocks by wide receivers and funnel the ball carriers back toward the middle of the field at the very least.

Both safeties will approach the line of scrimmage as quickly as possible and shed whatever blocker comes his way.

Like linebackers, the secondary will have different responsibilities on pass plays depending on whether a man-to-man or zone coverage is called.

In man-to-man calls, the cornerbacks will be responsible for the wide receivers opposite them.

The strong safety might have coverage responsibility of the tight





end or a second running back out of the backfield.

The free safety will have responsibility over either a second running back or a third wide receiver.

In zone coverages, each player will be responsible for a different area of the field to cover.

What area that is will depend on which type of zone coverage is called.

In a Cover 4 zone coverage, for example, all four players in the secondary will drop deep into coverage and split the field in fours from sideline to sideline.



# TAKEAWAY

The 4-3 defense is one of the best base defenses to run in football. Which is why teams across all ages and skill levels usually run some form of the alignment.

What makes it so great is the fact that it can be used with inexperienced players, or it can be used with a lot of wrinkles and adaptations for experienced players.

The 4-3 defense is extremely effective against both a running play and a passing play, giving defensive coaches even more flexibility when calling a specific play out of the formation.

While the popularity of the 4-3 defense also makes it something that offenses are used to seeing and can more easily plan for, that fact doesn't take away from the alignment's potential effectiveness.

If taught and executed properly, the 4-3 defense could be the best fit for your team, no matter how long you've been coaching and how long your players have been playing.





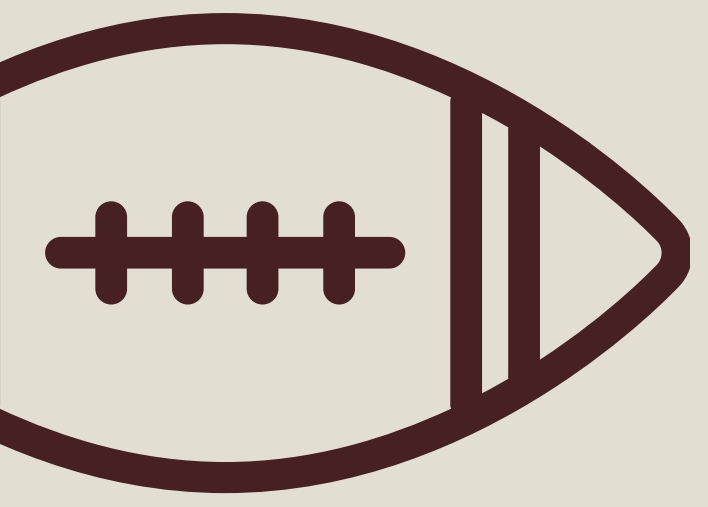


**THE**

**4-4**

**DEFENSE**





## 4-4

The 4-4 defense is one of the more popular defensive alignments among youth football teams.

That is because this defensive formation allows players at each and every level of the field to learn valuable experience at their position.

And possibly also learn techniques for their future experience, if they end up changing positions based on their developing size and skills.

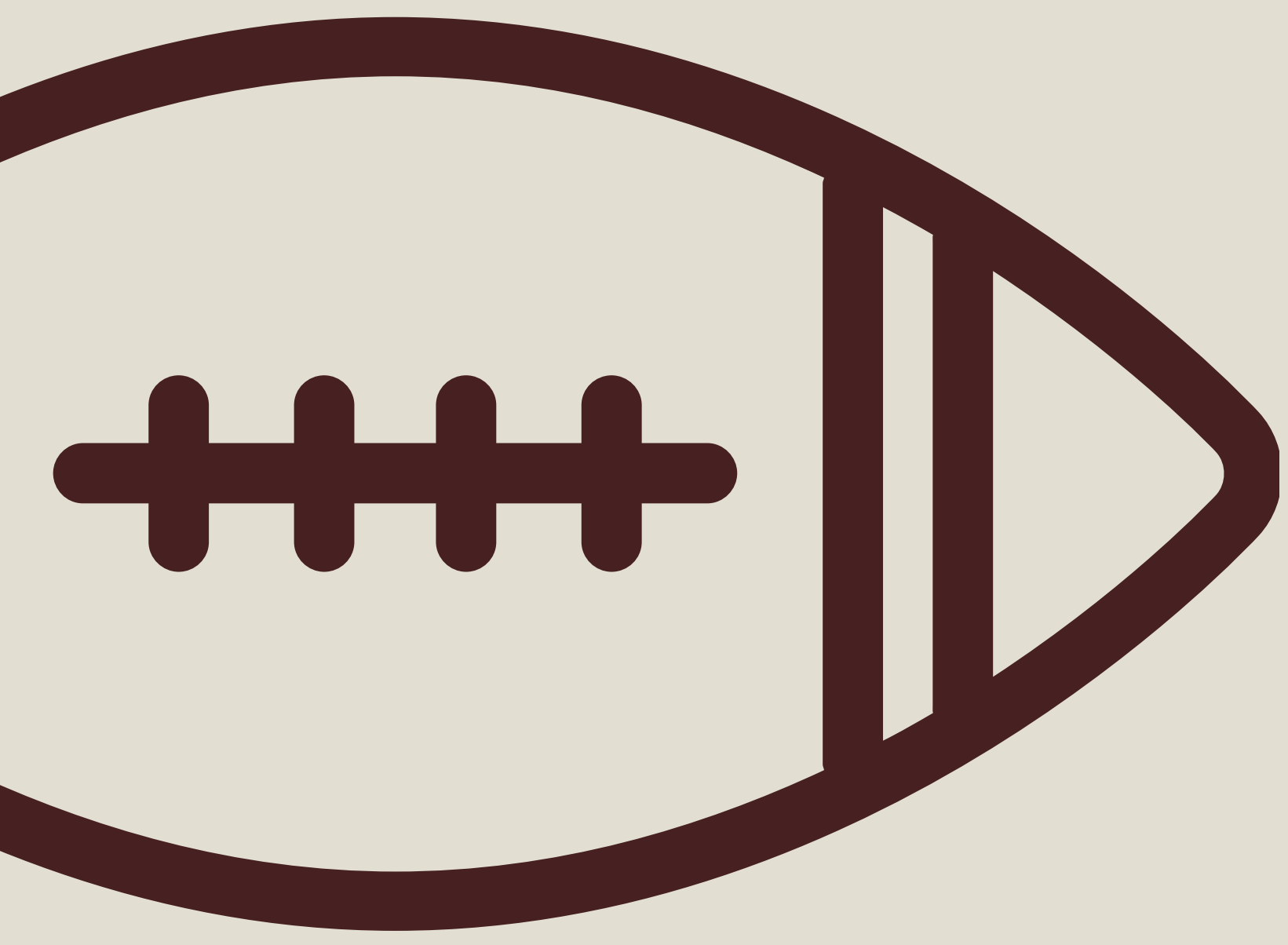
Growth spurts and development of skills such as speed, agility, and flexibility are attributes that sometimes develop in the latter portion of youth...

So it's not unheard of for a linebacker to eventually become a defensive lineman or even safety, or vice versa.

That's one of the reasons why the 4-4 defense is so popular at the youth level of football.

However, from a scheme and strategy standpoint, it's also a great alignment to run a good, solid defense that can help your team win football games.





# 4-4

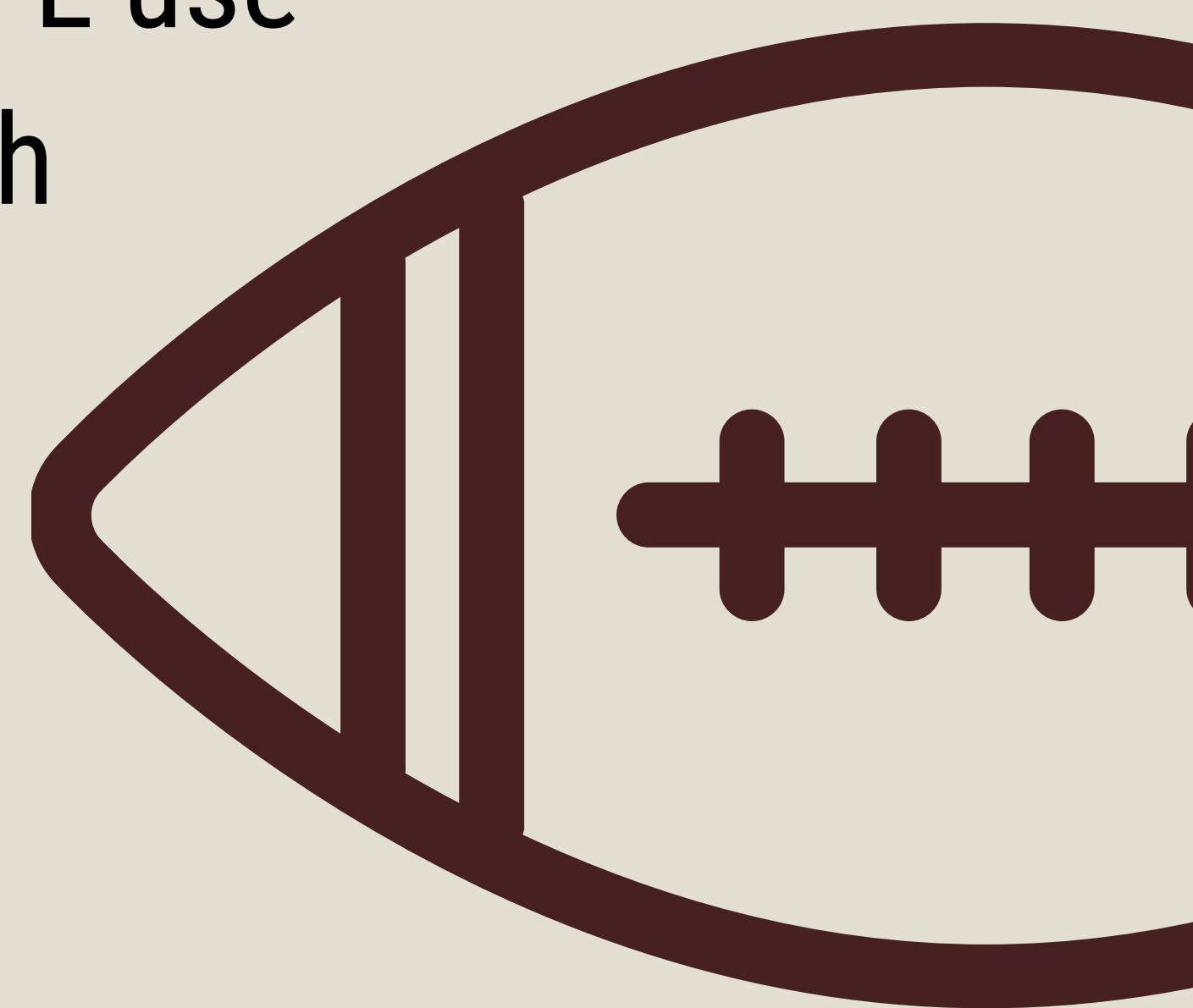
## Who Should Use It?

### 4-4 Defense



A 4-4 defensive formation is good for just about any team, and is used quite effectively at all levels of experience and skill level.

While the formation is popular among youth football teams, football teams at both the collegiate level and in the NFL use forms of the 4-4 defense from time to time with great results.







The 4-4 defense is great for teams that have four really good linebackers to get on the field at all times, or for teams with three good linebackers and a strong safety who is bigger bodied and plays very well near the line of scrimmage.

That's because the 4-4 defense can be run with either four traditional linebackers, or with three linebackers plus a strong safety taking on the role of a fourth linebacker.

The 4-4 formation is very similar to the 3-4 formation in that regard, except that the one extra defensive lineman puts a lot of pressure up front on the offensive line.





# STRENGTHS

1

## CREATES PROBLEMS UP FRONT

A 4-4 defense has four down defensive linemen plus four linebackers playing near the line of scrimmage, creating all sorts of challenges for an offensive line in recognizing who each player should block and then actually blocking them.

2

## CAN CONFUSE AN OFFENSE

You never know if there will be extra pressure coming in the form of a blitz with a 4-4 defense, or where that pressure will be coming from. All four linebackers could come on a blitz in any one play out of this defensive formation, meaning each and every offensive linemen has to be aware of this on every play.

3

## REDUCES COVERAGE TIME

This extra pressure at the line of scrimmage often means that quarterbacks have less time to throw against a 4-4 defense. That's a good thing, because there are only three players playing in the secondary in a 4-4 defense.

4

## IS GREAT AGAINST THE RUN

A 4-4 defense stacks the first and second levels of defense near the line of scrimmage. This makes it especially hard to run against. Youth football teams often run more than they throw, which is why running a defensive formation like the 4-4 is so popular.

5

## HARD TO RUN SHORT PASSING ROUTES

Even though there are fewer players in the secondary on the field in a 4-4 formation, it is often harder to run effective passing routes over the middle of the field, because there are four linebackers clogging that area.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## COULD BE SUSCEPTIBLE TO PASSING

If an offensive line is able to effectively block this extra pressure, it could open up big opportunities in the passing game. That's because with only three players in the secondary, there is a lot more room over the top and fewer players to help in coverage.

2

## PLAYERS HAVE TO READ THE PLAY

All players in a 4-4 defense, but especially the linebackers and secondary, have to read and react to each and every play. It's important that every player in this formation is able to determine quickly whether the offense is running a pass or a run play, and then playing his position accordingly quickly after that recognition.

3

## SUSCEPTIBLE TO MISDIRECTION

Because of the above bullet, the 4-4 defense can often be susceptible to play-action passes or misdirection run plays. That's because if an offense can trick a defender or two into thinking a play is a run instead of a pass, or that a run is going to the left instead of the right, offensive players could find openings in the defense as the defenders are a step or two behind the play.

4

## IT COULD CREATE MISMATCHES

Teams with speedier receivers could have a field day against two outside linebackers trying to cover them. With one fewer safety on the field, most times, speedy receivers could take advantage of the mismatches with linebackers on deeper passing routes.



# HOW TO RUN THE 4-4 DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**



## 4-4 Defensive Line



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





Up front are four traditional defensive linemen in a 4-4 defense.

However, unlike the 3-4 defensive formation, defensive linemen in this formation line up and operate a little differently...

In a 4-4 defense, there will be two defensive tackles, but neither is really designated the nose tackle and asked to line up over the center or the center's shoulder.

Instead, both defensive tackles have the same responsibility and alignment as the other on most plays.

The defensive tackles almost always line up directly over the head of the offensive guard on their side of the field, or slightly shaded to the inside shoulder of the guard, toward the center.

The primary job of both defensive tackles is to blow up the guard opposite him and not allow the guard to release to block a linebacker at the second level or to pull to the outside on a misdirection play.

This makes it important for the defensive tackles to read the snap of the ball properly and have an explosive first step so that the guards aren't able to make a move either downfield or down the line of scrimmage without making contact with the defensive tackle first.

The defensive ends will also line up similarly to each other, not





matter whether they are on the weak side of the offense or the strong side.

This is a little different from the 3-4 defensive alignment, as well.

Both defensive ends are typically asked to line up in what's called a 5 technique – that is on the outside shoulder of the offensive tackle.

Again, this alignment will be the same whether there is a tight end on their side of the ball or not.

The defensive ends' primary responsibility is to manhandle the offensive tackle as much as possible, and attack the B gap between the offensive tackle and offensive guard.

The defensive ends don't typically have outside contain responsibilities in a 4-4 defense, as they often have in other formations.

That's left to the outside linebackers.

However, if there is a tight end on their side of the field, that defensive end will be asked to at least make contact with the tight end before attacking the offensive tackle, so as to not allow the tight end to have a free release off the line of scrimmage to block a linebacker or run a passing route with ease.

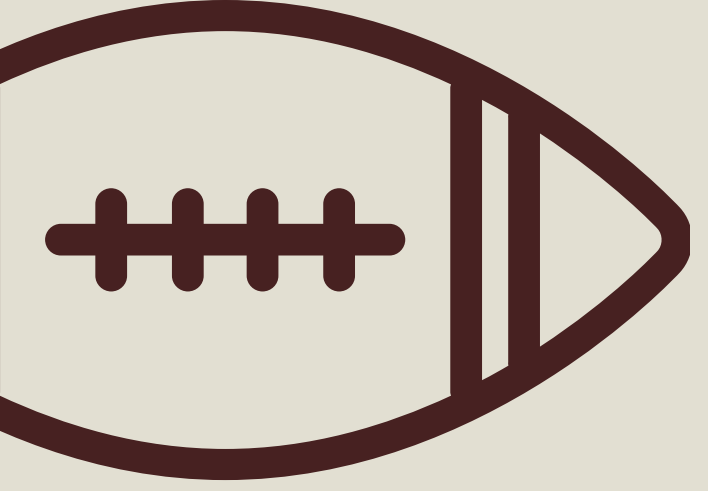


## 4-4 Defensive Linemen and Linebackers



# STAGE 2 THE LINEBACKERS





The four linebackers in a 4-4 defense are the middle linebacker (Mike), strong-side linebacker (Sam), weak-side linebacker (Will) and another outside linebacker that's oftentimes called the Bandit.

As mentioned before, this Bandit can also be substituted for a strong safety, if that player has the ability to play more like a linebacker.

Whether it's a traditional linebacker or strong safety playing that role of the fourth linebacker doesn't really matter, though.

The responsibilities and alignment are the same.

The Mike and the Sam are the two inside linebackers in the 4-4 defensive formation.

They will line up somewhere between the defensive tackle and defensive end and have primary responsibility for the B gap on their side of the field.

The Will and Bandit are the two outside linebackers.

They will line up outside the furthest offensive linemen on their side of the field – whether it be a tight end or an offensive tackle – and will have primary responsibility on outside contain.

If the linebackers read a run play by the offense, their main responsibility is to attack the line of scrimmage and ball carrier





through their primary gap.

There are two options if the offense runs a pass play.

They can either utilize a man-to-man coverage scheme, where each linebacker has a specific player they are responsible for covering, or they can run a zone defense.

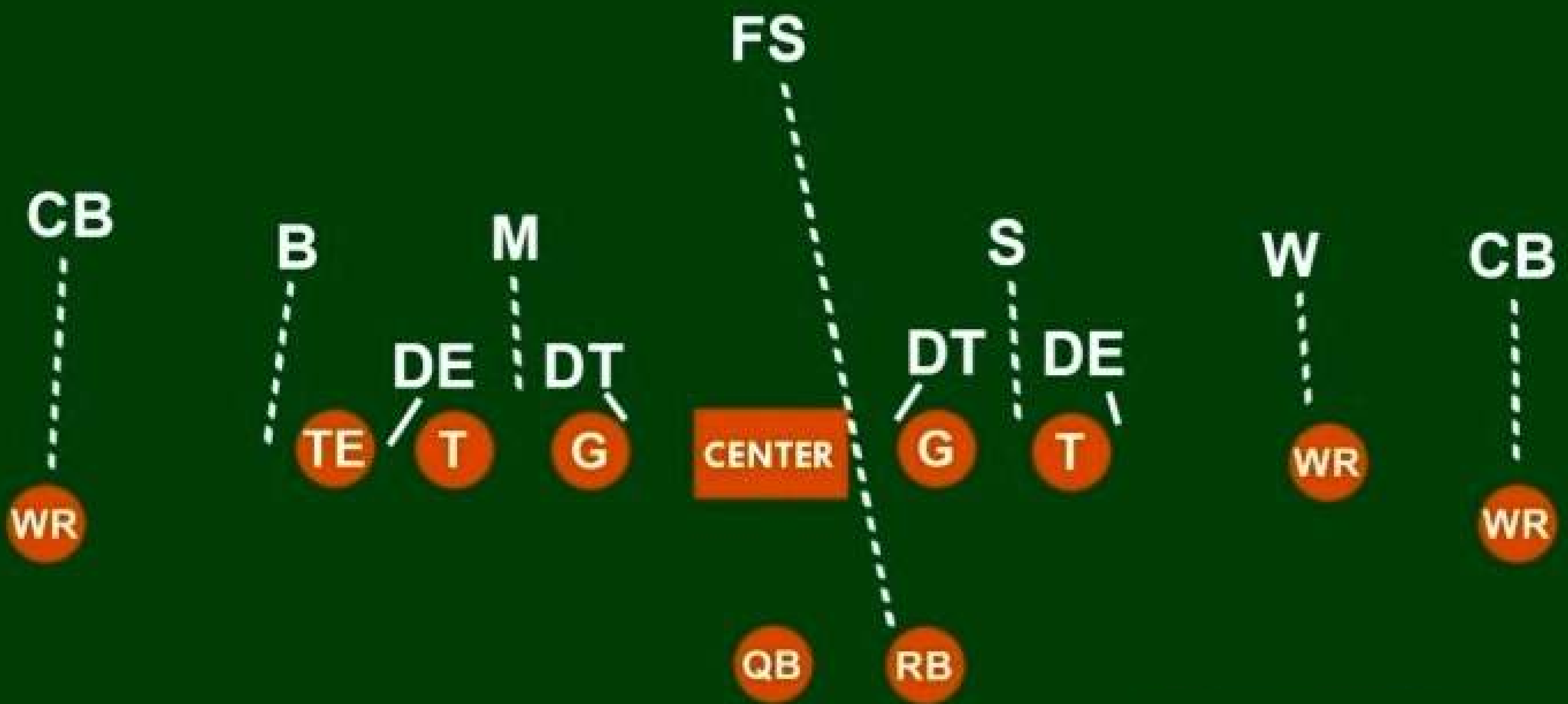
In a zone defense out of a 4-4 alignment, each linebacker will cover a quarter of the field, sideline to sideline, and be responsible for covering whatever receiver enters their zone.

Having this extra linebacker also allows defensive coaches to run a lot of blitz packages.

This blitz can really come from any of the four linebackers on the field, too, which makes it very difficult for offensive coaches to plan for the blitz, or for offensive players to adjust to the blitz at the snap of the ball.



## 4-4 Defensive Linemen, Linebackers and Secondary



# STAGE 3 THE SECONDARY





Secondary is the level that sacrifices a player in a 4-4 defensive formation. The secondary in this alignment will be made up of two cornerbacks and a free safety. The cornerbacks will often line up about five to seven yards off the outside wide receivers, shading them on their outside shoulders. The free safety will align himself in the middle of the field, a few yards behind the middle linebackers.

At the snap of the ball, it is essential that every member of the secondary recognizes whether the offense is running a pass or run play, and then react accordingly.

On a run play, the two cornerbacks will be tasked with shedding blocks by the wide receivers and funneling any ball carrier to the middle of the field where there is help with the ample linebackers. The free safety will also attack the line of scrimmage but needs to realize he is the last line of defense on the field.

If the defensive coach calls a man-to-man defense against a pass play out of the 4-4 alignment, each player in the secondary will have a player he is responsible for covering.

The cornerbacks will take the wide receivers they line up across from, while the free safety will often have responsibility to cover the tight end. If the play run is a zone defense, then the members of the secondary will split the field in thirds, sideline to sideline, and drop back in pass coverage that protects against the deep pass, beyond the depth for which the linebackers are responsible.



# TAKEAWAY

The 4-4 defense is such a popular option for youth football teams for many reasons. First, it allows every player, no matter what position, to learn all aspects of the game. This gives them flexibility as they grow bigger and stronger and get faster, and may end up switching their specific position on the defense down the line. Second, it also provides extra support against running plays, which offenses in youth football often select more than passing plays.

The 4-4 isn't just good for youth football teams, though. In fact, it can be a very solid option for any skill and experience level. That's because the 4-4 defense can be run with many, many wrinkles. It can be run with four linebackers and three members of the secondary, or it can be run with three traditional linebackers plus the strong safety who will play much closer to the line of scrimmage.

In addition, the 4-4 defense makes it very hard for offenses to recognize where the pressure is coming from on any given play, and makes it extra difficult to pick up on every player that may be attacking the line of scrimmage.





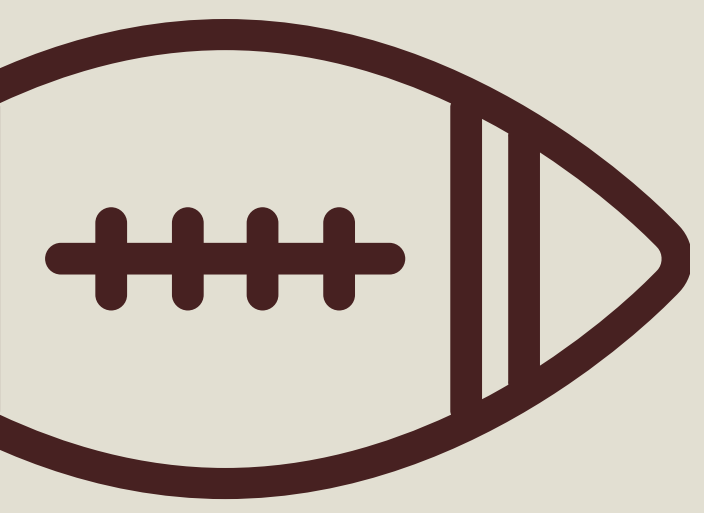


**THE**

**4-2-5**

**DEFENSE**





## 4-2-5

More than 10 years ago, the 4-2-5 defensive alignment was created as a wrinkle in defensive formations that caused opposing offenses a lot of headaches.

It's an alignment that attacks, attacks, and attacks some more with almost free will...

Relying on players to use their instincts to make quick decisions instead of reading the full play and reacting.

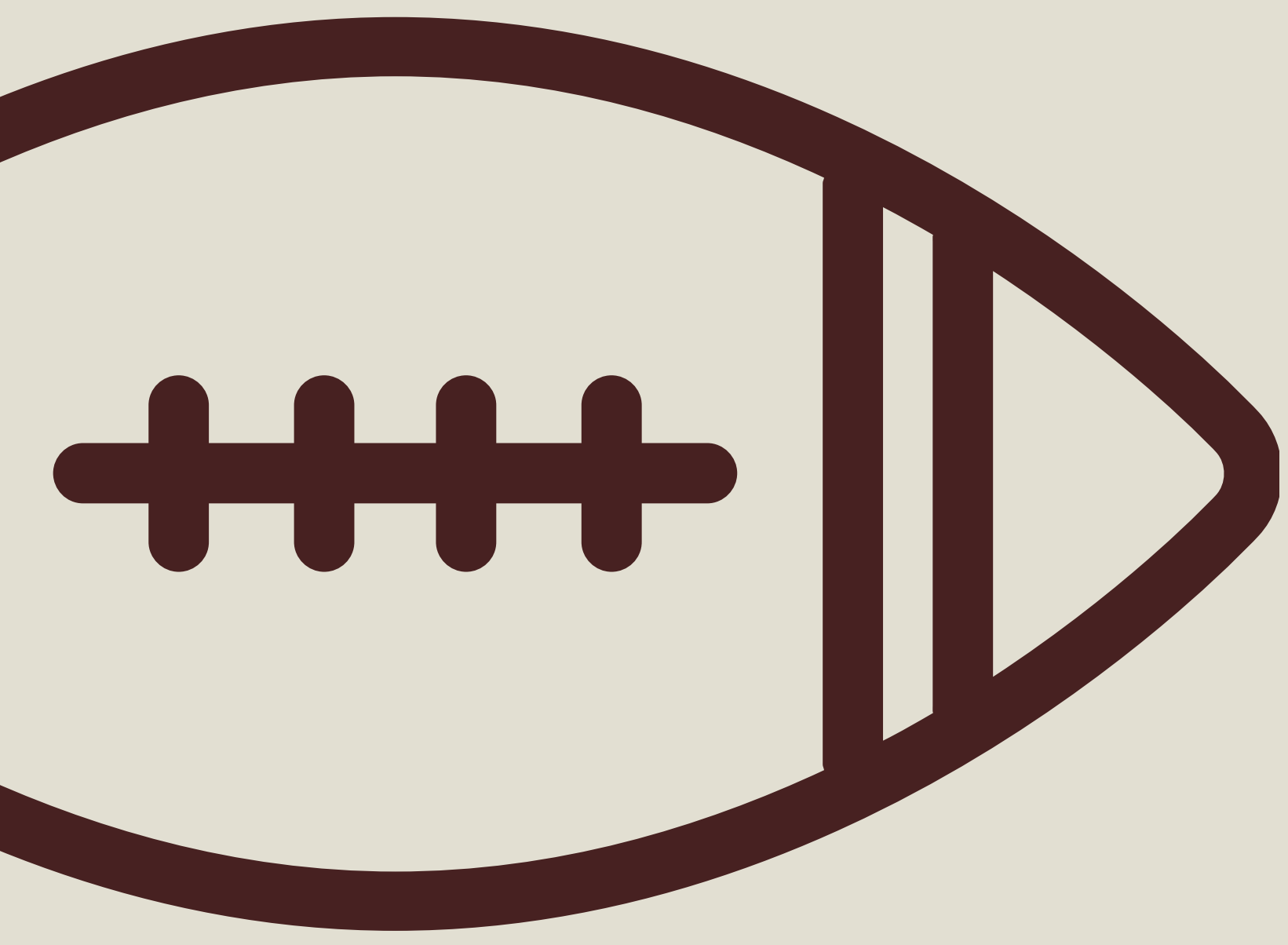
The defense calls for mostly smaller, athletic players who can cause havoc by running all over the field and by getting at the quarterback, receivers, and ball handlers quickly.

But today's game of football has evolved on the other side of the ball too, as offenses have studied the 4-2-5 defensive alignment and have made adjustments of their own to counteract it.

Many more teams are running a spread option and are utilizing what's known as run-pass options (or RPOs) to take advantage of the 4-2-5 formation asking defenders to play with their instincts instead of reading and reacting.

So, is the 4-2-5 defense still a formation that will work in today's game?



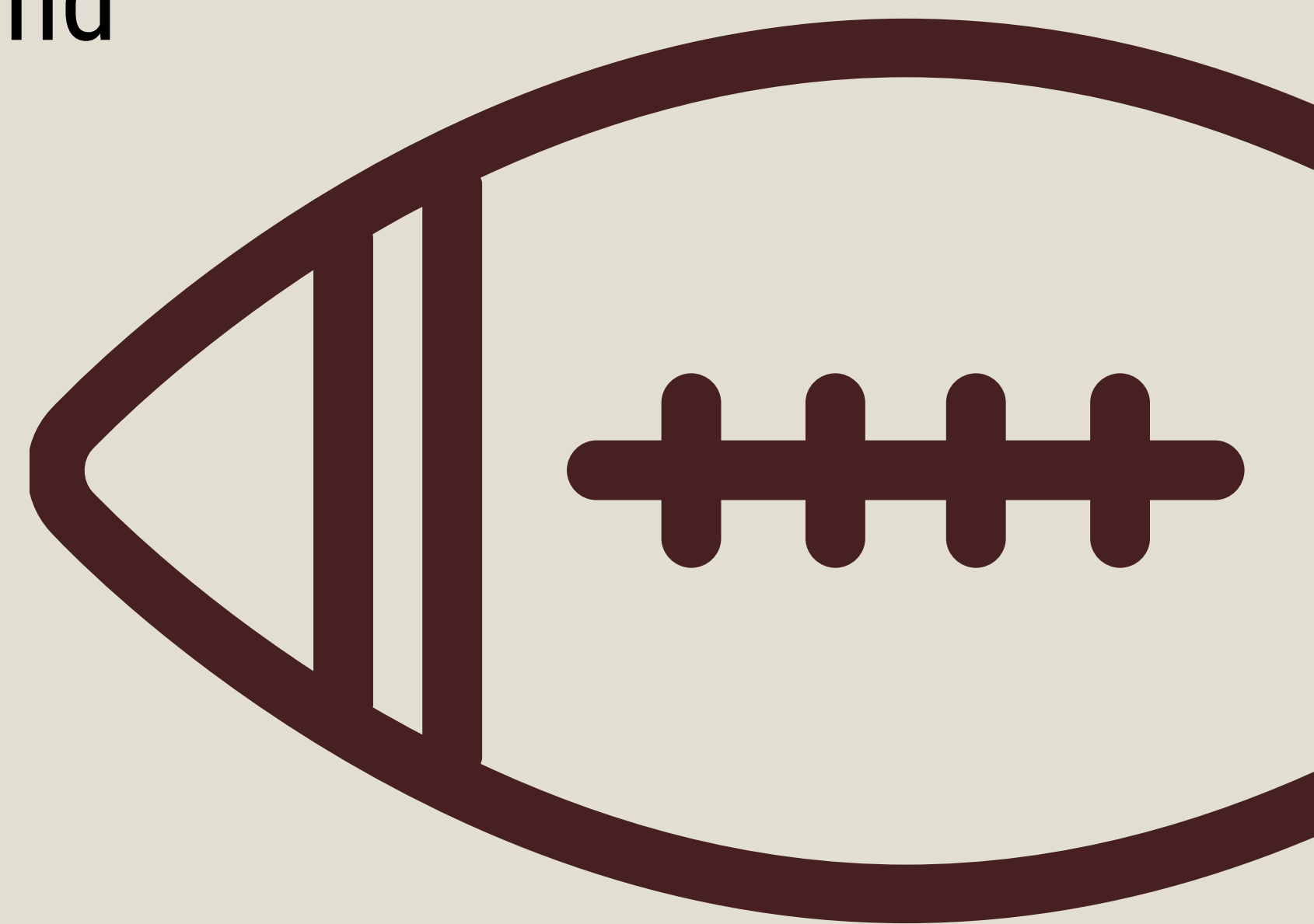


# 4-2-5

## Who Should Use It?



A 4-2-5 formation is great for defenses that are speedy at all three levels (defensive linemen, linebacker and secondary) and that have players with great instincts, a tenacious and aggressive approach, and the strength to match up with bigger receivers.







It's designed to break away from the typical definitions of each separate position to provide a lot more pressure on offenses up front.

The key to any 4-2-5 defense is whether your team has three components:

1. A strong, big-bodied, traditional nose tackle who can clog up the middle of the offensive line.
2. Defensive ends and linebackers who are smaller in size but quick on their feet to cause problems in blocking.
3. A group of players in the secondary who are rangy, smart and can cover really, really well.





# STRENGTHS

1

## CREATES PROBLEMS UP FRONT

A 4-2-5 defense can cause all types of havoc for an opposing offense, with a big nose tackle clogging the middle and hybrid defense ends creating pressure from the outside.

2

## DOESN'T RELY ON PLAY RECOGNITION

Defensive players, especially linebackers, aren't asked to sit back, read a play at the snap of the ball and then react to it. Instead, they are taught to react at the snap of the ball based on their instincts of what certain offensive formations, alignments, and down-and-distance tell them.

3

## REDUCES COVERAGE TIME

Creating more pressure on offenses up front should reduce the amount of time defensive players have to cover receivers running routes. And if that pressure isn't created, there's still five players in the secondary to do their job.

4

## CAN BE USED IN MULTIPLE FORMATS

A 4-2-5 defense was not designed just to stop the pass. It also is a problem for offensive run games because of the problems it can cause for the offensive line.

5

## CONFUSES QUARTERBACKS

The alignment isn't one that's widely used in football, so it isn't as widely studied by offenses in game preparation. While the alignment looks the same up front, the different body types of the players, and maybe even how they line up at the line of scrimmage, could cause a lot of confusion.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## COULD HAVE TROUBLE ADJUSTING

One downfall to the 4-2-5 defense is it could be susceptible to play-action passes or RPO plays. That's because linebackers and the secondary are taught to play with their instincts instead of reacting to the play once it develops, which could potentially opening space for receivers across the field.

2

## COULD BE A PROBLEM WITHOUT PRESSURE

The idea behind the alignment is to create pressure to reduce time for big plays. But if that pressure isn't there on a particular play, there could be a lot of time and plenty of space on the field for a big offensive conversion.

3

## SPACE IN THE MIDDLE

The trade-off for having four down linemen in this nickel-esque defensive alignment is having only two linebackers. That creates more space in the middle of the field for offenses, and could create a lot of mismatches on tight ends especially.

4

## COULD CREATE MISMATCHES

Bigger, taller, athletic receivers could have a fun time going against the 4-2-5 alignment. Because the defenders in such a system will usually be on the smaller side. Offenses could be able to take advantage of these possible height mismatches.



# HOW TO RUN THE 4-2-5 DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**



## 4-2-5 Defensive Linemen



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





The 4-2-5 defensive alignment starts up front with the big guys. There are four “down” linemen in this formation, and while it looks like a more traditional base defensive alignment, it throws a few wrenches into that categorization.

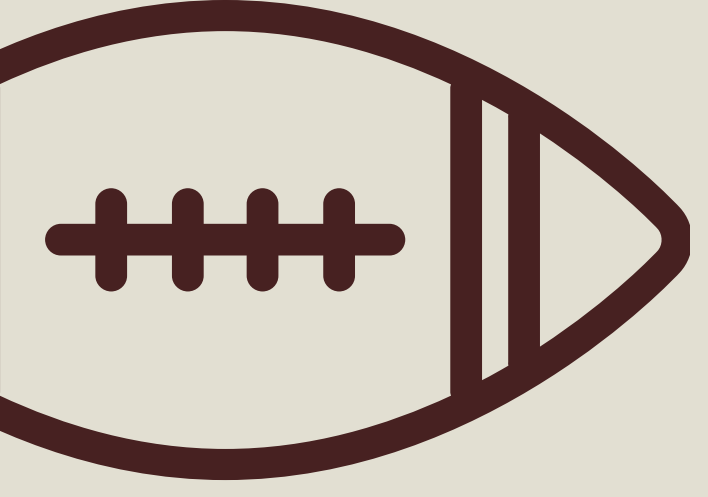
For the most part, the make-up and skillset of each of the players on the defensive line in a 4-2-5 defense are vastly different than in a base defense with four down linemen. With one notable exception: The nose tackle.

The nose tackle in a 4-2-5 defense could be perhaps the most important position on the field. That’s because the nose tackle might be the only “big body” the defense has on the field. All the other players could be on the smaller side, exchanging size for speed and athleticism.

The role of the nose tackle is to clog up the middle of the offensive line and take on literally as many blockers as he possibly can. His initial lining up position will be somewhere between the center and the guard. It’s not necessarily important that the nose tackle put pressure on the quarterback or make any stops in the run game himself at all. His responsibility is to take on blockers to create holes for linebackers to plug or for them to blitz into. That’s why it’s really important the nose tackle is a very big, strong player who can take a pounding.

The other defensive tackle in the 4-2-5 system will often line up on the outside shoulder of the other offensive guard. This is because





the nose tackle should be handling the center and the other guard by himself. This other defensive tackle's job is to create pressure from the down position, getting into either the A or B gap on his side of the center.

It gets interesting at the defensive end positions. Some of the more successful 4-2-5 defenses have traded traditional-bodied defensive ends for outside linebackers who now serve as ends. As former outside linebackers, these now hybrid defensive ends have a lot of speed and still a good amount of strength to get to the ball.

Further creating problems for offensive tackles, these hybrid defensive ends will oftentimes line up at the line of scrimmage, but in a two-point stance instead of a three-point stance with their hand on the ground. This initially causes concern for offensive tackles who know they are about face a speedy challenge and must get off the ball quickly themselves, otherwise the defenders will be past them before they know it.

These hybrid ends also could drop back into coverage on a blitz play where a cornerback or safety is rushing the quarterback. Having smaller players line up at defensive end could be a problem if they're not creating pressure on the offense, as they aren't often equipped to directly take on big, beefy offensive tackles. That's why it's essential that their first step when the ball is snapped is effective and quick, causing the offense to react to them instead of the other way around.

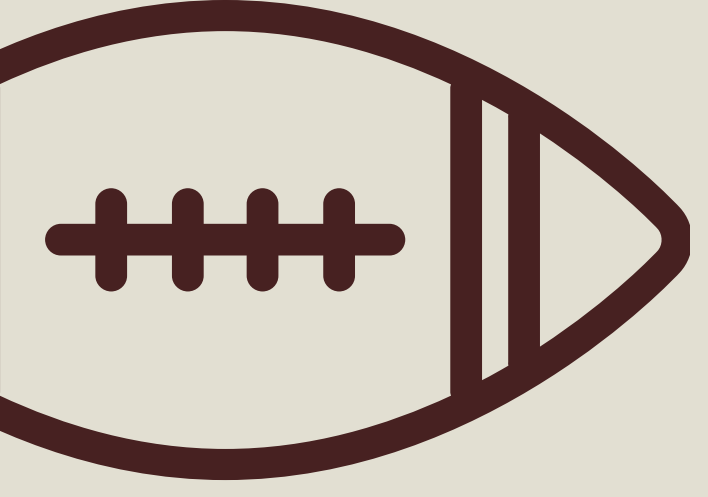


## 4-2-5 Defensive Linemen and Linebackers



# STAGE 2 THE LINEBACKERS





There are only two linebackers in a 4-2-5 defense, and both of these players are on the quicker side as well.

The Mike, or middle linebacker, will line up on the interior of the defense, shading the nose tackle on either one of his shoulders.

The Mike linebacker's primary duties are to plug up the B-gap in run or blitzing situations. This will be the space that the nose tackle will hopefully free up by taking on two blockers of his own.

Mike linebackers in the 4-2-5 system might fit more of the prototypical characteristics of a strong-side linebacker in other base defenses.

He needs to be quick enough to make adjustments on a run play versus a pass play, especially if he has coverage assignments on a passing play.

The Mike is probably the one player on the field in this alignment that needs to play with a little hesitation, reading an offense quickly first and then picking up his responsibilities based off what he sees, rather than just rushing straight to the line to plug a hole.

The second linebacker in this system will be a strong-side linebacker, or Sam.

The Sam in a 4-2-5 defense can often be converted strong safeties, players who at one time may have been small enough to play safety





but have bulked up recently.

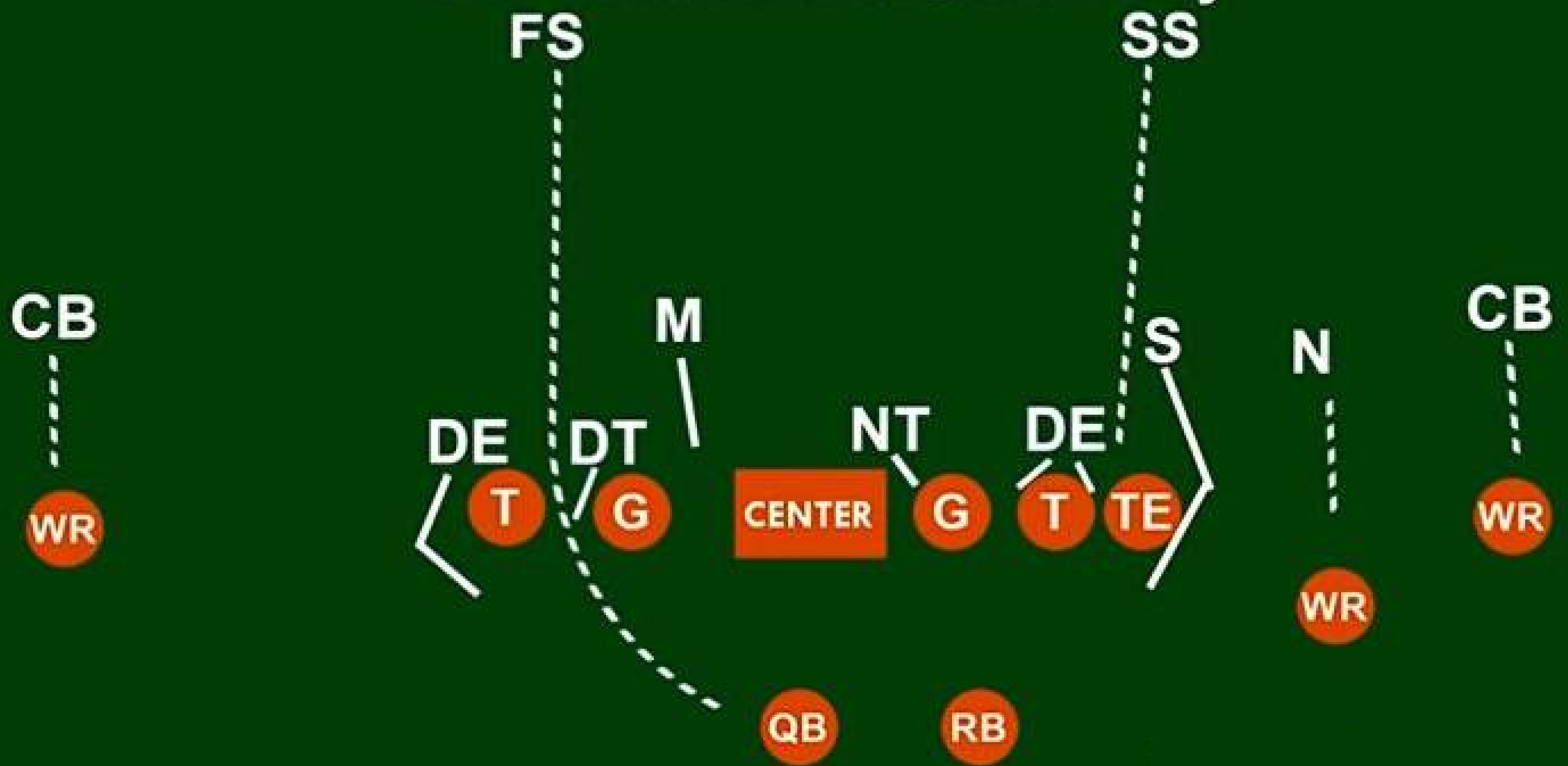
Converted safeties are very experienced in coverage, and they also are used to playing near the line of scrimmage and making tackles.

The Sam is one of the most versatile players on the field in a 4-2-5 alignment, as he is tasked with putting pressure on the quarterback, making stops in the run game, and covering receivers as well.

If there are no tight ends on the field, the Sam will still line up on the strong side of the field and have coverage responsibilities for slot receivers if he isn't blitzing.



## 4-2-5 Defensive Linemen, Linebackers and Secondary



# STAGE 3 THE SECONDARY





The secondary in a 4-2-5 defense is very similar to that of other nickel defensive formations in that there are two typical cornerbacks, two typical safeties, and then a third nickelback who often has skills of both a safety and cornerback.

The most important attribute in the secondary is speed and coverage ability.

As we mentioned before, the key to a 4-2-5 defense is creating pressure up front, which often reduces the amount of time the secondary is forced into coverage.

This is essential because the longer the secondary in this system is forced to cover straight up, the more possibilities there are for big plays by the offense.

Positioning, alignment, and ability to run are the keys to a successful secondary in a 4-2-5 defensive alignment.

The free safety and strong safety have similar assignments to defenses in other more “base” alignments.

However, they are used to either blitz more often or provide run support near the line of scrimmage, or when a cornerback blitzes, they have to compensate with more coverage responsibilities.

The cornerbacks’ responsibilities are simple – cover and cover well. Cornerbacks may be asked to cover receivers in more of a one-on-





one approach instead of with zone coverage, especially when offenses are lined up in multiple-receiver sets.

This is because there are only two linebackers to help in coverage, and most of the time, one of those linebackers is playing closer to the line of scrimmage.

That one fewer linebacker on the field can also open up extra space in the middle of the field for offenses, which is why it's essential that the two cornerbacks and the nickelback all have the ability to move quickly, especially laterally.

Offenses usually try to attack a 4-2-5 defense with either running plays or passing plays that don't take as long to develop to try to counteract the pressure that's being created up front by the quick defensive ends and linebackers.

That means at the snap of the ball, each member of the secondary must be on top of his game and be able to react quickly to his assignment.



# TAKEAWAY

The 4-2-5 defense is a nice option for coaches who have players on the defensive side of the ball who are either undersized or are super athletic and speedy.

This defensive alignment will actually be able to compensate for the lack of size and take advantage of the speed by creating mismatches for the offense at the line of scrimmage.

This will hopefully cancel out the advantages bigger receivers might have over a smaller secondary.

The big exception to this is the nose tackle, who needs to be big, beefy, strong and able to take on multiple offensive linemen every play.

The nose tackle is the key to the entire system, really.

If he is able to clog up the middle of the offensive line, forcing at least both a center and guard to block him on every play, then that will free up room for the linebackers, safeties, and even cornerbacks to put pressure at the line





of scrimmage.

Similarly, being able to utilize a hybrid defensive end who may have some experience as an outside linebacker could cause fits for offensive tackles who are used to squaring off against bigger defensive ends.

Hybrid ends who are smaller but quicker and who start in a two-point stance force these bigger, slower offensive tackles to have a very quick first step to protect the backfield.

The 4-2-5 defense is not a great alignment, though, for teams who have bigger, slower defensive players who aren't versatile.

The lack of speed will catch up to that team quickly as the offense is able to take advantage of the extra space over the middle of the field that the alignment creates.







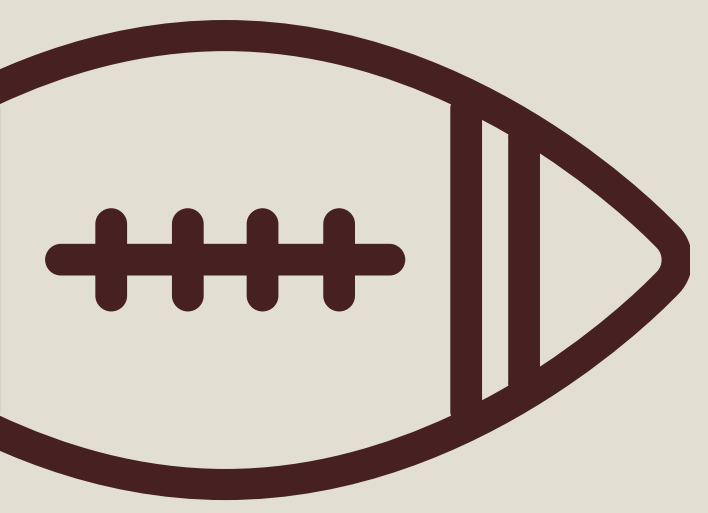
**THE**

**5-2**

**DEFENSE**







In obvious running situations for the offense - when the down and distance is third-and-one let's say - defenses often adjust by going to what's called a "big" or "stack" formation. This brings extra bodies near the line of scrimmage to stop the run. One of the most popular defensive formations to do this out of is the 5-2.

In its base form, it deploys five down defensive linemen and only two linebackers. But smart coaches nowadays are adding a few wrinkles and using the 5-2 defense on more plays than previous coaches ever did.

It's not that they feel there are more plays today that require a bigger presence up front...

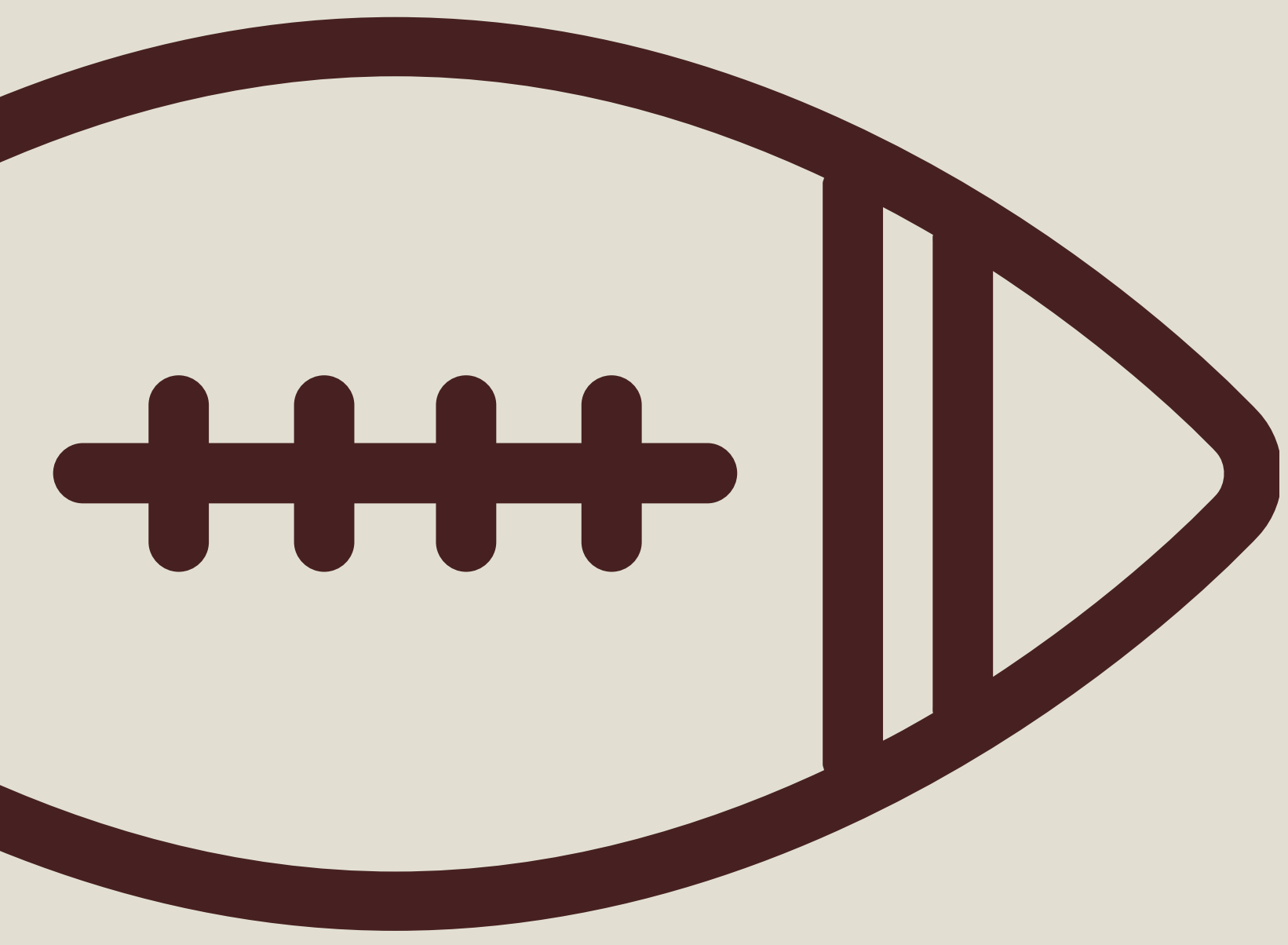
But rather the 5-2 can be deployed in so many different forms that it can create plenty of confusion and pressure up front without sacrificing too much at the second level of defense.

The 5-2 defense in its base form is still very popular at the youth levels of football, where most offenses run the ball at a much higher frequency than they pass.

The 5-2 allows defenses to stack the line of scrimmage and protect against the run by putting another defender directly across from the offensive line.

But it's also good against the pass and can be used in various forms to adjust based on the team's skill level.





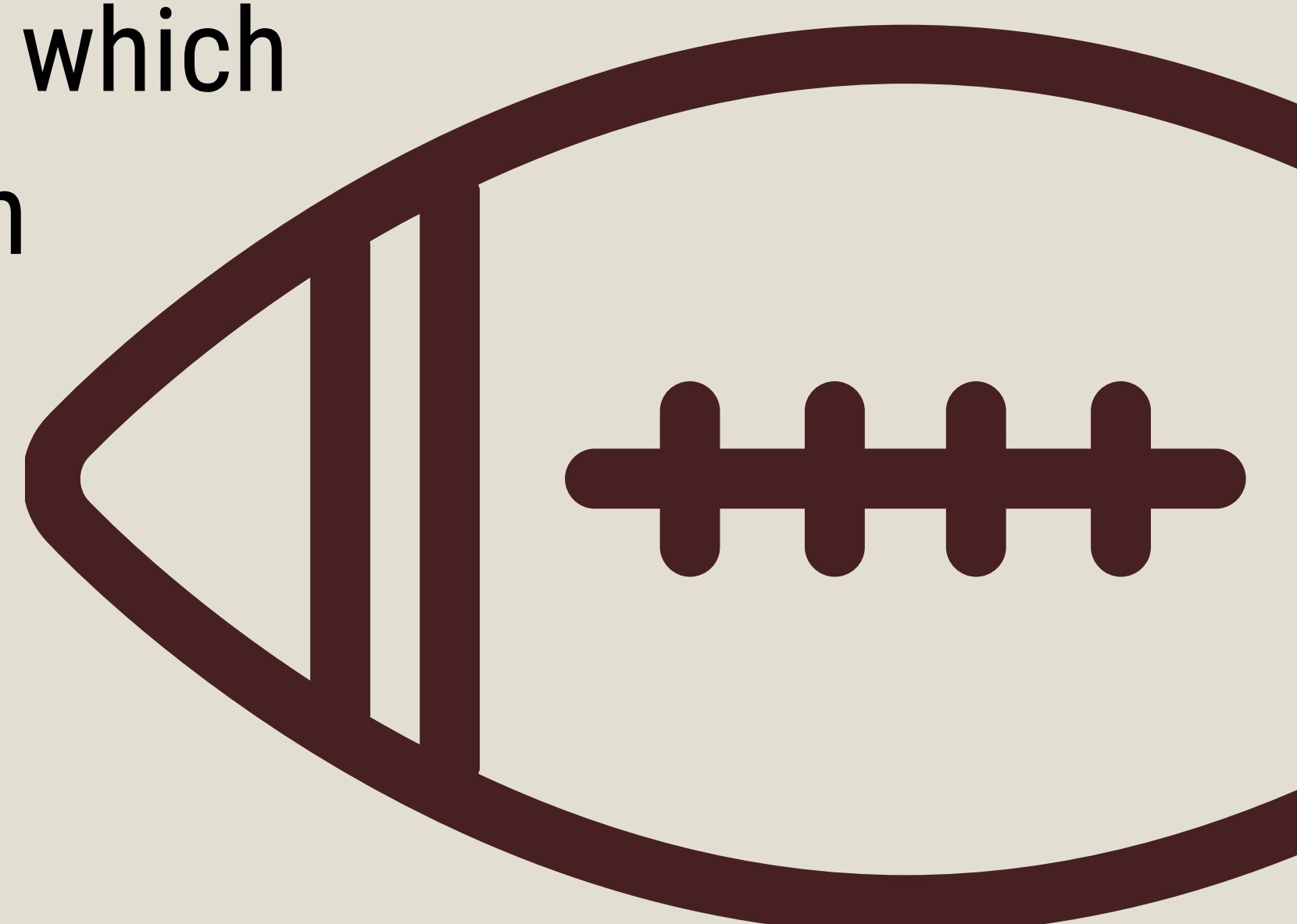
# 5-2

## Who Should Use It?



A 5-2 defense is a great formation to teach players who are new to the game of football because it is a simple defense to deploy.

It's also tailored to stop the running game, which makes up the majority of offensive plays in youth football as compared to the pass.







This fact doesn't make the 5-2 defense one that shouldn't be run at other levels of football, though...

It can be used in different iterations and formats at the high school, collegiate, and professional levels as well.

Simply make a tweak here and there to personnel and how they line up before the snap of the ball, and you'll have yourself a form of the 5-2 defense that will work for you.

It's a great defense to use no matter whether your team is loaded with big guys up front or is smaller in size and therefore needs to have more bodies help clog up the offensive linemen.





# STRENGTHS

1

## EASY TO LEARN

The base 5-2 defense is one of the easiest defenses to learn. That's because the five down defensive linemen are responsible for five of the six gaps along the line of scrimmage, leaving only one other gap to be filled by a linebacker. The other linebacker and secondary are free to roam the rest of the field.

2

## BODY ON BODY

The five defensive linemen will line up across from five of the six offensive linemen that are on the field for the majority of plays. That means just about every offensive linemen has a defender in his face at the snap of the ball, making it tougher for offensive linemen to pull or get to the second level for downfield blocks.

3

## IT'S GREAT AGAINST THE RUN

Having so many players at the line of scrimmage makes it difficult for the offensive linemen to open up holes for running backs to carry the ball. This could force them to the outside, where free linebackers, cornerbacks, and safeties will be waiting to make a tackle.

4

## ALSO GOOD AGAINST THE PASS

The extra defensive linemen in a 5-2 alignment doesn't sacrifice a player from the secondary. That means there are four good defenders on the field to protect against the pass, with two more linebackers still available to help out as well.

5

## PLENTY OF PRESSURE

The extra push at the line of scrimmage makes it easy for defenses to bring pressure from just about anywhere on any play. Linebackers, cornerbacks, and safeties can all blitz, and it's hard for offensive linemen to pick up the blitz because they're tied up with defensive linemen.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## SUSCEPTIBLE AGAINST THE SPREAD

Offenses can counteract the extra pressure up front by spreading the field. Putting more wide receivers on the field and running out of a shotgun formation could create a lot of mismatches for speedy wide receivers and running backs.

2

## EASY FOR LINEMEN TO SEE RESPONSIBILITIES

There isn't a lot of guessing for an offensive linemen against a 5-2 defense. Their blocking responsibilities are most often lined up directly opposite them. So on plays in which the defense doesn't blitz, a good offensive line might have no problem picking up their assignments.

3

## SPACE IN THE MIDDLE

The extra defensive linemen is added via sacrifice at linebacker, where only two players line up. That can create some extra space over the middle of the field for passing routes.

4

## REDUCES SPEED

A 5-2 defense usually sacrifices speed for size, which could allow a speedier, quicker offense to take advantage and move the ball successfully down field.



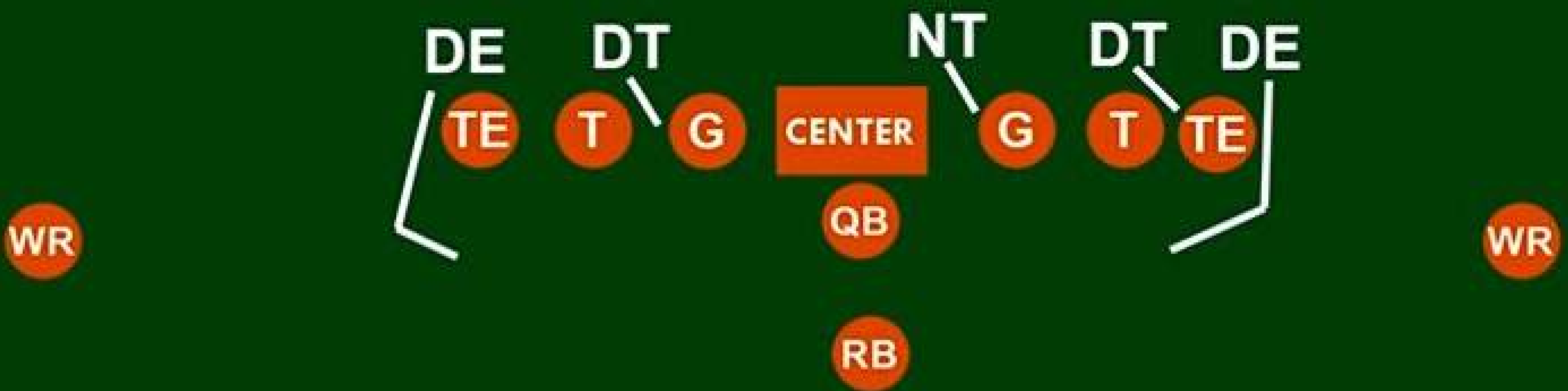
# HOW TO RUN THE 5-2 DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**



## 5-2 Defensive Linemen



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





The defensive line in a 5-2 employs two defensive tackles, two defensive ends, and a nose tackle spread out across the entire line of scrimmage.

Under this formation, each offensive lineman has a player lined up across from him, or at least right next to him, on every play.

The nose tackle's job is to clog up the middle of the field, taking on A gap responsibilities on any given play.

Most times, the nose tackle will line up over the center shaded toward the strong side of the offense.

In these cases, the nose tackle will be responsible for attacking the A gap on that side of the field, and hopefully occupying not only the center but also the strong side guard.

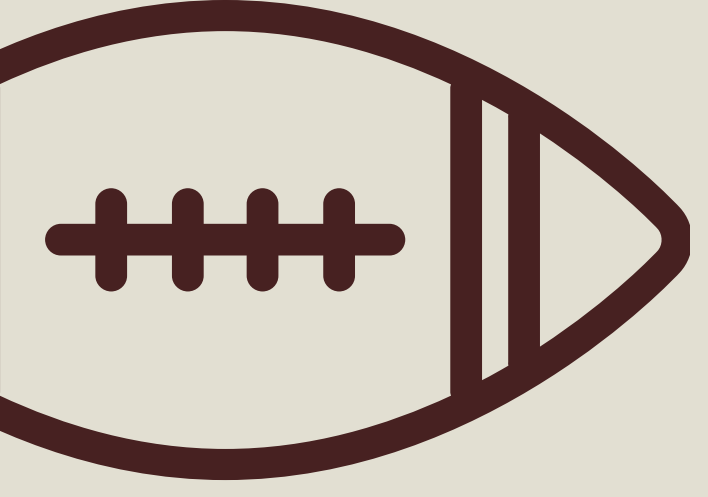
With this extra defensive lineman in a 5-2, the defensive tackles and defensive ends are able to line up wider than they normally would.

If an offense has two tight ends on the field, which it often does against a 5-2, the defensive tackles will line up either heads up to the offensive tackles or on their outside shoulder.

The defensive tackles will have primary responsibility for the C gap in this case.

If there is only one tight end on the field, the defensive tackle on the





weak side of the defense will line up on the outside shoulder of the guard and attack the B gap on that side of the field.

The defensive tackle on the strong side will stay in the previous alignment and have C gap responsibilities.

The defensive ends will line up on the outside shoulder of the last man on the line of scrimmage on his side of the field, no matter who that last player is, whether it's a tight end or an offensive tackle.

The defensive ends' responsibility is the same on every play:

Cause disruption in the backfield by bursting through the outside of the offensive line.



## 5-2 Defensive Linemen and Linebackers



# STAGE 2 THE LINEBACKERS





The two linebackers in a 5-2 defense are both considered inside linebackers. They will operate in tandem very similar to how the inside linebackers in 3-4 defense will operate.

One of these linebackers will be considered the Mike (the quarterback of the defense who calls out the plays) while the other could be considered a sort of hybrid between a Sam and a Will.

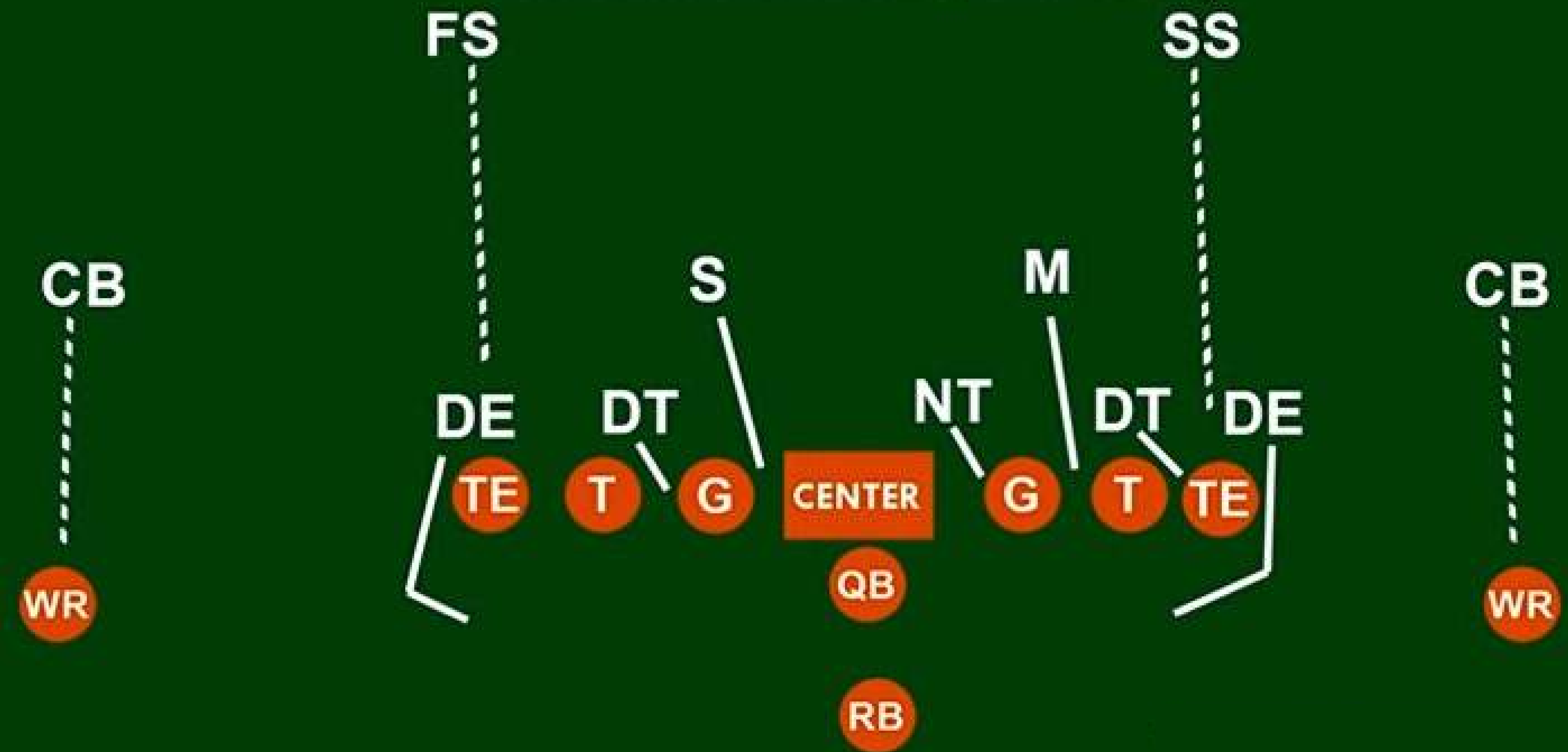
Both these linebackers will line up somewhere between the nose tackle and defensive tackle on his side of the field. They will either have A gap or B gap responsibilities depending on which gap the nose tackle is responsible for on that play.

On running plays, both linebackers will attack the line of scrimmage head on to fill their gap, or slide outside to help with tackling if the play goes that way. Against a passing play, both linebackers will matchup against either a tight end or running back in a man-to-man defense. In a zone defense, the linebackers will be asked to cover a specific zone on the field, either close to where they line up in a Cover 2 or Cover 4, or directly behind them in a Cover 3.

Linebackers are often asked to blitz against the pass out of a 5-2 defense, though. That's because even with one of the linebackers blitzing, there are still five other defenders on the field to matchup against any player on offense who runs a passing route.



5-2 Defensive Linemen,  
Linebackers and Secondary



**STAGE 3**  
**THE SECONDARY**





The secondary in a 5-3 defense has all its normal players on the field – two cornerbacks, a strong safety and a free safety. Responsibilities for these players can be very simple in base man-to-man or zone defensive plays. A defensive coach can decide to run any of the main zone coverages out of a 5-2 (Cover 2, Cover 3, Cover 4, etc.) because he will have these four players at his disposal.

In a man-to-man coverage, the cornerbacks will each cover a wide receiver. The strong safety will have coverage responsibility for a tight end most of the times, while the free safety will either cover a tight end or running back coming out of the backfield.

Smart defensive coaches will also utilize both the safeties and cornerbacks in blitz packages out of a 5-2 defense as well. If a cornerback blitzes, it's easy for one of the safeties to come from over top and cover the man or zone that the cornerback vacated.

If a safety blitzes, a linebacker can often pick up on that player's normal coverage responsibility. That's what makes the 5-2 still effective against the pass.

Run responsibilities are much more straightforward. Cornerbacks should funnel all ball carries to the middle of the field, while the safeties should approach the line of scrimmage and have final contain responsibilities, not allowing any ball carrier to get behind him.



# TAKEAWAY

The 5-2 defense is a great option for coaches at any level of football. It's not just for youth football teams anymore, as astute coaches have begun to work in new wrinkles. Such as having the defensive ends operate as a standing outside linebacker or having the free safety or strong safety approach the line of scrimmage before the snap of the ball to create even more pressure and confusion.

The 5-2 defense also allows for a blitz to come from just about anywhere on the field, and it's very challenging for offensive linemen and even running backs to pick up this extra pressure with five down defensive linemen. Even if you don't want to run intricate packages or blitz schemes out of the 5-2 defense, it's still a great alignment to run. It puts a "hat on a hat," as they say, creating a lot of pressure at the point of attack and making it difficult for offensive linemen to break free and block at the second level of a defense. And because no player in the secondary has been sacrificed for this extra defensive lineman, the 5-2 defense can still hold its own against the pass.





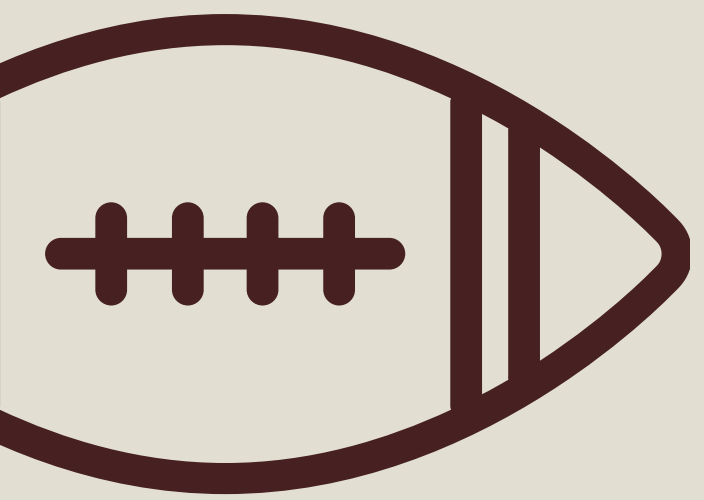


**THE**

**403**

**DEFENSE**





The 46 defense is perhaps the most famous alignment around. That's because it's associated with possibly the greatest defense in the history of the National Football League – the 1985 Chicago Bears. That team was a dominating force, with its defense helping to lead the team to a 15-1 record and a Super Bowl championship.

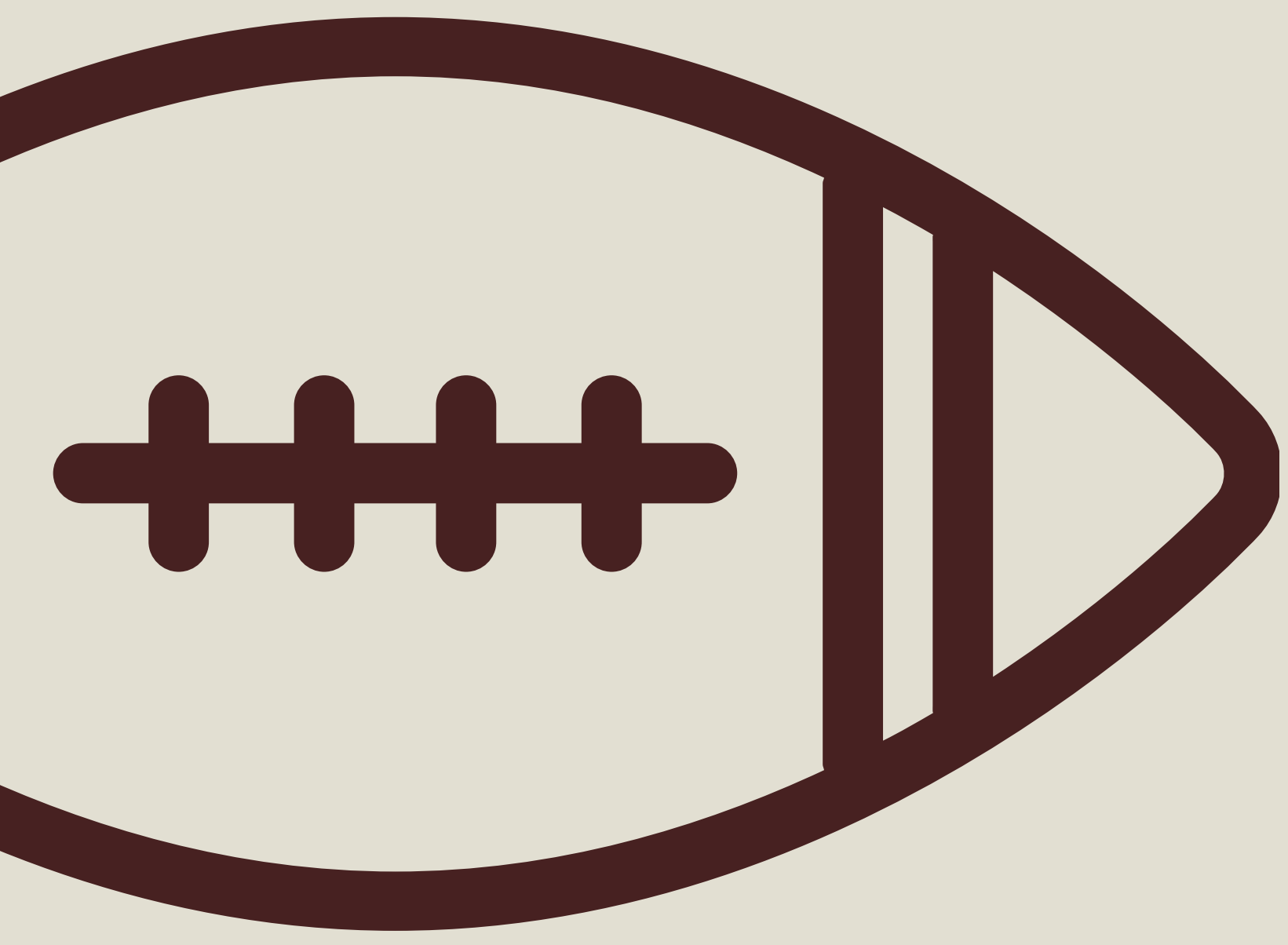
The Bears' defensive coordinator at the time, the legendary Buddy Ryan, created the 46 defense as a way to put loads of pressure on the offense, stacking the line of scrimmage. This made it impossible for offensive linemen to double team any defender and caused all sorts of havoc in the backfield.

Unlike other defensive alignments out there, the 46 defense is not named for the number of players at each level of the defense. Instead, Ryan coined the term 46 defense because his strong safety on that Bears' team, Doug Plank, wore number 46. In reality, the 46 defense is an iteration of the 4-3 base defense.

There are four defensive linemen, three linebackers, and four players in the secondary in a 46 defense - but the difference lies in where they line up.

In addition to the four down linemen, one linebacker and the strong safety will both stack the line of scrimmage before the snap of the ball, putting extra pressure up front right at the beginning.





# 46

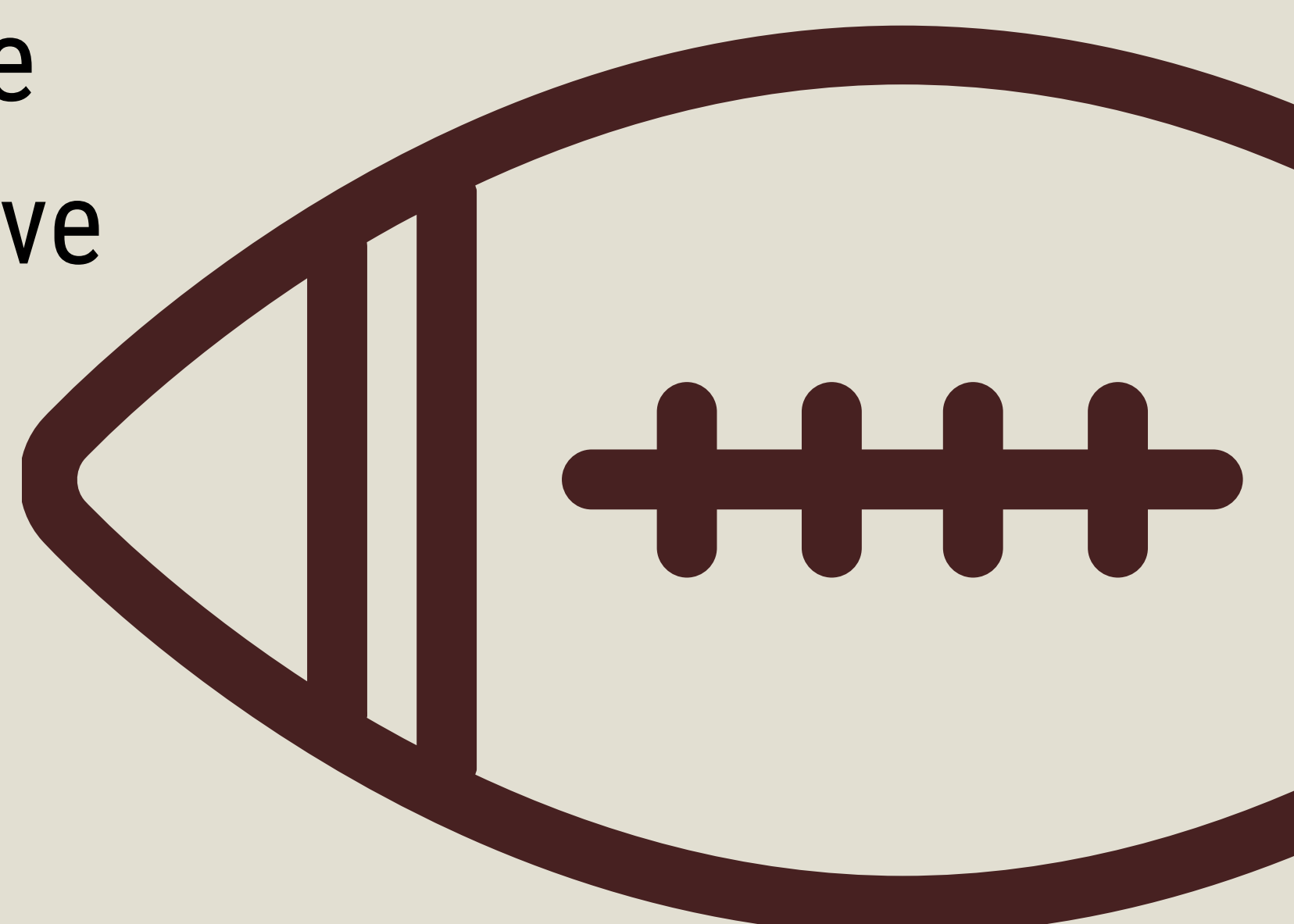
## Who Should Use It?

### 46 Defense



Based on the alignment alone, one might think that the 46 defense is only good at stopping the running game...

And therefore, would only be a good fit for youth football teams who defend the run more often, or for more advanced teams against run-heavy offensive formations.







But the fact that the 1985 Chicago Bears team is the one that made the 46 defense famous would suggest that one would be wrong if one made that assumption.

The 46 defense is just a 4-3 defense with a major wrinkle, and as such, it has many of the same strengths as the 4-3 defense does.

It's not a hard defense to teach as a base defense, because the responsibilities are relatively simple and straightforward, as we'll soon see.

At the same time, defensive coaches can get very, very creative with the 46 defense to keep offenses off balance even more.

Still, if you're a coach at the youth level, you don't have to be too scared by the notion that a professional football team made this defense famous.

The reality is that you don't have to run the 46 defense to the same extent that the Chicago Bears did.

You can run a simpler iteration that could still make your team famous for its ferocious defense.





# STRENGTHS

1

## STACKS THE LINE OF SCRIMMAGE

In addition to the four normal down defensive linemen, two other players – a strong safety and linebacker – will start each play at the line of scrimmage. This blocks the vision of offensive linemen and prohibits them from double teaming anybody.

2

## CREATES CONFUSION

How often do offenses see 6 defenders at the line of scrimmage before the snap of the ball? The answer is probably not very often. The 46 defense keeps offenses on their toes and makes them adjust their game to an alignment they probably haven't seen too often.

3

## CREATES PRESSURE

6 players will rush the line of scrimmage on just about every play, and that doesn't even count times when the defense might decide to blitz another defender. On a lot of plays, there will be too many defenders for the offense to block.

4

## IS GOOD IN ANY SITUATION

A The 46 defense is not just a run-stopping defense. While it's definitely great against the run because of how many players stack the line of scrimmage, it's also good against the pass. Five defenders will always be defending the pass, and one of the extra "defensive linemen" can always drop back into coverage, too.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## SUSCEPTIBLE TO CROSSING ROUTES

Since the amount of time quarterbacks have to get rid of the ball is less against the 46 defense, offenses often counteract that by running short passing routes. The extra two players at the line of scrimmage can open up space for receivers to find.

2

## HARD TO FULLY GRASP

While the 46 defense can be implemented in a base formation without a lot of wrinkles, it is most effective when those wrinkles are implemented. The entire basis behind the alignment is that different defenders will do different things every play. This may be harder for inexperienced players to fully grasp and execute.

3

## COULD BE THROWN AGAINST

The 46 defense was designed to create pressure, but if the offense is able to withstand that pressure, it could be a long game ahead for the defense. No pressure out of a 46 alignment is often a nightmare for the defense, as the offense can now pick apart the team that has only three players in the secondary.

4

## REQUIRES A LOT OF STRENGTH

The 46 defense asks a lot out of the two extra defenders who line up at the line of scrimmage. Defensive linemen are used to taking a pounding on every single down immediately at the snap of the ball, but strong safeties and outside linebackers are not. This could wear these players down over the entire stretch of the game if they're not prepared for the extra physicality.



# HOW TO RUN THE 46 DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**



## 46 Defensive Linemen



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





When we talk about the defensive line in a 46 defense, we need to talk about the strong safety and Sam linebacker, too.

That's because in addition to the nose tackle, defensive tackle and two defensive ends, the strong safety and Sam will align themselves at the line of scrimmage on every play.

So for the purposes of this breakdown, we'll be dealing with six defensive linemen.

We'll start with the alignment of all the players...

The nose tackle will line up directly opposite the center or shaded slightly to the strong side of the defense.

On the weak side, the other defensive tackle will line up on the outside shoulder of the offensive guard and the defensive end will line up on the outside shoulder of the offensive tackle.

The strong side of the defense will see the defensive end move more inside than an end is used to and line up on the outside shoulder of the offensive guard.

The Sam linebacker and the strong safety will each line up on one of the shoulders of the tight end – the Sam on the inside shoulder and the strong safety on the outside shoulder.

As you can imagine with this alignment, that's a whole lot of bodies





up front. Every offensive linemen has a defensive linemen lined up directly across from him before the snap of the ball except for the strong side offensive tackle. But that tackle has quite the blocking task, as he could see intense pressure from either the defensive end or the Sam on any given play.

The main responsibilities for all the defensive linemen are to primarily attack, attack, and attack some more. The nose tackle will have A gap responsibilities, most of the time to the strong side of the offense.

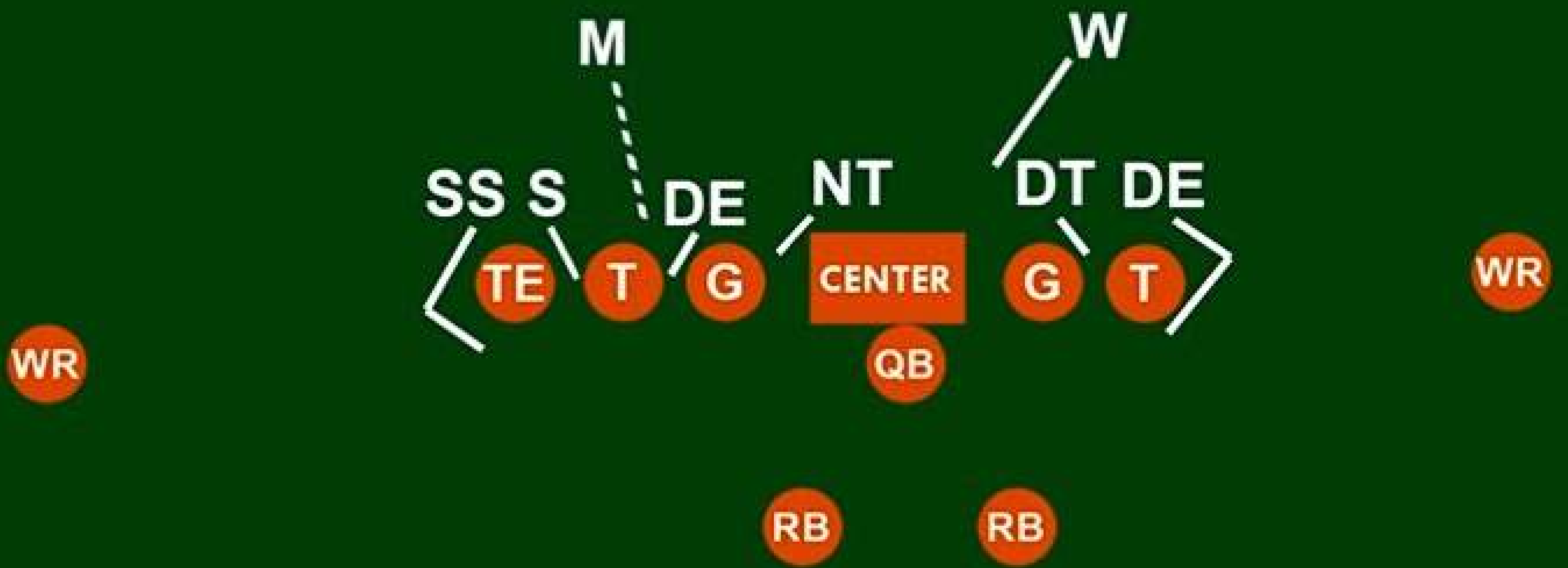
The weak-side defensive tackle and strong-side defensive end will have primary B gap responsibilities. The weak-side defensive end will have C gap and outside contain responsibilities. And the Sam and strong safety will have C gap and outside contain responsibilities, respectively, but that is done in tandem since they line up so close to one another.

With so many defensive linemen so close to each other, the 46 defense easily allows for defensive coaches to work in curls or stunts that would switch up the gap responsibilities and confuse offensive linemen even more.

In addition, it's easy to drop either the strong safety or Sam back into coverage, either to allow the Mike linebacker to blitz or to provide extra protection against passing plays.



46 Defensive Linemen  
and Linebackers



**STAGE 2**  
**THE**  
**LINEBACKERS**





The 46 defense employs only two linebackers in the traditional sense. With the Sam linebacker starting the play at the line of scrimmage, that leaves only the Mike and the Will in their traditional alignments with traditional responsibilities.

Both players will line up about five yards off the line of scrimmage, directly over the offensive tackles.

On running plays, the Will be responsible for covering the A gap on his side of the field. This is the only gap along the line of scrimmage that isn't occupied by a defensive lineman in a 46 defense.

The Mike will read that it's a run play and then move to fill any open space on his side of the field.

The strong safety and Sam will be funneling runners back to the middle of the field, so the Mike needs to see where any hole develops in doing so, and then fill that hole.

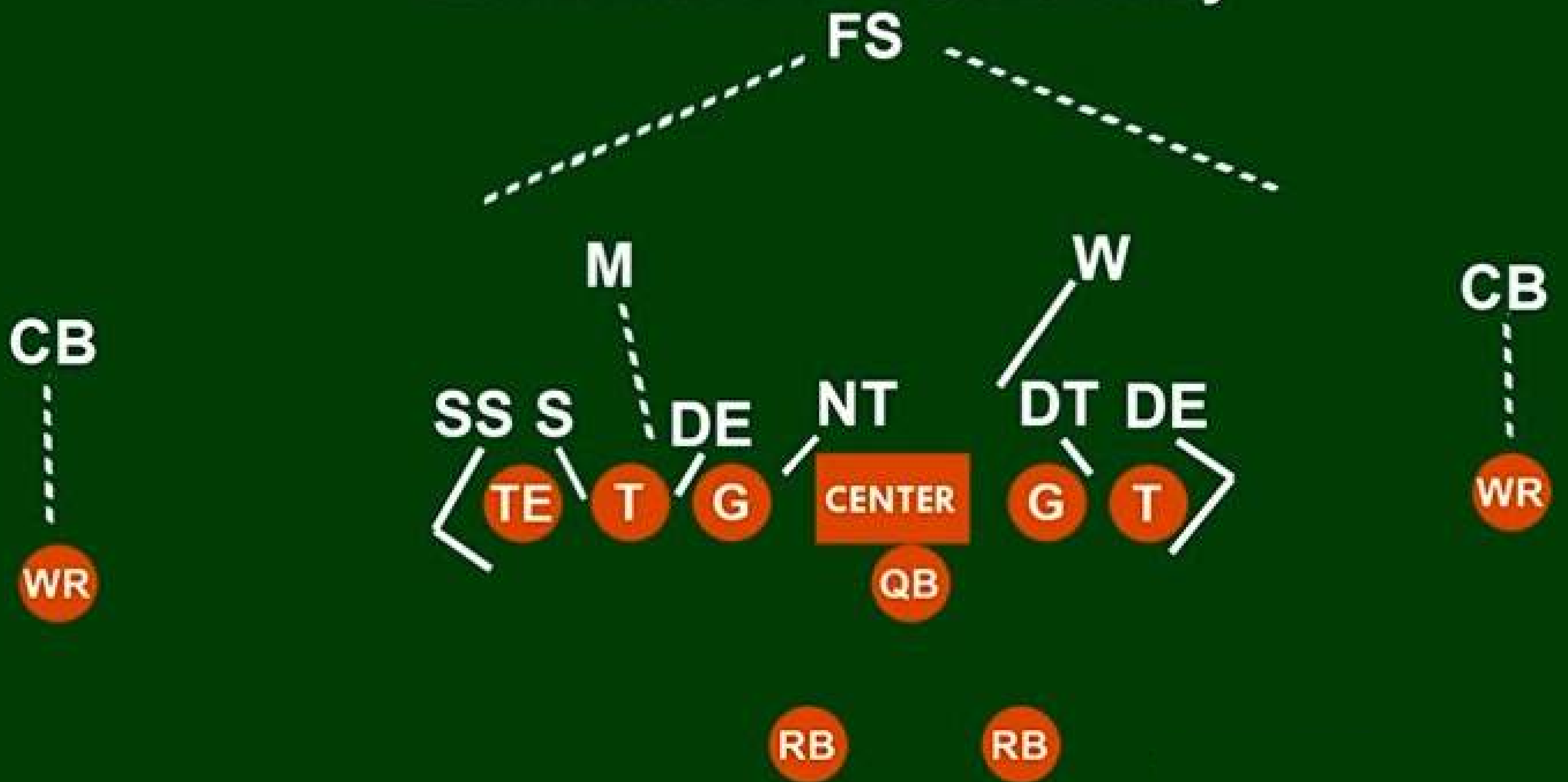
Most 46 defense run man-to-man coverage against the pass.

In this instance, the linebackers will be responsible for covering running backs out of the backfield or a tight end.

Zone coverage could be deployed as well, and in many of these cases, the strong safety might drop back into coverage to help out.



46 Defensive Linemen,  
Linebackers and Secondary



# STAGE 3

# THE SECONDARY





The secondary is also down a man in a 46 defense, with the strong safety at the line of scrimmage and acting more like a defensive lineman. That leaves two cornerbacks and a free safety to cover the rest of the field. The cornerbacks will line up over the wide receivers, with the free safety as the only man lined up deep.

Responsibilities for all players in the secondary are pretty simple and similar to what they are in other defensive alignments. The cornerbacks will defend the receivers in man-to-man coverage or drop back and cover an area of the field in zone coverage.

On running plays, they will serve as outside protection, funneling runners back into the middle of the field where all the other defenders are waiting to make a tackle.

The free safety is really the key to the secondary in a 46 defense. This player needs to be able to read plays quickly and effectively and react. He may be required to run all over the field, too, so he should have a lot of speed and lateral adjustment ability.

On passing plays, the free safety might have coverage responsibilities over a tight end, but most of the time, he will be serving as extra help to the cornerbacks and linebackers.

On running plays, the free safety must approach the line quickly, with primary responsibility of making tackles or funneling a ball carrier inside if that ball carrier gets outside or past the other defenders.



# TAKEAWAY

The 46 defense is one of the most famous defensive alignments around, as it was employed by what is considered one of the best professional defenses in history – the 1985 Chicago Bears.

Because of this, the 46 defense has been used in many different iterations at the professional and collegiate levels by coaches who wish to replicate its success.

But even though it's a defense that was designed for the most skilled players at the most advanced level of the game, the 46 defense can still be used by youth football teams.

That's because the alignment is really just a wrinkle on the 4-3 base defense, and so it uses many of the same principles and all the same personnel.

The 46 defense doesn't require new players to be on the field – say an extra defensive lineman, linebacker or member of the secondary.





Instead, it just requires the normal stable of players to have slightly different responsibilities.

The key to a successful 46 defense is having a strong safety and Sam linebacker who can take the every-down punishment of playing close to the line of scrimmage, and the adjustment ability and awareness of a really good free safety.

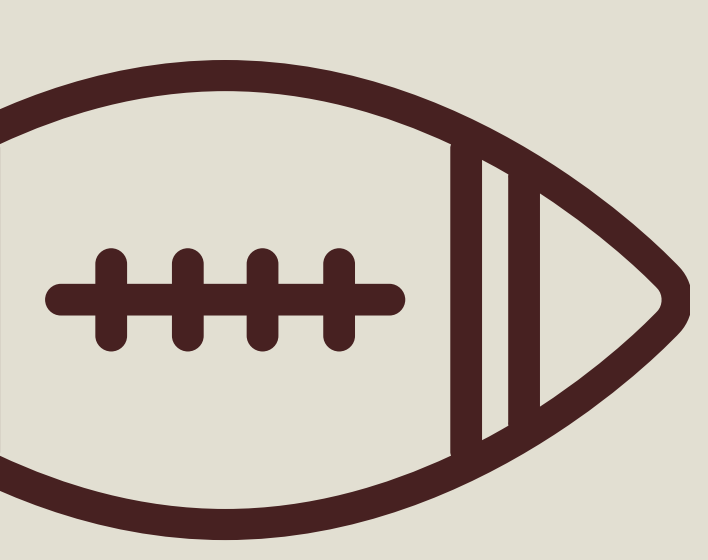






**THE**  
**DIME**  
**DEFENSE**





Question:

“What should you do when your defense is facing an obvious passing situation where the offense needs to gain a significant amount of yards to gain a first down?”

Or, “What should you do when the offense you are facing constantly runs a spread formation with four wide receivers on the field at the same time?”

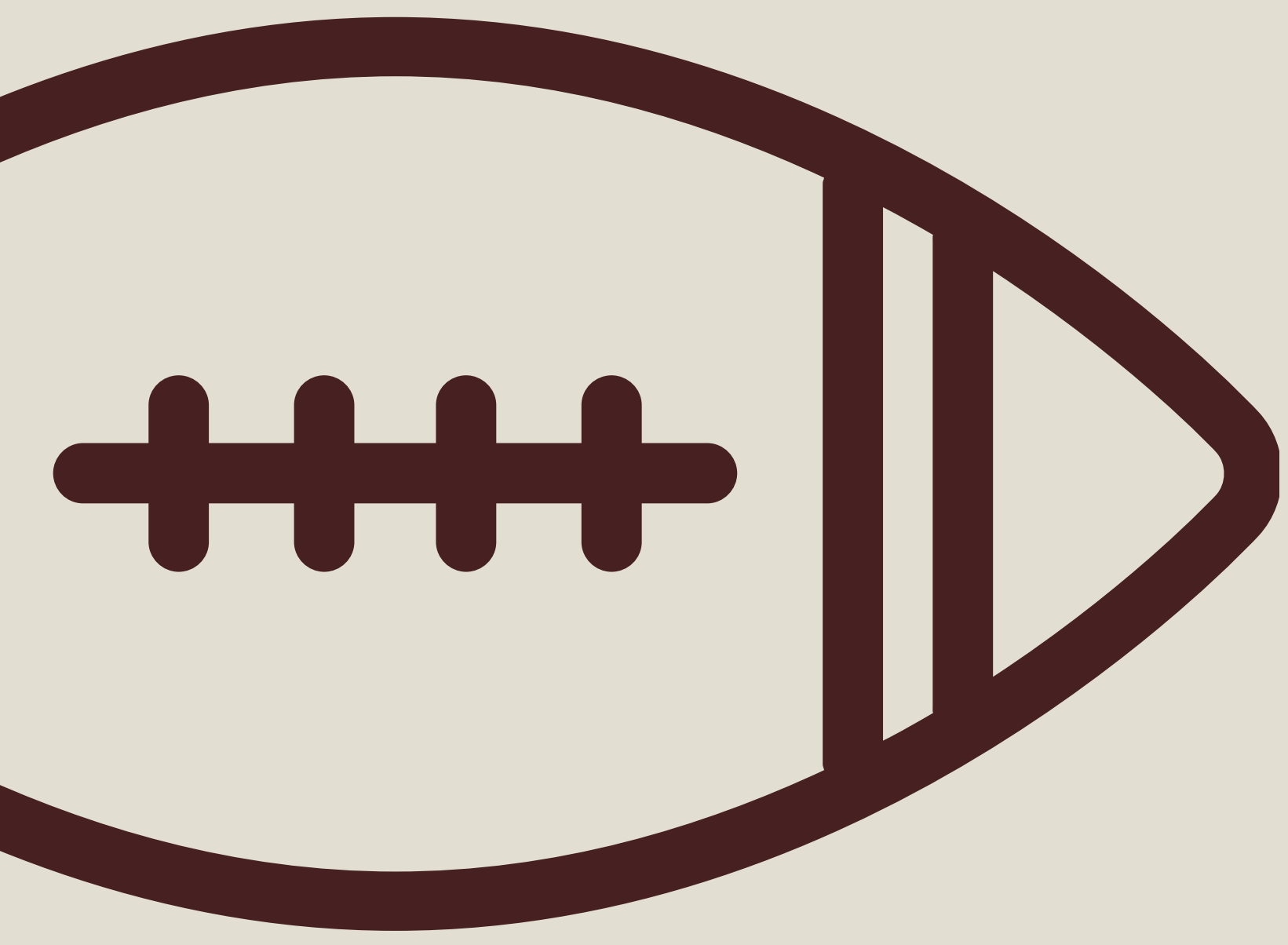
The answer to both those questions is that you can run the Dime defense.

The Dime defense was traditionally used in obvious passing situations, as it helps defend against the pass because it involves having six defensive backs on the field and only one linebacker.

However, as more and more offenses are utilizing multiple wide receiver sets and spread formations (especially at the collegiate and professional levels), defenses have responded by running the Dime defense more often.

That fact makes the Dime defense not as popular or necessary in youth football. But the alignment can also be used against the run by making a few adjustments to the base formation, and could also cause fits for offenses in the running game.





# DIME

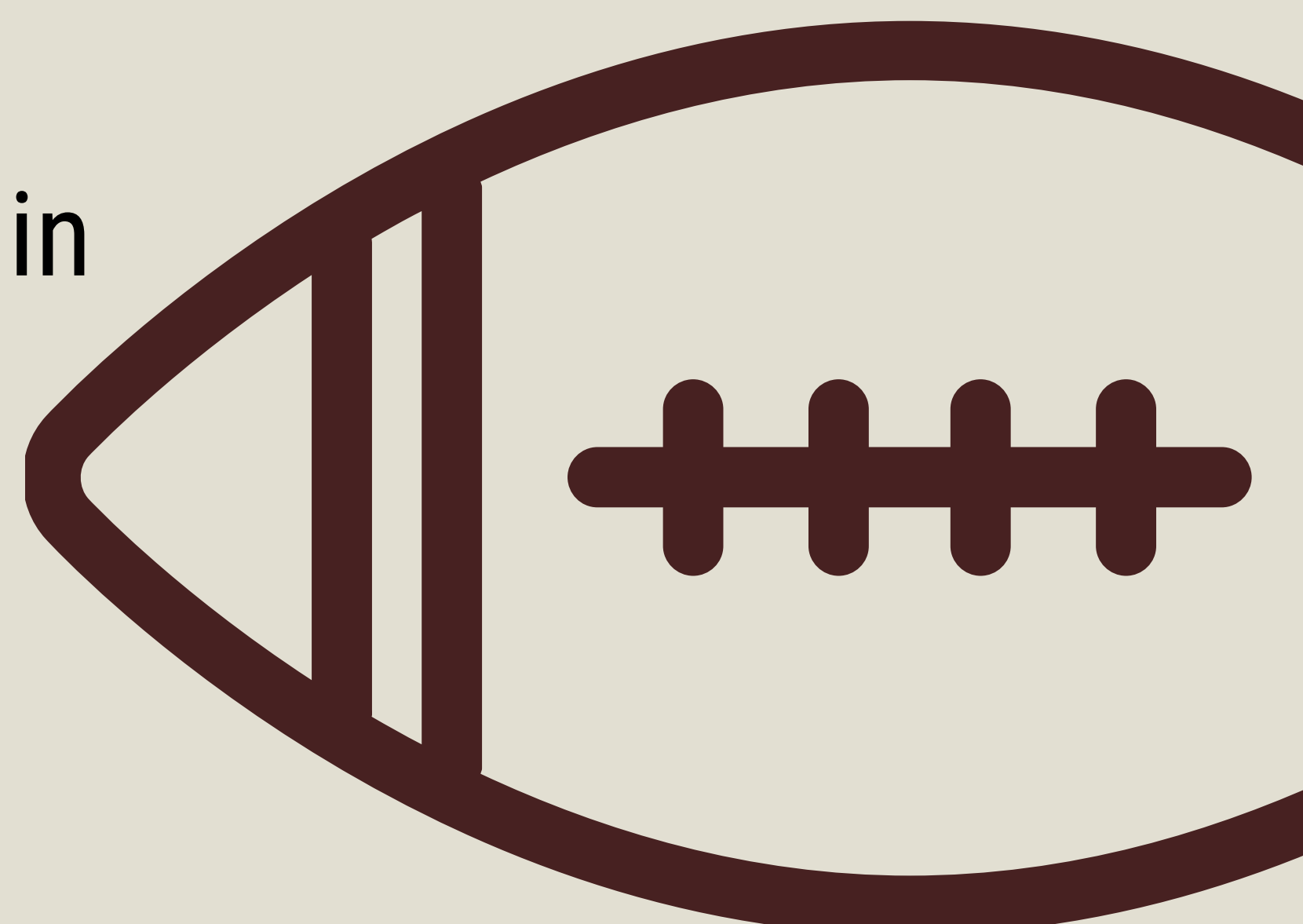
## Who Should Use It?



Just about any defense can use the Dime defense in some form...

It's a pretty basic formation in terms of alignments and responsibilities.

That makes it an easy alignment to deploy in almost any down-and-distance situation.







As mentioned before, the fact that there are six members of the secondary on the field in a Dime defense naturally makes it a formation that coaches use to defend against the pass.

Because the spread formation is becoming more common in today's game, the Dime defense is becoming more common as well.

The Dime defense also provides another added benefit to teams that run it...

It adds a lot of speed on the field.

This added speed and agility could result in a really good run defense too if your team's safeties (and even cornerbacks) are good tacklers.





# STRENGTHS

1

## ALLOWS FOR A FASTER DEFENSE

Six defensive backs makes the Dime defense the one with the most speed on the field at any one time. These players have the ability to speed all over the field covering wide receivers, or forcing ball carriers into the middle of the field where help awaits.

2

## IT'S GREAT AGAINST THE PASS

Six defensive backs makes the Dime defense the one with the most speed on the field at any one time. These players have the ability to speed all over the field covering wide receivers, or forcing ball carriers into the middle of the field where help awaits.

3

## ALLOWS FOR FLEXIBILITY

A Dime defense can be run with either three or four defensive linemen and one or two linebackers. That allows a defensive coach to be able to customize the pass-heavy alignment to better fit the personnel on the team.

4

## CAN BE USED IN MULTIPLE FORMATS

Both a zone and man-to-man coverage can be deployed out of the Dime defensive formation with ease. There are plenty of members of the secondary on the field to defend each receiver which means a defense doesn't necessarily have to run a zone defense to cover the entire field.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## COULD BE SUSCEPTIBLE TO CROSSING ROUTES

While the Dime defense was created to stop the pass, the lack of linebackers does leave a void in the middle of the field. As a result, offenses will often try to spread the field with their formation and then run crossing routes across the middle to take advantage of this open space.

2

## COULD CAUSE DEFENSIVE CONFUSION

The abundance of receiving options could end up setting up inadvertent pick plays, where defenders who are following their assignments all over the field end up bumping into one of their teammates and accidentally letting a receiver run free.

3

## SUSCEPTIBLE TO THE RUN

A defense that runs the Dime in early down situations could be susceptible to big gains on running plays, especially when the offense spreads the field with their alignment.

4

## MIGHT NOT BE GOOD FOR YOUTH FOOTBALL

Youth football teams often run the ball much more than they pass it. Therefore, a Dime defense might not be the best alignment for youth football teams because it can be hard to consistently keep the running game in check.



# HOW TO RUN THE DIME DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**

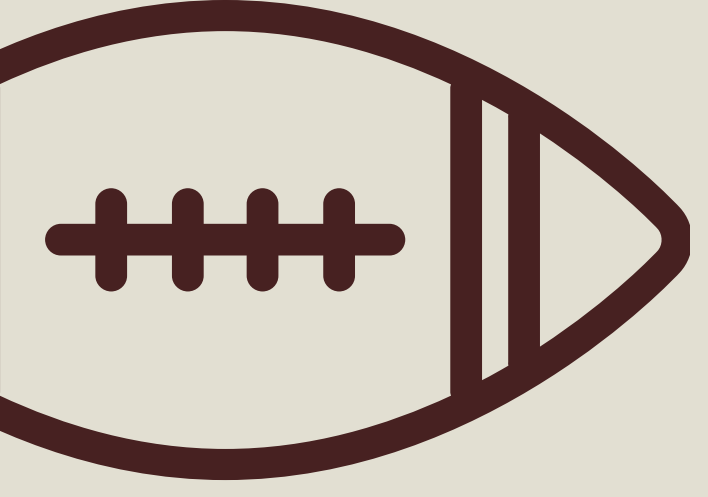


## Dime Defensive Linemen



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





Most of the time a Dime defense will use four down defensive linemen - so that's what we'll discuss here. However, there are times when a defensive coach might decide to run the Dime out of a base 3-4 system, which would mean there would be three defensive linemen and two linebackers. In the 4-3 base version of the Dime defense, the defensive tackles will line up over the offensive guards either heads up or over their inside shoulders.

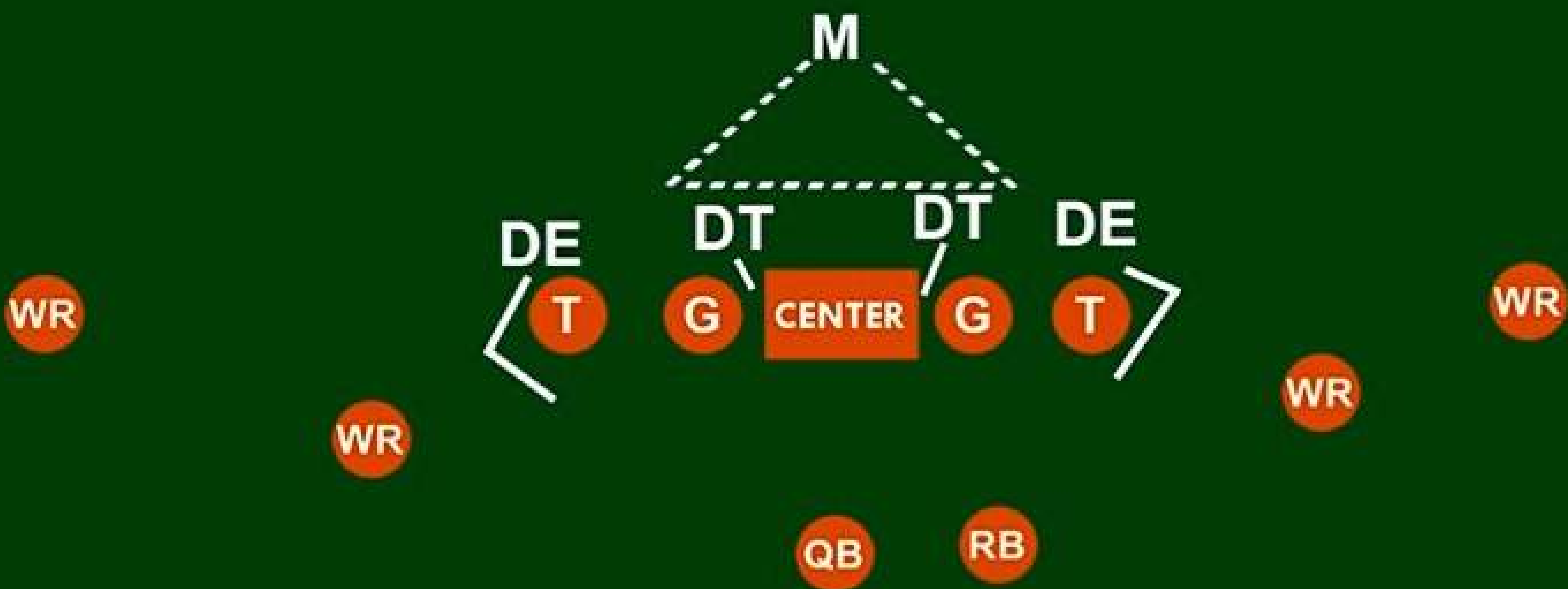
The defensive tackles' primary responsibility is to attack the A gap, although he could be tasked with B gap responsibilities if he lines up on the outside shoulder of the offensive guard. The defensive ends are really the key to the defensive line for a Dime package. They will line up on the outside the offensive tackles' shoulder and be responsible for causing havoc in the backfield.

However, the defensive ends will sometimes also be tasked with dropping back into coverage for extra support over the middle of the field. This is done a lot of times to counteract what we discussed before – the fact that offenses try to spread the field and run crossing routes against the Dime.

For these reasons, a lot of teams will employ traditional outside linebackers as their defensive ends in a Dime formation. They will even start the play standing up instead of in a traditional three-point stance that most defensive linemen use. Outside linebackers are usually great at rushing the passer because they are quick and strong, and they also are used to having coverage responsibilities against the pass.



## Dime Defensive Linemen and Linebackers



# STAGE 2 THE LINEBACKERS





In most Dime formations, there will be only one linebacker – the Mike or middle linebacker.

As mentioned, a second linebacker can become part of the Dime formation instead of a fourth defensive lineman, but most defenses will run the Dime out of the 4-3 base.

The linebacker's responsibilities in this formation are pretty simple...

On run plays, he is to plug the interior of the line of scrimmage where the play develops.

Because there are four interior gaps – the two A gaps and the two B gaps – and only three players to cover them, it is essential that the Mike reads the play first before he attacks the line of scrimmage.

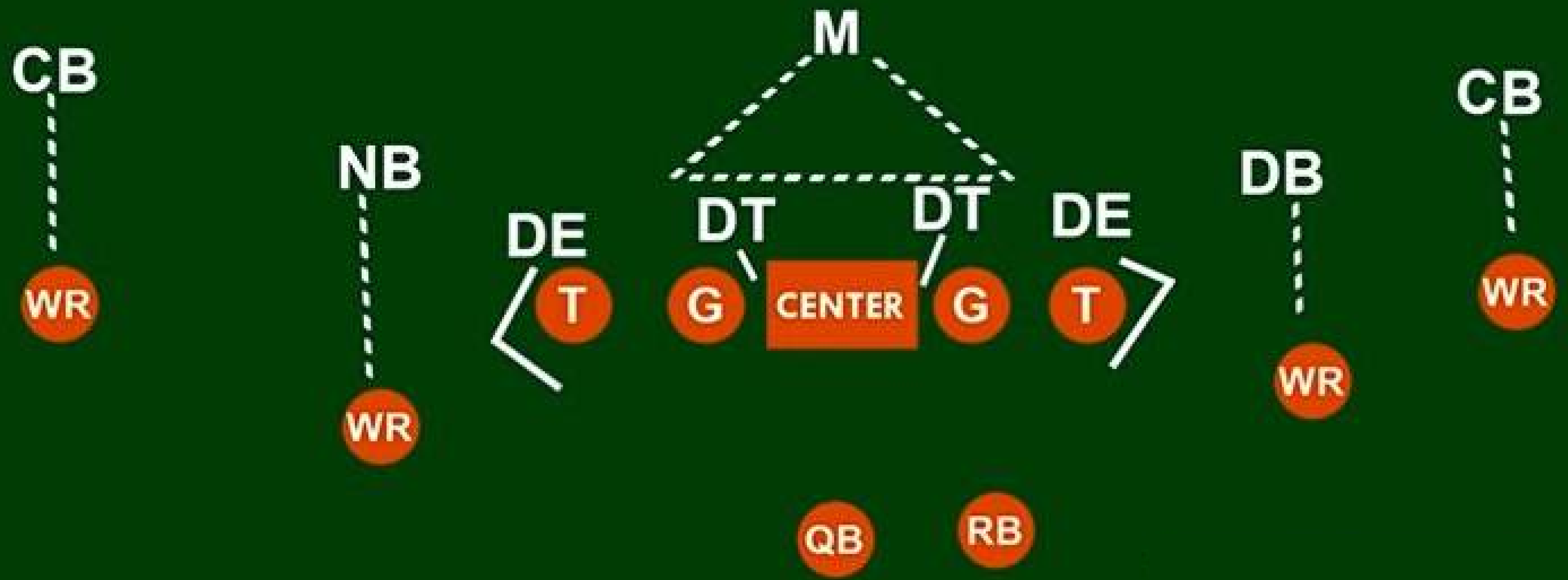
In passing plays, the Mike will be responsible for covering the running back in man-to-man plays. If the running back doesn't run a route out of the backfield, then the Mike will just assume zone coverage responsibilities for the middle of the field.

Those are the same responsibilities the Mike would have if the entire defense is running a zone coverage out of the Dime.



Dime Defensive Linemen,  
Linebackers and Secondary

———— FS ————— SS —————



# STAGE 3 THE SECONDARY





The Dime defense utilizes two cornerbacks, a free safety, a strong safety, a nickelback, and a dimeback – six members of the secondary in total.

The great part about the Dime defense when it comes to the secondary is that the four cornerbacks can play man-to-man defense, with both safeties serving as extra protection over the top. The cornerbacks will be the same traditional cornerbacks used in other formations. They'll line up opposite the offense's two best wide receivers. The nickelback will take the third best receiver, and the dimeback will take the fourth best.

When the defense runs a hybrid coverage out of the Dime, the four cornerbacks will remain with their man-to-man responsibility wherever he may roam on the field.

The free safety and strong safety lined up deep will split the field in half and be responsible for providing the cornerbacks with extra help over the top. But the defense can also run a pure zone coverage out of the Dime as well. In such plays, the two cornerbacks, Mike and either the nickelback or dimeback, will split the middle depth of the field in quarters from sideline to sideline.

Then, either the nickelback or dimeback will drop back deep and split the deep area of the field in thirds with the two safeties.



# TAKEAWAY

As you can see from the design of the different coverages in the secondary and linebacker, the Dime defense is created to keep every play in front of the defenders and limit big plays by the offense.

This goes for both passing plays and running plays, because of how the defense is aligned.

In man-to-man coverages, every possible receiver has a defender matched up against him, plus there is extra help over the top with the two safeties.

Not only does this provides an extra level of protection that other defensive formations don't, but it also allows cornerbacks or safeties the ability to blitz without leaving a receiver uncovered.

In zone coverages, there isn't much space that isn't accounted for, at least not in the deeper depths of the field.

That means that the offense may be able





to find some space on shorter passing routes, but it'll be hard to consistently produce longer gains.

Still, because the Dime defense is so tailored to defend the pass, it's a defensive formation that's hard to consistently deploy unless the offense runs a spread formation on every play.

With more offenses doing just that at the collegiate and professional levels, more defenses are responding with the Dime defense on the field at all times.

But that situation doesn't often apply to youth football teams, who often run the football more than they pass it.

That makes the Dime defense a formation that is best reserved for specific long down-and-distance situations for the offense at the youth football level.

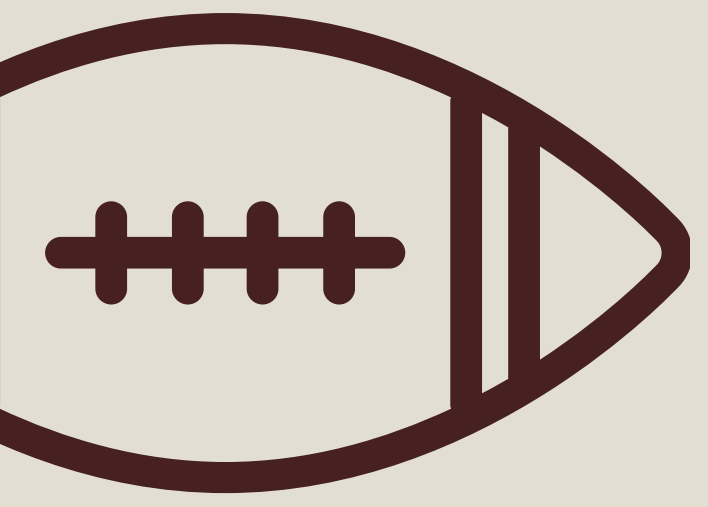






**THE**  
**NICKEL**  
**DEFENSE**





# NICKEL

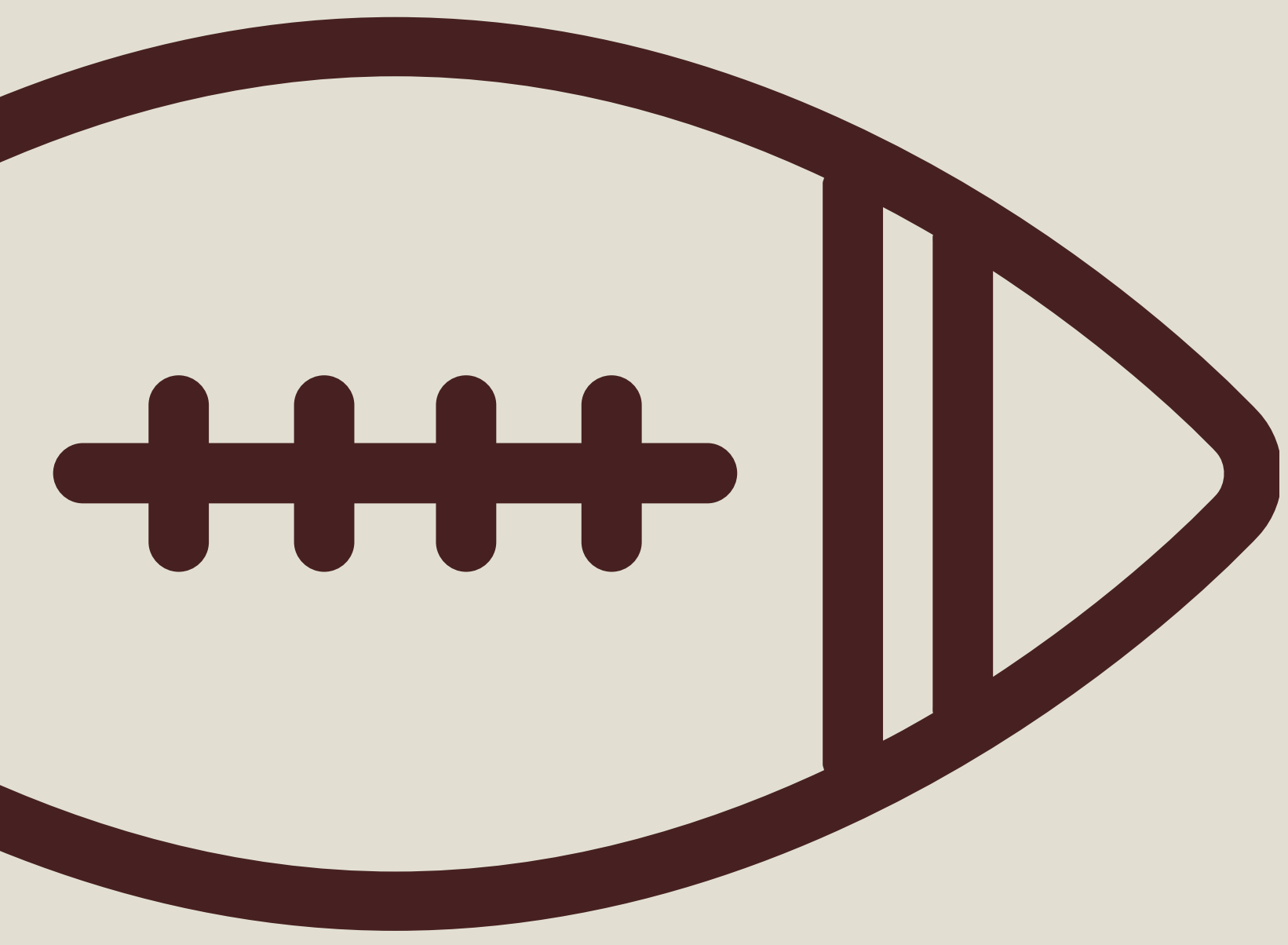
There was a time in football when the Nickel defense was used only in particular situations. When the offense was in an obvious passing situation, defenses would respond by taking a strong-side linebacker off the field and replacing him with an extra defensive back. This gave them more speed and coverage ability against an offensive formation that more times than not featured an extra wide receiver.

This extra player, called the nickelback, was often the third best cornerback or third best safety on the field. So while he was probably better than the linebacker he substituted for in terms of coverage abilities, he wasn't good enough to see the field very often in regular base formations.

But as offenses at the collegiate and professional levels started progressing into passing the ball more often and running a spread formation, defenses began realizing that the Nickel defense was a great option to run as a base formation.

The key to doing that was making a wrinkle to the original Nickel formation. Either making sure the team had a fifth really good player in the secondary, or moving a starting safety or cornerback into that nickelback position.





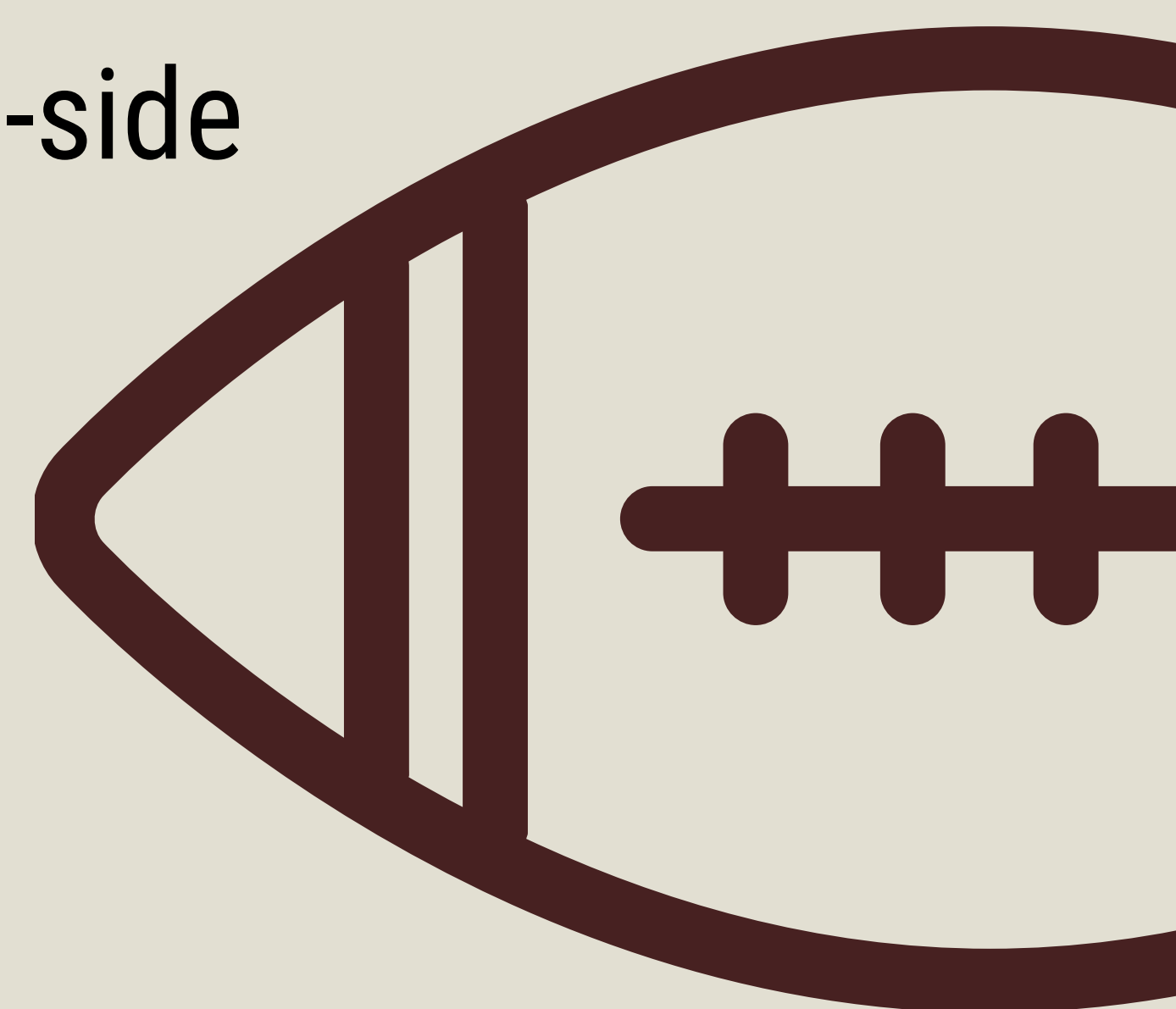
# NICKEL

## Who Should Use It?

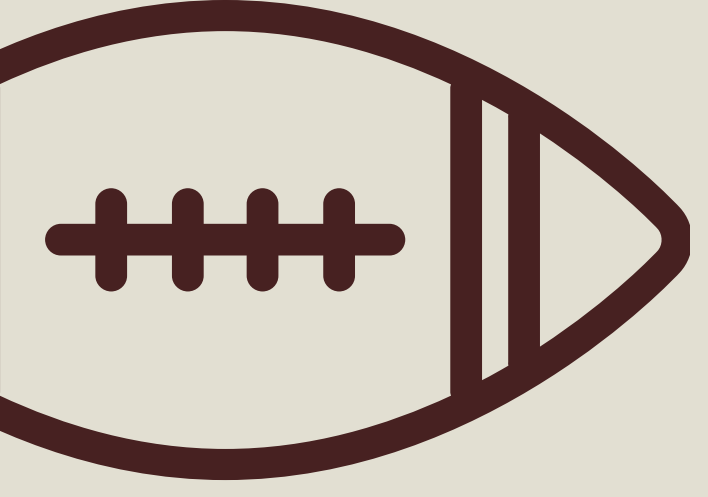


A Nickel defense can be used for teams of any level of experience.

The Nickel isn't that much of a deviation from a base 4-3 defense. The only difference is the swapping of a strong-side linebacker for an extra defensive back.







While the formation was designed to defend against the pass, if it's use properly, it can still be very good against the run too.

This is especially true if the player who mans the nickelback position is one of the normal starting safeties on your team. That player must have a lot of versatility to tackle, run with receivers, and provide excellent coverage.

The key to the effectiveness of a Nickel defense is the nickelback.

While the formation can be good employing that extra defensive back as the nickelback, it's most effective when the nickelback has a lot of skill.





# STRENGTHS

1

## ALLOWS FOR A FASTER DEFENSE

The extra defensive back will provide the defense with a lot more speed than a base 4-3 formation with three linebackers and four defensive backs. This is the main reason why it is a formation that was created to stop the pass.

2

## IT'S VERSATILE

With this nickelback playing much closer to the line of scrimmage than your strong-side linebacker would, this provides a lot of opportunities for blitz packages, extra pressure, and even more run support.

3

## CAN BE CONFUSING

A good nickelback will be a constant threat on the offense. Quarterbacks need to look all the way out to their left or right to see if a blitz is coming, something they don't have to do very often. Running backs in the backfield who would be responsible for picking up this blitzer have to do the same thing, causing at least a little hesitation on the offense's part.

4

## CAN BE SIMPLE OR COMPLEX

If you are a youth football coach with players lacking experience, you can run the Nickel and keep all the defensive backs in their normal positions. Or, you can get much more creative like a lot of teams at the collegiate and professional levels have, using different players in the nickelback position and running various blitz packages.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## OPENS UP SPACE

One thing offenses have done to counteract the Nickel defense is to spread the field with their formations more. With the third wide receiver lining up further outside, this pushes the nickelback's alignment closer to the sideline. That then frees up space over the middle of the field, where the outside linebacker would normally align himself in a 4-3 base defense.

2

## FEWER PEOPLE TO BLOCK

Offensive linemen love a Nickel defense if there isn't a blitz. That's because the alignment makes for one fewer player that they have to block. With one fewer linebacker, that means the six offensive linemen (including the tight end) have six rather than seven defenders to block.

3

## MORE ROOM TO RUN

It's fairly obvious that a defensive alignment created to stop the pass opens up room to run the football. Defensive coaches who ran the Nickel defense not long after it was created were willing to give up shorter running plays because they could limit the total number of yards they gave up.

4

## COULD SUBSTITUTE SKILL

In some cases, a Nickel defense will be substituting a starting-caliber player for a backup. If your defense doesn't have a solid fifth defensive back, then you will be substituting a starting-caliber linebacker for a player who isn't of the same skill level.



# HOW TO RUN THE NICKEL DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**



## Nickel Defensive Linemen



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





The Nickel defense is very similar to a base 4-3 alignment when it comes to the defensive line.

The only potential deviation from this is that a Nickel alignment is best run with a traditional big-bodied nose tackle who can clog up the middle of the line.

The nose tackle will align himself in a 0-2 technique, from heads up on the center to the inside shoulder of the offensive guard.

This player's job is to clog up the middle of the offensive line, attacking the A gap and trying to take on two blockers on every play.

If he's able to do that, he will free up the linebacker behind him to cover the B gap on that side of the field on running plays.

The other defensive tackle will line up in a 3-4 technique, over the other offensive guard or his outside shoulder.

This player will have either A or B gap responsibilities on this side of the field.

Most of the time, he will attack the B gap, except in the rare case where the tight end lines up on the side of the center opposite him.

In those cases, this defensive tackle will attack the A gap most of the time.





The defensive ends are outside technique players in a Nickel defense.

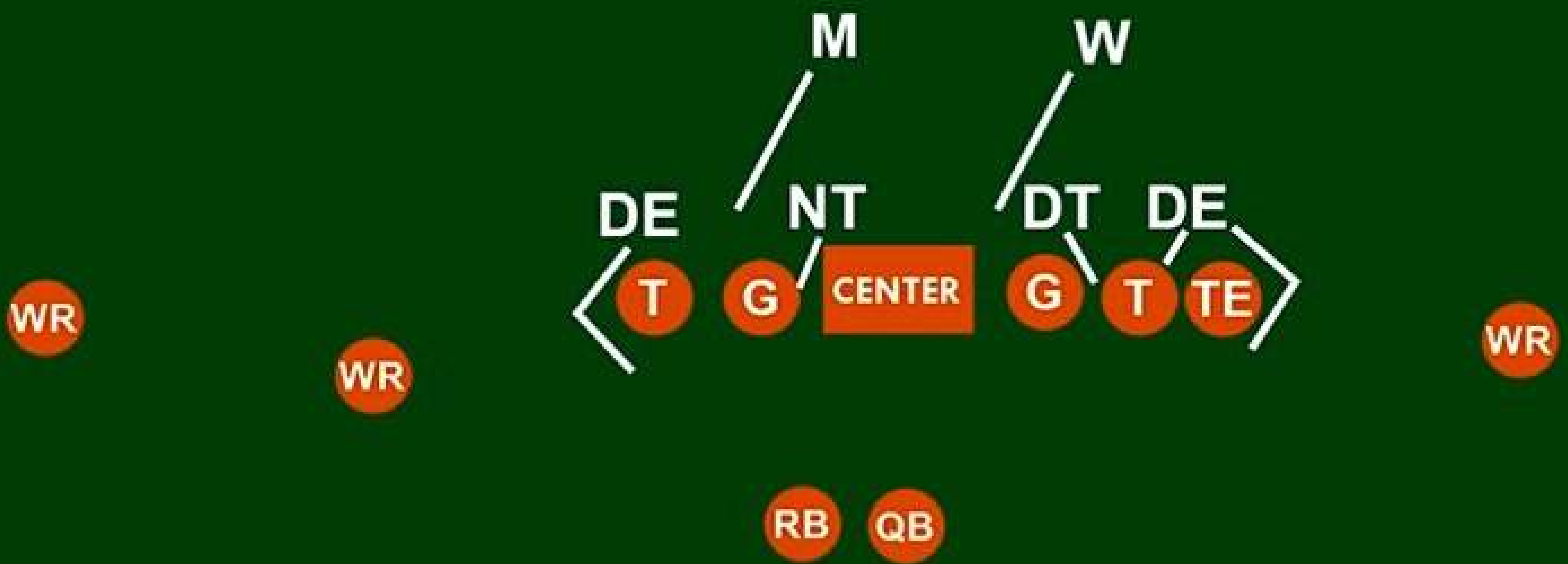
The end on the weak side of the field will line up on the outside shoulder of the offensive tackle, while the end on the strong side will line up between the tight end and the offensive tackle.

These players' responsibilities are to blow up the outside of the line, causing as much havoc as possible in the backfield, but also serving as outside contain.

This is especially important for the end away from the tight end, because the Sam linebacker won't be on the field to provide extra support.

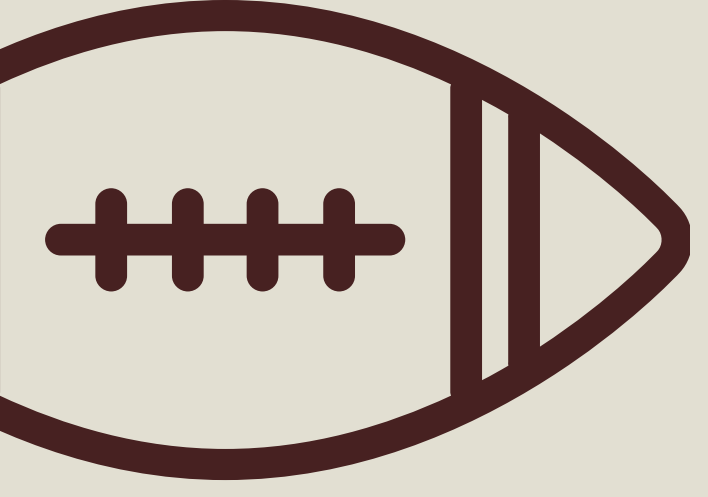


## Nickel Defensive Linemen and Linebackers



# STAGE 2 THE LINEBACKERS





The strong-side (Sam) linebacker is not on the field in a Nickel defense.

That leaves the middle (Mike) linebacker and weak-side (Will) linebacker to man the middle depth of the field.

The linebackers in a Nickel operate like the two inside linebackers of a 3-4 more so than they do as 4-3 linebackers.

The Will will actually line up on the strong side of the field in a Nickel defense, since that extra support will be needed in these situations, much like this player would in a 3-4 alignment.

However, it's essential that the Will is the linebacker who remains on the field in a Nickel and not the Sam, as the Will is often better at running around and covering, or blitzing the quarterback – two things that are of great use in a Nickel.

The Mike will man his traditional spot in the middle of the defense.

On running plays, the Mike will have responsibility over the B gap on his side of the field, as the nose tackle in front of him will be clogging up the A gap.

The Will will have responsibilities over the A gap on his side of the field.

If he reads that the running play is going to the outside, though, he





should slide toward the play, with an eye on that A gap the whole time in case of a cut-back run.

The Nickel can run both a zone or man-to-man coverage against passing plays, or could even run a hybrid of it.

In man-to-man, the Mike will have responsibility for covering the running back, if the back lines up on his side of the field.

If not, he will most often be used to spy on the quarterback or scan the field to see where he is needed in support.

In man-to-man, the Will most often covers the tight end, but could also be asked to cover a running back.

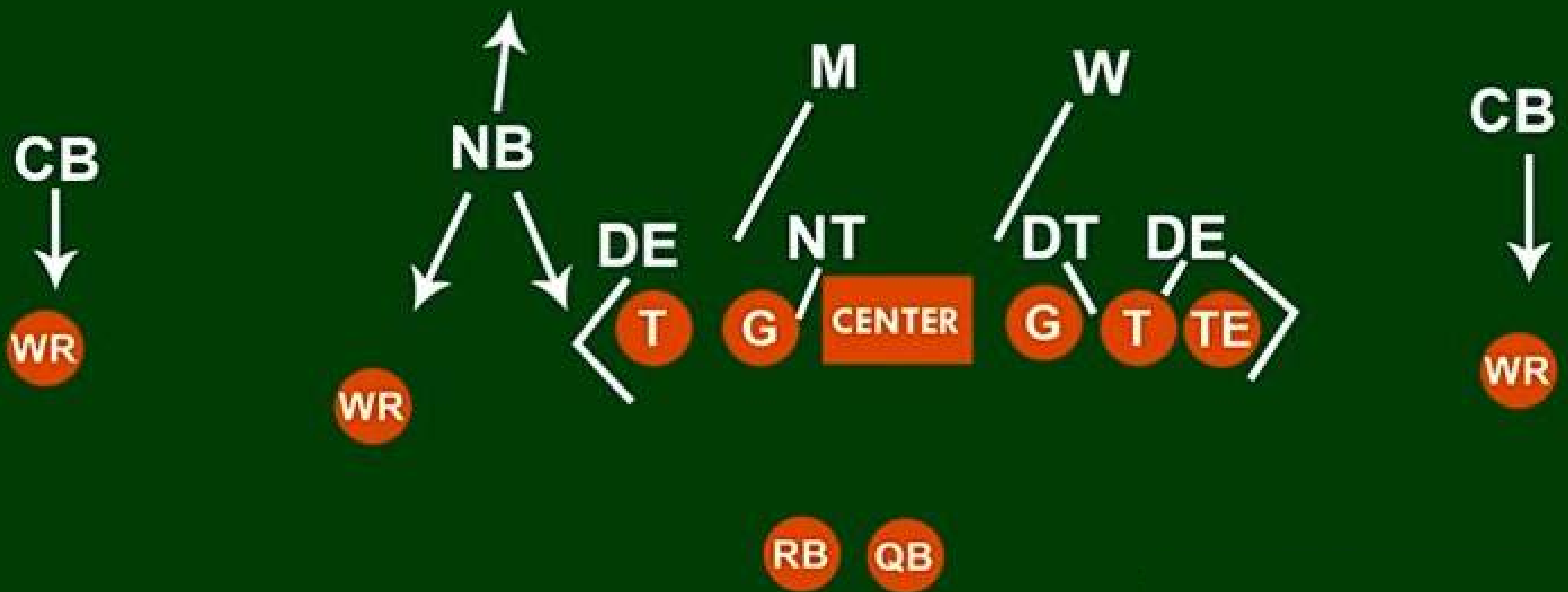
Zone coverage would allow both linebackers to split the middle of the field into fourths with the two cornerbacks, who will take the outside quarters.



Nickel Defensive Linemen,  
Linebackers and Secondary

← FS →

← SS →



# STAGE 3 THE SECONDARY





The secondary employs five defensive backs in a Nickel defense.

The two outside cornerbacks will align themselves over the outside wide receivers, and the two safeties will align themselves deep over the field. The nickelback has a few options for alignment. Either he can be heads up over the slot receiver, or somewhere in between the slot receiver and the defensive end.

This alignment in between the receiver and end can create a lot of confusion for offenses. They won't know whether the nickelback is covering the slot in man-to-man, whether the nickelback is dropping into zone coverage, or whether the nickelback is going to blitz. This is why this is the preferred alignment for the nickelback.

In man-to-man coverages, the two cornerbacks and nickelback will each matchup against a wide receiver. There are options for both safeties here. Either they can be assigned a player to cover – such as a running back or tight end – or they can provide zone-like coverage over the top. The latter is the most likely scenario in the Nickel defense, as it's a nice hybrid for coaches to run.

In a pure zone coverage, the two cornerbacks will be responsible for the outside quarter of the field, or what's known as the flat.

The two safeties will be responsible for the outside third of the deep zone, and the nickelback will drop back deep to cover the middle third of the deep zone.



# TAKEAWAY

The Nickel defense has become an alignment that is becoming more popular to use as a base defense on every play.

That's partly in response to offenses nowadays spreading the field more often and throwing the football on more plays than they used to.

In response, you'll see defenses at the collegiate and professional levels running the Nickel as a base formation on more plays.

However, even at the youth levels of football, teams can run the Nickel defense frequently, even though youth offenses run the football more than they throw it.

That's because the Nickel defense can be good against the run, especially if your team is able to move one of the starting safeties into the nickelback position.

The skillset of the nickelback is the key to the Nickel defense...





If you have a third safety or cornerback who is good enough to play on almost every down, then the Nickel could be a great formation for you to use as a base defense.

If your team doesn't have a skilled enough player to do this, though, it would be best to stick with a more traditional 4-3 or 3-4 alignment that employs either four defensive linemen and three linebackers, or three defensive linemen and four linebackers.

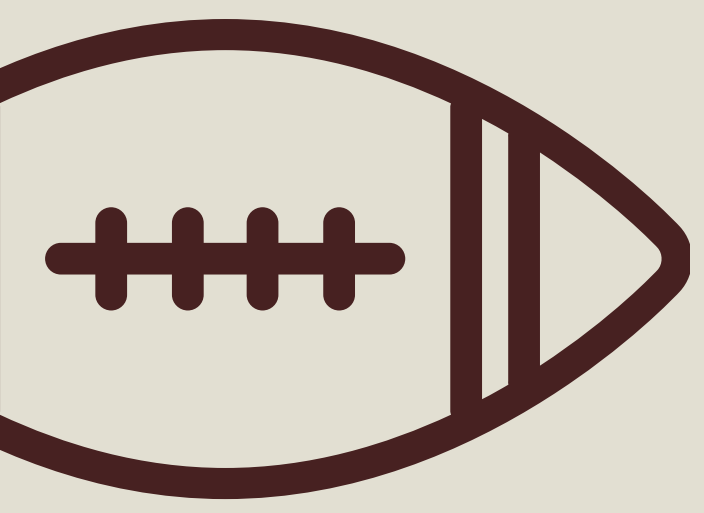






**THE**  
**TAMPA 2**  
**DEFENSE**





The Tampa 2 defense is a formation that is named appropriately for a specific team's approach to defense.

Much like the "46 Defense" was named after the stout defense of the 1985 Chicago Bears, the Tampa 2 defense was named after the defense that the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers ran in the late 1990s.

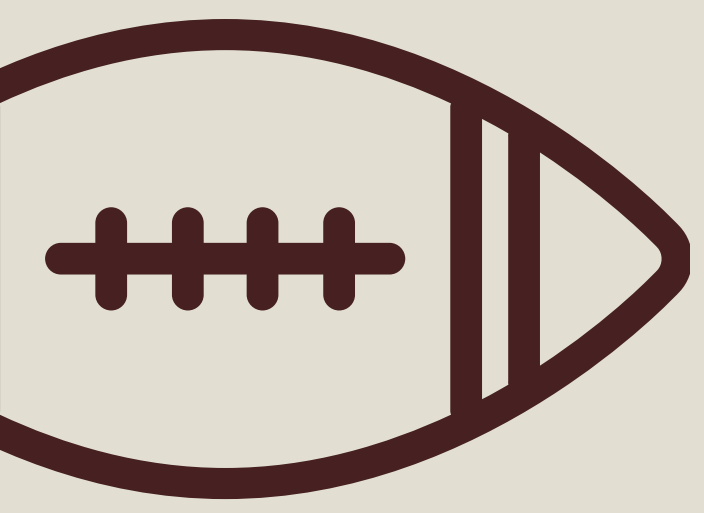
Tampa head coach Tony Dungy and defensive coordinator Monte Kiffin created what is now known as the Tampa 2 defense as a way to modify the traditional Cover 2 defense for the West Coast Offense.

For those who don't know, the West Coast Offense is a system that was designed to take advantage of holes in zone coverage areas often left open behind the linebackers by using quick crossing routes and play calling in the passing game.

Using principles he had learned as a defensive coach with the Pittsburgh Steelers, Dungy along with Kiffin employed some wrinkles to the base Cover 2 defense to better protect against, and attack, the NFL offenses at the time.

What resulted was one of the most feared and successful defenses of the NFL in the 1990s, one that eventually led to a Super Bowl





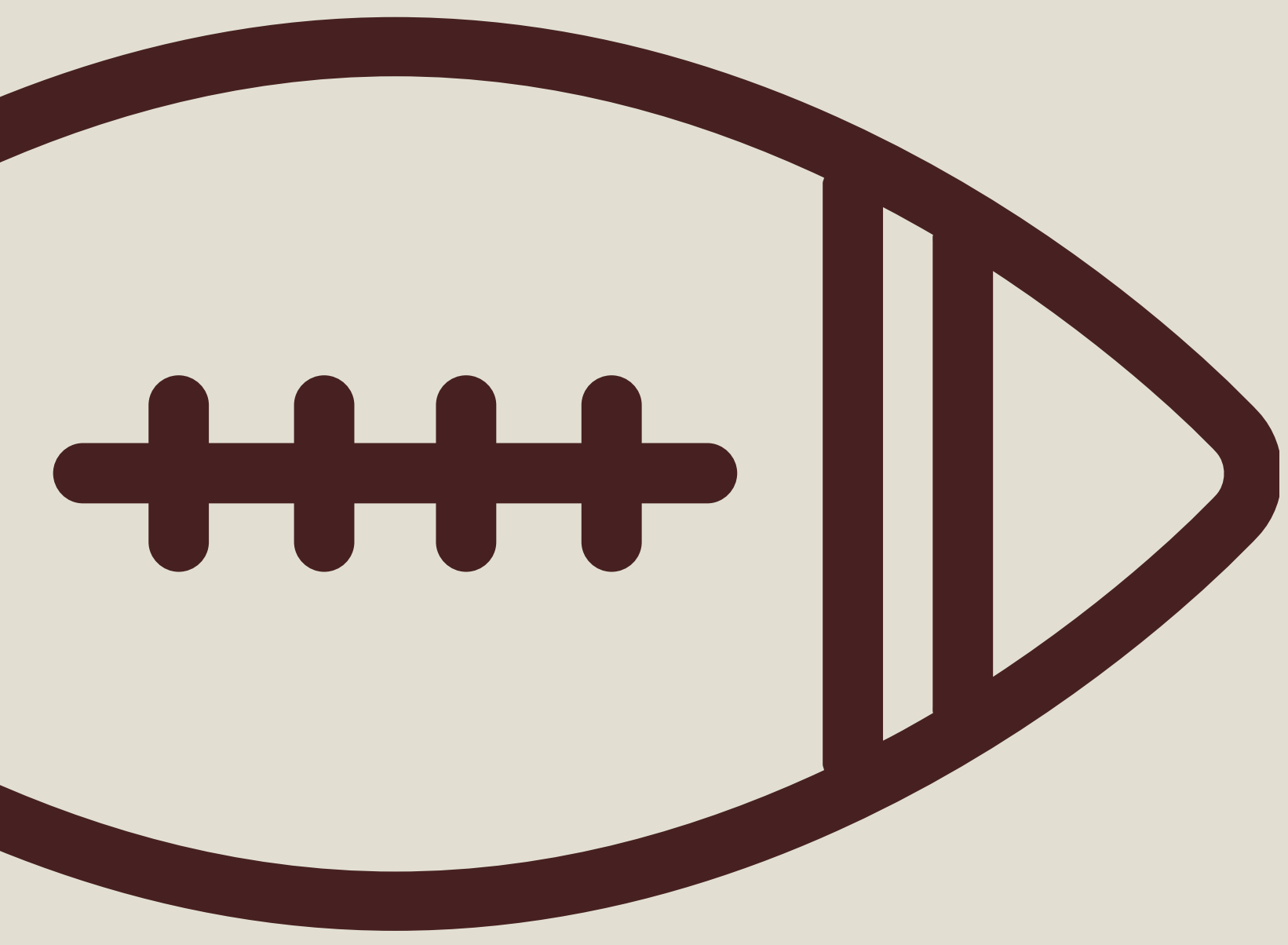
## TAMPA 2

victory in 2003, after Dungy left the Buccaneers for another job in the NFL.

While it was created at the highest level of football, the Tampa 2 defense can actually be used as a base defense by just about any level of football.

It does not have to be deployed simply as a scheme in certain passing situations or against certain offenses.





# TAMPA 2

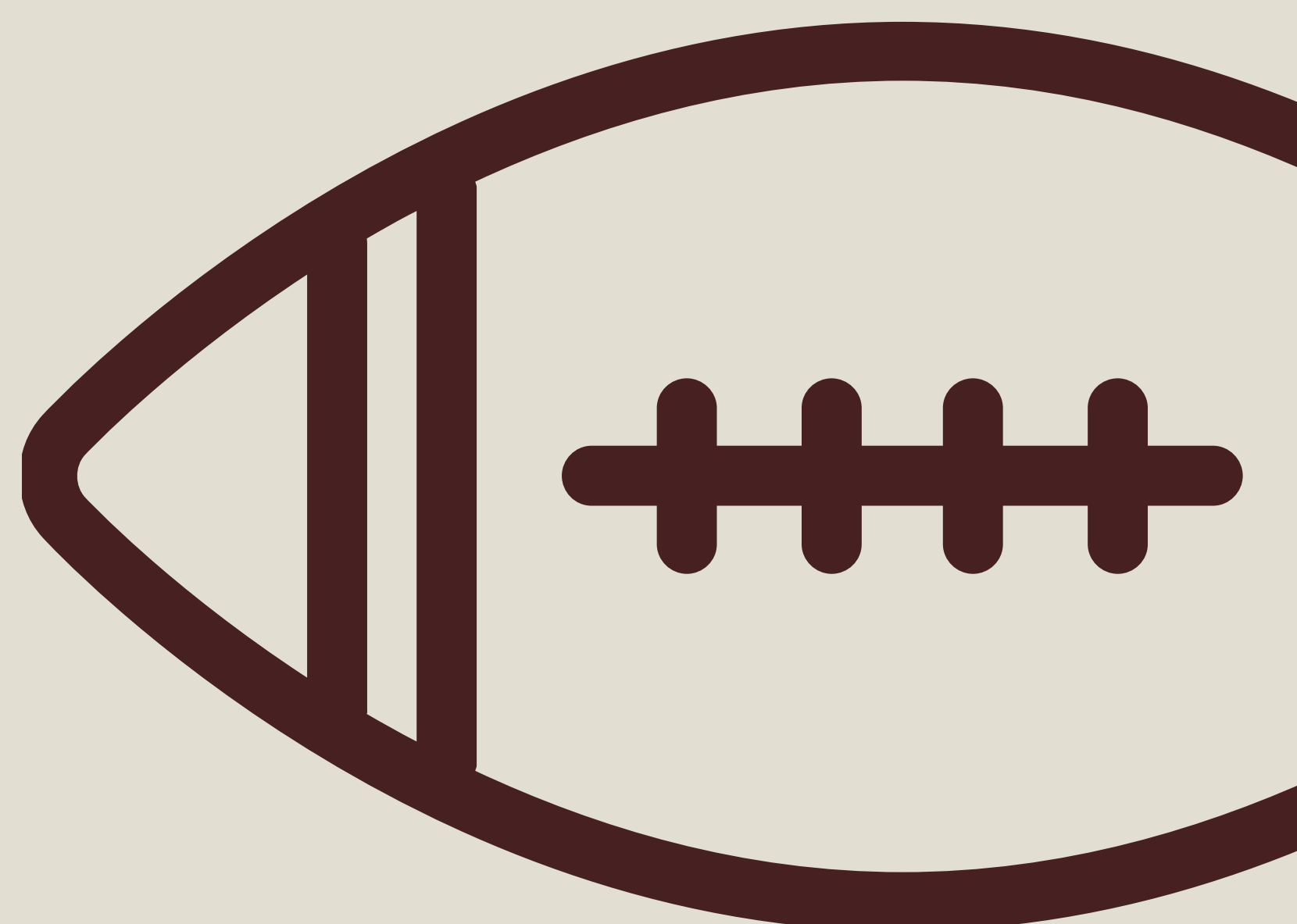
## Who Should Use It?

### Tampa 2 Defense

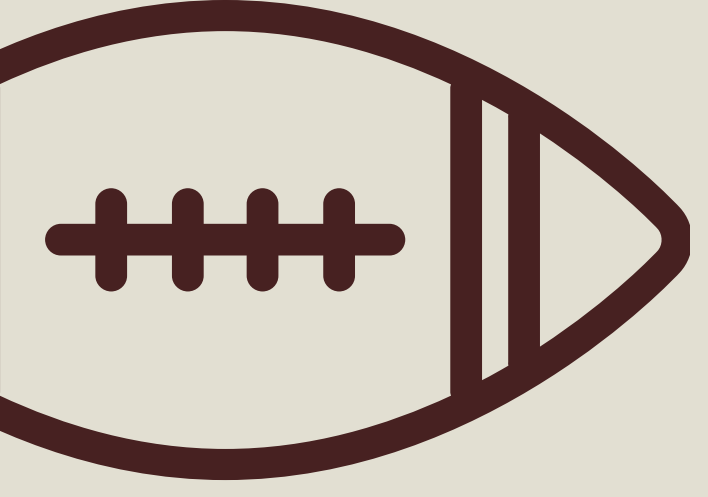


The Tampa 2 defense can be used by just about any football team at any level, in any situation.

That's because, in reality, it's just a base formation that employs traditional personnel with basic responsibilities.







While the Buccaneers' version of the defense utilized a lot of stunts, blitzes, and other wrinkles to counteract the smart offenses and players it faced in the NFL, a much simpler version of the defense can be run as well.

The Tampa 2 defense is a great one to teach youth football teams because it is simple to learn, and can be effective against both the pass and the run.

In fact, most of the defenders will look to read a running play first, and then react to other zone coverage responsibilities if the play is a pass.





# STRENGTHS

1

## IT'S SIMPLE

The Tampa 2 defense may sound like an intricate alignment, but it's actually quite simple. In reality, it's the Cover 2 defense with a few wrinkles in terms of coverage responsibilities against the pass. Yes, the Tampa 2 defense can get quite complicated, but it doesn't have to be.

2

## IT'S VERSATILE

The Tampa 2 defense was designed to defend against the passing plays of the NFL West Coast Offense. But while that may make you think it's only good against the pass, it's also very stout against the run. That's because it can be run as a base defense, and because players are taught to read run first, and then make adjustments if the offense runs a passing play.

3

## IT COVERS ALL ZONES WELL

The middle depth of the field is blanketed by two cornerbacks and two outside linebackers at all times. And the deep zone is covered extensively by the middle linebacker and the two safeties on the field. This not only reduces the amount of open space on the field, but it also provides plenty of extra coverage and tackling protection from three of the more versatile players on your defense.

4

## IT CAN BE CONFUSING

If your team has the basics of the Tampa 2 down pat, then you as a coach can start to implement various different wrinkles to the defense to apply extra pressure. This could include stunts and slants along the defensive line as well as blitz packages that could include linebackers, cornerbacks and safeties rushing the line of scrimmage to cause havoc in the offensive backfield.





# WEAKNESSES

1

## COULD BE EASY TO READ

Teams that run the Tampa 2 as a base defense and that don't deploy a lot of wrinkles in the play calling could be allowing the offense to read the play with ease. That's because in the base formation, each player will have the same basic responsibilities from play to play. So the key to a Tampa 2 defense is implementing at least some different packages or blitzes quite often.

2

## COULD BE SUSCEPTIBLE TO SHORTER PASSES

While the Tampa 2 defense was designed to stop the passing of the West Coast Offense, it could be susceptible to passing plays over the middle if a less experienced defensive team can't get to their zones. The middle linebacker is asked to drop back far from where he lines up, and the outside linebackers must slide to cover the void on the inside. So a smart offense with speed receivers could take advantage of this by running quicker, shorter passing plays to take advantage of the space left free.

3

## MISDIRECTION PLAYS COULD WORK

Because defensive players are asked to first read run and then react to pass, this could make it susceptible to misdirection plays. This is especially true if an offense is able to establish some sort of running game, and then works in play-action passes. If the offense can get a linebacker, cornerback or safety to bite on a fake running play, then there could be a lot of daylight for a big gain in the passing game.



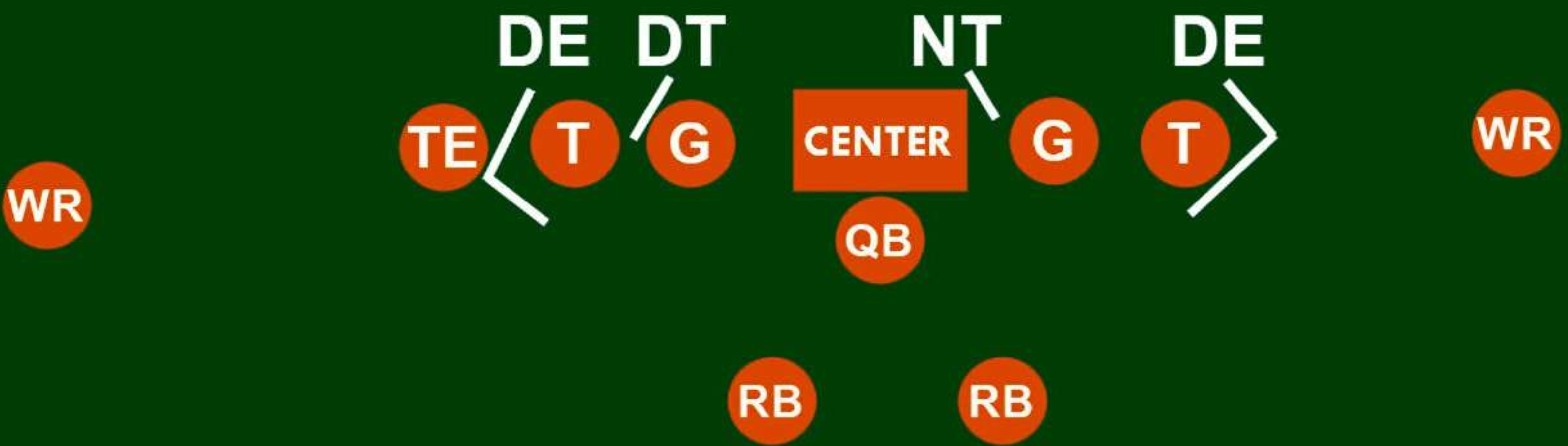
# HOW TO RUN THE TAMPA 2 DEFENSE



- **STAGE 1 - THE DEFENSIVE LINE**
- **STAGE 2 - THE LINE BACKERS**
- **STAGE 3 - THE SECONDARY**



## Tampa 2 Defensive Line



# STAGE 1 THE DEFENSIVE LINE





The defensive line in a Tampa 2 defense will employ a nose tackle, defensive tackle, and two defensive ends.

The defensive tackle will almost always line up in a 3 Technique, which means on the outside shoulder of the offensive guard.

The nose tackle on the other side of the line will line up usually in a 0-2 Technique, from heads up on the center to the inside shoulder of the other offensive guard.

Typically speaking, the nose tackle will be considered more of the run stuff and the gap filler.

He will be responsible for plugging the A gap on his side of the field and attempting to clog up the center and offensive guard on every play.

The other defensive tackle is more of a pass rusher type who can get into the backfield quickly and effectively through the B gap.

This goes for passing plays and running plays.

This defensive tackle's responsibility is to wreak havoc in the backfield.

The defensive ends line up in at least 5 Techniques, on the outside shoulder of the offensive tackle on their side of the field.





If a tight end is on the field for the offensive, the defensive end might also slide even further out to the inside shoulder of the tight end for alignment purposes.

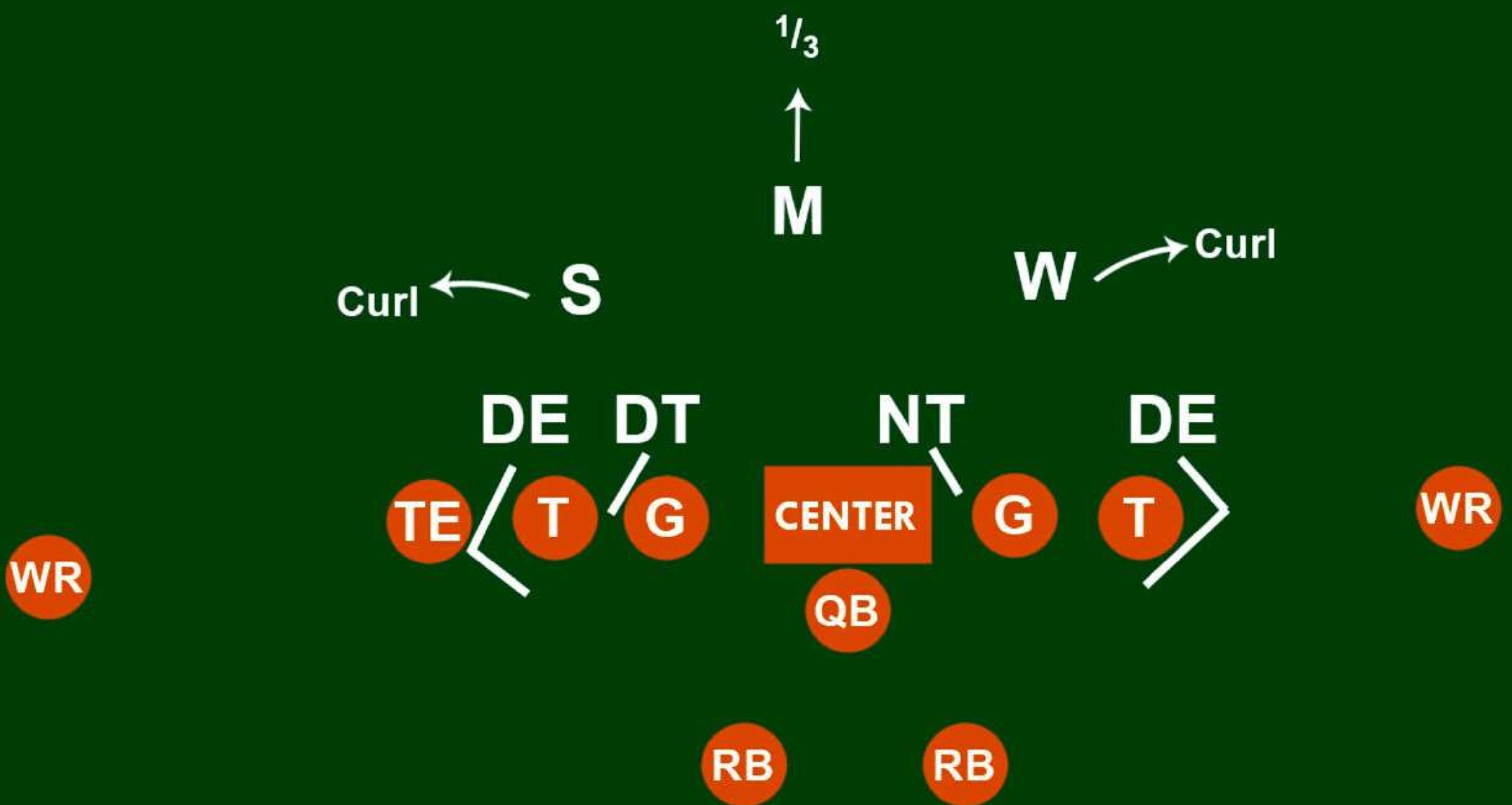
The defensive ends are considered edge rushers in a Tampa 2 defense.

Their job is to get into the backfield on the outside of the offensive tackles.

In the running game, their job is to collapse the line of scrimmage and force ball carriers on run plays to make a move, hopefully toward the inside of the defense.



## Tampa 2 Defensive Linemen, and Linebackers



# STAGE 2 THE LINEBACKERS





The Tampa 2 defense will have a Mike, Sam, and Will linebacker on the field at all times, much like in a traditional Cover 2 or 4-3 base defense.

Their alignments will differ slightly from both of those formations, though.

The Mike (middle linebacker) will line up a little deeper before the snap of the ball than both the Sam (strong-side linebacker) and Will (weak-side linebacker).

That's because the Mike's responsibility in coverage will be the deep zone, while the Sam and the Will won't have to drop back as much.

Another big difference between the Tampa 2 and other similar formations are that the two outside linebackers will be primarily responsible for the open gaps along the line of scrimmage on running plays.

It will be the Sam and Will's responsibility to cover the B and C gaps at the line, while the Mike will more often be the support tackler, identifying where the holes are and where the ball carrier is going before making a move to attack the line of scrimmage.

Passing coverages out of the Tampa 2 are always a zone coverage.

That's the entire idea behind the formation.





Once the linebackers recognize that the play is a pass, they will all drop into coverage at different depths.

The Mike in a Tampa 2 must be quick and have the ability to drop back into coverage.

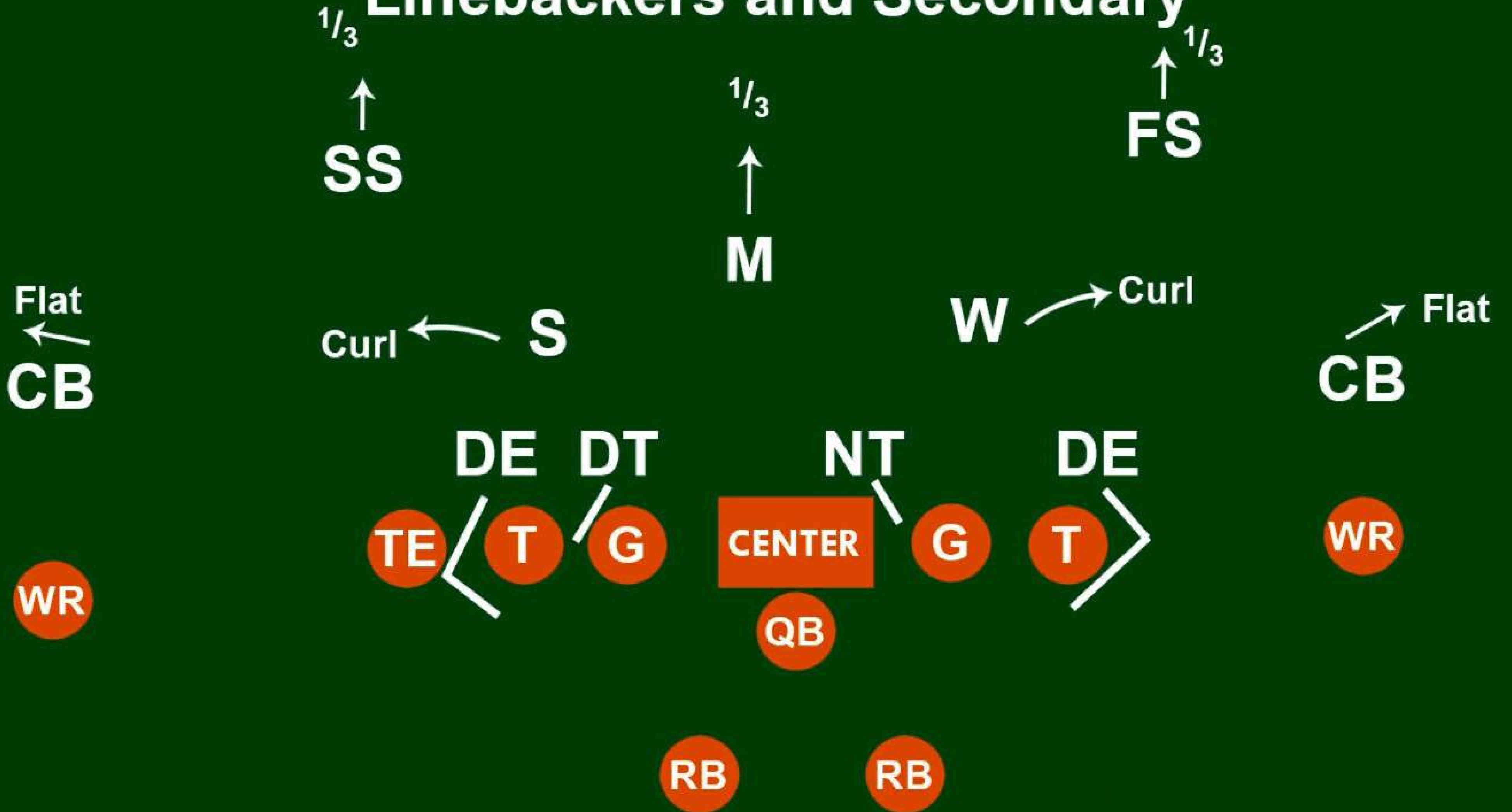
Once he reads that a play is a pass, he must drop straight back about seven yards to cover the middle third of the field.

The Sam and the Will line up a little closer to the line of scrimmage than the Mike because their zone coverage responsibilities are from the line of scrimmage to about seven yards back.

Their job is to curl to the quarter of the field that they will cover in tandem with the two cornerbacks.



## Tampa 2 Defensive Linemen, Linebackers and Secondary



# STAGE 3 THE SECONDARY





While the personnel in the secondary of a Tampa 2 defense will be the same two cornerbacks and safeties as in the Cover 2 and 4-3, their responsibilities are slightly different.

There will be no man-to-man coverage out of this formation, so the secondary is more focused on covering their zones, providing extra support, funneling runners inside, and occasionally blitzing as well.

The cornerbacks will line up across from the wide receivers and covering the outside quarter of the middle-depth zone, in the same vicinity as where the Sam and Will linebackers will be.

The cornerbacks in a Tampa 2 defense are asked to play a little more physical than they might be in a normal Cover 2.

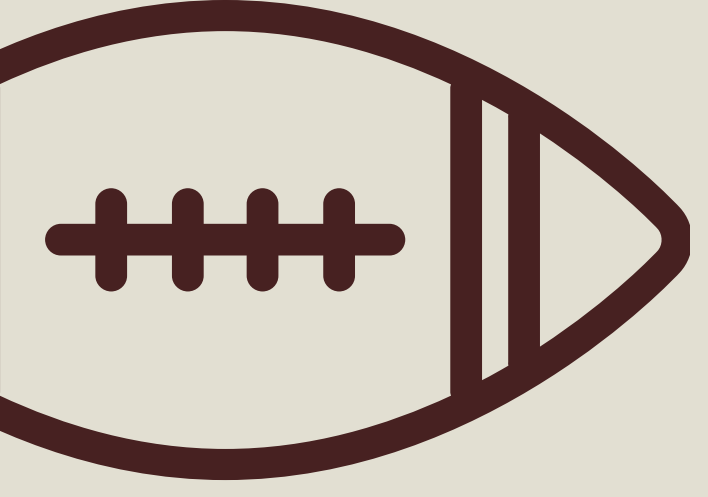
They are asked to get a good jam on the wide receivers once the ball is snapped, to make it harder for the receivers to get off the line of scrimmage, and to give time for the linebackers and safeties to properly get into place in the zone.

On running plays, the cornerbacks' primary responsibility is to funnel the runners to the inside of the field and let no one get outside of them.

The free safety and strong safety will align themselves at the same depth between outside linebacker and cornerback from left to right.

On pass plays, they drop back into a coverage that is actually





similar to the Cover 3.

That is, they cover the outside third of the field at a depth of about 10-15 yards, with the Mike handling that inside third.

The safeties will provide over-the-top coverage support for both the cornerback and outside linebacker on their side of the field, as well as keep an eye on tight ends, running backs, and additional wide receivers who are running deeper passing routes.

On run plays, the safeties need to attack the line of scrimmage but be smart about doing so.

They will be the last line of tackling defense, and must first make sure that a runner doesn't get outside a cornerback before they rush to the middle of the field.

Their primary run duties are a supporting role, so they can't freelance too much on their own.



# TAKEAWAY

While the Tampa 2 defense was created by two of the brightest minds in recent NFL history, it's a defense that has evolved over the years and can now be used in many different forms at many different levels of play.

The Tampa 2 defense is mainly just a wrinkle here and there from the Cover 2 defense, which means that it can be very simple to learn. It's also a good formation to run in both running and passing downs, too, because of the simple responsibilities that are placed on each defensive player on the field.

However, in order for the Tampa 2 defense to be run in its most effective form, defensive coaches will need to implement a lot of wrinkles and changes to the base formation, such as stunts and curls along the defensive line to blitzes with linebackers, cornerbacks, and safeties.

Still, the Tampa 2 defense is one that more and more defenses are utilizing in unique ways to cater to their specific team and skill level.







**”A WINNER  
NEVER  
STOPS  
TRYING.”**

**TOM LANDRY**

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