

16. PASS PLAY COVERAGE

16.1 - Terminology

1. On each side of the offensive formation, players in receiver positions outside the tackles are identified by their position. The widest receiver (the one closest to the [sideline](#)⁴) is #1, the next widest is #2, and so on, for however many receivers are on that side of the formation. When receivers are *stacked* (lined up one behind another) or *bunched* (lined up close together) on one side of the formation, the one closest to the line of scrimmage is #1 and the one behind them is #2, etc.
2. A forward pass play consists of three *phases*:
 - (a) Phase A is immediately after the snap when receivers are making their initial movement.
 - (b) Phase B is while players are running their pass routes or otherwise trying to establish their position on the field to receive a pass.
 - (c) Phase C is while the ball is in the air, [and until it is complete or incomplete](#).⁵
3. In determining keys, the following definitions are needed:
 - (a) Strength of the formation – determined by the number of receivers on a particular side of the offensive formation. The strong side is the side with the most receivers. It has nothing to do with the number of linemen on each side of the snapper but rather the number of receivers positioned outside the tackles. [IN xx1/xx3 FORMATION (CREW OF 5/6C/7/8)] If there is no strong side (balanced formation), the Line Judge's side is deemed to be the strong side.
 - (b) Tight end / split end – the end player on the line of scrimmage. A *tight end* is usually lined up no more than 4 yards from the nearest offensive lineman. If they are lined up wider, then they are a *split end*.
 - (c) Slot back / flanker back – a back lined up outside the nearest interior lineman or tight end. A *slot back* is usually lined up no more than 4 yards from the nearest offensive lineman. If they are lined up wider then they are a *flanker back*.
 - (d) Back in the backfield – a player in the backfield between the tackles at the snap.
 - (e) Press coverage – when a defender lines up in a position where they are close enough that they can touch the receiver as the receiver leaves the line of scrimmage.
 - (f) Trips – three receivers on one side of the offensive formation outside the tackles.
 - (g) Quads – four receivers on one side of the offensive formation outside the tackles.
4. It does not matter in determining keys whether a player is:
 - (a) on or off the line of scrimmage; or
 - (b) wearing a number between 50-79 or not.
5. If the formation is illegal (e.g. too many players in the backfield, more than one player in motion at the snap), the crew should failsafe to keys based on the position of players at the snap.
6. If the formation is new or unusual then verbally or visually confirm keys with other officials.

16.2 - General principles for pass play coverage

1. During Phase A, be in man coverage, watching receivers who are covered by defenders in press coverage.
 - (a) During this phase, there is likely to be physical contact between the defender and the receiver, and the responsible official must be able to rule on whether that is legal or not.
 - (b) The most common fouls in this situation are defensive holding and offensive pass interference.
 - (c) Receivers who are *not* covered do not normally need to be observed, since the likelihood of a foul being committed by or against them is low. However, that may change due to the movement of the players.
 - (d) If your key receiver(s) is not threatened by a defender, switch immediately to Phase B.
2. During Phase B, be in zone coverage, observing receivers and defenders in your zone.
 - (a) Only observe receivers who are close to defenders, since it is those players who are threatened by being fouled. Receivers and defenders who are not close to opponents should not be observed because there is little risk of a foul. The exception to this is any receiver who approaches a boundary line. [You](#)⁴ need to know if they go out of bounds voluntarily and thereby lose their eligibility to touch a pass.
 - (b) If there are no players in your zone who are close to an opponent, expand your zone until it includes close opponents who may not be being observed by another official.
 - (c) In the early stages of a play, as receivers cross the line of scrimmage, the zones for which the deep officials are responsible will be very close to the line of scrimmage. As receivers move downfield, those deep zones will expand and shallow zones will form behind them.
 - (d) If there is more than one receiver in your zone who is close to an opponent, normally observe the one nearer you, since it is more likely that another official will be able to observe the other(s). This calls for good teamwork between the Back Judge, the wing officials and the deep wing officials.
 - (e) The most common fouls during Phase B are defensive holding, offensive pass interference and illegal use of hands (Rule 9-3-4-e).
 - (f) In addition, look out for receivers going out of bounds (voluntarily or forced) at the sideline or end line.

3. During Phase C, be in destination coverage, observing receivers and defenders in the vicinity of where the pass will arrive. When the destination of the pass is obviously out of bounds, observe players nearest to that point.
 - (a) Only observe receivers who are close to defenders, since it is those players who are threatened by being fouled. Receivers and defenders who are not close to opponents should not be observed because there is little risk of a foul.
 - (b) The most common fouls in this situation are defensive pass interference and offensive pass interference.
 - (c) During this phase you also have a responsibility to observe fouls away from the destination zone such as unnecessary roughness and unsportsmanlike conduct.
4. The following sections cover the responsibilities of the pass-covering officials on each size of crew. The responsibilities listed here do not normally apply to the Referee, Umpire or Centre Judge, except that, in Phase C, the Umpire should also always observe action in the vicinity of where the pass will arrive.^o

16.3 - Crew of 4

1. During Phase A, the wing officials key all eligible receivers (#1-#4) on their side of the field. Where there is more than one eligible receiver, the primary key is any receiver in press coverage.
2. During Phase B, each wing official is responsible for the zone covering their half of the field.
3. During Phase C, each official is responsible for observing action in the vicinity of where the pass will arrive.

16.4 - Crew of 5/6C

1. During Phase A:
 - (a) The Back Judge always keys on the inside eligible receiver(s) outside the tackles (normally #2, but #3 in trips or #4 in quads) on the strong side of the formation. This will normally be the tight end or slot back.
 - (b) The wing officials always key on the widest player of the offensive formation on their side of the field (#1). This will normally be either a split end or a flanker back unless the Back Judge is keying on them.
 - (c) If the formation is balanced and there is only one eligible receiver to each side, the Back Judge has no key. If there are two receivers to each side, the Back Judge keys on the inside player (#2) on the Line Judge's side, and the Down Judge keys on the two on their side (#1 and #2), giving priority to one who is in press coverage.
 - (d) If there are three eligible receivers on the strong side, who keys on the #2 receiver will depend on whether #2 is closer to #1 or #3. If #2 is closer to #1, the wing official will key on #1 and #2. If #2 is closer to #3, the Back Judge will key on #3 and #2.
 - (e) If there are quads, who keys on the #2 and #3 receivers will depend on where they are relative to #1 and #4. If either or both is close to #1, the wing official will key on #1 and #2 (and #3 if all are close). If either or both is close to #4, the Back Judge will key on #4 and #3 (and #2 if all are close).
 - (f) A player who goes in motion will be the responsibility of the Back Judge unless they are the widest player at the snap.
2. During Phase B:
 - (a) The Back Judge will have the zone containing the deepest receiver, particularly if the receiver is in or moving towards the middle of the field.
 - (b) The wing officials will have the zone containing shallow receivers in their half of the field, plus any deep receiver who is not covered by the Back Judge, and any receiver who is moving towards, or threatens to go out of bounds on, their side.
3. During Phase C, each official is responsible for observing action in the vicinity of where the pass will arrive.

16.5 - Crew of 6D

1. During Phase A:
 - (a) The deep wing officials always key on the widest player of the offensive formation on their side of the field (#1).
 - (b) The wing officials always key on the most inside receiver outside the tackles (#2-#4) (often the tight end or slot back) on their side of the field. If there is only one receiver, the wing official has no key.
 - (c) If there are trips, who keys on the #2 receiver will depend on whether #2 is closer to #1 or #3. If #2 is closer to #1, the deep wing official will key on #1 and #2. If #2 is closer to #3, the wing official will key on #3 and #2.
 - (d) If there are quads, who keys on the #2 and #3 receivers will depend on where they are relative to #1 and #4. If either or both is close to #1, they are keyed by the deep wing official. If either or both is close to #4, they are keyed by the wing official.
 - (e) If there is motion, keys are determined by the position of the motion man at the snap (not by their direction). If they are the widest player (#1) then they will be the responsibility of the deep wing official on that side, otherwise they are keyed by the wing official.
2. During Phase B:
 - (a) Each deep wing official is responsible for the zone containing the deepest receiver in their half of the field.
 - (b) Each wing official is responsible for the zone covering all shallow receivers in their half of the field.
3. During Phase C, each official is responsible for observing action in the vicinity of where the pass will arrive.

16.6 - Crew of 7/8

1. During Phase A:
 - (a) The Side Judge and Field Judge always key on the widest player of the offensive formation on their side of the field (#1). This includes the motion man if their motion makes them the widest player at the snap.
 - (b) If there is a back in motion, the Back Judge keys on them unless they are the widest player on their side of the formation at the snap.
 - (c) If there are 2 receivers to the strong side, the Back Judge always keys on #2. If the formation is balanced, the Back Judge keys on #2 on the Line Judge's side and the **Down Judge** keys on #2 on their side.
 - (d) A wing official has no key if the deep wing officials and Back Judge are keying on all players on their side of the formation.
 - (e) If there are trips, the Back Judge keys on #3 and the wing official keys on #2.
 - (f) If there are quads, the Back Judge normally keys on #4 and #3 and the wing official keys on #2. However, if #3 is separate from #4 and nearer #2 the wing official keys on #3 as well as #2.
2. During Phase B:
 - (a) Each deep wing official is responsible for the zone containing the deepest receiver in their third of the field.
 - (b) The Back Judge is responsible for the zone containing the deepest receiver in the middle of the field.
 - (c) Each wing official is responsible for the zone containing shallow receivers in their half of the field.
3. During Phase C, each official is responsible for observing action in the vicinity of where the pass will arrive.

16.7 - Summary

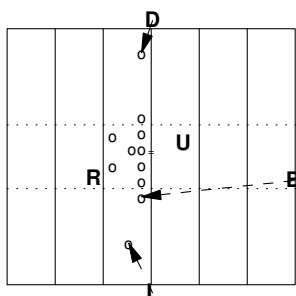
The table shows which official keys on which receiver according to the receiver's position on their side of the formation.

Formation		Crew of 5/6C		Crew of 6D		Crew of 7/8		
		Wing	BJ	Wing	Deep	Wing	Deep	BJ
Balanced	1	1	-	-	1	-	1	-
	1_2	12D	2L	2	1	-	1	2
Normal	1	1	-	-	1	-	1	-
	1_2	1	2	2	1	-	1	2
Trips	12_3	12	3	3	12	2	1	3
	1_23	1	23	23	1	2	1	3
Quads	1_234	1	234	234	1	2	1	34
	12_34	12	34	34	12	2	1	34
	123_4	123	4	4	123	23	1	4
	1_23_4	12	34	34	12	23	1	4
Motion	M_2	M			M		M	
	1_M		M	M				M

16.8 - Crew of 5 examples

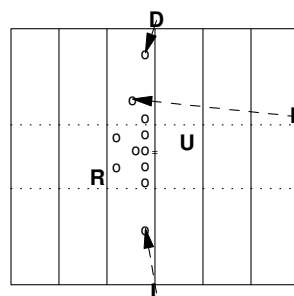
This section also covers crews of 6C with the addition of the Centre Judge in the offensive backfield opposite the Referee.

Figure A: Pro set



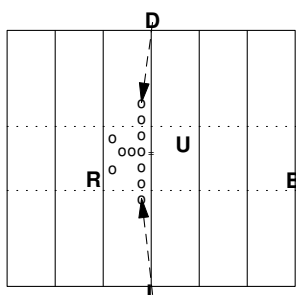
L's side is the strong side.

Figure B: Slot formation



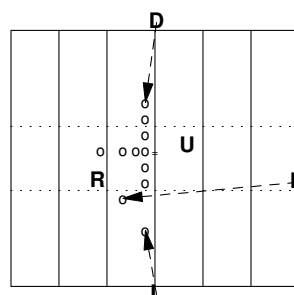
D's side is the strong side. B keys on the slot back on that side. D keys on the split end. L keys on the split end on the other side.

Figure C: Wishbone formation



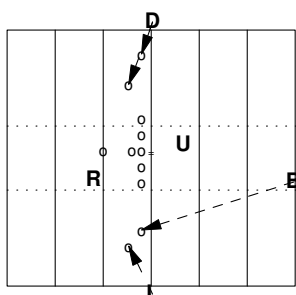
Balanced formation with one receiver each side. B keys on first back out of the backfield.

Figure D: Single-wing formation



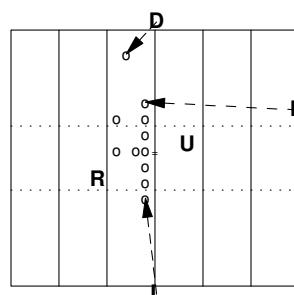
L's side is the strong side. B keys on the slot back. L keys on the split end.^λ D keys on the tight end to their side.

Figure E: Spread formation



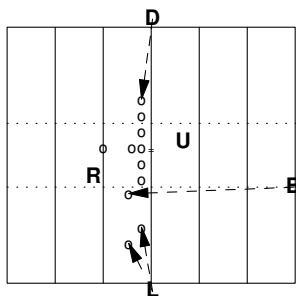
Formation is balanced with two receivers each side; strength declared to L's side. B keys on second player in on that side. L keys on the flanker on that side. D must key on both receivers on their side.

Figure F: Double-wing formation



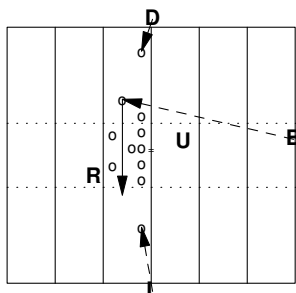
D's side is the strong side. B keys on the tight end on that side. L keys on the other tight end. D keys on the flanker back on their side.

Figure G: Triple receivers on one side (1)



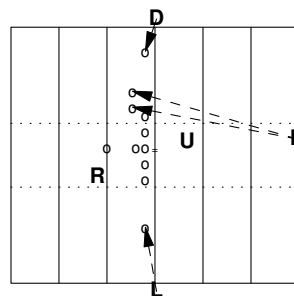
L's side is the strong side. B keys on the slot back. L keys both the split end and the flanker back.⁴ D keys on the tight end who is positioned on the weak side.

Figure I: Motion which changes strength



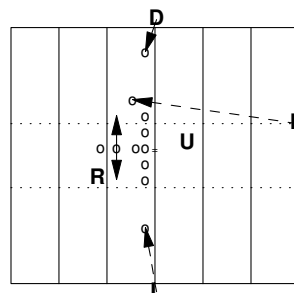
Strength is initially to D's side. D keys on split end on their side. L keys on split end on other side. B keys on the slot back and stays with them as they change sides.

Figure H: Triple receivers on one side (2)



D's side is the strong side. B keys on both slot backs. D keys split end on that side. L keys on split end on other side.

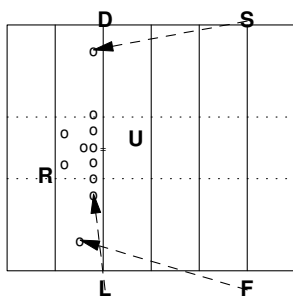
Figure J: Motion which does not change strength



Strength is initially to D's side. D keys on split end on D's side. L keys on split end on weak side. B keys on slot back, and also the motion man if they are near the slot back at the snap. If the motion man goes to the L's side, the strength changes, B has only the motion man, and D needs to key on both players on their side.

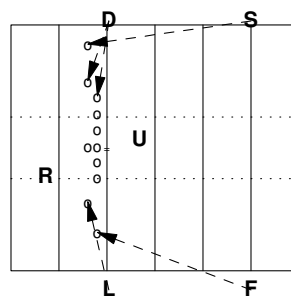
16.9 - Crew of 6D examples

Figure A: Pro set



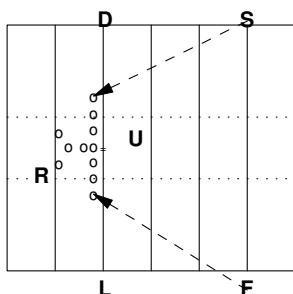
L's side is the strong side. F keys on the flanker. S keys on the split end. L keys on the tight end.

Figure B: Spread receivers



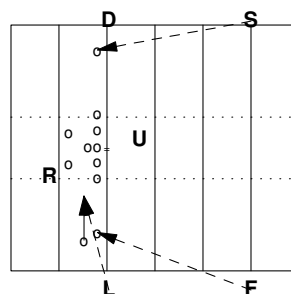
D's side is the strong side. F keys on the [split end^λ](#) on the weak side. L keys on the second receiver on that side. S keys on the flanker back. D keys on the end on their side and the remaining receiver.

Figure C: Double tight end and balanced backfield



Balanced formation. S & F key on the tight ends.

Figure D: Motion

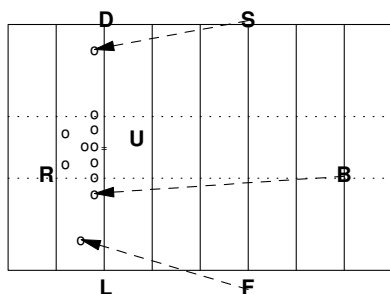


When the motion man ceases to be the widest player in the formation, they become [L's responsibility](#) and [F^λ](#) keys on the split end.

16.10 - Crew of 7 examples

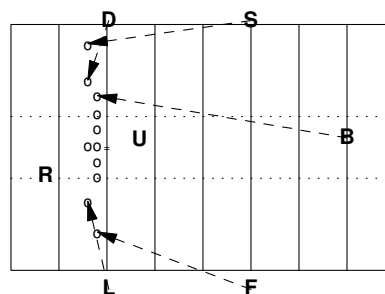
This section also covers crews of 8 with the addition of the Centre Judge in the offensive backfield opposite the Referee.

Figure A: Pro set



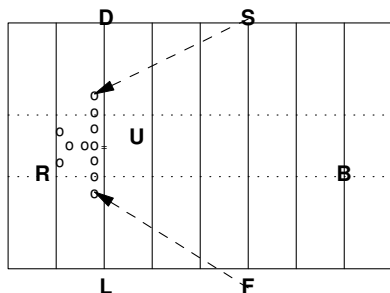
L's side is the strong side. F keys on the flanker. S keys on the split end. B keys on the tight end.

Figure B: Spread receivers



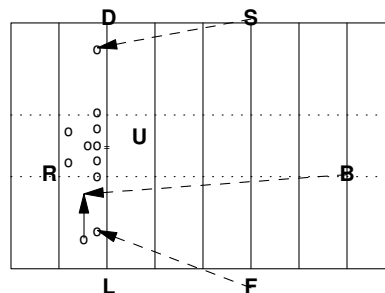
D's side is the strong side. F keys on the **split end**^λ on the weak side. L keys on the second receiver on that side. S keys on the flanker back. D keys on the second receiver on their side. B keys on the most inside receiver on the strong side.

Figure C: Double tight end and balanced backfield



Balanced formation with one receiver outside the tackles on each side. S & F key on the tight ends.

Figure D: Motion



When the flanker goes in motion **B**^λ and F exchange keys.