Using play action appropriately is one of the best weapons in your arsenal of offensive football plays. However, since this type of play is a bit more complex, time should be taken to teach it to the entire offense. It must be practiced on a daily basis so its mechanics are fundamentally sound and the execution is precise.

The linemen must understand that, at least at the point of attack, they must make contact at the line of scrimmage, rather that retreat into a normal pass-protection mode. This means that the play-action blocking is not as sound and can break down. The quarterback should be aware that there may be some penetration, and that he may take a hit just after the throw.

The running backs must run the same course they normally would on the running play, and must continue the fake as they pass through the line of scrimmage. The quarterback must take the same path and execute the same motions as he normally would on the running play until the very last second when he needs to look downfield and throw the football. All of these elements must be carried out with precision for the play to be most effective.

The quarterback should be expected to know and use three types of play-action fakes. The A fake is a fake where the quarterback must do his best to make the play
look like exactly like a running play for a sustained period. The \textit{B fake} is a type of fake where the quarterback will show the defense the football for a short time before pulling the ball back in and getting set to throw. The \textit{C fake} is an action that quickly shows the defense the football, but does not affect the rhythm of a timing pattern.

Before a play-action pass is designed, it’s important for the quarterback to understand what the play is supposed to do. First, whom do you want to influence (fake) with the play action? Is it one of the safeties, a cornerback, an outside linebacker, or an inside linebacker? Second, what running play will you be running your play-action pass off of? Third, what type of play fake is needed for the type of play you are designing? For example, when watching films of your opponent, which of the defenders is susceptible to the play fake? How does he react to the running play that your play-action pass is designed off of?

\textbf{The A Fake}

You should start with the A fake. An A fake is one where you want to do the best job fooling the defense. The A fake is the one where you want to get the back tackled; you want it to be a great fake (Figure 7-1). You want this action to appear identical to the run in every way until the last tenth of a second.

\textit{Figure 7-1. The A fake: The quarterback has the ball on his hip hidden from the defender(s) you want to deceive.}

An example when this type of fake can be used is against a team whose safeties are responsible for run support – a type of \textit{quarters} coverage. An appropriate play-action pass would most likely be built around an ISO play (a play where the full back
will lead through the hole, and the tail back will follow with the ball). This deceptive play should be the type of play that will have an aggressive run-support safety coming up hard to the line of scrimmage when he reads run. This is a good opportunity to use a play that has your wide receiver running a post route (from the same side the play fake is run to). The safety will come up a bit as he reads run, and will then be out of position to cover the post (Figure 7-2).

Figure 7-2.

The quarterback should make the play-action fake look exactly like the original ISO play for a sustained period of time. As he takes the snap from center, he must pull the ball to his midsection. As he then moves to the faking back, the ball will stay at that level. The quarterback will locate the faking back and should look at the back’s midsection – the area where he must place the football. He will then extend the ball with both hands to the back so that it is directly in front of him, clearly showing an exchange is imminent.

Now, as the ball is being pulled back to the quarterback’s body with the off hand, the arm normally used to give the ball to the running back must be allowed to swing away, as it would if the quarterback had actually given the ball to the faking back. At the same time, the quarterback will take a peak at the back of that hand as his arm swings away in the same direction as the running back; this completes the fake. The ball should then be on the quarterback’s back hip, hidden from the defense. It is important to have a coach watch the ball placement while standing 10 yards in front of the fake during practice time. Make sure the defense won’t be able to see the ball while the quarterback has it hidden on his back hip.

Once the quarterback has completed the fake, he should bring the ball up into good a carriage position, and locate his receiver immediately as he hitches up to throw the pass. In a play-action pass, the quarterback doesn’t have a lot of time to find all of his possible receivers. If the quarterback does not have his primary receiver, he must move up in the pocket and find an outlet receiver, or take off with the football.
The running back is also an important key in this type of play action. He must carry out the fake and, if it is a short-yardage play fake, dive to the ground. If this is an open-field play fake, his fake should be so convincing that the defense should tackle him. If fact, that should be the goal of the back, to be tackled because of the fake he has performed.

The B Fake

The B fake is a little different in that you still want to deceive the defense, but you are a little less concerned with hiding the ball for a sustained time period. You want to show the ball to the defense and bait them into flowing to where they think the play is going, then peel off and go the other way (Figure 7-3).

Figure 7-3. The B fake: The quarterback is showing the football to the defense before pulling it in and reversing the other way.

A good example of this would be a play where you want the defense to think you are running an outside stretch play to one side of the field, and then reverse out of that, and throw to the other side of the field (Figure 7-4).

As the quarterback receives the snap from the center, he will immediately place the ball in his midsection as he normally would during a run play. Then he will extend the football to the back (either with both hands or one hand) and hold the ball out so the whole defense can see it. While the quarterback meshes with the running back, he should have the ball held directly in front of the back establishing the likelihood of the exchange. The quarterback will then pull the ball back, snap his head around, and boot
in the other direction (getting at least nine-yards depth from the line of scrimmage) and locate his primary receiver. He should have both hands on the football. As the quarterback prepares to throw the pass, he should put himself in a position to run directly towards the area where he wants the football to go. His hips should be square to his target and he should relax and exhale just as he is throwing the football.

Figure 7-4.

It is usually important that the quarterback understand several points when throwing on the run:

• You should run toward the target. This improves the accuracy of the throw, and keeps your hips square to the target.

• If you are throwing the ball at the receiver’s feet, try standing up a little straighter just as you are ready to throw the pass. This helps to keep your shoulders more level during the throw.

• If you are consistently throwing the ball high to the receiver, you may have to lean forward slightly as you throw the pass.

• You should relax and exhale as you throw the football. This helps you keep your upper body and shoulders from tensing up as you throw the football.

• Be sure you don’t overgrip the football. You should have a firm grip on the football, but gripping it too tightly will cause the ball to wobble, and you will lose some control.

• You should never throw across your body. You will lose a great deal of control and velocity on the pass, which will make it easier to intercept.

• You should never, ever, throw late over the middle. Most of the time, when you are lucky, the ball will fall incomplete. Often though, this is when interceptions occur.
The C Fake

The C fake is used on timing patterns, as well as to influence or freeze the one defender who you want to take out of the passing lane. This can almost be called a token fake. On this type of fake, you will flash the football to the defender as you drop back to pass, but you will quickly bring the ball back into your body so you can hit your last step and get rid of the football on time (Figure 7-5).

**Figure 7-5. The C fake: You want to flash the ball at the defender, but not disrupt the timing of your pass.**

An example of this type of pass would be when you want to throw a 12-yard speed-out to your wide receiver on the weakside of the formation, but the outside linebacker has a tendency to fly to the flat and get into your passing lane. In this case,
you will play action a back in his direction and flash the football at him. The linebacker will then hesitate (this is all you want) and you will be able to throw the ball before he retreats into your passing lane (Figure 7-6).

It is important to remember that the C fake is designed to make a specific defender hesitate before dropping back so you can throw the ball behind him. The timing of the pass is critical and the fake itself is a token fake. You just want to flash the ball to the defender so he reacts to it. The C fake can also be used in the quick-passing game to get the backer out of the passing lane of a slant or a hitch route.

How to Install the Mechanics of the Play-Action Passing Game

Although this is predominantly a quarterback book, the play-action passing game is so important that it is appropriate to talk a little bit about the best way to install the mechanics effectively.

Have a video camera tape this drill about 10 to 15 yards from the line of scrimmage, facing the offense. Start with just the center, the quarterback, and the backs. Execute the running play that you are going to build the play-action pass play off of. Do this several times to make sure everyone is running the play with precision.

Now run the play-action pass play several times interspersed with the running play. When you watch the tape, you will be able to point out the subtle nuances that need to be polished so that the play-action pass play looks exactly like the running play from the defensive standpoint. Any parent with a video camera can help out, and it’s a great way to really hone the quarterback’s ballhandling skills, as well as the back’s skills to carry out the deception (Figure 7-7).
Summary of Play-Action Passing

• Play-action passing can be one of the best weapons in your offensive football arsenal.
• The plays themselves are more complex than strictly a running or a pass play, so all the members of the offensive team need to know what their roles are on the play.
• The linemen (at least at the point of attack) must make contact with the defender at the line of scrimmage, rather than to retreat in a pass-protection mode.
• The running backs must run the same course they normally would on the running play, and must continue the fake as they pass through the line of scrimmage.
• The quarterback must take the same path and execute the same motions as he normally would on the running play until the very last second when he needs to look downfield and throw the football.
• The quarterback must know whom he is trying to bait in the play-action pass.
• The three general types of play fakes are:
  √ The A fake – The quarterback does his best to make the play look exactly like the running play it was designed from.
  √ The B fake – The quarterback shows the ball to the defense, then pulls it back in and sets up to pass.
  √ The C fake – The quarterback quickly flashes the ball to a specific defender and continues in his drop to throw a timing pass.