### Over and Under 40 Fronts

<table>
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<th>Diagram</th>
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| ![Diagram](image1.png) | **4–3 Over Defense**
**4 Down-linemen and 3 Linebackers**
- Will (outside) Linebacker
- Mike (weak-side middle) Linebacker
- Sam (strong-side middle) Linebacker
- End
- “Weak 0” Technique Nose Tackle
- “3” Technique Tackle
- The NOSE is lined up on the WEAK SIDE of the center and the 3 technique is lined up on the strong side between the guard and the tackle. |

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| ![Diagram](image2.png) | **4–3 Under Defense**
**4 Down-linemen and 3 Linebackers**
- Will (outside) Linebacker
- Mike (weak-side middle) Linebacker
- Sam (strong-side middle) Linebacker
- End
- “Strong 0” Technique Nose Tackle
- “3” Technique Tackle
- The NOSE is lined up on the STRONG SIDE of the center and the 3 technique is lined up on outside shoulder of the WEAK SIDE guard. |

### Notes
An **over defense** refers to a 4-3 defense that shifts its strength to the **strong-side** of the offense. An **under defense** means the 4-3 defense shifted its strength to the **weak-side** of the offense.
How the Defensive Front ties into the Coverage
The NFL teaches quarterbacks how the defensive front ties into the number of defensive backs on the field. This is important because there are a lot of personnel changes that occur between downs at the highest level of play. Third and short might dictate that the offense run the football so the defense will put extra linemen / linebacker type players on the field and take the defensive back off the field. They do this so they have more strength and weight at the point of attack.

A passing situation will probably have the offense insert an extra wide receiver or two on the field. The defense will counter that by taking a linebacker or lineman out of the game and will insert an extra defensive back (nickel back) or two (dime back). The NFL and college levels often play “match-up” football. The offense will try to put the defense in a situation where a linebacker will have to cover a speedy wide receiver. Conversely, the defense will try to get an offense to block their better pass rushers with a running back.

Many NFL teams now send the offense to the line of scrimmage with two plays; a pass and a run play. The QB will take a look at the defense and if they don’t have enough pass defenders on the field, he will run the pass play. If the defense has too many pass defenders on the field, the QB will run the run play. They do this by calling both plays in the huddle. An example of the quarterback’s play call in the huddle would be, “Far right, 628 Flat Queen, kill (alert) 23 zone, on White, on white.” At the line of scrimmage if the QB likes the pass play versus the defense he will go through his normal cadence and run the play. If the thinks the run is the better play he
will yell “kill” (some teams use the word alert instead of kill), and that will tell the team they are running 23 zone now.

The quarterback can quickly see the defensive front and have a pretty good idea of what type of defensive coverage will be run. The diagrams will give you an idea of how many defensive backs the defense can have on the field when they run certain fronts.

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The typical high school quarterback might find this information interesting but not very useful because many times there is not a big difference between a linebacker and a defensive lineman in terms of size and ability. However, if a young quarterback plans on playing beyond high school, he will eventually need to know this information.
**Nickel and Dime Defenders**

A “Nickel Back” is a fifth defensive back and a “Dime Back” is a sixth defensive back. When you hear the phrase “nickel is on the field” what that means is the defense has taken out a linebacker and put in a defensive back. They do this when they expect a pass. When they put a “Dime” back in, that means that they now have six defensive backs on the field so you can see how the front now ties in with the secondary.

**Base Offense and Base Defense**

**4 – 3 Defense with 4 Defensive Backs**

This would be an example of a Base 40-front defense with 7 men in the box and 4 defensive backs. They are in this front because there are 2 wide receivers, 1 tight-end and two running backs.
3- Wide Receiver Offense versus a “Nickel” Defense

4 – 2 Defense with 5 Defensive Backs

Now there is a 3rd WR on the field so the defense will put the “Nickel Back” on the field. The odds go up that a pass play will be run and the defense wants to make sure that they don’t have a bigger, slower linebacker trying to cover a fast wide receiver. Most teams will put their 3rd receiver in the slot. When we go 4-wide receivers our two starting receivers will go to the slots, and our #3 and #4 receivers will go outside. We do this so our best receivers are running routes against the defense’s 3rd and 4th best defensive backs and their best defensive backs are covering our covering our 3rd and 4th best receivers (we probably want to throw to the inside receivers). We now have an advantage as far as match-ups are concerned with our best wide receivers. Many teams find it hard to do this because their terminology is difficult to learn. Since our offense is so easy, it’s not to move people in the offense.
4- Wide Receiver Offense versus a “Dime” Defense

4 – 1 Defense with 6 Defensive Backs

The picture above shows an offense with a 4-wide receiver set. Now the defense has both a “Nickel Back” and a “Dime Back” in the line up to cover the extra receivers. They are banking on the fact that the offense will pass the football. Linebackers are much better tacklers and run-stoppers than defensive backs are so they will only put their “nickel” and “dime” packages on the field when they think the offense will throw the football.
Cheat Sheet for Recognizing Coverages

Get to the line of scrimmage with 18-seconds left on the clock; with less than 10-seconds, all called shifts and motions are off

**The Center will make the following calls**
Odd – Center covered or shaded
Even – linebacker covering center
Clear – There is no one over the center
Solid – Center and both guards are covered

**There are four basic types of zone coverage**
1. Three-deep coverage
2. Two-deep coverage
3. Quarters coverage
4. Rotation coverage

**Cover Three Zone**
**Three-deep – Four-underneath coverage**
**Great for completing ball-control passes**

**Free safety:** 12-yards deep he can get as far as 2-yards outside the hash mark for disguise – any further than that and he won’t be able to get back – at the snap of the ball, he will fly back to the middle of the coverage (triangle with the two widest receivers).

**Strong safety:** Lined up outside the tight end at 5 x 5 (or outside the TE) looking into the backfield. He has the flat coverage on the strongside, and the **Will Backer** has the flat coverage to the weakside.
**Cover Two Zone**

Two-deep – five-underneath coverage

- Reading Free-safeties
- Check their Depth
- Check their Hash mark relation
- Look strong safety alignment and position – this determines man or zone
- Free safety depth – if he’s at 12-plus he is a deep back.
- If he’s at 10-minus, be alert for blitz

“Open” – there is NO defender in the deep middle of the field

“Closed” – there is a defender in the deep middle of the field

Free safety: 12-yards deep and on the hash mark (or within three yards outside of the hash mark).

Strong safety: 12-yards deep and on the hash mark (or within three yards outside of the hash mark).

- Four defenders in the secondary means you DON’T have eight in the box
- Two safeties will be deep and usually more than 11-plus yards from the line of scrimmage
- At the snap of the ball, they will immediately move backward
- The corners will usually be outside the #1 receiver at about 4 to 6-yards deep looking into the backfield
- Rotation means a secondary man lines up deep but ends up playing an underneath coverage
- When a safety gains width, the corner on that side now takes the flat

**NOTE: Cover Two Read Zone**

- Two safeties will be deep and usually more than 11-plus yards from the line of scrimmage
- At the snap of the ball, they will immediately move backward
- The corners will read the #2 receiver; if he goes to the flat area, the corner will stay in the flat area.
- If the corner’s flat area is not threatened, the corner will drop deep – they will not cover space without a receiver threatening that space
  - This may look like cover 4 (each defensive back covering 25% of the field deep)

**NOTE: Hard Cover Two Zone (not run much at all today)**

- Two safeties will be deep and usually more than 11-plus yards from the line of scrimmage
- At the snap of the ball, they will immediately move backward
- As the receivers pass the cornerbacks, the corner backs will either try to funnel them into the middle of the field, or force them out of into the sideline
  - The corners will then sit at about 9 to 12 yards off the line of scrimmage to the outside
**Quarters Coverage**
- Two safeties will be *deep* and usually less than 11 yards from the line of scrimmage
- At the snap of the ball they will be hang almost flat-footed (they will not drop back deep)
  - The safeties will read the number two receiver – if he goes vertical, the safety is responsible for covering him – if #2 goes flat or drags, the safety will double the #1 receiver along with the corner
- The safeties are responsible for the run first – that is to say that they will come up hard on all runs and / or play action passes

**There are two basic types of man coverage**
1. **Cover One-Free**
2. **Cover Zero**

**Cover One-Free** (This can sometimes look like Cover Three-Zone)
- **Free Safety**: 12-yards depth
- **Strong Safety**: Inside the number 2 receiver looking at him rather than looking in the backfield
- Confirm coverage by looking at the corners – they should be looking at the receivers and not looking in the backfield.
- **Blitz**: Look for a 5-6 man rush. Someone is coming on a blitz.

**Cover Zero**
No safeties in the middle of the field!
The safeties will be within 10-yards of the line of scrimmage
The safeties will either come on a blitz, or will be covering a receiver because the linebacker(s) or a corner is coming on the blitz.
- **Blitz**: Expect a minimum of a seven-man rush.
It is very beneficial for a quarterback to know what various defensive coverages and front are designed to do. Every defensive coverage has own its strengths and weaknesses, which can be exploited by the offense. Although defensive coordinators have devised a number of relatively exotic defense in recent years, most defenses involve the following base coverages: Cover 3 zone, cover 2 zone or cover 2 man; quarters – a coverage that is has either a man concept or a bracket concept depending on the release of the number two receiver, and finally man-to-man.

Coverages are designed to limit the productivity of certain offensive concepts. A well-rounded and diverse offense can take immediate advantage of the defense by knowing how to attack it in a sound and productive way. For example, cover 2 zone can hurt the productivity of an offense’s quick passing game. However, this defense can be vulnerable to routes that break open further downfield as long as the corners are anchored to their respective zones by putting a receiver in the flat area.

A quarterback who is cognizant of this fact can immediately audible to the appropriate pass play that will take advantage of this concept and create a big play for his offense. The quarterback who knows the concepts of defense can watch tape of an upcoming opponent and increase the probability of this kind of outcome.
Cover three zone is a fundamentally sound defense. However, as long as the offense is patient, it should be able to “nickel and dime” it’s way down the field. There are a lot of areas on the field that can be attacked provided the receivers run disciplined routes and the quarterback knows where to go with the football. The second-level coverage (the linebackers) has only four defenders available to cover the field horizontally. This means that there areas on the field that an offense can take advantage of. Curl routes, dig routes, sideline routes, and double square-in patterns are all appropriate to call Vs this type of coverage. Although it is unlikely that an

<table>
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<th>STRENGTHS</th>
<th>WEAKNESSES</th>
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<td>Three-deep Secondary</td>
<td>Weakside curl/flat</td>
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<td>Four-man rush</td>
<td>Strongside curl</td>
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<td>Run support to SS</td>
<td>Limited Fronts</td>
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<td>Flood routes</td>
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<td>Run support away from SS</td>
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<td>Dig routes &amp; Square-in routes</td>
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<td>Four Verticals</td>
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offense can throw deep attacking from a standard offensive set, a four receiver set with all four receivers running go routes with good spacing can create an immediate big play.
Cover two is another basic defense that has the capability to disrupt the timing of the quick passing game because there are not five-defenders at the second level defending the field horizontally to a depth of approximately twelve-yards from the line of scrimmage.

Additionally, the outside receivers can have the route disrupted due to the fact that the cornerbacks are taught to jam the outside receiver as he passing by his zone. However, the deep coverage can now be compromised down the sideline and deep down the middle of the field by an astute offense.
By sending one receiver deep to the outside, another receiver deep down the middle, and a third receiver in the flat, the defense has only two defenders to cover the three different areas that the receivers now occupy. This can be damaging to the defense in that these types of completions are usually big plays that gain substantial yards.
Quarters Coverage

Quarters coverage is one of the more recent innovations in defenses today. Generally speaking, this type of defense has the ability to double cover an offense’s outside receivers on medium to deep pass routes. This type of coverage also allows the two safeties to become more a factor on run support. This defense is susceptible in the flat areas of the field. This is because the outside linebackers are responsible for covering that area of the field. In addition, there is a way to nullify the safety help in covering the outside receivers by running inside receivers at the safeties. This usually converts the coverage to a man-to-man type of defense as far as the

STRENGTHS
- Allows for four-deep coverage
- Run support from the safeties
- Ability to double cover the outside receivers
- Allows corners to play aggressive technique on outside receivers because they have help over the top from the safeties.

WEAKNESSES
- Flat area coverage
- Safeties are very susceptible to play-action
- Double coverage on #1 can be nullified by having the #2 receiver attack the coverage of the safety.
defensive backfield is concerned. Furthermore, play-action fakes directed at one of the safeties can make this coverage vulnerable to a throw over the top of that safety.
Whenever a defense goes into any kind of man coverage, you can expect some type of blitz.

Versus Cover 1 Free, crossing routes can be very productive provided you have the extra rusher(s) blocked. In addition, fade routes run by the outside receivers or even four-vertical patterns run by the receivers can be big plays as long as you throw away from the free-safety.
Versus cover zero-man, expect more rushers than you can block with conventional pass protection. I have seen some teams bring seven and even eight defenders once in a while. Although this is fundamentally unsound because they can’t have all your possible receivers accounted for, it can cause a big play defensively if you think you can drop back and wait for one of your receivers to break open down field. You have to have a play before the ball is even snapped. You can audible to a quick “slide” protection to wash the extra defenders down, or change the protection to a maximum protection scheme. Some offenses have built-in hot routes that should break open immediately and be very effective against this defense.

Again, crossing routes are effective as well as routes that are run vertically down the field as long as you can get the pass off before the rush gets to you.