

DEFENSIVE BACK'S FUNDAMENTALS AND DRILLS

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Defensive Back's Fundamentals and Drills

Before getting into the nuts and bolts of defensive back's fundamentals and drills, I would like to point out, that I will not tell anybody anything that he (or she) has not heard before. This lecture is supposed to reinforce what you already know, show you some drills you might want to incorporate into your routines and to give you the chance to ask questions that you might still have.

Different Positions

Even though there are several fundamentals, that all defensive backs have to master, it is clearly perceptible that a Cornerback could have a different task than a Free Safety. A Free Safety in a 3-Deep Zone has obviously a different responsibility than a Strong Safety in the same zone. While back pedalling and breaks apply to all defensive backs, the multitude of coverages lead to distinctive differences. A 75-minute-lecture certainly does not leave enough time to cover all aspects of Secondary play. Therefore I will limit my explanations to basic fundamentals for all Defensive Backs. Additionally, I will cover a few techniques of secondary play and show you some drills.

Who should be a DB?

Generally speaking, DB's should be the best athletes on your team. Very often in European amateur football, the best football players are put on offense to score. I would support that with players who handle the ball often, i. e. QB's or RB's. However usually the fastest players are put as WR's. This makes not much sense unless you are going to throw the ball 80 % in a game and have a QB who can get the ball to the WR's. Look at it from this perspective:

You have 60 snaps (offensive) in a game – which is a lot for amateur football – you are playing a versatile offense (single back) and plan to run the ball at least 30 times (50 %). That means you are going to throw the ball 30 times as well. If your QB can have a completion percentage of 66 % (which is pretty good and assuming the WR's will catch all balls thrown to them), he will get the ball close to the WR's 20 times. Since you are playing a single back offense, you have three or four WR's on the field. For simplicity, let's assume four. That means that every WR (if you don't substitute) will have the chance to make five plays per game. That means that he takes an important part on round about 8 % of all offensive plays. Granted, you want your WR's to block on run plays as well – which they don't in Dutch, German or European amateur football (WR's don't even block in the NFL or NFL Europe and I personally don't think that our European WR's are coached better).

My Thesis is to put the best athletes (unless you are making QB or RB out of them) on defense and let them play in the backfield. I am not sure whether you get 100 % productivity; still I truly believe it as going to be far more than those projected 8 %.

DB Fundamentals

I believe the two major and most important and not stressed enough fundamentals are “running” and “tackling”. Every defensive player has to be able to run and to tackle. Sure, there are more keys to being successful – and I will get to those – nevertheless, if they don’t have the athletic ability to get to the ball (be able to run) and when they get there, are not tough, brave or strong enough to make a tackle, you defensive coaches will have a very long day... You should teach your whole team how to run (unless you find a track coach) and how to tackle. Let them practice those two techniques over and over and again.

Today, I am not going to talk about running any more. I am not an expert and it would not make sense for me to talk about this in particular. The tackling part I might cover again. However not in great detail (unless there is time at the very end).

The Basic Fundamentals

There are four basic fundamentals that need to be mastered by all Defensive Backs, disregardless of the position they are playing. These are:

- Stance
- Start
- Backpedal
- Breaks

STANCE:

I might have said this last year already nevertheless I would like to mention it again. Since I have been in the NFL Europe League, I am not big on teaching stances anymore. The reason for that lies in the type of football players we are working with. Although a lot of our players need plenty of coaching and reps in practices and games, it is the stance we worry about the least.

I would like to stress though, that especially in youth football and with less experienced and established players in senior football, the stance (the incorrect one) is the root of all evil. Stress the proper stance often in the beginning, jump on your players while it’s new and fresh and then let them play with it and become comfortable. As long as they are successful in their assignments (or breakdowns do not stem from wrong stances) they – and you – will be alright.

You might be curious know what the correct stance looks like (I hope you are)?

I propose a staggered stance (seems like less steps and motion is wasted from a stagger) with a toe to instep or toe to heel alignment. The feet are shoulder wide apart. Key to stagger and width is the ability to react and move while keeping the balance and being efficient. The weight should be on the balls of the feet. It helps to turn the toes in slightly. Ankles, knees, and hip need to be bend. Some people use the expression “create power angles”. I, personally, do not have a clue what power angles are, however bending those joints means you can create force from your muscles (especially those in thigh and butt). You can compare it to a spring.

The key to bending your joints is the degree to what you do it. Neither too much nor too less will do it. If, from your stance, you have to rise up or sink down to get going, your stance is not perfect. Football is a game of inches and split seconds. All movements (with DB’s) should happen on one level to avoid wasting movements, thus energy, thus time.

The back is straight, the head is up and the arms are hanging loose (or are slightly bend). As you all know, the player’s stance is often too high. Unless this is the case, don’t get overly concerned and restrictive.

START:

Proper weight distribution requires the player to push off of the front foot. If he had more weight on his back foot, he would be prone to losing his balance if attacked physically. I understand that this is only of importance in any kind of press situation however football is also a game of creating habits and automated motions, therefore certain fundamentals should be kept the same. Another argument (which could be disputed) is that by pushing off of the front foot, the player has gained half a step. I am not going to elaborate this because there are probably some coaches here today that were good in physics – and I wasn't...

With the proper start you need to stress being (and staying) low as well as using the arms just like if they were running forward.

BACKPEDAL:

The two most important aspects of the backpedal are the size of the steps and the lifting height of the feet. Since backpedaling does not come natural to humans (nobody goes through life backpedaling...), we don't have a very good feel for it. Initially, that means we have to practice it over and over, but it also means that the player will not be as fast as if somebody is running forward.

I remember that from the mid-nineties until recently a lot of coaches went away from teaching the backpedal and had their players shuffle or turn and run. Even though these techniques are still valid (some coverages require these techniques) and in use, I believe there is a renaissance of the good old backpedal. Anyway, coming back to the important aspects. The key is to be fast while still being able to react to cuts and thus break. This means in reality that the steps should not be too large and the feet should be kept low to the ground. Any large steps or high lifts require more time for the Defensive Back to gain control over his legs and feet and therefore waste too much time. Ideally, the feet drag over the grass. Remember though, we are not trying to plow the field! Again, the player shall not rise up while backpedaling and move his arms as if he was running forward. Depending on the coverage the head should be on a swivel or be "glued" to the aiming point.

BREAKS:

If every fundamental technique is up for discussion and disputable, the DB's break is even more. During my eight years in coaching, I have coached to techniques, learned a third (but never used it) and believe there are probably one, two or three more. As with a lot of things in football "if it works, it is right", there are several break techniques and they all can work. The last few years I have been using one technique only and that is the one I am covering today.

The break is likely the most crucial technique a DB has to master. The quality of the break will distinguish between an average and a great DB. I truly believe even though the Defensive Back does not know the route and therefore has to react to the WR, great technique will enable him to cover the majority of routes. In 1996 or 1997, I was fortunate to listen to a DB clinic by Jim Mora Jr. (at that time DB Coach for the 49ers). He showed us practice film from the previous training camp. He had one Cornerback who managed to defend every single pass thrown while he was doing 1-on-1's. For the coaches amongst you who have played DB, you know that 1-on-1 is an offensive drill and it can get quite frustrating for the DB's. Anyway, this particular DB, who didn't even make the team, had such an incredible transition from backpedal to the break to the burst that enabled him to close down on the WR rather quickly. I will be more detailed about the break when we go down to the gym. I will show you some drills to get really good at breaking.

I mentioned running, tackling and the basic fundamentals stance, start, backpedal, and break. Obviously, there are a lot more techniques that the Defensive Backs need to learn and be able to perform. The more schemes and plays you add to your philosophy/playbook, the more demands are put on your players. As you can imagine, it would take several days to cover every single fundamental and technique, especially considering the coverages and playing against the run or the pass.

This next section offers some Drills that might help to stress, and therefore improve, the above mentioned fundamentals. Again, these Drills are neither my invention nor are they the only means of preparing your Defensive Backs. However, all Drills I am using are task specific – that means they are very close or just like game situations.

Pre-Practice Drills

I would like to start with a few pre-practice drills which you could use every practice to make best use of your limited time and warm your players up for the rigors of a football practice.

1. STRIP DRILL

Partner up (2 players together); behind each other, on coach's command, slowly start jogging, the rear player clubs with one arm over the shoulder and with the other hand rips the ball from the front mans arm, he then finds the ball, picks it up and secures it

Two times – once each arm

C.P.: this is not a grab ass drill – the Defenses responsibility is to cause turnovers!

2. LOOK & LEAN DRILL

Jog off L.O.S. for 5 yds, plant and break on 45°, lean into a ghost WR, use arm barrier, and look back for ball

Two times – once in each direction

C.P.: nice and easy jog, arm barrier is not to cause P.I. but to feel WR – throw no balls!

3. SPEED TURN & STRIP DRILL

Partner up; align like in press man coverage; “WR” fakes inside (or outside) release and takes one step in opposite direction, sticking out a ball; the DB overplays the fake, speed turns and strips ball from “WR”

Two times – once in each direction

C.P.: nice and easy, make sure DB stays low while turning; picking up stripped ball and securing it would be a progression!

4. T-STEP PLANT PROGRESSION DRILL

4.1. PLANT

Align in front of a line (imaginary if necessary), plant step with one foot and return it back to origin; have DB in good football stance (no stagger though)

Three times with each foot

C.P.: feet at origin and end are parallel, make sure DB stays low – this is not a speed drill!

4.2. BREAK

Same alignment as above; execute full T-Step break with a plant step, a directional step and return to origin (4 feet motion); have DB in good football stance

Four times with each foot

C.P.: feet at origin and end are parallel, make sure DB stays low – first two times are slow, while the last two are sped up

4.3. BREAK & ROLL OVER

Same alignment as above; DB carries out easy T-Step break & rolls over for four or five steps

Three times – once straight, once 45° left, once 45° right

C.P.: feet can be staggered, make sure DB stays low through whole drill, the first step out of break is short – this is not a competitive drill!

4.4. SHOULDER THROW

Same alignment as above; DB carries out easy T-Step break but instead of rolling over, he excessively throws his shoulders forward and towards the ground; catches body from falling by using the legs

Two times – both straight back

C.P.: feet can be staggered, this drill shows DB that by staying low and throwing shoulders toward aiming point, the legs will automatically follow and thus speed up the break

5. COMING AT ME DRILL

DB T-Step breaks and slowly jogs (1/2 speed) towards the coach; he then catches a football, tucks it away, runs by the coach and hands the ball back

Two times

C.P.: make sure DB catches ball with extended arms and uses his hands; having DB break 45° in each direction would be a progression – they run nice and easy in this drill!

6. SHOOT HIP DRILL

Partner up; behind each other, on coach's command, slowly start jogging towards coach, when coach's hand comes off of the ball, the rear man shoots by the hip of the front man and intercepts the ball

Two times – once on each side

C.P.: make sure rear man shoots by hip low and catches ball with extended arms – no pushing or shoving in this drill!

The above introduced drills are mainly for pre-practice. Nevertheless, if time permits or the structure of the practice does not allow time in pre-practice, these drills can be incorporated into the Individual session.

Obviously, there are a wide variety of drills, very often pertaining to specific schemes or plays. It is my belief (which was built by the work with Pete Kuharchek) that you do not need countless drills to prepare your players. Instead, work with a limited number of drills that are close to game situations, improve a player's overall ability, and build confidence in him as he perfects the skills required.

Again, there are certain situations where you need to add drills specific to what you want to get accomplished against a particular opponent.

The following drills are fundamental drills which pertain to all coverages and game situations.

Fundamental Drills

1. W – DRILL

Line up parallel to L.O.S. in good football stance; on coach's movement, backpedal at 45°, break on ball at 45°, then backpedal again at 45° and break one more time at 45°

Two times – going down and coming back

C.P.: make sure DB stays low at all times and reacts to the ball, breaks are T-Step breaks, the last drive forward is full speed to finish the drill – to alternate the drill, the DB can either backpedal straight back and break 45° or backpedal at 45° and break straight back

2. BREAK & DRIVE DRILL

DB aligns 10 to 15 yds from coach in-between hashes; when coach turns shoulder, DB executes T-Step break and drives for ball – coach throws ball to side he turned shoulder to around the hash

Two times – once each direction

C.P.: on break, shoulders need to be thrown forward and explosive take off is required; catch ball with extended arms, tuck it away and score – could add two DB's as WR for aiming purpose – progression would be to have DB backpedal 3 to 5 yds and then the same

3. TURN & DRIVE DRILL

DB aligns 5 to 10 yds from coach in-between hashes; on movement DB starts backpedaling, when coach turns his shoulder, DB turns 45° downfield and aims for post route throw – could add two DB's as aiming point (slightly outside hash – 20 yds apart)

Two times – once each direction

C.P.: stay low while backpedaling and turning, explosive steps after turn (not too big); look for ball and catch it at its highest point, tuck it away and score

4. ROUTE BREAK PROGRESSION DRILL

4.1. SQUARE IN DRILL

DB aligns 5 yds from coach; on movement DB starts backpedaling, when coach turns shoulder, DB turns 90° in and intercepts ball

Two times – once each direction (both square in routes)

C.P.: stay low in backpedal and through transition, make sure DB does not curve his break; catch ball with extended arms, tuck it away and score

4.2. OUT DRILL

DB aligns 5 yds from coach; on movement DB starts backpedaling, when coach turns shoulder, DB turns less than 90° out and intercepts ball

Two times – once each direction (both out routes)

C.P.: stay low in backpedal and through transition, make sure DB comes back towards L.O.S. on his break; catch ball with extended arms, tuck it away and score

4.3. POST-CORNER DRILL

DB aligns 5 yds from coach; on movement DB starts backpedaling, when coach turns shoulder, DB turns 45° downfield, eyes on coach, when coach flips shoulder to other side, DB executes a speed turn and intercepts ball

Two times – once each direction (both post-corner routes)

C.P.: stay low in backpedal and through transition, make sure DB does not drift off after speed turn, the key is to bring the head around quick and find the ball; catch ball with extended arms, tuck it away and score

The following drills are Man Coverage Drills. Again, these drills just cover some fundamental requirements of the man-to-man coverage. I would like to point out that drill work for man-to-man coverage should cover at least half the drill time available. Man-to-man coverage is by far the most difficult task a Defensive Back has to carry out, therefore to be successful the effort put in has to be tremendous.

Man-Coverage Drills

1. STEM DRILL

Partner up; “WR” takes off jogging and stems three times 45° to one direction, the DB keeps his pre-designated leverage and stems as well; he slides steps to keep his hips and shoulders square to the L.O.S.

Two times – once each direction

C.P.: DB has not only to keep leverage but also cushion; make sure he does not rise up while backpedaling; the eyes are focusing on the “WR” hips

2. DIFFERENT SPEED DRILL

Partner up; “WR” takes off jogging, three times he increases his speed for a few steps, the DB keeps his initial cushion; the different backpedal speeds can be accomplished by changing the usage of the arms

Two times

C.P.: make sure the DB does not rise up while backpedaling; keep the same leverage throughout this drill; the eyes are focusing on the “WR” hips

3. SQUEEZE DRILL

Partner up; “WR” and DB align next to each other but face to face; the “WR” takes off at $\frac{3}{4}$ speed, the DB turns into the “WR”, leans into him and squeezes him towards the sideline

Two times – each leverage once

C.P.: the DB needs to give ground and take proper “pursuit” angle to close to “WR”; use arm barrier to slow down and feel “WR”; the eyes are focusing on the “WR” hips – this is not an all out race!

4. LEAN & UNDERCUT DRILL

Partner up; “WR” and DB align next to each other, looking downfield; both players take off jogging, after 5 yds the “WR” leans into DB to get ready for a cut (opposite the lean); when the DB feels the pressure, he slows down and undercuts the “WR”

Two times – once each direction

C.P.: in this drill, the DB shall not squeeze or use arm barrier, also the DB should not pull or push off of “WR” to avoid bad habits and P.I.’s; the eyes are focusing on the “WR” hips – this drill is not a race either!

5. HORIZONTAL MIRROR DRILL

Partner up; a “WR” runs parallel to a line and tries to cut and go upfield every three or four yards; the DB mirrors the “WR” movement by shuffling down the line and when the “WR” turns up, the DB punches with his inside arm, keeping his inside leverage

Two times – once each direction

C.P.: stay low in this drill with a good base; do not over pursuit the “WR” and keep the eyes on the “WR” hips; extend the arm while punching to keep separation from “WR” – drill needs to be run at slow to medium speed!

6. VERTICAL MIRROR DRILL

Partner up; a “WR” runs a zigzag path upfield, changing direction every two to three yards; the DB mirrors the “WR” movement by slide stepping or backpedaling; whenever “WR” changes direction, the DB punches with his inside arm, keeping his inside leverage

Two times – once each direction

C.P.: stay low in this drill with a good base; do not over pursuit the “WR” and keep the eyes on the “WR” hips; extend the arm while punching to keep separation from “WR” – drill needs to be run at slow to medium speed!

This concludes the DB clinic. I understand that there are a lot more fundamentals and techniques that I could have covered, however the limited time in these clinics does not allow to get into more detail – unless everything will be rushed through.

I hope I have helped some of you for your practices and also was able to successfully answer some questions you might have had.

Good luck with your teams!

Respectfully,

Jörn Maier