

FOOTBALL 101

If you are like millions of people who watch football on Sundays, you have undoubtedly heard the announcers use the term *Zone Read*. You might even recognize a Zone Read play when you see it happen on the field, but do you understand how it works or why coaches implement it into their offensive scheme? If not, don't worry. Football 101 has you covered. In this article, we will take a closer look at this popular offense, and break it down into easy-to-understand steps. Reeeeeaaaady BREAK!

ZONE READ. What is it?

When most people use the term *Zone Read*, they are referring to a running play known as the *Zone Read Option*. Simply put, the *Zone Read Option* is a play that leaves one player on the end of the defensive line unblocked. During the play, the quarterback evaluates the actions of this unblocked defender, also known as the *Free Edge-Rusher*, and then determines what he is going to do with the ball.

Every offensive football play will have a specific alignment consisting of 11 players. Let's begin our look at the Zone Read Option by identifying the offensive players involved in executing the play.

Offensive Player Positions

OFFENSIVE LINEMAN (OL): These are the big guys who have the job of protecting the quarterback from oncoming defensive players or opening up rushing lanes for the running back to run through. A special OL called the *Center* begins every play by snapping the ball to the quarterback.

RUNNING BACK (RB): This is the player who lines up in the backfield, takes the handoff from the quarterback, and advances the ball by running through rushing lanes that are opened up by the offensive linemen.

WIDE RECEIVER (WR): These are the speedy players who run predetermined routes and catch passes thrown to them by the quarterback.

TIGHT END (TE): This is a hybrid position that is a cross between an OL and WR. Most TEs are bigger than WRs, but smaller than OL. They are versatile players who can be utilized as blockers on some plays or pass catchers on others.

QUARTERBACK (QB): The QB is the key player who distributes the ball to the running back, tight end, or wide receiver. On some plays, such as the *Zone Read Option*, the quarterback may choose to keep the ball and run with it himself.

Offensive Player Alignment:

Now we know the offensive players who are needed to execute the *Zone Read Option*, but before any football play can begin, the players must line up. For a standard *Zone Read Option* play, the offense will line up with personnel consisting of five offensive linemen, one tight end, three wide receivers, the quarterback and the running back. The offensive linemen will line up in a traditional fashion on the line of scrimmage with the tight end closely lined up next to the end of the line. The wide receivers will split

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Offensive Player Alignment: (continued)

out with two on one side of the offensive line and the third wide receiver on the other side of the line. The quarterback will line up two yards behind the center offensive lineman, who will snap him the ball. The running back will line up two yards behind and off to the side of the quarterback. See Figure 1 for details.

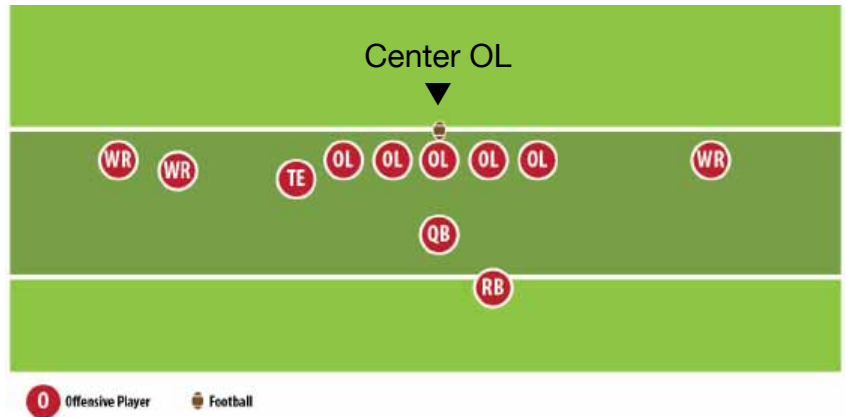


Figure 1. Standard Zone Read Option offensive formation. Copyright 2016 by Gary Erskine.

FACING A DEFENSE:

In the game of football, every offense must face a defense that is tasked with keeping the offense from scoring. Just like the offense, the defense also features 11 players with specific duties. Let's identify the defensive players who our offense will be lining up against.

Defensive Player Positions

DEFENSIVE LINEMEN (DL): These are the big guys who line up opposite the OL. Their job is to try to break through the offensive line and tackle the quarterback or running back.

LINEBACKER (LB): The linebackers are also known as the second line of defense. Their job is to cover the tight end or tackle any player who comes out of the backfield with the football.

DEFENSIVE BACK (DB): The defensive backs are the smallest and fastest of the defenders. They line up against wide receivers and try to stop them from catching passes and sometimes line up behind the linebackers as the final line of defense.

Defensive Player Alignment:

There are many possible player personnel combinations and formations that a defense might employ to stop an offense. Figure 2 shows the Zone Read Option formation against a typical 4-3 defensive alignment with four defensive linemen, three linebackers, and four defensive backs. Now that the offense and defense are set, we are ready to snap the ball. HIKE!

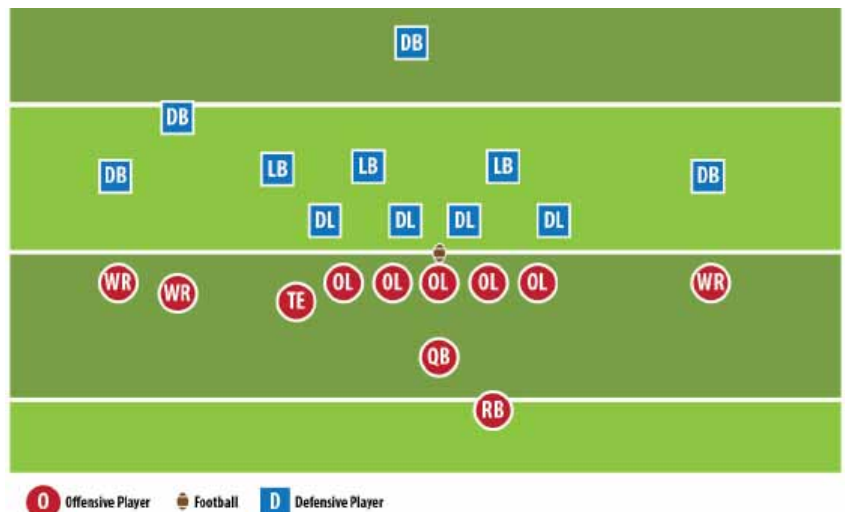


Figure 2. Zone Read Option offensive formation lined up against a typical 4-3 defense. Copyright 2016 by Gary Erskine.

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HOW THE PLAY WORKS:

The play begins with the quarterback signaling to the *Center* OL that he is ready for the ball to be snapped. This signal can be a predetermined verbal keyword or a hand gesture. Once the signal is given, the *Center* OL will snap the ball between his legs to the awaiting quarterback and each offensive player will begin to execute their assigned roles in the play.

Immediately upon snapping the ball, the wide receivers will run their routes. Even though this is a running play, it is important for the wide receivers to pretend that they might have the ball thrown to them. This will cause the defensive backs to run with the wide receivers down the field and away from the ball carrier. See figure 3.

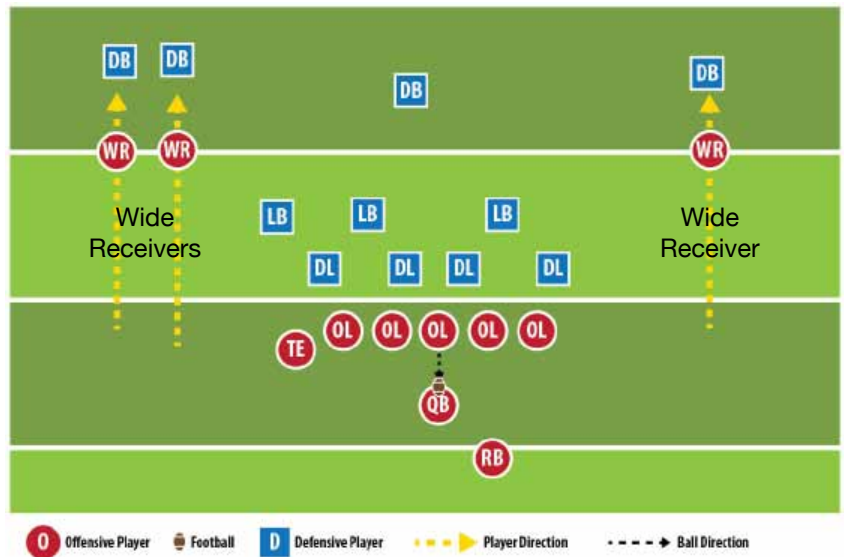


Figure 3. Wide Receivers (WR) running their routes and drawing defensive backs (DB) away from the play. Copyright 2016 by Gary Erskine.

While the wide receivers run their routes, the offensive linemen and the tight end will perform the ZONE part of the Zone Read Option play by executing a zone-blocking scheme. This just means all six of these players will run in the same direction and block any defensive player that is in front of them. This type of blocking scheme will cause the linebackers to run towards the direction of the zone block because they think the ball carrier is headed in that direction. It will also create a defensive *Free Edge-Rusher* on the backside of the line. See figure 4.

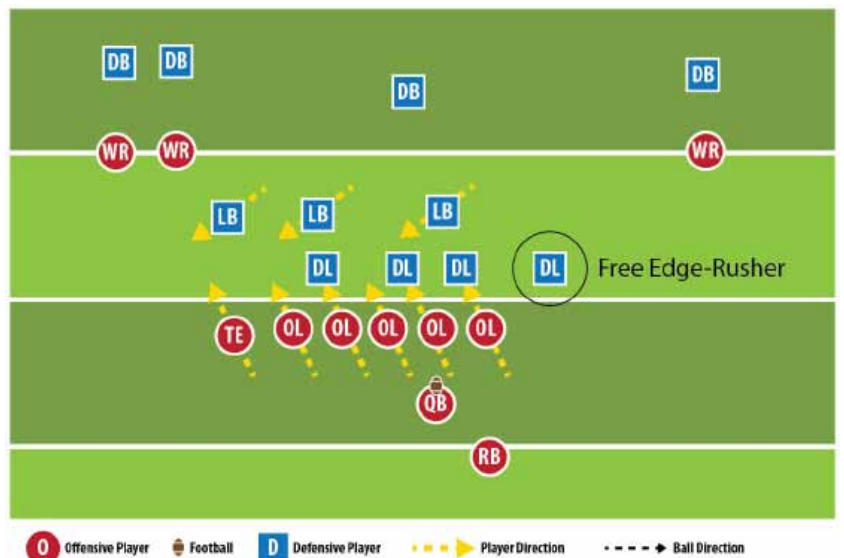


Figure 4. Offensive linemen (OL) and tight end (TE) executing a zone blocking scheme and creating a *Free Edge-Rusher*. Copyright 2016 by Gary Erskine.

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As the wide receivers are running their routes, and the offensive linemen and tight end are zone blocking, the running back will run towards the quarterback in the same direction of the zone blocking scheme. When the RB is next to the QB, the QB will place the ball in the mid-section of the RB as if he is going to hand the ball off. This is the pivotal point where QB will perform the READ OPTION part of the play by evaluating, or reading, the actions of the free defensive edge-rusher and then decide whether he is going to complete the handoff to the RB, or keep the ball and advance it himself. See figure 5.



Figure 5. Quarterback (QB) and running back (RB) begin the handoff process. Copyright 2016 by Gary Erskine.

Option 1:

If the QB determines the free defensive edge-rusher is running towards the RB, the QB will not complete the handoff. Instead, he will keep the ball and run with it to an area of the field that has been vacated by the *Free Edge-Rusher*. This usually results in a positive yardage gain for the offense. See figure 6.

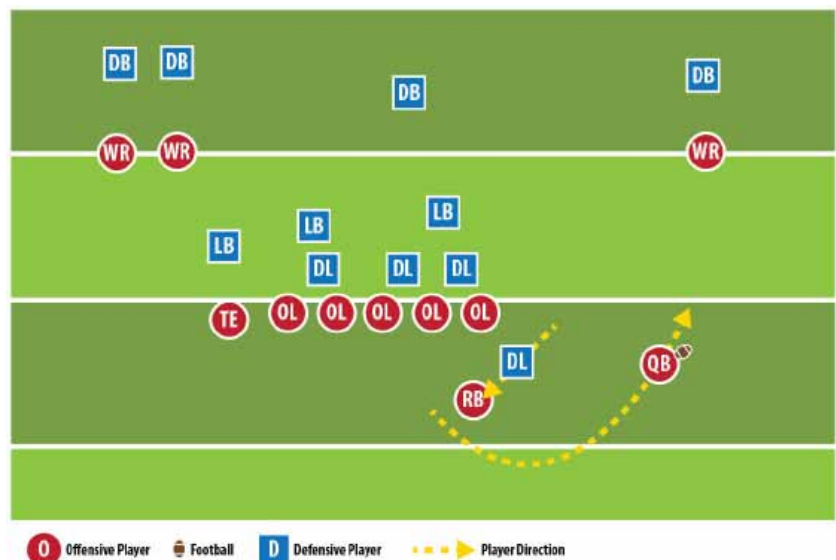


Figure 6. Quarterback (QB) decides the *Free Edge-Rusher* is running towards the running back (RB) and runs with the ball himself. Copyright 2016 by Gary Erskine.

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Option 2:

If the QB determines the *Free Edge-Rusher* is going to protect the back-side of the line, the QB will complete the handoff to the RB. The RB will follow his blockers, who will outnumber the defensive tacklers, and usually rush for positive yardage. See figure 7.

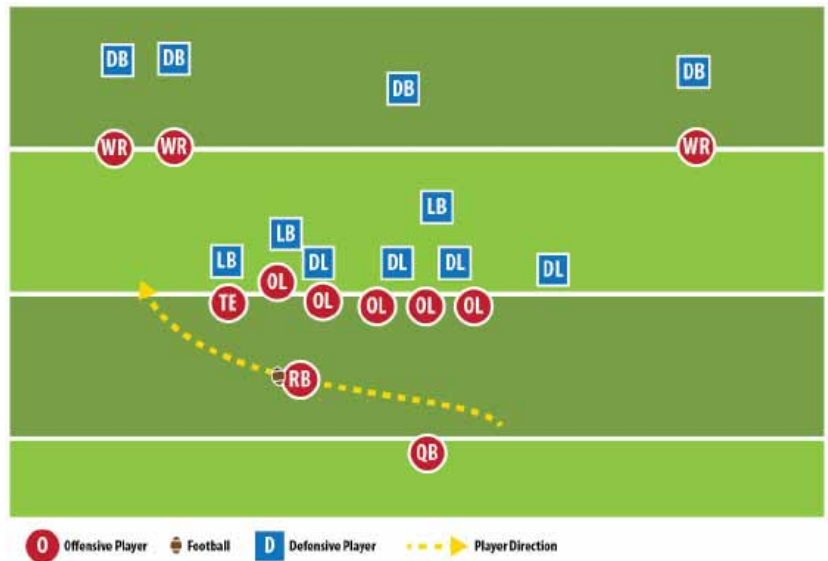


Figure 7. Quarterback reads the *Free Edge-Rusher* as defending back side of the field and completes the handoff to the running-back. Copyright 2016 by Gary Erskine.

Wrapping it up:

You just learned how the *Zone Read Option* play works. Offensive coaches use this play to confuse a defense or slow down an overaggressive, pursuing type of defense. The players who execute the *Zone Read Option* during a game make it look easy, but this play requires a lot of practice. The running back will have his eyes on the offensive line looking for running lanes and will never know ahead of time if the quarterback is going to keep the ball or complete the handoff. Without practice, the potential for a fumble is high. Once a team has mastered the *Zone Read Option* play, they can run it from different formations or even add different options such as a second runner to pitch the ball to or even incorporate the forward pass.