
HS 4-3 Defense Playbook

Base Defense with Multiple Fronts

Gridiron Encyclopedia

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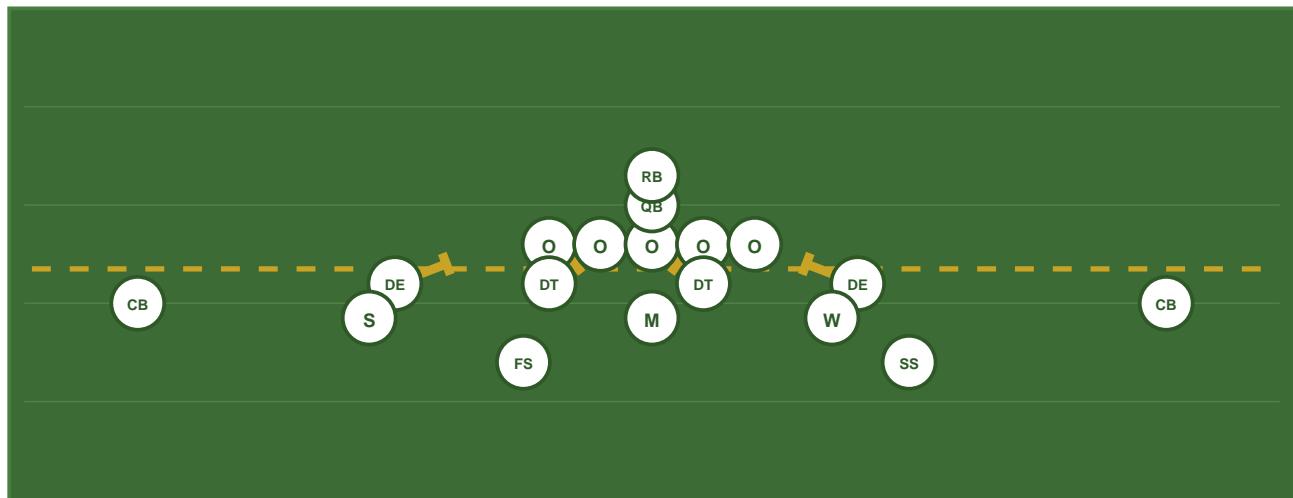
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Philosophy & Overview

The 4-3 defense is the most versatile base defense in football, featuring 4 down linemen, 3 linebackers, and 4 defensive backs. Its strength lies in the ability to present multiple fronts (over, under, even) while maintaining sound run fits and flexible coverage shells. The front four generates consistent pressure, allowing linebackers to flow freely to the ball. The secondary can operate in Cover 1, Cover 2, Cover 3, or quarters to match any offensive formation. Every defender must know their gap responsibility, their coverage assignment, and their run-fit key.

Over Front Alignment

The strong-side shade alignment places the defensive line strength to the tight end side. The nose aligns in a 1-technique (shade on the center to the strong side), the 3-technique DT is to the strong side, the 5-technique DE is on the strong-side OT, and the weak DE aligns in a 9-technique (wide).

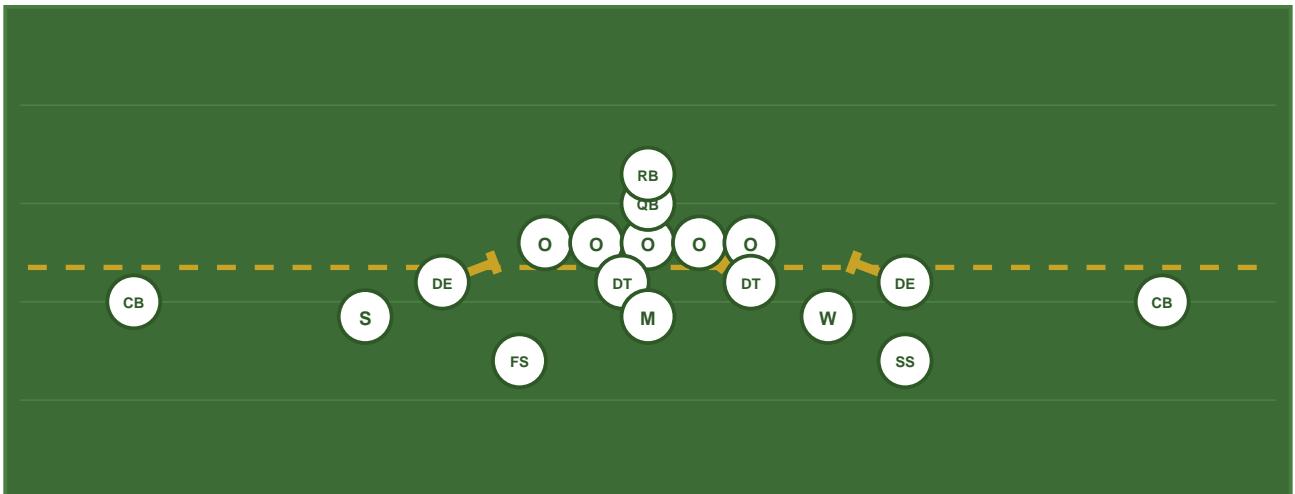


Over Front Alignment

- 1-tech Nose: Control the A-gap to the strong side. 2-gap vs. zone.
- 3-tech DT: Penetrate the B-gap. This is your primary pass rusher inside.
- 5-tech DE: Set the edge, contain. Squeeze down on runs toward you.
- 9-tech DE: Wide alignment. Speed rush and containment.

Under Front Alignment

The under front shifts the DL strength to the weak side. The 3-technique moves to the weak side, the nose aligns head-up on the center (0-tech), and the strong DE plays a 5-technique. This front is designed to create confusion about gap responsibilities for the offense.

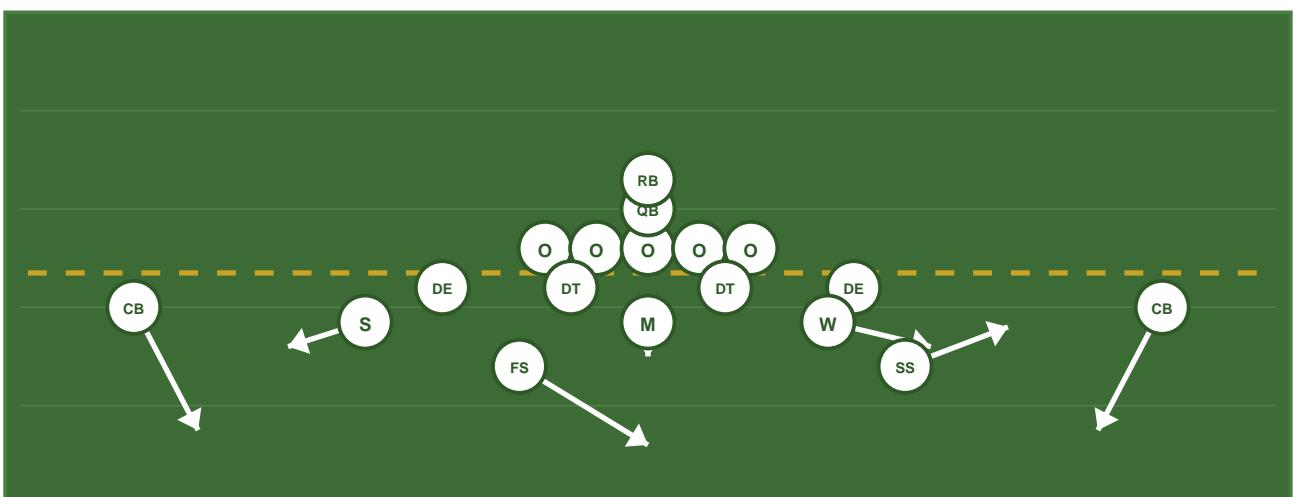


Under Front Alignment

- 0-tech Nose: Two-gap the center. Control both A-gaps.
- 3-tech (weak): Penetrate the weak B-gap on pass downs.
- 5-tech DE: Play the strong C-gap, set the edge on runs.
- Shifts allow the defense to present different looks from the same personnel.

Cover 3 (Base)

The base coverage shell. Three deep defenders (2 CBs and FS) each cover a deep third of the field. Four underneath defenders (3 LBs and SS) handle the short zones. The free safety is the center-field player. Corners play with outside leverage and funnel receivers inside.

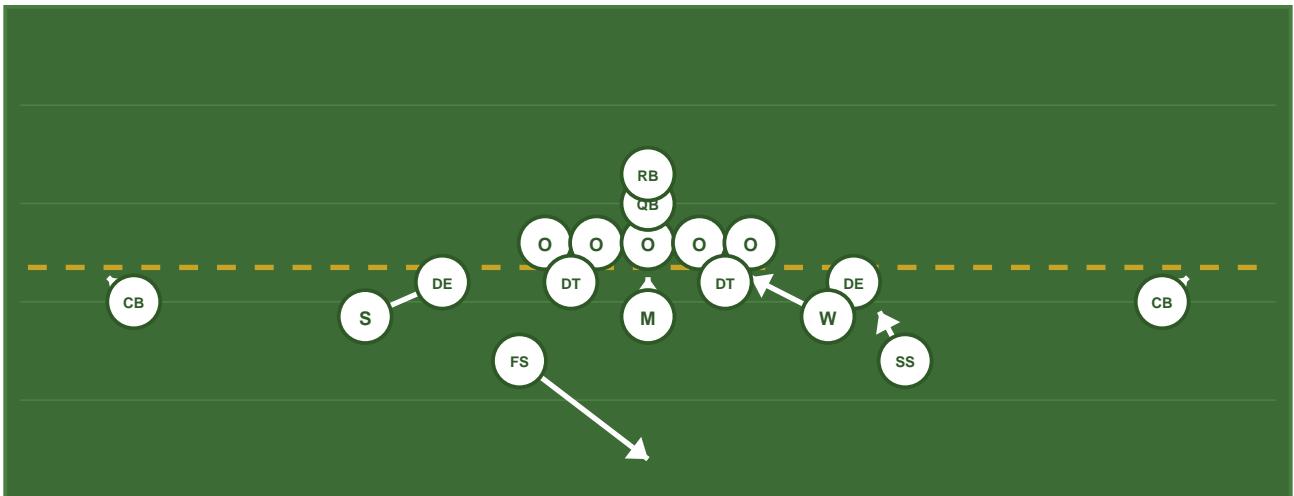


Cover 3 (Base)

- FS: Align at 12-14 yards. Read the QB, break on the throw. You are the center fielder.
- CBs: Jam at the line, sink to your deep third. Keep everything in front.
- SS: Flat responsibility — match any #2 receiver to the flat.
- LBs: Drop to curl/hook zones. Read QB eyes and break on the ball.

Cover 1 (Robber)

Man-free coverage with a twist. The free safety plays a "robber" role in the middle of the field, looking to undercut crossing routes and post routes. Corners play man coverage on the outside WRs, and LBs have man responsibilities on the RB and TE. The SS is man-to-man on the slot.

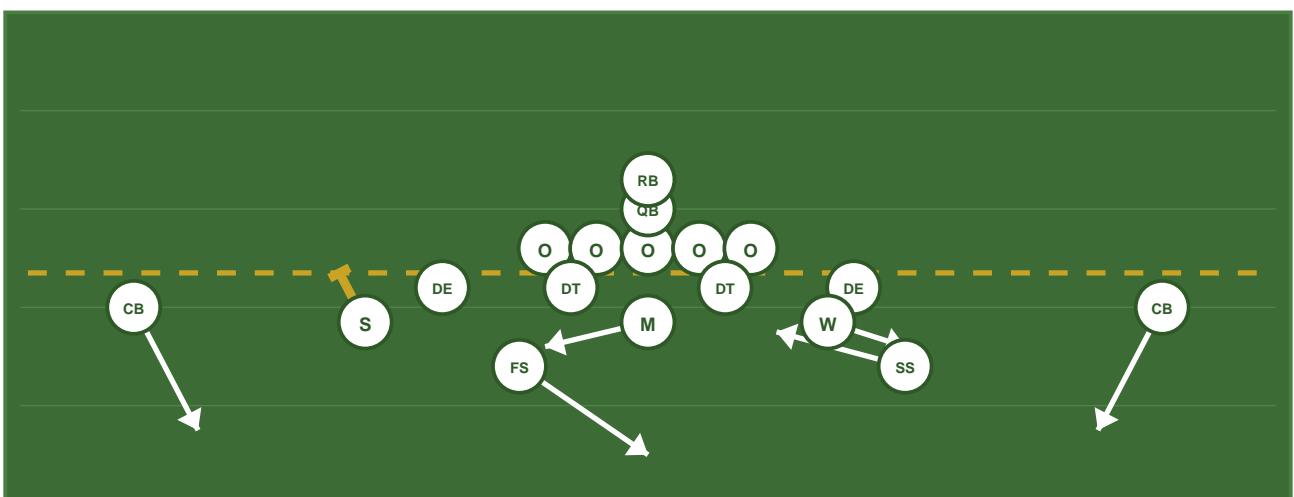


Cover 1 (Robber)

- FS: Play 10-12 yards deep, read the QB. Jump any crossers or post routes.
- CBs: Press or off-man technique. Win your matchup on the outside.
- LBs: Know your man assignment pre-snap. Carry vertical, pass off crossers.
- The robber technique creates turnovers — the FS must be aggressive.

Sam Fire

The strong-side linebacker (Sam) walks up to the line pre-snap and blitzes through the C-gap on the strong side. The corner presses, and the free safety plays over the top. Designed to disrupt strong-side runs and pressure the QB off the edge.

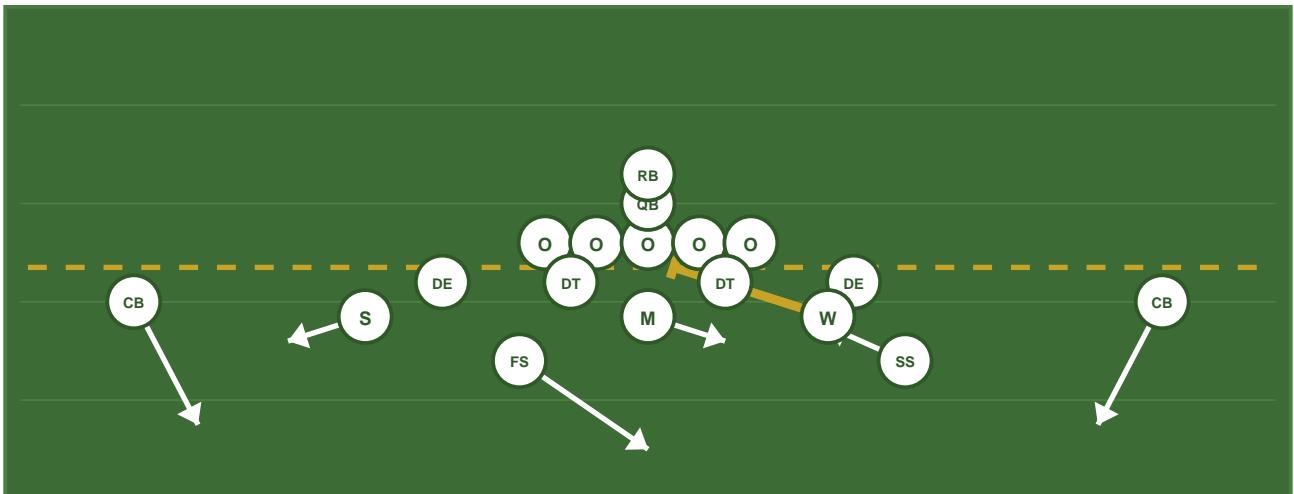


Sam Fire

- SLB: Walk up pre-snap, attack the C-gap outside the TE.
- CB (strong): Press coverage. No safety help to your side — play tough.
- FS: Shift to provide deep help over the strong-side CB.
- DE (strong): Squeeze inside to create a lane for the SLB.

Will Blitz

The weak-side linebacker (Will) blitzes through the A-gap from the weak side. The strong safety rotates down to fill the coverage void left by the blitzing LB. The coverage behind it adjusts accordingly.

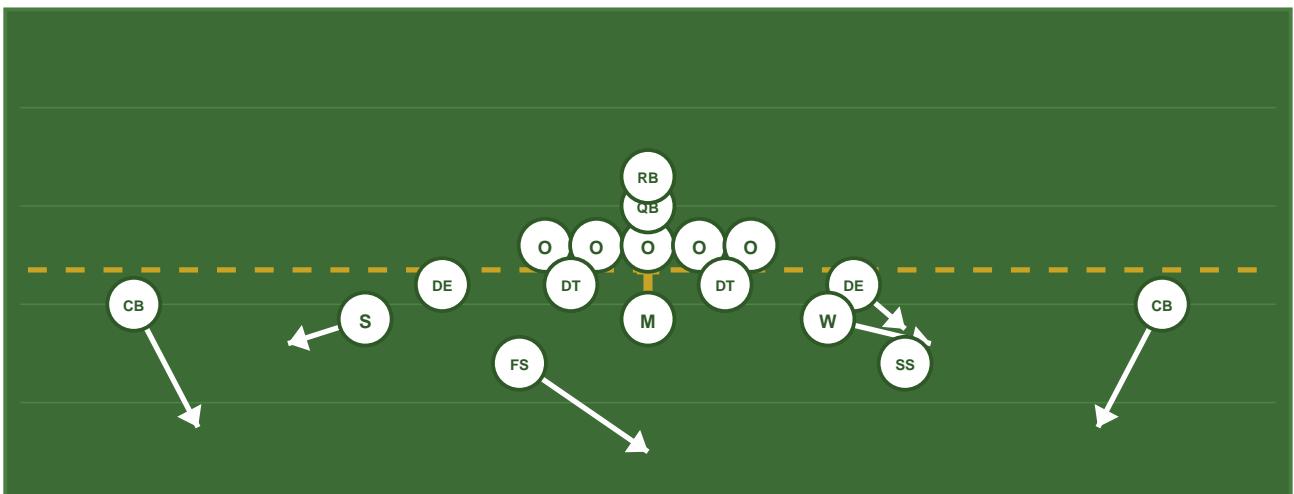


Will Blitz

- WLB: Time the snap, attack the outside shoulder of the OT.
- SS: Rotate down to replace the WLBs zone responsibility.
- FS: Shift to cover the middle of the field alone.
- CB (weak side): May need to play more aggressive technique.

Mike Blitz

The middle linebacker (Mike) blitzes through the A-gap while the defensive end on his side drops into coverage to replace the vacated underneath zone. This is a 3-under, 3-deep fire zone concept that brings 5 rushers while maintaining 6 in coverage.

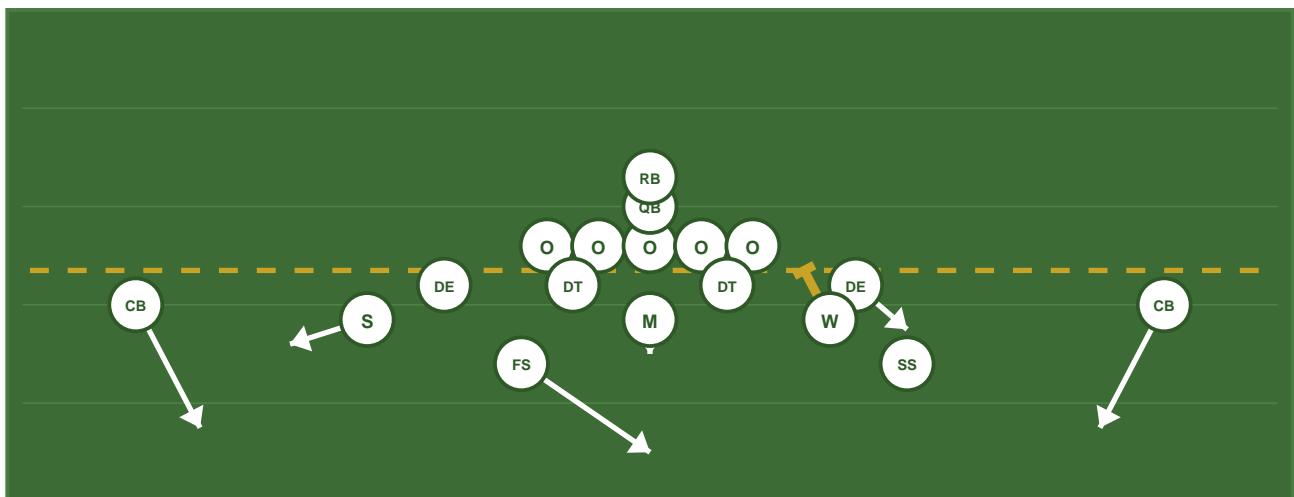


Mike Blitz

- MLB: Attack the A-gap at the snap. Get there fast.
- DE (drop side): Drop to the curl/flat zone vacated by the blitzing LB.
- 3-deep behind the blitz: FS middle, CBs deep thirds.
- The key is disguise — do not tip the blitz pre-snap.

Zone Dog (Simulated Pressure)

Four rushers come, but they are not the expected four. A defensive lineman drops into coverage while a linebacker replaces him in the rush. The offense sees 4-man pressure but cannot predict which 4 are coming. This confuses pass protection schemes.

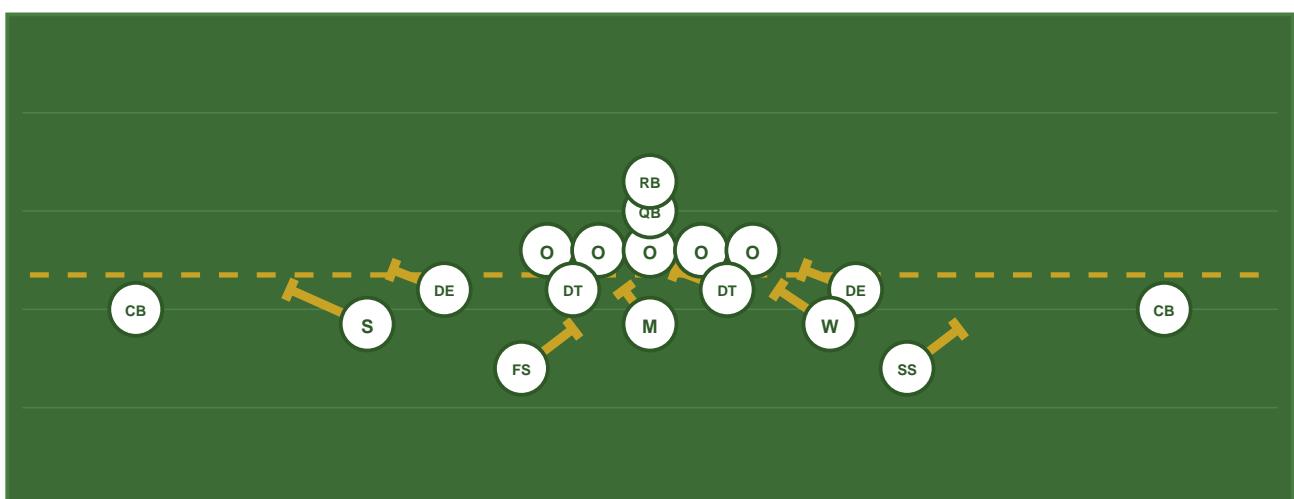


Zone Dog (Simulated Pressure)

- DE (drop): At the snap, drop into the flat zone. Sell the rush first.
- WLB: Replace the dropping DE in the pass rush. Attack his gap.
- The offense cannot slide or combo block effectively against unknown rushers.
- Excellent on 3rd-and-medium. Confuse the QB reads.

Run Fit vs Inside Zone

Gap assignments for all front-seven defenders against an inside zone run. Each defender is responsible for a specific gap, maintaining the integrity of the defensive front. The safeties serve as force and alley players behind the fit.



Run Fit vs Inside Zone

- DE: C-gap responsibility. Squeeze the OT and set the edge.
- DTs: Control your gap. Do not get driven off the ball.
- Sam: Force / D-gap. Contain anything bouncing outside.
- Mike and Will: Fill downhill into their gaps. Read guard pull keys.

Quick Reference / Glossary

Over/Under Front

Variations of the 4-3 alignment that shift the DL strength toward or away from the offensive strength.

1-Tech / 3-Tech / 5-Tech

Alignment numbers for DL. 1=shade on center, 3=outside shoulder of guard, 5=outside shoulder of tackle.

Fire Zone

A blitz concept that brings 5+ rushers while playing zone coverage (typically 3-deep, 3-under) behind the pressure.

Robber

A coverage technique where the FS plays in the middle of the field, reading the QB and jumping underneath routes.

Two-Gap

A DL technique where the defender controls the blocker and is responsible for both gaps on either side of them.

Contain

The responsibility of keeping the ball carrier or QB from escaping outside the defensive structure.

Press Coverage

A DB technique where the defender lines up at the LOS and jams the receiver at the snap to disrupt timing.

Curl/Flat

Underneath zone coverage areas. Curl zone is 10-15 yards over the OT, flat zone is near the sideline at 5-8 yards.