

LOOKING BACK TO SEE FORWARD

THE COMING OF AGE OF THE TEXAS OFFENSE

by Scott Gerlach | Photo by Brendan Maloney-US PRESSWIRE

Two years ago, Texas football under Mack Brown had a near-death experience. Some believe Brown saw the light and Texas is a born-again football pantheon, maybe stronger than ever. Others view Brown's program as a quickly withering husk, trying to make a dignified last stand. Either way, 5-7 will remain the reference point for the Longhorns until they discover where this overhauled program is headed. Was the 2011 season one of the last flails of a dying giant or will it be remembered as the first awkward step toward new glory?

Nowhere does this dichotomy of outcomes seem more plausible than on the

offensive side of the ball. And, in that sense, the most important theme of the 2011 Texas offense is yet to be determined. So while it's fair to say that many of last year's offensive struggles were really aftershocks from past failures, it's also true that the 2011 Longhorns' bid for respect is in many important ways dependent on the future success of this offense. As we straddle the gap between the two seasons, we will look back to see forward, gleaning what we can from the 2011 offense to help understand what awaits us this fall.

At this time last year, I was immersed in Boise State film, attempting to ascer-

tain the intent of Texas' new play-caller, and trying to understand the tenets of the offense he was bringing with him. It's not an offense that is easy to pin down or immediately describe. At first glance, you are drawn to the flash-in-the-pan plays — the off-schedule trick plays that show up in almost every Bryan Harsin game plan. The other obvious characteristics of the offense are the prolific use of pre-snap motion and an astounding number of formations. But as you delve even deeper, peel back the presentation of the offense, and look at its structure, you realize that its core ideas are aimed at making use of

a diverse, powerful running game, and generating explosive plays.

If Harsin's offense has an aesthetic hallmark, it is to make itself appear as complex as possible to the defense. At first thought, that certainly does not sound like a quick-fix scheme for a Texas offense that in 2010 had seen its worst offensive production ever under Brown. Of potentially equal concern, many of the most prolific offenses in the nation are now focusing on making their schemes as simple as possible, relying on spacing and repetition to bolster their offensive recognition and execution (think Oklahoma State, West Virginia and Baylor). In such an era, is an offensive system predicated on complexity a wise course in even the best of conditions?

The annals of football coaching are littered with strategists who failed to see their conceptual visions realized on the field. In part, that is because while football is one of the most complex sports, it is dependent on players being able to execute without analyzing — more reactions and fewer decisions. Indeed, most innovation in football isn't so much about new football ideas, it's about new ways to teach and group those ideas.

With that in mind, there must be more

to the story with Boise State's offense. Either the Boise State football program was propagated year after year with players possessing exceptionally savvy football minds — and therefore their success can't be replicated — or there is simplicity hidden within the complexity. After observing Harsin revamp the Texas offense over the last year, I'm now convinced of the latter.

The methodology of Harsin's offense is a lesson in specialization and efficiency. It's specialization that goes beyond the traditional personnel groupings and play packaging; the players themselves are actually specialized and packaged, as well. To understand any particular player's contributions, you have to go beyond his position and actually think about his role. Consider the case of D.J. Monroe in 2011. Categorically he was a tailback; by alignment he was a receiver and wing back, and yet his actual task was to be a sweep specialist and screen receiver. (While Monroe moved to the receiver position this offseason, his role in the offense essentially will stay the same.) The set of skills Monroe was asked to focus on was exceptionally specialized: take the ball on the perimeter, and turn the corner as fast as you can. Day after

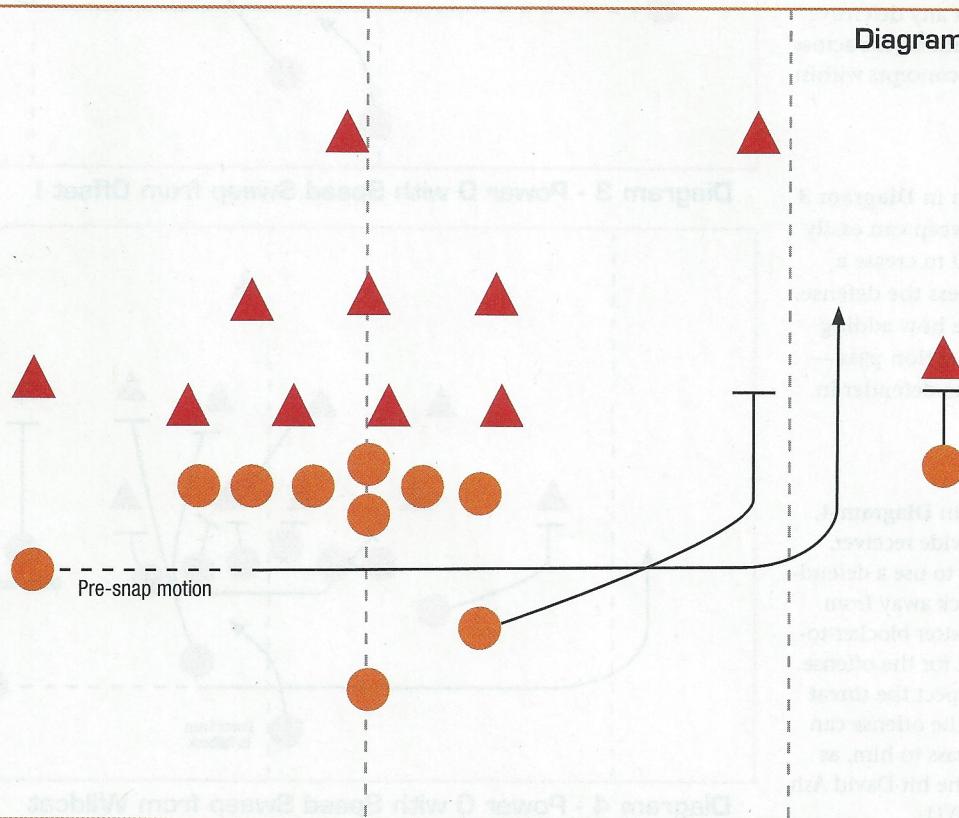
day in practice, Monroe is doing the same thing to perfect his craft, just as he would be in the offensive systems of Dana Holgorsen and Art Briles.

The difference is that where those offenses build complexity through a series of tags that alter a small set of plays, Harsin's offense achieves complexity by building and layering component plays on a week-to-week basis. In order to pull this off, the offense has to be deconstructed into focused ideas, and the offensive staff has to have the skill to teach new plays every week. Notwithstanding the fact that the offense constantly re-instantiates itself, if done properly, the players still wind up building skill through repetition. To illustrate how, let's look at a few of Texas' core offensive concepts and examples of how they were combined and re-combined throughout the year within this rapid play-building paradigm.

SPEED SWEEP CONCEPT

The Speed Sweep shown in Diagram 1 is a quick-hitting outside run concept. It can be a one-man concept (naked blocking), a two-man concept (one lead block) or a three-man concept (an inside blocker and outside blocker creating a running lane). In every context, the goal

Diagram 1 - Speed Sweep



of the sweeper is the same: get outside as fast as possible, find the corner of the defense, and turn up field.

POWER O CONCEPT

The Power O shown in Diagram 2 is an inside, physical running concept belonging to a larger category of what are known as gap-blocking schemes. Gap-blocking schemes streamline the learning of combination blocking, in a similar fashion to their better-known counterparts, zone-blocking schemes. The difference is that in gap schemes, the combination blocks utilize down blocks (angled blocks away from the intended point of attack) that first block down defenders, and then work to second-level defensive targets. While this is happening, one or more blockers are preparing to attack the defense at the targeted gap, in order to create a vertical lane for the running back.

The Power O blocking concept might be thought of as zone blocking away from the intended gap, combined with man blocking at the point of attack. This approach to blocking allows the offense to adjust to just about any defensive look and still identify its assignments. This scheme-based approach to blocking gives the offense the flexibility to make simple adjustments to just about any defensive front by reusing combination calls across all the different running concepts within each scheme.

OFFSET I

The Offset I formation in Diagram 3 shows how the Speed Sweep can easily be added to the Power O to create a tandem of plays that stress the defense. It is also easy to imagine how adding a third option — a play-action pass — would further exploit the defender in conflict.

WILDCAT

In the Wildcat shown in Diagram 4, the QB is displaced as a wide receiver, which forces the defense to use a defender to cover the quarterback away from the play and leads to a better blocker-to-defender ratio in the box for the offense. If the defense doesn't respect the threat that the QB poses, then the offense can just throw a wide open pass to him, as Jaxon Shipley did when he hit David Ash to seal the victory over BYU.

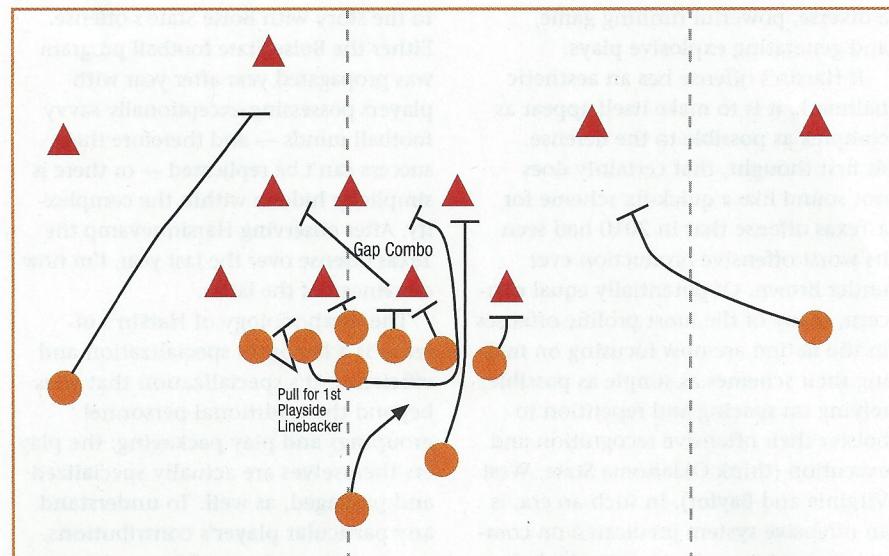


Diagram 2 - Power O Concept

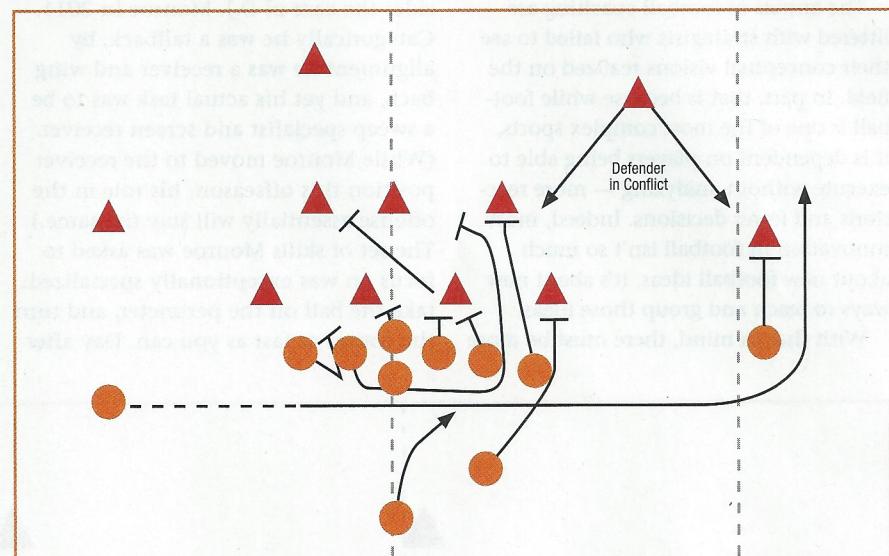


Diagram 3 - Power O with Speed Sweep from Offset I

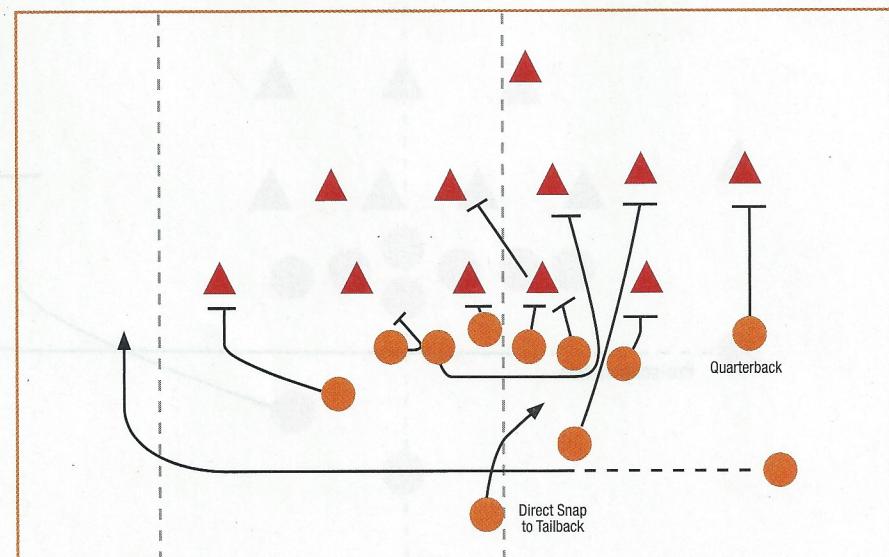


Diagram 4 - Power O with Speed Sweep from Wildcat

SPREAD

The two concepts can also be combined in a spread set, like the four-wide receiver set shown in **Diagram 5**. Reading a defender is another way for the offense to create a numbers advantage for the running game: if the defensive end stays in the box, the speed sweep should be successful; and if the defensive end instead attacks the sweep, then the QB can just follow the block of the pulling guard on the Power blocking for an easy gain.

Additionally, notice how the jobs for the five offensive linemen never change. Despite all the diversity in Bryan Harsin's running game, from the offensive linemen's perspective, there are really only six types of run blocking to know: inside zone, outside zone, gap, pin-and-pull, lead, and draw. So while the quarterback and blocking backs are learning play after play (they are the glue players), the unit whose development is the most repetition intensive (the offensive line) enjoys the benefit of blocking the same series over and over again.

This leap down the schematic rabbit hole isn't solely about understanding these specific offensive plays. Much more crucial is the glimpse it gives us into how very different sets of stresses can be applied to the defense simply by rearranging core concepts in the offense. To do so, for any given game plan the offensive staff must decide which plays they want to leverage against a defense, mold the personnel groupings and concept combinations, install the plays in the offense (if not already), and then rep the plays all week long.

Pulling that off week after week requires a careful orchestration of practice time, as well as strict attention to detail. It's football at a frenetic pace. If done correctly, it's also the basis for a culture of creativity and relentlessness. Who wouldn't want to play in an offense that is constantly trying out new plays, and where most players get a shot to contribute? This approach arms coaches with incredible game planning power once players settle into their roles and adjust to the dizzying practice pace. But, it also means that significant portions of the offense can be lost to injury (as we saw in 2011 with Fozzy Whittaker), and that the offense has to have glue players to tie all the different packaged roles together (perhaps the steepest learning curves are

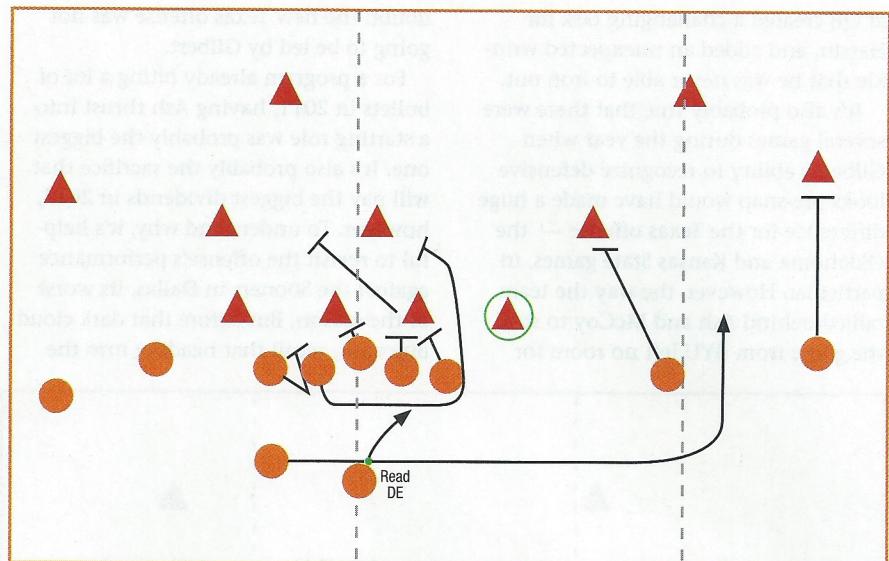


Diagram 5 - Power Read with Speed Sweep from 2 x 2

at tight end, H-back and quarterback). The offense doesn't just benefit from its highly modularized structure — it's inherently reliant on it.

All of this schematic back story hopefully helps paint a picture of a fairly compelling year one for Bryan Harsin in Austin — a first year in which his offensive system and decisions, in conjunction with youth, personnel gaps and injuries, produced a very turbulent set of offensive outcomes. But perhaps also a year in which he laid the groundwork for a compelling improvement in year two, wherein Harsin will be able to spend less attention on disaster mitigation, and devote more effort to featuring Texas' rapidly maturing offensive talents.

BATTLING THE PAST

It's worth recalling some of the reasons that Mack Brown hired Harsin. First and foremost, Brown had been talking about the desire for a downhill running game for the better part of a decade. Brown wanted new blood and excitement, but he definitely also wanted a coach who placed the same value on physical running that he did.

Harsin's philosophy takes Brown's idea a step further, attempting to shift the emphasis of the offense away from reliance on playmaking from the quarterback position, to building a personality through a physical running game. The idea is to create sustainable success on offense that features the sum of your talent, while buffering you from being crushed by one quarterback underachieving, or one

injury in a national championship game. Strangely enough, in Harsin's first year in Austin, it was quarterback play that hindered offensive success more than any other single factor.

The offense entered the 2011 season with a long list of issues that would have presented a significant challenge to any coordinator. Most notable were the pervasive youth and lack of depth across the entire offense. However, as usual, most of the trepidation that Texas fans felt heading into the season centered on the quarterback position.

When Harsin talks about the quarterback position, he talks about traits before skills: mental and physical toughness, competitiveness and understanding how to prepare for the game. Harsin most likely chose Garrett Gilbert as his starter, not because he believed him to be the best playmaker on the roster, but because more than the other two quarterbacks, Gilbert had the requisite traits that would help set the tone on offense and allow the running game to grow. Despite some of his obvious struggles, nobody questioned that Gilbert was a tough quarterback who wanted to compete.

No one could have predicted the dramatic fashion in which Gilbert would lose his starting job, and the manner in which Case McCoy and David Ash would be forced to play a much bigger part of the offense than Harsin had planned. In retrospect, I'm sure that Harsin would have approached the spring and pre-season practices very differently. As it played out, losing Gilbert as an option

at QB created a challenging task for Harsin, and added an unexpected wrinkle that he was never able to iron out.

It's also probably true that there were several games during the year when Gilbert's ability to recognize defensive looks pre-snap would have made a huge difference for the Texas offense — the Oklahoma and Kansas State games, in particular. However, the way the team rallied behind Ash and McCoy to steal the game from BYU left no room for

doubt: the new Texas offense was not going to be led by Gilbert.

For a program already biting a lot of bullets in 2011, having Ash thrust into a starting role was probably the biggest one. It's also probably the sacrifice that will pay the biggest dividends in 2012, however. To understand why, it's helpful to revisit the offense's performance against the Sooners in Dallas, its worst of the season. But before that dark cloud descends, recall that heading into the

Oklahoma game, the Texas offense was riding two impressive performances against UCLA and Iowa State. In those games, the Longhorns appeared to be drowning defenses in a waterfall-torrent of offensive ideas.

In fact, one of my favorite play calls of the year occurred early in the second quarter of the UCLA game. The Bruins had already been burned several times in the passing game, such that when Texas lined up in a 3 x 1 formation (three receivers to the left and one to the right), the UCLA defense responded by aligning both of the safeties outside the hashes (as they had done several times against earlier spread alignments). In this alignment, the Bruins were leaving the middle of the field open in order to provide extra support for the cornerbacks. Upon snapping the ball, Texas had its innermost receiver (Blaine Irby) run a stick route designed to influence the outside linebacker into widening toward the field side, after incorrectly keying that the offensive line was blocking for a passing play. Instead, Texas' offensive line was actually blocking a draw play right up the middle of the defense, featuring a fold block between the center, Dominic Espinosa, and the left guard, David Snow. A fold block is basically an exchange between two linemen, where one secures the down defender, while the other pulls around the block to attack a second level defender.

As you can see in **Diagram 6**, the fold block allowed both linemen advantageous angles on their targets, sealing out the only defenders in position to stop the play and putting Malcolm Brown in a one-on-one match up with UCLA's deep safety. The result was a wide open 16-yard run, a spectacular goal-line collision, the first college touchdown in a promising career and fans' first glimpse of Brown's averseness to shoes.

More than just putting points on the scoreboard, the play was significant because it demonstrated a hard counter to a simple problem that had been plaguing the Texas offense in recent years — namely, a defense cheating its alignment to close down on UT's outside threats. Whereas in the past the offense attempted to execute outside passing concepts against such looks, Harsin showed that he would not only attack an exposed part of the defense, but make sure his players were at an advantage every step of the

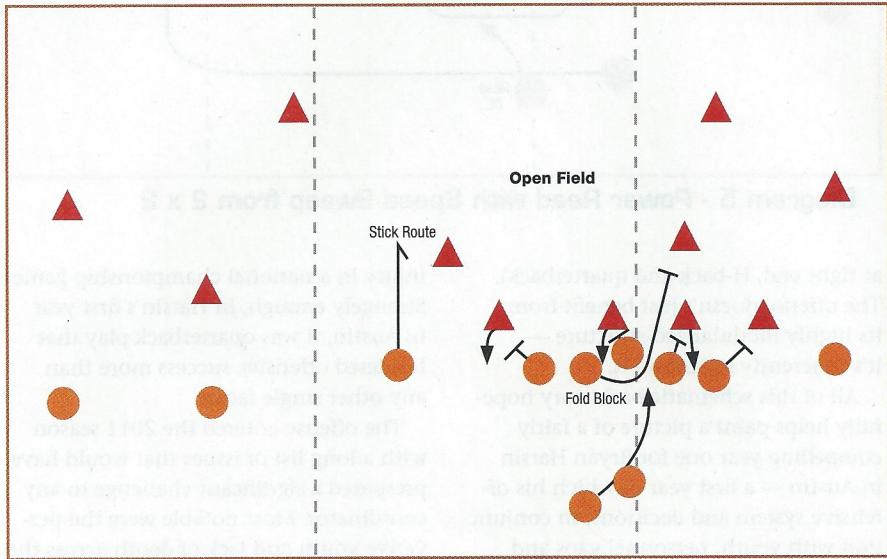


Diagram 6 - Stick - Draw vs. UCLA



This Malcolm Brown touchdown run against UCLA was one of the prettiest plays of 2011.

Photo by Jayne Kamin-Oncea-US Presswire

way. In the Iowa State game, there were similar moments when — despite playing a disciplined Cyclone defense — Texas was able to blow the game open via a few inspired play calls. Four games into the season, Texas fans were riding high, and Harsin seemed like a guy who could solve almost any problem.

OKLAHOMA TAKES THE FIELD

On October 8 in Dallas, the Texas offense was unceremoniously exposed and dispatched by Oklahoma. The Sooners made plain all of the gaps in experience and personnel that Texas fans knew constrained the upside for the 2011 team, but didn't want to admit. Against the third-ranked team in the country, the Texas offense was rotating two underclassmen quarterbacks with virtually no game experience, two tackles who were better suited to play guard, and had a freshman snapping the ball. The OU defense game-planned to limit Texas' offensive options by taking away its productive outside runs, and did so by bringing pressure from the field side and by attacking the offensive tackles with wide alignments from their edge personnel.

The two-play sequence that ended

Texas' first drive of the game was like an executive summary of UT's problems on offense. On first-and-10 from its 44-yard line, the Longhorns lined up in an empty, unbalanced 4 x 1 passing formation and ran QB Power for David Ash. The opportunity was there for a successful play, but as shown on **Diagram 7**, a misunderstanding of responsibility had Mason Walters and Tray Allen each

attempting to block Tony Jefferson, which allowed defensive end Frank Alexander to motor into the backfield unblocked. Either one of them could have easily blocked Alexander out of the play, but the lack of familiarity for the linemen with Texas' new gap-blocking scheme instead gave Oklahoma an easy tackle for loss.

On the very next play, Texas lined up

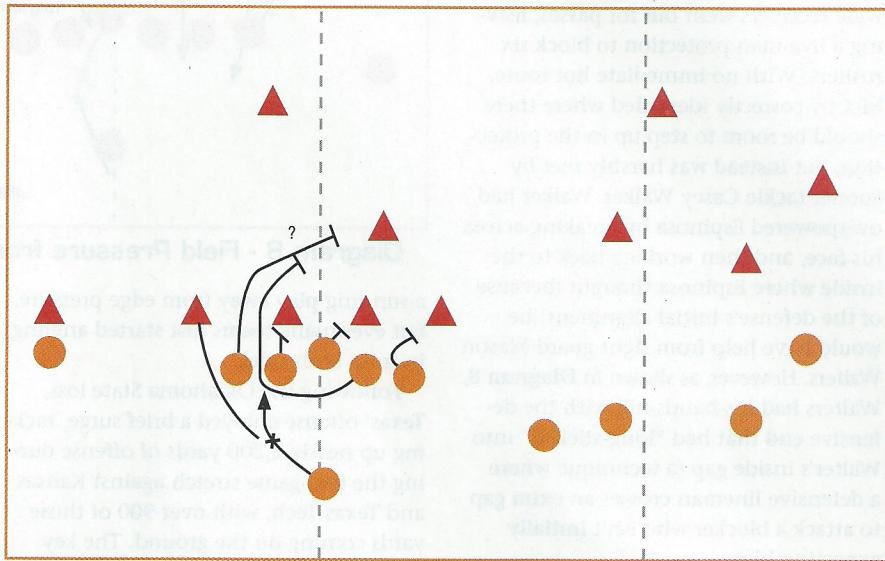


Diagram 7 - QB Power vs. Oklahoma



Oklahoma exposed the Texas offense in the Cotton Bowl.

Photo by Matthew Emmons-US Presswire

in another empty set on the left hash, this time with Case McCoy in the back-field. The Sooner defense aligned with five men on the line of scrimmage, with a sixth — a defensive back — creeping in from the field side of the formation just before the snap. The broadcast showed Texas' slot receiver trying to alert his quarterback to the threat, but McCoy didn't survey the field before calling for the ball. As the ball was snapped, five wide receivers went out for passes, leaving a five-man protection to block six rushers. With no immediate hot route, McCoy correctly identified where there should be room to step up in the protection, but instead was harshly met by Sooner tackle Casey Walker. Walker had overpowered Espinosa by breaking across his face, and then working back to the inside where Espinosa thought (because of the defense's initial alignment) he would have help from right guard Mason Walters. However, as shown in **Diagram 8**, Walters had his hands full with the defensive end that had "long-sticked" into Walter's inside gap (a technique where a defensive lineman crosses an extra gap to attack a blocker who isn't initially expecting him).

Again, there were simple ways to avoid this breakdown — a hot route, change in protection, or audible into a different play all would have mitigated the threat. Instead, lack of recognition combined with youth and physical limitations to create a disastrous result, as Walker's hard hit on McCoy resulted in a fumble and great field position for the OU offense. By the end of the game, the Longhorns had lost over 100 yards on negative plays, turned the ball over four times and gifted the Sooners three touchdowns. The majority of those plays could be tracked back to three main issues: physical limitations of the offensive tackles, lack of pre-snap recognition, and lots and lots of pressure from OU on the field side. Texas had a robust offensive structure in place, but much of the necessary substance was still missing.

NOT ALL PROBLEMS CAN BE IMMEDIATELY ADDRESSED

Oklahoma's success bringing pressure from the edges served as a template for many of the defensive ideas the 'Horns faced the rest of the season. The next week against Oklahoma State, Ash showed that he could check into

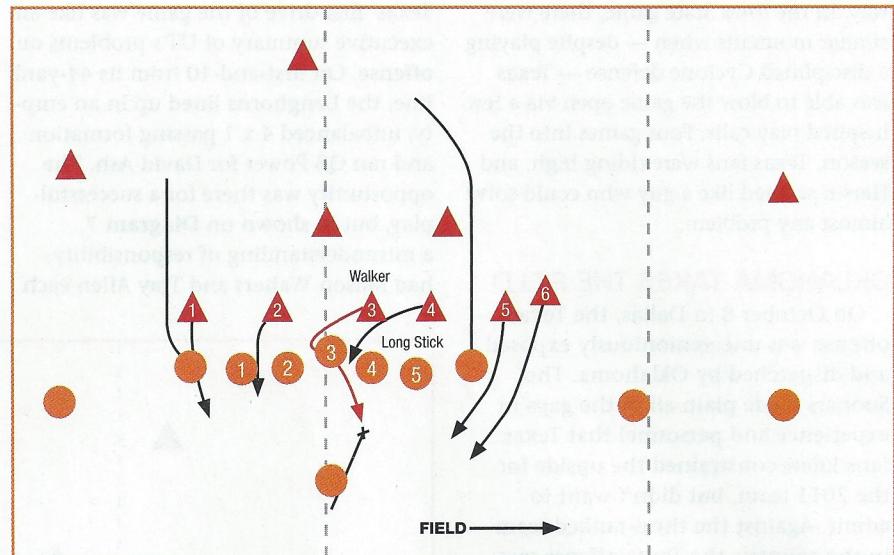


Diagram 8 - Field Pressure from Oklahoma

a running play away from edge pressure, but eventually teams just started angling in from both sides.

Following the Oklahoma State loss, Texas' offense enjoyed a brief surge, racking up nearly 1,200 yards of offense during the two-game stretch against Kansas and Texas Tech, with over 900 of those yards coming on the ground. The key seemed to be inserting offensive tackle Luke Poehlmann as a tight end. His ability to win battles against defensive ends allowed the offensive line to impose its will on the two less physical defenses. In one of his many displays of willingness to adapt to his team, Harsin went so far as to start lining up in goal-line personnel on first downs. He seemed to be saying, "If we can't help our running game by executing basic throws in the passing game, I may as well get as many blockers on the field as I can."

Defensive coordinators responded by playing only one deep safety, or no deep safeties at all, in order to bring extra defenders toward the line of scrimmage to attack the Longhorns from the outside in. The wager was that the Texas quarterbacks were more likely to throw an incompletion or interception than to exploit the undermanned coverage for a significant gain. Moreover, the insertion of Poehlmann as a tight end meant one less vertical threat the defense had to account for, mitigating much of the risk normally associated with playing man-free or straight-man coverage. It became clear that the only aspect of UT's offense that coordinators feared was the inside and outside running threats, and by

overloading the front with defenders, the diversity in the running game was much easier to deal with.

WHAT'S GOING TO CHANGE?

Far more than needing him to be a playmaker, the 2012 Texas offense needs Ash to avoid negative plays. If he can progress to the point where he can recognize box numbers and coverage shells in order to make check calls before the snap, that will go a long way toward realizing Harsin's goal of shifting emphasis away from the quarterback position. Better understanding his protections would also be extremely helpful, by allowing Ash to recognize when the blocking is outgunned, and where to look for running lanes as the protection engages the pass rush. If the bowl game against Cal and spring practices were valid indicators, we can expect Ash to make considerably fewer costly errors in 2012, and that's crucial to the development of the offense as a whole. Assuming the game slows down for him, the playmaking will follow fairly quickly.

As tough as 2011 was, Ash has plenty of physical tools that could make him a dangerous weapon at quarterback — he is a powerful runner with a strong arm on a big frame. If Ash's passing game does pick up in 2012, expect to see him running the ball more frequently, as well. Particularly with the outside running threats on the roster, the read game and QB draw from spread sets will give the offense a consistent numbers advantage on which Harsin would love to capitalize.

Ash is certainly not alone in that

regard. There is an abundance of young talent on offense right now that just needs a little operating room in order to start taking over football games. In addition to last year's young stars, Texas fans can expect to be dazzled by incoming speedy playmakers Daje Johnson and Jonathan Gray. Harsin has a system in place that will find and utilize their talents — expect to see Johnson in a role similar to D.J. Monroe's, while Gray is likely to be the new trigger man for the Wildcat.

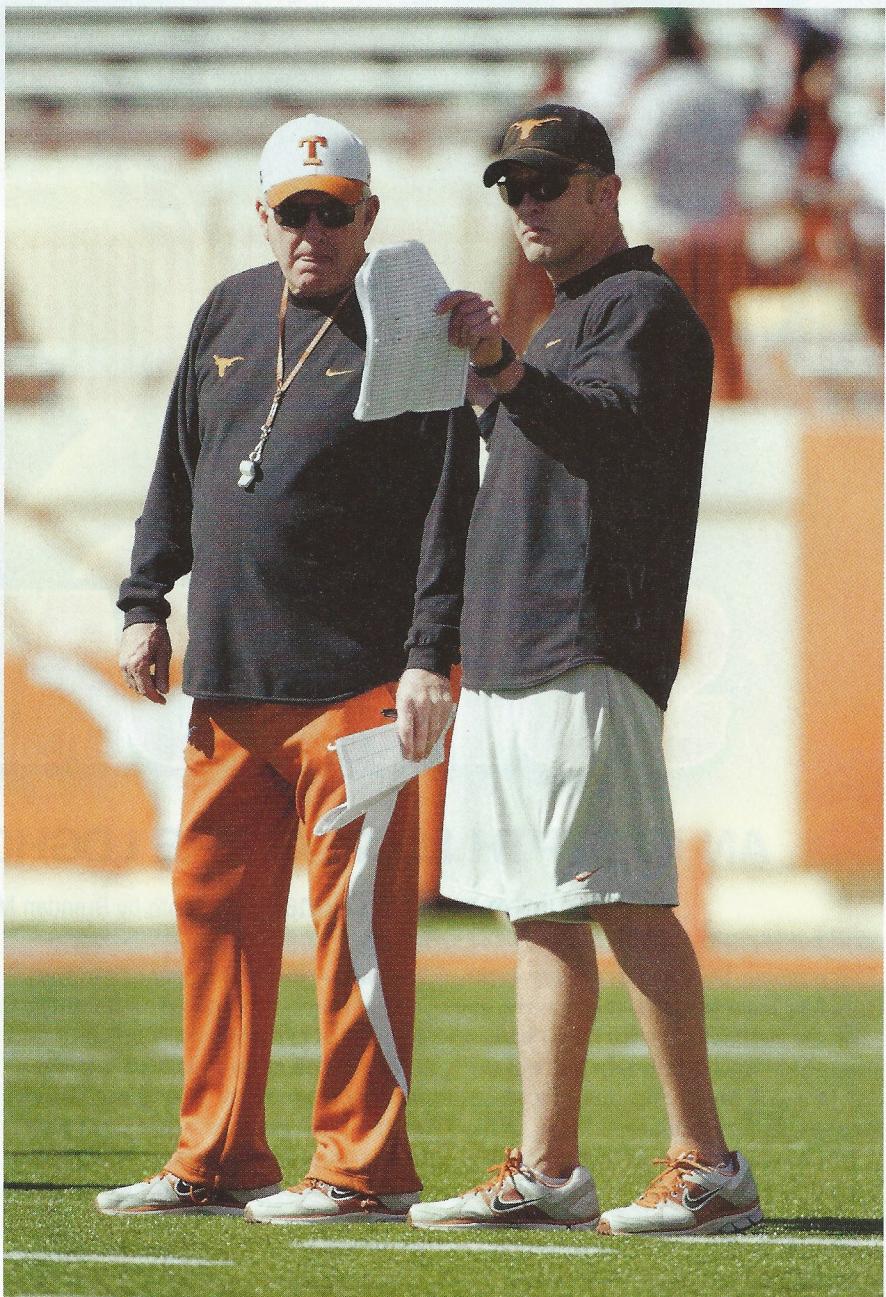
As exciting as it is to consider new skill talent, a few personnel gaps could continue to hamper the Longhorns in 2012. The struggles at the tight end position were evident throughout the 2011 season. All too often, otherwise well-blocked plays were stymied because the tight ends were not able to execute their assignments, and there's nothing about this year's group that indicates they will be significantly more successful in that regard. M.J. McFarland and D.J. Grant were the frontrunners for starting roles coming out of the spring, but while both present mismatches in the passing game, both have difficulty developing leverage as run blockers.

If there is one area where Harsin may need to focus schematically, it's on developing ways to keep his pass-catching tight ends involved in the game without asking them to regularly block a defensive end one-on-one. He may be able to accomplish this by incorporating additional techniques like arcing (releasing a tight end toward the sideline in order to influence the defender before contact), and by varying the assignment of the defensive end between the blocking backs, tight ends and offensive linemen. In addition, establishing the tight ends as passing threats would help improve their effectiveness in the running game, since they can occupy a defender as well by running a route.

Of course, the big upside for the Texas offense is in the play-action passing game. Run blocking improved significantly last season, notwithstanding the lack of assistance from the passing game. With the addition of a true left tackle in junior college transfer Donald Hawkins, along with Trey Hopkins' move from right tackle to his more natural position as a pulling left guard, the offense will enjoy continued progress not only in the running game, but in more robust pass protections as well.

Outside of tight end, the most pressing personnel challenge is building depth on the offensive line. If either of the starting tackles could not play for an extended period of time this season, it would be the biggest loss on offense outside of Ash. On the encouraging side, more depth at wide receiver and running back diffuses the potential for individual injuries at those positions to hamstring the team like they did last fall.

If last season was a story of rebirth, then 2012 should be a coming of age story — a year in which an offense under steady guidance begins to realize its full strength, but at other times still grapples with doubt and uncertainty. More importantly, this should be the season when the conversation shifts from the hardships that the Texas offense is trying to overcome, to the difficulty of trying to defend it.



Bryan Harsin looks to direct a more successful Texas attack in 2012.

Photo by Brendan Maloney-US Presswire