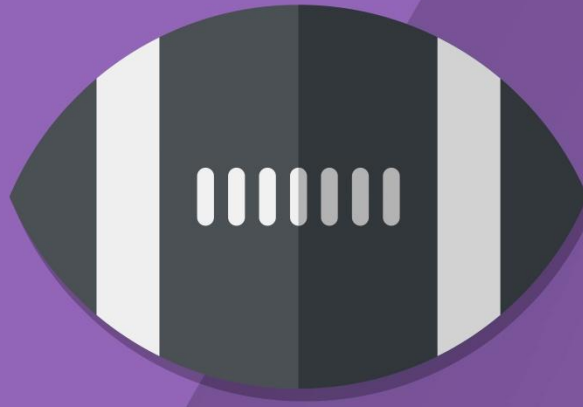




ESSENTIAL FOOTBALL TACKLING AND PURSUIT DRILLS

21

FUNDAMENTAL DRILLS
FOR A DOMINATING DEFENSE

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INTRODUCTION

Good ball pursuit and good tackling are cornerstones of a great defense.

In this mini-book, we have included 21 pursuit and tackling drills that will improve your players' defensive skills and allow you to build a highly effective, fundamentally sound defensive unit.

To help you better understand each drill we have included the skill level of each drill (beginner, intermediate and advanced) as well as its purpose, what is needed to run it, how it works and the expected result of the drill.

We have also included coaching tips to help you get the most out of each of the drills that you choose to run.

Start performing these drills consistently and watch your team's tackling and ball pursuit get better and better and better.

FORM TACKLE DRILL

Level:

Beginner

Purpose:

It's a must for kids to learn how to tackle properly – otherwise serious injury could occur.

What you need:

At first, you need a few tackling dummies to use for the littler players. Have coaches, parent helpers or other players hold them when the players use them to tackle.

How this drill works:

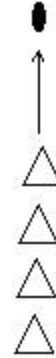
Kids will approach the tackling dummy at half speed and go through each motion very deliberately before they get to do it full speed. They need to be able to execute the proper form before they get to hit the dummy hard, or start tackling other players.

Result:

Fewer injuries down the road as kids learn the best way to tackle their opponent.

Coaching Tips:

- In this drill you want to go over the fundamentals of tackling: the breakdown, the lean, keeping your head up, and then the thrust through with your hips and midsection to drive the player back.



Learning proper tackling technique will seriously reduce the risk of kids suffering neck injuries.

AGILITY TACKLE DRILL

Level:

Beginner

Purpose:

Kids learn to get around obstacles to make the tackle.

What you need:

Lie tackling dummies on the ground around the player and then move the ball one way or another.

How this drill works:

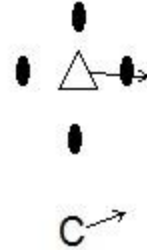
As you move, your player should follow, and still try to avoid the tackling dummies littered on the ground.

Result:

This is a great drill for building a young player's agility.

Coaching Tips:

- Make sure players are keeping their heads up and also seeing the dummies to elude them and make the tackle.



Players learn to avoid “ground clutter” and get in position to make the tackle in this drill.

ROLL OVER AND RECOVER DRILL

Level:

Beginner

Purpose:

Linebackers who are put to the ground learn how to get up and get back into the play.

What you need:

Create a hole for the running back to go through (off tackle) and have the linebacker line up as the middle LB. The linebacker will be on the ground.

How this drill works:

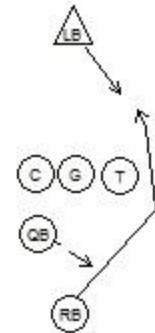
When the whistle blows, the linebacker will roll over and then get up to try and make the tackle.

Result:

Linebackers improve their ability to recover from a knockdown, get up and possibly make a play on the ball.

Coaching Tips:

- You should reward your linebackers for making a play, and penalize the running backs if they get brought down.



In this drill, linebackers learn to get off the ground and make the tackle.

CONTAIN DRILL

Level:

Beginner

Purpose:

Players learn contain principles which reduce the chance of an opponent breaking a big run.

What you need:

Line up the defensive line on the ball. You can also add linebackers into this drill, especially if you are running a 3-4 defense. Have a tackling dummy as a barrier for where a defensive end can go.

How this drill works:

A tackling dummy is placed perpendicular to the line of scrimmage at the outside of the tackle. If the defensive end has contain responsibility, he cannot go inside this area or get blocked into this area or otherwise the contain is lost and the team can run the ball outside. The same applies for a linebacker.

Result:

Once a player gets burned on their contain coverage a few times, they will learn the importance of discipline in that position.

Coaching Tips:

- An eager defensive end can get burned to the outside (or a linebacker) if they do not remember their contain responsibilities. This drill – and you – should remind them of that.



In this drill, the defensive end can't get pushed inside the tackling dummy as he would lose contain to the outside.

ANGLE OF ATTACK DRILL

Level:

Beginner

Purpose:

Players learn how to make a tackle when they don't have a straight angle of attack.

What you need:

Have a linebacker face a RB in this drill, about 10 yards apart. 10 yards to the right or left, you will also have cone.

How this drill works:

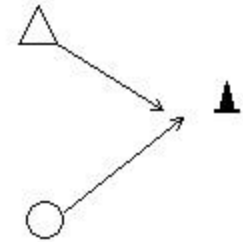
The RB will already have the ball, so upon the snap he takes off toward the outside of the cone and the linebacker will need to pick an angle of pursuit to make the tackle.

Result:

Players develop a greater understanding of angle pursuit.

Coaching Tips:

- Proper angle tackling technique should be taught to players (helmet across, in front) and you should also go over how defenders should approach players when they are trying to tackle at angle (pick good angles).



Players learn how to pick the proper angle of attack when attempting to tackle a ball carrier.

HOLD AND TACKLE DRILL

Level:

Intermediate

Purpose:

Defensive linemen and linebackers learn to hold a block to fill a gap or a hole, and then shed it to make a tackle.

What you need:

You can have two coaches on tackling dummies (or players), and you will need a defensive lineman. You can run this at more than one station.

How this drill works:

On the snap of the ball, the lineman, or linebacker will engage the tackling dummy (blue) and have quick chopping steps, but stay in a stationary position. When the runner comes along, the defensive player must disengage from the dummy and try to make the tackle. The defensive player must stay engaged until the runner reaches the pylon – and then they can shed the block and try to make the tackle.

Result:

Defensive linemen and linebackers gain the ability to fill the gaps and then make the tackle once the runner gets through the line.

Coaching Tips:

- To make this drill more difficult, add another tackling dummy, or make the line live and have the defender have to fight through the blocks in order to make the tackle. In that case, make sure the offensive lineman give the defender a chance to shed the block and make the tackle.



Defenders learn to shed the block and make the tackle in this competitive drill.

DRIVE TO SIDELINES DRILL

Level:

Intermediate

Purpose:

Defensive linemen and linebackers learn to get away from arm tackling and instead start getting their body across and in front of ball carriers

What you need:

This is a drill that is primarily for linebackers. Defensive lineman can participate as well.

How this drill works:

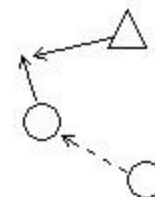
This is a very simple tackling drill that you can run to get your players used to tackling with their bodies, rather than with their arms. The thrower tosses the ball to a receiver (which can be a linebacker or D-lineman in this drill) and the defender must approach the ball carrier with his arms outstretched as though he were going to make a tackle. The important part of this drill is that the player NOT wrap, but make sure his head is up and that the head goes to the sideline side of the ball carrier's body. Then he must continue to drive that player to the sideline, without using the hands.

Result:

Better tackling technique and a reduction in attempted arm tackles.

Coaching Tips:

- The ball carrier should not run at full speed. Instead this is a drill about the proper way to tackle when going to the sidelines. Players should not rely on their arms to make tackles.



In this drill, players learn to keep their heads up and not use their arms as they drive the offensive player to the sideline.

BLOCK, RELEASE AND TACKLE DRILL

Level:

Intermediate

Purpose:

Defensive linemen and linebackers get the chance to make tackles after shedding blocks.

What you need:

Coaches will start off with two or three tackling dummies. Later, the offensive line can work with the defensive line, to help them perfect this skill.

How this drill works:

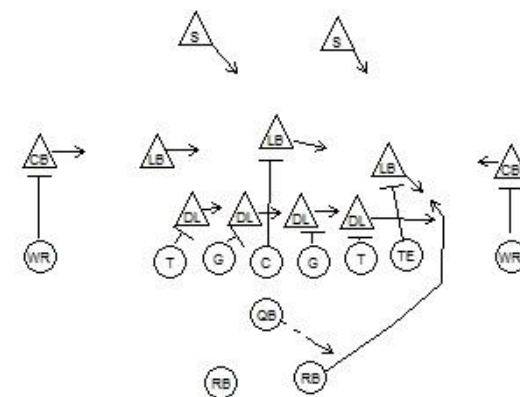
At first, this drill should be run at half speed. This will be the ideal way for linemen and linebackers to build the skills they need to shed tackles and make plays. Upon the snap of the ball, coaches with tackling dummies will assume the positions that the blockers would take. The defensive lineman will work on the following: fighting against the direction of the block, using their hands to fight the block off, recognizing where the ball carrier is, and then making the tackle. Linebackers will work on the following: recognizing where the ball is going, fighting off any blockers, and following the flow of the play until the ball carrier is taken down.

Result:

Your defensive line and linebackers develop the necessary skills to meet, shed and make tackles.

Coaching Tips:

- When you add real offensive linemen, continue to run the drill at half speed and make sure the linemen allow the DL and LB to work on their technique to make the plays.



Defensive linemen and linebackers learn to shed blocks and make tackles.

GET SOME GET UP DRILL

Level:

Intermediate

Purpose:

Players learn when they get put to the ground to get up fast, face more blockers and then try to make a tackle.

What you need:

Set up four tackling dummies or if you have a blocking sled, you can use that as well.

How this drill works:

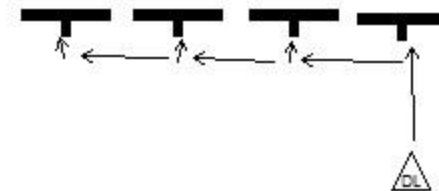
This drill starts when the coach's whistle blows and the player hand shivers and holds the sled or tackling dummy while chopping their feet up and down, and then when the whistle blows again, they drop down, roll to their left, and then hit the next part of the sled or the dummy. Then you repeat.

Result:

Improved agility and ability to get back into the play if they have been blocked to the ground.

Coaching Tips:

- By the end of this drill, your player is going to be tired, however, they are going to be much better prepared to engage blockers, be knocked over, engage and then get back into the play.
- To add an extra element to this drill, you can have a running back or receiver come straight off tackle and the defensive player needs to make the hit on them when they cross the line of scrimmage.



Players learn the important of being able to get back up after being knocked down in this drill, which is also a great conditioning drill.

AGAINST THE BLOCKS DRILL

Level:

Intermediate

Purpose:

Defenders learn to fight off blocks and make plays.

What you need:

Coaches on tackling dummies, and then when the offense and defense are brought together, they can each work on their respective skills.

How this drill works:

The coach will pretend that he is an offensive lineman and trying to make a block on the defensive lineman. The player should attempt to make contact and then shed the block once he knows which direction the blocker is trying to push him. Or, they should use their arms to try and fend off a block to get in better position.

Result:

Players learn to fight off the block of offensive players, which increases their chance of being able to make a play on the ball.

Coaching Tips:

- Defensive players should be taught to go against the flow of the block – not the flow of the play. If the offensive lineman is pushing them to the right, they need to fight left, and vice versa.



Players learn to overcome blocks and get in position to make the tackle.

DOUBLE TEAM FIGHT OFF DRILL

Level:

Intermediate

Purpose:

Defensive linemen learn how to fight through a double team.

What you need:

You will need two offensive linemen, and a defensive lineman – or you can have two coaches with dummies or shields acting as an offensive lineman.

How this drill works:

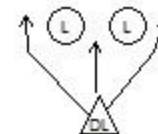
First, your defensive linemen can try to split the offensive linemen by going hard up the middle, and hoping neither reacts fast enough to prevent the split. Second, the DL can fake one way and get the offensive linemen to shift that direction, and then go around them. And third, the DL can try to hit the outside shoulder of one of the offensive linemen, as a speed rush. This might catch them off guard.

Result:

Improved skills as a pass rusher.

Coaching Tips:

- The object of this drill is to help your defensive linemen understand how to break a double team. It isn't easy, but they should work on methods of upsetting the offensive line scheme in order to break free of the two blockers.



Good defensive linemen are often double-teamed. In this drill, they learn how to fight out of the double team and make plays.

DROP AND REACT DRILL

Level:

Intermediate

Purpose:

Linebackers learn to drop back into zone coverage and then react to a running play.

What you need:

Set up your standard linebacker alignment (3 or 4 backers), and one quarterback and running back.

How this drill works:

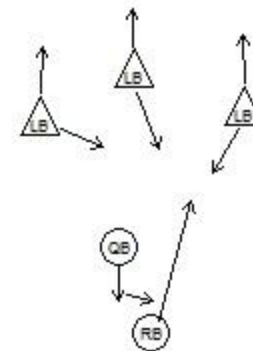
On the snap of the ball, the linebackers will drop into their zone assignment. At this time, they need to react to the play and then close on the running back.

Result:

As a linebacker starts to learn to read the plays, he will be able to back into his zone and then react quickly and break towards the runners.

Coaching Tips:

- The quarterback and the running back can do a number of things to throw off the linebackers, like: play action, straight running play, or just a straight drop back pass.



In this drill, linebackers must react fast, get out of their drops and pursue the ball carrier.

STRIP DRILL

Level:

Intermediate

Purpose:

Linebackers learn to create turnovers by stripping the ball.

What you need:

Set up a 'pit' area for this drill to take place. You will have two linebackers and one RB.

How this drill works:

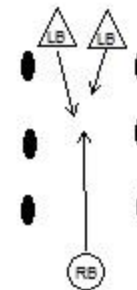
The drill will start with the RB carrying the ball. The coach will blow the whistle and the RB bursts forward. The first linebacker will make contact with the RB, and then the second LB will come up and attempt to strip the ball away from the runner. The RB can choose to take on the attack, avoid it or to get as much forward progress as possible, and protect the ball. This is also a great drill for the RBs to learn to hold on to the ball.

Result:

LBs learn to find the ball and pull it away from runners, and the RBs learn a little bit better ball control.

Coaching Tips:

- LBs should be taught to find the tip of the ball in the runners arms and then use their body as leverage to 'rip' it away from the runner. The runner, upon contact should learn to cover the ball with both arms for protection.



The basic idea of this drill is for the LBs to make contact and then strip the ball.

OUTSIDE SHOULDER DRILL

Level:

Intermediate

Purpose:

Linebackers learn to take the outside shoulder and make sure a play cannot turn the corner so that the runner is forced back inside.

What you need:

A skeleton offense, and 3 linebackers (maybe more later).

How this drill works:

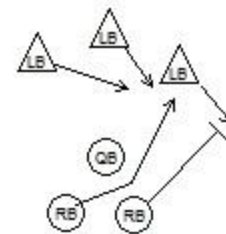
This is a running play to the outside, and the lead back is going to take on the first linebacker to make the block so the RB can get to the outside and make a big run. The object for the outside linebacker is to get to the outside shoulder of the blocker (shoulder nearest the sideline) in order to turn the play back inside where there is defensive help.

Result:

You avoid giving up a lot yards on the outside by teaching your LBs to attack the outside shoulder of blockers on their way to making a tackle.

Coaching Tips:

- If a player goes for the inside shoulder, they can be caved inside and the play can easily get outside.
- Repeat this play until the defense can force the ball inside and make the play. Switch up linebackers and RBs each time the drill is successfully run by the LBs.



Linebackers learn to force the play back inside in this competitive drill.

DROP AND RUN COVER DRILL

Level:

Intermediate

Purpose:

Defenders learn how to react when the drop into a zone and it is a running play.

What you need:

Run this drill with a skeleton offense (QB, RBs, WRs) and defense (DBs, LBs).

How this drill works:

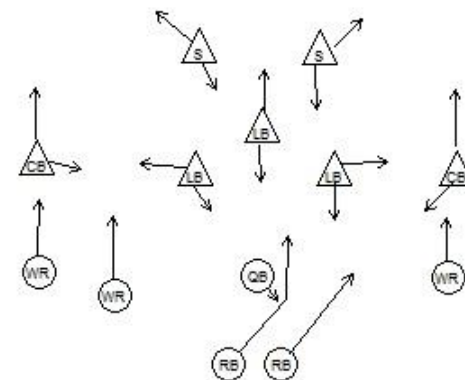
The offense will line up, and the defense will call a defensive pass coverage (zone coverage). Upon the snap of the ball, the defense will drop into their coverage. Occasionally, the offense should throw in a running play, so the defenders have to react to the run after they have dropped back into their respective zone.

Result:

Players learn to read and recognize the plays that are coming and they learn to get into their zone and then be prepared to come up and make the plays for run support.

Coaching Tips:

- Watch that players are making quick breaks to the ball once they read and recognize that a particular play is a run.



Players learn to react to a running play after dropping into a zone.

READ AND RECOGNIZE DRILL

Level:

Intermediate

Purpose:

Defenders learn to read what the offense is doing so they have a jump on making a tackle for a loss.

What you need:

Without the offensive or defensive lines, line up a quarterback, two RB's and two WR and a TE. On the defensive side of the ball, have linebackers, cornerbacks and safeties line up opposite.

How this drill works:

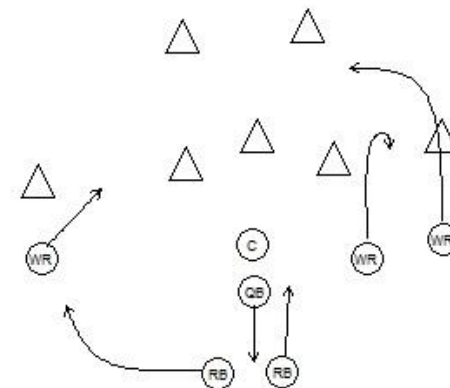
Upon the snap of the ball, cornerbacks will cover their men, but keep an eye on the play. Linebackers may drop into zone coverage, or they may be waiting to pick up their men on coverage. But, they also have to be aware of a running play. This is when they read the way the play develops.

Result:

Players learn to read the actions of offensive players and be able to react better.

Coaching Tips:

- Reading what is going to happen on a play is a key element of a great defensive player. If you can build those recognition skills in your players it will improve your overall defense.



In this drill, players learn to recognize what the offense is doing.

INSIDE RUNNER DRILL

Level:

Advanced

Purpose:

Defensive players learn the advantage of turning a running back to the inside of the field.

What you need:

You can line up a defensive line and linebackers if you like, or just linebackers.

How this drill works:

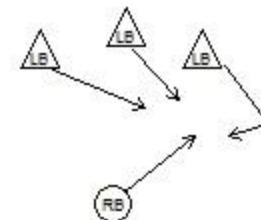
At half speed to start, a RB should run the ball wide and the LB need to react to this. The idea of this drill is to get the runner to cut back inside where there is more help for a tackle.

Result:

Players learn to take potential long inside gains and turn them into short runs stopped by pursuing tacklers.

Coaching Tips:

- Emphasize to players that turning a play back inside limits the chance that a player will get beat one-on-one – which could result in a long gain.
- You can up the speed as players begin to understand the skill and when they perfect the technique.



Defenders practice turning running backs to the inside of the field.

STRING IT OUT DRILL

Level:

Advanced

Purpose:

Defenders learn to string out a play by stuffing the different gaps and taking on blocks early in an offensive play's development.

What you need:

You can field a full offense and defense for this drill, but it should only be run at half speed to illustrate the tactic.

How this drill works:

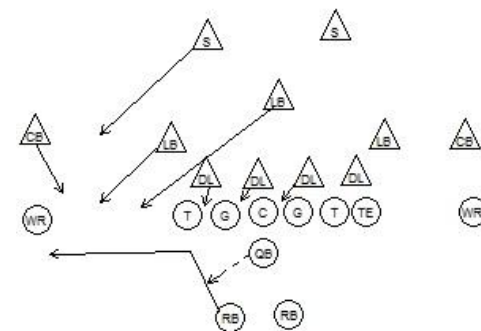
In this drill, the defense has to try to plug all of the holes and take on all of the blockers in order to string the outside running play right to the sideline.

Result:

Filling holes and taking on blocks makes it hard for an RB to find a place to run.

Coaching Tips:

- Pursuit on an outside play should try to plug up all holes and take on all blockers so there is no blocking downfield for a runner.



Players learn to fill gaps and string a play out to the sideline.

SHED THE BLOCKER AND TACKLE DRILL

Level:

Advanced

Purpose:

Linebackers and defensive lineman learn how to shed several blocks in order to string a play out to the sideline and then make the tackle.

What you need:

Line up the defender at one end, with 3 players or tackling dummies lined up across from them. There will also be a runner that the defensive player must tackle in this drill..

How this drill works:

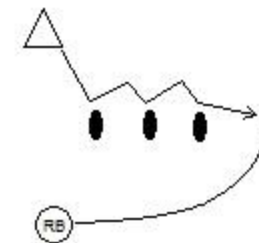
The runner (yellow) starts with the ball and runs $\frac{3}{4}$ speed to the right. Once the runner reaches the outside of the final tackling dummy (blue) then they can turn up field at full speed. In the meantime, the defender (red) will sprint to the first bag, punch it (heel shiver with both hands), go to the second bag, punch it and then the third bag and punch it – then on to make the tackle. The defender must try to do this at full speed in order to catch up with the runner.

Result:

Your defensive players will build their ability to shed blocks and make a defensive play even after contact.

Coaching Tips:

- The object of the drill is to help linebackers and defensive linemen quickly shed blocks in order to string a running play to the outside and then make the tackle on or near the sidelines.
- You can make this slightly more difficult for the defender by replacing the tackling dummies with actual lineman or lead blockers.



Players practice shedding blockers and getting to the ball carrier in this drill.

TACKLE SEARCH DRILL

Level:

Advanced

Purpose:

Players learn to read the play and react to the ball carrier.

What you need:

You can divide players into groups of 5 or 6 and have two pylons placed about 5 yards apart. The players line up, single file behind the first pylon. The first player steps out to the second pylon, with his back to everyone else.

How this drill works:

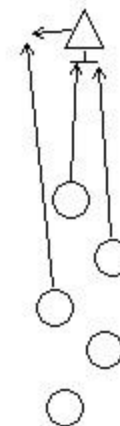
The player alone at the first cone will have his back to the rest of the players to start the drill. The coach will give the ball to any one of the players left in the group of 5. When the whistle blows, the lone player must search through the other players to find the ball carrier and make the tackle. The player comes out one at a time. The players coming out, that do not have the ball must 'pop' the linebacker at the other cone. The linebacker must shed that block and prepare to take on the next block, or to make the tackle if it is the ball carrier.

Result:

This is a great drill to learn which of your defensive players has a head for the game of football. It can become an intense drill, especially with the older players, and you will see your best players rise above the rest in this drill.

Coaching Tips:

- Watch for good stable technique when the player is shedding blocks (power stance, good stable core, and shoulders and knees lowered). Then, of course, good tackling technique is a must.



In this drill, the defender must identify the player with the ball and then make the tackle.

ENGAGE, DROP AND TACKLE DRILL

Level:

Advanced

Purpose:

Defensive linemen are going to get put down to the ground, here they learn to get back up and try to make the tackle.

What you need:

Have a center and two guards line up with a running back for the offense, and one defensive lineman lined up directly across from one of these positions.

How this drill works:

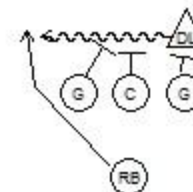
On the snap of the ball, the defensive lineman will engage the offensive lineman across from him with a quick pop, then will drop down to his knees, read the play and then bear crawl over to try to tackle the runner. The offensive lineman where the play will be running will stay in position and try to keep the defensive lineman from making a play on the runner.

Result:

Defensive linemen get a taste of what it is like in the trenches with this drill – helping them to learn to hit, drop and then fill running lanes.

Coaching Tips:

- The quicker a defensive lineman can make the initial contact, drop to his knees and then read the play, the greater the chance he can make a play on the runner, and avoid the block from the other defensive lineman.



This is a tough drill for the defensive lineman, going up against three offensive linemen, however, it is often the case when defensive linemen are knocked over and to the ground, and must get back up immediately to fill a hole where the runner might be coming.

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