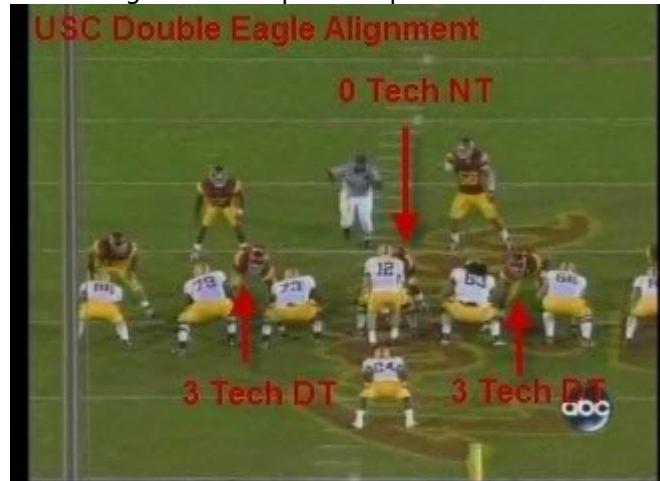


# USC 4-3 Under Defense - Pete Carroll

This article is a re-post that I have been meaning to move over onto the new area of the site for some time now. USC is not strictly under front as the Trojans have used a double eagle alignment the past couple of seasons.



However the under front is Pete Carroll's base defense and the one he states he knows the best. I'll add some pictures of different USC defensive front four alignments before the season starts. For the time being here is Pete Carroll's description of his version of a 4-3 based under alignment and a few adjustments. The initial diagram in the presentation below assumes a two back scenario and Cover 1 Flex in the secondary and this is often what you will see USC line up versus I formation teams.



# Pete Carroll

## Head Football Coach

### University of Southern California

It is always a pleasure to speak for Nike at these coaching clinics. I'm pleased to be here. When I was in the NFL we didn't talk to anyone about what we were doing or share anything with anyone.

Nike has done a fantastic job of giving us the opportunity to speak at these clinics. It is a lot of fun to visit with high school coaches. I know you guys are coming to these clinics to try to find ways to get better. We are doing the same thing. We are talking football and always trying to find ways to get better also.

I have been asked to talk about defense. I am going to start off with some general things and then move onto our specific schemes. I am really excited about being at USC and our team. I grew up in California and was always captured by the special atmosphere and style that surrounded USC.

To be here after all these years and get a chance to coach here is really thrilling.

I want to talk a little philosophy to give you a feel about how we run our approach to the defense. After that I'll work my way into our main defensive schemes. After all these years of coaching I continue to look for better ways to do things and improve. I found that after all these years I'm seeing things clearer than I used to. I am able to benefit from all the mistakes, screw ups, bad ideas, and bad games plans of the past.

My role as head coach is very simple. I have to orchestrate the performance of our players on game day. When you realize all that you have to do it can be overwhelming. If I can get game day performance to its height and get our players playing well then I can blend together the things I need to do to get that mix.

Some of these things are very basic, but you have to do a lot of little things right. If you don't you will find there are areas within your football team that are going backwards. We don't want to give our opponents an advantage anywhere.

If there are things in our program that we would like to do but we don't execute well we don't do them. We have to have all our schemes, clock management, and game plans in order. If we don't have them in order we don't attempt to do them on game day. I have found over the years that the more you try to do the thinner you spread yourself. The thinner you spread yourself the more apt you are to make mistakes and errors. To be a good football team you have to be hard to beat.

That means you are not beating yourself with mistakes and turnovers.

To do those things well you have to have a clear vision of what you want your team to look like.

You have to know that so well that you can convince your players and coaches of what they should see when they watch films of your team. If they can't do that then they are still misguided by their vision.

My philosophy is real simple. I want to play football with a team that plays with great effort in all phases of the game. Players have to play with great enthusiasm. That type of play energizes your team, staff, and everyone in the stadium.

The thing that I believe in is playing smart. This has to do with everything we do. It is what the coaches ask the players to do and how the coaches handle the game itself. It is the solid techniques they teach, the game they call, and the system they use. It is also our players on game day as to the way they handle the game. I want our players to be prepared for every situation that may arise in a game so they can make the proper decisions. I want them to have confidence and to play like they have been there before.

If we play with great effort, enthusiasm, and play smart, we have a chance to play well. Philosophy is like a rail road track. If you are off the tracks you have a bumpy road to travel.

You know something is wrong but you do not know how to fix it. The philosophy is the guideline that puts you back on the track. My philosophy about our football team is really simple. It is all about the ball. In all areas of football game if you don't have the ball you are nothing.

On offense, we want to take care of the football for as long as we can until we score. That doesn't sound like there is much to that statement. Every phase of our offense has to be geared to taking care of the ball. Obviously I'm talking about not turning the ball over. We want to keep making first downs and keep the ball until we score. We want to guard the ball with our lives. If we can do that on offense then we have a chance.

We want to constantly remind the team of possessing the ball. When our players are standing around with a ball in their hands a coach will walk over and try to knock the ball out of his hands. We do it on the sidelines at a game, in practice, or anywhere to remind them of how important it is. There has to be a conscious mind set of taking care of the ball.

Defensively we do a lot of different things. However we play defense not just to stop people or make them go three and out. We play defense to get the football. Every time the ball is snapped the defense tries to take the ball away from the offense. If the defense can take the ball away from the offense they are going to give it to the offense which is going to keep it until they can score. The offense can not score without the football. For that matter the defense can score if they get possession of the football.

Coaching football is a collection of a lot of little philosophies or beliefs. I don't know quite how to describe it, but there are a lot of little philosophies in everything that we do. It goes from holding onto the football to coaching stances or getting after the football on defense.

I have been fortunate in my career. When I started out coaching I spent three years as a graduate assistant. No one would hire me at first or even send me a rejection letter. A good friend of mine told me that there was a graduate assistant's job open at the University of Arkansas. That was the year Lou Holtz went there as the head coach. I got the position and it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

During that time I got to work with Monte Kiffin's staff on defense. He had been at Nebraska before he came to Arkansas. I think he is one of the best coaches in the United States. He is just an unbelievable coach. He ran a 4-3 under defense that he perfected at Nebraska and they won a national title and many conference titles while he was there in the 1970's. He brought that same

defense to Arkansas. I have been running that same base defense since 1977 when I learned it from him. I have used variations of this defense my entire career. I have stayed with its principles through all my years of coaching. I have a real strong belief in this defense. I know the defense and its adjustments so well that my belief system in it is strong and rock solid.

There is no offensive play calling or defensive scheme that is going to win national championships for you. It is how you can adapt and adjust to making the schemes work. The only way you can do that is to have a strong belief system. If you can't say what your philosophy is or tell others what you believe in then you don't have a philosophy.

The most important thing we do as head coaches is practice and preparation. You play like you practice. If you practice badly that is the way you will play. You have to design your practice for the players to get out of them what you want. Coaches have to envision how they want their practices to be and make it happen. If you come to one of our practices, you will see wall to wall enthusiasm. You will see and hear our players and our coaches really getting into what we are doing. They will be burning hard for an hour and 45 minutes with competition coming from every drill.

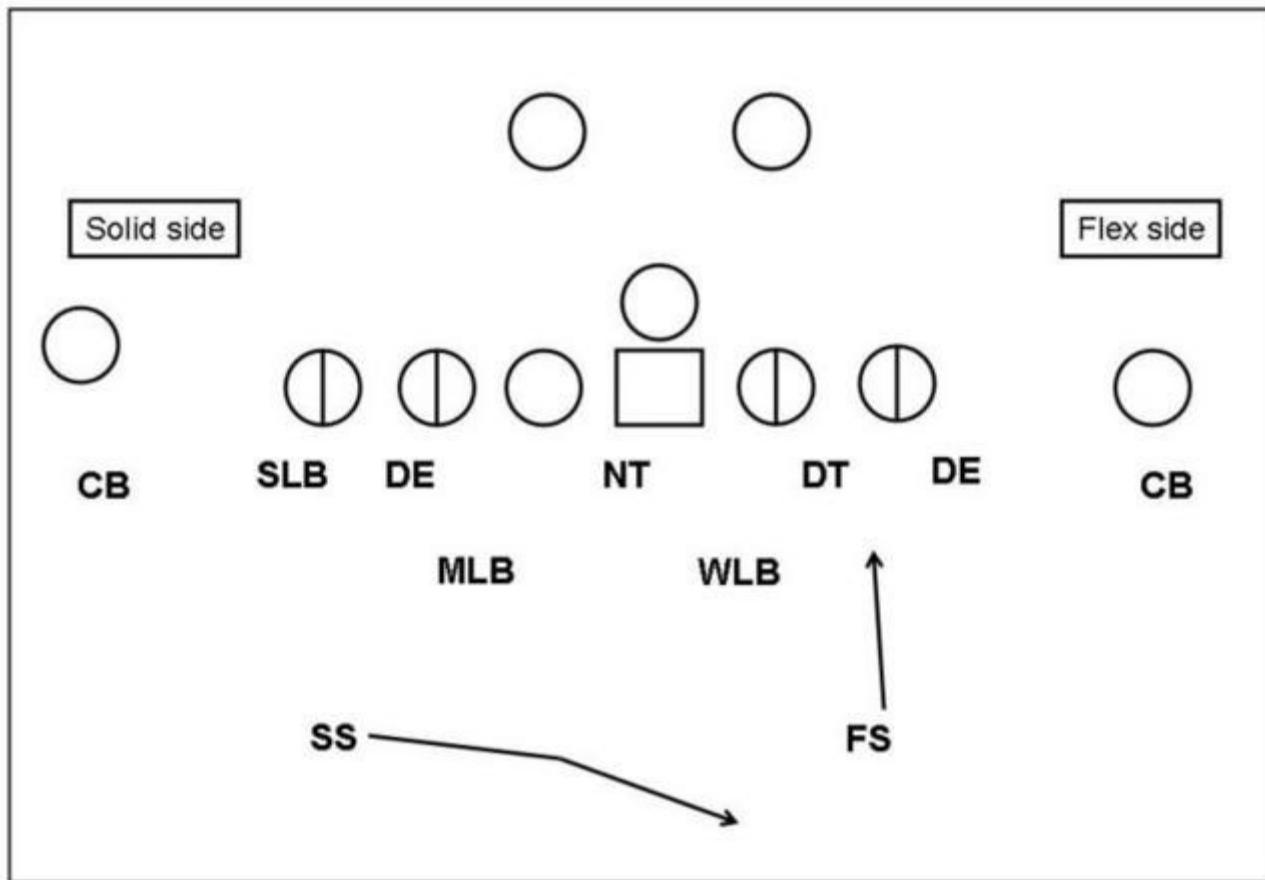
Any phase of practice I can get players to compete against each other, I'm doing it. They stay on task for every drill we do. I want our practices to be uplifting, challenging, and physical. I want something at stake on every snap. If something isn't at stake he is not going to do his best. So why would you ever have practice where players are not trying their best?

I want to talk with you now about our base defense the "4-3 under". This defense has stood the test of time. This front and secondary concept is the same basic one Monte Kiffin brought to Arkansas in 1977. This is the same defense we adapted and ran at the Minnesota Vikings together with Floyd Peters. It is the same base defense I ran at USC. We have run this defense so long and tweaked it so well that it is simple and easy to adjust. It is a good defense for stopping the run and can give you an aggressive pass rush.

The front of the defense is called a "4-3 under" defense. We use it in combination with different secondary schemes such as Cover 1, 2, 3, or man to man coverage, etc. I'll start out by explaining the 4-3 under in conjunction with Cover 1. In this case we'll call it Under-Cover-1 Flex (Diagram 1). The flex call means that free safety is going to the split end side of the offense. The word flex is just a term we use in reference to the split end side of the offensive line. The tight end side we call the solid side. From this front we get a "gap control" type of play. When you put a defensive lineman in a gap and tell him he has to control the gap he can play very aggressively. He can aggressively attack the line of scrimmage and not just read and react.

The more the attacking oriented the defense is the better off it will be. Obviously when you come off the ball, sometimes it is run and sometimes it is pass. We like to be in the mode of attacking the line of scrimmage, so when it is a pass we will get pressure on the quarterback.

#### **Diagram 1. 4-3 Under-Cover 1-Flex Front**



With this basic front we can get eight players in the box area of this defense on run plays. We are going to stop the run on defense very well when we use this front. In this defense we outnumber the offense. The defense has more players at the line than the offense can block.

The SLB plays the tight end in man-to-man with this front using outside leverage as he is aligned in a loose 9 technique. The SLB can not get hooked as he is playing outside leverage on all blocks. The nose tackle (NT) is in a 1 technique to the strong side. The defensive tackle (DT) is in a three technique to the weak side. The ends (DE) are in a 5 technique on the offensive tackles. The MLB has responsibility for the strong side B gap and the WLB for the weak side A gap.

The free safety (FS) is playing down to the line of scrimmage on run plays and is responsible for the number two receiver to the weak side of the formation on pass plays. He plays the receiver as well with outside leverage. It should allow him to play really aggressive in the running game because the running back can not beat the free safety coming out of the backfield. The WLB and MLB are bracketed on the other running back playing him in and out with outside leverage. The corners are matched up with the WR's man-to-man in this scheme.

The thing that is challenging is the MLB defending the play action plays. However, he knows that he is vulnerable and can overplay to where he is vulnerable.

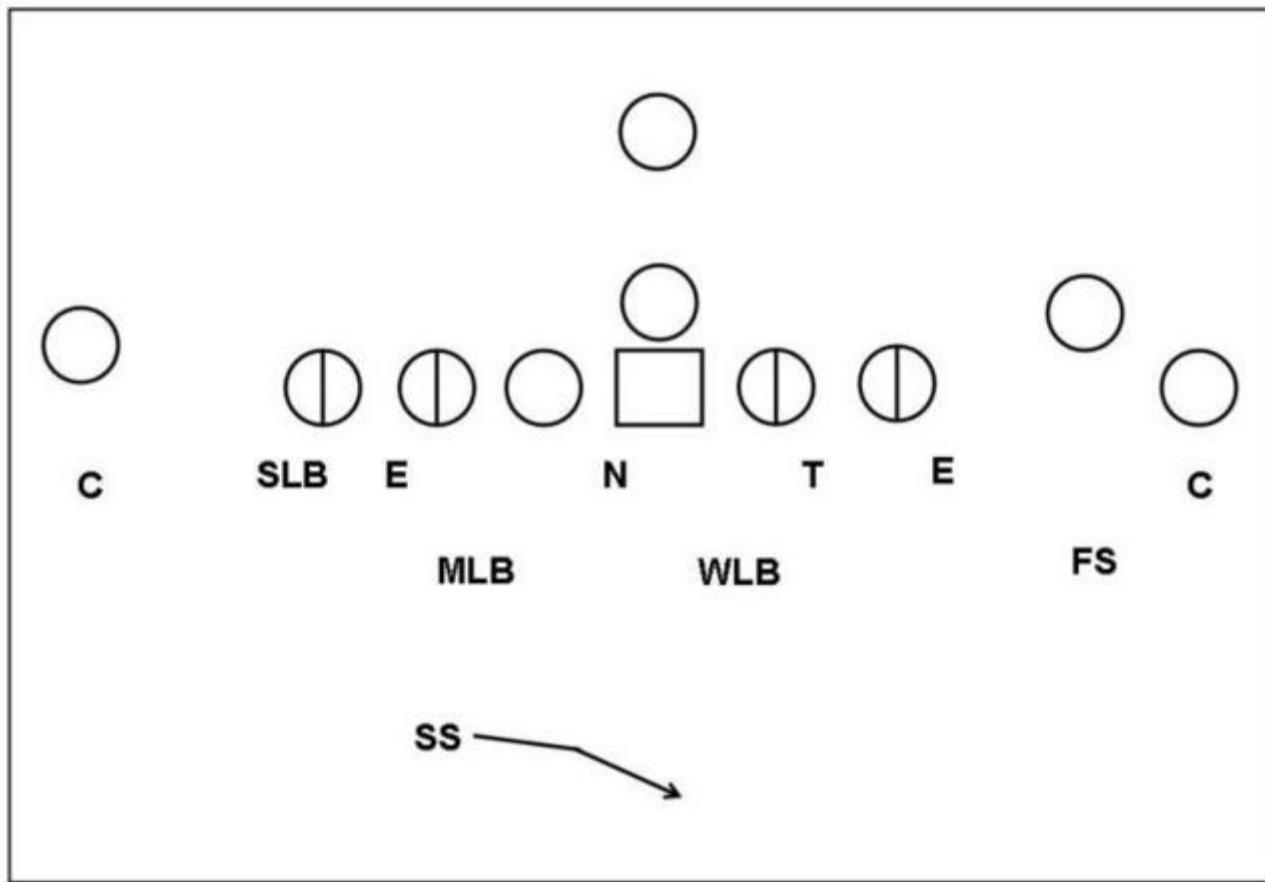
No matter what coverage you are playing you have to convince your players to win their leverage side. If the coach tells a player to play outside leverage and complains when a receiver catches a ball to his inside, the coach is wrong. When we give them a leverage side, we are telling them to just do that aspect right at least.

To take this even further for example we tell our corners to play inside leverage (i.e. to the inside shoulder of the receiver) in this defense. This helps the corner avoid giving up the big play to the inside of the field. If you want them to play the out route towards the sideline you have to give them someone playing support over the top. There is not a corner in college or the NFL that can both play the out routes and also avoid giving up the deep ball to the inside. You have to be realistic as to what your players can do. The only way a corner can play inside leverage and make a play on the out route is if the offense screws up or the quarterback makes a bad throw or the receiver runs a bad route. If you don't understand that then you are asking the corner to do something he can't do.

The flex side defensive end is playing on the outside shoulder of the offensive tackle in a 5 technique. He does not have to be a large player and can be more of a pass rushing end. The only thing he can not do is get hooked or reached by the defender and moved out of position. He can play pass first and still be effective. However he does have to maintain gap responsibility for the defense to work. The key to the defense is not getting hooked. If the solid side defensive end is aligned in the strong side C gap he simply can not get hooked. He has to control that gap as does each position on the defensive line.

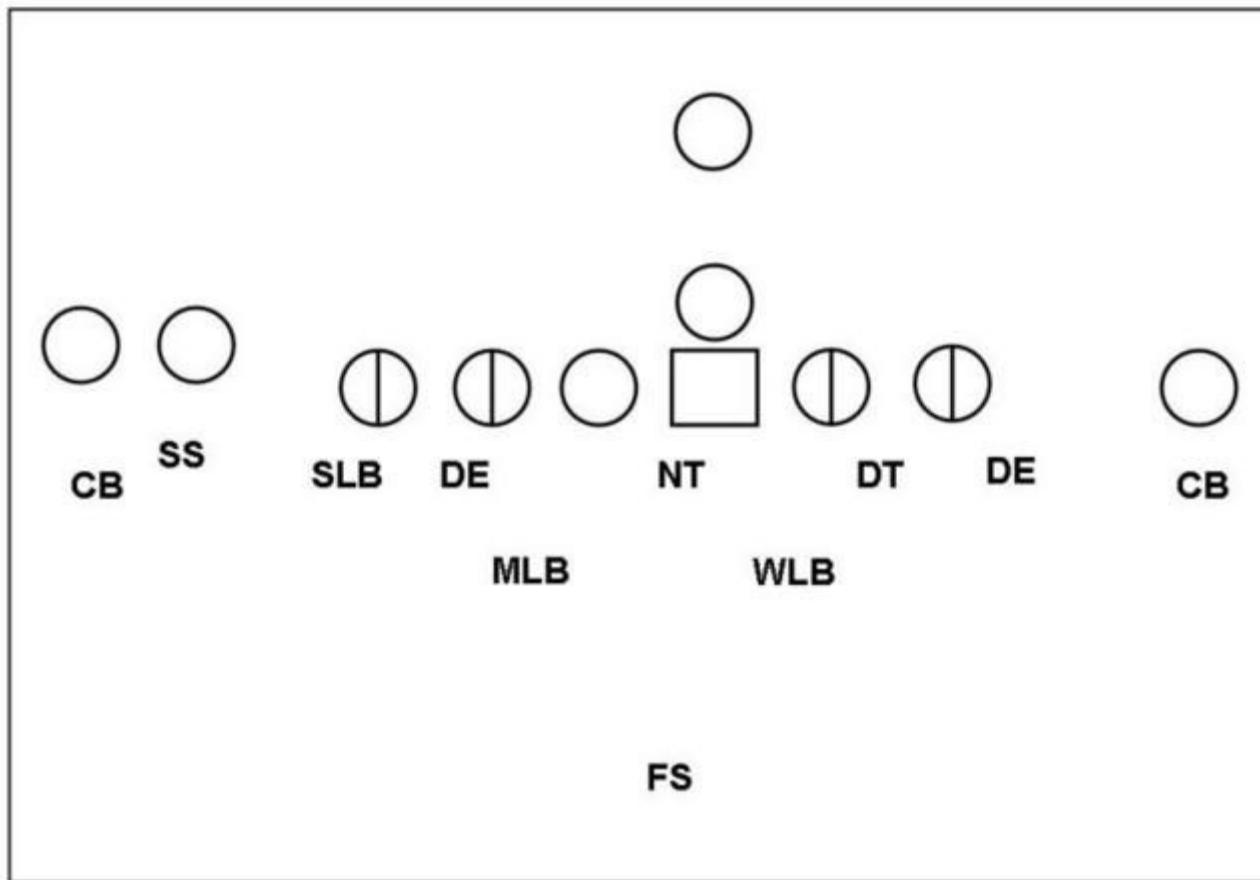
If the offense comes out in a one back set everyone plays the same except for the free safety. He is still playing the number two receiver to the flex side but he has to move outside to cover him.

#### **Diagram 2. One Back Set & Doubles**



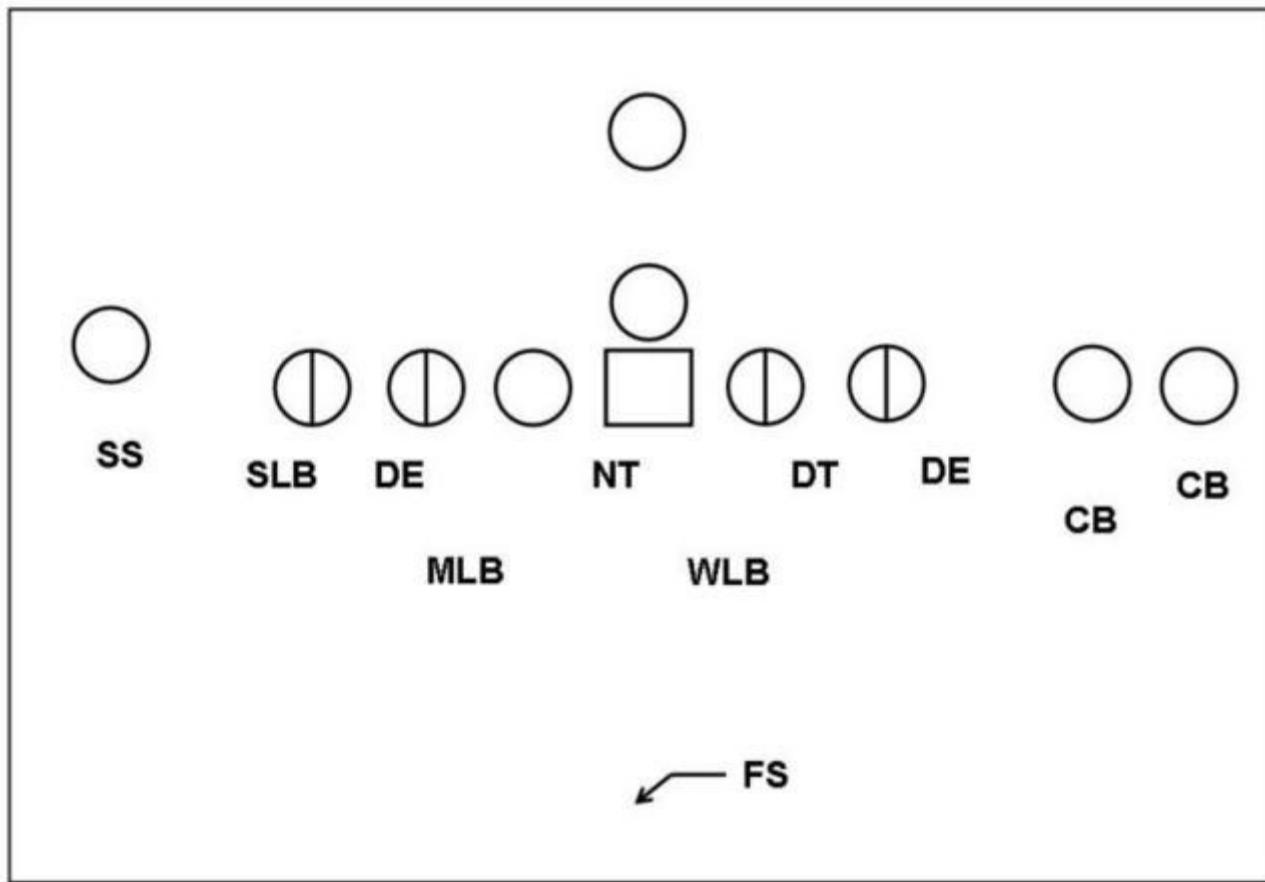
If we get a trips set, we can handle that in this alignment with our two safeties as well (Diagram 3). No one changes in this case except the safeties. The strong side safety moves out to cover the number two receiver to his side. The SLB is still on the tight end as before. The corner has the number one receiver and the free safety rotates to the middle.

**Diagram 3. Trips Set**



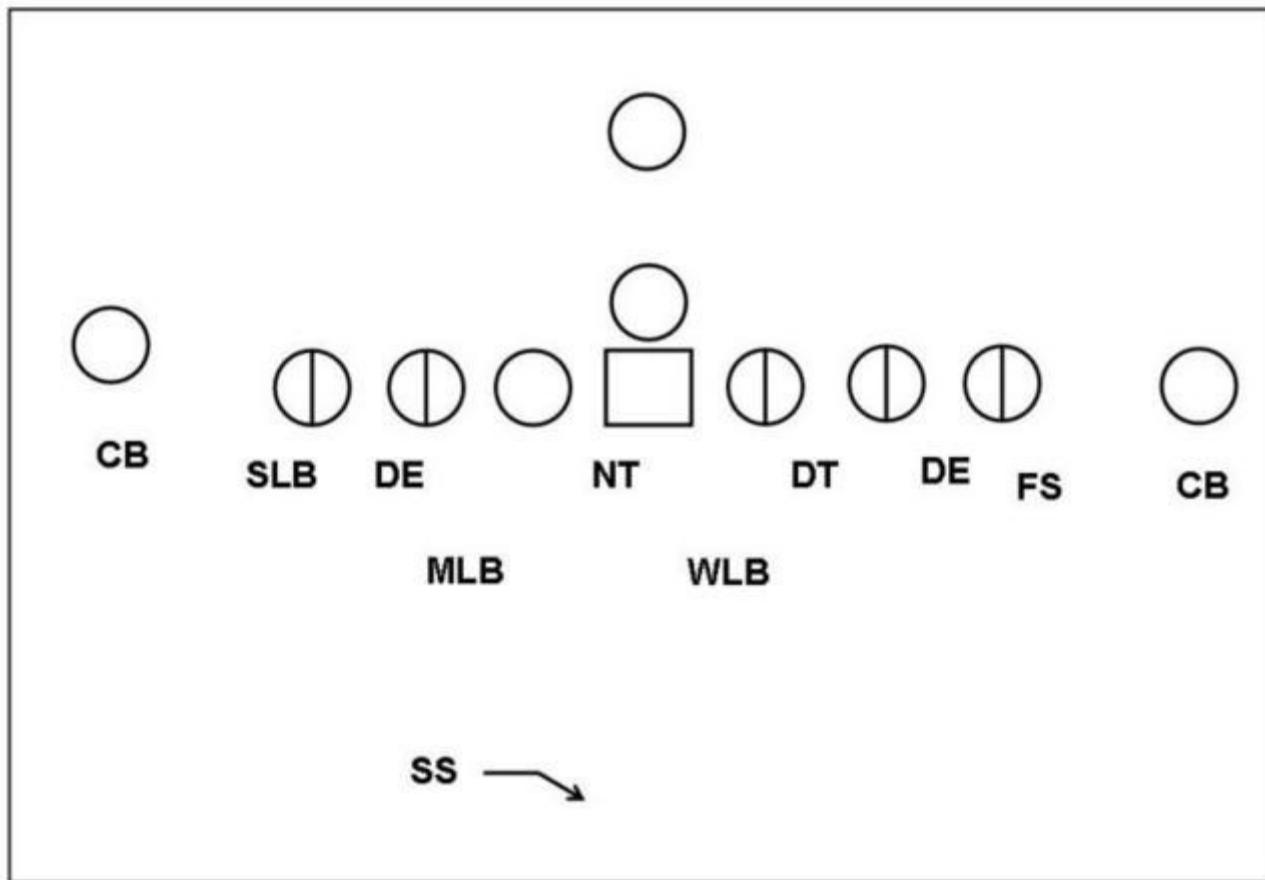
To stay out of mismatches, the corners can take the wide receivers and match up with them (Diagram 4). If both wide receivers come to the same side, we can put both corners on them and cover the remaining receiver with the strong safety. If the corners are on the boundary side the free safety is in the middle. If the corners are on the other side of the field the strong safety is in the middle.

**Diagram 4 Twin Doubles**



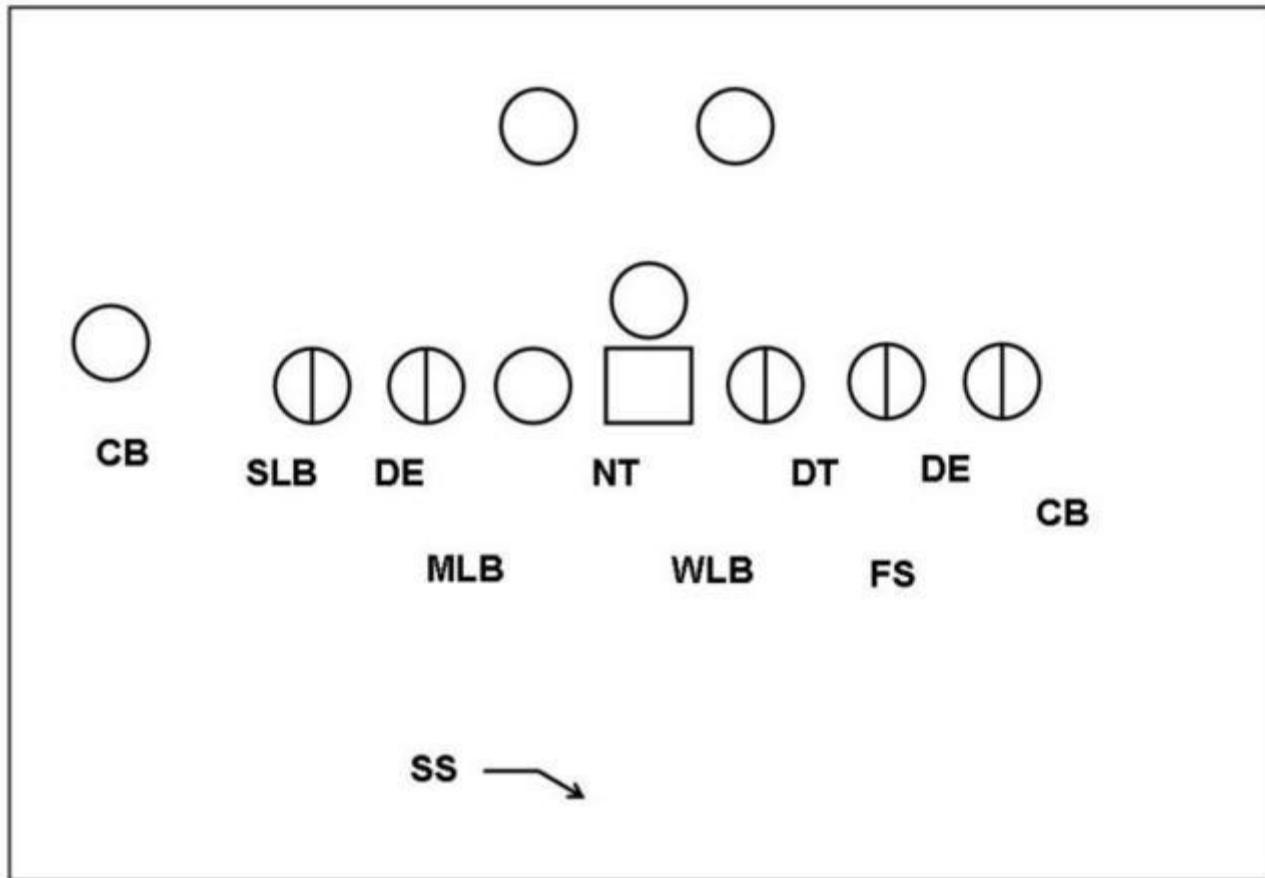
The other one-back set we see a lot of is the one-back and two tight end set (Diagram 5). We put the free safety up on the second tight end. That gives you a problem with run support, but we can play it that way. Everything in the defense is basically the same.

**Diagram 5. One-back and two tight ends set**



If the offense comes out and gives the defense a two-back and two tight end look nothing changes for the defense (Diagram 6). The corner comes inside and plays man-to-man on the second tight end. Everyone else has the same match ups they had with any two-back sets.

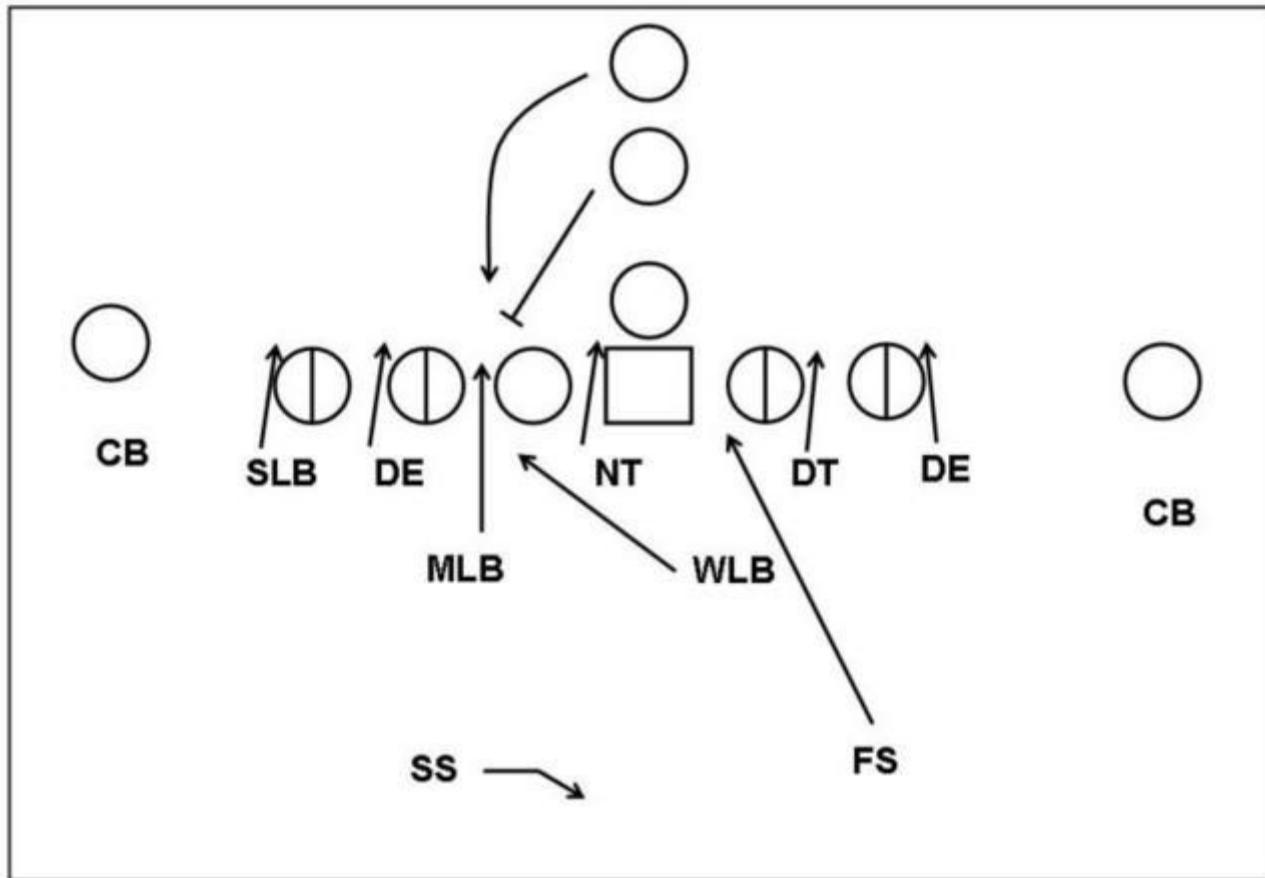
**Diagram 6. Two-back set with two tight ends**



I want to show you how we react to the run so when you see the film you will know what we are doing (Diagram 7). Our defensive ends are aligned in 5 techniques. The nose tackle is in the A gap to the strong side in a one technique. The weak side defensive tackle is in a 3 technique off the outside shoulder of the guard. The WLB has the A gap to the weak side, but on plays to the strong side he has to get over the center's block quickly. He cheats somewhat to the strong side with his alignment.

Everyone on the defense is turning the play inside. No one can ever get hooked. The MLB has the strong side B gap. If he is attacking in the B gap, he meets the block and turns it back inside. He plays with his head and outside arm free taking the block on with his inside shoulder. The free safety is our backside player. If the ball breaks back to the weak side A gap he has to make the play there. If there is a reverse run back the other way he has to make that play also. He generally does not cross the center line to make many plays.

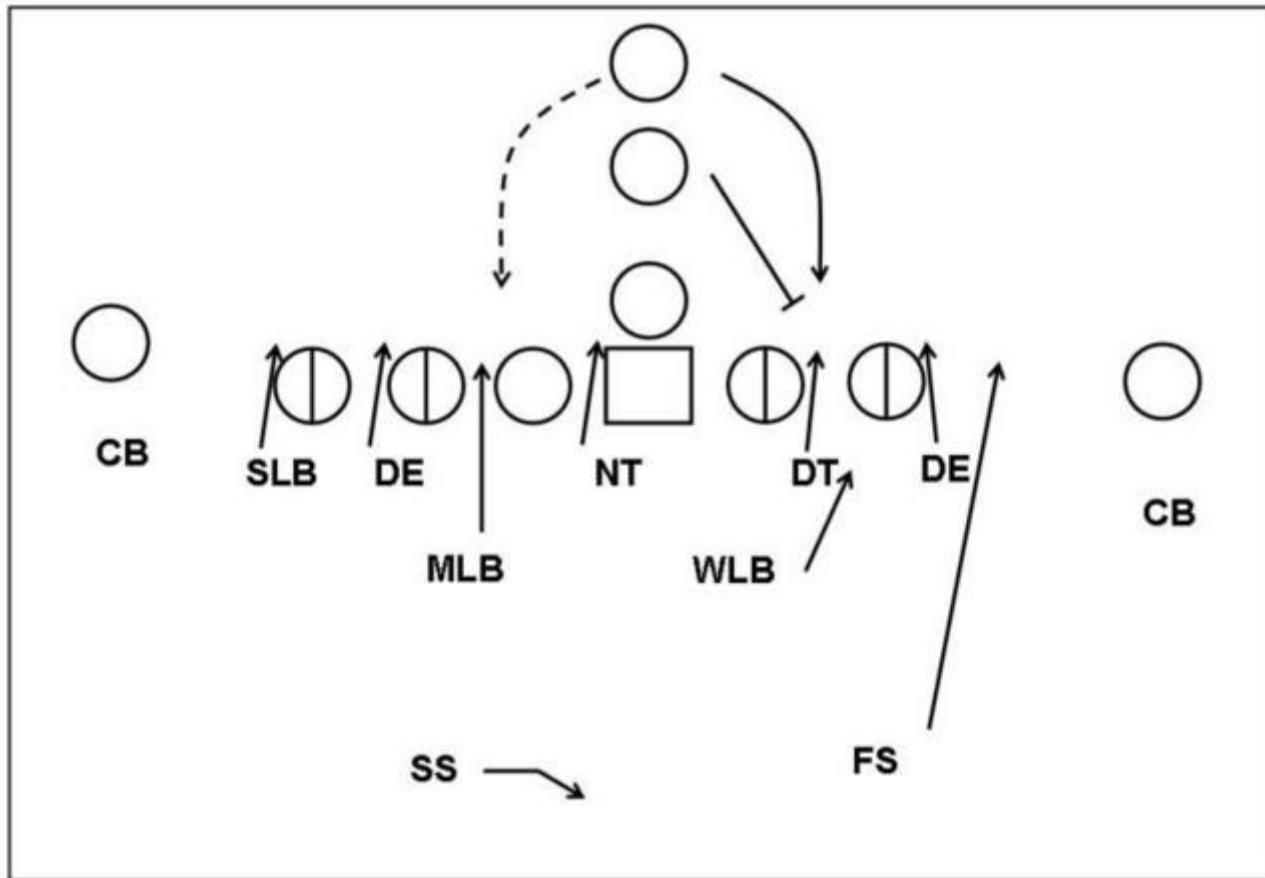
**Diagram 7. Strong side run responsibility**



On the strong side if the offense is lined up in an I formation they have only four blockers to that side. The defense has four defenders and the WLB flowing fast to that side. Everyone on the defense is knocking the ball back inside to the WLB on this play.

If the ball is run to the weak side the MLB becomes the backside run player (Diagram 8). His play depends upon the direction of the run. He has to first defend against any cut back runs through the strong side B gap. If he needs to run through the backside B gap on plays away from him he can. The free safety can do the same thing on the plays away from him. If you ask the MLB to play the cutback and to get over the top then he is not going to be able to be aggressive.

**Diagram 8. Weak side run responsibility**



On plays to the strong side everyone plays with their outside arm free. If the SLB gets a down block from the tight end he rides him down and looks into the back field for the next block coming at him. On that block we ask him to wrong arm the block and bounce the ball outside. With that type of play we get what we call backer force. The MLB sees the power play going off tackle. He knows the SLB is going to bounce the play. He comes over the top and plays the ball with the strong safety coming up late to play the ball from the outside. Everyone plays with their outside arm free.

There are various adjustments we can make with our personnel. We can take our nose tackle and move him head-up onto the guard for example into what we call a G position. What we normally do is slant back to where we came from. As long as the defender keeps the ball on his inside shoulder he can play as fast as he wants to.

We can also use our base alignment to show overload to one side and then slant back to the other side before the snap of the ball. That is the flexibility of the defense.

There is a lot of flexibility for changing the force in this defensive scheme. If the offense picks up on the fact that the free safety is your weak side force man then they can develop schemes to make it hard for him. All we do then is to change the force on the play from the free safety to the corner in order to switch it up.

We can also change the force by slanting the defensive 3 technique and 5 techniques inside and scraping the WLB outside. We bring the corner off his wide out and make him the force man. He is playing the number 2 wide receiver out of the backfield and thus is the force man on the run to him. The free safety then rolls over the top of the corner into the deep half of the field. If you don't want to play him in man-to-man you can play zone. With this kind of force change you can play quarter zone coverage to the strong side and half coverage to the weak side.

Most of the time we play our corners in some form of press coverage and have at least one safety deep in the hole for protection against the big play. Against some of the more spread out offenses we will back off our corners. With some spread formations we want to get the defensive backs eyes on the football. The deep safety is a player that is close to my heart. That is what I played. The deep safety has to play two routes. He has to defend the seam route and the post route. That is all I ask him to play. He has to find the seam route from the number two receiver. If there are two of them then he has to get in the middle and play them both. On the post route he has to stay on top of that route. That is easy to do but it becomes harder as offenses do more of it and get better at it.

In general we flip flop our defense. The SLB always goes to the tight end side. We often employ a rush and drop end from either side of the line. The rush guy goes with the SLB and the drop end goes with the WLB. The MLB aligns then to the SLB side of the play. The corners match up with the wide receivers and the safeties flip flop to the passing strength and running strength of the formation. This is our base defense. I'll show the video now and then take some questions.

End of presentation

April 16th, 2010 | Category: [Coaching](#), [Defense](#), [USC](#)