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Which Position Requires the Most Athletic Ability

by Ronnie Christ, Harrisburg Patriot-News



Psst! Interested in starting a great debate at next week's tailgate party?

Just ask everybody to answer these simple questions. Which position requires the most athletic ability? Who would be the best athlete on your favorite team?

Sounds easy, doesn't it? But you might be surprised at how many different answers you'll get.

Everybody knows defensive backs are the most skilled athletes on the field. Or are they?

How about those wide receivers? They're the guys who can outrun the wind, leap over tall buildings and juggle a football on their fingertips with all the dexterity of a circus performer.

What about the running backs, the glamour boys of the college game? Surely they must have an abundance of athletic skills.

And how can you overlook the quarterback,

who has to use his arm and his mind as well as his feet?

And then there are the linebackers, who must combine many of the athletic skills of defensive backs with the physical strength of defensive linemen. Wouldn't that combination place them at the top of the scale when it comes to athletic ability?

That leaves only the offensive and defensive linemen out of the picture.

And if you think those 260-pound Goliaths don't have great athletic ability, you tell them that.

Thus, what appears to have been a rather simple question may not have a simple answer.

Even the college coaches aren't sure.

"Our best group of athletes would be our defensive backs," says the coach of one of the Atlantic Coast Conference teams. "But there have been times when I would

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Athletic Ability

continued

have to say the best athlete on our team was our quarterback.

"There are some great quarterbacks who are not great athletes in the true sense of the word. But there are some great quarterbacks who are truly great athletes."

"There's no doubt in my mind that it has to be the quarterback," says an eastern coach who has counted on his QBs to keep his teams among the nation's offensive powers. "He has to be a super, super athlete. Just look for the teams that are the most successful and you'll find a lot of great quarterbacks."

"I think it all depends on the system you use and what you expect from the players at each position," says the defensive coordinator of another team. "In some systems, the linebackers often have to be the best group of athletes."

"There are some other defensive schemes in which the defensive ends must have superior athletic ability. The secondary people always rank at or near the top of the list. If you asked me to name the best athlete on our team, I'd have to say it's our free safety."

One of the many coaches to learn his craft under the old master, the late Paul "Bear" Bryant, considers the strong safety to be the best athlete in the game today.

"The wolfman, or whatever else you call the strong safety, is usually the best athlete on any team," he says. "He's the guy who anchors the defense. He's got to be tough enough to tackle the biggest running backs and fast enough to cover the best receivers."

"I rate the quarterback and tight ends among the best athletes. I've seen some Wishbone quarterbacks who could play almost any position."

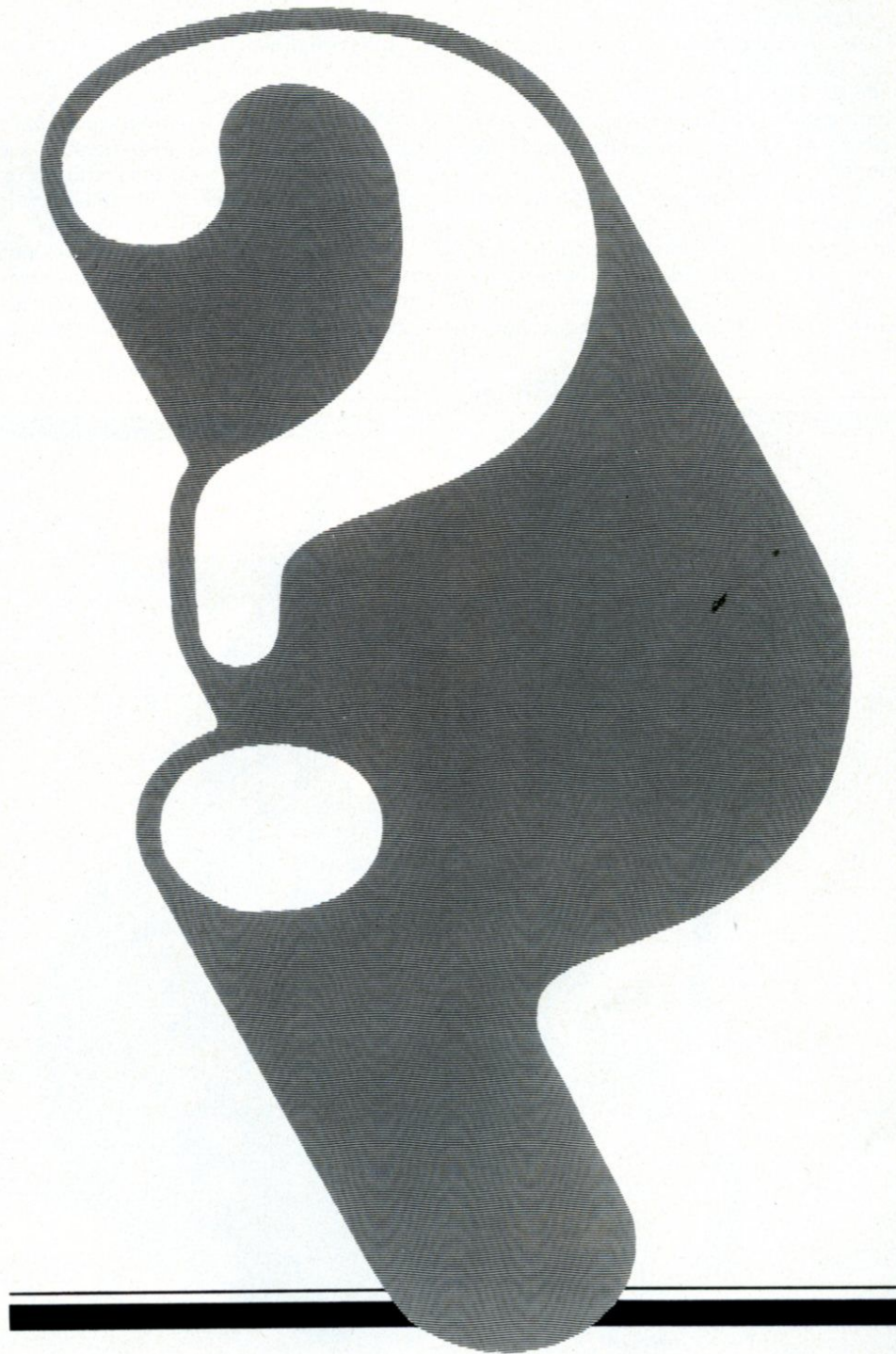
"I think the tight end is often overlooked when you talk about athletic skills. In many of the offensive systems used today, the tight end has to block like a tackle, catch like a wide receiver and run like a running back."

Many coaches rate wide receivers and defensive backs as the players with the most athletic qualities, but one southern coach points out that many linemen have most of those qualities.

And just what are those qualities? What is the magic formula coaches use to measure the degree of greatness in an athlete?

Almost every coach starts with either speed or quickness. They are not one and the same. A player can be extremely quick without being exceptionally fast. Not every great running back is a world class sprinter à la Herschel Walker.

"Speed has to be first because you can't be a great athlete unless you can run," claims one coach, who lists agility and balance as two other key qualities of a great athlete.



Flexibility, size, strength, alertness and mental and physical toughness are other characteristics.

One coach says that a great athlete is one who can play a variety of sports and play them well.

Another feels his best athlete is the kid who can play the most positions. And still another thinks too much emphasis is placed on speed.

Raw speed is certainly a factor, but it isn't the only factor in determining a great

athlete.

A lot of other factors go unnoticed, which means that quarterbacks and linemen often don't get proper credit for the skills they possess.

"A great athlete is one who is self-confident," one coach says. "Quarterback is a position which demands that. A great athlete has to have great mental awareness. No position demands that more than quarterback."

continued

Athletic Ability

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"If the great athletes are at the skill positions, then where do you put someone like Hugh Green, who played defensive end for Pitt? Or Dave Rimington, the super center at Nebraska? Or Bruce Clark, who was a defensive tackle for Penn State?"

"How do you compare a 170-pound defensive back who runs the 40-yard sprint in 4.4 with a 260-pound lineman who runs a 4.7? Which one is the better athlete? If you consider speed as the most important factor, it has to be the back. But I

don't think that's always true."

If a college coach put a "Calling All Athletes" sign on the bulletin board, what kind of team would he have?

There was a time when he would have had a room full of quarterbacks. Just about every coach used to recruit six or seven quarterbacks. Some still recruit four or five with each new crop.

Most high school coaches will pick out two or three of their athletes and train them as quarterbacks. Colleges recruit players like that because of their athletic

ability. The players may not have the arm to be great college quarterbacks, but have the athletic skills to play other positions.

The biggest improvement in athletic skills has been made by linemen.

Linemen today are much better athletes than they were five or 10 years ago. Colleges recruit a 6-4, 220-pound tight end who can run, and by the time he comes out of a college weight training program he could be a 270-pound tackle who can still run.

"Not every football player has great natural athletic talent," points out a recruiter. "But what happened to football at every level is that today's players are bigger, stronger and faster than they used to be. There are more people playing the game who possess the skills you associate with a great athlete. You find kids as far down as elementary programs doing things like running drills.

"Now you can't take a guy who runs a five flat 40 and train him to run a 4.5. That's just not possible.

"But what is happening is that all these kids who used to run 5.2 and 5.3 are now running five flat or 4.9. There just aren't any slow players in the game any more."

Despite gains made by players at other positions, defensive backs are generally regarded as the best athletes. They get that distinction because coaches find them able to play basketball and look like basketball players. Or able to pick up a tennis racket and play a decent game without special training. Or grab a set of golf clubs for the first time and not look like a duffer.

"Defensive backs rate so high because so much is demanded of them," says a coach. "They have to go one-on-one with the wide receivers, the other group that has to rate very high as top athletes.

"Defensive backs have to be able to run backwards and from side to side almost as fast as they run forward.

"Defensive backs must have great hand and eye coordination. A defensive back has to be smart.

"Offensive players initiate the action on the field, but defensive players have to react to it. They must have not only the speed to cover the fastest people on the offensive team, but also the acceleration coming out of a break to be in the right place at the right time.

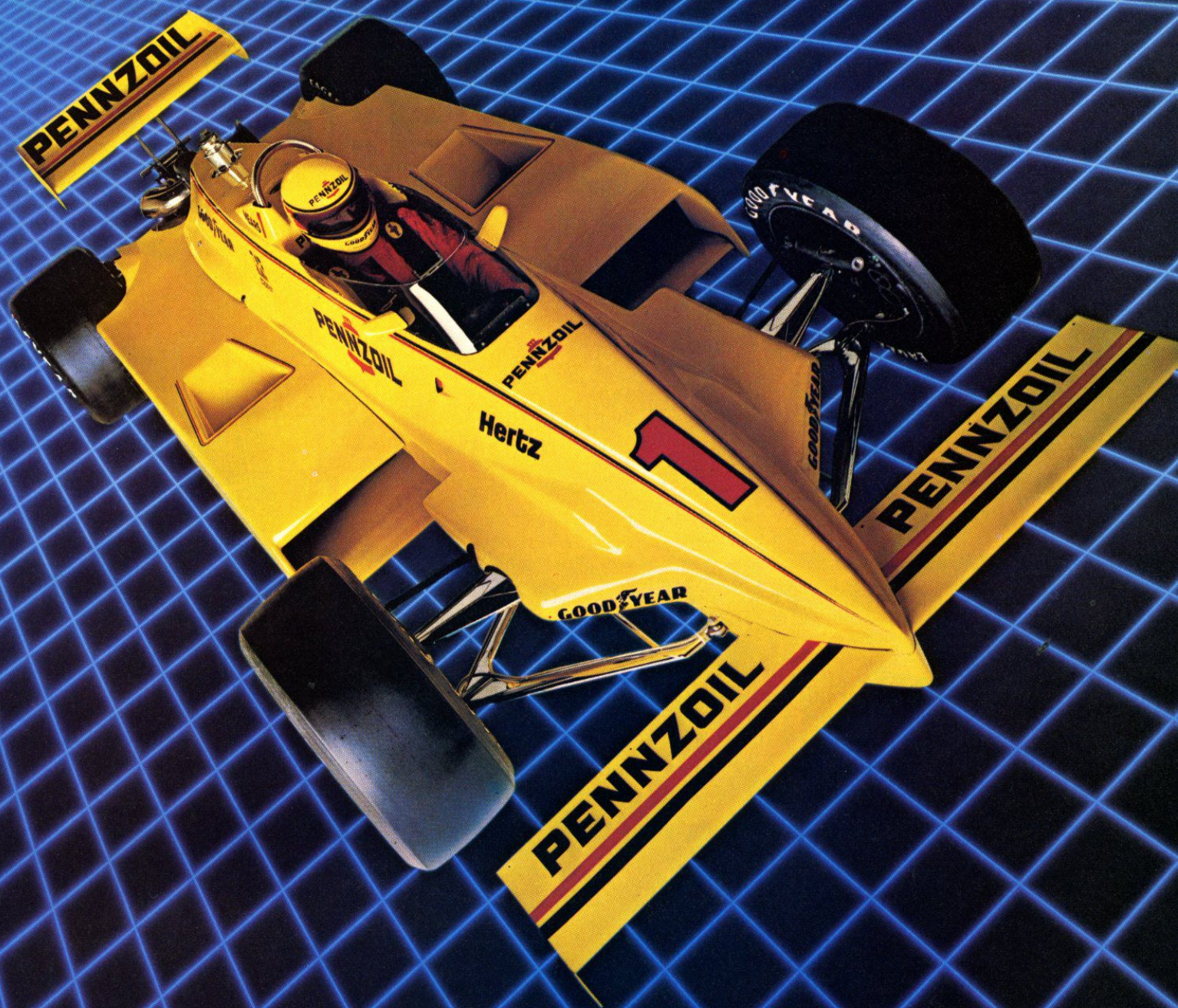
"The only athletic quality that defensive backs may lack is great size."

So, there you have it. While it is by no means unanimous, defensive backs get the nod as the No. 1 group of athletes in college football.

One other thing is apparent.

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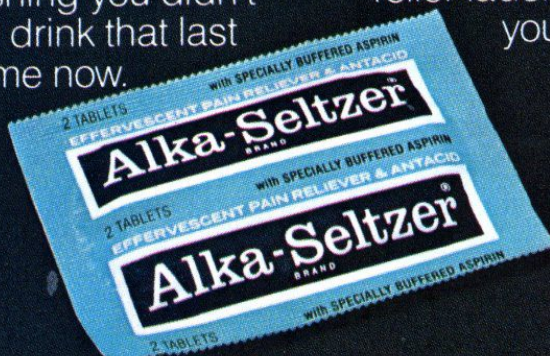
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THE TAILBACK

GLAMOUR BOY OF THE BACKFIELD

by Pam King,
Los Angeles Herald Examiner

He is the glamour boy of the backfield. He racks up the yardage, hogs the headlines and monopolizes the post-season honors.

If you want to be a football hero, pick up a pigskin and run with it. But don't do it from just anywhere in the backfield—take a few steps back, so that you're deep, deep behind the line of scrimmage. Then you can call yourself a tailback and you just may be ticketed for glory.

Since 1965, the first year a dictionary-definition tailback won a Heisman Trophy, nine others have followed in Mike Garrett's footsteps. Traditional running backs, operating out of Wishbone or Veer formations, won the Heisman only three times during that span.

"I consider myself the prototype," said Garrett, who parlayed his football notoriety into a political career in San Diego, Calif. "When I went to USC, I knew John McKay used an I-formation and I thought it was a peculiar looking offense. But I just wanted to play football, so I didn't care."

When Garrett entered college, a running back usually carried the ball 10 or 12 times a game. Yet his number was called more than twice that much, which set a precedent.

"The fear, at the time, was that a single player couldn't take that kind of beating," Garrett said. "I proved that he could, and from then on, coaches weren't afraid to use their best running back on every play."

Garrett had a unique combination of qualities—specifically speed and determination—that enabled him to establish the tailback position. His most successful successors have those same attributes.

"Any great tailback must have a natural instinct to feel seams in a defense," said a West Coast coach. "But that's assuming he's fast enough and strong enough to take advantage. The great one anticipates those openings and then attacks them with his ability."

"He has to be able to cut back, to adjust on the run. If he runs to daylight, then

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TAILBACK

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he's a tailback."

"What we look for," said a Southwestern Conference coach, "is a player who puts out that extra effort, and has the moves and speed to make people miss him."

As one famous eastern coach said, "Sheer speed is not the only answer. The tailback has to have the ability to make the linebacker miss him. He has to have the ability to change directions, to get what I call 'the hidden yards.'"

"Sure, there are certain parameters of speed, size and balance. He has to be durable, physically tough. Any time we recruit a guy with a lot of natural athletic ability, we'll give him the ball, just to make sure we're not passing up a natural runner."

But the coaches agreed—and Garrett insisted—that it is an intangible "something extra" that makes a great tailback.

"All too often, we talk about quickness, size and strength," Garrett said. "The reason an individual is successful is because he wants to succeed—at all costs. The trait I see that bonds all the great tailbacks is a strong personality and a will to win. And that, of course, is true of anyone successful in any field."

A tailback has to have a special type of personality. He has to love the challenge of the position. He is the glory guy on the team, and some youngsters handle that better than others.

As one former college tailback said, "The adulation is easy to accept, because that's what every player wants. But it's difficult to handle—unless you really know who you are before all the publicity hits you."

Great tailbacks retain the ability to concentrate, even though they are in the limelight. They feel they are the best—and still want to improve every season. For example, one exemplary tailback, known for his strength, relentlessly continued to lift weights.

A young man's personality is a big factor in his success.

"It's an ingredient you have to work on," a coach said. "It's part of the overall structure of the team."

One important aspect of personality is the tailback's effect on the linemen who block for him. He has a direct influence on the people in front of him. If they can give him blocking, they like to know he can do it on his own. If he's encouraging them, he'll receive better individual blocking. He has to have a great rapport with those people.

A former tailback said he could inspire his linemen by his consistent yardage gains—"leadership by performance," he called it.

"The guys up front like to get it over with in a hurry, so they appreciate a guy



A good tailback must have speed, size and balance, plus that intangible "something extra."

who can get the job done. If he appreciates them and lets them know it, you can see the evidence."

The evidence, of course, is statistical. The tailback is glamorous because he handles the ball so much. He gets the ball most of the time, gets the numbers, and gets the glory.

But he also gets the bumps and bruises. As Garrett pointed out, coaches used to think it was more abuse than one body could take.

"A tailback must have the ability to recover quickly and play in pain," said one head coach, who estimates his tailback handles the ball between 30 and 40 times a game. "He has to be able to cope with that punishment. Because he gets the ball more, teams zero in on him."

But for most tailbacks, the glory far outweighs the beating. For one thing, a naturally competitive person wants the ball all the time and doesn't think about the ultimate tackle. "It's like a ballerina," said a former tailback. "She has to get the bunnions if she wants to create the beauty."

More and more teams are employing the I-formation. In some cases, they want to take advantage of an exceptional running back in the program—why divide ball-carrying duties between him and another, less accomplished runner in the

backfield when he can be in on virtually every play? Other coaches simply believe that the I is a more versatile formation, one that enhances the passing game without detracting from the running game.

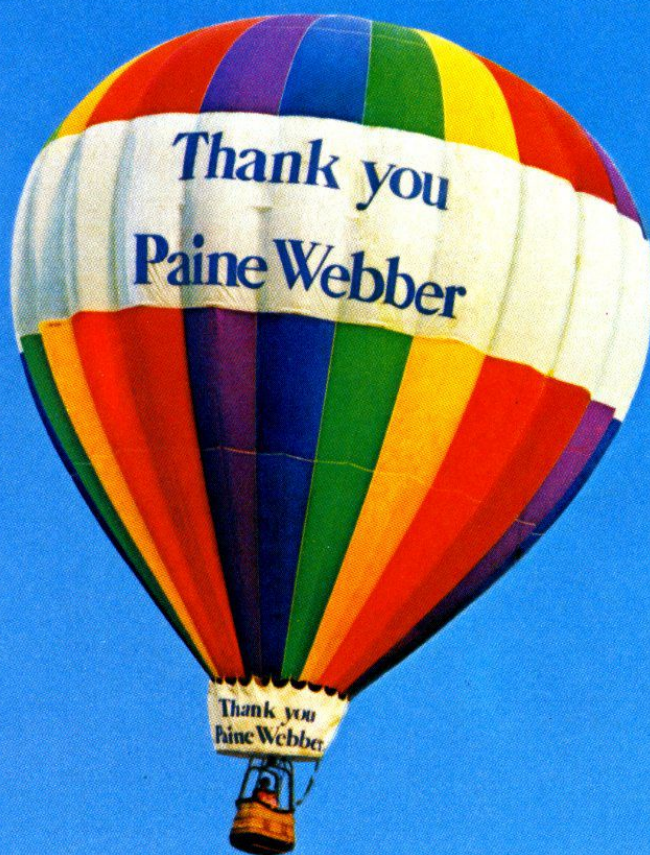
"The Wishbone doesn't capitalize on one outstanding back," said one coach. "The I offers a more balanced running attack, and also is a good passing formation."

"There are more and more good kids playing football, so it's not so hard to find a tailback. Every year, there are 30-40 great running backs, even if only four or five are truly unusual."

College coaches first look for prospective tailbacks among the pool of high school running backs. But the best high school athlete often plays quarterback; he too, can be a candidate for the tailback job. Heisman Trophy winners John Cappelletti and Marcus Allen both were signal-callers before they went to college.

"More and more great high school running backs are demanding an I-formation," said one college coach. "A team that has featured the tailback for several years sometimes has a better chance of recruiting a great high school back."

Obviously the high school stars know what's good for them. If they want their statistics to glimmer, they want to be tailbacks.



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The Weather Controls the Game Plan

*by Steven Krasner,
Providence Journal-Bulletin*

On Sunday, the head football coach gathered his assistants in a little room, trotted out his trusted movie projector, and watched films of his team's performance the day before.

On Monday, he put his team through its paces and talked to his assistant, who had scouted the team's upcoming opponent on Saturday.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the coaching staff began to formulate its game plan for its next opponent, taking into consideration the other team's strengths and weaknesses as well as his own team's strengths and weaknesses.

On Thursday, his team had a good day

of practice, and by the time Friday's practice was over, the coach was confident that he had everything under control for the next day's game. His game plan, he was certain, would produce a smashing victory.

And on Saturday, it rained. The field had turned into a quagmire and the wind was whipping through the stadium like a hurricane. Good-bye game plan.

"Weather conditions can do a real number on your game plan," said the coach of Division 1AA school in the East. "And in some cases, the weather can be a real equalizer, giving the underdog team a real good chance to pull a big upset just because of the conditions on that given

day. In the East, I would say that weather conditions are extreme enough to alter your game-plan thinking about 30 percent of the time."

Depending upon what part of the country you are playing in, a coach can expect to run into several different types of interference from Mother Nature. All around the country, rain and wind can be spoilers, but in the West and South, intense heat can become a major factor in the outcome of a game, and snow and intense cold have played havoc with more than one coach in other parts of the country.

And as difficult as it is to play in snow in

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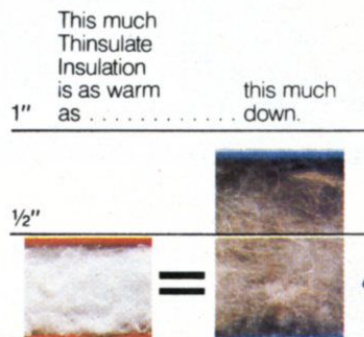
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Weather Controls the Game Plan

continued

the East and 100 degree temperatures in the South, the athletes can adjust to some extent to the conditions. But when there is a cross-over, that is when a southern school visits the East and has to play in a snowstorm, or when an eastern team shows up for a road game in November in the West and discovers the temperature at game time is 95 degrees, that adds up to trouble for the old game plan.

"Naturally, you try to anticipate the types of conditions you can be faced with," said a major college coach in the East. "And those conditions will force you to make alterations in your game plan."

"For instance, we went out West to play a game, and we knew that the temperature would be high and so would the humidity," he added. "We usually use around 30 people in any given game, but since we knew the temperature was going to be high, we also knew from a stamina standpoint that we'd have to use more than 30 players. I think we used 45-50 people that day, people who would not ordinarily be playing. So, in effect, the temperature, and not necessarily the team we were playing, dictated that we had to go with people we really would have preferred not to use."

Over the course of a season, the weather also can determine a team's offensive style. In the West, when a team can pretty much count on sunny, dry weather, there tends to be more passing. As you move further East, there tends to be more of an emphasis on the running game, though naturally there are exceptions to the rule on each coast.

One reason for a team in the East having to have a solid running game is that in the course of its season, it will most likely get several Saturdays of either rain, snow or severe cold. And passing games are much less effective when the receivers can't even feel their fingers or when the wet pigskin is squirming out of the quarterback's grasp.

"Rain and muddy weather can negate the power of an entire offense," said a man who has coached in the East and the Midwest. "It can turn a football game into a game of chance. In that type of weather, you know each team is going to make some mistakes—fumbles and interceptions. You just have no idea going in which team will make the most."

Natural grass, which is most common in the East, turns into thick mud during a heavy rainstorm, and intense cold weather turns the turf into a playing surface that resembles concrete. But artificial turf, a more common playing surface in the South and West, isn't without its Mother Nature problems, either.

"Of course, you don't have to worry about mud on artificial turf, but rain can

make the carpet very slick, causing a problem with footing," said one man with coaching experience on each type of surface.

"But the real problem in the East with artificial turf comes when there's a cold, freezing rain," he added. "I can remember one game where on one side of the field, the shadowy side, the turf was frozen, glazed over with rain. The other half of the field was like a sponge."

Many of the curve balls Mother Nature throws to the football teams put extra pressure on the defense.

It is true to some extent that the offense has an advantage in sloppy weather because the offensive players, particularly the running backs and wide receivers, know where they're supposed to go, so they know when they'll have to plant their foot to make a cut on the bad turf. The defender, meanwhile, has to react to the offensive player's cuts, and very often you'll see a defender sprawled on the muddy turf, watching in desperation and frustration as the offensive player gallops past him for a touchdown.

But as bad as snow, rain and mud are, the biggest nightmare for any coach on the day of a game can be fierce winds.

"A cross-wind can be a real killer," said one coach. "If you've checked out the other team on film and have gotten good scouting reports, and you feel you can exploit that team's defense with a passing game, a cross-wind can throw that part of your game plan right out."

"Wind can change the times you want to throw, the types of throws you can make, and it puts a very big dent in your kicking game," he said. "Naturally, that's when you have to turn to a running game, and you have to make it a field-position game. You have to find some way to keep the other team in its own end. We like to kick the ball down to their goal line when we can in a cross-wind, and force them to try to get out of there, because that's when you force turnovers."

"When you look in the papers on Sunday and look at the scores, and you see some 3-0 and 7-6 games, I'll bet most of those games were so low-scoring because of wind," he added.

And while the very good teams will have very little problem with the very bad teams, no matter what the weather, in games where there is a little less of a clear-cut difference in talent, Mother Nature can play a big part in the outcome. Underdog teams are always looking for a strong cross-wind to help hold the opposition's high-powered passing attack, and heavy rains to help slow down the enemy's solid ground game.

"I can remember one particular season where on back-to-back weekends we



Rain can abruptly alter the game plan.

were taking a step up in talent level to play a team, and the next week we were playing a team a step down from our level," said an eastern coach.

"If we were going to get some extreme weather conditions on either weekend, we hoped it would be the first because it would have helped equalize the difference between the two teams," he added. "Well, it was sunny and beautiful on our step-up game, and we lost. The next weekend the weather was miserable, as bad as I've ever seen it, and we were very fortunate to escape that day with a close win in a game that should never have been close."

The key to formulating a sound game plan, therefore, rests on more than just scouting reports. It helps if the Farmer's Almanac happens to be readily available, and football coaches avidly watch the weather spots on the nightly news programs as well as the sports spots, trying to get an inkling of what to expect from the weather for their next game.

But there is one way to avoid the weather-watching madness.

"For a couple of seasons, I coached in a place that had an indoor stadium, a nice roof over it," said one coach, smiling at the memory. "For every home game, the weather was the same, a nice controlled environment. You know, in some ways that was Heaven."

Because the heavens couldn't open up and destroy his game plan.

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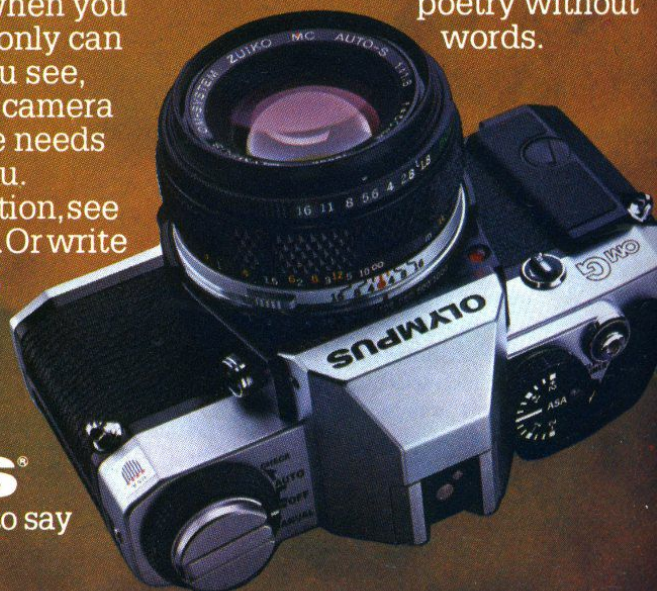
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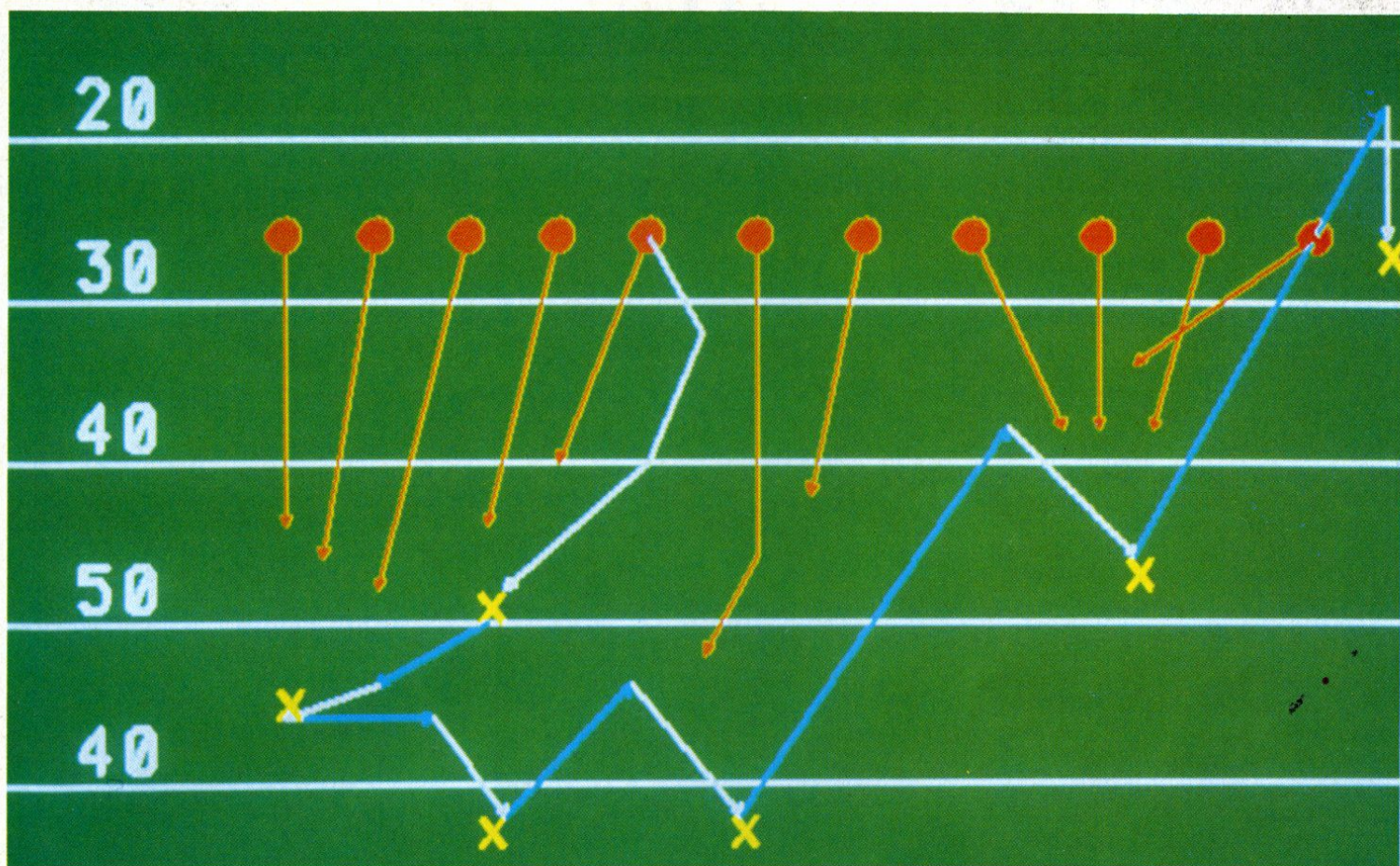


Photo Courtesy Cal Sports Information Office

This diagram illustrates the five-lateral play that the University of California used last fall to defeat arch-rival Stanford. The last man took the ball in for the score.

THE LATERAL

It's Still Winning Football Games

by Al Browning

It was on the first Saturday in November of 1869, the sixth day of the month, that 50 players, 25 from Princeton and 25 from Rutgers, competed in the first college football game.

Rutgers won six goals to four, but only after a professor from Rutgers witnessed the bodies crashing into each other and chastised the combatants: "You men will come to no Christian end!"

There were 100 or so spectators at that

game played in New Brunswick, N.J., which is a far cry from the 100,000-plus crowds that annually pack huge stadiums today.

Also, of course, playing rules have changed drastically, along with scoring procedures, and, as everybody knows, the game has taken on a strikingly different appearance. It was a combination of rugby and soccer that delighted fans in the first game, which featured almost

continuous motion. Now, the best of those two sports are combined with American-made innovations to produce one of the most exciting games in the world.

Gone are most of the facets of play used by Rutgers and Princeton in their first football game.

But the lateral pass remains, as football fans saw near the end of last season, when California used five such

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THE LATERAL

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maneuvers to win a game on a midnight-hour kickoff return. Granted, that play was a little wild, but it is interesting to note that the lateral pass, known as the "backwards pass" in NCAA rulebooks, was an offensive ploy in the first college game, and that five lateral passes provided us with perhaps the strangest conclusion to a college football game in modern history.

In fact, when Rutgers and Princeton played the first game, there was no other way for teammates to exchange possession of the football except through the use of a lateral pass. Amazingly, that makes the lateral pass and the fair catch the only two facets of play in the first game that are still used in football today.

"The backwards pass (lateral pass) has been used since they blew up the first football," said Coach Dave Nelson of the University of Delaware, who since 1961 has served as secretary and editor of *The NCAA Football Rulebook*. "The backwards pass is as old as the game, even older if you consider the start of football to have taken place in 1906, when the forward pass was legalized. That is when the third dimension was added to the game, joining running and kicking.

"It is interesting to note that there were 61 rules written in the first rulebook for football, and the backwards pass was included. It is, in fact, one of only seven original rules still in the book. That first rulebook was written in 1876, when our first rules committee was formed. That tells you know long the backwards pass has been in use."

The lateral pass has had a distinguished history in football. It was at first basic, then ultra-successful, then forgotten, then reborn, and now it is complex; a scientific offensive weapon that takes both skillful ball-handling and timing expertise to work properly.

"I recall reading a story once about how impressed (Coach) Walter Camp was when watching an Australian rugby team play on the West Coast," said Nelson. "That team destroyed an American team by making use of the backwards pass. Coach Camp was impressed by scores like 55-0, so he started thinking about making better use of the backwards pass in football.

"When I played at Michigan in the 1930s, Minnesota was particularly adept when it came to backwards passes. I can recall Minnesota making several on one play, two or three beyond the line of scrimmage.

"Even today, with offensive schemes as complex as they are, I doubt coaches really make good use of backwards passes. A lot can be done in that area."

A lot has already been done. . . .



Difficult to defend: the about-to-be-tackled player keeps the play alive with the lateral.

Writing in the *Saturday Evening Post* in September of 1926, Coach Amos Alonzo Stagg related action from the Yale-Princeton game in 1876: "Walter Camp, a freshman, got the ball out of the scrum-mage early in the first half and made a long run. Just as he was tackled, he passed the ball to O.D. Thompson, who continued on for the first touchdown by Yale. Princeton protested that the pass had been forward and therefore illegal. The referee tossed a coin to decide, and Yale won the toss and the touchdown was allowed."

In 1930, Coach Jimmie Knox of Harvard said this about the lateral pass: "The lateral pass as a play has been in football almost from the beginning. But it was in a distinctly haphazard form with the exception of definite plays, which were used as substitutes for old wedge plays at the beginning of the game. One of the early instances in which the play was used was in the Harvard-Yale game in 1894, when Cameron Forbes, who was then head coach of the freshmen, taught the Harvard youngsters a definite lateral. When this play was used against Yale, it gained 57 yards and completely fooled Yale ends and backs, the runner being caught from behind at the Yale 15-yard line. . . .

"In 1914, Frank Hinkey came to Yale as coach after seeing a great many Canadian rugby games. He built his attack around lateral passes. He used a formation in which one man stood fairly close behind center and was a definite threat for straight-ahead runs. Another man farther out and farther to the rear could get the ball on a lateral pass, and he in turn was a threat as a runner or as a forward passer. Still farther out and farther to the rear was another back, and his threats were also threefold. . . .

"The start of the 1886 Harvard-Princeton game reads like a rigger match: 'Brooks dribbles and lateral passes to Sears. As the latter is tackled by Cowan, Sears flips the ball sideways to Porter, who makes 20 yards before being thrown by Irvine.' Later, 'Fletcher shoots a long side pass to Burgess, who makes 30 yards.'

"Though Notre Dame outrushed Yale by a wide margin in 1914, the Elis won 28-0 on long gainer plays developing out of flank maneuvers."

Hinkey was so dedicated to an offense heavy in lateral passes that he imported Canadian rugby experts to tutor his backs. The lyric rhythm and flowing continuity they taught worked wonders.

In 1898, Stagg devised a lateral pass in which an end carried the football after receiving it from the quarterback. The end ran across behind his line and tossed the football to one of his halfbacks, who had circled back. Thus, a reverse run was on the books.

In 1894, Stagg had used a lateral pass on a kickoff, the receiver throwing the football to an end or halfback, in baseball fashion.

In 1910, Illinois used a lateral pass downfield after a short pass over the middle of the line.

Coach Andy Kerr of Colgate was a wizard when it came to lateral passes. Said Harvard Coach Lloyd Jordan: "I have never seen a man who could take an idea and develop it to the extent Kerr could."

In 1934, Colgate defeated Tulane 20-6. On a punt, four Colgate players handled the football and gained 40 yards.

What do we have in football now? Actually, much of the same.

The "quick pitch" is still used effectively by teams, provided a speedy running back is in stock, but it has become the most basic of a multitude of lateral passes used today.

The Wishbone offense, with its triple option philosophy, was instrumental in making the lateral pass a viable weapon on a par with the long forward pass and the bomb. And, while it is becoming outdated, it also has the distinction of forcing statisticians to rethink their trade. Quite

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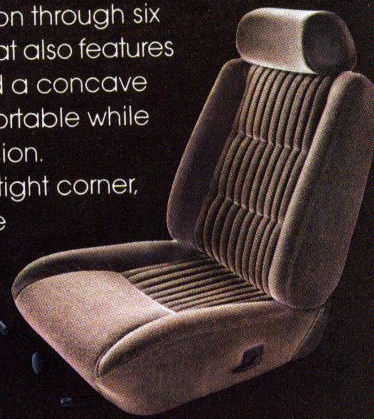


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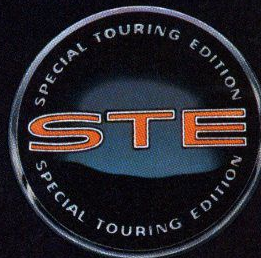
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