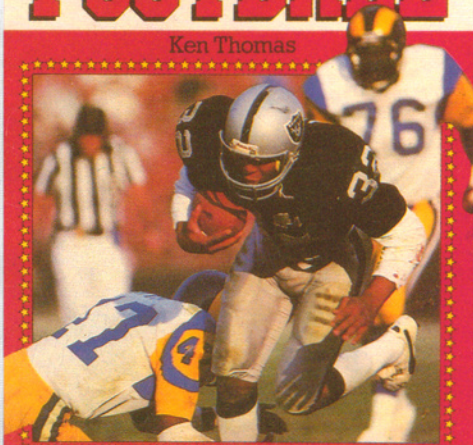


Selections  
from A GUIDE TO

# AMERICAN FOOTBALL

Ken Thomas



With a foreword by Nicky Horne

A CHANNEL FOUR BOOK

**A W.H.SMITH EXCLUSIVE**

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American Football is not unlike the codes of rugby football in that the ball is the same shape (prolate spheroid), the goal posts are similar and serve an identical purpose, and players attempt to make forward progress by running with the ball in hand. Furthermore, the principal method of halting the ball-carrier is by tackling. However, in American Football, once the ball-carrier is tackled to the ground, or clearly held, the ball is ruled dead and play comes to a complete halt. It restarts with a set piece, a face to face confrontation known formally as a 'Scrimmage' but idiomatically as a 'Down'. The team in possession is allowed four of these downs. By using one, two, three or all four downs, ten or more yards must be gained. If this yardage requirement is satisfied, possession is retained and a new set of four downs is earned. By repeatedly gaining the necessary ten yards within the sequence of the four downs, possession is maintained and the attacking team (known as the 'Offense') moves systematically down the field, with the eventual object of scoring. If the offense fails to make the necessary ten yards during a particular four-down series,

possession is transferred to the opposition (formerly the 'Defense'), which then becomes the attacking team (offense) and embarks on its return drive. This then is the

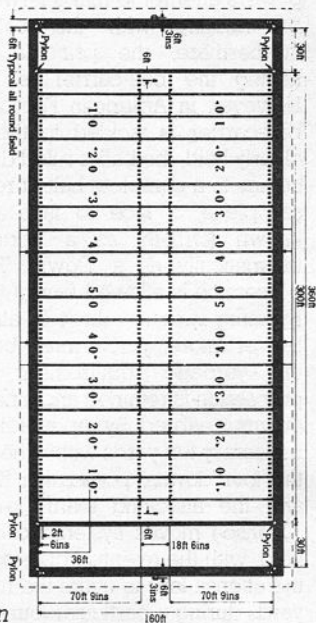


Fig 1:  
The Gridiron

basis of the ebb and flow of American Football.

The game takes place on a pitch measuring 360 feet long and 160 feet wide (Fig 1).

It is essential and convenient that the pitch be marked out at intervals of 5 yards and, to a lesser extent, 1 yard. The pitch therefore has the appearance of a 'Gridiron', which has become a popular name for it.

The prime objective is to score a 'Touchdown', worth 6 points, following which there is a kick at a goal worth 1 point, called 'Extra Point Attempt'. There is also the possibility of scoring with a 'Field Goal Kick' (3 points), which can be attempted at all times during the game on any set-piece down, and from any yardage position. The obvious comparison is with a penalty kick at goal in rugby, yet since an infringement by the opposition is *not* a prerequisite, more sensibly it might be compared with a drop kick at goal, which in rugby too forms part of normal play.

There are several major distinctions between American Football and rugby, the first of which is associated with passing the ball. From every set-piece down, one

forward pass is allowed (obviously by the offense) and it is worth noting that this pass must be delivered from the attacking team's side of the scrimmage line. In other words, a player in possession cannot hare off downfield and then throw a forward pass.

The second departure from rugby is that deliberate obstruction, known as 'Blocking', is quite legal. In doing this, a player is seeking to prevent the opposition from tackling the player of his own team who is carrying the ball. Again, the methods of blocking are strictly regulated and are to be distinguished from 'Tackling', which may be considered as using one's arms to encircle and hold an opponent. Significantly, a tackle, as in rugby, can be performed *only* on the player carrying the ball.

Free and unlimited substitution is allowed at all times of the game, between downs, to enable a player to perform his specialist role. In a 45-man squad there can be identified two groups of players, the defensive unit and the offensive unit, and in modern Football it is virtually unknown for a man to play both on offense and defense. One of the first things a new spectator

notices, therefore, is the constant comings and going of players, particularly when, following a loss of possession, the offensive unit of a team is replaced by the defensive unit.

## **SCORING POINTS**

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### **THE TOUCHDOWN DRIVE**

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By successfully gaining ten or more yards within each four-down series, the team on offense systematically moves the ball downfield until a touchdown is scored.

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### **LOSS OF YARDAGE**

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As will become apparent later, the play from any particular down can result in a loss of yardage. This loss is simply added to the yardage which was required from that particular down to give the yardage needed for another series of four downs.

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### **SCORING A TOUCHDOWN**

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The formal requirements for the award of a touchdown, worth 6 points, are best exemplified by description of the two most

common methods, namely 'Rushing' and 'Passing', by which the score is achieved.

### **Rushing Touchdown**

*The ball*, which must be under the full control of the ball-carrier (the rusher) needs simply to break the vertical plane which extends directly upwards from the goal line. *The goal line is part of the end zone.* Unlike the requirement for a try in rugby, is not necessary to place the ball onto the playing surface. To this extent, the term 'touchdown' is misleading.

### **Passing Touchdown**

An offensive player already in the end zone needs to catch and demonstrate his full control of the ball, which usually will have been thrown to him by the quarterback. If, as often happens, he has had to jump to catch the ball, he must land to touch the playing surface, with both feet within the end zone. It must be noted that *the side lines and the end (back) line are out of bounds* and therefore, his feet must not touch these lines in his initial contact with the playing surface. There is however, a supplementary rule which gives an advantage to the pass

receiver who catches the ball (not necessarily in the end zone) in the process of being tackled. If, in the opinion of the referee, he would have landed in bounds but was driven out of bounds by the force of the tackle before his feet could touch the ground, the pass reception (touchdown if in the end zone) is allowed.

Obviously a player can score a touchdown by catching the ball within the field of play and running into the end zone, as described for a rushing touchdown.

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### **EXTRA POINT ATTEMPT**

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Immediately following a touchdown, the offense kicks at goal from directly in front of the posts, the line of scrimmage being the 2-yard line. The kick, if successful, is worth 1 point and 'converts' the touchdown score of 6 to 7 points.

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### **FIELD GOAL**

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On any one of the four downs, at any time, the offense can attempt a kick at goal, from a

formal set-piece down. This, worth 3 points, is roughly equivalent to a penalty goal or drop goal in rugby, and will normally be attempted on 4th down.

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### **CONCEDING A SAFETY SCORE**

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Occasionally, an offensive player will find himself in possession of the ball inside his own end zone. This can occur when the team on offense is deep within its own half. The unfortunate ball-carrier will have been obliged to retreat into the end zone in an attempt to evade the pursuit of defenders. If the defense can trap him inside the end zone, by establishing a firm hold or by tackling him to the ground, a safety score, worth 2 points, is conceded by the offense.

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### **THE OFFENSIVE UNIT**

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It is a legal requirement that there be at least seven players to form the 'Offensive Line', the limits of which are defined by the players at the extreme ends. In the example shown, these players are the 'Split End' and

the 'Tight End'. Excluding these, the five grouped together, namely the 'Tackles', 'Guards' and 'Center', constitute the 'Interior Line'. Interior linemen are primarily guardians. They are the 'Heavies' who protect the Quarterback or pave the way for the ball-carrier, who will almost always be a 'Running Back' or occasionally, the 'quarterback'. The split end and 'Flankerback' are primarily pass receivers. The quarterback directs the show by 'handing off' the ball to a running back or throwing a pass to a receiver. Of all eleven players, the tight end has to be perhaps the most versatile, playing on the one hand the role of interior lineman and on the other that of pass receiver.

SE = Split end

TE = Tight end

T = Tackle

FIB = Flankerback

G = Guard

QB = Quarterback

C = Center

RB = Running back

## THE DEFENSIVE UNIT

The defensive unit confronts the offensive unit and can also adopt many standard formations.

The three defensive players, 'Ends' and 'Tackle', who line up face to face with the offensive line, constitute the 'Defensive Line' and will primarily attempt to ward off the aggressive intentions of the offensive line before tackling the ball-carrier. The four 'Defensive Backs' who are the 'Cornerbacks' and 'Safeties', have a responsibility to defend against the pass. The 'Linebackers', two outside and two inside, are required to identify the offensive play as either rushing or passing, before reacting to tackle the ball-carrier or assist the defensive backs in defending against the pass.

E = Defensive end    S = Safety

T = Defensive tackle    CB = Cornerback

LB = Linebacker

## OFFENSIVE PLAY - EXAMPLES

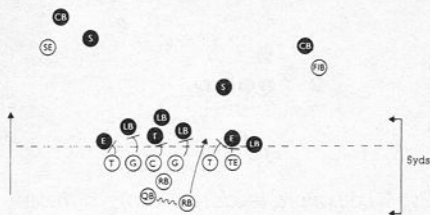


Fig 2: Creation of a gap in defensive line: blocking by right guard and right tackle. The running back aims for the gap between right guard and right tackle.

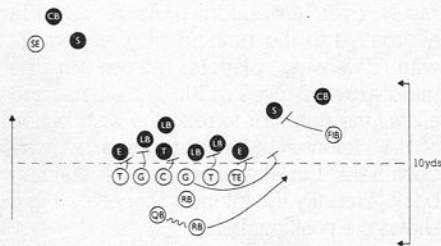


Fig 3: Right guard leads rush down right side

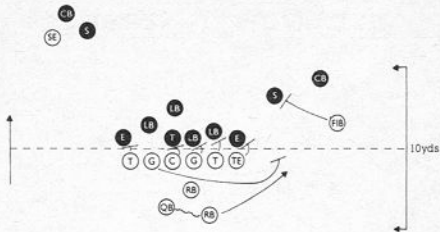


Fig 4: Left guard leads rush down right side

### Short Pass

The short pass is used in circumstances when only two or three yards are required to gain another first down. It is usually directed towards the side line and only rarely over the middle. As a valuable alternative to the running play, especially with defensive players massed in the middle area, it gives width to an offense and allows the receiver to read the distribution of the defense before threading his way downfield. For the short pass, a running back is usually the intended receiver. Fig 5 shows the positional play.

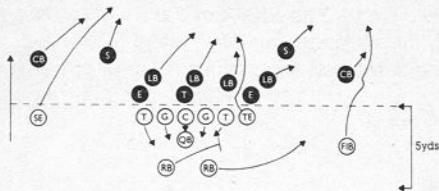
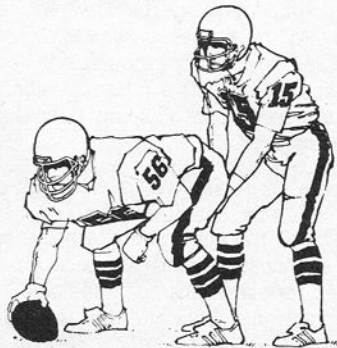


Fig 5: Running back takes up position for short pass. The tackles, guards and center form a temporary pocket, together with one running back. Split end, tight end and flankerback make decoy runs, with defensive backs and linebackers almost certainly dropping back to cover.





## The Medium Pass

With the medium pass, we come to the specialist pass receivers who take up wide positions on or behind the line of scrimmage.

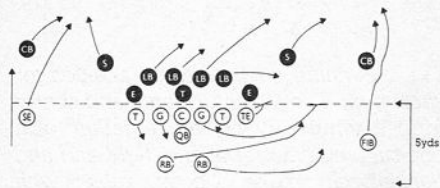


Fig 6: *Blocking for running back receiving short pass. The guard, tackles and center form a temporary pocket. Split end and flankerback make decoy runs with some defensive players dropping back to cover. Running back adopts a lateral position to make the reception, allowing blockers to take up stations.*

Classically, there are two types of pass, one down the side line, the other over the middle. The medium pass down the side line is simplicity in itself. In execution, the intended receiver runs down the side line, stops, turns his back to the defending cornerback and makes the reception. By

turning, he effectively shields the ball, thus guarding against an interception by the defender. This manoeuvre is shown below.

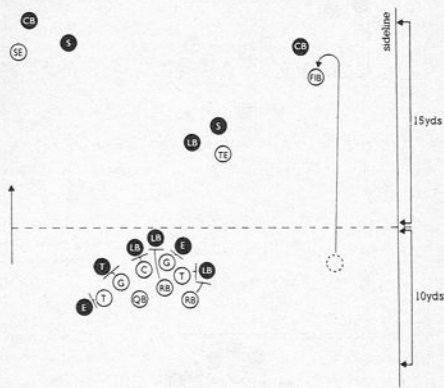


Fig 7: *Medium pass down the sideline: the hook pattern. The quarterback drops back in the pass pocket. Split end and tight end run decoy patterns.*

# DEFENSIVE PLAY

## DEFENSE AGAINST A RUNNING PLAY

### The Frontal Assault

The offensive linemen will be attempting to establish a gap for the running back. As will become apparent from subsequent sections, it is often possible for a defense to anticipate with confidence the type of offensive play it will face. On other occasions though, it will be a matter of allowing the offense to initiate a play before reacting to defend. This is particularly true for linebackers and defensive backs. The defensive lineman on the other hand, knows for certain that he will be in collision with offensive linemen on every play, whether it be run or pass. The instant play begins, the defensive lineman will therefore need to absorb this initial contact and very rapidly read the play as run or pass. On a running play, the subject of this section, the offensive lineman is *not* restricted in his downfield movement, and his commitment to a

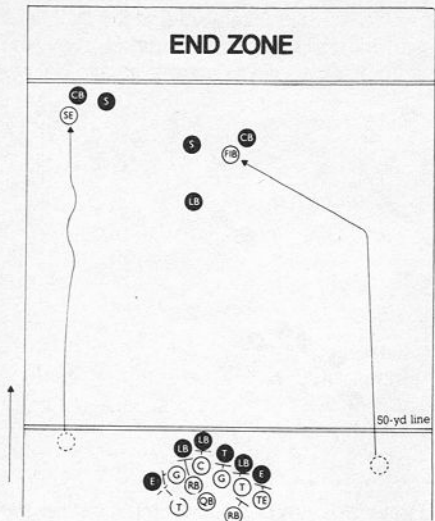


Fig 8: Long pass to deep middle or corner. The quarterback is in the pass pocket. Split end runs the flag pattern (i.e. towards the corner). Flankerback runs the post pattern (i.e. towards the posts).

forward and unqualified surge will quickly be detected by the defensive lineman as signalling this running play. His first tasks are not to lose ground, to fight against being shifted to one side or the other, and to prevent the creation of a gap. Should these objectives be achieved and the offensive surge controlled, there is the opportunity for counter-attack by penetrating the offensive line, now in some disarray, to tackle the ball-carrier, not yet at the line of scrimmage, for a loss of yards.

It is a most unlikely event for the defensive linemen alone, out-numbered as they are, to achieve such a success, but of course they are never alone. Immediately

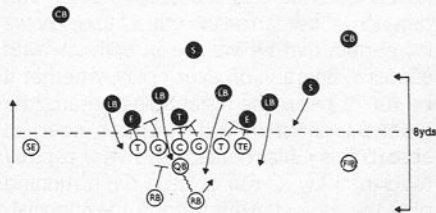


Fig 9: *Linebackers and safeties defend against the rush*

the play has been identified as a rush, the linebackers will spring into action, plugging a gap should it appear, or penetrating a weak spot in the offensive line to tackle the ball-carrier. There will even be extra assistance from safeties for they too, having identified the play as a rush, will rapidly advance, as shown in Fig 9.

## OFFENSIVE FORMATIONS

So far, the actions of offensive players have been considered on the basis that the offensive team takes up the same standard formation immediately prior to the snap of the ball. To the television viewer, there must appear to be a bewildering variety of formations and, focussing on the quarterback as he does, the cameraman does not make it easy to follow what is going on elsewhere. In reality, a team will use one of a small group of formations. These, together with discussions of their strengths and weaknesses, appear below.

## The Standard Pro Set

From the pro set (Fig 10), all standard plays are possible and they can be directed to either side. The advantage is that it does not reveal the play to the defense. The flankerback stands back from the line of scrimmage, enabling him to be a legal pass receiver. Were he to be on and functioning as the end of the offensive line, the tight end would no longer be eligible to receive a pass. A drawback is that in allowing for itself all the options, there is little opportunity to provide extra weight in support of a particular play. In subsequent formations, provision for the reinforcement of the rush or pass is made.

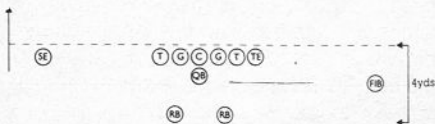


Fig 10: *The pro set formation*

## STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Team strategy is the prerogative of the Head Coach, and whilst he may well delegate matters of tactical detail to his assistant coaches, he is the general with overall control. He will almost always instruct the quarterback on what the next play should be. He will do this either by using a coded hand signal from the side line or, exploiting the free substitution rule, he will send on the information with the replacement player.

He will be indeed a fortunate coach if his team is powerful both in rushing and passing. More often, an offense will be based on the strength of its running backs and, of the seventy or so down plays, forty will be rushing plays. This would be a conservative tactic, though not without the possibility of a big gain, and it is a relatively simple matter to gain two yards on each play, perhaps even three. However, taking account of the odd mistimed hand-off or misdirected play, this would be insufficient for maintaining a long drive. Invariably, to

keep risk to a minimum, the coach will opt for a mixture of the rush and the short pass to either side of the field. An offense which is able to move the ball consistently and which starts to put together 1st downs, is said to establish 'momentum'. With this comes the confidence to attempt more ambitious and sophisticated plays, though they carry a greater risk of failure. These, for example the long pass, can bring instant success in the form of a dramatic touchdown.

One may well wonder why there is virtually no lateral passing in American Football, since to string together a series of passes, as in rugby, is quite legal. However, should the ball go astray during transfer from one offensive player to another, bouncing erratically as it would, it could be recovered by players of either team. Curiously, and I am not aware of the philosophical basis for the rule, should the defense recover the ball, it may *not* be advanced as part of that play. This is to be contrasted with the recovery of a fumbled ball, that is, a ball dropped by a player previously in full control, which *may* be advanced. To this extent, turning over the ball to the opposition during a lateral

passing sequence is not quite the catastrophe a fumble would be. Nevertheless, running the risk of relinquishing possession is considered, in itself, sufficient reason to restrict lateral passing only to the most desperate occasions.

For the defense, which is of course aware of the strengths of the opposition, there is always a problem. They may well try to guess the intentions of the offense and against, say, a suspected powerful rush, reinforce the line by all four linebackers taking close order and with a safety up at the line of scrimmage. Yet to do this weakens the defensive backfield and will serve to enhance what may otherwise be a moderate passing threat. On the other hand, a defense can pay closer attention to potential pass receivers, but only at the expense of numbers at the line of scrimmage, thus enhancing the rushing potential of the offense. Under normal circumstances, early in the game and when prediction of the imminent play is impossible, a standard 3-4-4 formation will be adopted. In this, the two central linebackers will be concerned primarily

with the frontal assault whilst the two outside linebackers will play with pass defense in mind.

As has been said before, several factors, alone or in combination, can sometimes virtually dictate the type of play to the offense. These involve the down status, field position, scoreline and time remaining on the game clock.

On 3rd down and with six or more yards to go for another 1st down, a pass is most likely. On the other hand, as the offense moves closer to the end zone, and the defensive backfield becomes increasingly congested with players, thus increasing the risk of interception, and particularly when only short yardage is required for a 1st down, a running play is more than likely.

For a team losing by three or fewer points, the offense may well settle for manoeuvring into field goal position, discarding the more ambitious objective of a touchdown. Here, a safe rushing play or short pass is usually preferred.

When the offense is losing by a margin greater than three points, and is some way from the end zone with time running out, a passing play is a certainty. This, though,

need not necessarily be a bomb, since the long pass against a defense primed to expect it has a poor chance of success. The wily quarterback will often opt for the short or medium pass down the side line. Once completed, the receiver can step out of bounds, in this way stopping the clock. The whole play may take up only five seconds of game time and by this means, the offense can leapfrog down the field in less than a minute. This is the so-called 'Two Minute Drill', since it is the last resort, usually reserved for the final two minutes of the half.

# TIPS FOR TELEVISION VIEWERS

Now that you've read this book, and know what the game is about, you might find the following tips helpful when watching television.

**Watch the Quarterback** As a start, rather than searching for the ball, focus on the quarterback, watching his movements. If he drops straight back he is going to pass, but if he rolls and fakes, you cannot be sure what he will do. Having got used to the fact that he will be floating around in the backfield, the man with all the options, you can start to take in the wider picture of things.

**Try to Predict the Next Play** On third down with more than five yards to go, a pass is almost certain. This will be strongly indicated if three wide receivers appear in the lineup. When only a short gain is needed, extra offensive linemen, more than seven on the line of scrimmage, will signal a running play.

**Watch the Offensive Linemen** On a pass play they are not allowed to smash down the field, so very rapidly they will all drop back to form a pocket for the quarterback, confirming the pass. If they all lunge forward, they are clearing the way for a running back.

**Identify Linebackers and Safeties: Are They Coming or Going?** Defensive linemen will be bent over with one or both hands touching the ground. Linebackers and safeties will be crouched and hovering. If they rush forward, they are 'blitzing', i.e. trying to nail the quarterback. If they withdraw from the line action, they are almost certainly setting up a zone defensive pattern. There will always be one linebacker, the real killer, who will go for the ball whatever and whoever is in the way.

**Punting and Field Goal Attempts** It is often more fun to watch the defensive players who will charge round the end of the offensive line, trying to block the kick.

**Kickoff and Punt Receiving** Anticipating the return run, it is best to focus in front of the punt/kickoff receiver, looking for lead blockers who are trying to establish a running lane to spring him into open field. Once there, he is going 'all the way'.

**Time Out** Keep a count of these (each team is allowed three in each half) because they are crucial when teams want to stop the clock towards the end of each half.

### **Sneaky Play Section**

(a) A quarterback will drop back as if to pass but instead will hand the ball to a running back. This is the 'draw' play.

(b) The quarterback might toss the ball to a running back who then throws a forward pass. This is the 'half back option play' and is perfectly legal.

(c) Look for a short kickoff, the 'onside kick', near the end of a half.

(d) Punters, holders and kickers are perfectly entitled to run and pass just as for a formal down. It is perfectly legal, rather cunning, and a favourite trick down in Dallas.



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