Chapter 1: Why Use The Trips Formation?

Coaches at every level are always looking for an edge competitively over their opponents. The use of the trips formation has become a very popular way to gain an advantage by placing additional receivers to one side of the formation thus making the offensive formation unbalanced with receivers by having three on one side to just one or possibly two on the other side. This unbalance causes defenses to have to make a decision. They must decide to either adjust to the additional receiver and bring another defender over, or stay in their regular defensive alignment. This forced adjustment is the basis of what offensive coordinators are looking at and basing their schemes. If the defense does not adjust, then they will run pass plays that are designed to get one of the three receivers open. If they do adjust, then they are looking to either run the ball inside or pass the ball to the single receiver who does not have any help on the backside of the formation.
Balanced Versus Unbalanced Formations

In High School football, this issue of unbalance is especially important when considering that the hash marks are wider than any other level. When the ball is placed on the boundary hash mark the field space is limited between the hash and the boundary. If you put two receivers there in a balanced spread formation, they are relatively close together and not spreading out the defense. This works against the spread concept because one defender can guard two receivers in his zone (Figure 1). Move one receiver to make the formation a 3 x 1 and a similarly balanced defense is now at a disadvantage (Figure 2).
Personnel Recommendations

When you look at the personnel of a trips formation it's best to plan from the goal of what are you trying to accomplish. Most coaches are trying to throw the ball from the trips formation and that of course is the purpose of this book. However sometimes trips formations can be used to better effectively run the ball. So where would you want to put your best players in a trips formation? I recommend that you put your best player at the #3 receiver position in a basic spread trips formation (Figure 3).

The reason for this is because your best player as both a runner and a passer can be used most effectively from this position. He also has the advantage of being matched up against a lesser athletic linebacker, can run routes closer to the quarterback, can run bubble
screens, can be the running back, and can cross the field for a pass. With your #1 and #2 receiver positions, you don't have to have the best athletes on the team. Depending on your strategies on throwing the ball out of trips, you're looking to get the ball to a #3 receiver first and then your #2 receiver might be your second primary receiver and your #1 receiver might be your dump-off or hot route receiver. So not all of the receivers have to be the best that you have available, but they do need to be able to execute basic routes and catch the ball well.

“When you get into different kinds of formations, I've found that it's best to just look at the route that you're trying to run and place your top receivers in the correct position for where you think they will be most effective.”

For example, when we are in our Bunch formation if we are trying to throw the ball, I might put my best receiver at the point of the bunch and have him running a deep Corner route. If we are running the ball I might move him back to the inside Wing where he can go in motion and then take the handoff going opposite. This could be a key to defenses that something is different but if you have players line up and snap the ball quickly it becomes very hard to identify and just another thing that defenses have to try to remember in order to identify what's coming offensively.

**Overload Formation**

Another strategy that trips formations can use is the overload formation. An overloaded formation is where a receiver is on the line of scrimmage outside of the tight end (Figure 4).
Instead of the tight end being an eligible receiver, he is now covered up by #1 and cannot release downfield. Some coaches like to have receivers who are split out be covered up, but there really isn't a great advantage to doing this often, other than making a defense recognize that it's an unbalanced formation and they need to shift their defensive alignment to be better balanced against a run play. As far as passing plays go, it doesn't really help you out much because even if they don't cover #3, receiver you can't throw him the ball since he is ineligible.

**Bunch Formation**
Another trips formation that is popular is the bunch formation (Figure 5). There are two kinds of bunch formations most frequently used. There is a tight bunch (Figure 5) and a wide bunch (Figure 6). The tight Bunch formation consists of three receivers grouped closely together about a yard to two yards apart from each other - just outside of the tackle to the side of the offensive formation. The wide bunch takes those three receivers grouped together and spreads them out to about 8 to 12 yards away from the interior linemen. A tight Bunch formation is a type of compressed formation. The advantage that coaches get from compressed formations is additional blockers in the run game and drawing defenders in tighter to the formation, which may increase space to run the ball outside. Tight Bunch formations also give your team the ability to scatter out wider into the field on pass routes. As receivers run routes they have lots of room to break into open spaces in any direction from compressed formations giving defenses a more challenging task to defend or cover these receivers. It also gives quarterbacks a lot of nice room to drop the ball in or lead receivers into open spaces.

![Figure 6](image)

A wide Bunch formation forces defenses to bring additional defenders out wider to where the three receivers are lined up. For example, a team could line up in a wide Bunch formation and call a
simple bubble screen pass and if there are not enough defenders, you could easily have a three on one situation where the receiver, after catching the ball, has two lead blockers in front of him and lots of open space to run into. Most wide bunch formations are intended to spread the defense out to cover the receivers. They could also run deep routes forcing defenders to cover both deep and wide throughout the field and which gives quarterbacks lots of room to execute run plays inside the box if the numbers are good.

**On or Off the LOS**

The next question is should your receivers be lined up on the line of scrimmage or off of the line of scrimmage. In a typical trips formation you will need to have one receiver on and two of the receivers off of the line of scrimmage. There's no real right answer to this so again you need to look at what your purpose for running trips formations. Are you trying to throw screens to your #3 receiver? Then he should be off the line. Are you trying to also throw screens to your #2 receiver? He should also be off the line of scrimmage. If #1 is going to be considered for a NOW pass or a quick screen it might be easier to have him off of the line of scrimmage and the #2 on if #2 is going to be kicking out blocking the defender over the number one receiver. Also consider when receivers are off the line that their depth of route will be 1-2 yards shorter when you are counting steps. However if a receiver is off the line of scrimmage a defender cannot press or jam him as easily and hold him on the line.

I think the basic principle you should follow with screens to put the receiver you want to throw the screen to off the line of scrimmage. The receiver that you need to be a blocker will probably be better lined up on the line of scrimmage depending on the screen that you want to throw.
My personal favorite is to have the #1 receiver on the line of scrimmage while #2 and #3 are off the line of scrimmage (Figure 3). I think having #3 as our best personal receiver and running back gives us the most options and ways to exploit defenses as well as variety in our offense. We have the ability to get him open quickly on the closest pass route. It also works well if we are running run-pass option (RPO) because again he is closer to the interior line and can be our first option if we are reading the defenders coming up against the run but we are trying to throw behind them. It does make it difficult for our #1 receiver to release off the line but that is what we are willing to give up in order to put our #3 in the best position possible to be successful. Alignment in trips formations can vary quite a bit and I already covered what a bunch formation looks like. Let’s talk about running a spread trips formation next. Where should your receivers be lined up?

**Spread Offense Spacing**

Basic spread offense guiding principles are to have receivers equally spaced out on the field from sideline to sideline so that defenders are spaced out and cannot cover multiple receivers at the same time. This spacing also forces defender to try to decide how they can defend both the run and the passing game. They can either assign a certain number of defenders to the run game, which leaves receivers uncovered; or they can cover all the receivers and leave fewer defenders to stop the run game. By forcing defenders to decide whether they stop the pass or the run, coaches can count numbers in the box and determine where they want the ball to go. The basic spread offense alignment is for your #1 receiver to be on the numbers, your #2 receiver on the hash marks, and your #3 receiver lined up on the goal post upright nearer to the sidelines (Figure 3).
Some teams, like Baylor (Figure 7), have used an even wider alignment where they put the #1 receiver below the numbers, the #2 receiver between the hash and numbers and the #3 receiver between the just on the hash (High School Alignment).

![Figure 7](image)

Again the intent is to force defenders to declare whether they are going to cover either the pass defenders or stop run plays inside the box. While this super spread alignment definitely forces defenses to make a difficult decision, it also makes it more difficult for quarterbacks with weaker arms to get the ball out to these receivers. That’s not an issue with a team like Baylor or most D1 schools quarterbacks, but it may be an issue with a team like yours. I have found that using the goalposts closest to the sidelines for a #3 receiver is the perfect width for quarterbacks at nearly all levels to be able to get a bubble screen or hitch route out to your best receiver at that position when they are uncovered or the matchup is favorable.
Other options for lining up in trips formations are to stack your #2 and #3 receivers (Figure 8). A stack formations will have both the #2 and #3 receivers lined up one in front and one directly behind, usually on the hash mark. The advantage of this is that you're forcing linebackers to decide whether they are going to cover the box for run or the stacked receivers. Some will split the difference and attempt to cover both. A stack alignment makes it easier for a quarterback to turn and throw the ball straight to a receiver that is just standing there and waiting to catch it rather than a receiver that is running an outside bubble route. Offensively the rule is simple. If the LB is closer to one then the other, run the play away from him. If he is neutral, you can play action or run-pass option him to determine after the snap the best possible place to get the ball. There are also some advantages to having stacked receivers in that the front receiver can clear out or drive-thru a nearby defender who is trying to jam or play close coverage freeing up the stacked defender.
One of my favorite adjustments to help with beating man-to-man coverage is to move the #3 receiver and the #2 close to each other, but not stacked (Figure 9). As the #2 receiver releases on his route vertically, the #3 receiver can break off the butt of the #2 receiver forcing a natural pick to occur that makes it difficult for defenders to run through. I love this strategy on the goal line or against any kind of tight press-man coverage.

**Empty Formation**

The final trips formation I’ll review is Empty. In an empty formation there are three receivers or trips on one side of the formation and two receivers or twins to the other side of the formation (Figure 10). It doesn’t really look any different on the trips side, but the effects of
this formation can help with some things. Because the defense is spread out the entire width of the field on both sides you may get better matchups to the trips side for all of your trips passing plays. (You may also see the exact same coverage to your trips side as you do a 3 x 1 set) Empty can also confuse defenses when you are running vertical routes as to which receivers are running vertical and which receivers are sitting in the under zones. Defenders will drop and then they have to identify who in the play is running deep and who is not. When you run empty formations you may want to run them when the ball is from the middle of the field because you are spreading out receivers to both sides of your formation. This can lead to some adjustments on your trips side because when the ball is in the middle of the field, the #3 receiver cannot line up on that goalpost closer to the sideline. He has to widen out a bit. The #2 receiver will widen between the hash and numbers and the #3 will be below the numbers.