3-3 Stack Defense - Football Information

The 3-3 Stack defense with the adjustments available is great against any offense. The 3-3 Stack will be an easy transition from our past 4-3 base and allows us to keep a lot of what we did in the 4-3. The 3-3 Stack allows us to play faster athletes in the secondary positions with two (2) corners and three (3) safeties across the back of the defense. Against the spread/west coast offense, this is a perfect defense as it removes a somewhat slower linebacker and replaces him with a defensive back.

Maybe the greatest thing about the 3-3 is it allows us to get more of our speed on the field and with the odd front it is easier to angle and slant to get into a reduction and does not tip off where the “BUCKET” is to the Offense. Historically, Sam LB’s have been bigger and more physical having to play over the Tight End. In spread type offenses Sam LB’s are often outmatched due to being forced to line up against a slot wide receiver. In space, the slot WR has a decided advantage over the Sam LB.

Despite being bigger and stronger, the Sam LB usually doesn’t have the speed to get to the places he needs to make plays. With an extra cover defender on the field, that problem has been eliminated.

Another advantage of the 3-3 is that nine (9) out of eleven (11) defenders know what their assignment is regardless of what the offense is doing. Only two (2) players make adjustments! By keeping the adjustments simple and contained, defenders are thinking less and reacting more, which leads to speed players being able to use their speed even more. We don’t want our defenders bogged down by having to process a lot of information prior to the snap.

Plus, with the front always balanced, the offense doesn’t have a bubble to check. You always have three (3) down lineman and three (3) stacked linebackers.

A final advantage is that the quarterback cannot make an accurate pre-snap read. With five (5) defenders in your secondary, it’s almost impossible for the QB to know if you are in a two- or three-deep coverage. You are giving the illusion that you are in both with five (5) defenders in a line across the back of the defense.

3-3 Basics

Below are the player alignments with the 3-3-5
Diagram 1: 3-3-5 Alignment

The diagram provides the look of the 3-3-5. The responsibilities are broken down by defender.

Nose Tackle (N) – Is in a “0” alignment and head-up on the center.

Ends (E)- In a “4” alignment the ends are head-up on the offensive tackles. We probably won’t reduce down the ends but sometimes get them a little wider in obvious passing situations.

Stack Backers (J,S,W)-

Jet (J) is the strong-side LB.

Sam (S) is the middle LB.

Will (W) is the weak-side LB.

Each LB stacks at a 4 ½-yard depth (depending on situation) directly behind the down lineman.

Safeties (SS, WS) –

“SS” –is the strong safety
“WS” - is the weak safety.

They are both positioned 7 yards deep and on the out-side shade of the tight-end (or imaginary TE if there isn’t one on that side).

If there is a slot receiver, the safeties move to the inside shade at a 7 yard depth. Safeties also must follow the “hash rule”, which stipulates that they do not align more than 3 yards outside or inside the hash mark.

**Corners (C)** - Are positioned to the outside shade of the No. 1 receiver on their side of the ball. They are also 7 yards deep. If the receiver is 6 yards to the hash, the corner moves to the inside shade.

**Assassin (A)** – The “Assassin” is the most complete defender. The Assassin aligns according to our game plan (in this example, against a two back set, The Assassin is in line with the strong-side offensive guard) but typically is 7 yards deep to give the defense the illusion of being 5 (five) across the back.

### Making Adjustments

There are 4 (four) basic alignment adjustments to the 3-3-5 for specific situations or when we want to give the offense a different look. The adjustments are called: *Spread, Sniper, Bluff and Ninja.*

**Diagram 2: “Spread” Adjustment.**
We will use the “Spread” adjustment to have a (5) five man front. The Jet and Will move to the line of scrimmage.

Diagram 3: “Sniper” Adjustment.

When “Sniper” is called, the strong safety (SS) aligns 3-yard-wide and 3-yard-deep position (called a “3-by-3) in the box outside the TE.

Diagram 4: “Bluff” Adjustment

When you need more run support in the box, “Bluff” is the call. This moves the strong and weak safeties into the box in 3-by-3 alignment.
Diagram 5: “Ninja” Adjustment

The “Ninja” is just the opposite of “Sniper” with the weak safety (WS) moving into a 3-by-3 alignment in the box.

Maximizing the Assassin

The “Assassin” is the one defender who is going to move around quite a bit in this defense. When that happens, the other defenders need to know their responsibilities based on where the “Assassin” is located. Diagrams 6-12 breaks down the call and the coverage when the Assassin moves.

Diagram 6: Sling The Coverage.
When the Assassin moves, it signals to the defense that it needs to “sling” the coverage. In this instance, the Assassin is on the LOS, so the WS drops into the middle of the field.

Two typical calls to move the Assassin to the LOS are **Strong Flash Storm** (Diagram 7) and **Weak Flash Storm** (Diagram 8).

**Diagram 7: Strong Flash Storm**

The Assassin has been moved 3-by-3 to the LOS. With the call being “Strong Flash” that signifies the Assassin is flashing from the strong side of the set. The “Storm” call indicates a 4-under, 3 deep coverage.

The player responsibilities are as follows:

- **A-** Run, edge, blitz
- **Strong E-** Loop B-gap
- **N-** Loop A-gap
- **Weak E-** Loop C-gap, Contain rush
- **WS-** Automatically sling the coverage
- **SS-** Seam defender on strong side
Diagram 8: Weak Flash Storm

The Assassin has moved into a 3-by-3 alignment on the weak side of the formation. The player responsibilities are:

- **A**- Flash from weak side
- **Strong E**- Penetrate C-Gap, Contain rush
- **N**- Penetrate A-gap
- **Weak E**- Penetrate B-gap
- **WS**- Automatically sling the coverage
- **SS**- Seam defender on strong side
- **J**- Hook-to-curl
Instead of having the Assassin move to the LOS, he can also replace a blitzing LB. When this happens we add the tag “Falcon” to the defensive call. (Diagrams 9-12) shows four examples. (two strong-side and two weak-side) of these calls.

Diagram 9: Strong Loop Storm “Falcon”

The “Strong Loop” calls means the N and J are looping into their gaps with J blitzing. The player responsibilities are:

A- Replace J. Play seam

Strong E- Penetrate C-gap

N- Loop B-gap

Weak E- Penetrate C-gap

WS- Seam defender on weak side

SS- Drop into deep coverage

J- Blitz through A-gap

S- Hook-to-curl
Diagram 10: Strong Loop X Fire “Falcon”

The “Fire” call indicates a five-man rush. The player responsibilities are:

- **A-** Replace J. Play seam
- **Strong E-** Penetrate C-gap
- **N-** Loop B-gap
- **Weak E-** Penetrate C-gap
- **WS-** Seam defender on weak side
- **SS-** Drop into deep coverage
- **J-** Blitz through strong A-gap
- **S-** Blitz through weak A-gap
- **W-** Cover the hole in the middle

Both of the previous calls can me made to the weak side as well. See below. (Diagrams 11-12)
Diagram 11: Weak Loop Storm "Falcon"

The Assassin is moving across the field in this instance. The player responsibilities are:

A- Replace W. Play weak-side seam

**Strong E**- Penetrate C-gap

N- Loop into weak-side B-gap

**Weak E**- Penetrate C-gap

WS- Sling Coverage. Play center field

SS- Seam defender on strong side

J- Hook-to-curl

S- Hook-to-curl

W- Blitz through weak A-gap
Diagram 12: Weak Loop X Fire “Falcon”

Assassin is moving to the weak side of the field on the snap. The player responsibilities are:

A- Replace W. Play weak-side seam

Strong E- Penetrate C-gap

N- Loop into weak-side B-gap

Weak E- Penetrate C-gap

WS- Sling the coverage. Play center field

SS- Seam defender on strong side

J- Cover the hole in the middle

S- Blitz through strong A-gap

W- Blitz through weak A-gap
This defense is also a beast against the run and is versatile enough to modify as our personnel changes and/or we want to add a wrinkle.

**Background on the 3-3 Stack Defense**

The 3-3, sometimes known as the “Bomber”, "Mustang" or "30-Stack," typically relies on 3 down linemen, 3 linebackers, and 5 defensive backs: 1 free safety, 2 cornerbacks playing off the line, and 2 roving safeties that move around. The safeties take on 2nd receivers or tight ends and have to be able to come up and make tackles, usually outside the box. Generally, when running a 3-3-5 the user is trying to confuse the offense by "exchanging” different pressures in the A, B, and C gaps using the lineman, linebackers, rovers, and free safety while playing mostly zone or sometimes man coverage behind. Teams that run the 3-3-5 generally use it because they are a fast but sometimes smaller unit who wants to cause assignment issues for the opposing offense. Also, a 3-3-5 can be adjusted based on formation to a 4-3, 3-4, 4-4, Goal Line, etc. with the same starting players.

To effectively play the 3-3-5 the "Front 8," especially the lineman and linebackers must be physical, stout, and tough. The lineman must be able to control their assigned gaps, get an effective pass rush, and take out double teams to free up the linebackers to make plays. The 2 outside or "Stud" linebackers must be effective at pressuring, reading and reacting to the play, and play at a low pad level as they will be taking on lineman and fullbacks while the "Mike" must be intelligent in lining up the defense in a counter to the offense's formation as well as flowing to the ball and being able to shed blockers and make plays. The rovers or "Drillers" must be capable of pressuring, dropping back in coverage, being physical, taking on lineman, keeping contain, and coming up and making plays. The cornerbacks must be good in coverage and be physical tacklers. And finally, the free safety is the most versatile athlete on the field as on any given play he can drop in coverage, pressure the quarterback or play one of the "Mike" backers in the 3-4. In addition to this the free safety must be a physical tackler and hitter and generally your best playmaker and smartest athlete.

**Running the 3-3-5 Defense in Football**

Spread Defense Takes Advantage of Team Speed and Angles of Pursuit 8
The 3-3-5 defense can be a great option for teams with a lot of speed as it neutralizes the passing game and can confuse the offense's blocking schemes on the run.

The 3-3-5 defense is emerging as a viable option for teams with more speed than size. With its unique set up, the 3-3-5 defense forces offenses to adjust to the defensive scheme and gives defenses many options in terms of blitzing and zone responsibilities.

**Setting Up the 3-3-5**

The basic formation of the 3-3-5 is as its name suggests, three down linemen, three linebackers and five defensive back. The front six players are stacked on top of each other with the outside linebackers directly behind the tackles and the middle linebacker directly behind the nose guard. The five defensive backs are lined up about 10 yards from the line of scrimmage across the field.

The defensive backs can flex toward the line in an umbrella shape if facing a team that has a wideouts or an outside rushing scheme.

The defensive tackles are lined up square with the offensive tackles with the nose guard directly over the ball.

**Basic Responsibilities in the 3-3-5 Defense**

When running the 3-3-5 defense, who has what responsibility is key to the success of the defense. From the 3-3-5, defensive teams have many options and can confuse the offense’s blocking schemes.

The front six players must work together to fill running lanes. The front three can slant to the right, left or even have the tackles take outside responsibility which means the linebackers must fill the corresponding gaps left by the linemen. By switching up who has which lane to fill, the offensive line may not know who to block.

For example, if the offense calls a run play up the middle, right of the center, the previous play, the nose guard may have been slanting that way. This time, the nose guard slants the opposite way taking the center with them and leaving the middle linebacker alone in the hole to stuff the run.

The basic responsibilities of the defensive backs vary by position. The outside corner backs play like traditional corner backs, covering receivers and helping contain on the run. The three inside defensive backs act more like strong safeties with the player in the middle as the key.
The middle players should be one of the team’s best tacklers yet have the speed to support the run defense where needed and fill any holes in the pass defense over the middle.

**Advantage of the 3-3-5**

The number one advantage of the 3-3-5 defense is its versatility. The 3-3-5 defense allows teams to blitz from anywhere on the field at any time. Because the basic formation has five defensive backs strung out across the field, if any of them blitz, the remaining backs can easily rotate and not leave an open zone like traditional defenses.

The 3-3-5 also gives defenses the opportunity to run to the ball and see how a play is developing. With only three players on the line, offenses have to come out and get the defenders which will give away the flow of the play.

Linebackers and defensive backs will have time to adjust to a sweep or reverse quicker as the offense tries to set up their blocks.

The 3-3-5 also gives the quicker defensive backs better angles of pursuit on plays as a defensive back could come in to support a play from any of the five spots on the field.

**The 3-3-5 Against the Run**

With only six players in the box, the most glaring weakness of the 3-3-5 defense is its ability to stop the run. But by sticking to the principles of the 3-3-5 defense, teams can effectively stop the run and hold offenses in check.

Against a strong running team, blitzing the safeties on nearly every play is probably called for since the threat of a pass is not really there.

But coaches need to make sure to mix up their blitzes and the responsibilities of the front six. By using the versatility of the defense and the speed of the defenders, the 3-3-5 can be very effective against the run.
LT END = 4 TECH
RT END = 4 TECH
NOSE = HEAD UP
LT SPUR = 3X3
RT SPUR = 3X3
LT OLB = 40 TECH
RT OLB = 40 TECH
MIKE = 10 TECH
Pass Coverage Rules

Normally, in a passing situation, the zones to be covered are the flats, hook/curl, and the hole. Responsibilities will change slightly when a blitz is called.

Defensive Line--

**Nose:** The Nose will play a head up technique on the center. He is responsible for 1 A gap and must force a double team in that gap. While a 2 gap NG is ideal, controlling his assigned gap is a must.

**Defensive Ends:** The DEs line up in 4 techniques (head up to the offensive tackle). They also will have a gap to control based on the called slant or stunt and their option responsibility will also vary amongst dive/QB depending on that call.

Linebackers--

**Mike:** Mike stacks four yards behind the NG. He is responsible for the A gap opposite the call. For instance, if the line slants weak, Mike is responsible for the strong side A gap. In a pass read, Mike has the "hole" or the hook/curl zone depending on straight dropback or sprint out action.
Outside Linebackers: The outside linebackers stack behind the defensive ends at 4 yards depth. These are B gap and C gap players again depending on the DL slant. Like the DEs, their option responsibility depends on the slant which will determine if they are on dive or QB. Usually, these players will also be the press players with sprintout to their side, but normal pass assignment is hook/curl zone. Assassin

Spurs: These are the most versatile athletes in the defense as they must be a linebacker/defensive back hybrid. The alignment for a Spur is 3x3 outside leverage from the last man on the line of scrimmage or 4x2 inside leverage from the #2 WR in Twins or Trips. The Spur is responsible for outside contain and must funnel all runs back to the LBs. On option, the Spurs take the pitch out of the equation. In a base formation, the Spurs cover the flats in a passing situation. Again, this position will be everywhere on the field from Safety in a Cover 2 or 4 shell to press Cornerback in a Cover 2 to bringing heat off the edge or B gap.

Defensive Backs--

Not much change amongst the DBs besides alignment/coverage disguises with the Spurs. In a normal Cover 3 call, the CBs will be 6x1 inside leverage on the #1 WR and the safety will be 11 yards off the ball with his alignment depending on the hash, strength, and WR set.

The Backbone of the 3-3-5

The 3-3-5 relies on versatility to match up against any formation. From the base formation above, almost any defense can be run. If the power running game is hurting you, drop a LB down onto the DL for a 40 look like this:
The 33 Stack has an adjustment for every formation that does not require a personnel substitution. The graphic above is only a simple example to illustrate the versatility. Now it should be noted that every Defensive Coordinator in a 33 scheme will also have a substitution ready where a DL will come into the game and one LB will come out. Many High School teams and even a few college teams play what is called a "Stand Up" front. Exactly how it sounds, the DL and LBs stand up and move all over the line of scrimmage before blowing up a gap on the snap. What they give up in size and technique there, the deception and confusion make up for that. Coach Specht at St. X even shows a base alignment of 3-3-3 and then moves from that. By having your best 11 athletes on the field, the versatility to match any offense is always there.

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That leads into the next backbone of the 33...deception and pressure. With this defense, pressure can come from anywhere at anytime. Therefore, pre-snap movement is essential. You will see the defensive line shifting across the line of scrimmage, linebackers prowling in the gaps, Spurs stemming to the edges or even starting out lined up with the safety before crashing down to their normal alignment. All of this disrupts the Quarterback's pre-snap reads for coverage and causes havoc amongst the offensive line calls.
4 Man Pressure Rules

4 man pressures will include the 3 linemen and 1 linebacker. Normally, in a passing situation, the zones to be covered are the flats, hook/curl, and the hole. With one linebacker blitzing, we will give up the “hole” and just cover the two hook/curl and flats zones.
Now imagine the possibilities we have now...a mobile unit that will be attacking on every snap. The defensive line will have a slant for every play (left, right, strong, weak, and a cluster call where both ends fire out to C gap and the NG fires strong A). At least one LB will be coming behind that DL slant...but usually more than one or a Spur will come also. We can walk the Spurs up to the edge in a 9 technique for a 50 look or move them out to jam the #1 WRs while the Corners drop to the hashes for a Robber 2 coverage, or we can...