

CHAPTER 1

High-Pursuit Philosophy and Tactics

Pursuit involves an intense, all-out effort that is driven by an insatiable desire to get to the football and to put the ballcarrier on the ground. Pursuit is the essence of a good defensive football team. Visualize 11 defensive players disengaging from blocks and sprinting relentlessly to the ballcarrier on every play. That type of effort makes it very difficult for an offense to sustain a successful running attack. It also makes it difficult for an offense to break a big play. This is demoralizing to the offense.

Pursuit is not, however, a natural reaction for most football players. On plays where the ballcarrier is not going directly at them, many defensive players will first look to see if they are needed. They will then make a quick decision on whether to join in the pursuit of the play. If they decide that they are not needed, many players will simply jog in the direction of the play. Even when a defensive player makes the decision that he is needed, unbridled pursuit of the ballcarrier is often the exception rather than the rule. Therefore, you need to emphasize pursuit as a key to your defensive philosophy.

At the various universities where I have coached, one of our defensive goals for each game has been to not allow a run over 15 yards. The great defensive teams I have been a part of would not allow more than 15 runs greater than 15 yards over the course of an 11-game season. Consistent success on defense cannot occur without great team pursuit. Our 2004 Penn State defense ended the season ranked 10th in the nation in scoring defense. That defense allowed only 11 runs over 15 yards throughout the 11-game season. Our 2005 Penn State defense allowed only 9 runs over 15 yards during the course of a 12-game season. That team finished 10th nationally in scoring defense.

Principles of Pursuit

Another positive by-product of emphasizing the relentless pursuit of the football is the mental effect it will have on your defensive team. Your defensive players will take great pride in their ability to play hard on every play. This will also increase their confidence. At Northwestern University in 1995, we often used the expression “If

we chase them long enough and hard enough, we will catch them and stop them.” When a defense focuses on pursuit, the defensive players develop a mind-set that includes the following qualities:

1. **Accountability.** Your players will feel accountable to each other. All members of the defensive team will develop tremendous pride in the great effort that they give on every play. No player will want to be the weak link in the chain of pursuit.
2. **Respect.** Intense effort will bring about a sense of respect and accomplishment from within. This will create a bond between your players that is built on mutual respect, and these feelings will permeate through your defensive unit.
3. **Aggressive attitude.** There is no question that intense effort leads to an aggressive style of play. Your players will take tremendous pride in swarming to the football. This will have an intimidating effect on the ballcarrier. Nothing is more demoralizing to a ballcarrier than having to unpile from under five defenders after every play, with the other six defenders forming a wall around him.
4. **Confidence.** The blend of accountability, respect, and aggressive play will lead to a strong synergy within the defense. The combination of these qualities will lead to success. With success comes confidence.



Photo courtesy of Penn State Athletics

Defensive players must develop an aggressive attitude and take pride in swarming to the football and putting the ballcarrier on the ground.

On the surface, unbridled pursuit to the football seems like a simple concept. However, pursuing is not simply running to the ball. If this were the case, speed and effort would be the only requirements for proficiency at this task. As we delve into the methods and skills involved in successful pursuit, you will discover that pursuit also requires discipline and the development of proper technique, including the technique to use when the defender regains leverage on the ballcarrier at the end of a pursuit course.

Four types of pursuit are employed by defenders:

1. Shuffle. This technique, often used by linebackers, is a controlled movement parallel to the line of scrimmage (this movement may initially feel quite unnatural). The shuffle technique begins with an 8- to 12-inch reach step with the foot in the direction of the defender's initial movement. The initial step should be low to the ground and parallel to the line of scrimmage. The other foot should slide a similar distance, also low to the ground and parallel to the line of scrimmage.

The shuffle technique allows the linebacker to easily change direction as he reacts to the ballcarrier. This technique is used when a defender has leverage on the ballcarrier, and it can be used from tackle to tackle when the ball is in the *box* (the area between the split tackle and the tight end). The following coaching points should be stressed when teaching the shuffle:

- **Stay square.** Defenders should always work to keep their shoulders square to the line of scrimmage. The football often changes direction during the course of a play, either by plan or by the broken or elusive running of an offensive back. Defenders must be in position to quickly change direction. Therefore, defenders should always keep their shoulders parallel to the line of scrimmage while moving in their shuffle.
- **Regain the shuffle.** When a defender is in his shuffle, he can react quickly with either foot. A common error for all defensive personnel is to overrun the football. When a pursuing defender gains leverage on the ballcarrier (gets within four yards of the ballcarrier), the defender should return to using the shuffle technique. This will help prevent the defender from crossing his feet over at the most critical moments—just before contact with the ballcarrier. Many missed tackles can be attributed to a defender crossing over as he meets the ballcarrier, allowing the ballcarrier to cut back across the face of the defender. Regaining the shuffle is a key in preventing overpursuit.

2. Alley. Alley pursuit begins whenever the shuffle does not allow the defender to keep pace with the ballcarrier as he gains speed. Now, the defender must turn his hips and run inside out to the ball. He must work his arms hard to keep his shoulders as square as possible. He should also maintain a low pad level. When the defender regains his leverage on the ballcarrier, he should regain his shuffle and fit inside out on the ballcarrier. This principle cannot be overstated.

3. Press. This term is used to describe a technique used by a linebacker when he has an opening to the ball. In this situation, the linebacker should press the ball,