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Banning the A-11 offense is a bad idea

By Michael Weinreb
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I spoke to a high school football coach named Kurt Bryan on the telephone the other day. He was angry, and I don't blame him, because there are a lot of reasons to be angry in America these days, and the wording of arcane high school football bylaws should not be prominent among them. Yet for some reason, Bryan and his colleague Steve Humphries have become, to a certain segment of the population, an example of what is wrong with this country -- deceitful and unsportsmanlike, insisting upon taking shortcuts to prosperity, bending the rules to fit their whims. To these people, Bryan and Humphries are heretics, championing a radical idea in a sport that does not take easily to change.

"It's amazing what some people will do in their attempt to stop progress," said Bryan, who, I will admit, can go a little overboard in his eagerness to provide a good quote. But in this case, given that several years of work have potentially been thrown out by a room full of men he's never met, he seems to have a point.

In August, I [first spoke to Bryan](#), the football coach at Piedmont High School in California, and Humphries, the team's offensive coordinator, about an offense they'd created called the A-11, which had already caught on at several other high schools and at least a few colleges across the country (and had also raised eyebrows in the NFL, according to an article [by ESPN's David Fleming](#)). It is a complex hybrid of the spread offense, a Dunder-Mifflin fire drill and a game of capture the flag, and to some of us, it looked quite a bit like the future. In the base formation, there are two quarterbacks and "pods" of three receivers on each side, and the whole thing is mind-blowing, and at first seems like it should be cause for 17 penalties. Except that it is perfectly legal on the high school level, thanks to a loophole in the rules that allows all 11 players to be potentially eligible on what is known as a scrimmage-kick formation, if everyone is wearing numbers between 1-49 and 80-99.



There are 10 different types of options in the A-11 offense (triple, crack, fly, jab, yo-yo, etc). In this play the A-11 staggers the QBs, short snaps and runs a quick hitting "speed" option on the end.

Or at least it *was* legal, until last month, when at a meeting of the National Federation of State High School Associations in Indianapolis, the rules committee, comprised of state representatives, voted 46-2 to close the loophole. Now, on first, second and third downs, at least four players must wear numbers between 50 and 79, which kind of kills the buzz, since the whole notion of the A-11 was that all 11 players could potentially catch a pass before the ball was snapped.

The reasoning, according to a West Virginia official on the rules committee, was that this whole scheme was "unethical," a "deception" based on a loophole in the rules. In North Carolina, where the A-11 has been declared an "unsporting act," the supervisor of officials declared it was "outside the spirit of the rule code."

"Was the A-11 talked about? Sure it was talked about," said NFHS assistant director Bob Colgate, a liaison to the rules committee. "There was a lot of experience in that room, and they

SportsNation on A-11 Offense

Should the A-11 have been banned? Will we see it and other innovations in the NFL or college? Register [Register your vote](#) now.

were very familiar with the A-11. There must have been a concern out there somewhere if 46 members voted that way."

Of course, the A-11 was already banned in West Virginia and North Carolina and a handful of other states before the committee voted to ban it nationally, all of which makes it seem as if Humphries and Bryan are somehow using this offense to artificially drive up stock prices or kidnap small children.

In fact, Humphries and Bryan originally devised this idea because they had too many undersized kids on their team already, and were struggling to form a complete offensive line; as one of the smaller schools in their division of the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF), they stumbled upon this loophole in the rules and spent months designing a system that would allow them to become more competitive. Then, they say, they ran it by CIF officials, just to be sure. They've been competing with it for two years now, and claim they've gotten few complaints from either opponents or officials. It certainly hasn't rendered them invincible; this past year, they went 8-3, and lost in the first round of the playoffs. And Bryan insists it hasn't made them rich, either. Despite the fact hundreds of schools nationwide have picked up on the A-11, despite the fact that they sell A-11 install manuals on their Web site for \$149 each, Bryan figures his royalties have amounted to approximately \$1,200. He tells me he's given away most of his secrets for free. "I drive a Honda!" he says. "It's like, if we don't share, we're a--holes. If we do, we're greedy."

Given the media attention this thing has gotten, it would not surprise me if there is an element of jealousy involved. But I do think this is about something bigger, something more than merely a single bylaw, or even a single offense. (Otherwise, isn't any sort of motion or play-action or halfback pass also inherently "deceptive"?) This is about *progress*, and what it means for the future of football, and there are certain officials on that rules committee who apparently have a sincere concern that offenses like the A-11 -- offenses that spread the field to its edges -- will, indeed, ruin football as we know it.

The problem is that these concerns now seem both antiquated and exclusionary. This past college football season proved that the game has *already* evolved, and will continue to evolve (Bryan, in fact, recently returned from a clinic with a Pac-10 team), and while the NFL can be glacially slow to adapt, it will no doubt get there at its own pace (with or without Ronnie Brown). In the meantime, Bryan and Humphries are not mandating that other schools adopt their methods; all they are asking for is the freedom to continue to develop their experiment in peace. They recently petitioned the CIF to adopt a three-year experimental policy that would either modify the NFHS rule to allow three ineligible receivers (numbered 50-79) within the formation, or reject the rule altogether -- a transgression which would cost the CIF its vote on the rules committee (this has already happened to many states in many other sports, including basketball. The CIF uses a shot clock despite the NFHS's refusal to adopt it -- which, at least in terms of appearances, does not exactly make the NFHS seem "in touch" with the future. I'm not sure what their position is on the picket fence play.)

"These guys love saying it's not going to happen, but it's *already happened!*" Bryan shouted at me. "It's an innovation that's already been proven, and they want it go away. What are you, *crazy?*"



Wasn't the past NFL season made a little more exciting by the Wildcat formation?

The critics would surely insist that they are not insane, that they are merely combatting lawlessness and closing a loophole that was never meant to be there in the first place, that they are somehow preserving the integrity of the game by keeping its roots planted firmly on the ground. They discount the ingenuity Humphries and Bryan have shown in implementing an entire system based on a loophole no one had noticed before; they discount the value of sheer inventiveness. But this has always been the case, and it always will be. After all, at least 50 percent of the purpose of the game of football is to retard forward progress.

"The offense should have to earn what it gets, and it doesn't today," a prominent coach once said. "The touchdowns have been cheapened and so have the records. They should call it 'passball.'"

These words were, in fact, spoken by George Allen, the former coach of the Washington Redskins. And he said them in 1985.

Michael Weinreb's book "[Game of Kings: A Year Among the Oddballs and Geniuses Who Make Up America's Top High School Chess Team](#)" has been released in paperback by Gotham Books. He is working on a book about sports in the 1980s. He can be reached at michaelweinreb.com.
