

# Who's on Line? Even the Referees Don't Know

 static01.nyt.com/ads/tpc-check.html

Jeré Longman

October 17, 2008



The Piedmont High School football team lines up against St. Mary's in Piedmont, CA October 3, 2008. Credit...Max Morse for The New York Times

By [Jeré Longman](#)

Oct. 16, 2008

PIEDMONT, Calif. 📍 After the 2006 season at Piedmont High, Coach Kurt Bryan and an assistant sat around with a dry erase board, trying to coax a Ouija board's connection with football's innovative spirits. Their aim was to keep this Bay Area school, with a small enrollment (785 students) and generally small but athletic players, competitive against bigger schools with bigger players.

Steve Humphries, the assistant, had an idea: What if the offense featured not one quarterback but two? Not bad, Bryan said, but things would really get interesting if all 11 players were potentially eligible to receive a pass.

Hence, the A-11 offense was born.

To its proponents, the A-11 represents the logical and inevitable evolution of a game that is becoming faster and more spread out at all levels. The alignment diminishes, or eliminates, the need for a traditional offensive line, where players can weigh 300 pounds even in high

school. And, coaches say, it reduces injury because it involves glancing blows more than smash-mouth collisions.

To its detractors, the A-11 is a gimmick that cleverly but unfairly takes advantage of a loophole in the rules. To these critics, the offense places an inequitable burden on defenses to determine who is eligible for passes and makes the sport nearly impossible to referee. Whatever one thinks of the offense, it complies with the current statutes of the National Federation of State High School Associations. And it is as entertaining to watch as it is radical in design.

“My wife says it looks like basketball on grass,” said Coach Johnny Poynter, who has installed the A-11 at Trimble High in Bedford, Ky., fearing injuries would leave his team unable to finish the season in a more conventional offense.

By placing one of the quarterbacks at least seven yards behind the line of scrimmage, and no one under center to receive the snap, the A-11 qualifies as a scrimmage kick formation like the alignments used for punts and extra points. Thus interior linemen are granted an exception from having to wear jersey numbers 50 through 79. (The exception was intended to allow a team’s deep snapper not to have to switch to a lineman’s jersey if he was a back or an end.) Any player wearing jersey numbers 1 through 49 and 80 through 99 is potentially eligible to receive a pass.

Piedmont’s basic A-11 formation calls for a center flanked by two guards, who are essentially tight ends. Two quarterbacks, or a quarterback and a running back, line up behind the center, with three receivers split to each side.

Under football rules, seven players must begin each play on the line of scrimmage and only five are permitted to run downfield to receive a pass: the two players at the end of the line and three situated behind the line. The difficult task for a team defending against the A-11 is to quickly and accurately figure out who those five eligible receivers are.

Prior to each Piedmont play, only the center initially goes to the line of scrimmage. The two “guards” and the split receivers each stand one and a half yards off the line. Then, just before the ball is snapped, Piedmont shifts into formation for the signaled play. With this simple movement, the possibilities for eligible receivers become dizzying.

According to Scientific American magazine, a standard football formation permits 36 possible scenarios for taking the snap and advancing the ball; with the A-11, the possibilities multiply to 16,632, providing a controlled randomness to the offense and potentially devastating chaos to the defense. Even the center becomes eligible to catch a pass if he is at the end of the line of scrimmage.

In the next 10 or 15 years, offensive tackles may effectively become extinct at football's upper levels because defensive ends and linebackers, as much as 100 pounds lighter and far faster, will be too evasive to block, Bryan said. A possible counter would be to spread the field with an A-11 type offense that can throw long or short or run draws, options and counter plays.

Image



Piedmont Coach Kurt Bryan said of today's players: "The game has to adapt to its athletes. Athletes don't adapt to the game."Credit...Max Morse for The New York Times

"The dimensions of the playing field haven't changed in over a hundred years, but athletes don't resemble what they did 100 years ago," Bryan, 44, said. "Something has to give. There are some football purists who think the game is going to revert back. That's crazy. People love excitement, entertainment. The game has to adapt to its athletes. Athletes don't adapt to the game."

N.F.L. rules governing jersey numbering are more limiting than high school rules, and coaches fear leaving their million-dollar quarterbacks unprotected by a standard offensive line. College rules permit the scrimmage kick formation only when it is obvious that a kick may be attempted. Still, some coaches, like the innovative Mike Leach at Texas Tech, find the A-11 intriguing.

"In the college game, can you totally eliminate offensive linemen?" Leach said. "I don't know, but this presents some ideas all of us should think about."

It is impossible to know exactly how many high school teams are using some aspects of the A-11. Bryan guesses 500 to 1,000. He said the offense is permitted in 40 or more states, but the National Federation of State High School Associations said the figure could not be confirmed.

The national federation will hold a football rules meeting in January, but at this point, it is too early to tell whether the scrimmage kick exception will be left alone, tweaked or overhauled, said Bob Colgate, the federation's assistant director.

Mark Dreibelbis, who supervises high school officials in North Carolina, where the A-11 is prohibited, said the offense was unfair to defenses trying to determine which receivers were eligible.

"We deemed it is deception and by rule it is unsporting," Dreibelbis said, adding, "I contend it can't be officiated effectively."

Mike Webb, who supervises officials in West Virginia, said the A-11 "ruins the balance between offense and defense."

Even in Piedmont, an affluent community surrounded by Oakland, the A-11 was met with skepticism last season when the Highlanders lost their first two games in the new offense.

"We almost had a team mutiny," center Trevor Fleshman said. Bryan said he got an anonymous call saying that A-11 stood for "all 11 coaches potentially getting fired."

After Piedmont won seven games in a row and made the playoffs, the resistance dissipated. "I have a lot of respect for the coaches for giving it a chance," said Jeremy George, a nifty runner and passer at quarterback.

Local referees attend clinics to study the A-11 and receive flashcards from Piedmont that depict the school's most common formations.

"I think good high school officials can handle this offense," said Sam Moriana, the coordinator of high school officials in the East Bay.

This season, after an 0-2 start, Piedmont has won two of its last three games. At a recent postgame party, one player's parents presented Bryan with the ultimate symbol of acceptance in Northern California 🍷 a bottle of A-11 wine.

## **Inside the World of Sports**

---