

Football's A-11 Offense: An Illegal Procedure?

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Where It's Legal

Players in the A-11 offense wear jerseys signifying that they could all be eligible to catch a pass.

But its radical formation isn't welcome at every level of football. A short guide to when it can be used:

High School: On every down (in 40 states; prohibited in others)

College: Every down; mostly used on third and long

NFL: Cannot be used

The A-11 Online

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[A-11 Blog: An Explainer](#)

Football games at tiny Piedmont High in the San Francisco Bay area have been getting lots of attention lately. The coaches there have developed a new offensive attack.

And depending whom you ask, their innovation is either offensive genius — or an offense to the game.

One of the team's recent games had every sign of a mismatch.

On one side there was Stockton's Stallworth Charter School, with some of the most athletic high school football players ever. On the other was Piedmont High, with a bunch of your typical suburban high school kids.

Yet there they were at halftime, tied at 27. In the locker room, Piedmont Coach Kurt Bryan rallied the troops.

"Don't you love going against the best?" Bryan asked his team.

"Yes, Coach!" they yelled.

"Right now, that team is stunned," Bryan told his players. "This game was supposed to be over. Over! We're it, man. We're it. They're stunned."

Stallworth was indeed stunned — by the A-11 offense, something football has never seen before, at any level.

A True Spread Offense

Instead of everyone bunching up around the ball on the line of scrimmage, Piedmont's players spread out across the entire width of the field, in pods of three.

Several yards behind the middle pod, which includes a center and the ball, two quarterbacks wait for the snap — or, sometimes, a quarterback and a running back.

But that's not all, says Bryan.

"The A-11 offense stands for all 11 players potentially eligible," he said.

Normally, only five players are allowed to catch a forward pass on any given play — and they must wear jersey numbers in two ranges: 1 to 49, and 80 to 99.

But in the A-11, all the players wear eligible numbers — and anyone can catch a pass, as long as he lines up in a legal position. While seven players are required to be on the line of scrimmage, defenses often have no hint of which seven players will be on the line.

The goal is to confuse the defense as much as possible, to give the offense every edge it can get. And opposing Coach Sam Fant said Piedmont did exactly that.

"I tell you, about 60, 70 percent of the time, I didn't know where the hell the ball was at!" Fant said after the game.

"It took us the whole first half, nearly, to try to figure out what the hell was going on."

At tiny Piedmont High, almost anyone can be a varsity athlete. So to compete with larger schools, Bryan and another coach came up with the A-11 — and found the jersey-number loophole in the rule book that made it legal.

Still, Bryan had his doubts before the first game using the formation last year.

"We told ourselves and our staff and our kids two things: Either we are gonna be an absolute joke and we're gonna get fired, or we're gonna do well and we're gonna help change football history in a good way," Bryan said.

He certainly didn't get fired. Piedmont won its final seven regular-season games last year, to make the playoffs after starting 0-2. Now, hundreds of schools around the country are using the A-11 as well. The coaches have a Web site, sell playbooks and DVDs online, and even

run special clinics.

An Innovation Too Far?

The question of whether the A-11 offense is changing football for the better or worse depends on whom you ask.

"This is an unsporting act in terms of deception, which is not in accordance with the rule code or the intent and spirit of the great game," said Mark Dreibelbis, the supervisor of officials for the North Carolina High School Athletic Association.

He says there are other, better, more legal ways to level the playing field.

"The A-11 offense is taking an exception to the rule code" and using it on every down, Dreibelbis said.

So North Carolina and a handful of other state associations have banned the A-11. And by next season, the organization that sets high school rules nationally could do the same thing.

But Piedmont's Kurt Bryan says the A-11 shows how football is evolving.

"Ever since the forward pass came into play, the game has slowly become faster, more spread out, more athletic," Bryan said.

"If you take a look at 10, 15, 20 years down the road, the game is going to look more like the A-11, not less like it."

Piedmont's players love the offense, too. Senior quarterback Jeremy George says it's a great fit.

"We don't have a very big class, both in number and in size," George said, "but we've got a lot of skill players. I don't think it fits for everybody, but it works for us."

The second half of the game with Stallworth didn't work out as well for Piedmont. Their opponents made some adjustments, Piedmont made some mistakes — and the final score was 61-34.

But without the A-11 offense, the coaches said, it would've been a lot worse.

Now, the A-11 spread offense is, well, spreading — around the country, and even to a military school in Japan.

Ben Adler reports from member station KXJZ.

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