

3-4 DISGUISE DEFENSE:

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO THE MODERN APPROACH TO THE OVER, TITE, & MINT FRONTS

By: DL Byrum

Check out my youtube channel at:

[YouTube.com/SchemeGuide](https://www.youtube.com/SchemeGuide)

Join my X's & O's Discord Server at:

[Discord.gg/kb9X4qJZFF](https://discord.gg/kb9X4qJZFF)

Support me on Patreon at:

Patreon.com/SchemeGuide

DEFENSIVE PHILOSOPHY:

“It’s not the strongest that survive, or the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change.”

-CHARLES DARWIN

“The measure of intelligence is the ability to change.”

-ALBERT EINSTEIN

“If it ain't broke, find a way to make it better.”

-KIRBY SMART

Kirby Smart is a well-known commodity in college football. A long-time Saban disciple, Smart has overseen the evolution of the Saban defense since 2004 when he joined the LSU staff as the DB coach. Under Smart’s tutelage, the Georgia Bulldogs have sustained the success Mark Richt was able to maintain prior. Outside of Smart’s first year in Athens (2016), the Bulldogs have been in the upper regions of Defensive Efficiency finishing 4th in 2017 and 11th in 2018. Smart’s 2017 team was able to play in the National Championship game, losing to his mentor’s (Saban) Alabama team. Smart’s prior tenure at Alabama speaks for itself, winning four National Championships while in Tuscaloosa.

Coach Smart gave a great clinic in 2018 on the state of Defensive Football at the time, here is a summary of his thoughts.

The Game of Football since the late 2000s has completely changed. From I form and Under Center QBs to Spread Sets in the Gun. RPOs have replaced quick game. Read Options have shredded 4 down lineman fronts, and defenses need to adapt or die. Some of the adaptations have been the move to lighter linebackers, hybrid defenders, and an emphasis on speed across the board.

1 High Safeties are now playing shorter and reading the QB for RPOs now on running downs to help the LBs deal with RPOs, a greater emphasis is being put on Tackles for Loss and just pressuring QBs instead of the over emphasis on sacks.

Teams must shorten their playcalls to deal with tempo, and third down is by far more important to win on than ever before.

2 Man is a great 7-on-7 coverage, but not if a QB can run. So if you run 2 man, make sure you bring a spy (ideally the LB opposite the HB in a 3 man front, or a DT in a 4 man front).

Good Defenses today need to be multiple and have the ability to do more than one thing if they want to succeed.

Avoid being predictable on third downs.

Smart used to always bring a 5 or 6 man pressure on third downs and opponents picked up on that and got easier completions. While he still uses those pressure looks on third down he mixes them up with fake blitzes like these ideas:

- Use of simulated pressures (take a zone blitz and drop a lineman or 2 into vert hooks).
- Cover 1 with a low hole robber that bluffs a blitz only to take any crossers.
- Put the 1 tech in an over front in a bluff blitz so they will engage the center and guard then drop out, with a LB blitzing to replace him.

1st and 2nd Down should be your “meat and potatoes”, your gameplan on third down should be different and attack what the offense does. Most opponents will play with tempo on early downs, but will usually take their time a bit more on third down. That’s where you can get exotic with more elaborate set ups and adjustments.

You can’t just sit back and “just play Quarters”, you have to use formation shifts, pressures, and disguised coverages to your advantage.

Using Hot Blitzes are a great way to attack the offense, get TFLs and pressures, and turn up the heat on the QB. Extra pressure = “bad throws”. Batted balls, dropped catches, INTs, and sacks are all the benefits that come from rushed throws or bad throws. Maximize these. In Hot Coverage, the Deep Middle Safety plays more like a middle hole player, reading the QB and patrolling the middle of the field. Cannot drop too deep. Hot blitzes aren’t everything. You can’t live in them or you will get exposed. Remember, you don’t have the numbers in coverage.

In conclusion, you can’t stay static. A defense has to be multiple and force the offense to guess. In order to win the run game, you have to defend the open “B” gap and change it by moving the front. A defense has to be smart with its pressure and multiple, all without being too complicated. As Smart proved, this can be possible. Georgia will interchange from 3 to 4-down and back again, but one thing stays true – SPEED. The Nickel defense isn’t going anywhere, and the future of defense is *NOW*.

INTRODUCTION TO OVER, TITE, & MINT

OVER FRONT

The over front has become the most common 4 man front in football. It features a NT lining up in a 1 technique opposite the play strength and an Under Tackle lining up in a 3 tech to the play strength. In Madden, the NT usually is in the A gap opposite the play strength with the UT in the opposite B Gap, but it is important to leave “Auto-Flip” set to On to ensure it is aligned properly. Outside the tackles will be both edge rushers either in 7 or sometimes even 9 techniques. They crash down forcing a double team on the 1 tech and in 5 man protection

schemes, allows 3 pass rushers 1 on 1 battles to get to the quarterback. It looks like this:



The Over Front was popularized by Jimmy Johnson at the University of Miami in the 1980s and grew in popularity among 4-3 teams along with its twin, the Under Front through the 90s and early 2000s. With the rise of spread offenses the Nickle 4-2 Over became the preferred choice for 6 man fronts at all levels across the country. Only the 3-3 stack was a real alternative, but it had its own limitations and was built more for a 1 high defensive structure and required tweener athletes.

While the Nickle 4-2-5 Over was popular it had a growing weakness. A new popular play called the read option would overtake the sport and allow the defense to read one of the edge rushers. Where this became an issue is the natural weak spot of an over front is the bubble between the 1 tech and the 7 tech edge rusher. If that end is left unblocked and read as waiting by the qb, then the give hole for the RB is massive. If the end crashes to that side, QB has a wide lane as well. Smart Spread teams began attacking the over front with these techniques, which only exacerbated with the advent of RPOs. Defenses began looking for alternatives.

TITE FRONT

The TITE front isnt fully original, in many ways it was the old Eagle Front. A nose tackle head up on the center, and 2 ends lined up inside the tackles. The TITE front has both ends specifically in a 4i technique. This allows the NT and a LB cover the A gaps, or possibly the NT 2 gapping, and having both ends sitting in the B gaps. This applies for base sets and nickle sets as well. Over the past few years, you've seen Big 12 teams run it increasingly often, and SEC and other teams start to incorporate variants of the look more often as well as they begin to deal with an increasing number of spread formations.



The TITE having both Ends able to stuff the B gaps on running downs or attack the edge on passing downside is fundamentally important, because zone schemes can't get first level doubles on the way to the second level LBs. The second level is well protected, allowing them to get downhill or flow to the football. And pulling guards from the backside can be difficult because the interior DL can just attach themselves to their butt and follow them to the play. What you lose in pass rush off the edge, you gain by dominating interior gaps and protecting your second level, filling everything on the inside and spilling the ball to the edge defenders.

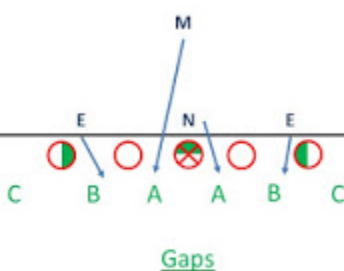
Teams like Virginia Tech, LSU, Alabama, Georgia, Iowa State, have been employing these formations to defend the spread at a growing rate over the past 5-6 years in the college ranks, while Vic Fangio and Brandon Staley have been leading the way at the pro level.

The Tite Front plays on the Spread's reliance on the open "B" gap "bubble" found in most four-down defenses. The open gap is called a "bubble" because there is a natural opening in the four-man front and the conflict player is usually located there. Conflict players, which are usually the overhangs, are the 'backers most offenses read when designing RPOs or packaged plays. The Tite Front is great against Spread teams that utilize Zone heavy run schemes to attack a defense because it gaps out the interior of the box (meaning everything is clogged up).

Gapping out the interior gaps with the Tite Front allows a defense to plug both "B" gaps by placing defensive linemen in them, mainly in what is referred to as a 4i technique (the Defensive End will align on the inside shoulder of the Offensive Tackle while reading the Guard). Many times in the Tite Front, the Nose will "lag" or attack the Center from a "zero" (head-up alignment) and "fall back" to the "A" gap to the RB's side. This technique combined with the Tite Front blocks the natural cut-back lane found in Zone runs.

One popular idea is what Madden calls 3-3-5 Wide. With a single LB stacked behind the Nose tackle in a Tite Front, all 4 interior gaps can be filled, allowing the OLBs to spill and contain and allowing the defense to cover all the gaps:

Tite Front
4- Man Box

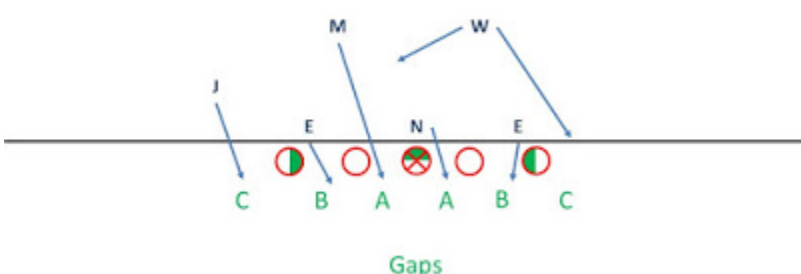


MINT FORMATION

Mint is a form of Tite Front that has 2 Off-Ball Linebackers and

1 edge rushing OLB with a slot player opposite the Jack. In many ways it looks like the classic 3-4 Eagle look, but with only one OLB. Madden calls Mint 3-3-5 Odd.

Tite Front
Mint Box



Breakdownsports.blogspot.com



In Mint, the Jack or hybrid OLB/DE is set away from the passing strength, and the Ni, referred to as the * (Star), works to the passing strength. Base rules state these two hybrids are to never be on the same side of the ball in Mint (that is not to say they don't have packages where they can be). The \$-backer is typically the most athletic of the ILBs (think a 4-2-5's Will) and aligns with the TE. The Mac, or Mike, goes opposite the \$. If the offense is in a true 10 pers. formation (no TE) the \$ will then align off of a predetermined (gameplan) WR.

One addition Kirby Smart utilizes in their scheme is the use of a delayed blitz versus the pass, (this can be achieved in madden by putting one backer in a QB spy then sending the spy after 1 or 2 seconds). Most three-down defenses will attempt to send a fourth rusher. In Mint, the obvious choice would be the stand-up Jack, but in some cases, it is better to send one of the ILBs. The way this works is clever. Once the offense has shown its cards and is in pass-pro, the LB opposite the * is allowed to insert on the Guard.

Both 4i's will rock outside for contain, gaining one-on-ones with the Tackle and widening the gap, isolating the Guard in space. The Nose, will engage the Center and work to the *'s side (hopefully bringing the Center with him). This "lag" helps bring the Center and Guard together forcing a double on the Nose. Finally, the LB opposite the * will now insert on the Guard. If the Guard were to rock out with the 4i, there is a gaping hole for the LB to run through. Below is Colorado (HC Mel Tucker was the Georgia DC in '18) running a delay stunt.

<https://youtu.be/toLwb6drnTo>

In Nickel groupings, they can carry a * (Ni) and a \$ (hybrid Will)

to combat Spread heavy offenses, then can switch to a more traditional 3-4 personnel group when going against Pro Spread or "heavier" personnel groupings. Without any new teaching.

Georgia can also sub in traditional down linemen to create a 4-3 or 4-2-5 package if need be. In a podcast over the summer (2019), Mississippi State's Head Coach Joe Moorehead stated the use of hybrid fronts that can bounce from three- to four-down is what gives his offense the most issues. This multiplicity allows Georgia to get in the best situation possible without the need to have a ton of sub-packages. They can go from Mint to Over with no players being subbed out and even have calls were the Jack and * are on the same side. This makes the scouting more difficult for offenses. The Jack can easily turn into a D-lineman

Versus most opponents who run zone heavy run games Mint will be our primary formation. On passing downs we will employ an over front. Other Eagle Fronts will be used mixed in, vs heavier sets, and at the goalline. We will audible between formations before the offense snaps to disguise our Defensive weaknesses and confuse our opponents.

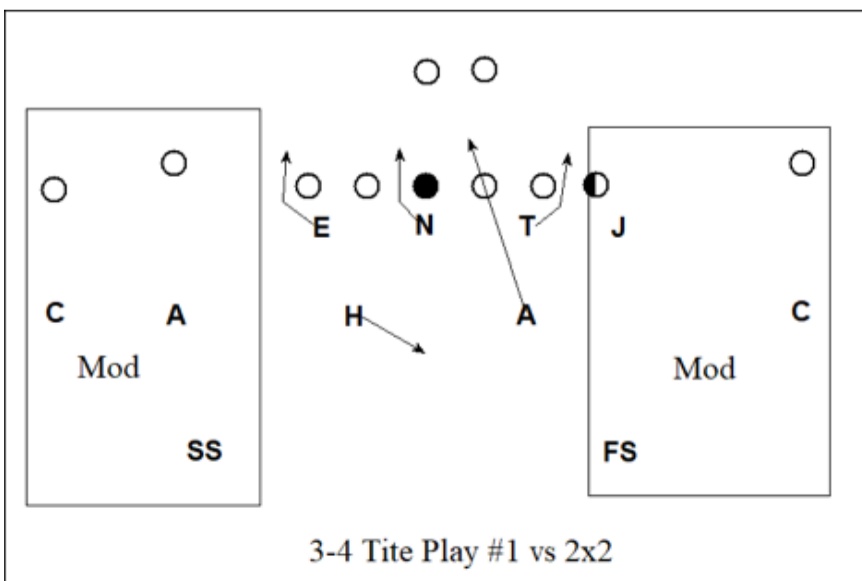
STUDYING KIRBY SMART AT GEORGIA:

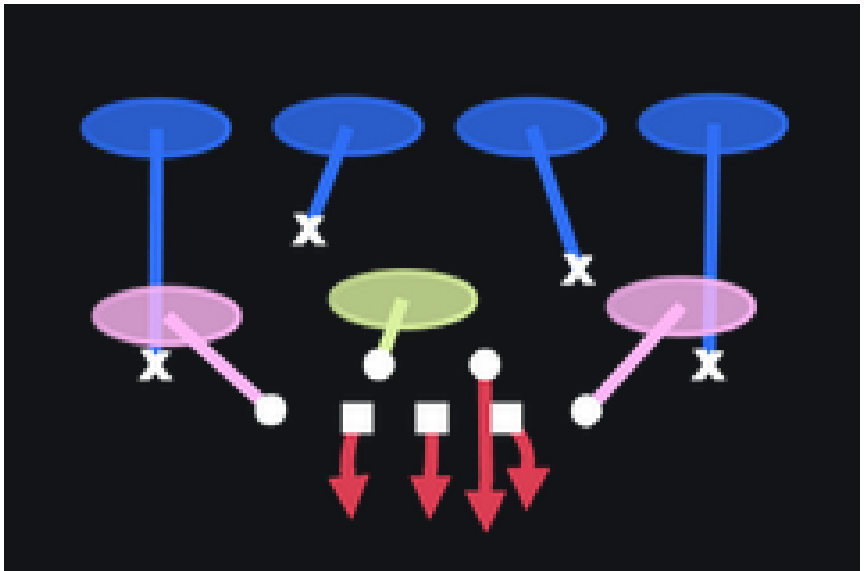
Smart started off using the Tite front in 2017 primarily on run-heavy downs to great effect. As the season progressed, Smart began to use it more in passing down situations, which worked ... less well. I am not sure what Smart's rationale was when using the Tite front in this manner, but it tended to just give the QB more time in the pocket.

While Smart can be an exceptionally varied play caller, a lot of Smart's use of a Tite front comes from 6 main plays (there are others, but I'm just going to be covering the main ones here). That may sound simple or easy to defend, but it is not. The reason is that Smart is very adept at switching which call the defense will run based on offensive formation and game plan. Compounding the problem is that Smart likes to shift from a Tite front to an Over front and vice versa just before the snap. It is devilish in its apparent simplicity.

Kirby Smart's Base Plays From TITE & MINT:

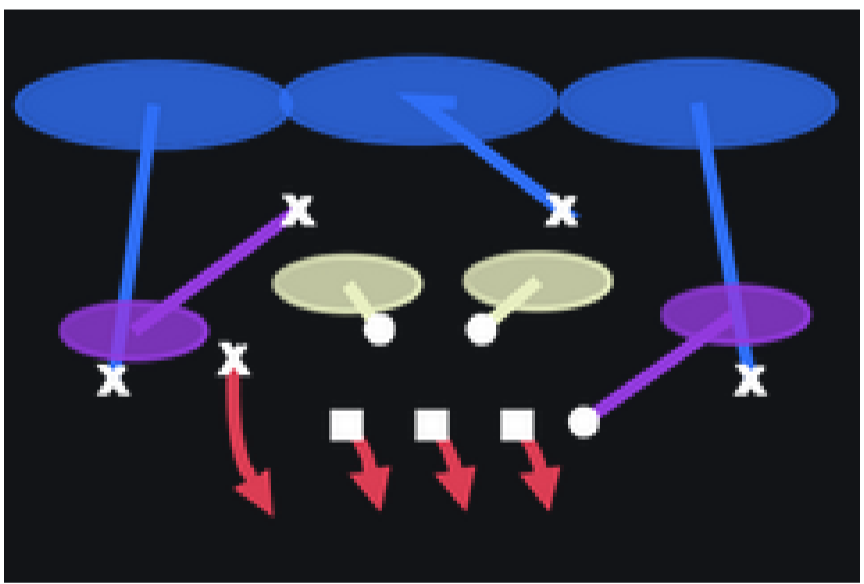
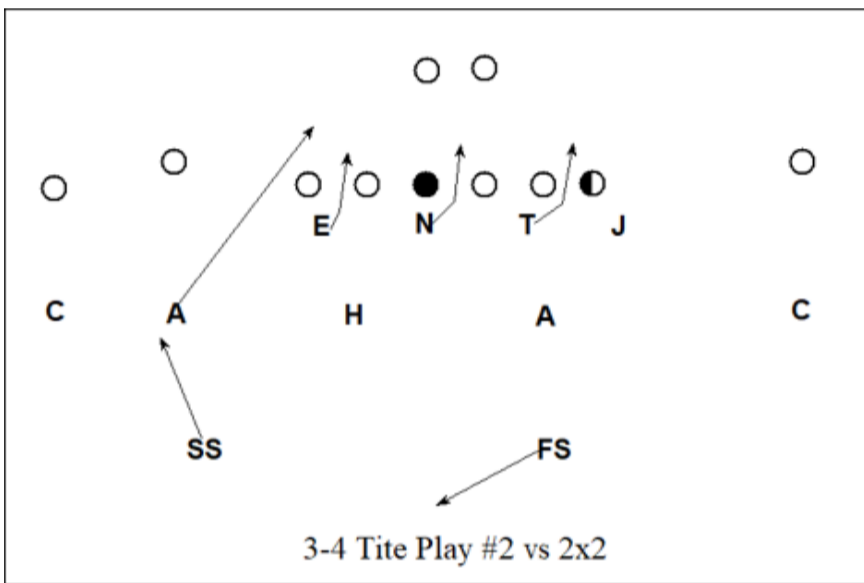
Play 1: Quarters with a Weak ILB Pass Rush:





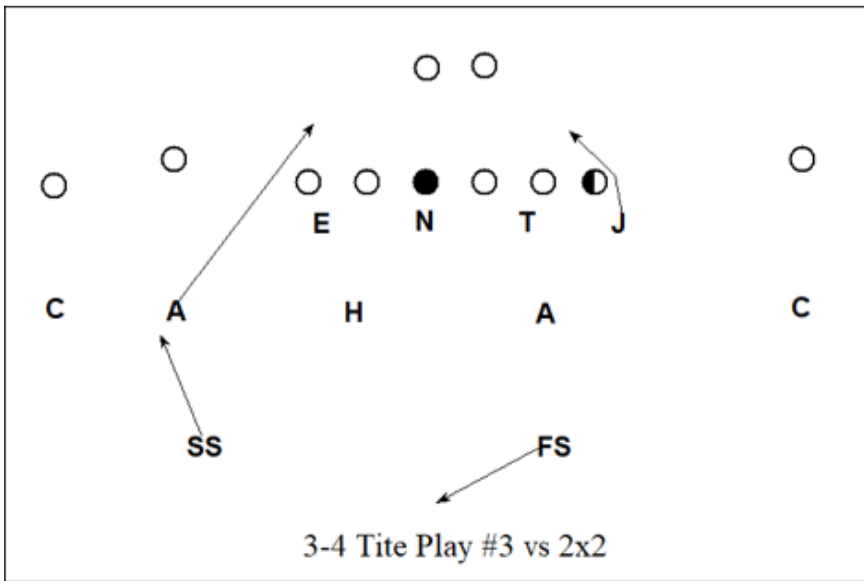
If the quarterback sprints out to either side, however, the inside linebacker will become an exterior rusher to the same side as the quarterback is rolling. This ended up being the most common play I charted from Georgia's defense. Smart primarily uses this play primarily in run/RPO-heavy down-and-distance situations.

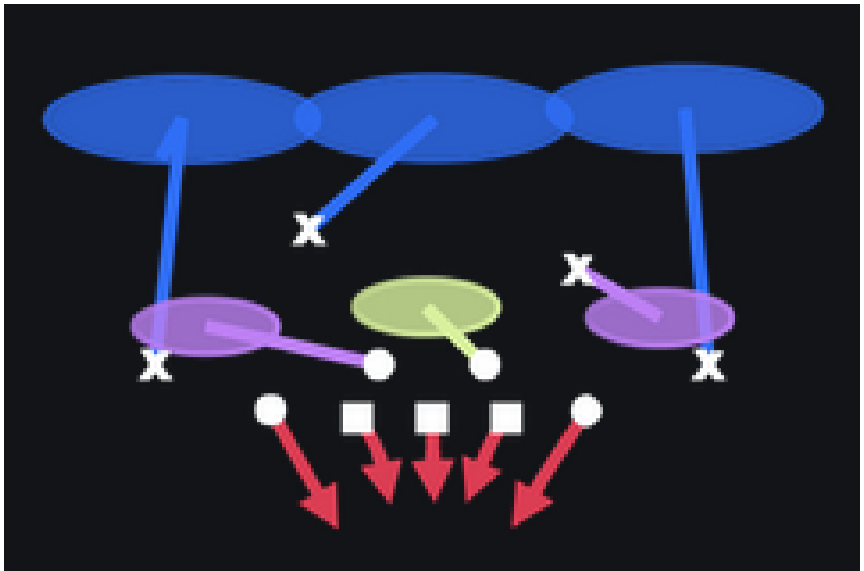
Play 2: Cover 3 Sky Weak with Strong Apex/* Rush



Smart seems to use this play a lot more when the ball is on the far hash and he wants a rusher coming from the field.

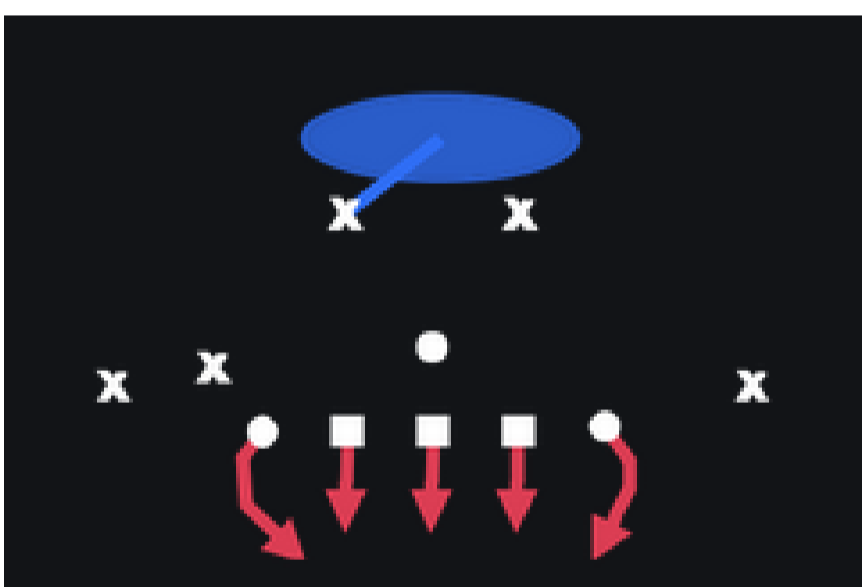
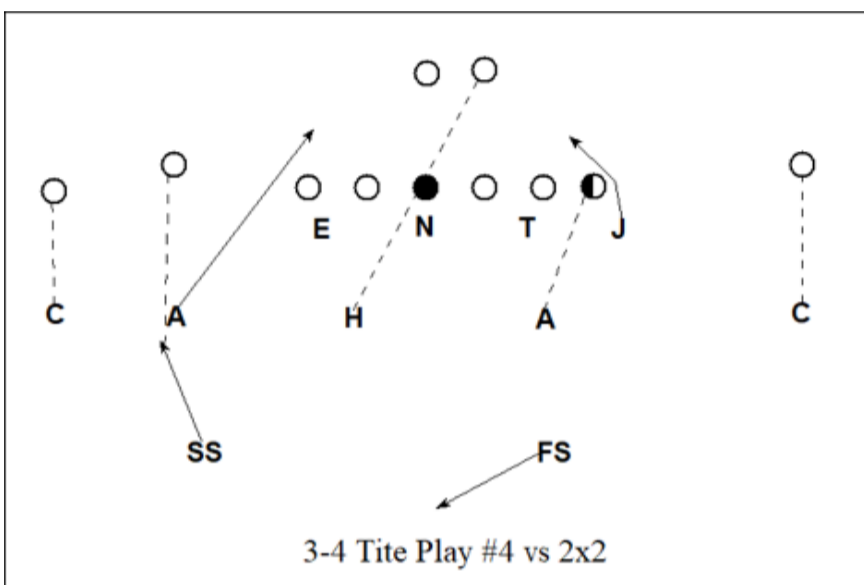
Play 3: Double Outside Blitz Fire Zone





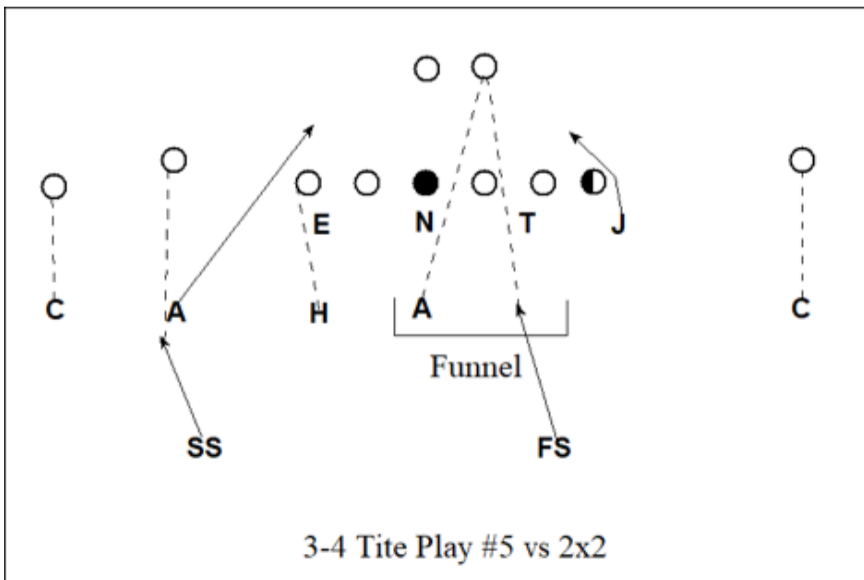
Smart will run this play on nearly any down-and-distance and against nearly every offensive personnel grouping.

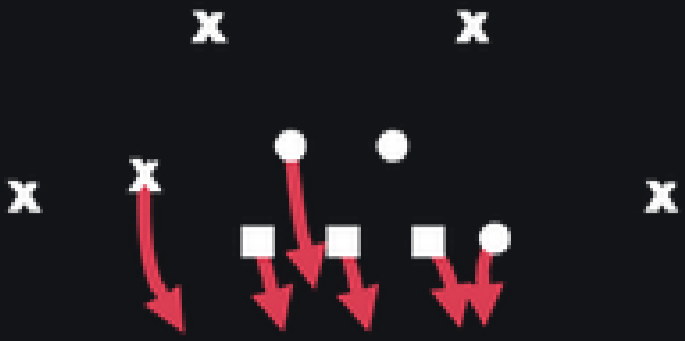
Play 4: Double Outside Blitz Cover 1 Man



Smart runs this play more on short yardage situations, or when he's seeing more zone-beater concepts from the offense.

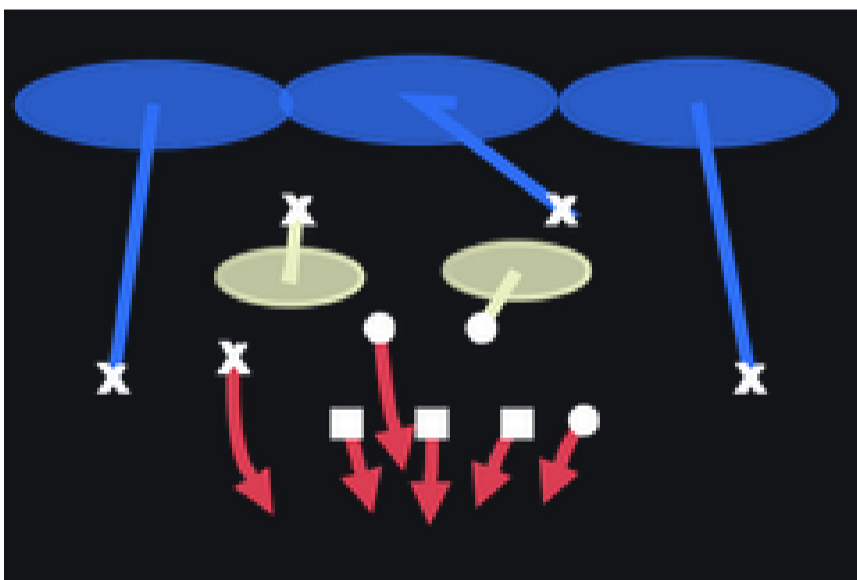
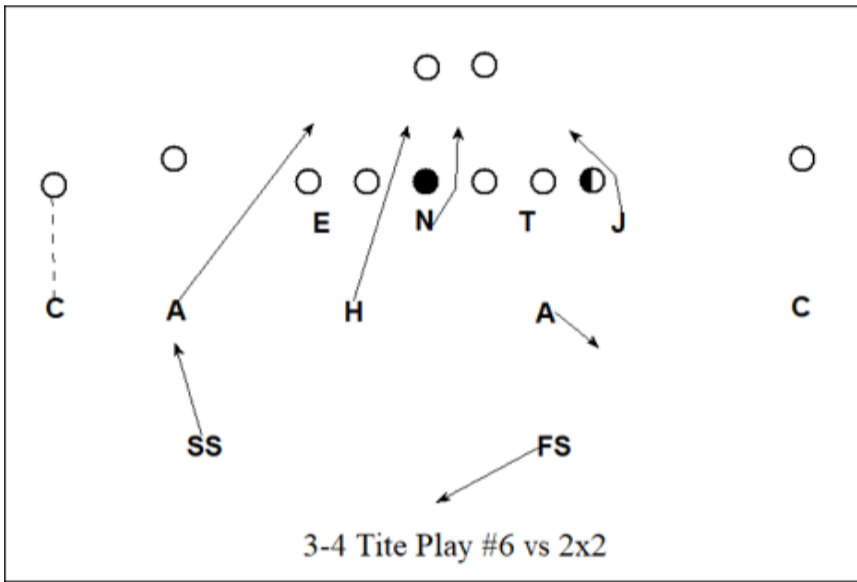
Play 5: Double Outside Blitz Cover 0





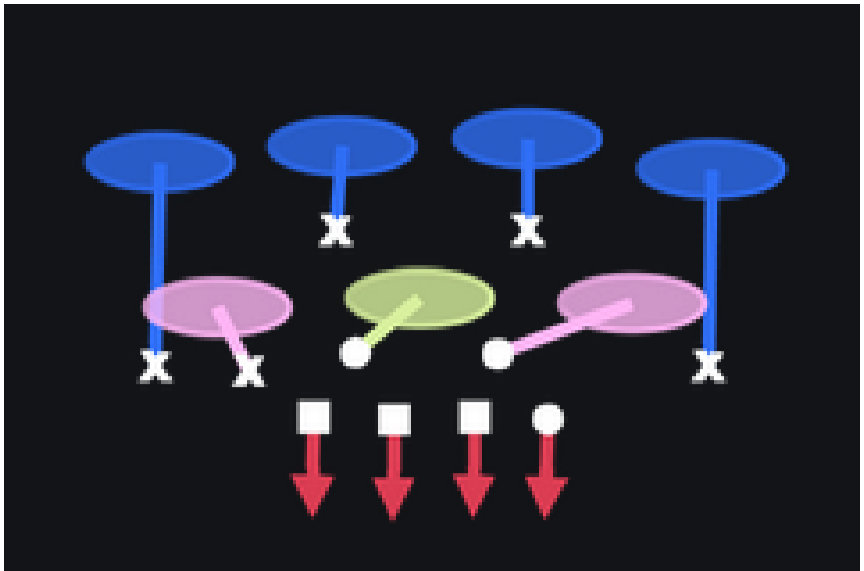
In short-yardage or red zone situations, Smart will run a similar double outside blitz but with the second safety coming down to help play a 3-on-2 funnel concept. Essentially, the two safeties and the remaining inside linebacker will take the tight end and running back based on flow, and the third will become the robber player in the hole.

Play 6: Blitz 6 with Hot Coverage

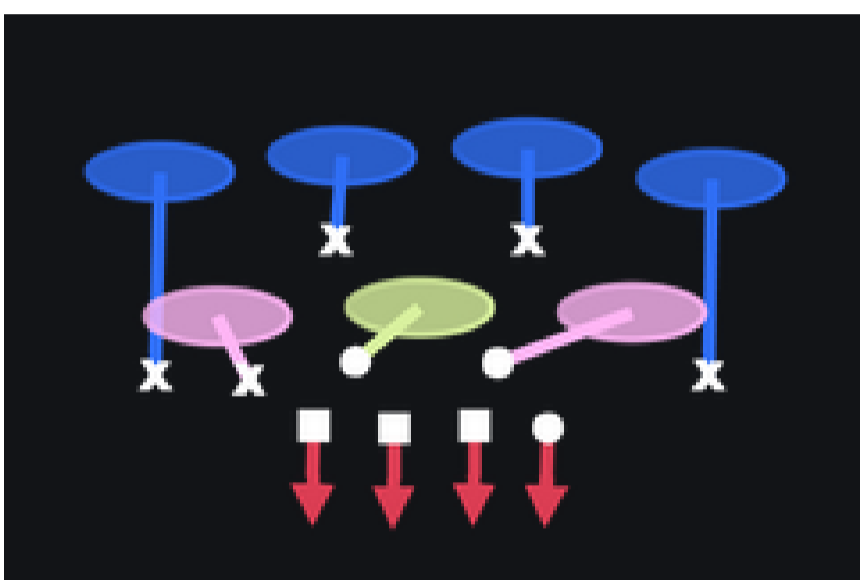


When Smart is feeling particularly aggressive on passing downs, he will run a 6-man blitz with a form of 5-man zone coverage commonly known as Hot.

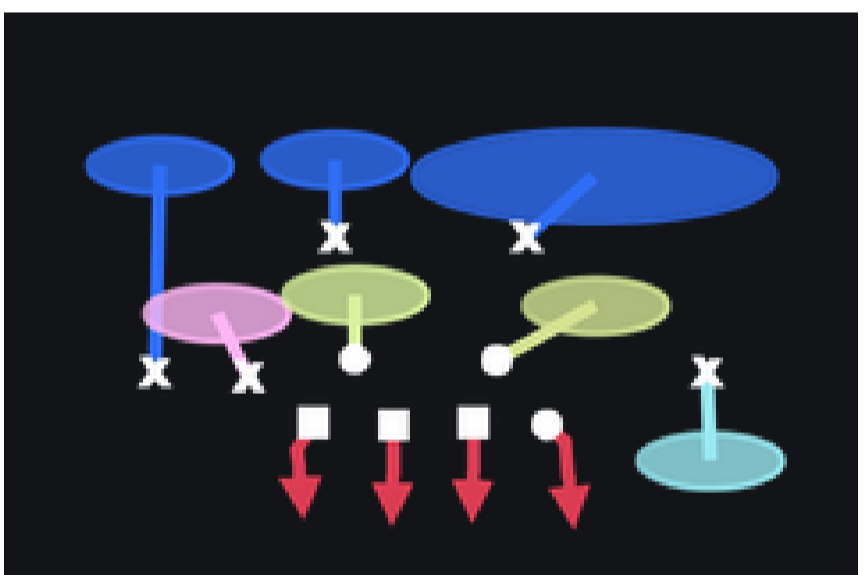
Kirby Smart's Base Plays From an Over Front (all of which are found in 3-3-5 Sam):



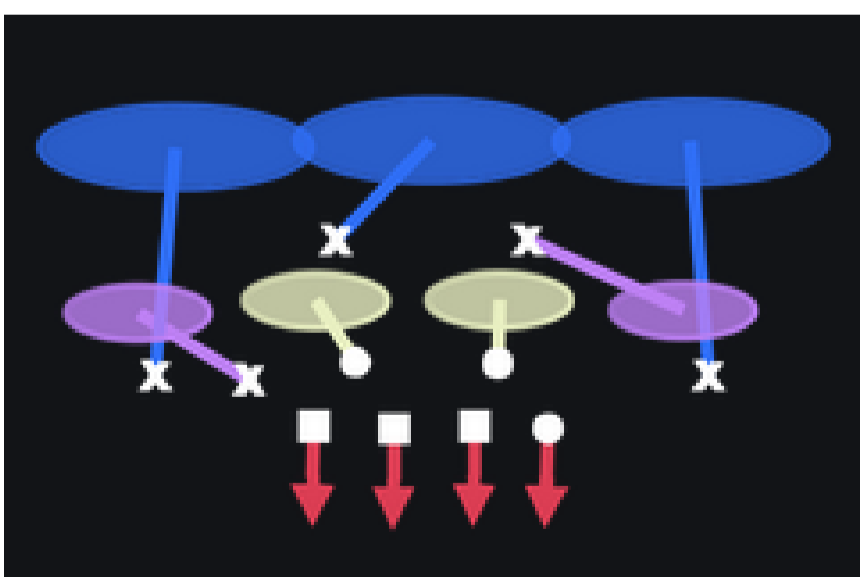
Quarters



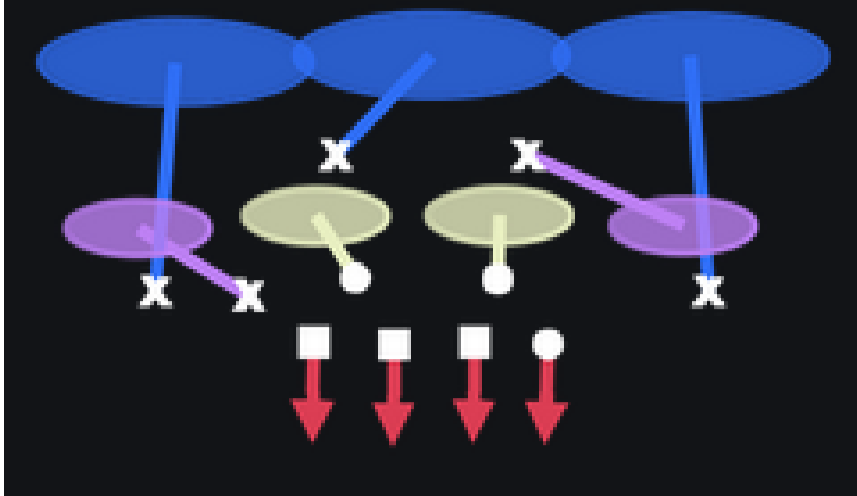
Palms



Cover 6



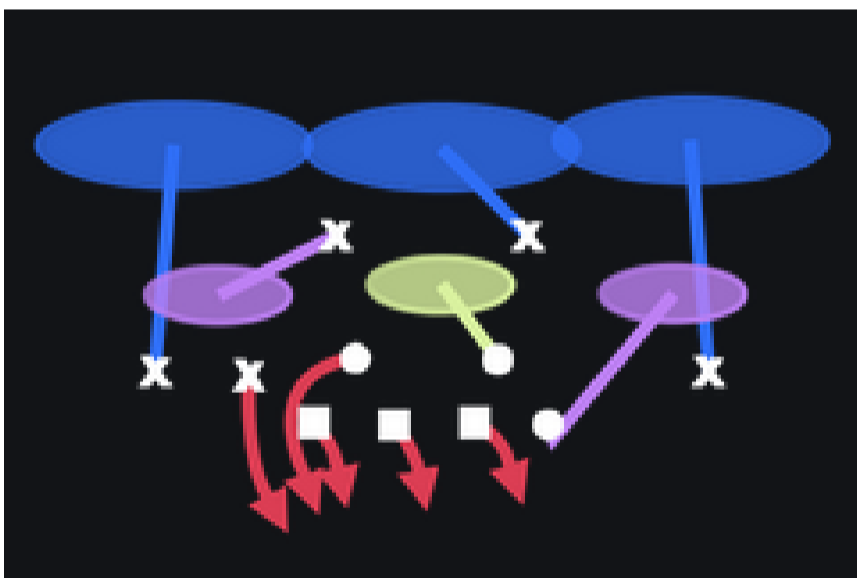
Cover 2 Man



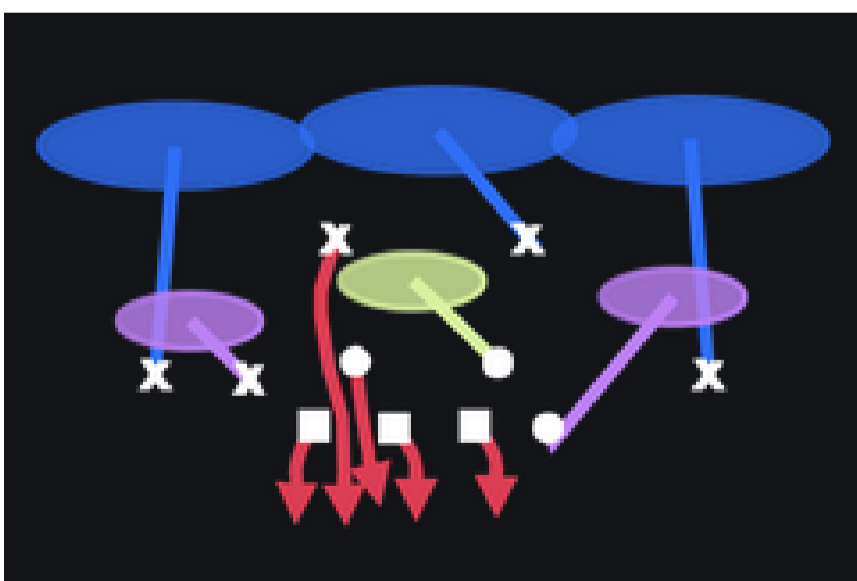
Cover 3 Match



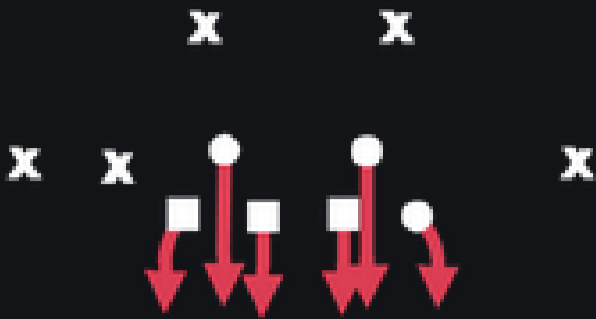
Cover 1 Robber



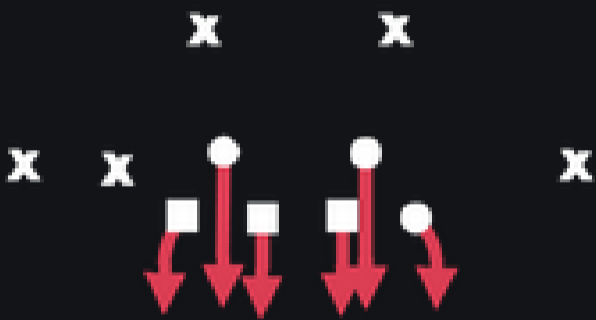
Fire Zone Nickle Blitz



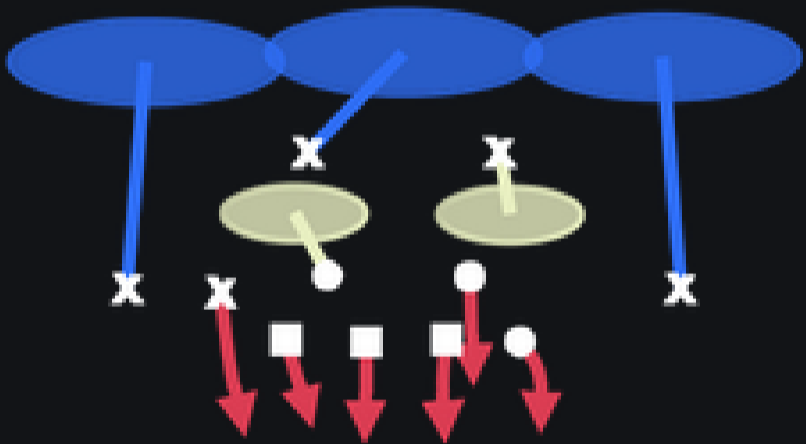
Fire Zone FS Blitz



Cover 1 Mike Blitz



Cover 0



Hot Blitz

Saban's favorite play:

Rip/Liz is infamous now as Saban's go to play, and it's a pass coverage Kirby has brought with him to Georgia as well. Rip/Liz would be 3 Match in madden terms. I'll let Coach Saban's own words describe how it came about:

"When you're playing a passing team you always have a better chance with split-safeties, but with all this zone read / zone option stuff we see...all the spread stuff, sometimes you've got to be able to play middle-of-the-field coverage to get an extra guy in the box.

We got to the point where, this is the reason that we do this, when everybody started going spread we couldn't play 3 deep zone. This started with the Cleveland Browns, I was the defensive coordinator in the early 90s and Pittsburgh would run 'Seattle' on us , four streaks.

Then they would run two streaks and two out routes, what I call 'pole' route from 2x2. So we got to where could NOT play 3-deep zone because we rerouted the seams and played zone, and what I call "Country Cover 3" (drop to your spot reroute the seams, break on the ball). Well, when Marino is throwing it, that old break on the ball shit don't work.

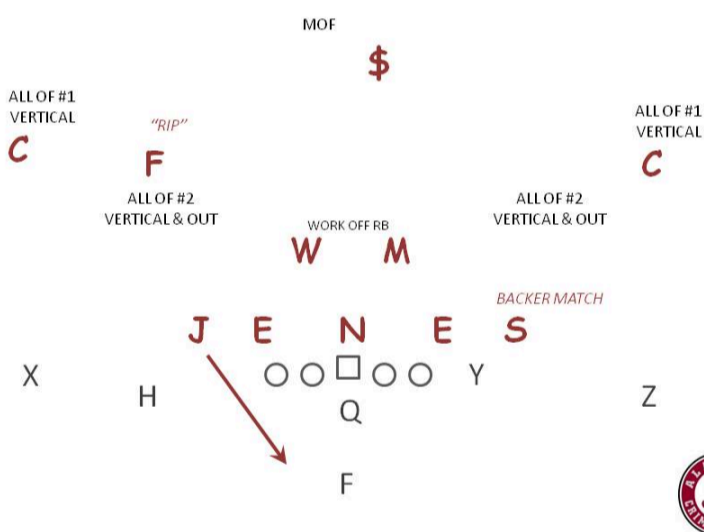
So because we could not defend this, we could not play 3 deep, so when you can't play zone, what do you do next? You play Man (cover 1), but if their mens are better than your mens, you can't play cover 1.

We got to where we couldn't run cover 1 - So now we can't play an 8 man front.

The 1994 Browns went 13-5, we lost to Steelers 3 times, lost 5 games total (twice in the regular season, once in the playoffs). We gave up the 5th fewest points in the history of the NFL, and lost to Steelers because we could not play 8-man fronts to stop the run because they would wear us out throwing it

We came up with this concept; how we can play cover 1 and cover 3 at the same time, so we can do both these things and one thing would complement the other. We came up with the concept "rip/liz match".

COVER 3 - "RIP" / MATCH LEFT



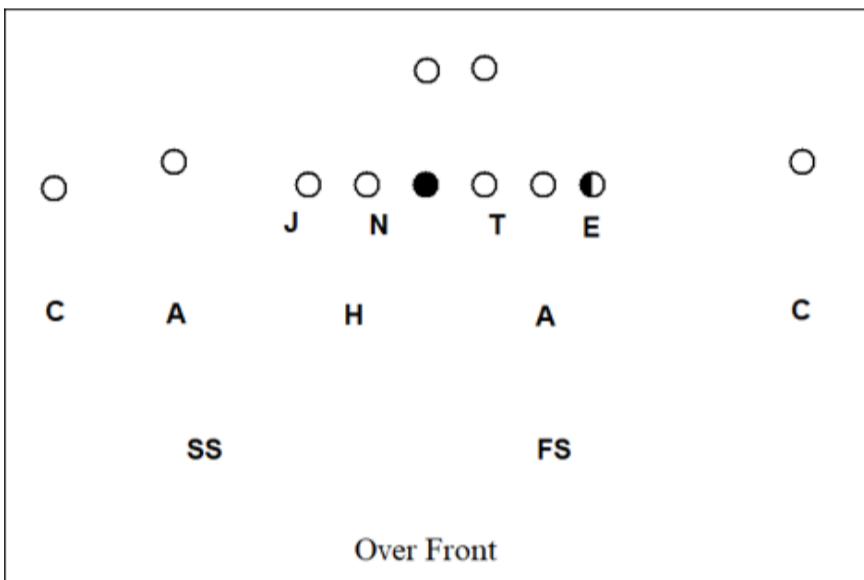
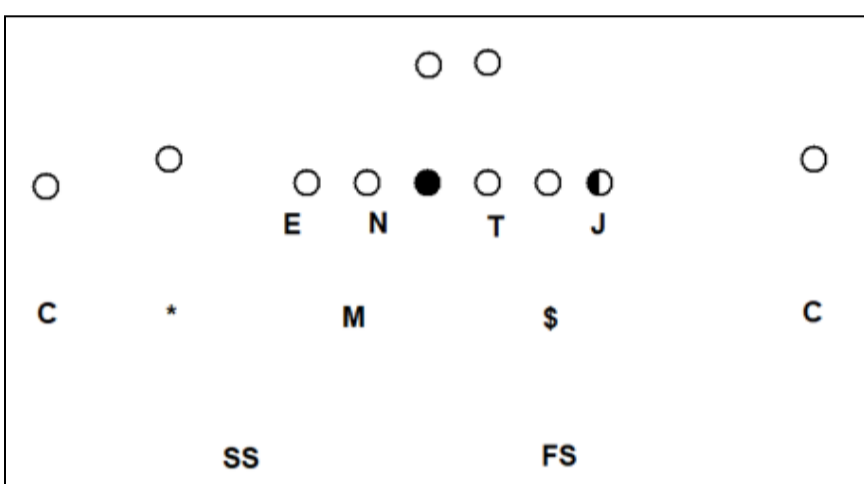
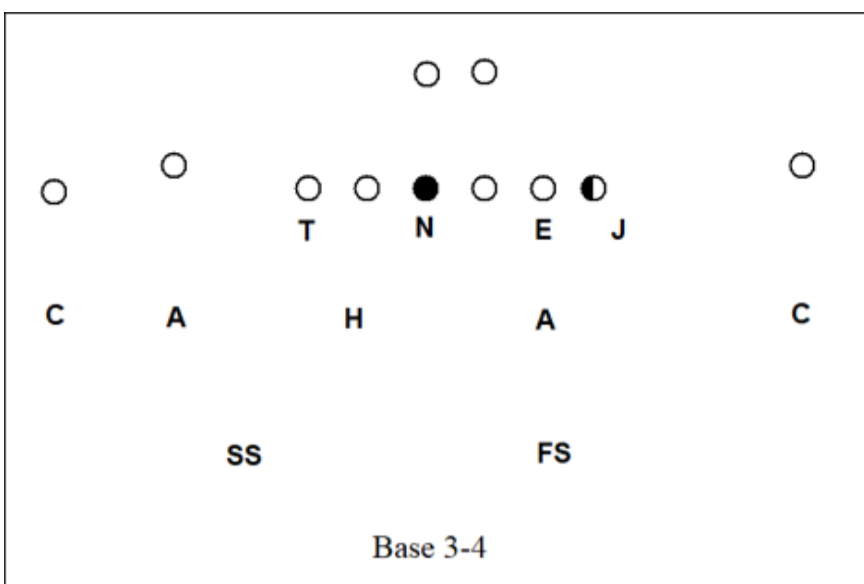
Cover 3 Match is effective for all these reasons in Madden, however, you only want to run it vs 2x2 sets. The Trips match conversion (called Mable in Saban terminology) is not in the game anymore, making it only effective vs 2x2 sets like gun doubles, gun spread, or singleback ace. Vs trips it is almost indistinguishable from cover 3 sky (the deep coverage still matches but the seam-flat zones becomes curl flats vs trips, bunch, and empty).

Conclusion

In many ways, Kirby Smart is one of the leading edges in where college defenses are headed: utilizing both 3- and 4-man fronts, and playing several different varieties of Quarters along with Cover 3 Match and Cover 1 Man. And while most defensive coaches will espouse how their defense will be multiple but rarely are in game, Smart truly lives up to this principle he spouts a press conferences and coaching clinics.

In many ways, Smart does not see predictability simply as a mistake, but a symptom of an even greater sin: complacency.

FORMATIONS & PERSONNEL ALIGNMENT



| POS | TYPE | 3-4 ODD EAGLE / TITE | 3-3-5 ODD MINT | 3-3-5 SAM OVER | 3-3-5 WIDE EAGLE |
|--------|---------------|----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| LE 1 | Power Rusher | End (E) | End (E) | | End (E) |
| RLE1 | Speed Rusher | | Jack (J) | | |
| DT 1 | Run Stopper | Nose (N) | Nose (N) | | Nose (N) |
| RDT1 | Run Stopper | | | Nose (N) | |
| RDT2 | Power Rusher | | | Tackle (T) | |
| RE 1 | Power Rusher | Tackle (T) | Tackle (T) | | Tackle (T) |
| RRE1 | Power Rusher | | | End (E) | |
| LOLB 1 | Power Rusher | Apex (A) | | | Apex (A) |
| MLB 1 | Pass Coverage | Mike (M) | | | |
| SUBLB1 | Pass Coverage | | Mike (M) | Mike (M) | Mike (M) |
| MLB 2 | Pass Coverage | Money (\$) | | | |
| SUBLB2 | Pass Coverage | | Money (\$) | Money (\$) | |
| ROLB 1 | Speed Rusher | Jack (J) | | Jack (J) | Jack (J) |

| | | | | | |
|--------------|------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| CB 1 | Man-To-Man | Left C | Left C | Left C | Left C |
| CB 2 | Man-To-Man | Right C | Right C | Right C | Right C |
| SCB 1 | Man-To-Man | | Star (*) | Star (*) | Star (*) |
| FS | Hybrid | FS1 | FS1 | FS1 | FS1 |
| SS | Hybrid | SS1 | SS1 | SS1 | SS1 |

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| LE1 (E): | 290+ lbs , BSH, PMV, Acc, Pursuit, Tackle, STR |
| DT1 (N): | 320+ lbs , BSH, top STR, high PRC & AWR, PUR, TAK, PMV. |
| RE1 (T): | 290+ lbs , BSH, PMV, Acc, Pursuit, Tackle, STR |
| LOLB (A): | 240+ lbs PMV, BSH, PUR, TAK |
| MLB1 (M): | 230+ lbs ZCV, MCV, PUR, TAK, POW, AWR, PRC, ACC, SPD |
| MLB2 (\$): | 220+ lbs ZCV, MCV, PUR, TAK, POW, AWR, PRC, ACC, SPD |
| ROLB (J): | 240+ lbs FMV, BSH, PUR, TAK, Athlete |
| CB1 (C): | Athlete PRS, MCV, CTH, PRC, SPD, ACC |
| CB2 (C): | Stud PRS, MCV, CTH, PRC, SPD, ACC |
| SCB1 (*): | Ballhawk ZCV, PRC, AWR, ACC, COD, and CTH. |
| FS1 (FS): | Athlete ZCV, PRC, AWR, ACC, COD, and CTH. |
| SS1 (SS): | 3rd Best ZCV, PRC, AWR, ACC, COD, and CTH. |

HOUSE RULES

COACHING ADJUSTMENTS:

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| AUTO-FLIP DEFENSIVE PLAY CALL: | ON |
| AUTO-ALIGNMENT | DEFAULT |
| BALL IN AIR DEFENSE: | PLAY RECEIVER |
| CORNERBACK MATCHUPS: | DEFAULT |
| OPTION DEFENSE: | AGGRESSIVE (unless vs elite option QB) |
| PASS RUSH: | CONSERVATIVE |
| STRIP BALL: | CONSERVATIVE |
| TACKLING: | CONSERVATIVE |

WHEN TO RUN FORMATIONS & FRONTS:

| | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 3-4 ODD | VS 2 BACK OR HEAVY |
| 3-4 OVER ED (4-3 STACK) | VS 12 PERSONNEL |
| NICKLE 3-3-5 ODD | VS 11 / 10 PERSONNEL vs ZONE RUNS |
| NICKLE 3-3-5 SAM | VS 11 / 10 PERSONNEL vs GAP RUNS |
| NICKLE 3-3-5 WIDE | AT GOAL LINE OR SHORT TO GO |
| NICKLE 3-3-5 WILL | VS 11 / 10 PERSONNEL vs GAP RUNS |

PRIMARY COVERAGES:

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| COVER 4 QUARTERS | SHADE OUTSIDE |
| COVER 4 PALMS | SHADE OUTSIDE |
| COVER 6 | SHADE OUTSIDE |
| COVER 2 MAN | SHADE INSIDE & OVER THE TOP |
| COVER 3 MATCH | SHADE OUTSIDE |
| COVER 3 SKY | SHADE OUTSIDE & UNDER OR OVER |
| COVER 3 SKY WEAK | SHADE OUTSIDE & OVER THE TOP |
| COVER 1 BLITZ | PUT ONE BLITZER INTO A HOOK ZONE OR MAN ON PRIMARY WEAPON |
| COVER 3 ZONE BLITZ | SHADE OUTSIDE |
| HOT BLITZ | PUT OUTSIDE CORNERS ON DEEP QUARTER ZONES. |
| COVER 0 BLITZ | SHADE INSIDE & OVER THE TOP |
| COVER 0 DOUBLE BUZZ | SHADE OUTSIDE & OVER THE TOP MAN UP BOTH SAFETIES ON TOP 2 OFFENSIVE WEAPONS |

BASE AUDIBLES:

COVER 3 MATCH COVER 4 COVER 2 MAN ZONE BLITZ

SOURCES AND ADDITIONAL READING:

<https://matchquarters.com/2019/10/04/georgias-mint-package/>

<https://matchquarters.com/2018/07/27/thaca-football-lecture-kirby-smart-2018/>
<http://sportsrealise.com/2021/01/a-worthy-rival-the-kirby-smart-defense/>