Writing About Sports
Essay 3 – Draft 3

The System: Football for Sale

"A playbook is but a crystal, transparent and unchanged; it cannot express the pressures and influences leading to its existing or give any indication as how it will continue to be shaped and reshaped over time." --Chris Brown, Grantland.com staff writer and student of Mike Leach

For the vast majority of football's history, coaching knowledge has been disseminated freely through personal interaction. Coaches spent their offseasons in conventions and meetings sharing information and learning from their colleagues (Layden). In the early 2000's, a former Kentucky football coach broke this unwritten rule by putting a price tag on the high-powered spread offense he and his peers had developed at the college level. "The System," as he called it, was marketed to high school coaches who could buy it complete with plays, drills, and even specific consulting. Over the next few years, the offense gradually became prevalent at the high school level while filling the pockets of its salesman (Brown). While the secrets of the offense have been almost entirely divulged, the move to monetize The System has forever changed the landscape of the coaching information network. Yet a fan must ask: is the sale of such a coaching system good for the game itself?

A History Lesson

For as long as coaches have roamed the sidelines, there has been a tension between secrecy and information sharing between them. Information was traditionally withheld from opponents when it would yield a specific strategic advantage but was otherwise shared, either for the sake of goodwill among fellow coaches or for the growth of the game. It was with the latter in mind that Glenn Scobey "Pop" Warner (for whom national youth-level football is now named) published *A Course for Football Players and Coaches* in 1912. The book detailed every aspect

of the game from position descriptions to offensive plays to how to purchase or even make equipment. In one of the rare cases of true invention in the game, Warner's book contained descriptions of a new offensive formation which would come to be known as the single-wing and would serve as the most powerful offense in football until the 1940's, its popularity due in part to its ease-of-access for coaches in Warner's manual.

The main takeaway from Pop Warner is that, as long as football coaching has existed, coaches have sought to share information with anyone who would care to listen. This is not to say, however, that there is no value to secrecy in football. Any competitive coach will gladly hide information if it is to his advantage, and it would be foolish to think that conference rivals have many chats about X's and O's.

One notorious example of the advantage of secrecy came in the form of football's most-remembered trick play: the puntrooskie. In the fourth quarter of a tied contest against Clemson in 1988, Florida State coach Bobby Bowden unleashed a devious fake punt from his own 21-yard line that led to a game-winning field goal (Manselli). The problem, and undeniably part of the lore of the play, was that Clemson knew it was coming. Bowden had originally installed the play against Miami two weeks earlier but never had the opportunity to use it. In his excitement over the play, the ball carrier, LeRoy Butler, told his former high school coach, who then mentioned it to a few of his old players, one of whom was a Clemson alumnus who in turn tipped off head coach Danny Ford. The design of the play was effective enough that Florida State converted the try, but when he learned of Ford's knowledge of the puntrooskie, Bowden put a blanket ban on the discussion of any trick plays outside the football team, lest the information leak into the wrong hands (Manselli).

Secrecy, however, is not simply limited to trickery on the football field. In the cutthroat

world of the NFL, teams seek any advantage possible, both on and off the playing surface. In the 1980's Jimmy Johnson developed a chart that mapped the estimated "value" of every pick in the NFL draft in order to gain an advantage in last minute trades (Pro-Football-Reference.com). For years, Johnson's Cowboys were the only team with access to "the chart," but as personnel drifted in and out of the Dallas front office over time, the chart gradually made its way around the league until its use was commonplace. For half a decade, the withholding of information gave Jimmy Johnson a strategic advantage over the rest of the league, an advantage that would help the Cowboys win three Superbowls in the early 90's.

These examples tell us a lot about the collaborative nature of information sharing in football. While Pop Warner's book was for sale, its goal was to grow the game rather than to turn a profit. Coaches are generally united by the common struggle of outmaneuvering their opponent with novel strategies, and there seems to be some understanding of this fundamental need for knowledge sharing between them. Therefore, they are willing to distribute this information freely, so long as it doesn't put their own team at a disadvantage. Moreover, there is a well-established precedent for doing so. This culture of collaboration has driven the majority of innovation in football over the years, including the development of the "spread offense" that would be eventually sold for profit.

The Rise of the Spread Offense

It can be said that the modern spread offense that became prevalent at the high school level in the mid 2000's was first developed in the late 80's at Valdosta State University by Hal Mumme and his disciple, Mike Leach, who later made it famous at Texas Tech. The truth, notes Leach's former student Chris Brown, is that teams have been running variations of pass-first wide-open offenses since as early as the 1950's, and, like almost all football strategies, the

concepts that Mumme and Leach developed were adapted from those of other coaches. In an era characterized by power running I-formation teams, the two spent a great deal of time exchanging passing concepts with LaVell Edwards and Doug Scovil at Brigham Young (whose own offense was adapted from that of the legendary Sid Gilman), as well as former Baltimore Colts great Raymond Berry, and anyone else who was "fringe" enough at the time to consider an air attack a viable means of winning football games. Some of Mumme's most effective plays at Valdosta were pulled straight from the BYU playbook, while many more were simple adaptations (Brown). Mumme's staff, however, wasn't picky about from whom they borrowed. While Leach was known to drive over six hours to Green Bay to talk with Packer assistants, Tim Layden also quotes him as saying, "We would do the same thing if we saw a high school team with a good play. We'd go talk to them about it" (161).

Like all coaches, Mumme and Leach were always hungry for a competitive edge, and this hunger drove the uniqueness of their spread offense. Often playing with lesser athletes than those of their competition, the duo couldn't afford to build a team on the backs of dominant offensive linemen and blue-chip quarterbacks because those types of players simply didn't find themselves at places like Valdosta State. The beauty of the spread was that it achieved maximum effect with minimal resources. The every-down use of the shotgun (a tactic considered a gimmick until around 2005) put significantly less pressure on the offensive line. The running game was effectively replaced with endless flanker screens (those 0-yard passes to the sideline that can be found in every modern playbook), a concept borrowed from Purdue (Brown). All a team really needed to effectively score points was a few speedy, smart receivers and a quarterback capable of making a deep pass (Layden 153). Requiring fewer elite athletes meant that handicapped programs like Mumme's could achieve dominance by way of mere strategy alone.

It was neither Hal Mumme nor Mike Leach, however, who would go on to make the spread the ubiquitous offense it is today. Mumme would eventually take Leach to Kentucky in 1997, but many of his assistants (most notably current West Virginia head coach Dana Holgorsen) were left to find work elsewhere. Mumme replaced Holgorsen with a local high school coach, Tony Franklin, who in three years would find himself the scapegoat for Mumme's firing in the face of NCAA recruiting violations. With his reputation ruined, Franklin could not find any work coaching until he was called upon by the head coach of Hoover High School in Alabama to install the then-notorious Kentucky spread. Hoover High would go on to win four state 6A titles from 2002 to 2005 and be gifted its own MTV television program, but Franklin may still have gotten the better of the deal. Seeing that the offense could be effective at the high school level and with no coaching job actively awaiting him, Tony Franklin decided to do, according to Brown, something no one had ever done before: he began to sell his offensive system to anyone willing to buy it.

The Tony Franklin System, or as it is better known, The System, allowed coaches to build championship contenders for the nominal fee of $3000 (ChampionshipSystems.com). While the act of putting a price tag on an offense may seem bizarre or even against the spirit of the profession, the circumstances under which it was done were equally unusual. For the previous 20 years, most teams at the high school level had operated out of I-formation offenses with the quarterback under center. The early 2000's, however, saw people like Mike Leach (promoted to offensive coordinator at Oklahoma) and even professional teams achieve success passing the ball out of the shotgun. The System was a ready-made solution for coaches seeking to integrate a devastating passing attack at a time when coaching resources on the subject were highly limited. According to Brown, "$3000 got you more than just the plays, but instead got

you gobs of information, drill tapes, installation guides, gameplans, and, most important of all, a direct line to Tony: weekly calls to discuss whatever problems your team was facing, what adjustments you needed to make, how you could make it work." Furthermore, subscribers to The System began forming their own coaching community, exchanging ideas, and further developing the modern spread offense.

Tony Franklin has since moved on to other coaching positions (most recently the offensive coordinator at Louisiana Tech), but his impact on the game of football has been immeasurable. Since his style of shotgun pass-first offense began to proliferate at the high school level, the offense has sent recruits trained in the spread to college programs, which have in turn adapted their offenses accordingly. In 2002, the Big 12 conference's pass/run ratio hovered around 50 percent (excluding Mike Leach's Texas Tech, which threw the ball 80 percent of the time). In 2012, the conference passed the ball on 66 percent of plays, and almost all teams based out of some form of spread offense (Big12sports.com). Even at the professional level, teams have gone from using three receivers 23 percent of the time to more than 50 percent of the time over the same period (Pro-Football-Reference.com) to keep pace with the needs of the modern passing game. By fundamentally transforming the way players are coached at the high school level, Tony Franklin has actively influenced the way the game is played across the entire spectrum of football.

Often Imitated...

By selling The System around the country, Tony Franklin did more than just turn a profit; he created an industry. Over the past decade, copycat systems and subscription football coaching websites have developed with wild success. This phenomenon isn't limited to the spread offense, either. Today's coaches have access to consultation on defense, special teams, and even a

modernized version of Pop Warner's single-wing. High school and college coaches moonlight as personal consultants and spend their offseasons traveling the country and installing their systems for their clients. A group of coaches who have experience with a system will charge others to attend clinics (Tony Franklin has clinics in Nashville, Atlantic City, Dallas, and L.A. already lined up for 2014), and then they will use these clinics to market their personal consulting (ChampionshipSystems.com). Coaching, or rather the teaching of coaching, has turned into a profitable business for those associated with football.

As the spread offense and its variants have proliferated (the style of play is so ubiquitous that term "spread" really has lost all meaning at this point), this business model has heavily incentivized the development of coaching innovations. Many coaches have engaged in a sort of arms race to find the next big thing they could market to the football world. The most famous of these innovations was known as the A-11, a system based on a rule exploitation developed by two coaches at Piedmont High School in San Jose California. In the A-11, the offense is aligned in what the rules dictate to be a "punt formation" for every play, allowing any player to be an eligible receiver, rather than the standard five receivers and backs. Coaches nationwide became intrigued after seeing an article about the offense in *The New York Times*, and its inventors, Kurt Bryan and Steve Humphries, immediately sought to market the new scheme (Layden 246). Within months of the offense's invention, Bryan and Humphries were actively turning a profit from their invention. Ultimately, their success was short lived due to changes in the rules made at the high school level to remove the A-11 from the game (it was never actually legal at the college or pro level). The A-11 website is now a purely not-for-profit venture (Brown).

Despite the failure of the A-11, the offense serves as a clear example of why these coaching systems are so profitable: the voracity of the market. Websites like that of the A-11 see

relatively little traffic compared to the higher-quality subscription pages and forums such as CoachHuey.com, as well as for-profit system websites that allow coaches to satiate their urge to find any edge—through any means—that they can get on their competition. When wins and losses can make or break a career, it pays for a coach to invest in himself, and Tony Franklin and his imitators provide a very convenient tool for coaches to improve their craft.

And that's just it—what you're buying with The System is not the information, but the *convenience*. The information has always been available (and coaches have always been willing to share it, even Tony Franklin), but now coaches no longer have to get in a car and drive six hours to learn about a smash route because all of the information is at their fingertips. If a coach has a specific concern, he can simply call up his payrolled football consultant and get an answer. It is easier than ever to be a football coach, provided you have the proper funding.

For the Good of the Game

The question still remains, is the sale of coaching systems actually beneficial to the game of football? It seems to me that there are three main points of concern: the development of players, the development of coaches, and the development of football schemes as a whole. In the case of the players, it is very difficult to differentiate between their development improving and the athletes simply becoming better. For instance, the fact that the average NFL nose tackle in 2012 weighs more than he did in 1996 (Schatz et al.) has nothing to do with improvements in practice drills; the modern pro game is simply demanding a larger player. At the same time, Andrew Perloff notes in *Sports Illustrated* that quarterback play has steadily improved both in the transition from high school to college and college to professional football over the past 10 years, most likely because the players are getting significantly more practice time in 7-on-7 leagues organized by System coaches. Furthermore, the ability for a quarterback to read pass

coverage has skyrocketed recently, and there can be no denying this improvement is correlated with not only increased practice reps, but also better instruction.

It can be argued that coaching systems provide a barrier to entry for new coaches because of the requirement of a significant capital investment, but such thinking incorporates a key oversight: coaches haven't stopped trading ideas in the traditional manner. Relatively few people are publishing books à la Pop Warner, but coaches still freely share their knowledge with their peers. Just last offseason after the college-style read-option began to creep into NFL offensive playbooks, defensive coordinators scrambled to the universities to gain insights into how to shut it down (Pro-Football-Reference.com). Furthermore, even system coaches also aren't afraid to share the knowledge they bought with their (often young) assistants. Though he may be at a disadvantage compared to his consultant-backed colleagues, nothing is stopping a current coach from using the traditional method of learning the craft, and, chances are, he'd be learning from coaches who paid for their information.

In terms of the development of the game, coaching systems, if anything, have driven innovation by providing a monetary incentive to come up with something new. There has been more schematic development in football in the last ten years than there was in the prior twenty (Layden 165), a trend I would expect to continue as coaches keep putting their heads together. Moreover, a culture of invention in football has begun to emerge, with every coordinator seeking to put his own spin on a well understood offensive concept. The trick plays, the modern puntrooskies, aren't going anywhere either. If anything, offenses like the A-11 have shown us how they can be even more prevalent. It can be argued that too much development could be bad for the game, that perhaps coaching innovations might outpace the sport itself and render it unwatchable, but at least for now, the amount of variation in modern offense, especially at the

college level, makes the sport more entertaining than ever to a fan who knows the game.

Even with these ideas taken into consideration, it would be foolish to claim that this attitude of monetizing football knowledge is entirely without danger. I believe the danger, however, lies where keeping secrets is worth the most: at the professional level. What if Jimmy Johnson had sold his famous chart? He could have exchanged an organizational advantage for a personal profit. Currently, many NFL teams have under their employment analysts with advanced degrees in mathematics and economics, mainly inspired by the growing prevalence of advanced statistics in baseball. What happens when one of these analysts finds themselves in a situation like that of Tony Franklin? The selective sale of analytic information could very easily swing NFL contests, potentially even Superbowls. That is a danger worth considering.

Often, it is said that if you're good at something, you should never do it for free. Innovation in football coaching and the teaching thereof have proven themselves to be commodities and services of monetary value. While there are some dangers set by the precedent of Tony Franklin's monetization of The System, the benefits football has reaped from the move have so far outweighed these risks. What football has now gained is a system of systems, integrated to provide key insights to any coach in need.

As long as he's willing to pay for it.

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