

RECEIVER TECHNIQUES AND DRILLS

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

Thank you. It is a pleasure to be here. Football is a team concept game. Any success we had at the University of Kentucky came as a result of the entire team. The most important thing you do in coaching is to teach your athletes. You communicate something to your players that you want them to execute and do effectively. Everyone has a different wave length they are on. The way you convey things to them is crucial. Some players may need confidence. In a lot of cases confidence is more important than getting their attention. At our level we have their attention, the only thing we have to do is give them confidence that they can do the job and be successful.

Effort is a crucial thing. Anybody on your team can give you great effort. The worst player you have can give great effort. If a guy is not giving great effort you don't have his attention. There are a lot of different ways to skin a cat. This is how I handle that. I get on that guy and get on him hard. He is cheating you, the team, and himself by not giving great effort. If a guy is having trouble executing but is giving you great effort, he is going at it the wrong way. That is the coach's job. I need to communicate and teach him. He is going as fast as he can, but is not doing it the right way.

What is the best play we ran at Kentucky? The best plays we have at Kentucky have been packaged by someone else. We have copied and stolen ideas from other successful programs. BYU has been an essential influence to what we do. We do an awful lot of what the 49ers are doing and have done. In football great ideas are not hard to find. I think packaging is more important than great ideas. The wishbone is a great offense, but it is not the offense we run at the University of Kentucky. It wouldn't fit our system or our offense. As a result, we don't run the wishbone. Not because it was not a great idea, but because it doesn't fit into our package.

I think most packages tend to be too big rather

than too little. The plays that you run need to be the type of plays that the dumbest player on the offense can execute them. Of course, if you are running the ball to the left and your backside wide receiver doesn't understand the play, you can survive that play. Ideally, the complexity has to be such that everybody on your offense can understand it. It is better to have too little that everyone understands, than to have too much if you have some players who don't understand.

What I'm getting at is, regardless of what plays you run, the best thing we do at Kentucky is practice. We do a great job practicing specifically what we are going to run. We try to design our practices so they are centered around the skills and techniques we are going to use in games.

We practice for 1 hour and 45 minutes on our heavy work days. We don't stretch. We warm up slowly doing football-specific drills. We have three real core fundamental drills. I think they are good drills and have been good to us at several different levels. The drills don't teach just one thing. They teach a lot of things. We run all three of them in succession every day as we practice. At Kentucky we stress the fundamentals. You have to be real specific and do the same things every day. When we see a guy drop a ball, it is because of something he is not getting done in the drill.

The first drill we start out with every day. It doesn't matter what kind of practice it is. It doesn't matter if we have pads on or just shorts and helmets. Even on walk through days we do this drill. Chris Hatcher played at Valdosta State for three years. He won the Harlan Hill Award, which is like the Heisman Trophy in Division II. He does a great job of coaching our quarterbacks at Kentucky. The drill is called "settle up." We run the drill at one-quarter speed. We count our running backs as wide receivers in this drill. We have our starting center snapping the ball to the starting quarterback. We have two dummies down-

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field which represent cover people. The receiver settles up between the two dummies, catches the ball, and turns straight up field.

The first fundamental thing that we emphasize is the quarterback stance. We are looking for several things in the stance. We want pressure on the center's butt so the center has a target for the ball. The quarterback's fingers are barely under the center. We are a passing team and we want the ball to come to the hands so we can get out from under the center quickly. We want the quarterback high in his stance. His toes are turned in just slightly with the weight on the balls of the feet. We want a slight bend in the knees and a relatively narrow stance, as compared to some teams. We want the feet under his armpits. The reason for that is to take a big first step. The back is relatively straight and the eyes never leave downfield.

As the quarterback takes his first step he wants to cover as much ground as possible. He brings the ball to his ear. The ball is ready to be thrown at any point. When we do the three-step drop, we take a big first-step, cross over on the second, gather and throw on the third step. On his third step, his back foot is slightly to the outside. He can see the right side of the field because he is dropping to the right side. The back foot being slightly outside allows his shoulders to be slightly open so he can see the back side also.

We also back out from the center. We start with the opposite foot. He steps back with his left foot, when he backs out from center. We do this drill with the ball on a line. The quarterback drops down that line. You would be surprised at the number of quarterbacks who don't drop back straight.

During this drill we are working on the center exchange, the drop, and fine tuning the throw. We call it "throwing darts." We want to get the thumb down and throw it where we want it.

The receivers are being coached by the receiver coach during this period. The first thing we work on is the receiver's stance. We tell the receivers to start low and stay low. We want them to be relaxed, backs

straight, and still see downfield. As the receiver plants to a run pattern, we want 90 percent of the weight on the front foot. I want the hands relaxed. I don't care if they carry them high. What I don't like is the statue look. That tightens the entire body. Any time you do anything athletic, you need to be relaxed. If the receiver has trouble stabilizing, he needs to turn his front foot in slightly. The last thing we look for are false steps. We want them to go immediately forward. Don't let the receiver lift the front foot and take a double step. He goes quarter-speed and works for the perfect move.

As the receiver comes down the field and settles, he settles closer to one dummy than the other. The dummies are representing coverage like a linebacker. We want the receiver to form what we call a "noose" with the fingers. That means bring the fingers of the hands together. We want the little fingers or thumbs together. We emphasize catching the ball in the hands, tucking it under the arm, and going straight upfield.

We don't want the receiver's arm straight or bent too far. If the arms are too straight, the ball can hit the hands and bounce forward. If that happens, the receiver has no chance of catching the ball. If the arms are too bent, the receiver can't see the ball if it jams him. We want to catch the ball in our hands. We want to see the ball hit our hands. The elbows are pinched in to let the elbows hinge and soften the hands. Even if the guy tightens up his chest, if the elbows are pinched in, his elbow will hinge to a degree. That softens the hands in spite of the fact he is doing a lot of things wrong. There will be times during the course of the game where he catches the ball against his body or bats it around and catches it. But in practice we are working for perfection.

Once he catches the ball, he tucks it in. He tucks the ball to the side that he receives it. He turns and goes straight upfield. We are not a big juke team. That gives you an advantage on a defender. The receiver has made an immediate decision on where he is going. The defender is wondering what the receiver is going to do with the ball. If the receiver turns and starts to juke, he has lost the advantage of the immediate decision.

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Now everything is back to even, plus the pursuit is coming. More often than not, turning straight upfield will enhance the yards after the catch. There is never any gray area on that.

As the receiver turns in between the dummies, the quarterback throws the ball away from coverage. In this case he throws toward the 1 on the jersey. He doesn't throw toward the 9 in the number 19, because that is the side closest to the coverage. The quarterback hits the 1, the receiver turns to that side, and goes straight up field. The quarterback can see things the receiver sometimes can't. The receiver may think he has coverage one way when actually the closest coverage is the other side. Wherever the quarterback throws the ball, that is the side the receiver wants to turn to. The quarterback puts the ball in a catchable situation as far away from the defender as he can.

The second drill we do is called "pat-n-go." In this drill we start out approximately half speed. We align the receivers in closer. They are barely outside the hash marks. The receiver arc-releases. Then he gives up a little ground, gets his numbers toward the line of scrimmage after he has taken about three steps, catches the ball and goes upfield. The quarterback takes a one-step drop and pats the ball. The receiver comes off slow like in a hot route situation. The quarterback pats the ball and throws to the receiver.

After that we get into our full-speed drills. This one is called "foot fire." This drill is designed to get a release on a bump-and-run technique. The receiver works his feet and hands at a rapid rate. He is trying to get the defensive back to react to the speed. He works his hands and feet slightly inside, hoping the defender will jump inside. That doesn't happen very often. If the receiver sees a lean in by the defender, he bursts outside. The receiver wants to give the illusion he is going inside by speeding up the feet and hands.

By alignment, our receivers are at the top of the numbers. Inside the numbers belongs to the defender and outside the numbers belongs to the receiver. We never want to get pushed outside the numbers. We

want to preserve as much ground as we can. If we get up against the sideline, there has to be a perfect throw to get the ball in there. If we preserve ground and hold at least the bottom of the numbers, the quarterback has a big area to throw the ball into. The receiver wants to lean in on the defender until he sees the ball released. The ball is not a short ball. It is a ball with air under it. Now the receiver has a lot of room to adjust to the ball. The receivers are looking at the quarterback. Most of the time in this type of coverage the defender is looking at the receiver. The receiver can see the release and knows where the ball is going to come down. The receiver gives the defender two steps to the inside. The defender will loosen a bit because he thinks it might be a post. Physically if the receiver is nice and low he can shove the defender inside. He can't be blatant about it but he can move him. If the ball is underthrown, the receiver can gear down and make the defender play through him to get to the ball. Of course, that is pass interference. Ideally, we don't want the ball thrown short or inside. We want the ball thrown over the receiver's outside shoulder.

We take our quarterbacks and run the "barrel drill." We place barrels at certain places on the field and let the quarterbacks try to throw the ball into them. The barrels are about 25 yards down the field. The quarterback takes his drop and tries to make baskets in the barrels. The only way to do that is put air under the ball. I'm not telling you we throw all the balls into the barrel. But if the ball is close, that is a good throw. The receivers can always adjust.

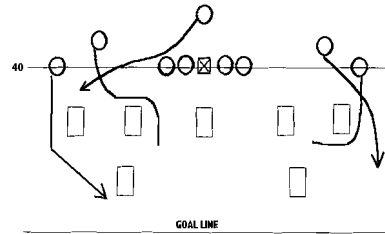
This next drill is the best drill we run. We call it "routes on air." This drill teaches a lot of techniques that we do. This is particularly good to teach zone reads. We set up seven stand-up dummies. They represent the underneath five short zone players and the two deep hash defenders. You can set the dummies up anywhere, to go against the defense you face. We have five quarterbacks line up in this drill. Last year we had between three and four, depending on what the JV team was doing. If we don't have all five quarterbacks, our coaches would stand in for them. All five of the quarterbacks are lined up in the middle of the drill taking an imaginary snap. The receivers are

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lined up in a formation getting ready to run a play. The receivers work on their techniques of stance, route running, and good catching techniques. The coaches are going to stress running great routes. The receiver wants to settle in the biggest seam he can find. We do the drill from the 40-yard line going in. We want the receiver to catch the ball, tuck it away, turn straight upfield, and score.

When I did drill work like this I would imagine I was working against Lester Hayes. I ran a great route, turned around, and didn't get the ball. The ball was thrown to someone else. That diminished my zeal to run a great route. In this drill, all five receivers get a ball thrown to them. We want them to catch the ball. We can get through each drop back passing play that we run five times in a 15-minute period.

The quarterbacks line up five in a row. They are kind of crowded, but that is the way I want it. The quarterback lives in a crowded world a lot of the times. The quarterback has to get used to bodies being around him. We are working on the reads of the quarterback. We start out with the guy on the right going through his reads. He throws the first read. The next quarterback throws the second read. The guy on the other end has the five read and throws his ball last. The reads are determined by the pattern being run. The coach can't really tell if the quarterback's eyes covered the five reads like he was supposed to, but he can tell the first through fifth reads by the order in which the balls were delivered. If the balls are being released out of order, you know they are not going through their reads. We rotate our quarterbacks, so they don't have the same read each time. You find quarterbacks who will get comfortable with a certain wide receiver. We don't want that. We want the quarterback to learn the entire play. It forces the quarterback to throw each route of each play in the course of this drill. He has to read the play in progression at least five times for each play that we run. For the number of reps, catches, throws, and the fact that the quarterback reads the play in progression, this is the best drill we run.



After we run our "routes on air," we do the same thing versus "one-on-one." We take our number one defensive backs and go against them. When we run our goal line offense or red-zone offense, we go to the goal line to run them.

The other thing I want to talk about are our releases. We see a lot of man coverage in the SEC. We like to practice releases on a line. You can tell when a receiver has actually gotten over the top of a defensive back and back on the line. Receivers are like defensive linemen and corners are like offensive linemen. That is kind of true. The corner is trying to protect a cushion between the two of us. He is trying to protect a space behind him. The receiver is trying to break the cushion and get past the defensive back. The receiver is using rips and swims, which are used by defensive linemen to get past offensive blockers.

One of the most important things that a receiver has to do is attack half of the defensive back's body. The defensive backs are probably stronger and faster than the wide receivers. Therefore, I only attack half of his body. If I'm trying to get outside, I only attack the outside number of the defensive back.

The first thing the receiver is going to do is "foot fire." The defensive back is all wound up. He is going to wreck the receiver's route. I want to loosen the defensive back up and at the very minimum get his weight distributed on his inside foot. The "foot fire" creates indecision on the defenders part. If the defender lunges at the receiver, the receiver should go by him immediately. The only way a lunge works is if the defenders get all of the receiver and put him on

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his back. Alabama did that to our receivers. They lunged at us. Defensive players are wound tighter than offensive football players, particularly the defensive backs. In the back of the defensive back's mind is, "If I foul this thing up, it is six points."

The first thing defensive backs want is to get their hands on the receiver. The receiver never wants the defensive back's hands on him. As long as he can have separation he has time to react to what the receiver is going to do. The receiver doesn't want him to have any time to react. Whether it is in the course of a route or the release, always knock the defender's hands off. What we try to do is break the elbow with a rip. That also causes the defender's shoulder to turn, which allows us to get by and into a move. When we are doing the rip move, as the hand comes through, the foot must come through also. When the receiver's foot gets through, he is open. If the receiver gets over the top of the defender, he has a two-way go. If the receiver has superior position, it doesn't matter if the defender is faster, the receiver is going to win.

At times the defender will be really strong. He is not just a little stronger than the receiver, he is sufficiently stronger. We do the same thing. We use the foot fire. But when we go to knock his hands off, we have to go to the ends of his wrists. But if you have to go to the ends of the wrist, instead of the elbow, we can't turn the shoulders as well. Always come down on a defender's hands, not up. If you come down on the arms, it won't hurt you much, but it will hurt the defender. I like the rip because it keeps the receiver low. I don't like the swim move, unless the receiver is tall. It exposes too much body. The swim I like to do is called the "short swim." Instead of coming over the shoulder, the receiver swims over the arms.

I like big receivers over small receivers. A small receiver has to be great with his feet and great at getting skinny. He is a little target for the defender to work on. There is very little surface to hold him up. The advantage of a big receiver is his arms are generally longer than the defensive back. If the receiver is big, he can do anything he wants with the defensive back. He can't get his hands on me like I can him. I can turn

his shoulder just for the simple reason I have longer arms. A tall receiver is a bigger target and is hard to hold on the line of scrimmage. He has more leverage because of those arms. However, each receiver has to use what he does best.

Let's talk a little about running routes. There are various things that are going to happen before the receiver gets to the point he is going to break his route. The route may break at 10 or 15 yards, but it doesn't matter. You know where the route breaks and the defender doesn't. That is the receiver's ace in the hole. As the receiver goes upfield he needs to be on the side of the defender that the route is going to break to. If I am on the other side of the defender, I have to cross his whole body. If the body position is right, the receiver can lean on the defender, break the route, and at the minimum be open for an instant.

If the receiver beats the defender at the line and gets behind him, he should move in the direction where he last saw the defender. The defender has panicked and is going to go to the last place he saw him. If the receiver does that first he will be a step ahead of the defender.

When a receiver runs a route, I think it is very important to have his numbers on his jersey over his feet. I mean when the receiver sticks or breaks a route. The best way to figure out if your players have their numbers over their feet is to have a wet day outside. I watched a lot of film and found the same guy slipping down all the time. Come to find out his weight wasn't over his feet. I don't believe slipping is entirely an accident. If you slow the projector down and watch a guy's slip, his numbers are back and his feet forward. There is no weight over his feet and he slips. If the receiver can stay relatively low, at some point in his route he will have an encounter with the defender. If the receiver can stay low, that helps to keep the weight over the feet. When the numbers on the receiver's jersey come up and go back, the defensive back reads that as a break. He closes on the receiver and pins his hip. We never show our numbers to the defensive back.

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When the receiver gets ready to make his break we want him to accelerate the hands. That gives the defensive back the impression that the receiver is going faster than he is, instead of gearing down.

I'm big on "stick routes." Occasionally, by alignment we are outside the defender. The receiver has the defensive back beat on the out by alignment. The receiver wants to get to the out as quick as he can. If he does that the speed can't get there to cover. If the receiver sticks a route it allows him to cut really sharply. I think it distributes the weight of the receiver and allows him to come out of his cut really fast. If a receiver sticks his route, it makes the defensive back hesitate.

Defensive backs are kind of paranoid people. They don't like to have their space invaded. There will be a time in a receiver's route where the defensive back tries to get his hands on the receiver. It will happen when the receiver breaks his cushion. The receiver has to get the defensive back's hand off him. Knocking the hands down has to be a constant thing. The reason is defensive backs kind of see with their hands. He can't see the receiver, but if his hands are on him, he knows where he is. If you knock his hands off, he gets an uncomfortable feeling.

Another thing that is kind of in the experimental stages is how to break the route once the receiver beats the defensive back. The receiver goes vertical and breaks the defensive back's cushion. He has to turn to run with the receiver. If the receiver wants to break his route to the outside, he leans on him and breaks. The lean tells the defensive back the receiver is going outside. There will be a time in the route where the defensive back will have his back to the receiver. It is like the trick you played on your buddies in school. You reach around and pat him on the shoulder away from you. He looks that way. Instead of leaning into the defensive back and breaking that way, touch him on

the other side. When the defensive back is not touching the receiver and his back is turned is the most vulnerable position. If the receiver touches the defensive back on the off shoulder and breaks the other way, you will be surprised what will happen. Most of the time the defensive back takes a couple of steps to the side that you touch.

We stress coming back for the ball and catching it at the highest point. You are losing ground on the route but you are gaining ground on the defender. The receiver is creating more separation between himself and the defender.

We have a couple of receivers right now who run with their arms outstretched. They see the ball in the air and they run for 15 yards with their arms stretched out. All that is doing is telling the defender that the ball is coming and probably is in the vicinity of the receiver's hands. When they do that it breaks the receiver's stride. He is not low any more in a full-out sprint. He is like a pizza delivery guy. We work on catching the ball without making a sound. That means develop soft hands.

We do two drills at post-practice. We split the receiver in half and work with the jugs machine. We work on hand placement, and reaction catching. The drill I like is called the "last five steps of a route." That drill is exactly what it says. The quarterback takes his drop. The receiver is down the field about 10 yards. About half way through the quarterback's drop, the receiver sticks his route, looks back to the quarterback, and catches the post. All he has run is 5 steps and he has gotten a catching rep. He can run 40 posts without expending any serious energy.

I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you. If we can ever do anything for you at the University of Kentucky give us a call. Thank you.