


# Teaching Flag Football Tactics and Skills



This is where we'll give you in-depth information about the tactics and skills you'll be teaching to your YMCA Rookies players. We'll start with team tactics, then move to individual skills. Much of the information here—especially in the tactics sections—is geared to preparing players for competition against other teams. Remember, in YMCA Rookies you won't be competing against other teams, but the tactical information will be helpful for you as you hone your players' skills and knowledge of how to respond in various game situations. When they move on to YMCA Winners, they will be putting the tactics to fuller use. Please read the tactics sections with this in mind.

Remember to use the IDEA approach to teaching skills—introduce, demonstrate, and explain the skill, and attend to players as they practice the skill. If you aren't familiar with flag football skills, rent or buy a video to see the skills performed or find a book on flag football skills (see appendix A for suggested additional resources).

With young, inexperienced players you'll have your work cut out for you. Emphasize proper mechanics, rather than outcomes, to give players a solid foundation to build on.



## Offensive Tactics

The objectives you set must be realistic and important—not only to you, but also to your players. If your team is incapable of reaching the goals, or is not interested in achieving them, then they serve little purpose.

Scoring is the obvious objective when a flag football team is on offense. But scoring is an outcome produced by the team's ability to

- ⊙ execute consistently,
- ⊙ move the football, and
- ⊙ maintain possession.

To execute, move the ball, and maintain possession at the YMCA Rookies level, you have to have a strong passing game. We'll look at the passing game after we explore the first three tactics.

### **Execute Consistently**

Consistent execution comes from consistent practice. For your players to execute consistently, they need many repetitions of the tactics and skills that they are learning. If your players know that a team goal is consistent execution, they'll be more eager to perform the skills as they continue to learn the fundamentals.

Teach your receivers the proper patterns to run and your quarterbacks the proper depth to drop to throw the football. Your players need to practice running a pattern many times before they'll feel confident that it will work.

By giving the players enough repetitions to eliminate mistakes, you'll help your team execute consistently.

### **Move the Football**

The object on offense is to move down the field and score by using good passing plays. The offense must believe they can march the football down the field regardless of who they're playing or the defense they're facing. Select pass patterns and plays that use the strengths of your offense.

### **Maintain Possession**

Obviously, when the offense controls the football, the opponent cannot score. To keep control, the offense must consistently produce first downs. An offensive game of short, quick passes is hard to stop. Maintaining possession is especially important when your offense has a narrow lead at the end of a game.

### **Passing Game**

At this level, running plays are not allowed. The offense *must* use forward passes to move the ball downfield (of course, receivers can run with the ball once they catch it). The forward pass is a potent way to gain yardage and score points. Throwing the football helps develop individual players, forces the defense to defend the whole field, and gains yardage on offense.

You must do a good job of preparing the quarterbacks and receivers in the basic skills covered later in this chapter. Keep the passing attack simple so that the quarterbacks and receivers know what to do. Timing is important to the success of a passing attack, so allow time for players to perform many repetitions of the basic patterns.

The passing game starts with a pass tree (see figure 8.1). These are patterns that we recommend YMCA Rookies receivers run to get open to catch the football. The quarterback drops straight back and throws the football to the open receiver.

Different pass patterns may be helpful in different situations. Here are the five pass patterns we recommend you teach your YMCA Rookies players.

- ⊙ **Curl**—When the defensive player retreats too fast, use the curl pattern. The receiver drives deep and then curls back to the football (see figure 8.2a).
- ⊙ **Square-out**—The square-out pattern is very successful when the defensive player is playing off the receiver (see figure 8.2b). The receiver runs downfield 5 to 10 yards and then cuts sharply to the sideline, catching the ball just before stepping out of bounds.

- ⊙ **Slant**—The slant is similar to a square-out, but the cut is not as sharp (see figure 8.2c). With this pattern you can often gain more yardage than with a square-out, though it can be a more difficult (longer) pass for a quarterback to throw.

- ⊙ **Streak**—Use the streak if the defensive back is playing tight on a receiver with speed. The receiver shows a curl move then breaks to the outside and sprints downfield (see figure 8.2d).

- ⊙ **Post**—The post is similar to the streak, but the receiver breaks to one side and heads long (see figure 8.2e).

The passing game takes time to develop, and you must be patient to bring the separate parts of this offense together.

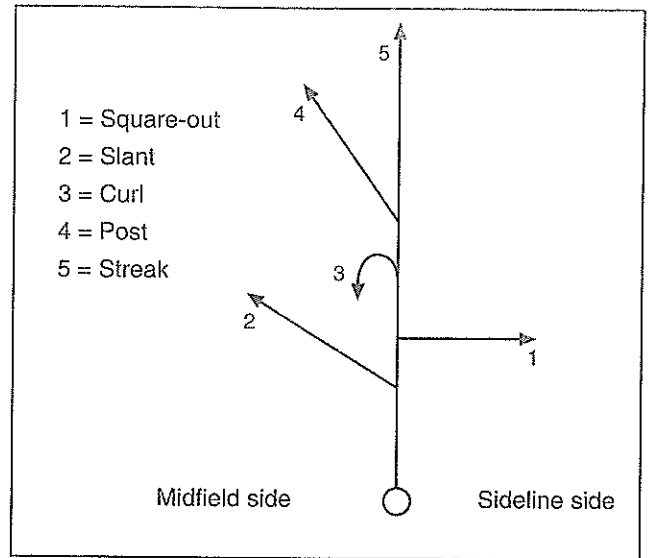


Figure 8.1 Pass tree.

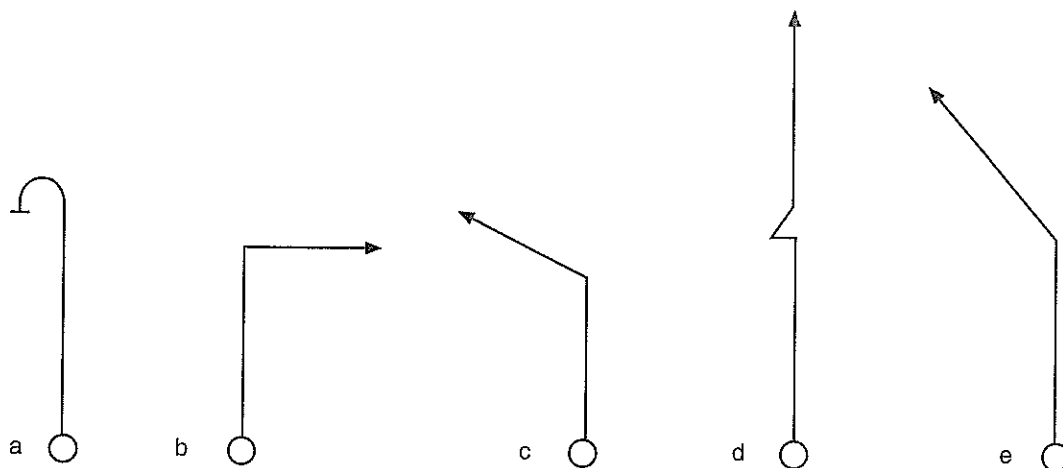


Figure 8.2 Pass patterns: (a) curl, (b) square-out, (c) slant, (d) streak, (e) post.

## Run-and-Shoot Offense

Flag football affords a great opportunity to use a run-and-shoot offense, because there is a lot of room for passing the ball with relatively few players on the field. In this offense, the receivers respond to the defensive coverage and “shoot” to the open area. (This offense is geared more to 6- and 7-year-olds than to younger kids.) It’s an exciting offense that calls for a quarterback with a strong arm and the ability to find the open receiver and for receivers who can read the defense and find the open seams on the field.



## Defensive Tactics

Your defensive approach should reflect the talents of your players. Your basic defensive alignment must capitalize on their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses. For example, if you have a somewhat big, slow team, you will want your defensive backs to not play too tight on the offensive receivers.

The three most important goals a defense can strive to accomplish are

- ⊙ to prevent the easy touchdown,
- ⊙ to get possession of the ball, and
- ⊙ to score.

In addition, you’ll want to teach players how to play player-to-player and zone defenses. We’ll look at the three goals first and then explore the different types of defenses.

### Prevent the Easy Touchdown

Although the obvious objective of defensive flag football is to keep the opposition from scoring, a more functional objective of defensive play is to prevent the opposition from scoring the easy touchdown with a long pass (or long run after a short pass). Make your opponent earn every point it scores by having a defense that challenges every yard. Praise players for preventing first downs and stopping the opponent’s drives downfield.

### Get Possession of the Ball

The defensive team may gain possession of the ball by preventing the opponent from gaining the next first down on four downs, forcing a “punt” (punt situations are handled at the YMCA Rookies level by a method other than kicking the ball, as explained in chapter 9), or intercepting a pass.

### Score

The defense can score by returning an intercepted pass. Remember that all fumbles are dead at the spot to avoid pileups and subsequent injuries. The defense also can score by pulling the flag of the ball carrier in his or her end zone for a safety.

## Player-to-Player Defense

In a player-to-player defense, each player on the defense is assigned a specific offensive player to cover. This defense works best when you have athletic players with speed and the ability to not get beat. Inexperienced or slower players tend to get beat more often in one-on-one situations, leading to big gains or scores for the other team.

Think in terms of who you are playing, too: if the receivers are fast and athletic, you may want to play a zone defense to lessen the risk of getting beat for a big play.

## Zone Defense

In a zone defense, each defensive player is assigned to cover a certain area of the field. A zone can help guard against big plays; defensive help is never too far away. Mistakes made in zone defenses often are not as costly as those made in player-to-player defenses. A disadvantage of using a zone is that the opponent can overload a zone; in this case the defender in that zone should cover the deepest offensive player in the zone until the ball is thrown to a different player.



## Offensive Skills

The offensive skills you will want to teach your players are stance, throwing (playing quarterback), and receiving.

### Stance

The stance is the proper alignment of a player's body to start each play. Before the snap, offensive players should stand with their weight on the balls of their feet with their knees bent and their backs straight. All offensive players should use a two-point stance, as follows:

- ⊙ Place the feet shoulder-width apart, in a heel-toe relationship, with the foot closest to the football back slightly more than the other.
- ⊙ Keep the back straight, leaning forward slightly.
- ⊙ Square the shoulders to the line of scrimmage.
- ⊙ Hold the arms in a comfortable position.

Figure 8.3 illustrates how this stance should look.



Figure 8.3 Proper stance.

## Playing Quarterback

You'll need to teach your quarterbacks how to play out of the shotgun formation and how to throw passes.

### Shotgun Formation

Quarterbacks start in the shotgun formation. They line up about 5 yards behind the center. They should look at the defense and scan the field for particular defensive formations. That will enable them to see who might be open.

### Throwing the Football

Quarterbacks should keep the ball in the ready position at the armpit before raising it straight up to throw. They should grip the ball with the fingers over the laces and the index finger close to the tip of the football to guide it, leaving some space between the palm and the football (see figure 8.4a). They should extend the elbow out and lead the ball toward the throw (see figure 8.4b). They should release the ball with the thumb and the wrist facing down. On release, the index finger should be last to leave the football, and it should be pointed directly toward the target (see figure 8.4c).

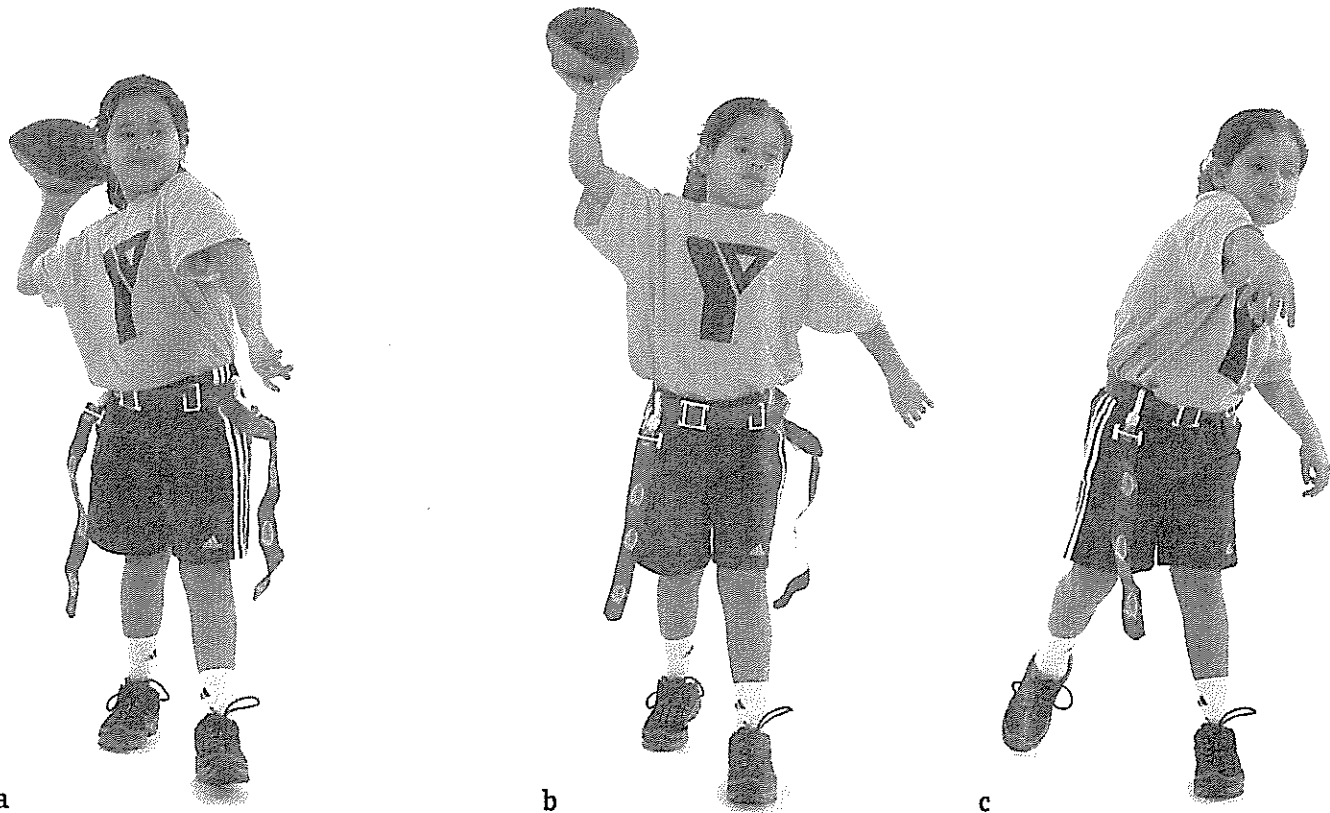


Figure 8.4 Proper throwing form for quarterback.

## Receiving

Receiving involves running patterns and catching the football.

### Running Patterns

When the quarterback calls a play in the huddle, the receiver knows what pattern to run. The quarterback selects this pattern from many options on a pass tree (see figure 8.1 on page 117).

The most important thing you should teach receivers is to explode off the line of scrimmage. They should run to the outside shoulder of the defensive back, forcing defenders to turn their shoulders parallel to the line of scrimmage to cover them. Next, receivers must come under control at the breaking point of the pattern. They then plant a foot, turn the head and shoulders, and react to the football.

### Catching the Football

The next step in coaching receivers is to teach them how to catch the football. This is a matter of concentration and dedication. Receivers should watch the football into their hands. If the football is thrown high, receivers should catch it with thumbs together (see figure 8.5); if it is thrown low, receivers should catch it with little fingers together (see figure 8.6). Also, teach receivers to catch the football in their hands and not trap it against their bodies.

Give receivers ample opportunities to catch every type of pass that they will see. Instruct receivers to tuck the ball under the arm and protect it after making the catch. Success will help the receivers gain confidence, and first downs and touchdowns reinforce that catching the ball is fun.



Figure 8.5 Catching a high pass.



Figure 8.6 Catching a low pass.



## Defensive Skills



Figure 8.7 Proper stance for linebacker.

Playing defense is part instinct, part effort, and part technique. You can't do much about your players' instincts, and most young players love the game, so effort isn't a problem. What a flag football coach *can* do is teach and develop players' defensive skills. The rest of this chapter will focus on defensive stance, pulling the flag, rushing the passer, and covering receivers.

### Stance

The proper initial alignment of the body for the defensive player is very important. Teach the defensive line players, linebackers, and defensive backs the proper stances for their respective positions.

#### Defensive Line Players

The stance for defensive line players is the same as that for the offensive line players. Before the play, defensive line players should stand with their weight on the balls of their feet, knees bent, and backs straight, ready to move on the play.

#### Linebackers

The linebacker should have a good balanced stance, with feet shoulder-width apart and slightly staggered. Figure 8.7 shows the proper stance for a linebacker. Teach your linebackers the following points:

- ⊙ Bend your knees slightly to ensure low body position.
- ⊙ Focus your eyes on the player you are to defend.
- ⊙ Have one foot slightly forward; step with this foot first as you react to the key and find the football.

#### Defensive Backs

Coach the defensive backs to line up with a slightly staggered stance in a relaxed position. Figure 8.8 shows the proper stance for a defensive back. Instruct your players as follows:

- ⊙ Keep your feet slightly staggered, with the outside foot back.
- ⊙ Point the toes straight ahead.
- ⊙ Focus eyes on the player you are to key.
- ⊙ Assume a slightly crouching position, with your knees slightly bent.
- ⊙ Take a short step on the snap and then react to the play.



Figure 8.8 Proper stance for defensive back.

## Pulling the Flag

If you want to have a good defensive team in flag football, you must teach your defensive players to pull flags. Players who learn the correct fundamentals of flag pulling early can more easily develop skills as they get older.

### Head-On Flag Pull

The head-on flag pull is used when defensive players are lined up straight across from the offensive player coming toward them. Keep low and center your attention on the ball carrier's waist. Figure 8.9 illustrates proper flag-pulling technique. Emphasize the following points to your flag pullers:

- ⊙ Make sure that you are under control so as not to overrun the ball carrier or dive and miss the flag pull.
- ⊙ Maintain a wide, balanced stance; keep the feet moving with choppy steps.
- ⊙ Extend your arms and head in front of your body.
- ⊙ Keep your head up, your back arched, and your knees slightly bent.
- ⊙ Slide your body to one side to avoid contact and reach for the flag.
- ⊙ Always wrap around your opponent, but do not hold. As you wrap around, attempt to pull both flags.

### Angle Flag Pull

This flag pull is necessary when the ball carrier runs a wide play or gets close to the sideline. Coach your defensive players using these guidelines:

- ⊙ Keep under control and be ready to move in any direction.
- ⊙ Maintain a good balanced stance and stay on your feet with your head up.
- ⊙ Reach for the flag with your body under control, head up, eyes focused on the ball carrier's waist or numbers.
- ⊙ Stay relaxed as you pull the flag.

### Open-Field Flag Pull

After the runner has cleared the line of scrimmage or when a receiver has caught the football and has just one player to beat, the defender must use the open-field flag pull. Coach your players that in the open field the most important thing to do is get close enough to the ball carrier that they can pull the flag. Stress these coaching points:

- ⊙ Keep under control with your legs bent.
- ⊙ Keep your feet moving, head up, and arms out away from your body.
- ⊙ Use the sideline to your advantage, penning in or getting an angle on the runner.
- ⊙ Your sole responsibility is to prevent the score by pulling the flag.

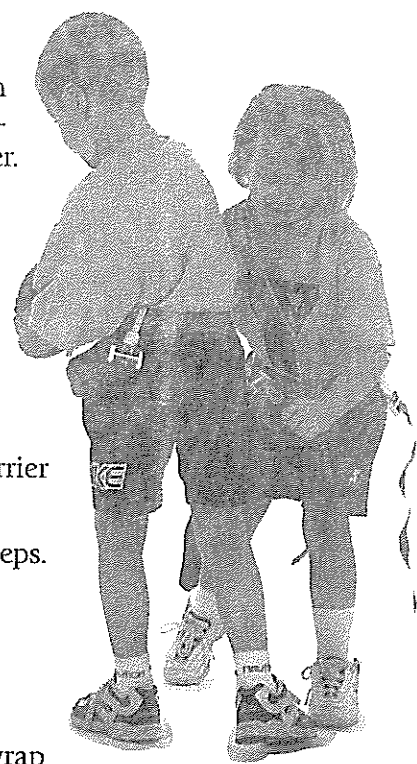


Figure 8.9 Proper flag-pulling technique.

## Covering Receivers

The defense must be able to cover the receivers to stop the offense from moving the ball through the air. Spend time training your players to defend the pass. Following are some of the necessary skills.

### Proper Alignment

The defensive corners (cornerbacks) should line up 5 to 7 yards off the wide receivers. The safeties should line up 8 to 12 yards deep off the line of scrimmage. If you are playing only one safety, he or she should line up deep in the middle of the field.

### Drop Step

Instruct your players to bend at the waist with a forward body lean. The drop step should start with a step backward with the back foot and a push off the front foot. As players turn, they are running sideways at a 45-degree angle. Their arms should move in a normal, relaxed running fashion. Players should be under control so that when receivers make their break to catch the ball, defenders are ready to drive on them.

### Player-to-Player Coverage

Looking at figure 8.10, use the following guidelines to teach your players how to cover receivers:

- ⊙ Keep your eyes focused primarily on the receiver you are covering (at the belt region).
- ⊙ Maintain a 3- to 4-yard cushion between you and the receiver.
- ⊙ Never turn your back on the receiver.
- ⊙ Once the ball is in the air, play it aggressively.

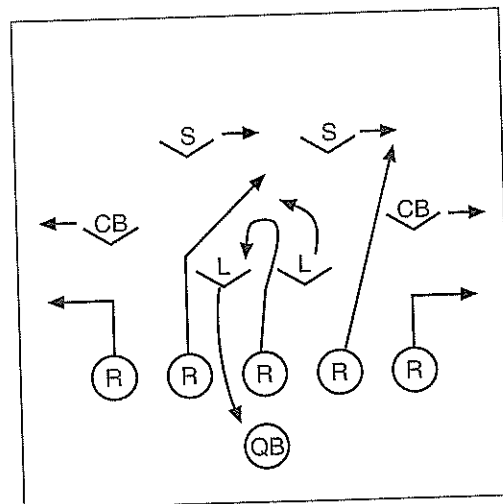


Figure 8.10 Player-to-player coverage.

### Zone Coverage

Teams use zone coverage extensively because of the speed of the game and because flag football is predominantly a passing game. A relatively inexperienced player can more easily learn the game and its techniques by playing zone rather than player-to-player. Figure 8.11 shows an example of zone coverage. Use the following guidelines to teach your players how to play a zone and cover receivers:

- ⊙ Keep your eyes open and your head up to be alert for players running into your zone.
- ⊙ Maintain a 3- or 4-yard cushion between you and the receiver.
- ⊙ Never turn your back on the receiver.
- ⊙ Once the ball is in the air, play it aggressively.

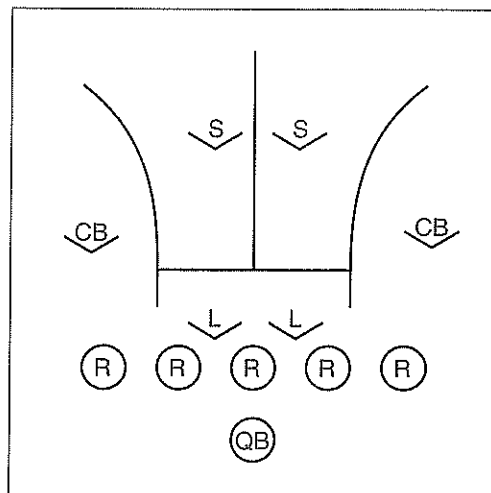


Figure 8.11 Zone coverage.