

## 16. KEY SYSTEMS

### 16.1 – General

1. In determining keys, the following definitions are needed:
  - (a) Strength of the formation – determined by the number of receivers on a particular side of the offensive formation. The strong side is the side with the most receivers. It has nothing to do with the number of linemen on each side of the snapper but rather the number of receivers positioned outside the tackles.
  - (b) On a 5 or 7-man crew, if there is no strong side (balanced formation), the Line Judge's side is deemed to be the strong side.
  - (c) Tight end / split end – the end player on the line of scrimmage. A *tight end* is usually lined up no more than 4 yards from the nearest offensive lineman. If he is lined up wider then he is a *split end*.
  - (d) Slot back / flanker back – a back lined up outside the nearest interior lineman or tight end. A *slot back* is usually lined up no more than 4 yards from the nearest offensive lineman. If he is lined up wider then he is a *flanker back*.
  - (e) Back in the backfield – a player in the backfield between the tackles at the snap.
  - (f) Trips – three or more receivers on one side of the offensive formation outside the tackles.
2. It does not matter in determining keys whether a player is:
  - (a) on or off the line of scrimmage
  - (b) wearing a number between 50-79 or not
3. The priority of keys to determine initial assignments for each group of officials is as follows:
  - (a) Deep officials – i.e. Side Judge and Field Judge;
  - (b) Back Judge (5 or 7-man crew);
  - (c) Wing officials – i.e. Line Judge and Linesman.
4. The general rule is do not key the same player as any official ahead of you in the order of priority. For example, on a 7-man crew, the Line Judge or Linesman should not key the same player as the Back Judge, and the Back Judge should not key on the same player as the Side Judge or Field Judge.
5. When receivers are "stacked" (lined up one behind another)<sup>§</sup> or "bunched" (lined up close together)<sup>§</sup> on one side of the formation, the officials should take their keys based on which routes the receivers run after they split. Those that run towards the middle of the field will tend to be the Back Judge's responsibility. Those that run towards the sideline will tend to be the responsibility of the appropriate deep official or wing official.
6. If the formation is illegal (e.g. too many players in the backfield, more than one player in motion at the snap), the crew should failsafe to keys based on the position of players at the snap.
7. If the formation is new or unusual then verbally or visually confirm keys with other officials.
8. If your key player (or one of many) is not threatened at the line of scrimmage then you do not need to focus on him so closely. It is only at the point when opponents come into proximity that you need to observe them.
9. Once players have established their pass routes, switch to zone coverage.

### 16.2 – 4-man crew

1. The wing officials key all eligible receivers on their side of the field.
2. Where there is more than one eligible receiver on a particular side, the primary key is the eligible receiver on the end of the line of scrimmage (tight end or split end). Any flanker back, slot back or motion man is a secondary key.

### 16.3 – 5-man crew

1. The Back Judge always keys on the inside eligible receiver(s) outside the tackles on the strong side of the formation. This will normally be the tight end or slot back.
2. The wing officials always key on the widest player of the offensive formation on their side of the field. This will normally be either a split end or a flanker back unless the Back Judge is keying on him.
3. If the formation is balanced and there is only one eligible receiver to each side, the Back Judge keys on the first back on a pass route out of the backfield. If there are two receivers to each side, the Back Judge keys on the inside player on the Line Judge's side, and the Linesman keys on the two on his side.
4. If there are three eligible receivers on the strong side, the wing official on that side keys on the third receiver if he lines up near the widest player, otherwise the third receiver is the responsibility of the Back Judge.
5. A player who goes in motion will be the responsibility of the Back Judge unless he is the widest player at the snap.

### 16.4 – 6-man crew

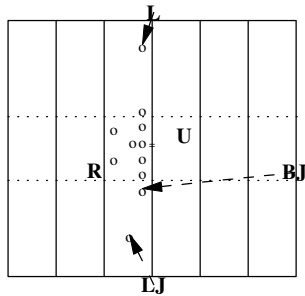
1. The deep officials always key on the widest player of the offensive formation on their side of the field.
2. The wing officials always key on the most inside receiver outside the tackles (often the tight end) on their side of the field. A running back running a pass pattern to one side of the field may be the second player.
3. If there are three receivers on the strong side, the deep official on that side keys on the third receiver if he lines up near the widest player, otherwise the third receiver is the responsibility of the wing official.
4. If there is motion, keys are determined by the position of the motion man at the snap (not by his direction). If he is the widest player then he will be the responsibility of the deep official on that side, otherwise he is keyed by the wing official.

### 16.5 – 7-man crew

1. The Side Judge and Field Judge always key on the widest player of the offensive formation on their side of the field. This includes the motion man if his motion makes him the widest player.
2. The Back Judge normally keys on the most inside receiver positioned outside the tackle on the strong side of the formation. This is normally the tight end or slot back. If the formation is balanced, the Back Judge keys on the most inside receiver outside the tackle on the Line Judge's side, if there is one, and the first back out of the backfield, if not. If there is a back in motion, the Back Judge keys on him after the snap unless he is the widest player on his side of the formation.
3. The wing officials key on the second receiver on their side of the formation. Since the second receiver would never be the widest receiver, the only concern is not to double cover the Back Judge's key player. The normal coverage is therefore the nearest back in the backfield. A wing official would only key on a tight end if there were two in the formation, in which case the Back Judge will take the one on the Line Judge's side and the Linesman the one on his side.

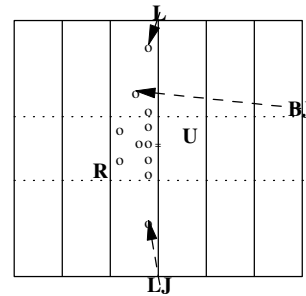
### 16.6 – 5-man crew examples

**Figure A: Pro set**



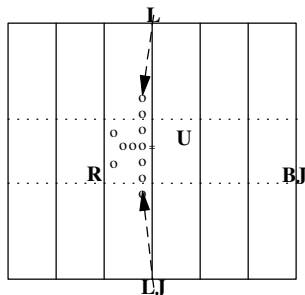
LJ's side is the strong side.

**Figure B: Slot formation**



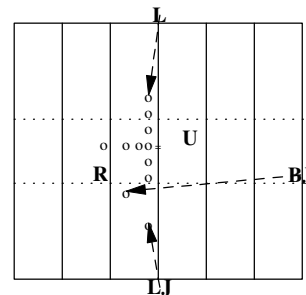
L's side is the strong side. BJ keys on the slot back on that side. L keys on the split end. LJ keys on the split end on the other side.

**Figure C: Wishbone formation**



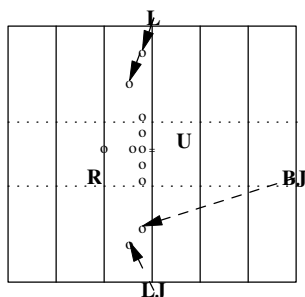
Balanced formation with one receiver each side. BJ keys on first back out of the backfield.

**Figure D: Single-wing formation**



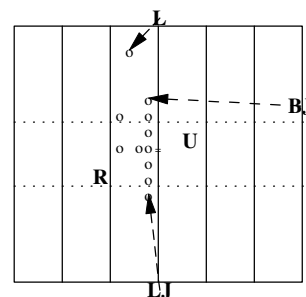
LJ's side is the strong side. BJ keys on the slot back. LJ keys on the flanker. L keys on the tight end to his side.

**Figure E: Spread formation**



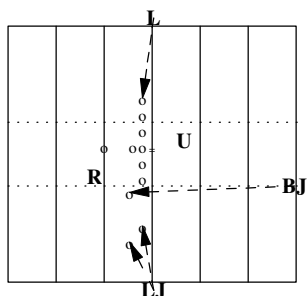
Formation is balanced with two receivers each side; strength declared to LJ's side. BJ keys on second player in on that side. LJ keys on the flanker on that side. L must key on both receivers on his side.

**Figure F: Double-wing formation**



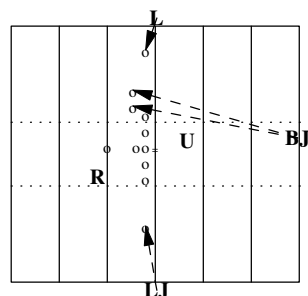
L's side is the strong side. BJ keys on the tight end on that side. LJ keys on the other tight end. L keys on the flanker back on his side.

**Figure G: Triple receivers on one side (1)**



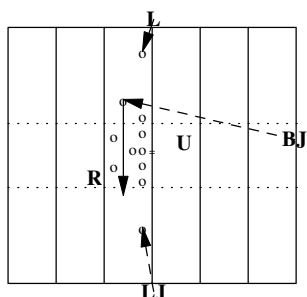
LJ's side is the strong side. BJ keys on the slot back. LJ keys both wide receivers. L keys on the tight end who is positioned on the weak side.

**Figure H: Triple receivers on one side (2)**



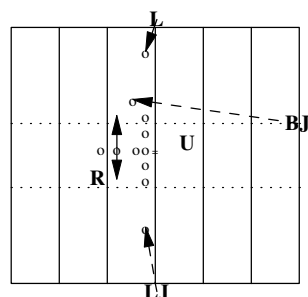
L's side is the strong side. BJ keys on both slot backs. L keys split end on that side. LJ keys on split end on other side.

**Figure I: Motion which changes strength**



Strength is initially to L's side. L keys on split end on his side. LJ keys on split end on other side. BJ keys on the slot back and stays with him as he changes sides.

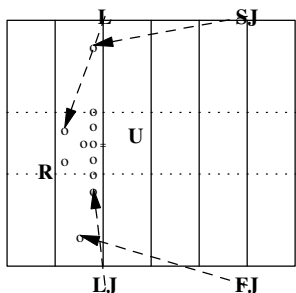
**Figure J: Motion which does not change strength**



Strength is initially to L's side. L keys on split end on L's side. LJ keys on split end on weak side. BJ keys on slot back, and also the motion man if he is near the slot back at the snap. If the motion man goes to the LJ's side, the strength changes, BJ has only the motion man, and L needs to key on both players on his side.

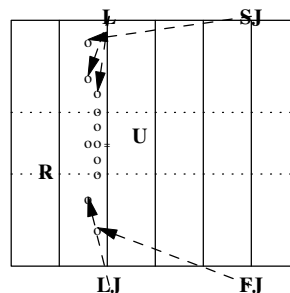
16.7 – 6-man crew examples

Figure A: Pro set



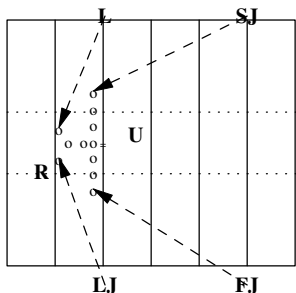
LJ's side is the strong side. FJ keys on the flanker. SJ keys on the split end. LJ keys on the tight end. L keys on the backfield.

Figure B: Spread receivers



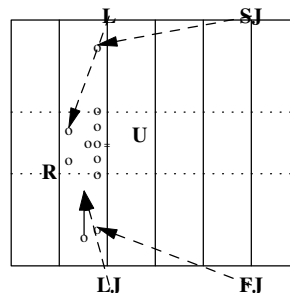
L's side is the strong side. FJ keys on the wide receiver on the weak side. LJ keys on the second receiver on that side. SJ keys on the flanker back. L keys on the end on his side and the remaining receiver.

Figure C: Double tight end and balanced backfield



Balanced formation. SJ & FJ key on the tight ends. L & LJ key on the split backs. The remaining back (the fullback) is the responsibility of whichever wing official he moves towards at the snap.

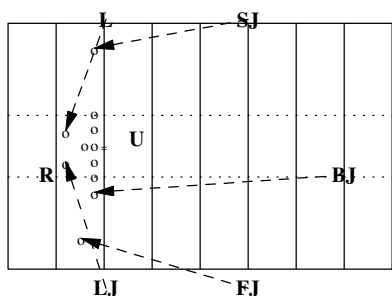
Figure D: Motion



When the motion man ceases to be the widest player in the formation he becomes the LJ's responsibility and the FJ keys on the split end.

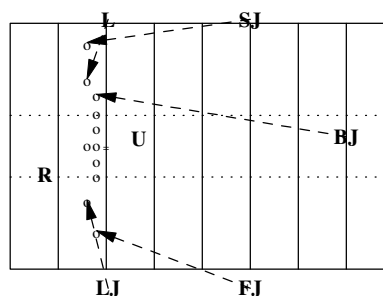
### 16.8 – 7-man crew examples

**Figure A: Pro set**



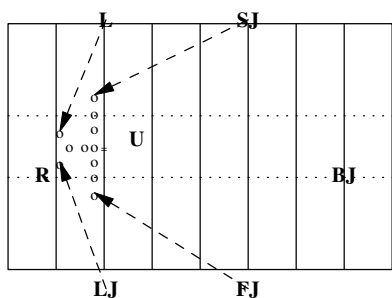
LJ's side is the strong side. FJ keys on the flanker. SJ keys on the split end. BJ keys on the tight end. L & LJ key on the backfield.

**Figure B: Spread receivers**



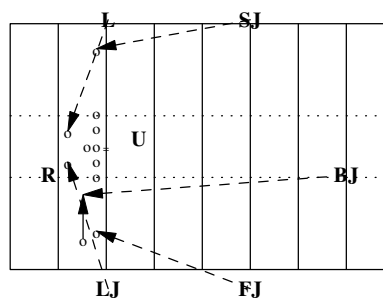
L's side is the strong side. FJ keys on the wide receiver on the weak side. LJ keys on the second receiver on that side. SJ keys on the flanker back. L keys on the second receiver on his side. BJ keys on the most inside receiver on the strong side.

**Figure C: Double tight end and balanced backfield**



Balanced formation with one receiver outside the tackles on each side. SJ & FJ key on the tight ends. L & LJ key on the split backs. The remaining back (the fullback) is the responsibility of whichever wing official he moves towards at the snap or the BJ if he goes downfield.

**Figure D: Motion**



When the flanker goes in motion the BJ and FJ exchange keys. If the motion extends inside the tackle, the LJ takes over responsibility and the BJ keys on the first back out of the backfield.