

# How the hell do you stop Baylor? Part I: What are they doing?

By [Nickel Rover](#) on May 22 2013, 10:32a □ [@Iain\\_Boyd26](#)

Stay connected for news and updates





Cooper Neill

In 2011, Baylor finished fifth in the Off. S&P rankings, led by Heisman-winner Robert Griffin III. In 2012, the Bears replaced him with Nick Florence and dropped to ...11th. And Big 12 defensive coordinators said, "Oh, no..."

- [□Share on Facebook\(200\)](#)
- [□Tweetpost\(64\)](#)
- ★Recs (10)
- [26 Comments](#)

After a third consecutive bowl appearance in 2012, it has become very apparent in Waco and beyond that the savior of Baylor football was not Robert Griffin III, but head coach Art Briles.

Briles had come to Waco via Houston in 2008. From 2002-07, he had transformed Houston from a Conference USA creampuff into a multi-season league champion with an explosive spread offense that had produced standouts quarterbacks like Kevin Kolb and [Case Keenum](#). From 1999-2001, Briles had learned the college game under spread offense patriarch Mike Leach as Leach's running backs coach while adding his own contributions to the Texas Tech run game. This drastically improved the Tech attack.

Briles' own history as a football coach goes back to the 80's when he got started in Texas High School football, the hotbed of modern offensive creativity. Briles began as a Wishbone/Veer offense guru before embracing the possibilities of the spread passing game in the 90's and transforming Stephenville HS into a Texas 4A state power.

These roots are essential to understanding how Briles has come to develop the concepts of his particular brand of the spread offense.

When Briles left Houston to take the head coaching job at Baylor, he brought one extremely important person with him, Copperas Cove "athlete" Robert Griffin III. Griffin took over the quarterback spot as a freshman, and Baylor sent a small snowball hurtling down the [mountain of possibility that exists for any FBS Texas school](#). This snowball eventually became an avalanche of offensive football.

After struggling through Griffin's freshman year and sophomore campaign, which was marred by a knee injury that put him on the bench, Baylor exploded into prominence in 2010 with a 7-6 record that included a win at struggling Texas. Then 2011 happened, and opposing coaches descended into Big 12 Hell, a world of burning sulfur, prodding demons, weekly shootouts, and a Baylor football program that could no longer be penciled in as a win, even for Bob Stoops.

After eventually disposing of rival TCU in the season opener, RG3 also took down Big 12 giants Texas and Oklahoma in Heisman moments that catapulted Briles' Baylor program into the national spotlight.

If Big 12 defensive coordinators were expecting their visitation in hell to be brief, they were in for a horrendous shock.

In 2011, Griffin had tormented Big 12 defenses with a season in which he threw for 4,293 passing yards at 10.7 yards per attempt. He flung 37 touchdown passes to only six interceptions while adding another 699 yards and 10 touchdowns on the ground.

In 2012, Florence threw for 4,309 yards at 9.3 yard per pass, with 33 touchdown passes to 13 interceptions, and 568 rushing yards with 10 more touchdown runs.

Griffin was unmistakably a legendary football player, and the seemingly minor differences in production between his campaign and Florence's (RG3 also faced a season with tougher Big 12 defenses) amounted to the difference in beating OU, UT, or TCU. However, it's now clear that Baylor has an offensive system that has to be taken seriously if opposing coaches want to transform their stays in hell into a stop in purgatory before ultimate ascendance into the [heavenly bliss of yesteryear](#).

\*\*\*\*\*

So how did Briles build this system? What exactly is he doing that's so damned hard to stop?

Baylor's attack is a system that relies on simple principles and a holistic approach to attacking defenses that makes sense when viewed from an outsider's perspective, yet is strangely unique to football. To fully grasp what makes Baylor different, and seemingly unstoppable, you must examine three aspects of that system.

### **No. 1: The formations**

Like most pure spread teams, Art Briles' typical offensive sets usually include four receivers and very rarely include fewer than three. However, Briles' understanding of "spread" is one of the purest you'll find in football.

Here's an example of the Air Raid-influenced Oklahoma offense in a four-wide receiver formation:



There are horizontal stretches for the defense from outside receiver to outside receiver, however nothing at all like what Baylor does on a routine basis:



Notice that the slot receivers are aligned way outside the hash marks. The wide receivers in Baylor's offense have extraordinarily wide splits in comparison with other teams. This serves a few purposes for the offense:

### **1. It makes effective disguise very difficult**

Teams that want to bring outside defensive backs on blitzes or disguise which players will be covering the slot receivers have tremendous difficulty doing so when the receivers are so far away from the offensive line.

Oklahoma [used] a five-man box with their OLBs out wide to match the Baylor splits and their safeties deep to prevent scores. Baylor ran for 252 yards.

If you want the Baylor QB to wonder whether you are blitzing off the edge or covering the slot receiver you'll have to really book it right before or after the snap in order to reach your assignment, or the QB will have a pretty open pitch-and-catch for easy yardage.

## 2. It stresses the defensive perimeter

Thanks to Baylor's extensive screen-and-outside-throw package, you need players to be able to get out to those receivers in order to defend the screens and passes that will otherwise snatch up five to 10 yards per snap with relative ease.

## 3. It isolates some part of the defense

Defenses have to make choices with their alignments against Baylor. Are you going to maintain a normal six-man box to stop the Baylor run game and give up screen passes to the outside, or will you widen out your linebackers to stop the screens and hope they can get back inside to stop Baylor's run game?

In the image above you can see that Oklahoma has a five-man box with their outside linebackers out wide to match the Baylor splits and their safeties deep to prevent scores. Baylor ran for 252 yards in that game.

\*\*\*\*\*

## No. 2: Holistic concepts

Many teams will spread the field with multiple receiver sets and attack the perimeter with the quick passing game, but not every team is actually able to spread out wide and still attack other parts of the field. Many of Texas' offenses under Greg Davis in the 00's drove Longhorn fans crazy with attacks that lacked a power run game or vertical passing threat.

Two-deep, pattern-reading defenses such as the one Oklahoma is deploying above against Baylor were created to stifle spread offenses by forcing them to drive the length of the field by being nearly perfect on short passes.

However, Baylor has their eyes on the entire field nearly all the time.

## Perimeter concepts

Another feature of Baylor's extra wide receiver splits appears in their screen game.

At the last moment you see TCU cheat their linebackers' alignment after Baylor's QB [Nick Florence](#) has already received the play call. The right backer sneaks out to stop the hitch screen while the left backer cheats in to stop a run play.

As it turns out, it's a packaged concept that features a screen against the right backer with a run against the left backer. It's up to Florence to read the right backer and determine if the screen or inside zone run is the better playcall.

Lots of teams use this packaged concept, but the difference is in the split of the Baylor receivers. The slot receiver catches the screen *four yards* past the line of scrimmage, whereas many teams throw that pass behind the line. Thanks to tough running and good blocking by the outside receiver he finishes the play 13 yards downfield.

This kind of tactic requires a quarterback who makes quick reads and possesses the arm strength and accuracy to hit receivers split out wide. Every instant saved while the ball is delivered means

less time for the defenders to respond and arrive to make the tackle. When the quarterback can make that throw accurately, the Bears are able to stay ahead of the chains with the yardage gained even before the receiver makes a move or breaks a tackle, which happens routinely.

Baylor has many spread passing concepts that they utilize, mostly based off of quick reads for the QB that can attack different parts of the field. But their ability to repeatedly hit the perimeter on screens for consistent yardage is primary to their overall success.

### **Downhill running game**

Baylor has a very diverse running game that is built to take advantage of its personnel and spacing and also includes the Quarterback as a threat.

It includes but is not limited to:

#### **Inside zone paired with bubble screens**

Notice here that the wide spacing and threat of bubble screens to either side of the field transforms the normally downhill Inside Zone play into one in which explosive runner [Lache Seastrunk](#) is almost immediately in the open field by drawing the linebackers and safeties out to the flats.

Baylor has also used the play with bigger running backs like Terrance Ganaway or Glasco Martin, who find that running downhill through the arm tackles of linebackers darting back into place after checking the screen is an enjoyable exercise.

#### **Zone Read**

Instead of reading linebackers to throw the bubble screen, the QB will read the DE (or here an OLB) and either hand off or keep the ball based on the read. In this example, Baylor is aiming for the cutback lane with both the QB and the RB as an ode to Briles' Veer-option football past. As a result, the linemen are essentially blocking down at angles. Defenders who are looking to avoid being reached on zone blocks have to worry about the possibility of this "Zone slice" play punishing them for pursuing too hard.

#### **Power Read**

Baylor will utilize Power-O blocking by the offensive line, with a guard pulling into the hole. If the DE crashes inside, then the QB will hand the ball off to a sweeping WR or the running back, who handles the run much like an outside zone run. They also run Power Read with the back looking for the inside gap and the QB looking outside. As with all Baylor plays, there are multiple stress points and a quick read by the QB to determine which to exploit.

The run game is the lifeblood of the Baylor offense. It has enough diversity in keys, varying angles, and threats to present defenses with schematic problems aplenty before the opponent can even address the screen game, or the final component of Briles' death trap.

#### **Play-action and vertical passing**

In many of the clips you'll see opposing safeties lining up deep off the ball, as many as 15 yards, before the snap. This final element to the Baylor offense is the reason why.

Giving up 13 yards on a hitch screen pass is scary enough, but the way in which Griffin and Florence would routinely throw deep bombs over the heads of safeties for one-play scores absolutely terrifies defensive coordinators.

While coaches would want to bring the safeties either outside the hashes to help against the screen game, or closer to the line of scrimmage to stop the inside runs, the Bears' vertical passing game demands that they stay back.

Most essential to Baylor's success is the play-action game:

In the first clip, they catch Texas corner [Quandre Diggs](#) with a double move by [Terrence Williams](#). The safety help isn't there because the safety is peeking into the backfield to stop the run.

In the second clip, Baylor targets Kansas State's [Dante Barnett](#), the replacement safety for [Ty Zimmerman](#), with [Tevin Reese](#) and a double move inside. Teams that have poor play on the back end will find their weakest links isolated and attacked vertically by Baylor. It's nearly impossible to hide major chinks in the armor at defensive back, and the stakes are six points.

While so much of the rest of the Baylor playbook urges defensive backs to fly downfield to make tackles on runners and receivers, the vertical passing game will quickly destroy defenders who play with flat feet or peek too long into the backfield.

### **No. 3: Tactics**

Baylor is a no-huddle team, naturally. For defenders and opposing coaches, this means that in processing the myriad of places on the field where you are on the verge of being assaulted, you have next to no time. Most, if not all, of Briles' concepts begin with one quick read by the QB; this means that the offense thrives on simplicity. Baylor is basically an option offense in all that it does. The nature of spread passing games has become quick-triggered and based on one or two reads, just like the Veer offense that Briles operated in the 80's.

The danger for Baylor is if the defense becomes difficult to read and the QB is made to hesitate or has to make a decision with inaccurate information. However, utilizing any serious degree of disguise or different personnel groupings is made extremely difficult by the wide spacing of the Baylor personnel and the quick tempo. If you call in a blitz or exotic look and are unsuccessful, the Bears can hurry to the line of scrimmage and punish you for the mistake over and over again while you desperately try to switch to a safer call.

The better the grip Baylor has on the defensive approach, the quicker the Bears can snap the ball and make plays. They keep coming all day long, and Briles doesn't seem to remotely care about margin of victory or defeat. They've been held under 30 total points only four times in the last two seasons and never under 20. In that same stretch, they've scored 50 points or more nine times.

Essential to Baylor's ability to attack so many different parts of the field is the fact that Briles recruits so well to this system. He finds big, mauling kids to fill the offensive line and uses some

of his best, most powerful athletes inside at guard or center so that defenses are forced to devote numbers in the middle to stop the run game.

At running back, Baylor balances power backs like Glasco Martin or Terrance Ganaway with explosive speedsters like Lache Seastrunk. The wide receivers have to block to play, but Briles prizes speed above all. His players are usually either accelerating from a stand still after catching a screen pass or trying to blow past safeties on play-action routes.

Quarterback is obviously the key to the offense. The ability to make quick decisions is a crucial element to a Briles QB, although this is also manufactured by playing in the system for years. The more essential physical gifts are a strong arm, accuracy, and enough mobility to force the defense to account for the QB in the run game.

The team features all of these elements in their 2013 personnel and likely a few more wrinkles that Briles has worked up in the offseason. So how can it be stopped? We'll get to that in Part 2.