In our offensive philosophy, we set up the passing offense by using the running game. We force defenses to be aggressive and overload the line of scrimmage to stop the ground attack, creating many opportunities for the passing game.

Just because we want a physical rushing game doesn’t mean we can’t or won’t pass the football. We work extremely hard to develop the passing game so that our offense can take what the defense gives. If the defense wants to stop the run by gambling and overloading, we take advantage by throwing the football down the field against one-on-one coverage.

Championship football teams are able to run and pass the football effectively. Your philosophy and personality will lead you in developing and implementing your own passing system. The ability to pass the ball effectively will always give a team the chance to win ball games, so work hard to execute the passing game at a very high level. The ability to pass the ball effectively places additional stress on defensive units by forcing them to be sound in the secondary in order to prevent giving up the big passing play.

Passing efficiency is vital even for teams who throw the ball only 10 times a game. The University of Oklahoma threw the ball just 10 times a game while using the wishbone rushing offense, but the great tight end Keith Jackson averaged huge yardage for each reception he made because the defense forgot about him while trying to defend the Sooners’ powerful running game.

Types of Pass Plays

We package our passing offense into four basic areas: timing routes; play action passes; sprint-out passes; and naked, bootleg, and waggle passes. We teach each package of the passing game separately so that every player understands his individual responsibilities within each package. For each passing package, linemen learn their protection rules and the quarterback learns his responsibilities, as do the tight ends and receivers.

Timing routes, including three-step drop, five-step drop, and some seven-step drop passes, utilize timing and synchronization between the quarterback and receiver. Timing routes require a great deal of repetition between quarterback and receiver to develop the timing and execution level needed to beat defenses. A well-executed timing route is very difficult for the defense to stop because the quarterback and the receiver know exactly what the other will do, while the defender must react to the play after the snap. I encourage every offensive system to develop efficient timed passing routes. Examples of timed routes appear later in this chapter.

Play action passes are used to fool the defense. We fake one of our favorite running plays to get the secondary to commit to the run then throw a pass downfield against a confused or out-of-position defense. The play action passing game can be a huge weapon if the offense runs the ball effectively, providing a big-play threat. Defenses that are willing to walk up and overload to stop the run take a big chance of giving up a big play. If the defense chooses to stay back and reduce the risk of the big, play action pass, the running game will be even more effective.

Sprint-out passes allow the offense to stress the defense by rolling the quarterback out of the pocket and placing him in position to run or pass the football. Rolling the quarterback out of the pocket also relieves some of the pressure that defenses can place on the quarterback when he is in the pocket. If you have a quarterback who can throw well on the run, implement some of the sprint-out passing plays presented later in the chapter.

Naked, bootleg, and waggle passes are lumped together in our system because the pass protections are included in the names of the routes. All three passes are hard play action and
involve special offensive line, quarterback, and receiver rules. These built-in, play action passes fool the defense into believing that the offense is running the ball. Also, they allow the quarterback to move out of the pocket to reduce the defensive pressure on the pocket.

Naked tells our offensive line and quarterback that we will fake the running play called and there will be no pass protection on the backside pass rusher. In other words, the quarterback is naked, or on his own, once he reverses field to deliver the ball.

Bootleg is another play action passing scheme that requires one of our guards to pull to lead the quarterback as he completes the play fake, reverses direction, and rolls out to pass the football. Another great way of tricking the defense is to use a solid play action fake, change the quarterback’s direction, and roll out against the grain of the defense.

Waggle is another form of play action pass that involves aggressively turning the offensive line in the direction of the play fake while pulling a backside lineman to the backside to block the remaining defensive lineman. Waggle protection is a very effective way to draw linebackers into the trap of believing that the offense is running the ball when they are actually throwing it.

In our offensive terminology, 80s and 90s are our three-step timing routes and 50s and 60s are our five-step timing routes (table 9.1). The first number in the call tells offensive linemen and the running back the protection; the second number tells receivers what routes to execute. For example, if the quarterback calls, “54,” the 5 tells the offensive line and the running back that they must execute an odd, five-step protection, and 4 tells the number one receiver to run a comeback and the number two receiver to run a flag route. Any adjustments are made simply by tagging additional routes or tagging additional pass protectors such as the tight end or fullback. This system gives the offensive play caller the flexibility to attack virtually any defense he comes across by making simple, yet precise, communications to every player.

Whatever communication system you incorporate, make sure it addresses all 11 players effectively. Offensive linemen don’t need to know what the receivers are doing, and receivers don’t care what the linemen are doing. Make sure the communication is precise and effective.