

# Keys for the Passing Game

*A Systematic Approach*

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*Why does discussion of keys for the passing game always seem to begin and end with the back judge? This article takes a hard look at the topic and concentrates on key assignment for 4- and 5-man crews.*

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## INTRODUCTION

When officials talk about keys in the passing game, the phrase “the back judge keys on the tight end” inevitably comes up. You hear it spoken as if it’s an inviolable rule. Is it always true? And why is it that any discussion of passing game keys always seems to begin and, even more curiously, end with the back judge? Let’s start at the beginning.

Keys should be established using a systematic and fundamental framework for assigning officials to eligible receivers at the snap. This assignment is meant to increase the likelihood that any questionable acts by or against eligible receivers are observed and evaluated so that neither team gains an unfair advantage not intended by the rules.

These keys are initially established pre-snap. They are solely a function of the offensive formation including any pre-snap movement. They are ultimately determined at the snap so that shifts and motion may be dynamically changing our keys up until the moment of the snap. These keys continue in force until eligible receivers have passed the first line of defense or until it is clear that no downfield pass is intended.

A smooth transition from pre-snap keys to downfield coverage is necessary once the eligible receivers clear the first line of defense and it becomes apparent that the offense intends to throw the ball downfield. Once these two things happen, each covering official will need to reorient himself and refocus on new responsibilities.

A “systematic” means of assigning pre-snap keys implies that there is a set of underlying rules or guidelines that ensures that each official on the crew knows exactly what his responsibility is, knows the responsibilities of his crewmates, and guarantees that no two officials are watching the same action while other player interactions proceed unobserved.

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There is no perfect system of keys, and the effectiveness of any particular system is almost always a function of the number of officials on the crew. A four-man crew will have a very simple system of keys, but will in the long run need to accept compromises and sacrifice complete coverage for this simplicity. At the other extreme is the seven-man game where any system of keys will usually be designed so that the back judge, side judge, field judge, head linesman, and line judge are each keying one of the five eligible receivers. However, such a system is significantly more complex with several “if-then” considerations.

In this article, we will present one system that has been shown to be effective for all size crews. We will concentrate, however, on its application to four- and five-man games. It is by no means the only system nor is it the definitive be-all, end-all system. It is just one system that appears to have passed the test of time and offers some measure of validation. If you use a system that is different from this one, you will inevitably find any differences to be fairly minor.

Finally, it concludes with several diagrams showing how the system works within four- and five-man crews of officials for a few offensive formations.

## **BASIC CONCEPTS**

The **strength** of an offensive formation is determined solely by the number of eligible receivers outside the tackles on each side of the formation. Simply, ‘strength’ is declared to the side of the formation with the greater number of eligibles outside the tackle. This definition ignores the number of linemen on each side of the snapper. Therefore, an unbalanced line has no effect in determining the strength of the formation for the purpose of assigning keys. Any formation that has an equal number of eligibles outside the tackles is said to be **Balanced**. For convention’s sake, strength is declared to the LJ’s side of the field when the formation is balanced.

## **GENERAL RULES FOR PRE-SNAP KEYS**

The following general rules govern the assignment of pre-snap keys:

1. As a general rule, in determining pre-snap keys for passing coverage, it does not matter whether an eligible receiver is on or off the line of scrimmage. All that matters is where each receiver is laterally on the field relative to other receivers.
2. The priority for assigning pre-snap keys is as follows:
  - a) Deep officials—Field Judge and Side Judge (ignore for 4- or 5-man games)
  - b) Back Judge (ignore for 4- or 6-man games)
  - c) Wing Officials

This means that the deep officials select their keys first, followed by the back judge. Only afterwards do the wing officials select their keys.

3. No official should key the same receiver as an official ahead of him in the priority scheme. For example, the back judge should not key on the same player as one of the deep officials (7-man game); the wing officials should not key on the same receiver as the back judge (5-or 7-man game) or the deep officials (6-, or 7-man game).
4. By convention, if eligible receivers are in tandem (i.e. one behind the other), the one nearest to the line of scrimmage is considered to be the widest.

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5. In a 5- or 7-man game, if there is a balanced formation, the back judge declares strength to the line judge's side of the field.
  6. Any formation that is extremely unusual or new requires that the crew of officials verbally or visually communicate and confirm keys with each other.

### **SPECIFIC RULES FOR INITIAL KEYS (4- and 5-man games)**

**4-man game** – As mentioned earlier, the 4-man game has a very simple framework for assigning keys, but as a result of that simplicity, each official has a wider scope of responsibility that will probably compromise the overall effectiveness of the system. The fewer the number of officials on the crew, the greater the sacrifices in coverage we're forced to accept.

1. The wing officials must key all eligible receivers on their side of the field. This becomes particularly challenging with a team that runs out of a trips formation frequently.
2. When there is more than one eligible receiver on a particular side, the wing's primary key will be the receiver on the line (tight end or split end). Any slot back, flanker, or motion man becomes a secondary key.

**5-man game** - The addition of a back judge in the 5-man game provides not only better downfield coverage on kicks and passes, but also affords us an opportunity to better establish keys toward the middle of a spread formation.

1. Except for a trips formation, the back judge always keys on the inside eligible receiver on the strength side of the formation. In most cases this will be a tight end or a slot/wing back.
2. The wing officials will always key on the widest eligible receiver in the offensive formation on their side of the field unless the back judge is keying on him. This will normally be a split end or a flanker, but could be a tight end in some formations.
3. If the formation is balanced and there is only one eligible receiver to each side (e.g. a "full house," "Power-I," or "wish-bone"), the back judge keys the eligible receiver on the line judge's side of the field. The LJ takes the first back out of the backfield to his/her side of the field.
4. For trips, the back judge keys the two outside receivers to the trips side of the formation. The wing man on that side looks through to the inside receiver. It's not unusual for this inside receiver to stay home and block, so it is much more natural for the wing to focus his immediate post-snap attention on that receiver.
5. A player who goes in motion may or may not change the strength of the formation. That in turn may require the back judge to follow his key to the opposite side of the field, or it may require him and the strength-side wing to re-key as necessary. Regardless, when motion occurs, all

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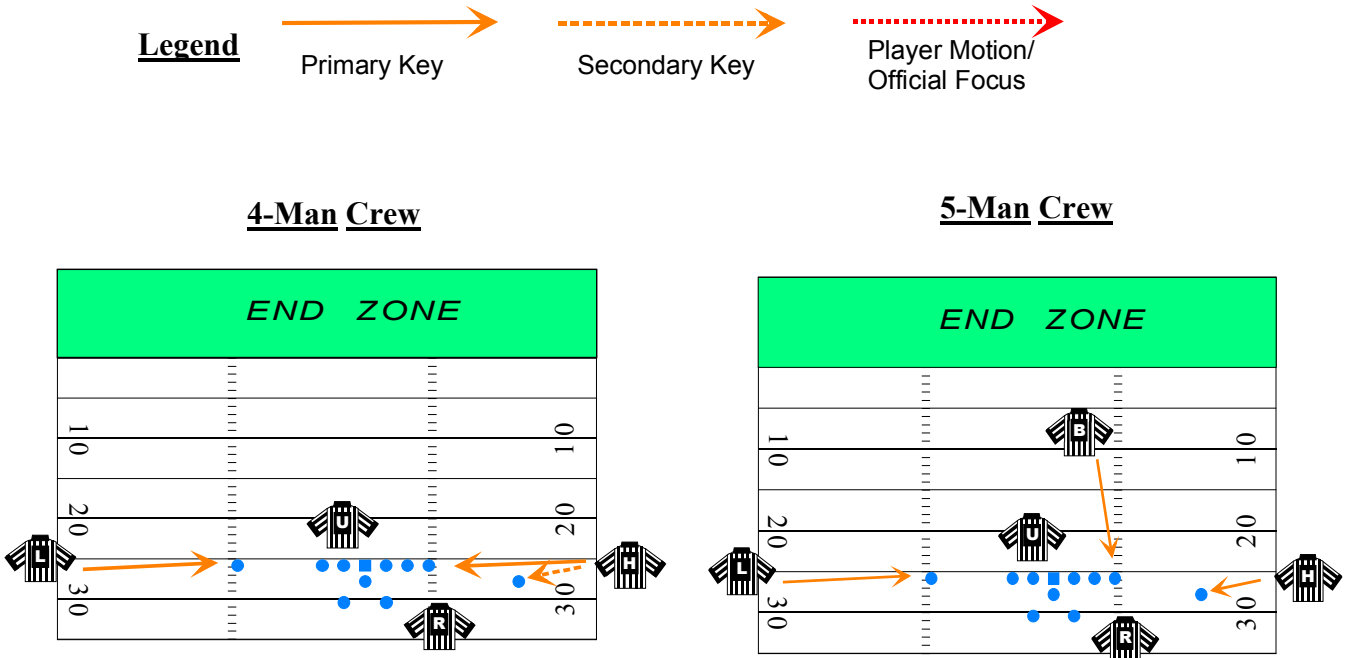
officials will need to be alert to the formation as it exists at the snap. However, if any motion serves to balance the strength of the formation, the original strong side remains the strong side.

## **IN CLOSING**

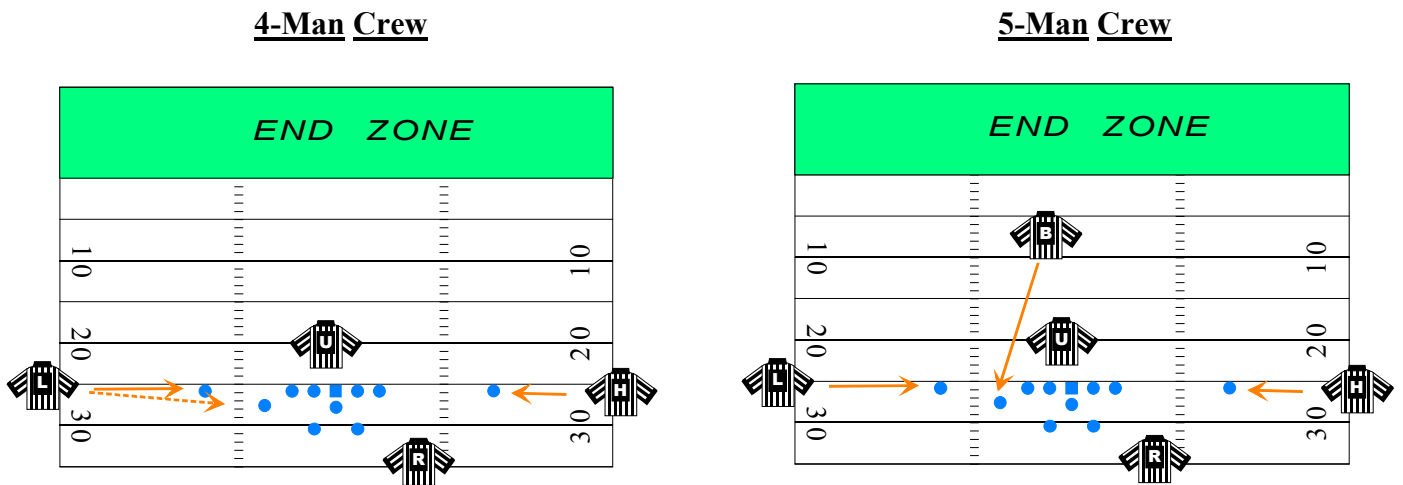
No system of keys is infallible, and no system can guarantee complete coverage of all receivers regardless of formation. However, any system can be made into a workable program provided all officials subscribe to it and demonstrate full understanding of the system. Like all other elements of officiating, practice and game experience are crucial to proper execution. And, as you might expect, communication is the one critical success criterion in any system of passing game keys. If you currently use no formal system for assigning keys, give this one a try at your next scrimmage. See if it works for you. But by all means, don't let the discussion of keys end with the back judge!

**SOME EXAMPLES**

Here are some standard formations along with the key assignments for 4- and 5-man crews of officials.



**Figure 1 – Pro Set – Strong formation to HL's side.**



**Figure 2 – Slot Formation – Strength to L's side**



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Bob Masucci is an information technology contracts manager at AT&T in Piscataway, NJ. Residing in Clinton Township, NJ, Bob is a 26-year football official. During those years, he has officiated in 24 state playoff games, including 11 state finals. As an active member of the North Jersey chapter of the New Jersey Football Officials Association, he has participated in the training and mentoring of new officials and has independently developed a wide array training materials.

