The Passing Situation Enigma

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Y. A. Tittle cannot complete passes with men hanging on his arm. Johnny Unitas cannot complete passes with men hanging on his arm. How can anyone expect Walter McReynolds to complete passes under the same conditions? Or Ronnie Waldo, for that matter.

Anyone can gripe at the pass blocking. Bad pass blocking allows an overabundance of unhappy company into the backfield, much to the embarrassment of a quarterback hopefully endeavoring to throw the ball at one of his own men. Defensive harassment causes bad passes, which fall into two categories: incompletions and interceptions. Rice sampled both last Saturday against Stanford, falling 34-7.

Lest we degenerate into a lengthy indictment of bad pass blocking, we must enumerate some causes of leaky lines. The first is obvious: we might have a bad line. But the line opened up holes for an average of about five yards per rush, not counting quarterbacks thrown for losses. So it can't be too bad.

Third And Three—Time To Pass

Another cause for faulty pass protection is more subtle. We must first introduce the concept of the “passing situation.” Everyone knows that a passing situation is third down and more than a yard to go for a first down. At least that's what Rice followers are led to believe. Third and three and we pass. Simple.

Has it ever occurred to anybody that the Defense might also be familiar with the concept of the passing situation? It may have been a subconscious urge to rush when Rice had a third down, but the Stanford defense always seemed to rush at the right time. Rice’s passing situations coincided perfectly with Stanford’s pass-rush situations. Green Bay's offensive line can’t stop a blitz. Neither can Rice’s. So poor protection for the quarterback can’t always be blamed on pass blocking.

We won’t suggest that Rice quit passing on third down without offering some alternatives. A punt is a weak alternative, but it’s better than an interception. Nevertheless, third down punts have never been overly popular with Owl fans. So that leaves running plays as a choice on “passing situations.”

Seven Tries, Six Misses

Using the Stanford game as an example, we can defend the practice of eliminating the passing situation concept from Rice’s offensive philosophy. A good passer will complete about 50% of his passes in any given game. Before the Stanford contest was out of reach, when the score was 17-7 with 11 minutes left in the game, Rice had tried 16 passes. Seven were on third down; of these, one was completed; two were intercepted, one for a touchdown; two were almost intercepted; and two were blocked.

Of the remaining seven passes, after the Owls had no other choice but to throw, four were completed for a total of 15 yards; two were intercepted; and one was nearly picked off. When Rice was not in a “passing situation,” only one throw was intercepted, and one of these a game shouldn’t kill anybody.

On the other side of the ledger, while Rice had decent field position, over half of the rushing plays gained five yards or more, which would have picked up first downs in nearly all of the “passing situations.” It’s obvious that Rice’s passing game fails apart when the defense expects—and gleefully awaits—a pass.

Unimaginative Stereotypes

And it’s equally obvious that the Owls can thank a lucky star that they still have time to correct an unimaginative and all too stereotyped system of play selection before the conference games start. The film of the Stanford game showed that Rice did not play 24 points worse than the Indians. If the Owls can eliminate bad breaks which they bring on themselves, they are still conference contenders. But this has to be proved seven consecutive Saturdays beginning this week against SMU in Dallas.

The Mustangs have been crippled by injuries and ineligibility to key players. But they have not laid down against any of their opponents. They’ve played Florida and Ohio State virtually without a first team, and haven’t been humiliated yet.

Rice should be able to whip SMU handily, but they won’t if the Mustangs’ stunting defense is given an easy afternoon guessing Rice’s plays.

Pass And Run Not Irreconcilable

The remedy to this problem is a varied offense. Passing and running are not irreconcilable. Rice’s running attack is excellent, and McReynolds is a skillful passer. His play calling has been imaginative in the past, so he’s been proved to be an outstanding quarterback on occasion. One example is the Baylor game last year. McReynolds mixed his plays well enough to outgain Don Trull, Larry Elkins, and the rest of the Bears by over 70 yards. This total could have been astronomical if five straight fumbles hadn't made a shambles of the Rice attack, causing a 21-12 loss.

But McReynolds has to be able to keep the defense off balance every week until the end of the season, and this will take all the maturity a senior should have. He has to shake the stigma of “inconsistent” which has followed him since his freshman year.

The Owls’ defense is already great, and there’s no reason why they shouldn’t have a great offense to go with it. But first they must completely abandon the “passing situation” concept which has hampered them all season long. If they do, the student body and the Houston following will be treated to the best season in recent years, as well as to a team which should receive a major post-season bowl battle.

If not, they will witness one of the major disappointments of the 1964 season.

A well known national magazine has predicted that Rice will win the Southwest Conference championship with an 8-2 record. They’ve already lost their two.