

BLITZ!

By SCOTT M. JOHNSON
Originally published in the Everett Herald

KIRKLAND -- Darrin Smith hates to think. He knows it's an important part of being an NFL player, but the Seattle Sea-hawks linebacker would much rather just clear his head, get his legs going and try to knock an opposing quarterback silly.

"If it's a blitz, I can just go," Smith said. "I think every linebacker loves that."

Smith is part of a new breed of NFL linebacker. Whereas the position used to require size and strength, today's professional linebackers are built for speed. After all, what better way to get around an opposing lineman when blitzing the quarterback?

"One of the biggest things you need against offensive linemen is quickness and speed," said Smith, who is just 6-foot-1, 230 pounds, but has been clocked in under 4.5 seconds in the 40-yard dash. "If you sit there and wrestle with them, I think they'd love that because they're so strong themselves."

In a league filled with speedy linebackers, defensive coordinators are turning to the blitz more than ever. Designed to send safeties, linebackers or even cornerbacks after the quarterback, the blitz has become as important to football as the forward pass.

"There's more of it than when I first came into the league," said Seahawks linebackers coach Jim Lind, who has been in the NFL since 1992. "... Right now, defenses are doing it and it's successful. At a certain point, when the offenses figure it out, it's like, 'What do we have to do next?'"

The rise in blitzes league-wide isn't solely based on the changing speed of linebackers. Many defensive types see it as the best way to slow down a quick-passing offense like that of the Seahawks and an effective method of confusing an inexperienced quarterback -- of which there are many this season.

There has also been an evolution of the blitz that makes it less of a gamble. Players are coming from all angles, leaving quarterbacks a split second to make their read. They are also blitzing into gaps in the offensive line, thereby occupying blockers.

"It's gone from going after the quarterback at all costs to filling every gap, no matter what play they call," Seahawks linebacker Chad Brown said.

What was once a play designed to put an extra line-backer or two into the opposing quarterback's face has evolved into an art form in the NFL. Now there are blitzes designed to stop the run and others called just to confuse the offense.

One such blitz is called the zone blitz. Brought into fruition by the Pittsburgh Steelers under defensive coordinator Dom Capers earlier this decade, the zone blitz sends one or more linebackers after the quarterback while defensive linemen drop into pass coverage. The zone blitz has been seen by some as the most effective way of stopping the so-called West Coast offense, a variation of which is run by at least seven NFL teams. By dropping linemen into coverage, slant patterns over the middle are less effective.

"This is definitely a zone blitzing era," said San Diego Chargers linebacker Junior Seau. "And for one reason: we need to get to the quarterback. If you don't get to the quarterback, if you don't disrupt his vision or his timing, you can be hurt."

The Seahawks' offense has seen its share of blitzing this season for two main reasons. First, Seattle is one of the teams that uses a West Coast-style offense. Second, opponents are trying to attack the inexperienced parts of the Seahawks' offense -- namely right tackle Grant Williams and quarterback Jon Kitna.

"A lot of teams will do that against me because I'm a young quarterback," Kitna said. "And that's fine with me. I accept that challenge. That's been the overlying theme for our first four games: teams put a lot of guys in the box, they say, 'Let's see you throw it.' We've done a good job of that so far, and we're going to have to continue to do it."

From a defensive perspective, the blitz is a gamble because less players are in pass coverage. An experienced offense, perhaps smelling blitz, can throw over the top for a big play. A running back or receiver can also break a screen pass for a long gain against the blitz.

"We can play real sound, good defense without blitzing," Seahawks coach Mike Holmgren said. "If you can do that, you're much better off. You are *much* better off."

Until offenses adapt, the blitz will remain a major part of defensive schemes. Some offensive coordinators -- New England and St. Louis, for example -- have designed offenses based on throwing the ball down-field so that blitzes will be less effective. For others, like Kitna, the blitz will have to be combatted in a more trial-and-error basis.

"This is a blitzing league now," Kitna said. "They blitz Dan Marino to heck, so I can certainly expect that they'll blitz me. That's the nature of the league right now."

"... Everything in this league is cyclical. That's the way they want to try and pressure the offense and make the offense make mistakes. I don't know why teams are blitzing more, but that's the trend."

A trend that makes players like Darrin Smith very, very happy.

RED DOG!

The blitz used to be an unconventional defensive tactic in its own right. Now it has many different versions throughout the NFL:

Basic blitz

Usually involves one or more linebackers or safeties assigned to pressure the quarterback and engage blockers

Brought into prominence: In the late 1940s by Chicago Bears defensive line coach Heartley "Hunk" Anderson and taken to another level by New York Jets defensive assistant Buddy Ryan in 1969

Corner blitz

A defensive back attacks from the outside while a safety or linebacker rotates to cover the assigned receiver

Brought into prominence: In early 1960s by St. Louis Cardinals, who used safety Larry Wilson to rush quarterback

Run blitz

Designed to create havoc in the backfield while concentrating on the run; based on filling gaps between offensive linemen

Brought into prominence: Its origin unknown, the run blitz has been used in the Chicago Bears' 46 defense of 1985 and today by the Tennessee Titans

Zone blitz

While linebackers/safeties pressure quarterback, defensive linemen drop into coverage

Brought into prominence: In 1992, when defensive coordinator Dom Capers and head coach Bill Cowher took over in Pittsburgh