



THE EVOLUTION OF TIM TEBOW

The Natural, National Champion, Heisman Winner, NFL Quarterback?

by Chris Brown

You tend to remember the exact circumstances of your major firsts: the first time you heard your favorite band, looked into your future beloved's eyes, got your first real compliment from your boss, or, of course, that other famous "first" that need not be mentioned.

Among these, I vividly remember the first time I saw Tim Tebow play. Before the college football season begins in earnest, ESPN enjoys cruelly teasing desperate football fans by airing a few high school games. In late August 2005, ESPN's choice was a battle between Nease High School in Florida and Hoover High School, from Alabama.

My impression of Tebow was that he had the physical size and arm strength to make a nice *drop-back passer*, that he scrambled and ran a lot of designed quarterback runs that he'd have to grow out of in college, and that he had some arm strength but would have to work on his reads and accuracy, as all quarterbacks do.

Well, let's just say I slightly underestimated Mr. Tebow. Roughly four years later, after that game between Nease and Hoover, a lot has changed. Tebow has become quite possibly the greatest college player of a generation. Of course, he continues to have doubters, those that belittle his success in Meyer's spread offense, not to mention so-called draft gurus who say that Tebow will be taken in the third round of the NFL Draft... *as an H-back or tight end*. Putting aside that ridiculous bit of buncombe (I am convinced he will be an NFL quarterback of some sort one day), Tebow's narrative involves a great deal of growth and development: The kid has come a long way.

PROLOGUE: MEYER'S OFFENSE AND CHRIS LEAK

Although Urban Meyer's offense utilizes multiple receivers and has always featured a solid passing game, the entire point

of it is to get into the shotgun and use the quarterback as a run threat to change the game's arithmetic. Football math is quite straightforward: There are 11 players on each side, so each player on offense should have a defensive counterpart. Most importantly, even if the offense could block with 10 guys, one defender would remain unblocked—the ball carrier's defensive counterpart.

Now, at least since the rise of the "Tee" (the under center, drop-back-focused quarterback), the defensive counterpart for the quarterback has typically been a deep free safety. When a quarterback like Dan Marino or Peyton Manning hands the ball off, he is done, he just watches the runner. As a result, his counterpart, the deep free safety, just stays back to ensure that what looks like a run isn't actually a play-action pass. That is all well and good, but the problem is that there is another unblocked defender, this time located far closer to the line of scrimmage: the running back's defensive counterpart. Thus, the offense goes to great lengths to make this defender as irrelevant as possible without actually blocking him. Most typically, they block everyone to the side the run is going to, and hope he can't chase the play down.

But, from a run game perspective, the quarterback need not be entirely useless. In the NFL and over the past couple of decades in college football, some quarterbacks—like Steve Young or John Elway—have tremendously helped their ground attacks by running bootlegs, thus influencing that backside defender (Diagram 1). The offense might only call the bootleg a few times a game, but an athletic enough quarterback could make that defender "stay home." Obviously, however, this is an imperfect solution to the problem.

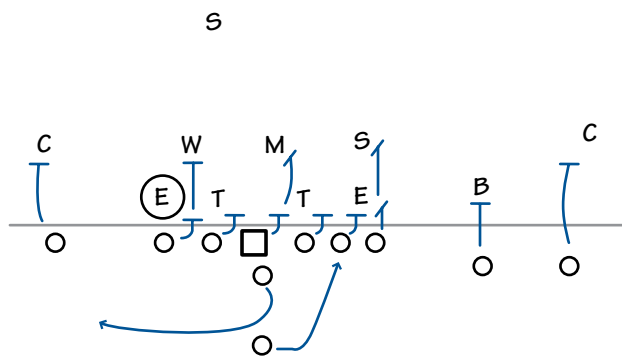


Diagram 1

The other way to recapture a numerical advantage—far more potent for the run game—was to make the quarterback a constant threat to run and make fakes. And the offenses that were the very best at this were option teams, like Nebraska in their heyday. The option had several advantages for the offense. One, the quarterback became a true run threat—rather than a Dan Marino-esque statue—and therefore the defense

had to account for him and the offense gained another "blocker." Second, the nature of its blocking was improved because the offense could "block" a guy by optioning away from him. Instead of asking a fullback to handle a defensive end he might not have been able to, the quarterback and running back could make him wrong, every time. And finally, there is little that influences the defense more than faking, and the best kind of faking is not a fake at all: it is a read. But option football is time intensive, and few option teams could field passing games commensurate with their running prowess. For whatever reason, their popularity waned, and offenses seemed content to give up their numerical advantage to the defense.

Enter the shotgun spread, the zone-read, and Meyer and Co.'s various tricks. Meyer didn't invent his offense, first implemented at Bowling Green, from whole cloth: He learned it from Rich Rodriguez, Randy Walker, and Kevin Wilson of Northwestern (Wilson is now the offensive coordinator for the Oklahoma Sooners), Scott Linehan then of Louisville (now offensive coordinator for the Detroit Lions), and others. But, core to his offense, going all the way back to Bowling Green and Utah, was the meshing of the shotgun spread idea with the understanding that a shotgun quarterback who is a threat to run and make fakes (i.e. reads) seriously distorts the defense. There are games the defense can play, but even the zone-read—the lowest and most basic "spread offense" play—is like a bootleg on steroids. One of the front defenders, usually the backside defensive end, *must* account for the quarterback, lest they give up a big run. This opens up the run for the running back and makes the deep safety the running back's new defensive counterpart (Diagram 2).

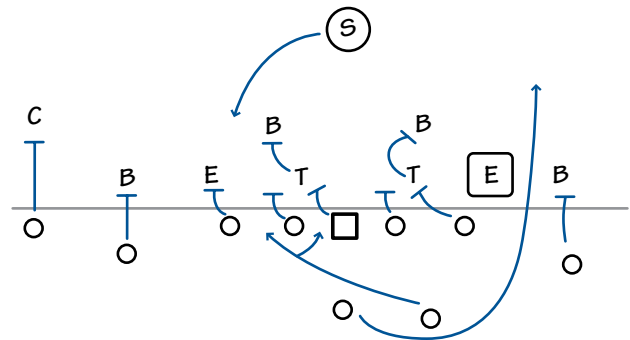


Diagram 2

The upshot of all this is that Meyer's offense—particularly the running game—is really predicated on having a quarterback who is a threat to run the ball. That doesn't mean that the offense only works with Pat White or Vince Young, the key word is "threat." In 2004, when Meyer's Utah Utes went undefeated, his team was ranked third in the country in both total yards and scoring offense, yet his quarterback, Alex Smith, was ranked third on the team in rushing (631 yards). Most

importantly, though, he was a threat: *Including* sacks, he averaged 4.7 yards a carry.

The Florida faithful know where I'm going with this. In 2005, Meyer's first season in Gainesville, his offense was not bad, but it was not spectacular: 59th in the country in scoring and 61st in total offense. And, while nothing was perfectly sharp, it is easy to find the biggest drop-off from Meyer's teams before and since: the running game.

His 2004 Utah squad totaled 2,833 yards rushing, and this past season's national champion Gators compiled 3,236. But, Meyer's first season with the Gators, in 2005? A mere 1,761 yards. That total is almost half of what last season's Gators did and represents a nearly 38% drop from Meyer's previous season. And, it is easy to find the central issue: In 2005, Chris Leak totaled 81 yards rushing on the season, for an average of 0.8 yards per rush. Again, Alex Smith had managed a respectable 631 yards for 4.7 yards a carry the year before. (In 2007, Tebow totaled 895 yards at 4.3 yards a clip.)

Meyer's staff did some soul searching to try to remedy the issue (Meyer cried more than once that season), but in the end there were "fit" issues for Leak in Meyer's offense, and so the arithmetic problems remained. Thus, there was a void for a quarterback with some wheels. Like much else in football, the ultimate solution would have to come in the form of personnel, not schemes: Meyer needed a quarterback who could run as well as Alex Smith. He got one even better.

TEBOW'S FRESHMAN YEAR: THE NATURAL

Tebow's freshman year was no doubt something of a blur for him. He performed well and often in many games, and became something of a fan favorite, but the kid was green, and was essentially out there on raw talent. Yet that raw talent brought a new (or more accurately, old) dimension to Meyer's offense: the quarterback as run threat. Leak was still the far superior passer, and, contrary to what some may have thought, a complete transition to Tebow would likely have produced far more headaches and losses than it would have been worth. But it is further unlikely that Florida would have won the national championship in 2006 without him.

Tebow's final rushing total for the year was 469 yards, at 5.3 yards per carry, which seems small until you realize that Leak had 30 yards rushing. Most of Tebow's passing yards came either in garbage time or as a novelty, often as a surprise in the same way that a pass by Darren

McFadden or Ronnie Brown out of the Wildcat would be in the NFL. This is not to say that all Tebow's passing was gimmicky, just that he was young and Meyer was content to use his young talent effectively without overloading him.

And Tebow's effect on the rest of the offense (along with another year in Meyer's system) was in the results: As a team, the Gators threw for nearly 600 more and ran for 500 more yards than they had the previous year. But, aside from his bruising rushing style, the jump-pass, and the national title, Tebow's legend began to germinate and grow. Despite losing a lot of talent off the 2006 team, expectations would be great for the Gators going forward for one single reason: Tim.

SOPHOMORE YEAR: THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES

Tebow's 2007 season was legendary. There is little way to describe in words what it was like to watch a sophomore throw for over 30 touchdowns and 3,200 yards and rush for another 23 touchdowns and 895 yards on his way to the Heisman Trophy. And what made it all even more fascinating was the manner in which he did it: always with class (though only sometimes with grace—Tebow's a bruiser), and always with great heart. It just wasn't the way things were supposed to work. Some kid was not supposed to just waltz into the SEC and single-handedly take it over.

But that was the problem—in 2007, not everything was so rosy. The Gators lost four games that season—that's Ron



The Natural, dragging tacklers in year one.

Zook stuff—and despite all his wonderful plays, Tebow as a sophomore threw inopportune interceptions and failed to always make the correct reads on some of Urban Meyer’s more Rube-Goldberg spread option plays with their variances and moving parts. And for Florida that season, the problems and successes were tied up: Florida was, to a large extent, the Tebow show, and he didn’t get enough help. Tebow had as many carries as the next three rushers—Percy Harvin, Kestahn Moore, and Brandon James—combined.

This Tebow-centrism manifested itself in the strategies that Meyer employed. Sometimes Meyer, along with his then-offensive coordinator Dan Mullen (now head coach of Mississippi State) did employ some kind of faking, zone-read, or option scheme using Tebow and another player, such as Moore or Harvin, as he made popular at Utah. However, more often the best they came up with was to line up with no backs in the backfield, with Tebow in the shotgun, and play the numbers game that way. Again, this had some benefits for Tebow—primarily simplifying his reads—but the strategy was largely borne out of a lack of backfield threats.

This strategy nevertheless worked because Tebow still presented the run threat that Leak did not, so the free safety’s bind—to cover the quarterback run or quarterback pass—remained. If the offensive line did its job, then Tebow could run the ball and the only man he really had to worry about was the safety, who was usually several yards downfield, and, by the end of the year, safeties were not too fond of Tim (Diagram 3).

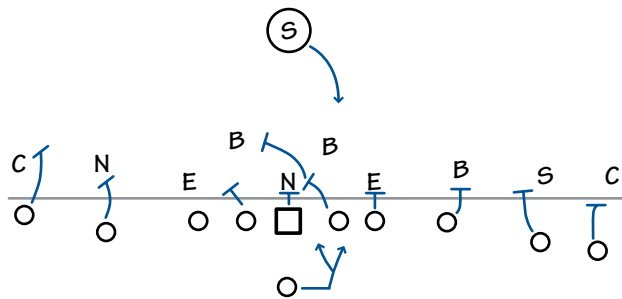


Diagram 3

To keep the numbers manageable, Meyer and Mullen always kept as a safety valve one of their “constraint” or “keep ’em honest” plays. If the defense tried to leave one the receivers uncovered to bring an extra guy inside to tackle Tebow, then they could always go to a bubble screen to an inside receiver (Diagram 4).

In many ways, for stretches of the season this alone was the strategy: quick outside passes if the defense cheated in and inside runs by Tebow himself. And this is also precisely the kind of run game that Meyer prefers: simple, even simplistic, but built squarely on the idea of numbers in the box. If you’ll

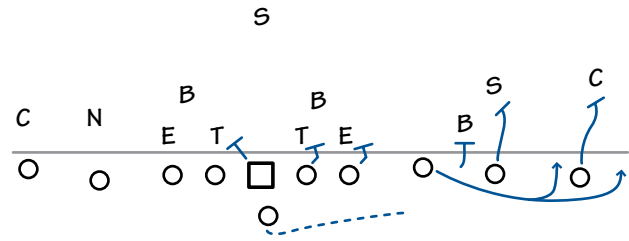


Diagram 4

notice, if the defense put two safeties back in some kind of Cover-2 scheme, and assuming Florida forced the defense to put a man over each of its receivers, then that would leave a mere *four* defenders to deal with the Gators’ five linemen. For that reason, Tebow never saw a lot of Cover-2. Thus, with some extra guys up front and almost no faking threat—other than what Meyer could accomplish motioning receivers like Harvin around—Tebow had to be able to throw a bit. And he did.

The most common concepts from this no-back look were “option routes” by inside receivers while the others pushed deep. Option routes are what they sound like: The receiver runs to a predetermined depth but can then break inside or outside, or settle between defenders against a zone. It’s backyard football, put within a sophisticated college framework. Meyer has long employed these routes because he learned much of his passing game from visiting Joe Tiller at Purdue and Scott Linehan when he was at Louisville. (Remember, before Bowling Green, Meyer had worked for Lou Holtz and Bob Davie, who are known for many things, but not for being passing game gurus). While at Notre Dame, Meyer began visiting Louisville and some other places because the Irish’s third down offense was so bad, particularly against the blitz. His reward was to get to call the plays—on third-and-long, lucky him. Nevertheless, Meyer later revisited his old contacts and he, Dan Mullen, Mike Sanford, and others with him compiled it into his own system.

Besides their general effectiveness, the other reason Meyer has always used a lot of option routes at Florida is because the SEC is a man-to-man league. Sure, all the teams run some zone, but if you can’t beat man, you can’t throw the ball or beat the blitz. And why do teams in the SEC, from LSU to Saban’s Crimson Tide, play so much man coverage? For the same reason that Florida’s Charlie Strong uses it: It is easier to get extra guys into the box to stop the run when you can confidently put your secondary one-on-one on the outside.

So when SEC defenses cramped the box *and* covered down on all of Meyer’s receivers, you typically saw the option route schemes in (Diagram 5).

Moreover, the other benefit to Meyer and his young quarterback is that the read is actually quite simple: If it is man, look at the guy until he gets open. It is the receiver

with the freedom to move, and it is his job to be uncoverable. Now, that doesn't mean that the quarterback can stare down the receiver, but neither is the read so complicated that he has to swing his eyes from side to side. Tebow was able to drop back, check to see if he could steal a big play on the outside, and then thread the ball into a receiver breaking away from a defender, whichever way enabled him to get open.

When defenses went zone, however, not too much changed, though the option routes no longer became the money throw. Instead, the coaches called in something equally similar, such as the "follow" concept shown to the two receiver side in the diagram. The outside receiver just ran in on kind of a lazy shallow cross while the inside receiver ran about a 12-yard in route. Usually, the inside receiver opened things up for the outside guy, but if the defense jumped the lazy shallow, then the inside receiver would be wide open. On the other side, he might run a "smash" pattern, which used a similar "bait short, throw behind him" strategy. The outside receiver would run to five yards and turn around, while the slot ran a corner route. The inside receiver, often Cornelius Ingram, would run some kind of deep divide route trying to split the safeties and threaten deep. Tebow would peek at that player early and then work one of the simple combinations to either side. It was here

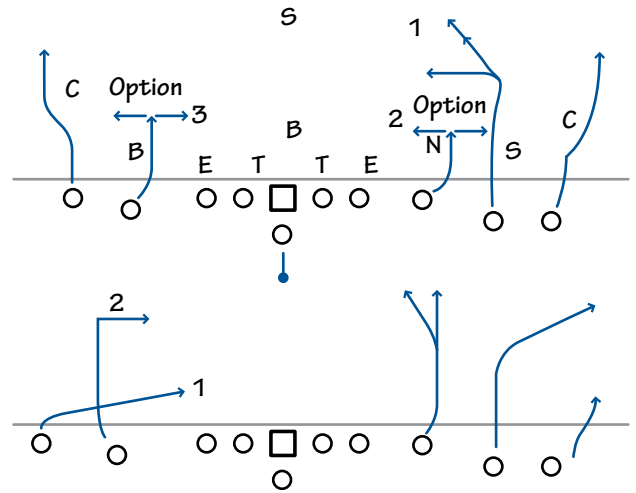


Diagram 5

that he continued to grow and develop throughout the season.

And what a season. In game after game, Tebow rose the occasion and carried the Gators. But, after Florida's disappointing bowl loss to Michigan, it became apparent that Tebow couldn't do it all alone. If, in 2008, he matched his sophomore year's statistical heights, then it was unlikely that the team would win a national title, or even the SEC. In other words, as wonderful as Tebow was in 2007, the team needed to improve.



The veer in action: Tim Tebow and Percy Harvin in 2008.

JUNIOR YEAR: TRUE GRIT

Going into 2008, the questions were not so much about whether Tebow could succeed as a full-time quarterback rather than prototype Wildcat offense and jump-pass novelty—those questions had been answered—but whether the team would be good enough. Who else on offense would emerge? How would the young defense perform? Other than a poor showing against Ole Miss, the defense stepped up (especially in the national title game), but early on, at least, the offense floundered a bit. Yet, some of that was Meyer being committed to getting better. Against the early part of the schedule, Hawaii and the like, falling back on old ways with Tebow doing it all would have been tempting, but would not have ultimately made the Gators a better team.

One of the points of emphasis for Florida's run game, aside from increased use of the power and counter game with Percy Harvin, was increased use of the "veer," as adapted to the shotgun spread.

The veer is a term used for a version of the old traditional triple-option. In the true triple, rather than just having the quarterback and a pitch back, the offense gained a huge numerical advantage at the point of attack with a specific strategy: Not blocking the most

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footwork, so it is often easier for quarterbacks. I also think that footwork is a learnable skill, and since Tebow does not lack for discipline and work ethic, anything he is asked to do at the next level he will work to master. But there is a kernel of truth to the fact that throws in the NFL are incredibly small. And, although much is made about “quick delivery” and all that, the NFL isn’t really about just putting a quarterback back there and expecting him to just “feel” timing. Yes, that is part of the game too, but Bill Walsh proved that the best way to get timing is to practice it, and the best way to practice it is to calibrate receiver and quarterback steps—with drops. Brees, a guy who always had great timing but didn’t have to learn the footwork that goes with it, has developed into one of the game’s best “rhythm passers.” His drops and footwork are excellent, he is always in position to throw, and, as a result, his timing and accuracy allow him to terrorize defenses.

This is an ideal for Tebow, but one that he must work at. He’s proven to be fairly accurate, and by the time he graduates he will have over 9,000 and maybe even 10,000 career passing yards—he will be an NFL quarterback. But he still has a tendency to stand in the pocket and just wait out receivers, stare them down a bit, and even throw it a little late. The point is not that these are fatal flaws, but that they are correctible. The other point is that he hasn’t been asked to throw many rhythm routes at Florida.

What Loeffler brings is a merging of the techniques and the concepts to improve Florida’s passing game—to make it more timing based—and to teach the quarterbacks how to do that. To illustrate, two concepts that have been in Florida’s arsenal that Loeffler has long been around and will emphasize are known as “stick” and “spacing.” Both are three-step “rhythm throws.”

“Stick” is a three-man route: the outside guy runs a “go” or vertical route; the inside slot runs a quick out (or sometimes a bubble route); and the innermost slot or tight-end runs the “stick route.” The actual stick has the receiver run to five or six yards and turn to the outside, though he wants to come back towards the line slightly. The idea is to put the flat defender (often a nickel defender or outside linebacker) into a bind—he either has to cover the quick out or the stick receiver in the zone spot. On the back side, the single receiver runs a quick out—the quarterback will throw that route if the cornerback plays soft and wants to give up the easy five. What makes the play work is how quickly it all happens. The quarterback takes his drop: one, two, three, *throw*. His read must be complete by the time his back foot hits on his third step. The receivers will run their routes, but the ball should be in the air before they turn around. When done correctly, the play is like stealing. And the best part is that the throw itself is so easy. It’s right in front of the quarterback (Diagram 7).

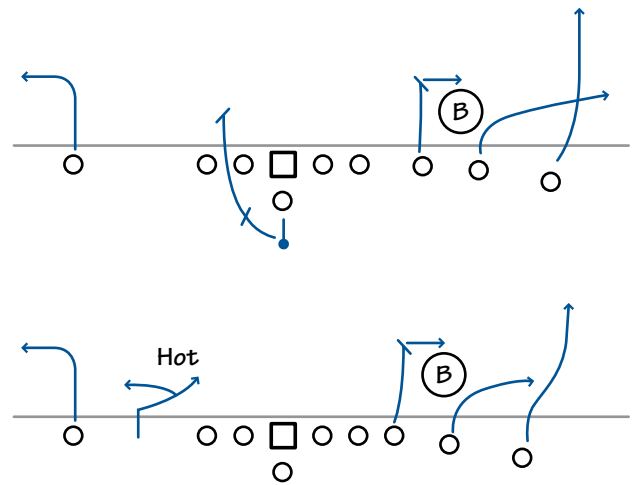


Diagram 7

“Spacing” is somewhat similar. The receivers condense their splits (or take very inside releases). The innermost slot runs to the flat, to a depth of just a yard or two. The middle slot runs a “hook” at about five yards, just inside the inside linebackers. His job is to control those defenders. The outside receiver will push to about six yards and just turn around, though he may shuffle slightly to find a passing lane that the quarterback can throw the ball into. The idea is that the receiver who runs to the flat and the receiver who runs the hook part the seas for the outside receiver, who settles right in the void and faces the quarterback for an easy completion. Well, easy if the quarterback has great timing. That window opens and closes quickly; this route, too, is one, two, three, throw. Somewhat complicating matters is that if the spacing receiver is covered, the quarterback has to find someone else to throw to. And those reads must be done instantaneously too (Diagram 8).

Loeffler will emphasize these routes to not just attack SEC defenses but as a mechanism to help Tebow become a

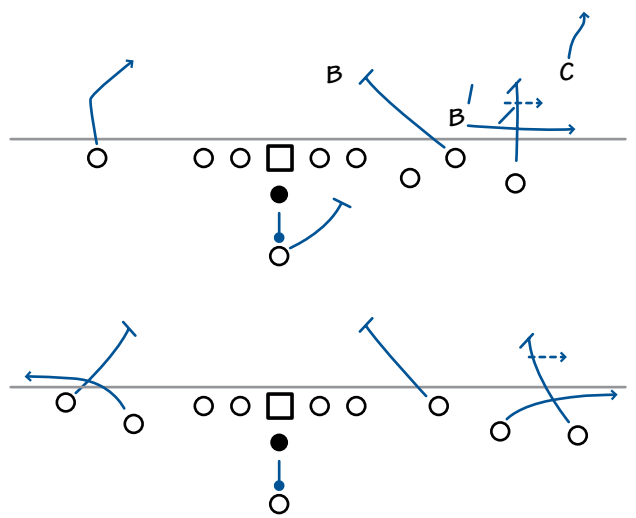


Diagram 8



Tim Tebow struts into the future.

truly great *passer*, his final step. Indeed, Brees throws these routes multiple times every game. If Tebow can master them, he'll be well on his way to NFL quarterback, but more importantly, to three-time national champion.

A final thought on Loeffler's effect on Meyer's offense, specifically regarding the entire under center-shotgun debate, i.e. that "shotgun quarterbacks" can't make it in the NFL. I find this argument garbage, though it is true that quarterbacks need to develop a different, and broader, range of skills for when they get to the NFL. But, I do not expect Loeffler's influence, or Meyer's desire to help his quarterback, to lead anyone to junk what Florida has done the past several seasons. As I've repeatedly emphasized, the quarterback in the gun is central to the running game. Just having Loeffler gives Meyer and Tebow great spin heading into next year's NFL Draft: "Sure, we still spent most of our time in the shotgun, but Tebow *worked on it* with Loeffler." And that's it. When scouts asked Texas Tech's Mike Leach about his shotgun quarterback, Leach bristled and told them they didn't know what they were talking about. Now Meyer will be able to plausibly, if not entirely honestly, say that Tebow has gotten all kinds of practice under center, even if the Florida offense changes little. Come NFL Draft season, rumors often matter as much as reality.



Tebow's story is intertwined with the story of how Meyer's offense has evolved from its early days where he was drawing plays in the dirt at Bowling Green and Utah. And

it has found its fullest manifestation as operated by Tebow. Indeed, this symbiotic relationship between triggerman and offensive guru to produce records and titles bears great similarity to Steve Spurrier and Danny Wuerffel: the Ol' Ball Coach had honed an attack for years, but for one period, it was the right coach, the right time, and the right quarterback. So it is with Tebow and Meyer. Time will tell if Meyer's creation will decline after Tebow departs, as Spurrier's slowly did. But this season, Meyer has a final run with his guy.

To reevaluate my cursory analysis of Tebow from that ESPN broadcast four years ago, I re-watched the game between Nease and Hoover. (Yes I taped it. VHS. Don't ask.) Hindsight is 20-20, of course, but I was struck by the fact that my earlier analysis seemed quite a bit, well, *off*. My earlier impression had been that Tebow was a bit inaccurate, maybe even wild with his throws. And, early on, there was some truth to that: the first couple of series he missed a few passes high or wide. Yet after that his coaching staff called some conservative passes for him, and he went on to throw for roughly 400 yards in defeat, including several thread-the-needle routes over the middle and to the sidelines, and some beautiful Wuerffel-esque fades.

Also present—and there is little way I would have quite understood the significance then—was the patented Tebow steamroll: On scrambles or called runs, instead of running out of bounds, Tim, then quite a bit skinnier than he is now, absolutely destroyed a couple of Hoover players by lowering his shoulder and running right through them. In sum, a re-review of that game, coupled now with knowing the kind of character Tebow has, tells you all you need to know: He has the physical tools to succeed, like size and arm strength, and there is no questioning his drive and determination.

Which is precisely why evaluating him for the NFL ought to be a lot easier than it was just catching a high school game. When Mel Kiper projects Tebow as an H-back, he overlooks the only question he has to ask: Does he have the physical tools—like size and arm strength—to succeed in the NFL? If the answer is yes, and I think it is, that's all you need to know. If they are being honest, not a single person could tell you in good faith that they didn't think Tebow would work hard enough to be an NFL quarterback.

But, for at least another year, all that is irrelevant. Tebow has the chance to go down as one of the great players in college football history. We should all enjoy it, and make sure to tape some of the games. You never know, you might want to remind yourself what that Super Bowl winning quarterback looked like in college. **MSP**

Chris Brown writes the extremely detailed and altogether brilliant website *Smart Football* (<http://smartfootball.blogspot.com>).