

March 28, 2011

Shakopee Saber offense still just football

Brian Jerzak
MinnesotaPreps.com Staff Writer

For the last regular season game of the year, I decided to check out the Shakopee Sabers football program.

They had not had a season like this since the early 80's, and were on the verge of their first conference championship since that era. When I went to watch them play, I was treated to a completely different style of offense than I had ever seen. I remember wondering if I was seeing an offense from the future or an offense from the past. Either way, it worked that night, and it helped the team to an undefeated regular season. I got a chance to talk to head coach **Jody Stone** about his offense, where it came from and what the heck it actually is.

From what I remember, some things were noticeable right away. The offensive line didn't have any splits - they line up foot to foot. They line up in what looks like a shotgun formation, but the center could be snapping the ball to multiple people - including someone in motion - on any play. Beyond that, I needed some help from Coach Stone.

Stone just finished his fifth season as the head coach at Shakopee. He was born in Virginia, where he first became a head coach. Five years ago, he moved with his wife to Shakopee to get away from the long commute and congestion that was everyday life just outside of Washington D.C.

When he got to Shakopee, the football program had been down for years. He started out running a 'normal' offense, but realized he didn't have the kids at that point in time that could play with the top schools in the Missota or the metro area.

"Half way through my second year (in Shakopee) we were trying to figure things out. What was wrong with Shakopee football? It wasn't really a football town," said Stone. "I felt that maybe a change would give us an identity and give something for the community to be proud of. We were at rock bottom. We were 0-9 that year - we had to shake something up."

Stone was first exposed to this offense back in his playing days.

"I grew up in a small town in southwestern Virginia and I had to play against a team that ran the same thing every year - the single wing. They were really good at running it, and they won a lot."

Stone's assistant coaches (Jason Trelstad and Joe Dellwo) started researching the offense. Together with Coach Stone they used what information they could find to piece together a playbook that would work for them.

"We didn't know exactly what we were doing that first year," admitted Stone. "As coaches we just had to get a little smarter with the offense."

Everyone had to throw out a good chunk of football skills they grew up on.

"We are just running football plays. The plays are the same. There are just some different things that take everyone a while to adjust to. We don't have (line) splits - our guys basically stand on top of each other's feet. It is kind of the opposite direction where most people want to spread people out. Being able to spin around and have our quarterback - I guess that is what you would call him - spin in a complete circle. Something as simple as taking a handoff and giving a handoff we had to relearn it because it was different. We had to stop doing it the traditional way and learn a new way to do it. Other than that, it is pretty much just football."

The reaction to the offense was mixed. Stone was told he would be laughed at if he implemented this offense. He was actually told by someone that if he went through with it, the guy would sell his house and move out of town. Just recently, after proving they can win with the offense - they finished the regular season undefeated last year - someone asked him if now because they have had success if they were going to stop running "that stupid offense."

"Ultimately I came here to try to help the school and community win. That was my only motive. I didn't think it was too risky to install the Single Wing, because if we didn't win I was going to get fired running off tackle out of an 'I' offense or in the spread. It didn't matter. I would have deserved it. I would rather have gone down fighting."

More important than having the community buy in was having the kids believe in it.

"The kids were a little skeptical and worried about fumbling, but we showed them some videos. We showed them how it was old school. We told them we were going to be blue collar, and we were going to be different. We really played up that we were going to be different - no one else is going to be doing it. We knew we were going to have to sell the kids on it, and we spent a good amount of time talking about the history of it and showing them some teams around the country that were doing it. When they actually got on the field and were doing it, they saw they were scoring some points and they were in."

It took a couple of years for the kids and coaches to get comfortable with the new offense. Early on, they would have success with the base plays, but once defenses figured out how to stop it, Shakopee wasn't ready to successfully counter with adjustments.

"Now, as a coaching staff, we feel pretty confident that we know what to look for and our kids know what to look for - that is exciting. They are coming off the field saying, 'we've got to run this or that. It's wide open.' That first year was a little bit messy. The next year we won five games with it and then this last year - especially because we had talented players - it was hard for people to match up with us and that made it even better."

As complicated as the offense seems, Stone tried to sum up what they do in simple terms.

"We want to run the ball off tackle," said Stone. "It comes down to blocking. We build it around a blocking scheme. Everything that is going on in the backfield is just getting to the hole we want to get to as fast as we want to get to it. What we are able to do with smaller guys is double and triple team and block together as a unit to get people moved so that we can run the ball. We want to run the ball."

"Until we became committed to the weight room, we were never going to be able to run the ball the conventional way. We needed to take our smaller, smart lineman that I love a lot and let them work together and block down on the 270-pound kid and move him. That is what I would really like people to see. We would love to have a whole line of Division I linemen, but we are moving people. We broke almost every record in school history and we did it with linemen that are 5'11" and 200 pounds. We are really proud of the blue collar attitude our kids take. It is a true team type of thing. We are all working together."

With all the smoke, mirrors and controversy that seem to be associated with Coach Stone's offense, they are just trying to do what every offense has wanted to do since the game began. They want to score points, win games and be able to run the ball off-tackle.