

NFL

Offenses reversing shotgun trend

By Josh Dubow
AP Pro Football Writer

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — On the first offensive play of the season for the Baltimore Ravens, Lamar Jackson did something he hadn't done often in the past.

He took the snap from under center, faked a handoff to Derrick Henry and connected on a 49-yard pass to Zay Flowers. The play might have seemed ordinary enough on the surface but Jackson's position at the snap was different.

No team attempted fewer passes with a quarterback lining up under center in Jackson's first seven full seasons as a starter than the Ravens. But first-year coordinator Declan Doyle has brought a new offensive philosophy to Baltimore this season, with a nod toward more old-school football instead of the shotgun formations that have been the rage in the NFL in this generation.

"More explosives (and) advantages," Jackson said about the pluses of moving under center. "They do not know if I am going to run it, if Derrick will run it. Is it a run play? Is it a pass play? It's a disadvantage (for the defense) each and every down, and we need that. We need that with this type of system."

The Ravens are far from alone this season as several teams are putting a modern touch on the under-center



Baltimore quarterback Lamar Jackson takes a snap during last month's joint practice with the Minnesota Vikings in Eagan, Minnesota.

offense with more use of fullbacks and multiple tight ends.

Through two weeks, 13 of the 32 teams have increased their rate of plays from under center by more than 10 percentage points, according to Sportradar, with the league-wide rate going from 34.7% last season to 42.3% so far this season. That tops the 41.4% in 2017 — the previous high in Sportradar records that only go back to 2015 — and is a 48% increase from 2023, when the percentage of under-center plays reached a nadir at 28.6%.

Among the other teams with a notable increase this season are those like Arizona, Las Vegas, Washington, the New York Jets and Giants, who all brought in new offensive play callers

this past offseason.

But a shift has also been made by offenses that had been traditionally operated out of the shotgun, like Kansas City and Cincinnati.

PATRICK MAHOMES' MOVE UNDER CENTER HAS HELPED THE CHIEFS

Andy Reid's Chiefs have nearly doubled their under-center rate since 2023, with the 34.5% rate so far the highest for any season with Patrick Mahomes at quarterback. Kansas City has gone from having the fifth-fewest yards rushing from running backs on under-center plays last season to the third-most this season behind free agent acquisition Kenneth Walker III.

Mahomes has nearly tripled the number of

under-center dropbacks, going from 2.6 in 2025 to 7.5 so far this season.

"You have to adjust to the team and play to everybody's strengths and so when (Reid) first got here, it was feeding Jamaal Charles and letting him run and then we evolved to more of a spread out scheme with the speed that we had," Mahomes said. "Now we're trying to find that perfect balance of both."

The league had shifted out of balance a few years ago as offenses shifted predominantly to the shotgun as wide-open passing games took over the NFL.

SHOTGUN BEGAN IN THE 1960S AND TOOK OFF IN THE

2000S

The transition from under center to shotgun took generations. The shotgun was first brought to the NFL by San Francisco 49ers coach Red Hickey in the early 1960s, with his quarterback lined up about seven yards behind center to counter the strong pass rush of teams like the Baltimore Colts.

It quickly died out before Tom Landry brought it back in the 1970s for the Dallas Cowboys. But it was still mostly used by only a handful of teams in passing situations. According to game charting from the old website Football Outsiders, teams used shotgun on 7.1% of formations in 1989 and that only ticked up slightly to 12.8% in 2000.

It started increasing that decade, first to cater to spread running quarterbacks like Michael Vick in Atlanta. When the New England Patriots used shotgun on about half of all snaps during a record-setting 2007 campaign, it led to a league-wide increase in the formation.

The pistol formation — with the quarterback about two yards closer to the line and a running back behind him — came into vogue in the 2010s to cater to running quarterbacks like Colin Kaepernick and Robert Griffin III, making under center even less common.

Chip Kelly's Philadelphia Eagles were the first team on record to go under

center on less than 10% of offensive plays in 2015 and his 49ers did it on just 2% of plays in 2016.

UNDER CENTER USAGE PEAKED IN 2017

League-wide, the use of under-center formations was at 41.4% in 2017, according to Sportradar and then dropped for six straight seasons to a low of 28.6% in 2023.

But there's been a steady switch since then as offenses have gone back to the running game to counter defenses using two deep safeties to take away the deep passing game.

"I really think kind of the league just goes in circles," 49ers defensive coordinator Raheem Morris said. "It goes into the patterns and defense and the offense and the West Coast offense, up under, things of that nature. Pistol from a little bit from college, gun, just waves."

The Los Angeles Rams went from a heavy shotgun team in Matthew Stafford's first season in 2021, with a nearly 60% rate, to a heavy under-center team last season at nearly 60% as coach Sean McVay transformed his offense from three receivers and one tight end to more formations with three tight ends.

That led to a run on blocking tight ends in April's draft as teams looked for personnel that worked for an under-center offense.

UNDER CENTER OFFENSE OPENS UP RUNNING GAME

The main advantage of going under center is having more options available in the running game, which puts more stress on the defense.

With a running back behind an under-center quarterback, offenses can run both directions and behind various blocking schemes. With the back standing next to the quarterback in the shotgun, some of those options are removed.

It's also more effective to run play-action passes out of the under-center offense because the ball is briefly hidden from the defense, making it harder to determine whether a play is a run or a pass.

"Defenses play different calls based off of whether you're in shotgun or (under center)," said 49ers coach Kyle Shanahan, a longtime proponent of an under-center offense. "Sometimes you only do drop-back plays in shotgun and never under center and that changes entirely what a defense does. So, you just try to balance things out so you can have a threat of every type of play call and any type of look so the defense can't eliminate certain things."

But many quarterbacks weren't comfortable turning their backs to the defense in an under-center offense after running predominantly shotgun in college where they can see the defense.

Now coaches in the NFL are spending time teaching quarterbacks the under-center offense with No. 1 overall pick Fernando Mendoza the latest to undergo the transformation this season in Las Vegas.

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