

DEFENSIVE TEAM BY COMMITTEE

by Chase Stuart

For seven straight years, Footballguys.com has promoted the Defensive Team By Committee (DTBC) strategy to help fantasy players dominate their leagues. Fantasy defenses are inconsistent from year to year, so predicting which defenses and special teams (D/STs) will do well is difficult. Even still, of course, the teams available at the ends of your drafts usually provide less rewards. So how do you get great production while saving your most important draft picks?

We spend countless hours analyzing team offenses, and relatively few thinking about team defenses. But an average defense against a bad offense will do just as well as a great defense against an average offense. Therefore, the key to the DTBC system is to find two teams available late in your draft whose combined schedule features predominantly weak offenses. Since you start your defense based on matchups, and your D/ST will usually oppose a weak offense, your D/ST position will score lots of fantasy points. At least, that's the plan.

In 2006, the recommended DTBC pairing ranked third in fantasy points per game. Two years ago the DTBC was off the charts good, outscoring even the top individual D/ST on a FP/G basis. Last year, the DTBC was not very good, as both the Bills and Saints struggled. We let you down in 2008, but that doesn't mean the theory is wrong or that this year is going to be disappointing. Hopefully, you'll follow our advice again and you can ride your DTBC to your fantasy playoffs.

When picking a D/ST committee, you should look for four factors:

- A very easy combined schedule
- Two teams with late average draft positions (ADPs)
- Big play ability – think pass rushers and defensive backs with good hands
- Reason to expect improvement in 2009

The first step in creating the DTBC system is to grade the offenses. I've used the Footballguys.com projections to rank the offenses, scoring them the following way: $(0.3 \times \text{Points scored}) + (0.03 \times \text{Total Yards}) - (2 \times \text{Interceptions thrown})$. Each team's projection is shown in the first column in the table, along with their projected rank, and how they ranked under the scoring system in 2008. While most leagues award significant points for sacks, I don't factor into the team offensive projections sacks allowed data, as those numbers are particularly difficult to predict. But don't worry: we'll absolutely keep pass rushers in mind when we select the DTBC.

Not surprisingly, the Jay Cutler trade bumped Denver down

and Chicago up. Tampa Bay lost Jeff Garcia and Jon Gruden, and may be starting a rookie QB; they dropped in the rankings. On the other side, Philadelphia added bookend tackles Jason Peters and Stacy Andrews while drafting flashy talents Jeremy Maclin and LeSean McCoy; Philadelphia vaulted into the top five of these rankings as a result. The bottom three teams – St. Louis, Cleveland and Detroit – were terrible in 2008; we don't expect their offenses to improve in 2009.

09 Proj	Team	09 Rk	08 Rk
297	New England Patriots	1	4
278	New Orleans Saints	2	1
274	San Diego Chargers	3	3
265	Philadelphia Eagles	4	10
261	Green Bay Packers	5	7
259	Atlanta Falcons	6	6
259	Indianapolis Colts	7	13
256	Arizona Cardinals	8	5
246	Carolina Panthers	9	8
245	New York Giants	10	2
244	Dallas Cowboys	11	19
243	Minnesota Vikings	12	17
241	Tennessee Titans	13	16
240	Chicago Bears	14	20
238	Denver Broncos	15	9
236	Pittsburgh Steelers	16	21
234	Houston Texans	17	12
233	Jacksonville Jaguars	18	23
232	Baltimore Ravens	19	14
229	Miami Dolphins	20	11
226	Buffalo Bills	21	24
223	New York Jets	22	18
222	Cincinnati Bengals	23	32
221	Tampa Bay Buccaneers	24	15
218	Seattle Seahawks	25	27
218	San Francisco 49ers	26	25
216	Washington Redskins	27	22
208	Oakland Raiders	28	28
201	Kansas City Chiefs	29	26
196	St. Louis Rams	30	30
195	Cleveland Browns	31	31
182	Detroit Lions	32	29

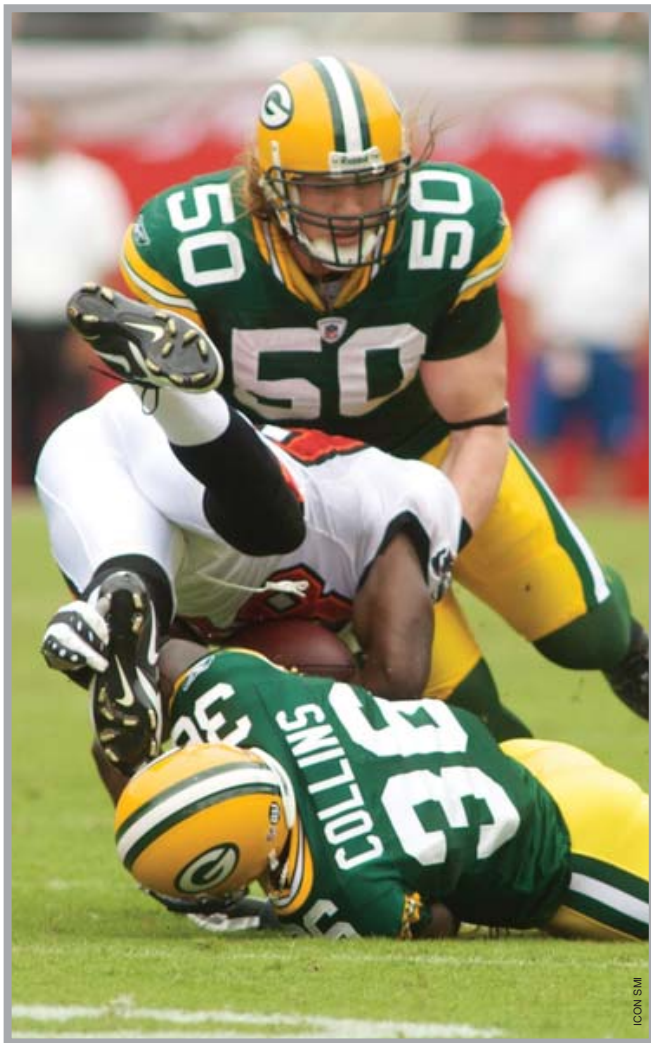
After grading the offenses, I went through the NFL schedule and assigned the corresponding projection for each opponent that every team played. For example, when the Jets host the Patriots in Week 2, New York's D/ST receives 297 points. However, for road games, an additional five points are added, so when the Ravens travel to Foxboro in Week 4, Baltimore's D/ST gets 302 points. Obviously, you want your committee to have the lowest possible number of combined points. Bye weeks are valued at 400 points to avoid combining D/STs that share the same bye week. After doing this for every game in every week, we can now rank each team's schedule and pair up the defenses to form the best possible committee. **One note: I'm ranking the committees through 16 weeks, as most fantasy leagues don't play in Week 17.**

The 2009 Defensive Team By Committee

Green Bay Packers (ADP: D/ST 12)

- DE Ryan Pickett, NT B.J. Raji, DE Cullen Jenkins
- OLB Aaron Kampman, ILB A.J. Hawk, ILB Nick Barnett, OLB Clay Matthews
- CB Charles Woodson, FS Nick Collins, SS Atari Bigby, CB Al Harris

Like the other duo in this year's DTBC, Green Bay now plays a 3-4 defensive front. The key to any 3-4 defense is the nose tackle, as Kris Jenkins proved for the Jets last year. There



wasn't a better nose tackle prospect in the draft than B.J. Raji, and he's a big body who can help eat up blockers. Ryan Pickett is a former first round pick with over 100 starts to his name, but he's not a household name. The former DT is certainly large enough to play as a 3-4 end, but that may not be an ideal fit for him. Expect Pickett to play tackle next to Raji when the Packers play four down lineman and Pickett will also see some time at nose while Johnny Jolly plays end. Cullen Jenkins will man the other end spot, and his above average size and speed combination makes him a good fit there.

Aaron Kampman had 37 sacks the last three years as a defensive end, but over 90 percent of those came in nickel and dime situations. In the base 3-4 defense, Kampman will play as an outside linebacker/pass rushing specialist, but in nickel and dime sets he'll play at end. Either way, expect another good year out of Kampman. The other pass rusher is rookie Clay Matthews, the first round pick from USC. Matthews has experience in the 3-4 and should be a good fit immediately for the Packers. A.J. Hawk, the former weak side linebacker, shifts inside in the new 3-4 defense. Hawk's a natural fit as a 3-4 ILB and his physical style of play should suit him well there. Rounding out a terrific unit is Nick Barnett, who was a solid MLB for half a decade for the Pack but was never a big play guy. With more beef up front, Barnett may finally have fantasy status that matches his NFL ability. Barnett tore his ACL last year, but is expected to be fine by opening day.

The secondary features two cornerbacks who debuted twelve years ago; since then, Woodson and Harris have made seven Pro Bowls and intercepted 55 passes. While both players have their best days behind them, they're still solid cornerbacks for 2009. Nick Collins continues to mature as a player – in 2008 he intercepted seven passes and led the league in INT return yards (295) and touchdowns (three). Strong safety Atari Bigby suffered through injuries in 2008, but in 2007 he intercepted five passes and forced three fumbles.

The most important addition for GB may be off the field. Green Bay hired Dom Capers to coach the defense, and he brought in former pass rushing great Kevin Greene to coach the outside linebackers. There's no doubt that Capers will have the Packers playing aggressively in 2009. Whether or not he produces a good NFL defense is an open question; for fantasy purposes, though, Green Bay should produce a bunch of sacks, turnovers and some scores this year. As a bonus, Will Blackmon is one of the better return men in the league, and he'll handle both punt and kick return duties. He'll team with Jordy Nelson on kick returns, but Blackmon's most dangerous returning punts – he's scored three times on just 44 career punt returns.

Arizona Cardinals (ADP: #18)

- DE Darnell Dockett, NT Gabe Watson, DE Calais Campbell
- OLB Bertrand Berry, ILB Karlos Dansby, ILB Gerald Hayes, OLB Chiike Okeafor
- CB Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, FS Antrel Rolle, SS Adrian Wilson, CB Bryant McFadden

Arizona plays a hybrid 4-3/3-4 defense, but as the team matures under HC Ken Whisenhunt and transitions at defensive coordinator (from Clancy Pendergast to Bill Davis), expect more 3-4 sets in the desert. While it's difficult to project exactly who will be playing where in Arizona, the Cardinals have a

bunch of depth on defense and will exploit that advantage this season. Gabe Watson's the team's best bet at nose tackle, but DT Bryan Robinson will also see extensive playing time. Darnell Dockett should play inside in the 4-3 but will be on the outside in the Cardinals base defense; he's a wide body that is athletic enough to be a playmaker as a 3-4 end. Calais Campbell stands tall at 6'7, making him a good fit for the 3-4 defense, but he was inconsistent as a rookie in 2008. He displayed terrific talent at the University of Miami and should only improve as he matures.

The Cardinals have several options at the outside linebacker position. Bertrand Berry and Chike Okefor are veteran pass rushers who have combined for over 100 career sacks. Veteran Clark Haggans and second round pick Cody Brown (Connecticut) will also help attack the passer. Between the four of them, Arizona should have no problem bringing the heat. On the inside, Karlos Dansby is good for about 10 big plays a year – sacks, forced fumbles, recoveries or INTs. Gerald Hayes isn't a big play guy, but is a sure tackler and solid linebacker in the middle.

As talented as the linebackers are, the strength of the Arizona defense is the secondary. Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie ("DRC") and Adrian Wilson are going to be perennial Pro Bowl candidates for the next few years. DRC is already one of the most athletic defensive players in the NFL and is a terrific playmaker who had four INTs in the second half of the season and then two more in the playoffs. Adrian Wilson can do it all – get to the passer (eight sacks in 2005, two in the NFC Championship Game), create turnovers and make big plays (his resume includes both a 99-yard fumble return TD and 99-yard INT return TD). Playing alongside these two stars is Antrel Rolle, another terrific athlete who plays "centerfield" for the Cardinals. He struggled initially in 2008 as he transitioned from corner to safety, but he was living up to high expectations by the end of the year. Arizona signed yet another ex-Steeler, Bryant McFadden, to play the other cornerback spot. McFadden is just hitting his prime and was one of the more prized free agents this offseason. He's a solid cover corner who played very well down the stretch, and will provide a nice upgrade to the Arizona secondary.

If your league combines defense and special teams, Arizona continues to look like a strong sleeper. Whether it's Steve Breaston, Jason Wright, Early Doucet or even DRC on kick and punt returns, Arizona should feature an electric return man every time the opponent kicks the ball.

The Combined Schedule

- Week 1 – Arizona vs. San Francisco (218)
- Week 2 – Green Bay vs. Cincinnati (222)
- Week 3 – Green Bay @ St. Louis (201)
- Week 4 – Green Bay @ Minnesota (MNF) (248)
- Week 5 – Arizona vs. Houston (234)
- Week 6 – Green Bay vs. Detroit (182)
- Week 7 – Green Bay @ Cleveland (200)
- Week 8 – Green Bay vs. Minnesota (243)
- Week 9 – Green Bay @ Tampa Bay (226)
- Week 10 – Arizona vs. Seattle (218)
- Week 11 – Arizona @ St. Louis (201)
- Week 12 – Green Bay @ Detroit (Thanksgiving) (187)
- Week 13 – Green Bay vs. Baltimore (MNF) (232)
- Week 14 – Arizona @ San Francisco (MNF) (223)

- Week 15 – Arizona @ Detroit (187)
- Week 16 – Arizona vs. St. Louis (196)

This committee runs the weather gamut, with an opening day matchup in the desert and a night game in the Frozen Tundra in December. More importantly, you get an amazing seven games against bottom three offenses (St. Louis, Cleveland, and Detroit). The toughest two games are when the Packers play the Vikings, a team that, at the least, should have some turnover prone players at QB and RB. With the exception of Carson Palmer, none of the quarterbacks that our defensive combo will have to face are very scary. While this defensive committee option looks nice, you might want to consider ...

Grabbing Just One?

In some leagues, it's just too costly to spend two rosters spots on defenses. In larger leagues, it may not be feasible to grab two defenses that you like. If you're only drafting one defense, it still pays to know the ability level of its opponents. However, this year, it **really** pays to know. The Pittsburgh Steelers – the team with the best defense in the NFL – happen to have the second easiest schedule in the league. Pittsburgh plays five games against bottom five offenses and then two more against the Bengals. With the second easiest schedule, you might want to consider reaching early on the Steelers defense. Another defensive stalwart, Minnesota, has the third easiest schedule. The full list is presented at right: Note that both the bye week (which was considered a 400 point week earlier in the article) and Week 17 have been removed.

Backup Options

The table below shows some alternate combinations in case you grab one-half of the committee but are unable to secure the other. For example, if you have Green Bay but not Arizona, Seattle is a great backup choice. Note: Some of the stud defenses (Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and Minnesota) match up well but obviously aren't expected to be available late. They are therefore not listed in the table below.

Team	oppFP
GB	3346
Pit	3420
Min	3425
Ari	3427
Cin	3440
SD	3441
Cle	3492
Sea	3498
Hou	3502
Chi	3522
Bal	3535
Oak	3545
KC	3550
Det	3554
Ind	3557
NO	3564
Jac	3566
Was	3572
Phi	3583
StL	3592
SF	3596
NE	3597
Den	3614
Dal	3629
Ten	3642
Buf	3645
NYG	3665
Atl	3705
Car	3721
NYJ	3722
TB	3771
Mia	3776

Green Bay with...	Points	Arizona with...	Points
Seattle	3453	Cincinnati	3470
Cleveland	3455	Seattle	3503
Cincinnati	3458	Washington	3503
Buffalo	3469	Denver	3526
Houston	3473	San Francisco	3531

Lastly, be sure to check out Footballguys.com for an expanded and updated version of this article in August. The projections will have been updated many times since then, and as a result, the ratings of each offense will have changed since May.