



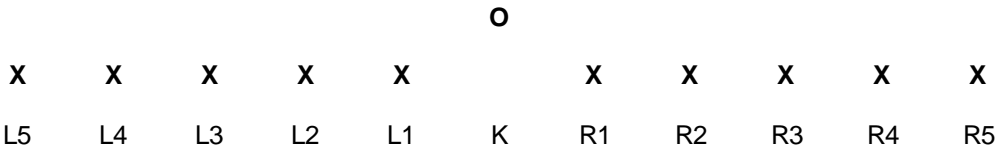
“GUNNER”? “LANE-FILLER”? JUST WHAT ARE THOSE GUYS ON SPECIAL TEAMS DOING?

ON ANY GIVEN SUNDAY each NFL club has 66 starters on special teams.

The six 11-man units -- field goal, kickoff, kickoff return, punt, punt return and PAT -- play a key role in the game's outcome. But ask even the most avid NFL fan to name the positions and assignments of these important squads and they will likely stall after kickers and punters have been identified. So what are those guys on special teams doing?

The diagrams below are a crash-course in everything one would need to know about kickoff and kickoff return teams.

KICKOFF: Positional terms and alignment vary, but there are two basic principals to keep in mind when examining a kickoff unit. First, responsibilities will be broken down into three broad categories: gunners, lane fillers and safeties. Second, if a “wedge,” which is a protective barrier formed by the return team, is used, defensive players will react to its movement.



- Wedge Busters** – Usually located inside, where L1-L2 and R1-R2 are shown above. Their job is to break the protective “wedge” formed by the return team. A typical wedge involves three or four men interlocking arms in front of the return specialist. Being a wedge buster is one of the most physical jobs in the NFL. Some players, such as New England Patriots linebacker **LARRY IZZO**, thrive on it. “I love getting out there and hitting guys,” he says. “I’m very aggressive.”

“It’s like throwing yourself in front of a bus,” added Philadelphia Eagles special teams coach **JOHN HARBAUGH**. “The goal is to take two blockers out of the equation.”

But as Detroit Lions special teams coach **CHUCK PRIEFER** points out, “The guy who hits the wedge first rarely makes the tackle. Like I tell the kids, you’re sacrificing yourself so someone else can make the play.”

- Gunners** – Also located near the kicker. Some coaches prefer the L1 and R1 slots, but others will place them slightly further out. Gunners are typically the fastest players, usually defensive backs, running backs or receivers. When the ball is kicked, they race downfield and attempt to tackle the returner before he advances.

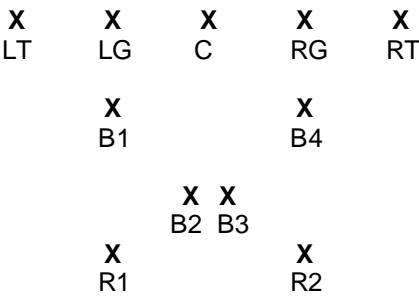
Harbaugh believes Pittsburgh Steelers wide receiver **SEAN MOREY** is one of the best gunners in the business.

“He has a tremendous ability to penetrate and make quick diagnoses, which enables him to make the play,” says Harbaugh.

- Lane Fillers** – These players fill the lanes that can be used by the return man, which can be straight ahead or criss-crossed. Typically, they will be located in the L3-L4 and R3-R4 slots. The general idea is to create uneven match-ups that give your lane-men the best chance for success.
- Safeties** – Usually found on the outside ends (L5 and R5). Their role is mainly precautionary, but they can serve as blockers if the return specialist comes in their direction. For example, if the ball is kicked to the right, R5 will become a blocker, securing the right sideline and L5 will become a safety net. The safety hangs back with the kicker and attempts to tackle a returner if he breaks through the defense.

KICKOFF RETURN: Every player on a kickoff return unit has one main goal – opening running lanes. Teams generally place two of their quickest players around the 10-yard line to serve as return guys. Coaches will have a preference as to which player catches the ball, but defenses will try to avoid returners such as Kansas City’s **DANTE HALL**, who is one of the best return specialists in the NFL today.

Plays are designed and returners will look for those running lanes first, but things happen very fast and adjustments need to be made on the fly. A returner who can think and move quickly is a valuable commodity.



- Front Line** – The main purpose of the blockers on the front line is to slow down the defense. They confront players on the opposing team, hopefully delaying their efforts to get downfield and stop the return.
- Second line** -- Most teams form a wedge with their second line of defense. B1-B4 will wait for either R1 or R2 to field the kickoff and choose a direction. When he does, they form a protective barrier in front of him, often joining arms for additional support.
- Return men** – Returners must catch the ball cleanly and be decisive in order to succeed. Teams usually want their return specialists to be able to run a 4.3-second 40-yard dash, but also to have enough body control to be able to utilize that speed properly. Great returners can make a few potential tacklers miss them in the open field.

