

## ONE HARD YARD

It's one of football's greatest momentum-shifting plays: third-and-one. If converted, it sustains the drive, keeps the clock ticking, and wears down the defense.

If the defense stands firm, it can mean a change of possession, help provide a much-needed rest for defenders, deflate an offense, and crank up or silence a crowd.

So what is the key to winning the battle during these critical encounters in the trenches? According to Green Bay Packers defensive coordinator **BOB SANDERS**, defenses need to be ready for anything and stay flexible.

"Offenses make it tough because they have so many different personnel groupings," says Sanders, whose defensive unit ranked third in the NFL last season in third-and-one situations, denying opponents six times in 13 third-and-one situations. "Every team cycles through those different groupings in all situations throughout the course of a season, so you need to be ready for anything. Like anything else in football, if you get stuck relying on one strategy in any situation, it's easy for the opponent to counteract that. You need to stay multiple."

After a coordinator decides on the proper personnel and defensive front, it all comes down to execution and toughness.

"You need to have a gameplan, and everybody has to know exactly what their role within the plan is," Sanders says. "After that, it comes down to execution and staying physical. Everyone needs to be on the same page, stay downhill, stay physical, and hopefully you'll have a shot to knock them off the ball."

With all eyes focused on the running back, what's a ball carrier to do? Pro Bowl running back **STEVEN JACKSON** of the Rams likes to keep things simple on third-and-short.

"The key is rushing north and south," says Jackson, who led all running backs in total third-and-one conversions last season (14) and was sixth in conversion percentage (.824). "Short yardage is a matter of will. You have to want it more than the defense."

Here's a look at the top running backs in third-down conversion percentage during the 2006 season:

PLAYER	FIRST DOWNS-ATTEMPTS	PCT.
Lorenzo Neal, San Diego	8-8	1.000
Tiki Barber, N.Y. Giants	5-5	1.000
Michael Turner, San Diego	4-4	1.000
Corey Dillon, New England	6-7	.857
LaDainian Tomlinson, San Diego	5-6	.833
Steven Jackson, St. Louis	14-17	.824
Joseph Addai, Indianapolis	9-11	.818
Eight players tied	--	.800

The top five NFL defenses in stopping opponents on third and one:

TEAM	FIRST DOWNS-ATTEMPTS	PCT.
Carolina	10-20	.500
New Orleans	6-12	.500
Green Bay	7-13	.538
Minnesota	9-16	.563
Cincinnati	8-14	.571

## ONE EYE ON THE BALL, ANOTHER ON THE CHAINS

Any good NFL wide receiver can catch the football on first and second down, but what separates a starter from an all-star is the ability to convert when your team needs it the most – on third down.

Third-down receptions often are the most critical for a wideout to make. First, they must go against a defender who has them marked as a target. Then, they must run their route to the first-down marker.

"Usually on third down, they know you're the go-to guy, so you might see bracket coverage," says Pittsburgh's four-time Pro Bowl receiver **HINES WARD**. "It's just about being on the same page as the quarterback. It's about the quarterback trusting you to get the proper depth and that you'll make a play for him to keep the chains moving. It's just a feel thing."

Over his long career with the Denver Broncos, **ROD SMITH** has been one of the best on third-down and believes it's all about getting to the yard-marker. "If it's third-and-six and you run a five-yard route, what's the point?" he says. "It's really a factor in who wins and loses in this league if you look at third-down conversions. It's indicative of who is going to win the game because if you keep the sticks moving, you're going to get into field-goal range and score more points."

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