



## William & Mary has the most creative offense in CFB. Here's what you might be missing



By Bruce Feldman Feb 27, 2023



It was the most bizarre-looking successful play that anyone ran in college football in 2022. The man who birthed it didn't give it an interesting name or title, but when Christian Taylor, William & Mary's offensive coordinator, called the play over the headset, the rest of the offensive staff grew very quiet. Taylor thought he detected a bit of an apprehensive, "*Oh crap, here we go*" vibe until head coach Mike London chimed in.

"Da-da-da! Da-da-da!" London replied, mimicking the famous ESPN SportsCenter theme.

With 14 minutes left in the second quarter of a scoreless FCS game, the William & Mary Tribe faced a second-and-goal at the Delaware 4. Hollis Mathis, a sophomore quarterback who was lined up in right slot, motions across the formation and then stops behind the center. Not necessarily *under* center. Behind center. A Blue Hen defender shifts over inside the box.

And then...

The center snaps the ball through Mathis' legs to [Darius Wilson](#), another William & Mary quarterback, who was lined up behind Mathis in shotgun formation. Wilson catches the snap while Mathis darts right as a Blue Hen defensive end gives chase from the left side of the offense. Wilson runs the speed option and pitches the ball to running back Bronson Yoder, who was lined up next to him. Yoder sprints into the left corner of the end zone for a touchdown as Delaware defenders look baffled by what just happened.

The idea sprouted inside the William & Mary offensive staff room the Monday before the Delaware game. The coaches were kicking around thoughts after working on their base game plan.

"What if we snapped it through his legs?" said Mario Acitelli, William & Mary's offensive line coach. Of all the wild ideas that come out of these brainstorming sessions, this one seemed to be among the most far-fetched.

But Taylor was on board. They decided to try it after Tuesday's practice with center Ryan McKenna and Mathis because Wednesday is the day they work on third downs and goal-line offense. The very first snap went right into Mathis' crotch.

"Oh, hell no, Coach. We can't do this," Mathis said.

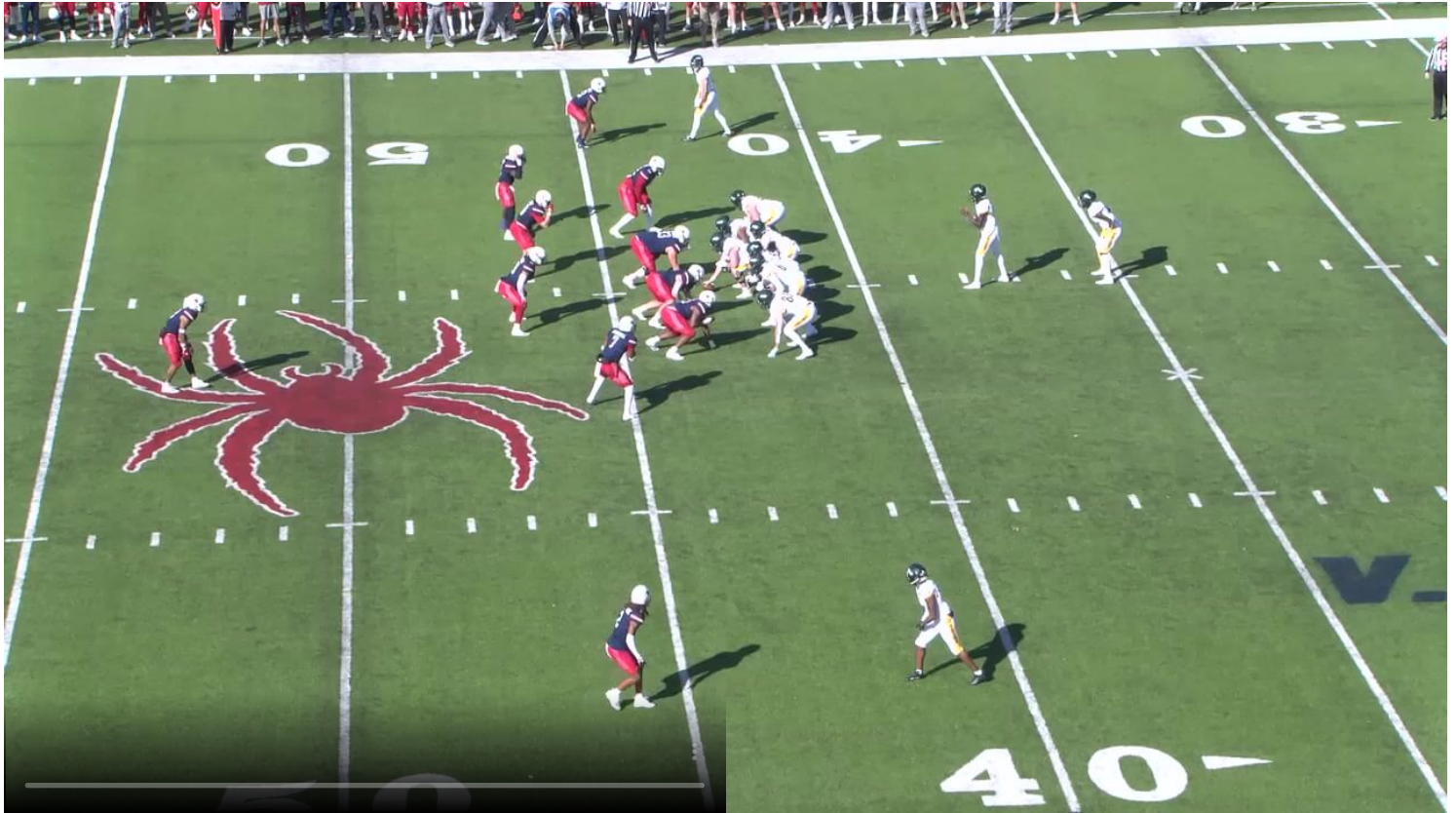
The 6-foot-4, 285-pound McKenna said he'd get lower. Mathis inched up onto his tippy-toes. Three more snaps were delivered without incident.

"The very first time we tried it ... let's just say Hollis needed a bag of ice after it," Acitelli said. "My dad, who was my middle school coach, claims we did it back then, but I don't remember that. I know it has been done before somewhere else, like pretty much everything else in football. We didn't invent it."

What the Tribe did, though, was use it as an ideal counter to another wrinkle they had run one month earlier against Campbell, when they motioned Mathis under center and he gained 5 yards on a quarterback sneak.

"They (Delaware) had seen it on film and knew that was a possibility," Taylor said. "I'm sure there's more stuff we can do off it."

There is. Late in the season, Caylin Newton, Cam Newton's younger brother (who plays wide receiver but was actually a record-setting quarterback at Howard), lined up under center, only to motion out. He ran a wheel route up the sideline for a long gain off of a play-action pass.



The play against Delaware went viral — which the Tribe staff admitted was pretty cool, especially when they heard from coaching buddies, “Man, what are you guys doing over there?”

What Taylor and the Tribe are doing is running one of the most successful and innovative systems in the sport. It's a wrinkle off of another wrinkle that helped the Tribe become must-see film for all coaches — this from an FCS conference, the Colonial Athletic Association, that has long been known inside the sport as a breeding ground for some of football's brightest minds. It's also why several FBS programs, including [Miami](#), gave Taylor strong consideration for their offensive coordinator vacancies.

In 2021, William & Mary led the CAA with 205 rushing yards per game (No. 12 in the country) and had a league-best 5.0 yards per carry. In 2022, Taylor incorporated a bunch of plays utilizing two quarterbacks on the field at the same time to go with more triple option concepts. Those number jumped even higher, to an average of 266 yards on the ground (third-best in the nation) and 6.0 yards per carry to go with an average of 7.1 yards per play overall (fourth-best nationally).

What's even more impressive is that at Taylor's previous coaching stop, the University of San Diego, his team ranked No. 2 in passing and helped develop walk-on tight end [Dalton Kincaid](#) into an [NFL](#) prospect (Kincaid later transferred to Utah). Two of his quarterbacks at USD, Anthony Lawrence and Reid Sinnett, were Walter Payton Award finalists. San Diego also became the first non-scholarship program to win an FCS playoff game. (The Toreros did it twice, beating Cal Poly and Northern Arizona.)

The 39-year-old Taylor, a former Tribe quarterback, left his alma mater in 2010 to become an offensive assistant at [San Diego State](#), then followed Brady Hoke to Michigan to become an analyst before returning to the FCS. Al Borges and Tanner Engstrand, now the Detroit Lions passing game coordinator, were big influences on how Taylor looked at the game.

One CAA defensive coordinator said a big key that makes Taylor's offense so lethal is that the Tribe "use a ton of eye manipulation," adding that William & Mary motioned about 65 percent of the time in regular-down situations. William & Mary's bread-and-butter is running the wide zone, and like a Kyle Shanahan operation, the DC says, they really want to get you running to the sideline, get you so sucked up in the run game and *then* run bootlegs and get the tight end wide open on a Y-cross.

"The problem is, like the [49ers](#), they're so check-with-me. They find where your 2i (defensive lineman) is and check (to a stretch play) in that direction. You move the front but they'd still reset it to get into the perfect play. Their quarterback knows all the answers. And now a lot of their stuff is triple-(option)-based so they'll have a three-back set with the wide receiver under center and then they run triple back into the boundary.

"All the triple stuff with the two-quarterback stuff is probably one-third of the time. The scheme really speeds up inside linebackers' internal clocks, where the wide zone gets up on them. They want your shoulders not to be square and they get you gong east-west and cut it back. It's also a cultural thing with them, where their guys get tackled and sprint back to the huddle.

"They played (FBS) Charlotte and absolutely destroyed them. It was a clinic. They avalanched us. They avalanched almost everybody."

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Taylor's offensive philosophy is, "You gotta do something most teams aren't doing." His system is geared toward utilizing the personnel he has. Previously, he was more tight-zone driven and relied on the power but conceded that many teams were doing that. He started going to more wide zone in his last season at USD. Last year, the Tribe ran more wide zone than anyone in football. But heading into 2022, Taylor felt it was crucial to find ways to slow down the backside of the defense.

"We thought, what ways can we keep a defense more honest?" he said.

The staff studied a lot of what [Baylor](#) offensive coordinator Jeff Grimes was doing with the speed option; what [Coastal Carolina](#) did with its unique ways to build off of the triple option; and what Josh Gattis and [Michigan](#) did in 2021 with their motions and ways they dressed plays up.

The result for William & Mary was employing the triple option threat but dressing it up out of pro-style sets, from all sorts of formations, and motions coming out of it, with bootlegs, play action off it and screens. What's even more vexing for defenses is all of the two-quarterback stuff the

Tribe has built into it. What that has led to is essentially a positionless offense, where they're often workshoping the idea of, "Which player are we gonna put at which position?"

 play from the big [#wmHomecoming](#) win vs. No. 6 Delaware? Lots of options  [#GoTribe](#) | [#CAAFB](#) [pic.twitter.com/GldZbldYUx](https://pic.twitter.com/GldZbldYUx)

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"We might say, is this even possible?" said Acitelli, a former two-time FCS All-America lineman who played every offensive snap for [Appalachian State](#) when the Mountaineers pulled off their stunning upset of No. 5 Michigan in Ann Arbor in 2007. "We get pretty wacky in there. Coach London gives us a lot of freedom to try things."

Taylor inherited most of the William & Mary offensive staff when he was hired in 2020.

"We had all been there for like a year and a half together, and then it was Covid-19, so I'm sure it was hard for him to get to know us well," said Matt Johns, the Tribe's quarterbacks coach. "But it's been awesome. The guy has no ego, and in this profession, that is not common."

The O-line coach at the time, Gordie Sammis, was a big wide-zone guy. After the 2021 season, Sammis left for UConn and was replaced by Acitelli. Johns and Acitelli like to watch film together because they've realized that is when their best thinking occurs.

"The coolest part about it is the collaborative part of what we do," Johns said. "We'll all throw some crazy ideas on the board and maybe one or two stick each week."

William & Mary approaches each opponent by trying to assess how the Tribe will block the top five or six defenses they're going to face and what issues they might have. "Then, we start dressing it up, trying to stay away from the motions and shifts that are gonna give us those issues," Acitelli said. "We think about how are we gonna attack their structure? If we can make them pause for just a count, it really gives us an advantage. And it kinda goes week by week."

It also helps that they have talented players who are really smart. Newton might've been the most versatile player in FCS football in 2022. The 6-foot, 210-pounder led the team in receptions and was among the conference's top punt returners. He also completed a pass.

"He added such versatility to us because he can be a blocker and a triple option threat," said Acitelli. "He's the toughest wide receiver I've ever been around."

Newton is gone, as are tight end Lachlan Pitts and right tackle Colby Sorsdal, but everyone else returns. A team that went 11-2 in 2022 is optimistic it is primed for an even bigger season next fall. Wilson, the starting quarterback, threw 16 touchdowns and only seven interceptions while running for 534 yards last season. He looks like a budding star.

"He's super intelligent and very accurate," Taylor said. "Hopefully, he has a breakout year."

The Tribe are already more than halfway through spring ball. After that, it'll be back to the board to try to come up with more wrinkles to throw at opponents.

“Once we get through spring ball,” Taylor said, “we’ll delve into our research and hopefully, keep coming up with something that produces a lot of wins and is also fun, exciting, creative and that players enjoy playing in and people enjoy watching. Our guys are so smart, motivated and instinctive. They’ll come in and draw up plays. They’re just as involved in this thing as we are.”

*(Top photo of Caylin Newton in 2022: David Jensen / Icon Sportswire via Getty)*

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