



CHATting About Greatness: Applying CHAT to “the 46” Defense

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Using his antecedent knowledge about the game he loves (football), Braeden Weiss explores how cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) helped him to understand the creation of one of the most innovative defenses of all time. By researching and applying CHAT to “the 46” defensive scheme he figures out the secrets of the creation of “the 46” defense.

“Some say the 46 defense is just an eight-man front. That’s like saying Marilyn Monroe’s just a girl.” – Buddy Ryan, Chicago Bears former defensive coordinator and creator of “the 46” defensive scheme (quoted in Evans).

The Genius of “the 46” and the Genre That It Was

Every NFL fan should know about the 1985 Chicago Bears, their Super Bowl run, and what is considered to many as the greatest defense in the history of football, and arguably the greatest football team of all time. The statistics of the ’85 Bears defense show their greatness, especially in the playoffs when they beat teams with ease, beating the New York Giants 21-0, the Los Angeles Rams 24-0, and finally beating the New England Patriots 46-10 in the Super Bowl (1985 Bears Season). The secret behind the Bears’ defense that year was the revolutionary defensive scheme called “the 46.” It was named after the very physical and hard-hitting safety Doug Plank (#46), who was the starting strong safety (the player who is the farthest away from the ball at the beginning of the play) for the Bears in the 1970s when Buddy Ryan was hired as defensive

coordinator (Hardy Evans). This strategy was created under the philosophy that the only way to stop the passing game was to put the quarterback under pressure. Putting the quarterback under pressure means to get close to tackling or sacking the quarterback while he is throwing the ball. It started out as just a blitz package (several defensive play calls that are made out of the same formation), but it evolved and was perfected into its own scheme over the years (see Figure 1). Buddy Ryan is considered one of the best defensive coaches of all time because of his work ethic and genius at stopping the other team from scoring.

The writing genres (football plays) that Buddy Ryan used while creating the scheme wouldn't be as obvious to most people who have not learned about CHAT (a theory that helps a writer understand the complexity of specific writing situations). But those who have learned this know that writing genres are everywhere, like a scoreboard, a newspaper, or even a business card. The genre of "the 46" was very complicated and extensive. After learning about CHAT, I can see how all of the aspects of CHAT can be understood when I apply them to Buddy Ryan's creation of "the 46." In fact, I think that considering the "the 46" through CHAT analysis helps to show how the complexity of writing that every coach that has ever created a playbook or written a play on a chalkboard has encountered.

Before I get into the analysis of "the 46" I would briefly like to define CHAT. **CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory)** is a theory that helps us think through the process and reasoning behind any specific situation in writing. It is a very important concept to understand so that you can think in the way that gets the most out of your writing. It can be confusing at times, but the more you study and think about it, the clearer it becomes.

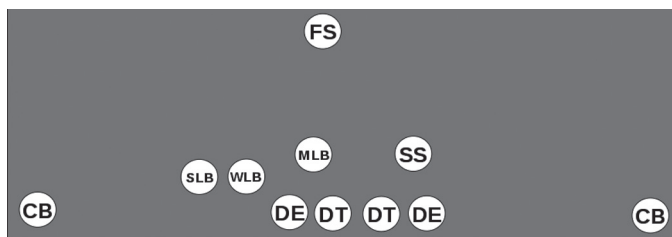


Figure 1: "The 46" formation.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and "the 46"

Writing was very prominent in the work of Buddy Ryan and his defensive schemes, especially in "the 46," and he was very skilled at it. With Buddy Ryan being a football player in college at Oklahoma State University, he wasn't considered a very smart writer, so he was an unlikely person to

be an expert at writing playbooks. If you look at one of Buddy Ryan's 46 defensive playbooks and know about CHAT, you can see that every factor of CHAT can be found extensively throughout, though some factors are more prominent than others. CHAT in Buddy Ryan's work is, in my opinion, not by accident. I feel that it's not an accident because I think that he thought through some of the aspects of CHAT (without knowing it) when he created the play. Though I don't think that he knew cultural-historical activity theory, we can still use CHAT to analyze "the 46." However, I think that from years of experience being a player and a coach, he understood how to create a playbook that would be effective in teaching and instructing his players how to run the scheme properly.

"The 46" was so innovative that even Bill Walsh, one of the greatest NFL coaches of all time, had this to say: "I had to use every bit of knowledge and experience and wisdom I had to come up with game plans to attack this defense. It's really the most singular innovation in defensive football in the last twenty years" (Bill Walsh). He is saying that no one in the history of football had ever written something like what Buddy Ryan did. This had to come with some challenges because something we all take advantage of is being able to research the genre we are writing, but Buddy Ryan didn't have anything similar to go off of except his previously written playbooks. Imagine how much easier it would've been for him if he had known about CHAT; he might have gotten the information across much easier, which could, in turn, make the learning process even simpler and make the players more in sync with the scheme, which would eventually lead to a better overall defense.

CHAT Analysis of "the 46"

Reception, or the way that writing is received by its audience, in my opinion is the most important CHAT concept used in the production of "the 46" (Walker). It is very complicated and anyone who has ever played football would know how much communication there is. In the *30 for 30* film on the 1985 Bears, Mike Singletary explains that Buddy Ryan would give a gesture from the sideline to Singletary that meant "automatic call," which gave Singletary the freedom to call what he thought was appropriate for the situation. So, the players' reception during the explanations of the way "the 46" was designed was crucial so that Singletary's call would be effective. In order for Ryan's intended audience (the players) to understand the scheme, he had to create the playbook in a format that the players could easily understand, while still showing them the complex responsibilities of the position they were playing. For example, a defensive end in "the 46" defense had basically three techniques to rush the quarterback. The first technique was an outside

technique in which he is to take an outside route to the quarterback then use something called a swim move where the defensive end hits the offensive lineman then brings his arm over the shoulder of the lineman and pushes with his elbow on the lineman's back towards the quarterback. The next technique is a crashing technique where the defensive end pushes the offensive lineman inside for another defender to attack the quarterback. Then, lastly, the defensive end goes about three yards up field and doesn't let anyone get outside of him. That is just one position out of eleven positions on the field, and every position has its own responsibilities and jobs, each one just as, if not more, complex. As you can see, Buddy Ryan understood the importance of reception and showed it in his writing of "the 46."

Representation, the way all authors think about and plan their writing, was another crucial concept that was used in the creation of "the 46" and is crucial in almost all genres (Walker). When Buddy Ryan made the final rendition of "the 46" for the '85 Bears, he knew that he had one of the best middle linebackers of all time at his disposal. According to Brian Holloway, Mike Singletary was the key to the success of "the 46," and Buddy Ryan made it that way. He had to plan out what position would do what by understanding the type of player that was at each position. If Mike Singletary wasn't middle linebacker, Buddy Ryan wouldn't have put such a big responsibility on that position. A lot of people criticize "the 46" by saying that the players and the three future Hall of Famers (Pro Football Hall of Fame) made the defense what it was, not the scheme. But Buddy Ryan knew the type of players that he had and the best way to utilize their skills, and that's what was so innovative about "the 46." Never before had any defense been created to utilize the players' skills, and there hasn't been one as effective since. A modern-day equivalent of this is the 2013 Seahawks when they used a 4-3 setup with a press cover 3, which is complicated, but all you need to know is that to run this type of defense you have to have the right personnel or it is not effective at all.

Production, everything that goes into the creation of a genre, is another crucial part of this genre (Walker). Without production in the genre of the playbook there would be no way for any of the players to learn the plays and schemes of "the 46." So, depending on the team, 20-26 defensive players would have to learn the scheme on the original document. The way production was used in making "the 46" was that Buddy Ryan typed up every aspect of "the 46" on the writing program that he preferred. He then printed every piece of paper and put them in an organized playbook. Then he made a playbook for each player that was on the defensive roster.

Distribution refers to when the author considers where his/her text might end up and the audience that might read it and also considers the way the genre would be given to the audience (Walker). Buddy Ryan had to

consider distribution while creating this genre. He considered and assumed that all of the players that would read the scheme would understand the football language and symbols. He and his fellow coaches were very careful about the way he distributed the playbooks to make sure that no other team would get their hands on the defensive strategy. The players also had to be careful about the distribution in the same way as the coaches. Because the defensive strategy could be the difference between winning and losing.

Socialization, or the interactions of people caused by the creation, distribution, reading, and post-reading of a genre, was also very important while “the 46” was used (Walker). During the creation part of “the 46,” the coaches had to socialize with Buddy Ryan to learn how to teach the position they coached and learn the correct techniques to use that would be effective in “the 46” scheme. The other coaches had to learn the scheme themselves because one of the downsides of having such an innovative strategy is that none of the other coaches that he was working with knew how to coach a scheme like that. During the distribution part of it, the players talked to and with the coach that gave them the playbook. Then, after the reading of the playbook, the players would go to film study before practice and talk about the keys to success for the defense and ask about things they didn’t understand. Then they would ask for tips on how to better utilize their skill when playing in the scheme.

Ecology relates to the environment that is affecting the author and what he/she is writing (Walker). Ecology was relevant in the work of Buddy Ryan because when he first started coming up with “the 46” it was a blitz package for a defense that was part of a non-playoff team, so he didn’t have the experimental freedom that he would have had if the team was a contender. The environment also affected how quickly and clearly he wrote “the 46.” For example, if he wrote in his quiet, peaceful office, then he probably wrote it more efficiently than if he wrote while he was at practice.

Activity takes into account all of the things that the author does while creating the text and is, in my opinion, one of the hardest things to grasp in cultural-historical activity theory (Walker). The activity system of “the 46” is very complex, and it starts with the philosophy that Buddy Ryan had: to stop the passing game you had to put pressure on the quarterback. That philosophy then branched off into many different ideas and actions that went into what eventually became “the 46” defense that made the ’85 Bears defense so great. Some of the activities that Buddy Ryan did while making “the 46” included the idea he had, the writing of it, the creation of the playbook, the distribution of the playbook, the analyzation of the playbook, and every little thing that happened in between.

There are several different modern variations of “the 46” in the NFL today, but none are as effective as the one masterminded by one of the greatest defensive coordinators of all time. There is no doubt in my mind that the NFL wouldn’t be the same without the revolution that was “the 46.” And Buddy Ryan continues to be one of the premier role models for the defensive coordinators in the modern NFL. The ’85 Bears defense is one of those teams that will never be forgotten and will always be the standard that all defenses compare themselves to. Applying CHAT to “the 46” has helped me understand all that went into creating this defensive scheme because none of it would have been possible without writing.

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Braeden Weiss is a student athlete at Washington Middle School who plays football and basketball. He is very interested in quantum physics and plans on becoming a quantum engineer. He loves playing and watching football with friends and family. He has studied the great history of his favorite NFL team, the Chicago Bears.

