"You could also certainly make the argument that some of these players are tight ends in name only,"
JUSTIN GALLANTY, FORMER YALE FOOTBALL PLAY-BY-PLAY BROADCASTER

The tight end revolution takes root from Yale to the NFL



LIZA KAUFMAN / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR
Yale's tight end room has been crucial to its offense, reflecting an evolution in tight end usage at all levels of football.

FOOTBALL

BY AUDREY KIM
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Yale's football program has propelled a number of tight ends — the hybrid blockers and receivers — from New Haven to the national stage.

The tight end position adds a level of versatility to offensive schemes, an element that Yale has capitalized on. Among the notable tight end alumni produced by the Bulldogs are Jackson Hawes '23, who plays for the Buffalo Bills, and Spencer Mermans, who transferred to Georgia Tech following the 2025 season.

"The Tight End position has become more recognized over the past few years," Yale football head coach Kevin Cahill wrote in an email to the News. "Teams are trying to use the position groupings to attack the speed of defenses. This allows an offense to be more versatile against defenses that are more pass defense oriented."

Hawes was drafted to the Buffalo Bills in 2025 and made their 53-man roster as the third-string tight end. During his rookie season, he took the field during 487 regular season snaps and participated in 43 percent of the Bills' offensive plays.

Hawes is known to be an outstanding blocker whose talents complement those of Dalton Kincaid, Buffalo's first-string tight end who heavily leans into his role as a receiver. When a team, such as the Bills, places two or three tight ends on the field at once, the formation is known as 12 or 13 personnel, respectively.

These tight-end-heavy personnel formations have been on the rise across all teams in the National Football League, with the Bills using 13 personnel about 34 percent of the time through the first two weeks of the 2026 season, according to Yahoo Sports.

"It's sort of a natural progression of offense based on what defenses have done over the last ten years or so. Defenses started getting lighter and faster, and playing more and more nickel and dime, meaning five or six defensive backs on the field," ESPN NFL analyst Mina Kimes '07 said in a phone interview.

Defenses have evolved to be lighter to better protect against long passes, which has allowed offenses to use heavier formations. These configurations favor shorter passes and running the ball, which help exploit opponents' weaknesses.

"In response to that, offenses, when they have multiple tight ends on the field, can run on those aforementioned light defenses, or when defenses respond by putting an extra linebacker on the field, they're usually able to find mismatches in the pass game," Kimes continued. "It sort of allows offenses to take advantage of defenses' weaknesses based on who they put on the field, but defenses have invested so much in their secondaries that at times they're kind of vulnerable to this sort of look from offenses."

The most common personnel formation in football is 11 personnel, which means one running back, one tight end and three wide receivers. When teams choose to play more tight ends, they forgo additional wide receivers, who specialize in catching passes from the quarterback.

However, when teams play in 12 or 13 personnel, their tight ends are able to either act as receiving options in a pass play or as extra blockers in a run play, giving the offense a new level of versatility which enables them to be unpredictable.

Cahill wrote that tight end utilization has been a focus of Yale's "in game planning and recruiting."

"It allows our offense to operate the run game and pass game more effectively," he wrote.

Mermans, who transferred to Georgia Tech following the Bulldogs' record-breaking 2025 season, earned a Pro Football Focus grade of 91.3 during his final year with the Elis — the highest PFF grade of any Division I tight end in either the FCS and FBS. Mermans and the rest of Yale's tight end room played a pivotal role in securing the Ivy League title and making a run in the FCS playoffs last year, before Cahill took over as head coach.

"The tight ends provided a headache with our defensive scheme," Cahill told the News, referring to the times he faced Yale when serving as Lehigh's head coach in 2024 and 2025. "They created more gaps to defend and played aggressively."

The advantage of using tight ends is that they are versatile, especially now that more and more tight ends are leaning into their roles as receiving options.

"You could also certainly make the argument that some of these players are tight ends in name only," former Yale football play-by-play broadcaster Justin Gallanty wrote to the News in a text. "Everyone who watches the NFL can easily name a handful of players who look like tight ends but are really functioning as wide receivers."

Three tight ends currently rank in the top 20 for NFL receiving yards in the 2026 season: Detroit's Sam LaPorta, Las Vegas' Brock Bowers and Arizona's Trey McBride. Buffalo's Dalton Kincaid is currently the Bills' top receiving player, outranking their wide receivers Keon Coleman and DJ Moore.

The tight end position evolved as a response to a shift in defensive formations — but defensive coordinators can adapt in response, according to Gallanty.

"This is all a cat and mouse game," he wrote. "Defenses will eventually adjust to teams running 12 or 13 personnel and then the offenses will make a shift in another direction. Nothing is permanent when it comes to football."

The main threat of tight-end-heavy formations is that they make an offense unpredictable, especially when a team features a tight end corps with both blocking and receiving talent.

"Something I think defenses want right now is a nickel corner or a third safety who's a really good tackler, and Seattle is a great example of that," said Kimes. "Their draft pick last year, Nick Emmanwori, who's an amazing player, pivotal to their Super Bowl run, allowed them to defend a run against teams that put a tight end on the field because he's so good at tackling, but then he's a safety so he can also cover too."

Adaptable players set themselves apart with their ability to be playmakers in any situation. As NFL offenses put more emphasis on tight end usage and defenses seek equally versatile players as a counter, teams' needs will be mirrored in their NFL draft picks.

"It's absolutely something that happened in the draft this year. There was a huge run on tight ends in the second and third rounds of the draft, particularly blocking tight ends, which was a signal that the NFL wanted that sort of versatility in their tight end group, and you're seeing a lot of them get a pretty significant amount of snaps early on," Kimes said.

The recent emphasis on versatility can be seen in all levels of football. Having more tight ends on the field allows teams to create offensive formations that can effectively execute both pass and run plays, while simultaneously adding an element of unpredictability.

And as NFL teams prioritize a need for multifaceted players, college football teams may choose to follow the same trends with their own play style and development.

Yale football currently lists five tight ends on its 2026 roster.

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STAT OF THE DAY

THE MOST COMMON PERSONNEL FORMATION IN FOOTBALL IS 11 PERSONNEL