

Roaring crowds place premium on silent count

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GREEN BAY - Ever since the advent of wearable technology, televised football games have come with a distinct auditory component.

In Denver and New York, where quarterbacks Peyton and Eli Manning were usually involved, microphones amplified the shared cadence that connected viewers to the largest city in Nebraska. Omaha, Omaha, Set!

In Green Bay, where Aaron Rodgers has run the show since 2008, the pre-snap verbiage that torments defenders was audible on almost every play. Greeeeeen 18. Greeeeeen 18. Hut-hut!

But those refrains are dependent on the offensive line hearing the quarterback behind them, and in today's world of large crowds and mammoth stadiums, communication on the road is never guaranteed. Such will be the case Sunday when the Minnesota Vikings host the Green Bay Packers for the regular-season unveiling of their new, roofed stadium, U.S. Bank Field. Screams from more than 66,000 fans will echo around the sleekly designed behemoth.

To combat the noise, the Packers' offense will rely on a silent count during portions of the game. Rodgers and his linemen will arrive at the line of scrimmage and, with the exception of a few words or finger points to set the protection, begin each play without an audible cadence. Silence, silence, snap.

"Certainly we have a plan in place for the noise," offensive coordinator Edgar Bennett said during the week. "No different than some of the things when you go back and look at some of the other stadiums that we've played in that have tremendous noise. We have a plan in place and we feel good that we'll be able to go out and we'll be able to execute. The key is getting everyone on the same page."

But what exactly is a silent count? How can teams run their offense without speaking before the snap?

At its core, a silent count is a form of non-verbal communication that indicates when the ball should be snapped on a given play. This is accomplished through signals that travel from the quarterback to the center, and from the center to the rest of the offensive line. Once the cue has reached the linemen, the silent count begins. And if all goes well, the line moves in unison to begin the play.

"I think a lot of it is the tackles have to know when you're going to snap it based off your body movement," center JC Tretter said. "So a lot of that just takes reps, and they have to trust the ball will be gone when it's supposed to be gone because they're going off your body movement. It's just consistency, it's just reps. Getting used to it."

Fans who watch football regularly have almost certainly witnessed a silent count, even if they didn't realize it.

Think back to weekends when your favorite team played road games in loud environments. Try to picture the pre-snap activity. Do you remember the center looking between his legs at the quarterback when the offense was in a shotgun formation? Or maybe you saw a guard stare at the quarterback before turning around to tap his center on the shoulder before each play.

If either of those actions sounds familiar, you've seen a silent count.

"Obviously teams do it a bunch of different ways," Tretter said. "You have the guard tap, you have the guard flash, you have the (quarterback) leg kick. There's just a bunch of different ways to do it."

So here's what happens in simplest form: Once the offense arrives at the line of scrimmage, the quarterback and his linemen survey the defense to align the protection. The quarterback then retreats to shotgun depth and scans the defense one last time. When ready, the quarterback makes a gesture to the center, who is typically looking back between his legs. The center then makes a gesture of his own, which triggers the official beginning of the play. Having seen the motion, the rest of the linemen begin counting to a predetermined number. The ball is snapped when the number is reached, and all five linemen move together.

But as Tretter mentioned, not all teams run their silent counts the same way. Some prefer to have their center look between his legs to get a signal directly from the quarterback. Others want their center to keep his eyes on the defense, so one of the guards watches the quarterback instead. The guard taps the center on the shoulder or backside once the quarterback is settled, indicating the play is ready to run. Or, as Tretter mentioned, the guard might flash his hand in the center's peripheral vision instead.

"It's really more so just getting the timing down," rookie offensive tackle Jason Spriggs said. "When Aaron wants the ball and when the center is going to snap it."

Exactly when the center snaps the football is contingent on the second part of the silent count — a trigger from the center to the rest of the line. This trigger tells the offensive linemen to begin the count, and the signal varies from team to team.

Tretter and Don Barclay, the Packers' backup center, both spent time with the scout team during the last few seasons. Among their responsibilities as scout team centers was to study and mimic the silent counts of opposing teams. Through film study they discovered

a number of different triggers used by teams across the league: raising the head, nodding the head, turning the head left or right, turning the head left and right.

And there are probably more.

"As a center you have full control over everything," Barclay said. "I feel good about that at center. You control everything, you kind of drive the bus. When you're there for a while and your people get a feel for how you're going to snap the ball, that helps out a lot."

The Packers' linemen would not disclose the details of their silent count, but a review of last year's game against the Denver Broncos provides a fairly clear picture of what takes place. That night, Rodgers and the offense faced arguably the loudest environment of the season inside Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Rodgers operated out of the shotgun for several plays on the first possession, and the offense used a silent count almost immediately. Corey Linsley, the starting center, looked back at Rodgers through his legs and waited for a sign at the beginning of each play. When Rodgers was ready, he lifted his leg slightly, and at that point Linsley picked his head up to the normal position — a potential trigger. The snap followed one or two ticks later.

And the Packers changed the pattern periodically to prevent the Broncos from jumping the snap. At times, Linsley returned his head to a normal position but no snap would occur. Rodgers then reset the offense and started the silent count process anew.

Tretter, the new starting center, followed the same silent count procedure last week against the Jacksonville Jaguars.

"Oh gosh, I deal with it every day going against our guys," defensive tackle Christian Ringo said this past week. "T.J. Lang, I think he's the best when it comes to cadence. When the ball moves, he moves — simultaneously. The ball and him move at the same time. So I definitely get a good look at it every day at practice."

Though Rodgers operated with a silent count in Jacksonville, the environment Sunday night might double or triple the noise. The volume inside U.S. Bank Stadium was measured at 114 decibels during the Vikings' first exhibition game last month. The record in the old Metrodome was 118.

Appreciation is born of comparisons, so here are a few: an emergency vehicle siren reaches 115 decibels; thunderclaps and chainsaws reach 120; the deck of an aircraft carrier is 140.

Now imagine running an offense in that.

"The crowds in Minnesota have always been loud," Rodgers said. " ... We expect it to get rocking when we get out there on offense."