ZONE OFFENSE

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ZONE DEFENSE IN BASKETBALL

Zone defense, as well as "alternative" basic defense after defense man-to-man with specific characteristics, imposes special activity of offensive players. This means that each team, and especially the coaching staff should determine the special offenses and movements of players against the zone defense, with which it will be able to play against each variant zone defense. Given the large number of variants of zone defense, it is almost impossible to drill special offense for each specific variation of zone defense. For this reason it is necessary that the basic zone offense modifies depending on the variant zone defense against which to play. Bearing in mind the common features of all variants of zone defense to keep more space and a ball, a small toy, it is possible to carry out an offensive game with a basic offense against the zone defense that will have modifications for adaptation to different variants of the defense. In basketball there are more types of zone defenses.

Contrary to the man-to-man defense, zone defense is based on strict coverage of specific area and the offensive player inside was found in this area. The defense is based on switching the offensive player when he moves from one area to another, or from the area of responsibility of one player in the area of responsibility of someone else. Each zone defense means precisely set schedule defenders. They are arranged so that each of them covering a certain space, and therefore the players who come to these places, either dribbling or running into and thus, all five defenders are responsibility to close driving and cutting lines.

The defenders should be concentrated in the shooting area and must respond to changes in position of the ball and the offensive players. Moving a defensive player causes the displacement of the other four, mostly to the ball. This means that the zone defense in the basic positioning is only in the starting formation and later should be transformed in relation to the position of the ball and the offensive players.

STRENGTHS OF ZONNE DEFENSE

- Zone defense is relatively strong in the shooting range.
- From the zone defense is relatively easy to organize a fast break and early offense, because it often happens that the players after rebounds are already in fast break corridors.
- Zone defense is good option to manage foul trouble. It is possible to hide a player who is burdened by large numbers of personal fouls.
Zone defense allows easy traps.
Zone defense is relatively easy to be transformed into another defense as half court zone press or half court man-to-man defense.
Zone defense allows players to concentrate on a smaller area and a small number of defensive elements necessary for keeping a space. In addition it is possible to successfully play this defense with players who have not expressed defensive skills necessary for aggressive man-to-man defense.
Zone defense can be very effective against teams that use a lot of screens with penetrations to the basket.
With this defense it is possible to control the tempo of the game so that the game slows down.
This is a great defense against the teams that do not have enough information.

**ZONE DEFENSE WEAKNESSES**

- Zone defense is not efficient against good shooting teams from perimeter, especially from long distance and corners.
- Zone defense is not effective against fast break and early offense.
- Zone defense are weak against one side overloading when in one court area are more offensive players than defenders.
- It is impossible to cover all spaces equally well against the well-skilled offensive players.
- It is difficult to specify the rules in relation to the defense of man-to-man. So it may be that there is a misunderstanding about which defensive player is responsible for any failed, especially for those who attack the "gap" area between the two zones of responsibility.
- Too long playing zone defense can lead to neglect of the basic defensive skills and fundamentals of man-to-man defense.

**ZONE OFFENSE PRINCIPLES**

The zone offense can be applied to attack all types of zone defenses.

- **The best way to beat a zone defense is with the fast break.** You can score two, perhaps even three easy points, but what you also do, which has an even greater effect, is demoralize the opponent.
- The second basic way to attack the zone defense is **put the offensive players in the gaps of the zone.** This means putting a player in between two defensive players, assuming a contrary alignment to the alignment of the zone.
- The third element entails the **use of screens:** single, staggered, and double. There is a difference between a screen on a man-to-man defense and a screen against the zone defense. If we play against man-to-man, we set a screen and jam the defender, who is guarding a teammate for whom the screen is being set. In the screen against a zone defense, however, we simply block the move of the nearest man to the screener, or we block the one nearest to the area where an offensive player positions himself. We do this because zone defenders cover a certain area of the court, and are not concerned with defending a particular player.
• **Passing the ball within the free-throw area** is another very important element used to attack the zone because from this position it is possible to pass easily in all directions, and to all positions of the court. In this area, we should try to exchange players quickly.

• **To move the defense** it is also very important; quickly change the side of the ball from left to right and vice-versa (as well as passing the ball inside will also keep the defense moving).

• The next essential element in the zone offense is depending on the coach's philosophy. **Overloading the strong (ball) side** of the offense with three or four players at a time.

• **Dribble penetration into the lane in between two defenders** will split the defense, and is another key attack element. In this case, the offensive player, who drives in the lane, must make a quick, two-count stop for better balance and then take a quick shot before the big man moves over to defend. The other option is to pass the ball to an open teammate. Drive penetration-and-shoot and drive-penetration-and-pass creates many problems for the zone defense.

• Another very crucial element, that I insist a lot, is that **the ball be passed inside a minimum of two times before a shot is taken**. By moving the ball inside, the defense instinctively collapses towards the ball and, therefore, loses its outside aggressiveness. When the offensive player receives the ball in the right low-post position, he must first see all his four teammates (for the possible swing pass), but he also has time and space for playing one-on-one.

• **Offensive player positioning.** If they face the defenders and start to move or cut in certain directions, it is easier for the defenders to see them and move to guard them. However, if the offensive players stay inside the lane behind the defenders, the defenders cannot see what's happening, and they must turn their heads. The offensive player (especially player on the short corners) has the advantage. It is now easier to pop out. With less distance to cover, shooting position is better and a shot can quickly be taken. If the defender does not see where the ball is, the offensive player can easily make a flash cut in an open area and punish the defender for his mistake.

• I would like to underline an important technical and tactical point against the zone defense; use of pass and shot fakes from triple threat position.

• The last element on zone offense is not a technical aspect, but, rather, a psychological one. You must emphasize the psychological aspect of the game, convincing your players that **a basket made against the zone is the reward, a product of the fine effort of the whole team as a unit**. The shooter must be sure that his shot will go in, while the other four players think that he will miss the shot and move very aggressively to get the offensive rebound.

• **The early start for the offensive rebound begins when the ball, still in the hands of a shooter, reaches the level of his chin.** During the lifting action, and immediately before the shot is actually released, the offensive players should be moving if for a possible rebound. Statistical data and video evidence, together with other "live" observations, clearly show that 90 percent of teams and players go for a rebound when the ball is actually released from the shooter's hand and is going towards the basket. However, it is too late at this point to go for the rebound. I think you would actually be better off running back to play defense because you will never get to the ball.
When your opponent switches to play a zone defense (teams rarely begin games playing zone defense) it is because they want to change the rhythm of the game or they want to change something with the intention of recovering an option of winning the game. As you probably know, it is not very common to see teams change from man-to-man to zone defense when they are winning the game. For this reason, the first 2 or 3 offensive sets against a zone defense are key in the development of the game.

If you are in control of the game tempo and you are running and capturing offensive rebounds the situation is not so critical but if the game is tied the first possessions against a zone defense are very important. Before talking about options against a zone defense, it is necessary to underline two points: offensive rebound and game tempo.

1. **Offensive rebound:** it is easier to capture an offensive rebound against a zone defense than it is against a man-to-man defense. Everybody knows that to perform a great box out in a zone defense is more difficult because the positions are different and normally players are more accustomed to practice boxing out when playing a man-to-man defense.

2. **Game tempo:** more often than not a team playing zone defense will lose some concentration in their defensive transition. Having less individual responsibility can produce some mistakes when taking care of the defensive balance.

These two concepts are the first aspects that should be considered with players when you start to work against a zone defense. After that you can start to talk about how to take advantage in offensive sets against the zone. Basically it is very important to maintain game spirit. I like to play on zone offense with two main concepts:

1. Inside game and
2. Pick & roll options.

It is impossible to read the game well if you have a huge number of offensive sets in your playbook. For this reason, I prefer to help the players in correctly reading the game: this is more important than if the defense are playing a zone or man-to-man.
LOW POST OFFENSE

My first option against a zone defense is the use of our inside game. In this case, we prefer to use only the inside game with inside players because it is easier to find great passing lanes inside if you have a big man in the paint that causes the defense to collapse.

- Player 1 will dribble straight to take one defender with him. 3 will overload the help side once this has happened (DIAGRAM 1).
- DIAGRAM 2: First option is the high/low game. 5 must perform a strong SEAL when 3 overloads.

**DIAGRAM 1**

**DIAGRAM 2**

- DIAGRAM 3: If 4 swing the ball back to 1, he will cut to the corner and 5 play side pick & roll with 1.

**DIAGRAM 3**

- DIAGRAM 4: If 4 swing the ball to 2 then they play side pick & roll (similar to “horns”).

**DIAGRAM 4**

**DIAGRAM 5**
PICK N ROLL OFFENSE

This is can be main offensive game style against man-to-man and zone defense and for this reason all players must have a great read of different situations. I want to use this advantage against man-to-man or any type of zone defense.

- Diagram 6: after a first pass to 2, 4 must move to ask for the ball down low. If 4 is not open we continue with our passing game.
- Diagram 7: if 4 can receive the ball he can look to score, 5 can make a basket cut, or 4 can kick the ball out to 1.

**DIAGRAM 6**

**DIAGRAM 7**

- **DIAGRAM 8**: The end of the play involves a middle pick & roll.

**DIAGRAM 8**

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ZONE OFFENSE 1

- Starting position is same like secondary break initial alignment.
- Better P&R guard is on opposite side of entry pass (cross move in transition to change guard starting position).
- Give & go 1 and 2 with 1 who fills left side corner /DIAGRAM 9/.
- First trailer (4) moves to corner and follows team move on wing /DIAGRAMS 9 and 10/.
- Down screen 5 for 3 (2) /DIAGRAM 9/.

**DIAGRAM 9**

**DIAGRAM 10**
• In the beginning it is possible to create advantage using a first P&R game /DIAGRAMS 11,12/.

**DIAGRAM 11**

**DIAGRAM 12**

• After 2 passes there is a close out situation 1 against 5. Be sure to use dribble penetration. Try to move the ball quickly and use circle move on the help side. 1 must attack 5 and 5 must maintain physical contact with direct opponent on help side, waiting for proper timing and pass /DIAGRAMS 13, 14/.

**DIAGRAM 13**

**DIAGRAM 14**

• If central zone defender (player 5) goes to help on P&R game, practically is the same like against man-to-man defense /DIAGRAM 15/.

**DIAGRAM 15**
ZONE OFFENSE 2

• If first pass against 2:3 zone is made to player 5 on the free throw line, player 2 moves to corner and player 1 should open passing line being on ball level and opening passing line from player 5 /DIAGRAM 16/.

• If he receives the ball from 5, they start to use P&R game as against man-to-man defense. Player 4 moves to the corner in order to open space for teammate 5 in the middle of the paint. Moving in that way offense transforms zone defense to man-to-man defense /DIAGRAM 17/.

DIAGRAM 16

DIAGRAM 17

DIAGRAM 18

DIAGRAM 19

DRIBBLE ZONE OFFENSE

DIAGRAM 20

DIAGRAM 21

DIAGRAM 22

DIAGRAM 23
OFFENSE AGAINST 1:3:1 ZONE

**DIAGRAM 48**

- Option for 3 on the ball side
- Pass fake to 1 and pass to 3

**DIAGRAM 49**

- Boulder #3
- Ball side 3 x 4
- 1 
- 2 

**DIAGRAM 46**

- Shooting option for 2

**DIAGRAM 47**

- 3 cut & staggered screen on the ball side