

Aggressive 1-3-1 Defense

By: Denny Lehnus

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Coach Lehnus won more than 800 games in his coaching career. He started his career as a high school coach in Illinois. He eventually went on to become the head basketball coach and Athletic Director at Kankakee Community College in Kankakee, Illinois. During his 19 years at K.C.C., Lehnus was named NABC National NJCAA Coach of the year and was inducted into the NJCAA Hall of Fame. His teams were consistently ranked among the top junior college teams in the country. In 1993 Lehnus returned to coach his alma mater, Anderson University. Coach Lehnus has been asked to speak many times through the years regarding his famed "Aggressive 1-3-1 Zone Defense." The following rules and concepts were first put together toward the end of his tenure at Kankakee Community College.

To better understand the aggressive 1-3-1, you first need to know why our program went exclusively to zone defense. At the time we decided to play an aggressive zone, we needed something different, a new look, to combat everyone else's man-to-man preparations and to better prepare our team by doing something that our opponents would consider different or which created a change for them. Secondly, we felt that the zone would reduce fouls. Although I did not keep statistics from the earlier high school years, I have support data from the last twelve years at the junior college level. Our teams have attempted an average of 227 more free throws per year than our opponents have, so we have reduced our fouls. Thirdly, there are many good man-to-man offenses, but I am not certain how many good zone offenses exist. Every year when a session is complete and I sit down to make notes, one of the things I put down is, "look for another zone offense." The fourth reason to support our zone strategy is to force offenses to be more patient, and with today's athlete that really is not "very cool." Introduction of the 45-second clock may reseat in the aggressive zone producing even more force offensive tactics. The fifth reason for using the zone is that it tends to reduce the effectiveness of a good one-on-one player, particularly inside. Another positive result of our zone is that with proper rotation of our rebounders should always at least know where to go and hopefully have the inside position by being in the proper locations. Lastly, which defense would you rather attack, man-to-man or zone? My answer to that question obviously, would be the man-to-man defense, and I am relatively certain that most of the readers will agree.

Why did we go to a 1-3-1 zone? If aggressively played, we felt that it was the most versatile of the zones. We could trap high, we could trap low, we could jam the middle, and we could force the ball to one side of the floor if desired. Furthermore, not many teams play a 1-3-1, so once again; opponents have to prepare specifically for us. There are not many effective ways to attack the 1-3-1, thus reducing our preparation time.

Prior to presenting the specifics of the 1-3-1, I would like to give you some of our basic philosophy. The 1-3-1 is really a very conservative defense. It is based on percentages. If we give up any shot, our first choice is to give up the outside shot. We want to protect the middle and limit our opponents to one shot. However, our defense is not a stand-around defense. If a player on the other team picks up the ball, we want a defender in his face immediately, and we try to maintain as much pressure as possible.

Another very important part of our defensive philosophy is that any distraction hurts the offense. Distractions include a lob pass, a kick out of bounds, a deflection, or any other type of interruption. Our players are heartily commended when they cause any of these disruptions.

There are some important keys to the 1-3-1 zone. Foremost, like anything else, if you're going to play 1-3-1, make a commitment to it. Next, it is necessary to sell your players on it by convincing them the defense will help them win. Players must work hard to master the aggressive 1-3-1 defensive skills and develop the physical conditioning to be relentless in playing

it. I have been asked many times how we get our kids to play so hard. I cannot tell you a specific thing we do other than showing the players we will not accept anything less, and if they are going to play, they must bust their rear-end from the time they cross that sideline until it is time for them to come out of a practice or a game.

Another key to the success of the aggressive zone is to get the five players on the floor working together as a unit. Although it is a very small thing, it is important to teach our players to move while the ball is in the air. Many defensives, which tend to be less aggressive and not particularly effective, wait until an individual opponent has received the ball before moving to play the man with the ball. We emphasize that when the ball leaves the passer's hands, each player need to be moving and to get to the receiver or any potential receivers as quickly as possible.

In general, we recruit players possessing over all quickness and intensity. Beyond these traits, the following will identify some of the characteristics we look for in each specific position.

The point guard needs to have excellent reflexes. Preference is given to a big point guard with a long reach, and one who is a physically talented player, because the point guard is given a lot of freedom to use his natural instincts. If this player is aggressive, and meets the described characteristics, he will get a surprising number of rebounds over the course of the season.

The post man can be your slowest player. He needs basic intelligence but he does not need to be a good rebounder. None of our post position players has ever lead us in rebounding in 12 years at the junior college level. Although he need not have great skills, the effective post man must be a hard worker.

The wing positions require the best athletes, because this is the toughest spot to play in the defense. Hopefully, these players have long arms, good quickness, and will produce the most rebounds. The wing players must be very aggressive, especially on the boards.

The baseline position utilizes the most aggressive player (we use a guard). Strength may be as important or as more important than quickness at this position. This is the ideal position for the over-achiever.

We emphasize a few basic keys on defense. First, we spend a lot of time telling our players to get their hands up. We also emphasize good balance, particularly on the weak side. We do not want a player standing on the weak side with his hands down, his knees stiff, and thinking he does not have nothing to do. Emphasis is on knowing what is going on at all times, keeping the eyes and head moving, and talking to each other. The ability to communicate is so important. As previously stated, it is important to emphasize to the players that they disrupt the offense in any way they can, whether through a kicked ball, a forced lob, or a turnover.

Our point guard (see #1 in Diagram A) normally will pick up with the man with the ball between the circles. He will force the ball to which ever side the offense wants to go. Once the offense decides which side it wants, we attempt to keep the ball on that side. We do not want the offense to dribble the ball back to the other side. The only accepted manner of return of the ball to the other side is via a lobbed or bounced guard-to-guard pass or a ball which is thrown to an offensive player who has been forced to move out of position to receive the pass. The point guard stays in the guard-to-guard passing lane, and forces a ball to a side. We like to "herd" the offensive man with the ball into the wing man's area without a lot of intense pressure.

The point guard has very little responsibility when the ball is above the free-throw line. We let him decide if he wants to come over and trap, as indicted in Diagram A. If he does not want to trap, he can drop off once the ball is picked up and try to stop the guard-to guard pass.

The post man's (#5 in Diagram A) rules are very simple. The post man has two basic positions. If the man and the ball are above the free-throw line, the post man is going to play on the ball side in a denial position. If the opponent is below the free-throw line, our post man plays in front of the offensive post man. We do not worry too much about technique, such as "step with your right foot and then pivot." We only ask the post man get to the front of the position any way he can. Our post man quickly learns this principle, because if they do not execute, they get a

seat by me. The final thing we emphasize to the post man is not to worry about the lob pass. You can not expect a post man to play in front then worry about lob passes.

Our wing men (#3 & #4 in Diagram A) pick up the offensive man with the ball, one big step in front of the free-throw line. They have a responsibility for protecting what we call the “seam” and maintaining a position of constant pressure. The weak side (away from the ball) wing man #3 drops into a position where he can protect against the pass to the low post. It is his responsibility to prevent a pass on the angle down low. He has to be in position to cover the diagonal pass at all times, and he must be prepared to move quickly up the lane if the guard-to-guard pass is made. The weak side wing man also has the responsibility for calling all cutters. A rule of thumb in teaching weak side wing play might be “prevent a diagonal pass to the elbow area at all times, and deny a good shot if a guard-to-guard pass is made.”

The first thing the baseline man is going to tell coach is that he cannot cover sideline to sideline. Although he is probably right, it is important to convince him that an all-out effort on his part is necessary in attempting coverage so that the total defense can be effective. We have developed a technique for convincing the baseline man that he can do the job if he works at it. We tell him not to think of covering sideline to sideline, but to think in terms of covering the floor in segments, i.e., from block to the sideline, from sideline back to the block, from block to block, and from block to sideline. If the ball is at the elbow (Diagram A), the baseline man’s responsibilities are to get to the block on the ball side in front of any post men. This movement must be made by going in front of all offensive players. By going in front of all offensive players (again, while the ball is in the air), the baseline man sometimes just happens to be in position to intercept a pass.

Some of you probably think you could defeat the defense by screening our baseline man, but we have solved that problem. We tell our baseline man not to get screened! If you tell him not to get screened, but he proceeds to get screened a couple of times, when he hears the horn for somebody coming in to hand him his warm-up, you will be amazed how little time it takes for him to learn how not to get screened, or at very least, or make an effort to fight through the screen.

One variation, which has worked well, is refereed to as “thunder” and is described in Diagram B. It involves a trap on the baseline. The point guard picks up the player with the ball between the circles and forces the ball to a side, as the wing man steps up to trap. Once the dribbler picks up the ball, the point man can drop off or stay in the trap at his own option. The wing man, however, has no option. He must stay and apply pressure. The wing man steps up, seals the seam, and applies pressure.

The post man is sliding in this position; the baseline man is on the block on the ball side; the weak side wing man has dropped. On the pass to the baseline, the point man goes to the high post immediately. When the pass is made, the wing man opens up to the inside and then goes to trap.

If an opponent attempts to attack the defense by sending a wing cutter to the basket, after the cutter passes the ball to the baseline and the defensive wing man goes right down to trap, a very wide passing lane is open. However, if the defensive wing man simply opens up he has taken away about six feet of that passing lane. The defensive wing man should be taught to go to the trap with an inside out pattern. The post man goes to the block on the ball side immediately. The baseline man moves out to the trap and has responsibility for stopping anybody from driving the baseline. The weak side wing man must move up the lane somewhat. If the ball is high, the weak side wing should cheat low. When the ball is on the baseline, the weak side wing needs to cheat high. The weak side wing cannot play tentatively, but must get in position to take away the offense’s pass to the elbow.

Definite rules need to be emphasized for the trap in the corner. First, if a man has his dribble and has the ball down in an offensive position, the defensive man remains one arm length away from him. The only time the defensive man guards the offensive man closely is if he has

lost the dribble or has put the ball over his head. When either happens, the defensive man moves quickly towards the offensive man with his hands up in order to contest the pass; however, he should not hack or slap at the ball. When an offensive man is trapped in the corner we want to avoid silly fouls.

We do not allow our players to leave their feet until the man has lost his dribble. We also have a rule for the point guard, which stresses high post and attack. As the ball goes to the baseline, the point guard goes to the high post. If the point guard finds no offensive player in the high post area, he moves approximately half way between the high post area and any offensive player in that area. When the point guard moves out to stop the pass out of the trap. The weak side wing has to call any high post cutters. When the point man hears "high post", he immediately returns to the high post area.

Another variation of this defense, in addition to thunder, is identified as "lightning" and shown in Diagram C. When the ball is in the wing area, there is no difference between thunder and lightning. However when the ball is passed to the baseline, we have a somewhat different situation. The post mans responsibilities stay the same (he drops to the block and fronts anyone). The point guard drops to the high post. The weak side wing man retains his normal responsibilities. The strong side wing man opens up, in the event the offensive man cuts. Then the strong side wing man denies the ball back to the man who passed to the baseline. The ball side wing man is positioned with a hand in the passing lane, trying to deny the ball back from the baseline. At this point the baseline man moves out and plays the offensive man one-on-one. What we would really like is for this player to bounce the ball twice and pick it up. If he does, we will guard him very aggressively, hoping to deny the ball back to the guard. The point mans rule in lightning is high post and retreat, so if he find no one in the high post area, he backs off to the weak side elbow area.

One special situation often occurs when the offense throws a skip pass or a diagonal pass to the elbow (Diagram D). When this happens, we try to convince our players to call "skip". Our weak side wing man, (hopefully while the ball is in the air) moves up the lane as quickly as he can, but he must be under control. He needs to get to that position soon enough so that the offensive player does not even think about shooting the ball. He should come up aggressively, with his hands up. The post man slides over in front of the low post man. If the offensive post man moves out on the baseline, our post man goes out and plays him like the baseline man. Our baseline man moves to the ball side and fronts the post until such a time he and the post man can make a switch.

In conclusion we teach our players that their defensive position is dictated by the position of the ball on the court. A player must first go to his position, as dictated by the location of the ball, and then he can adjust if there is no player to guard in that area.

This is a very basic defense, and while it looks a little risky at times, it is a very conservative defense...one that can win for you!

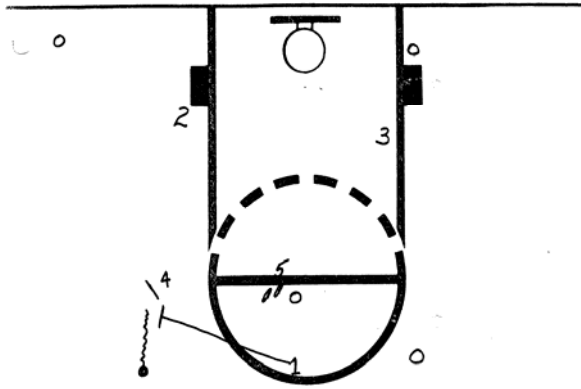


DIAGRAM A

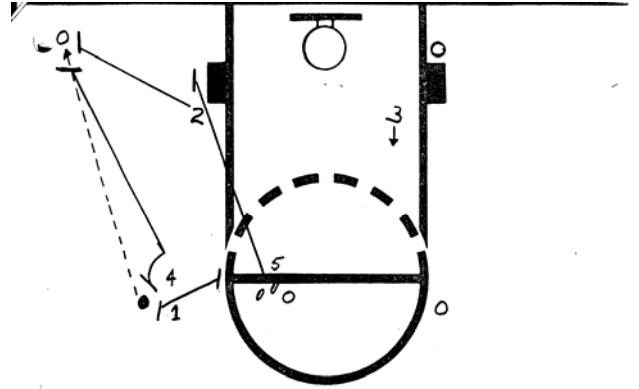


DIAGRAM B

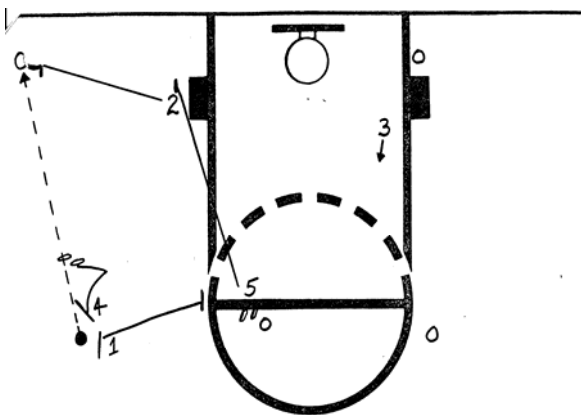


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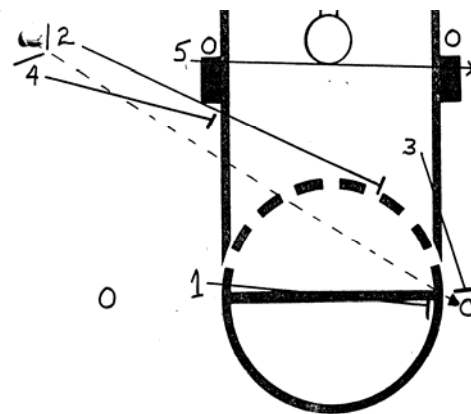


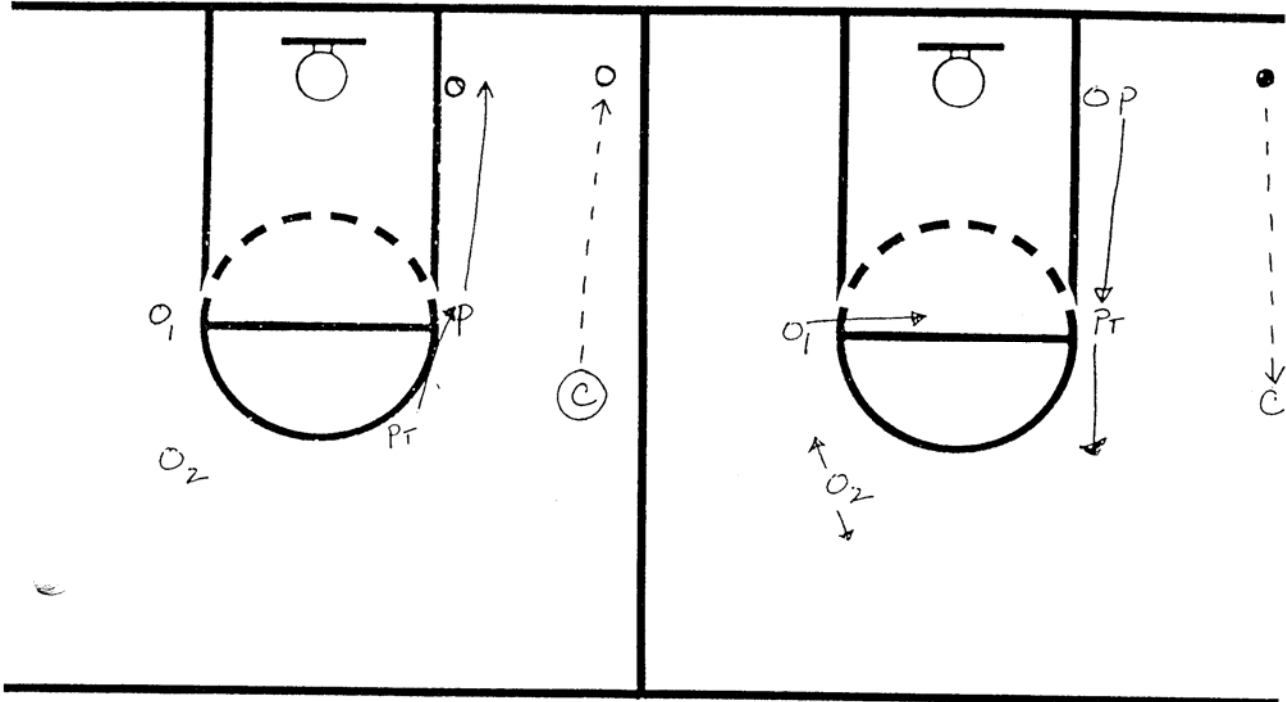
DIAGRAM D



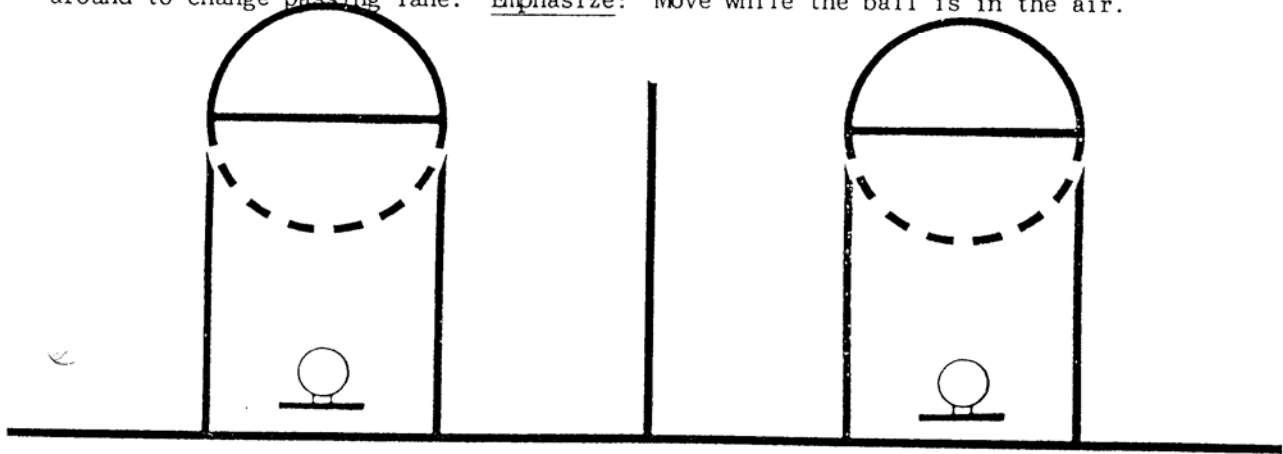


Point/Post Drill

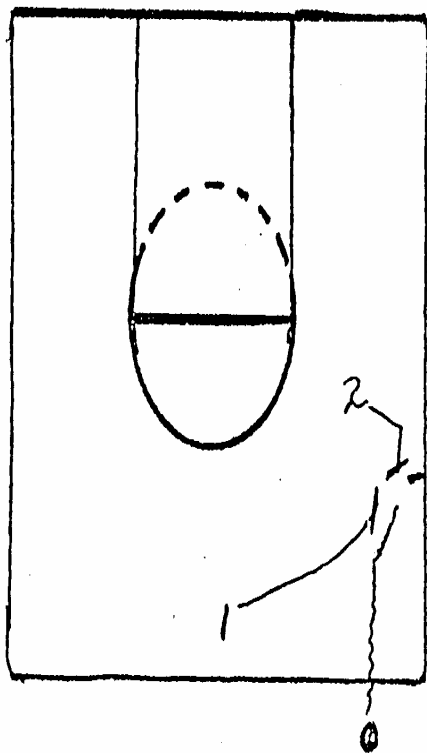
BASKETBALL STRATEGY PLAN SHEET



When Coach passes the ball to the baseline, post must slide to front low post, and pt move to HP area, and then play whatever defense Coach has called (i.e. Lightning or Thunder). On return pass to Coach, pt goes to passing lane post to HP area. O₁ can break to HP area any time, but must call "High Post" before he breaks. O₂ can move around to change passing lane. Emphasize: Move while the ball is in the air.



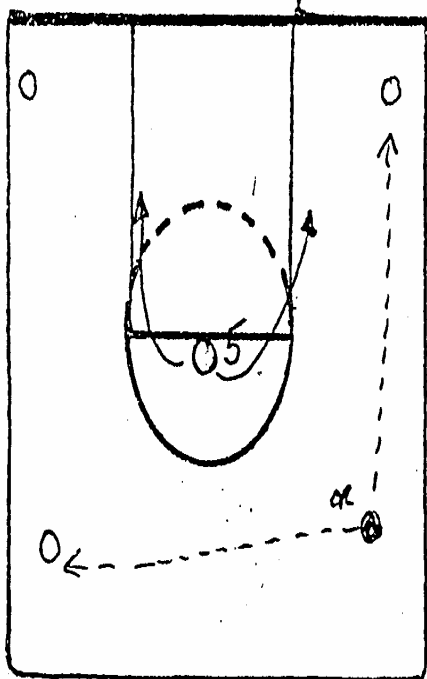
"High Trap"



1 must influence the ball to side then herd dribbler in that direction 2 comes up under control and stops penetration toward endline. Once the ball is picked up normal trap procedures.

- Emphasize:
1. No foul
 2. Hands up
 3. Ball can't be dribbled back to other side
 4. 2 can't get beat on sideline

"Post Defense"

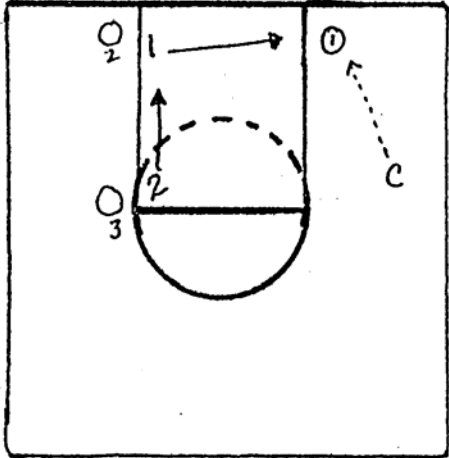


The ball is passed around and 5 must try to keep the ball out of the post area.

Position: Below FT line -- FRONT
At FT line -- BALL SIDE

If ball gets in defender has 10 fingertip push-ups

"Ring the Basket"

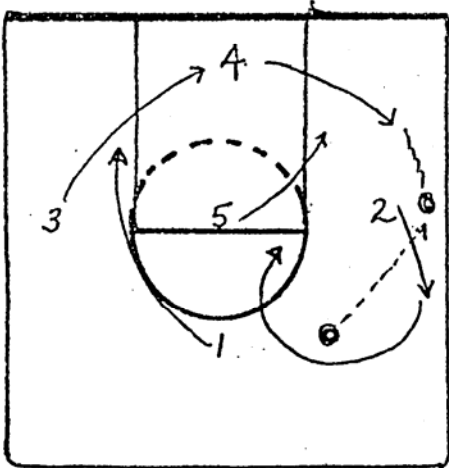


Coach passes the ball to 01
 As soon as the pass is made 1 must react to cover 01. 2 must then drop to cover both men with priority placed on the low man. 01 shoots or tries to pass to 02 or 03

Emphasize;

1. Don't move until the ball is passed
2. 2 must anticipate
3. Hustle

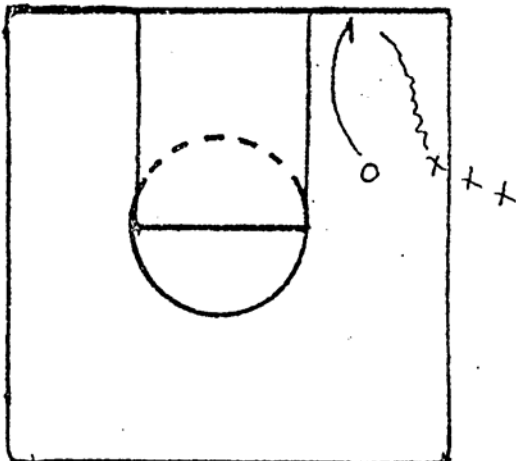
"Rotation"



This is simply putting the above drill into action in a game.

- 2 has missed pass so 4 rotates to wing
- 3 rotates to baseline
- 5 handles post area
- 1 rotates to weak side
- 2 hustles back to the point or high post as is needed

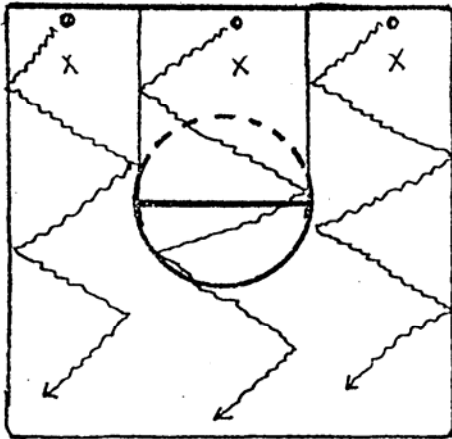
"Cut Baseline"



X has the ball and a head start. O must move to play defense and stop baseline drive.

- Emphasize:
1. Be in squared up position on baseline
 - 2..1 foot out of bounds
 3. Try to draw offensive foul

"1 on 1 Defense With a Towel"

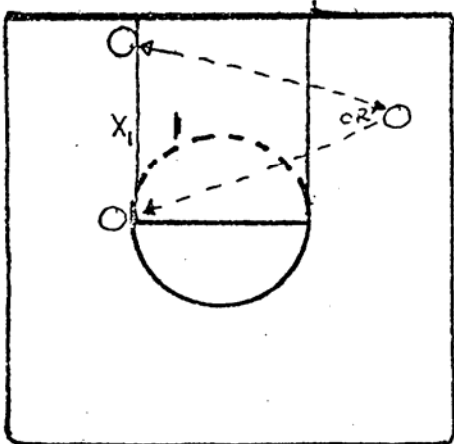


O dribbles in zig-zag pattern shown
 X has a towel around his neck with an end in each hand. X assumes defensive crouch and tries to cut O off at each imaginary sideline. When they reach the other end they change places and come back.

Emphasize:

1. dribbler push defensive man
2. Def. should be arm's length away
3. Def should cut off and square up at each side line.
4. Move feet - Broomstick between knees

"Anticipation Drill"

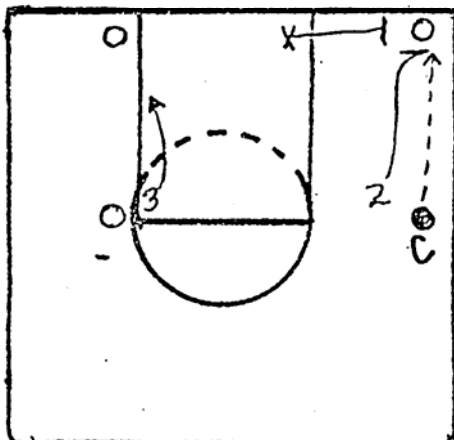


Ball may be passed either high or low
 X1 must stay until he deflects the ball
 he must anticipate and react.

Be sure O's do spread too far.

Can put defense on the passer

"Baseline Trap - Weakside Wing"



The ball is passed to the baseline and the trap is executed

1. no foul in trap
2. Trap can't be split
3. Don't leave feet until dribble is lost
4. Be under control
5. Don't get beat baseline
6. Weakside wing must stop cross-court pass
7. offensive players can't cross lane
8. 2 must trap from inside out