

Contributing to Team Offense as an Individual Player

Are You A Facilitator or a Hindrance?

by Alan Lambert

Introduction

Here we are again at the start of a new season. In thinking about more concepts to share with you young players one thought in particular came to mind that I feel needs addressing. There is an on-going battle in today's modern game of basketball. The battle: Too much emphasis is being placed on becoming a great individual player instead of becoming a great team player who takes advantage of their above average individual skills to facilitate a team's success. There are few players who will physically ever achieve the combination of superb physical skills, great decision making, and athleticism that let them reach the Hall of Fame, or to make the NBA. In fact if statistics are correct the odds are something like 1 million to 1 or more.

Great players can break down most defenses and cause substantial problems for their opponents. However, only great teams win championships. Greatness as a player isn't measured in scoring titles, it is measure in championship trophy's. To do that you need every individual player on your team capable of performing to the most of their ability in a way that helps your team meet offensive goals and achieve on court success. Even Michael Jordan's great skills, considered by many to be the best that ever played the game, didn't find team success with the Chicago Bulls until the onset of Phil Jackson's arrival as the coach, Scottie Pippen, added through the draft, and the many terrific role players such as Steve Kerr, Bill Wennington, B.J. Armstrong, Ron Harper and others arrived.

So where am I going with this Pointer today? The point is that you most likely will not become another Michael Jordan. But you can be make a significant contribution to your team's offense as an individual player. This will not be done so much because of your athleticism, as much as it will be an understanding the ways you contribute to team offensive success as an individual player. Today's Playground Pointer is meant to get you thinking about multiple ways to contribute to your team's offensive execution aside from simply shooting the ball and scoring points. Granted you must be able to shoot and score as they are basic requirements for all good players. However you can contribute in other ways as well. Let us see how.

Think In Snapshots

I want you to think of the action on the basketball court as a series of *snapshots or "frames"* in a motion picture. For the beginner their lack of experience as to what court cues to attend to results in the movie frames running by so quickly they miss important decisions. As you gain experience as a player, you become physically quicker, stronger, and more skilled. More importantly your library of stored basketball experiences begins to increase both in size and organization so that you can use these external court cues to access your library to pull out the most proper movement decisions and commands in milliseconds.

In addition as you become more experienced you are better able to filter out relevant and irrelevant cues from the game. *For example, you realize that the foot position a defender has in front of you does not put them in a position to stop your first step penetration. Or, the defender is positioned with both shoulders facing you so that they cannot immediately recover on a lob pass to your teammate they are guarding on a lob pass.* This has the effect of "slowing down the movie frames" from a decision making point, even as the game level you are playing speeds up. Some athletes have referred playing in situations like this as "the events being played in slow motion" where every detail is apparent. Your goal as a player is to be able to literally stop-action each "frame decision" in very rapid sequences so that you can "read and react", (as coaches say), at any point in time to make the correct decision.

Be Sure You Have the Right Tool at the Right Time

I mention this concept of thinking in snapshots because that is offensively how you want to begin to integrate your individual offensive skills within your team offense. Now having a large "*Experience Library*" and being able to slow the game down from a decision making point are only useful if your basketball fundamentals are so well developed that you can pull the correct "*skill tool*" out of your *basketball tool box* when you most need it. The more skilled tools you have developed, the more decision options you have at your fingers to assist you as an individual in reaching team offensive goals (scoring, passing, penetrating, rebounding, etc.). If you can't pass with you left hand, you have one less option, and the defense has one more insight into their "*Defensive Experience Library*" to use against you if you see what I mean. Remember continue to build your fundamental basketball skills as you learn to make smart individual decisions in your team's offense. Success as an individual in a team sport comes from being able to utilize the right tool (basketball skill) at the right time. Now let's get down to some specifics in terms of what you should be thinking in specific situations on offense.

Entry Into Your Team's Offense

Here are several tips which you should store in your *Experience Library* to assist you in being a facilitator of your team's offense rather than a hindrance:

1. *Get into position as early as possible so as not to delay the start of your team's offense.* Nothing will disrupt team offensive rhythm more than having to wait for a player to get into proper court position before the offense can be initiated.
2. *Create a lead (to receive a pass) only when your teammate with the ball is ready to pass and has their head up.* Cutting tool early puts added pressure on the ball handler and give your defender time to anticipate your cut and intercept the ball.
3. *Always make the defender first defend you going away from the ball prior initiating your entry cut.* Faking to get open best works when you use a "sort of boxing 1-2 jab" type action where your second action is initiated just as your defender responds to the initial action.
4. *When you receive an entry pass, square up, look like you are a threat to score* (even if you are not) and stay in the offense looking coolly and calmly for the next pass option. If your eyes (head) are moving all over the place, your powers of observation are decreased. Keep your head and eyes steady. Coaches tell players over and over again, to be a threat. Your eyes make you a threat more than any specific skill. If you doubt that try playing blindfolded. Any team where all five player catch and square to shoot (whether or not they take the shot) are better offensive teams because they force the defense to think "defend basket". There is no need to defend the basket against a player who doesn't see the basket. That results in more pressure in the passing lanes, and more difficulty in executing your team offense.
5. *If you cannot get open to receive an entry pass, take your defender away and re-create the entry.* If your defender continues to over play you so hard you cannot get open, use a counter play such as a back door or screening another teammate to get them open to keep the defense honest.

Playing With the Ball in Your Hands

Here are several tips for helping you to make good decisions while the ball is in your hands:

1. *Ask yourself, can I shoot and score right away after receiving the ball without forcing the shot against pressure?* If not you must move the ball. If you hold the basketball for more than 2 seconds in attempting to decide what to do with it (and if you have no clear plan of attacking the basket), you allow the defense to take control of the situation both on and away from the ball. Teach yourself to square up, look, if no shot available to count thousand one, thousand two.
2. *When you must move the ball you can do so through the pass or the dribble.* Ideally you want to move the ball through the pass because almost all players can move the ball faster by pass than by dribble over larger distances. Larger distances stretch defenses and force defenders to come out of their stances to cover that distance, meaning it is more likely there will be a defensive fundamental breakdown along the way.
3. *If all immediate passing lanes are closed to you initially, only then consider using the dribble to move the ball to a better passing angle to remove the defenders pressure out of the passing lane.* You can do this either by dribble penetration, or using a back up dribble which can effectively stretch a defense out over more spacing making it more difficult to deny open court area. Remember to be ready however to keep you dribble as you use the back-up so that you can re-attack if your defender gets overly aggressive pressuring the back-up.
4. *If you must dribble penetrate do so with an open mind.* Be ready to go all the way to the basket if no defense can get in front of you, to pass if a help defender steps up after beating your opponent, or to penetrate to create a passing lane which allows you to continue on in your team offense. What many young players do is to commit to the first two and forget the most obvious keeping your team in their offense. Once you penetrate beyond the "snapshot" of no return, you have broken your team's pattern and you will either score, or force a shot or pass that is outside of what you normally practice. Be sure that when you go beyond this snapshot, that you are nearly 100% sure you can get to the basket and score, or can draw a teammates defender to open up a score for a teammate.
5. *If you must penetrate think "I want to draw at least 2 defenders".* If you can draw 2/5th of a defense to the ball, at least one teammate is open. Keep this important point in mind however. Kobe Bryant in his first 2 years in the NBA consistently drew 2, 3 and even 4 defenders and could score. The Lakers, however, had problems with team offensive rhythm and continuity. So much so, that when Kobe was unable to score a lot after breaking the offensive pattern, the Lakers often lost. In the last two years as Kobe's *Experience Library* has grown, he is better learning when and when he should not penetrate and at what times of the game it is critical he stays within the offense. The result: 2 NBA Championships.
6. *Finally, when you have the ball, you must think have all of our team's offense's primary and secondary options disintegrated far enough to warrant by-passing that option and proceeding to the next.* While that may not seem like an critical point, it is in fact a very important point in fitting individual play into team offense. Team's practice both plays execution and shots for a reason. To reduce uncertainty in decision making and to build confidence in your ability to offensively execute. When option 1 or 2 are not open, go on to 3, and then 4. Your chances of your team scoring are much greater in what you practice than in anything you can "pull out of the air" to create.

Playing Offense Without the Ball

Here are several important points to keep in mind when you do not have the ball on offense:

1. *You should be doing one of three things when you do not have the ball. You should be preparing yourself to come to and receive the ball, preparing to set up a teammate via a screen to receive the ball, or positioning yourself away from the ball with good spacing (about 15 feet) from a teammate to make it less possible for your defender to play help defense.* The good spacing may ultimately lead to your getting an open shot if a teammate can draw your defender to the ball or to rotate help on another teammate.
 2. *When you are preparing to come use a screen, make yourself a threat at the position you are awaiting.* In other words, make your defender defend each position you are not in addition to the one where you want to come to the ball. Most often this can be achieved by always taking one or two steps in the direction of the basket. Why? Because if the defender doesn't honor your "threat cut" you can continue to the basket for a pass and score. The greater this threat, the more likely you will get open coming off a screen.
 3. *Always keep in mind that a cut off a screen to the ball is useless if your timing is poor and you arrive either too early or late.* The same is true when creating entry leads. Both are total wastes of motion and energy. Timing is everything in basketball, you can count on it. When you want to cut? When the passer has their head up and is ready to pass of course.
 4. *When you are preparing to set a screen, be sure to set the screen at the point designated in the offense which gives both a great angle cut to the ball and basket.* Even as you screen keep peripheral vision on the ball and defenders so that if someone cheats early to help on the screen you can slip the screen and cut for a pass and score.
 5. *If you are not required to set a screen at a given snapshot frame, nor are the person coming to the ball, be a threat by either flashing to create an additional passing outlet beyond the primary option in your offense, or create spacing by taking your defender out of help position.* If your defender does not follow you away from the ball, you instantly become a skip pass option away. Keep in mind that if you are opening up away from the ball to move enough to keep an open passing lane to each of your teammates. Never hide behind any defender unless you have the intent to force a head turn to create a flash cut opening.
- There are many more concepts worth learning if you pay close attention to your coach as they teach your set and motion offenses. It is not enough to just know the basics of the offense, you need to expand your Experience Library, and Skill Tool Box. As both expand, you will begin to find that the snapshot frame rate for making decisions slows down, as your speed and effectiveness as an individual player in your team offense increases. And that is worth learning because you will never make the contribution you are capable of as an individual player to your team success unless you do.

And the Answer Is?

Finally, train yourself to internally ask final two questions in any situation on offense. *Have we, as a team, practiced the counter play you are about to undertake in breaking the pattern? If so, do the results of breaking the pattern lead to an easy score or wide open shot? If the answer to either question is no, stay within your offense and let the team create the shots and openings for you.* Making plays you have not practiced are doomed to consistent failure. In any case the ultimate goal of your team offense is to create easy and make able shots for you and your teammates where you individual skills are best utilized.