

2-2-1 PRESSURE DEFENSE

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by Jim Calhoun



At the University of Connecticut the 2-2-1 zone press defense has been used with remarkable effectiveness. This defense plays an integral role in a Connecticut defense which annually produces a high number of turnovers, yet still is able to hold opponents under 40% field goal shooting. The ability of the 2-2-1 to pressure teams and force tempo, but also allow coverage to keep easy baskets to a minimum is most appealing to my philosophy.

This particular press is used for several reasons. First, we feel that the work ethic and the individual talents of our team members fit into the scheme of the press very well. By combining attitude and hard work with our quickness and athleticism we are able to play this defense very effectively. In turn we can play this press very aggressively and dictate tempo of the game with it. The 2-2-1 press forces our opponents to attack us; in effect, teams cannot just bring the ball upcourt without incurring a ten-second violation or being forced to make a decision as to where and how to avoid traps. Certainly it causes opponents to think about something other than their halfcourt offense. This, of course, is a major objective of the press, which is not designed to take the ball away from opponents nearly as much as to force them into mental and physical errors on which we will capitalize.

The 2-2-1 is a very versatile press. We can get into the 2-2-1 off of made baskets or free throws, backcourt out-of-bounds situations, and even off of missed shots attempts. Furthermore, various options can be utilized within the scheme and execution of the 2-2-1. In addition to our standard version, we can match up out of it, we can pull the press back into a "retreat" version, and we can also trap particular players at different locations. Each of these options will be discussed in this report.

There are seven keys to the press:

1) PRESSURE - Ball pressure is a fundamental key to the success of the press. We emphasize solid, intelligent pressure on the ball, which in turn will enable us to apply other steps in executing the press.

2) FORCE - Our second objective is to force the ball to a sideline - also referred to us an "alley" - where we can set up a trap between one of our "first line" defenders and a "second line" defender.

3) CONTAIN - In addition to being able to pressure the ballhandler and force him to the sideline, we must be able to contain him and keep the ball out of the middle of the court or the press will break down

4) "1-4" PRINCIPLES - Within the 2-2-1 press alignment we emphasize one defender applying solid pressure on the ball, and the remaining four defenders in good, balanced help position.

5) ROTATE - After we funnel the ballhandler into a trap, each of our defenders must rotate accordingly and make the proper defensive adjustments. This becomes even more important when there is a ball reversal.

6) CHALLENGE EVERY SHOT - When the ball is advanced against our press and a shot is taken, it must be challenged aggressively.

7) REBOUND - We must secure the rebound and limit second shot opportunities.

INITIAL SET-UP, SLIDES, AND ROTATIONS (DIAGR. 1)

The ball is not denied on the inbounds. Tight pressure is immediately applied on the ball after it is inbounded by the first line defender on the ball side X1. The opposite frontline guard X2 pinches to the middle and must stay at or above the level of the ball as it is being advanced. The strongside second line defender X3 plays "cat and mouse", a game of hedge and recovery always staying in the passing lane and encouraging a lob pass. The second line weakside defender X4 must



play in tandem and communicate with the deep man, X5. X5 will move to the strongside to defend the deep “alleyway” against any lob pass to a frontcourt offensive player. X4 will quickly rotate back to the basket. It is important to note that any pass to the middle is greatly discouraged. We must KEEP THE BALL OUT OF THE MIDDLE for our press to be effective. The ball must go around our press, never through it.

We do not discourage the reversal pass because we do not believe that will hurt us if our protection is good. After our first trap, we will rotate, adjust, and recover to retrap, a unique feature of our 2-2-1, which has contributed significantly to the success of our press. Many teams trap once before pulling their press back. We will trap a number of times in a single possession before tacking off the press. Another point we emphasize is that we do not believe the long diagonal pass will hurt us, simply because we will discourage that pass and make it very difficult to throw by placing good pressure on the ballhandler.

DIAGRAM 2

On a ball reversal we will employ the fundamental “bump” principle and make the appropriate rotations. As the ball is reversed, the entire zone quickly rotates back to our regular 2-2-1 alignment. As the ball is reversed from 1 to 2, X1 immediately pinches to the middle and “bumps” X2 back over to the strongside where he can pressure the ball and force it sideline. In maintaining our objectives of keeping the ball out of the middle, X2 must hold for X1 momentarily before this adjustment is made. To execute this movement efficiently and effectively requires good recognition, anticipation, communication, and hard work. X3, now the weakside second line defender, must trap back toward the middle into what we call “short middle” position. X4 is now the strongside second line defender, applying good “hedge and recover” principles and attempting to lull 2 into a sideline trap. X5 rotates back to the basket for protection in what we call “deep middle” position.

This is a good example of our “1-4 Principle” at work. Initially X1 pressured the ball while X2, X3, X4, and X5 essentially formed a “box” of help behind him ready to react. On the reversal X2 now pressures the ball at the point of our “1-4 Principle” with X1, X3, X4, and X5 providing help behind him.

DIAGRAM 3

We are always trying to spring out traps in the alleys along either sideline. It is important to note that we are not as concerned with where the trap is made in the alley as long as

it is a good trap. We tell our players that “we want a good trap, not necessarily an early one.” By a “good trap” we mean an aggressive, solidly executed trap in which our defenders have their hands up, put pressure on the ball, and body up to the offensive player to make it more difficult for him to escape or make a pass.

We can create good traps in the backcourt as well as in the frontcourt. Again, we allow the reversal pass - we would like for the opponents to use as much up the 10-second limit to get past halfcourt as possible. Moreover, once the ball does get advanced just over halfcourt, ideal trap situations arise and we tell our players “this is where we’re going to get them.” Another advantage of having the having the trap occur in this area is that we



have less ground to cover should a trap be broken.

When a trap is broken each player must work hard to recover back into good defensive position. The short middleman and the deep middleman must work very hard to protect the middle area and the basket. In essence the deep man must move with the basketball or “mirror” the basketball as it is advanced.

We can recover back into a man-to-man or zone defense according to my preference. I will normally indicate this to the players through a verbal or numerical signal.



DIAGRAM 5

In the match-up option of the 2-2-1 we will make an adjustment to deny the reversal pass after it is inbounded. This tends to confuse or distract opponents after they have initially tried to confront the regular version of our 2-2-1.

In diagram 5 the ball is inbounded to 2. X2 immediately puts solid containment pressure on 2 and attempts to force him sideline. His counterpart on the frontline of the press, X1, jumps up to guard the inbounder and deny the reverse pass. X3 moves up and matches up with 1, who ordinarily would have been X1's man.

X4 and X5 will also match up to the frontcourt personnel. Hence, the match up becomes more like a man-to-man press except that we will also trap out of this version of the 2-2-1 press. Rotations will be similar to those in the regular version of the 2-2-1 press.

The secondline defender on the weakside will be a pivotal player in this configuration because he must play off his man and be ready to rotate and protect against a long pass while a trap is being made.

DIAGRAM 6

Depending upon the scouting report of an upcoming opponent, we may find it advisable to vary our 2-2-1 pressure by pulling it back and retreating some. This presents another look for our opponents to contend with. We simply will start our frontline people back toward halfcourt (as opposed to the foul line extended area where they would normally pick up opponents). When executed properly this version of the press is also very effective at helping us to alter and control the tempo of the game.



DIAGRAM 4

We will oftentimes try to spring several traps within each possession depending on the strength of our opponents. We will obviously gamble much more, encourage more traps, and therefore may allow a few more easier hoops against weaker teams. We take fewer chances with multiple traps within a possession against the stronger teams on our schedule.

Assume they throw out of our first trap near midcourt to a player ahead in the alley. Continuing the action from diagram 3, if 2 throws up the sideline to 4, X5's job is to control 4 by not sprinting out wildly at a live ball. X5 has to time his close out to correspond with X4 coming from midcourt. As X4 and close a trap, X3 must cover the strong-side block and basket, X1 has to sprint to cover anyone in the top of the key to elbow area, and X2 takes any pass out of the trap back towards midcourt.

Other options available to us include versions where we fake traps or we leave one player alone to handle the ball against the press. This creates more confusion on the part of our opponents. We are prepared to make their adjustments because we practice the press and incorporate breakdown drills into our daily regimen in order to enhance the effectiveness of the press. To sum up, then, we feel that the 2-2-1 press is a very effective means of controlling tempo and providing us with opportunities to capitalize on the mistakes of our opponents. At the same time we feel it is a very safe press because we work very hard at the necessary rotations. Further, it is not a press where we emphasize a very early trap and have the whole floor the recover (such as the 1-2-1-1, for instance).

With hard work, good communication and teamwork, the 2-2-1 is a very effective means of full or 3/4 court pressure.