

Teaching Defensive Basketball

Told Not Coached

As a young basketball player in high school, I can't say that our team was taught how to play defense. Usually the coach, who was not very knowledgeable about basketball, would simply say "cover your man" or "stay between him and the basket". Initially, the coach would quickly show us how it was done, but beyond that we had to pick it up on our own. When the coach urged us to be more aggressive, we'd be nose to nose with our opponent, trying to steal the ball. Most of our defensive knowledge came from watching older players perform or from pick-up games. Gradually the defensive aspect of our game improved but unfortunately we also picked up some bad habits. These flaws would hurt the team when we were in tight games.

At all levels of basketball, it is important to teach the "abc's" of defensive basketball on a regular basis in order to build a solid foundation. It's interesting that at the university level coaches still spend considerable time focusing on the defensive basics even though they must teach a variety of defenses and presses.

The ABC's of Defensive Basketball

1. Stance

Teach the players to assume a proper defensive stance. From a standing position, have the players bend their knees and rest their hands on their thighs just above their knees. Their feet should be shoulder width apart. Have them raise their bent arms until their hands are around waist level, slightly outside and ahead of their body. Their hands should be relaxed and facing upwards. The head should be up, which straightens the back. The player is now in a proper defensive stance.

What this stance does is lower the body into a balanced position from which the defensive player can quickly react to the

offensive player's moves. Many players at the house league level tend to stand tall and lock their knees. In order to make a move, the defensive player must now lower his body into a defensive stance. This maneuver takes a second, which provides the offensive player with a one to two step advantage.

Staying in a defensive stance is not comfortable. It puts a strain on many of the body's muscles which will be sore following the first few practices, but in time, the muscles will strengthen and the stance will become natural.

2. The Shuffle Step

Defensive players do not run around in the defensive end of the court; they shuffle their feet quickly while maintaining a low center of gravity. It is crucial that players learn this skill as early as possible. The coach should demonstrate how to move laterally by pushing off the insides of the feet. The coach should emphasize that the players should never cross their feet. Also, the coach should demonstrate how to shuffle forwards and backwards. Make sure that the players practice with different feet forward as they shuffle forwards and backwards.

It is wise to use a wave drill on a regular basis to practice the defensive shuffle. The coach stands in front of his players and directs his players' movement by waving his hand. It is important that the players react to hand movement rather than vocal commands because it forces them to keep their heads up and their eyes on the coach. In a game, they have to play defense and keep their eyes on the ball, which is similar to this drill.

As the players practice this drill, the coach should check to make sure his players have assumed a proper defensive stance, maintained a low profile, and are

balanced. Develop the technique first and then work on adding quickness.

3. The Drop Step

The drop step is one of the most important moves in defensive player's skill set. Whenever a ballhandler begins to dribble or a player without the ball begins a cut, the defender must take a drop step on the side the offensive player is moving. This should be the first reaction by the defender. For example, if the ballhandler is dribbling right, the defender would react effectively by dropping the left foot back a step. The drop step enables the defender to maintain position in front of the offensive player and, as the defender continues to shuffle left, it forces the offensive player to change direction.

4. Play Defense by Moving the Feet

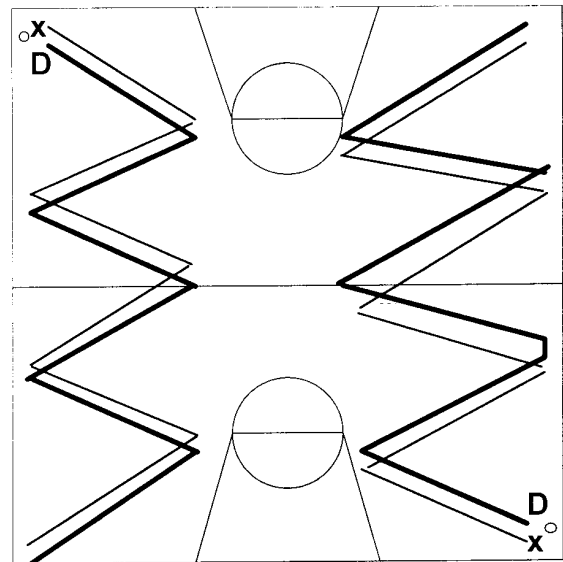
Having observed house league basketball on a regular basis, it has become evident that most players have not been taught that their first reaction to a dribble or a cut by a player involves moving their feet. Far too often, the first reaction of many players is to reach with their arms. Reaching for the ball is the one of the worst defensive habits to develop. Coaches and players must realize that reaching for the ball locks the knees and eliminates the players' ability to shuffle their feet. Also, it leads to fouls because the defender is off balance.

It is important to teach players to play defensive basketball with their feet. The game of basketball is usually won or lost based upon who controls the space on the court. The defender is trying to control a very small area – a half meter on either side of his body. He works hard to control this space and make sure his man does not beat him on the dribble or cut by him if he doesn't have the ball. On the other hand, the offensive player is trying to take

advantage of any space provided by the defender. The offensive player uses fakes to increase this space so that he can drive or cut past his defender.

Control Dribble – Defensive Shuffle Drill

To practice the proper footwork, the coach should have the players work in pairs. The offensive player dribbles in a zigzag pattern down the floor using a control dribble and a cross-over dribble or a reverse pivot to change directions. The dribbler works on protecting the ball. The defender works on his footwork – the drop step followed by the shuffle step, forcing the offensive player to the sidelines. The defender will not reach or try to steal the ball. If the dribbler exposes the ball, the defender can swat underhand at the ball; however, he should maintain defensive balance and not reach to steal the ball.



Far too often this drill becomes a competition. The offensive player wants to beat the defensive player and drive to the basket. That is not the intent of the drill. The main focus should be on the offensive player dribbling down the floor under control while the defensive player is working on his footwork and forcing the offensive player to change direction. Emphasize that the

defensive player's main responsibility is to maintain a good defensive position. He should not be trying to steal the basketball. The intensity of the drill depends on the players' skill level. The coach should position himself at center court so he can see the drill from the defender's point of view and provide feedback.

5. The Defender's Objective

The defensive player's objective is to control a very small amount of space on the floor. If he is covering a dribbler, the defender uses the drop step and then the shuffle step to take away a straight line access to the basket. If the dribbler drives, the defender should force him on a diagonal line away from the basket. It is important that the defender keeps his feet moving. Too often a defender works hard for the first few steps but then eases up. A talented offensive player recognizes this flaw and continues to drive hard to the basket and beats the defender in the last two steps.

The defensive player should be taught to assess his opponent's strengths. What is his opponent's dominant side? Is his opponent capable of dribbling efficiently with either hand? Usually a player is much stronger on one side than the other, especially at the house league level.

It is important to teach a player how to overplay his opponent's strong side. This is easily done. The coach should show the player that he must position himself so that his head is in line with the offensive player's dominant shoulder. This effectively takes away a direct drive to the basket and forces the dribbler to take a more diagonal route to the basket or to dribble with the non-dominant hand. Usually a player is not as comfortable or as quick on the non-dominant side, which enables the defender to make up the half step lost by overplaying the dominant side. It is important that the defender does not overplay the non-dominant side as the dribbler often tries to

switch back to his dominant side. The coach must constantly remind the defensive player to overplay the dominant side and force the opponent to dribble and do lay-ups with his weaker hand.

How close should a defensive player be to the dribbler? Usually the defensive player should be at an arm's length from the dribbler. This prevents the dribbler from passing on the first step. The defender can easily make a drop step and take away the direct route to the basket. However, this suggestion can vary depending on the distance from the basket. If the dribbler is closer to the basket, the defender must close the gap and play within half an arm's length; however, he has more help from his teammates as the key is a congested area.

Practice Individual Defense Using a One on One Drill

During games the players have a restricted amount of room to maneuver because of the other defenders, but they do not practice under these conditions. I would suggest that the coaches supervise the one on one drill. Restrict the area for the one on one practice by having the players begin seven or eight feet from the basket and beat their man. Restrict the time to six seconds. These restrictions will force to players to make moves that they face during their games. Also, with the coaches providing feedback, bad habits will be eliminated. The fact they are competing one on one with half of their teammates watching forces them to perform at a more intense level. Make sure they practice from different angles to the basket.

What is Aggressive Defense?

When a coach urges his team to be more aggressive, what message do the players receive? Usually they believe they should be more physical and play "in your face" basketball. Consequently, the game

becomes quicker and scrappier with more reaching, clutching and grabbing. They are focused on gaining possession of the ball.

I view aggressiveness as speeding up the game; however, the emphasis is on pressuring the offensive players by outworking them and anticipating their moves. This can only be achieved by moving the feet quicker and taking away the offensive player's space. The defender will play closer to the dribbler, making him feel pressured and forcing him to perform at a quicker pace. It is important that the defender does not focus on stealing the ball. Too often this results in reaching for the ball and ends with an unwanted foul. Normally, an offensive player under stress tends to force his shots. Just by having the offensive player work a little harder than he normally does in practice, the defender has done his job on the dribbler. He does not have to shut down his opponent!

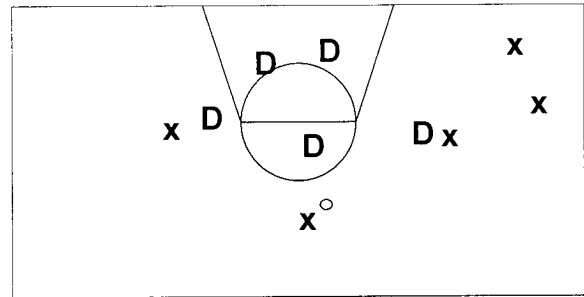
Pressure can also be placed on the players without the ball. The defender can do this by taking away cutting lanes and forcing the offensive player to move farther away from the basket in order to receive a pass. The defender should always work hard to frustrate his opponent, forcing him to play at a pace he does not use in practice.

Coaches should teach their players how to deny the ball. Nothing frustrates an offensive player more than an efficient defender denying him a pass. Even if he receives a pass, his defender has closed the gap and is ready to play aggressive defense. To play this kind of defense leaves the "back door" option open. At all times, players away from the action on the non-ball side of the court should have sloughed off their men to help their teammates.

What is "Help" Defense?

Recently, I watched several boys bantam house league games. Watching them play defense really bothered me! It

seemed that the coaches were intent on clogging the key, so much so that their players were not really practicing efficient defense. Here is an example.



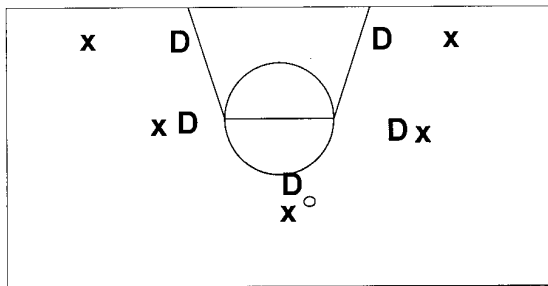
Far too often defenders are not guarding nor sloughing off their man. They are simply plunking themselves in the middle of the key. This is considered playing a zone defense. The defenders in the key are not within guarding distance of their men.

It is very evident that the two defenders are not guarding their men. Yes, their opponents were scoring fewer baskets, and the coaches were pleased with winning the game.

It bothered me that the coaches were doing a disservice to their players. Instead of having them play aggressive man-to-man basketball, they were content with having one or two players guarding the key. This general disrespect for the rules governing bantam basketball forced the teenage officials to call technical fouls on the offending team, and then have to explain their rationale to the coach.

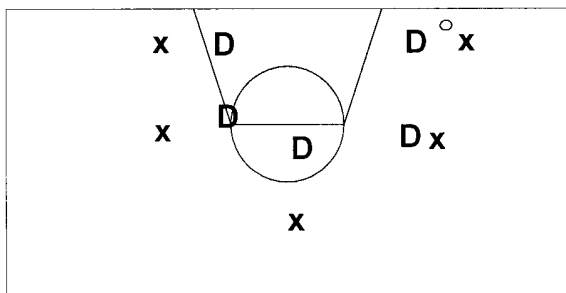
What is the rule regarding man-to-man defense versus zone defense? If the defensive player is covering a primary receiver, a player adjacent to the passer, the defender must be within an arm's length of his man. If the defensive player is covering a secondary receiver, the defensive player must be within two arms' length. Here are two examples.

Ball at the Top of the Key



Notice that the ball is at the top of the key. The two players adjacent to the ball handler must play their man. The two players on the baseline can slough off their players and have one foot in the key. When the dribbler drives towards the basket, the other players can respond and move into a help position.

Ball on One Side Down Low



Note that the ball has moved to the right side of the court. The player adjacent plays his man tightly, while the other players slough off their men. They are still defending their man but have moved into a help position. If help is needed, they can slide over and pick up a player driving to the basket.

In both of these examples, the defenders are learning how to guard their men in relationship to the position of the ball. If help is needed, they can aggressively move into a help position. This is a skill that the players must learn and coaches must teach. Simply allowing a player to camp in the key might lead to fewer baskets, but unfortunately it also develops bad defensive habits. Most basketball associations banned the use of zones below the midget level because young players were not developing

their defensive skills properly. Coaches must learn not to play games with this rule. Do your players a favour: teach them how to play aggressive defense and apply zone principles by showing them how to slough off properly, thereby abiding by the rules.

Playing Two on Two & Three on Three

Practicing two on two or three on three within a restricted area mimics game conditions. Have the guards play two on two in half of the three point area. Two post players can play two on two within the key. Three on three can be played in the three point area. Under the supervision of the coach, the players can work on denying the ball, sloughing off their man, providing help defense and double teaming. Also, they can work on boxing out their opponents and controlling the backboard.

Offensively, the players can practice getting into the open, driving against a player, using the give and go and in the case of three on three, setting a pick. This kind of practice creates the same pressure and situations that the players will experience in games. Also, the physical demands of two on two or three on three competitions raise the players' endurance.

From time to time it would be beneficial to involve the players in a full court three on three game. This activity incorporates the fast break, which puts additional pressure on the defenders. Coaches should make sure that the play does not become raggedy. It is important that the players learn to run a controlled fast break, and if it is not there, to settle down into a half court game.

Playing Defense Against a Post Player

A defensive player should restrict the post player's options. This is mainly done by denying the ball. If a post player cannot receive the ball inside, he loses much of his effectiveness as he is forced farther from the basket where he is not as effective.

A defensive player should restrict the post player's movement into the middle of the key. If an offensive player receives a pass in the key, he has an excellent opportunity to score. To restrict the offensive player's movements, the defensive player must anticipate his opponent's move and quickly shuffle into position to block the line which the offensive player wants to take. Only practice enables a defensive player to hone his ability to anticipate his opponent's move.

A defensive player must keep his arms raised. This allows him to take up more space in the key and forces the post player to take an altered, less aggressive route. By keeping his arms raised, he also creates smaller passing lanes. Two defenders' combined arm span cover almost the width of the key. Keeping the arms at one's side simply creates larger passing lanes and makes the passer's task much easier.

A defensive player must constantly fight for position. This does not mean that the defensive player is pushing the offensive player. What it means is the defensive player is moving his feet quickly to be in position to deflect a pass, take away the offensive player's line into the key, square up when the opponent receives a pass and box out after a shot is taken.

A defensive player must apply constant pressure. The defensive player must work hard to maintain an advantage. He shouldn't give the offensive player an edge by being overly aggressive, moving out of position trying to steal the ball or taking a foolish foul. When the offensive player takes a shot, the defensive player should apply

pressure by getting a hand in the other player's face. Blocking shots is intimidating but making the other player change his shot is just as effective. The defensive player should always maintain his balance whether he's blocking a shot or defending a dribbler. Once he is off balance, the defender can not respond quickly enough to box out and rebound.

Remember that the defensive post player always has help from the guards. Whenever an offensive player has received a pass and has his back to the basket, the defensive player should apply pressure and expect his teammates to double-team the offensive post player. Don't foul the offensive player in the key because he is under extreme pressure from front and back and is in a rush to make a move.

A defensive player must always have his eye on the ball. As well, he must anticipate the pass or be prepared to help out teammates. Whenever the defensive player tries to help a teammate, he must keep in mind that his player is now free. Be prepared to respond to a pass in that direction. Most guards tend not to shoot the ball but use the drive to draw the defenders to them and then pass off. Don't be overly aggressive in helping out. Many times just faking to help will force the guard to make his move.

Summary

It is wise to practice defense on a regular basis. As the players' individual skills improve, the team's defense improves. This only happens if the coach plays a proactive role during practices and games.