



## **THREE OF A KIND**

### **Course 01: Coach Ettore Messina**

### **Lesson 01: Basic Defensive Concepts**

**Language: English**

#### **DEFENSE INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to the Thirst Edition of the Euroleague Basketball Institute On-Line Clinic. I have decided to start this course in the same way that I start when assembling a new team: talking about defense. The reasons for doing so are simple and I will attempt to explain them.

First of all I believe that the game of basketball evolves from defense (gain possession of the ball), to fast break (trying to score before your opponent is organized), to a set offence (attempting a high percentage shot using the talent available and being organized).

I find it difficult to imagine a different mental approach concentrating first of all on offence and then on defense, because the first objective of every team is that of gaining possession of the ball in order to use it in the best possible manner, preferably without our opponent having scored.

From a psychological standpoint, this approach has an evident advantage: an efficient defense which forces opponents to commit errors reduces the pressure of "having" to score at all costs in order to stay in the game.

Being convinced that we must “protect our half court” without allowing easy baskets allows our players to try to break more often, and in general shoot with less fear of missing.

Finally the aspect that is closest to my heart: working together on defense is the truest essence of teamwork, where all of the players contribute, where they are committed with actions that rarely will bring them public recognition, but that bring a very specific benefit to the team.

Leaving alone a player you are assigned to guard in order to close out an attacking player who has beat one of your a team-mates implies not only a willingness to help others, but also the conviction that another team-mate, for an instant, will worry about covering your assignment whilst you are helping on defense.

The true, profound significance of teamwork is the availability to help your team-mates and the confidence that you will be helped by others whenever you need their help.

The creation of a team is not only achieved by technical and tactical work, but also in the definition and acceptance of the principles of social interaction which almost always find an application during coaching actions.

Our daily defensive work is fundamental to define and reaffirm the ethical principles we wish to hold ourselves to in order to play and live together.

## **Lesson 01: BASIC DEFENSIVE CONCEPTS**

In this and the upcoming lessons we will take care of individual defense, with the assumption that the basic fundamentals are understood (defensive slide, blocking out for a rebound, reading passes), and concentrating our attention on the concepts that contribute to our tactics in team defense.

Which are the objectives that we have in our team defense?

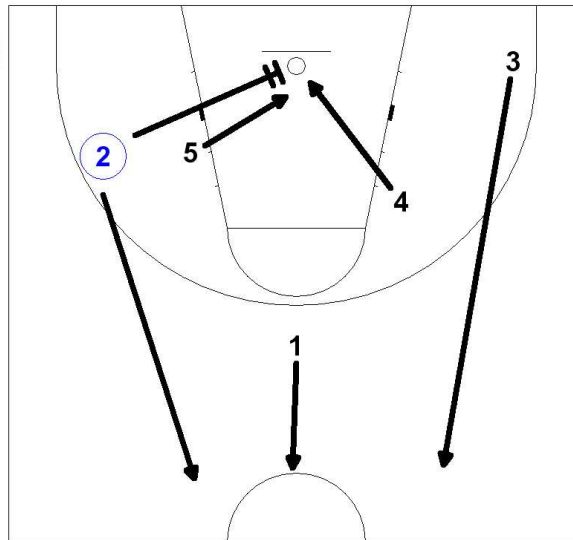
1. No easy fast break points
2. No open set shots
3. No offensive rebounds

### **NO EASY FAST BREAK POINTS**

We must clearly define the rules regarding our defensive balance, explaining that if we eliminate the possibility for our opponents to score 20 fast break points, this will mean that our defensive goal in a game will be to hold our opponents to around 60 points.

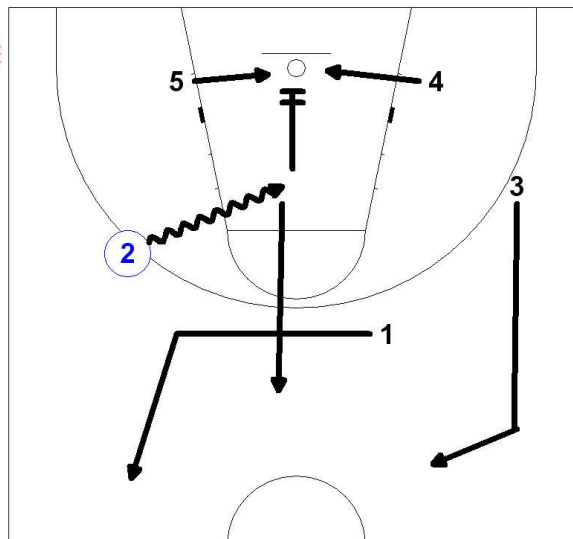
On offence usually I ask the three outside players to start to defend our basket whilst the two inside players go for the offensive rebound (**diagram 1**).

LESSON 1  
INDIVIDUAL DEFENCE  
DIAGRAM 1



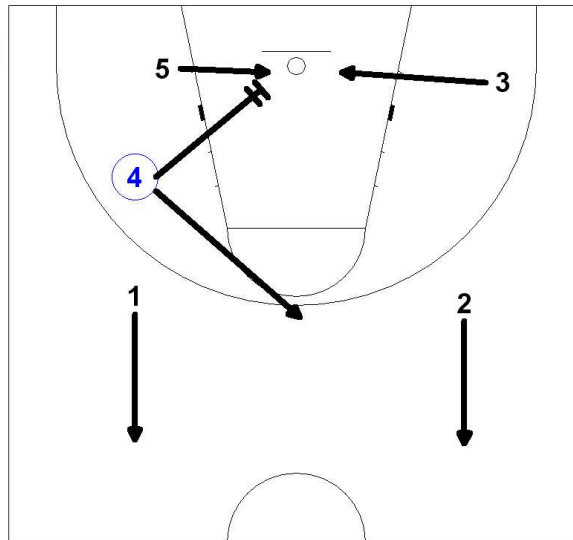
If one of our outside players dribble penetrates we will have our two inside players go for the offensive rebound and the outside player who has shot the ball will be the front of a defensive triangle, with the remaining two outside players taking their position from him (**diagram 2**).

LESSON 1  
INDIVIDUAL DEFENCE  
DIAGRAM 2



In the case of one of the inside players taking a jump shot from outside, I believe that the other inside player should go for the offensive player along with the strongest outside player (usually the small forward) and have the jump shooting outside player form the front of the defensive triangle, whilst also being able to capture any long rebound (**diagram 3**).

LESSON 1  
INDIVIDUAL DEFENCE  
DIAGRAM 3

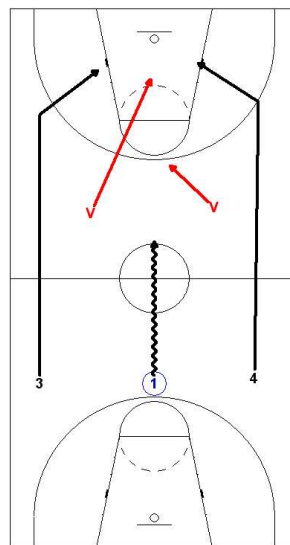


Some teams send three players for the offensive rebound, but I am convinced that it is more important to have a strong defense against a possible fast break by your opponent than gaining one or two more offensive rebounds during a game.

In practice I try to emphasize help defense with the use of several fast break drills where the defense are at a numerical disadvantage, as is often the case during games.

A simple example of this is in **diagram 4**. In the classic 3v2 2v1 drill (the two defenders come back in the other direction against the player who has shot or turned over the ball) starting with the two defenders at the centre circle; these must come in when the three offensive players start attacking at full speed, talking amongst themselves to decide who should defend the ball and who should defend the restricted area.

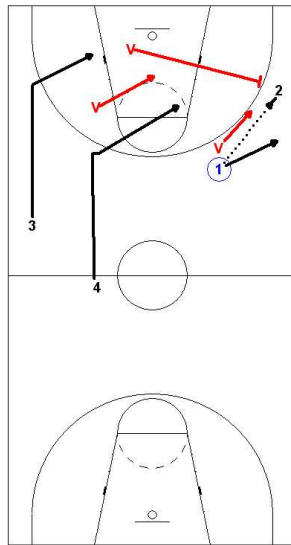
LESSON 1  
INDIVIDUAL DEFENCE  
DIAGRAM 4



The evolution of this drill is illustrated in **diagram 5**, with 4v3 Continuous. The three defenders in this case also start from the centre circle, and must

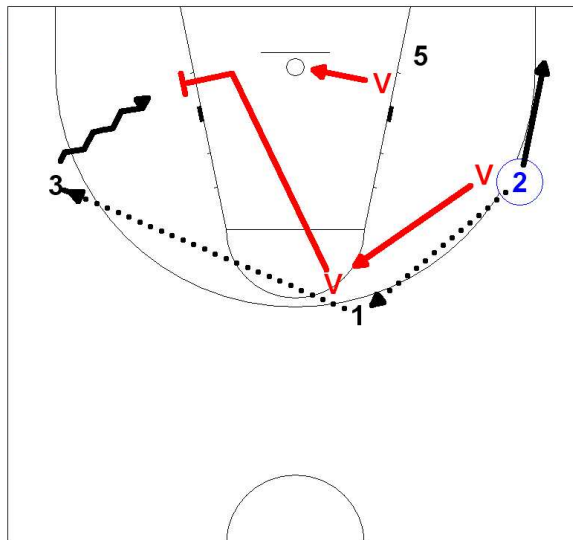
recover defending 1v1, defending the player with the ball and his two closest team mates, leaving the player furthest away from the ball alone.

LESSON 1  
INDIVIDUAL DEFENCE  
DIAGRAM 5



This situation forces the offence to find the free player with rapid ball movement, and at the same time the three defenders must talk to each other, defend the ball, and continue their adjustments by always defending the player with the ball and his two closest team mates (**diagram 6**). The three defenders, in numerical inferiority, start to adopt a fundamental principle in our defense during this drill, that is to “move whilst the ball is in the air and not once it has arrived at its destination” and is one that we will revisit in many other situations.

LESSON 1  
INDIVIDUAL DEFENCE  
DIAGRAM 6



### NO OPEN SET SHOTS

We want to force our opponents to shoot under the most pressure possible, making any shot attempt difficult, or closing out the shooter forcing him to dribble the ball, leaving us open to possible dribble penetration, or to make an extra pass that was not desired.

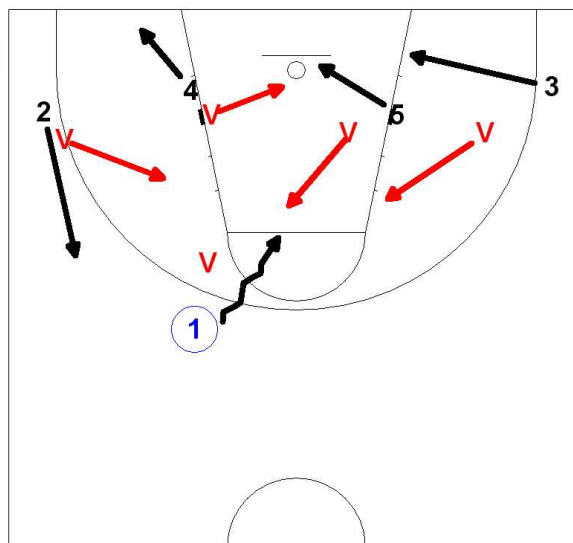
This is our basic rule; sometimes, as a tactical choice, we may choose to allow a player who has a particularly low shooting percentage to shoot, in order to achieve a better defensive coverage of players who are very dangerous. We will make this choice on very few occasions, because I believe that leaving a player unguarded, regardless of who the player is, results in increased danger, either because he can pass the ball with more ease, or because he can set screens for his team mates (that are dangerous for us) due to not being closely guarded.

## NO OFFENSIVE REBOUNDS

As an offensive possession does not finish with a shot but is continued with an attempt to capture a possible offensive rebound, so does a successful defensive possession finish when a defensive rebound has been captured. A mistake when blocking out, with the result of an offensive rebound being captured by our opponent, can have terrible consequences not just on the scoreboard, but particularly in the psychological aspect of a team who may have worked very hard for 20 seconds. It is important to remember that the defense that has broken down the least will be less vulnerable in the rebound, because each block out will be more secure. If too much dribble penetration is permitted, it is probable that the shot will cause problem to at least two or three defenders who will be helping and recovering, with an obvious difficulty to establish a good physical contact to block out a specific opponent.

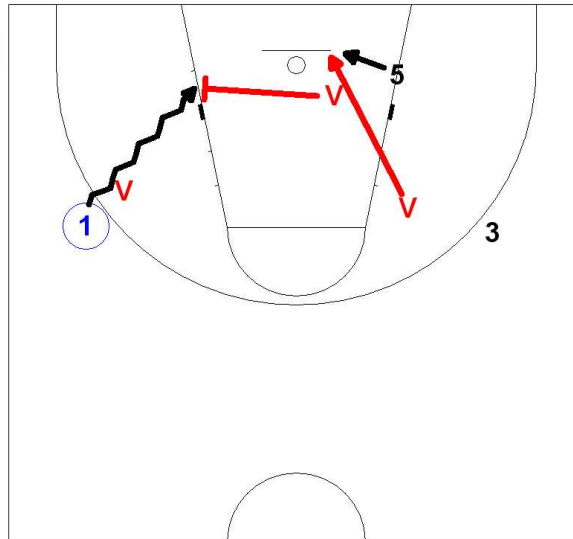
In the same way, if we abuse of our help and recovery, we will have difficulty to keep our opponents far from the basket at the moment of the shot attempt. The situation illustrated in **diagram 7** demonstrates this: as soon as there is dribble penetration in the centre of the restricted area whether it is the defenders of the two inside players or the defenders of the two outside players who have to help their team mate and have great difficulty to effectively block out their opponent.

LESSON 1  
INDIVIDUAL DEFENCE  
DIAGRAM 7



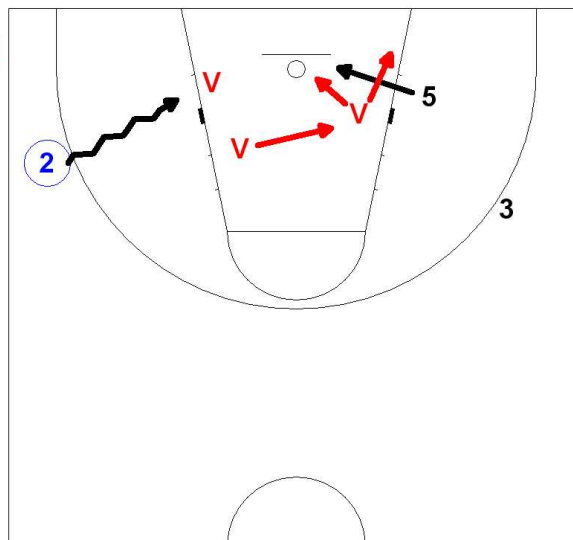
Another situation of great difficulty for the defense is that illustrated in **diagram 8**. If there is dribble penetration along the endline and help from an inside defender there needs to be a second help from one of the outside players to defend the inside offensive player who has been left momentarily unguarded. If this inside offensive player immediately goes after the offensive rebound, it is more than likely that the outside help defender finds himself underneath the basket making it impossible to rebound the ball.

LESSON 1  
INDIVIDUAL DEFENCE  
DIAGRAM 8



In these cases we must insist in practice and work with our players to make sure they block out their opponent and keep them outside of the rebounding area, with their back parallel to the endline, pushing their opponent to an area where the ball cannot fall (**diagram 9**).

LESSON 1  
INDIVIDUAL DEFENCE  
DIAGRAM 9



Once we have established what it is we wish to achieve with our defense it is appropriate to define how we will go about achieving our objectives.

1. Emphasizing individual responsibility
2. Slowing down the timing of an action
3. Taking away the preferred passing angles of our opponents

## EMPHASISING INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

A good team defense cannot ignore the role of 5 defensive players to allow 1v1, particularly in dribble penetration. Also with professional players we must insist on 1v1 drills (stationary, off the dribble, simulating help defense on an imaginary opponent and recovery to the same player), both to increase self confidence as well as to master the technique.

We have already mentioned that the fewer dribble penetrations that take place, less help is necessary and there is less risk of giving up an offensive rebound.

## BREAKING THE TIMING OF AN ACTION

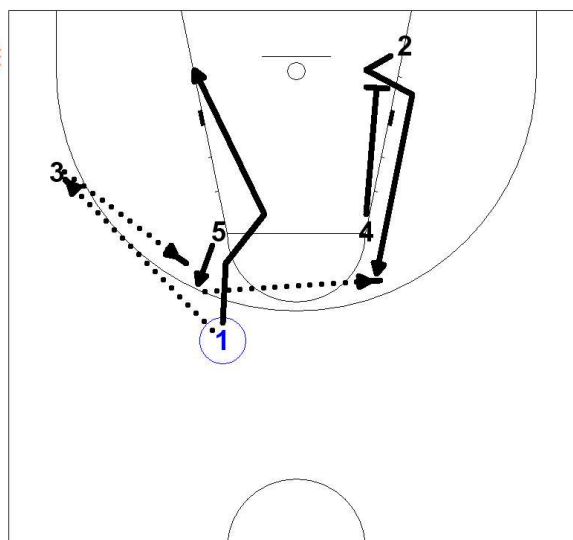
When we refer to the timing of an action, we are making reference to the fact that a player must ensure that his action is coordinated with that of a team mate, so that for example, a screen set for a team mate to get open is performed at the same time as another player is ready to pass them the ball.

If the concept of timing previews that the ball and a player who aims to receive the ball must be at a given time in the same area of the court, the use of the body check against an opponent who is not in possession of the ball and the anticipation and pressure on the man with the ball, we will ensure that our opponents do not achieve what they have planned.

## TAKING AWAY THE PREFERRED PASSING ANGLES OF OUR OPPONENTS

An example that is illustrated in **diagram 10** will help us to better understand this concept. In one of the most classic examples of offensive movement, O1 makes a high post cut and the ball is reversed coming back to a shooter (O2) who is coming off of a down screen.

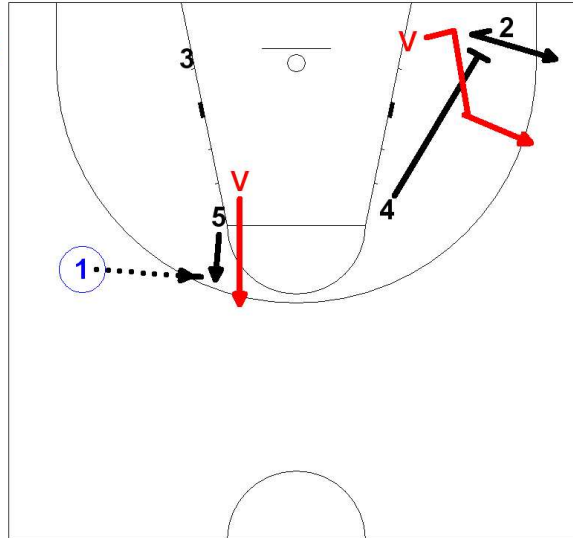
LESSON 1  
INDIVIDUAL DEFENCE  
DIAGRAM 10





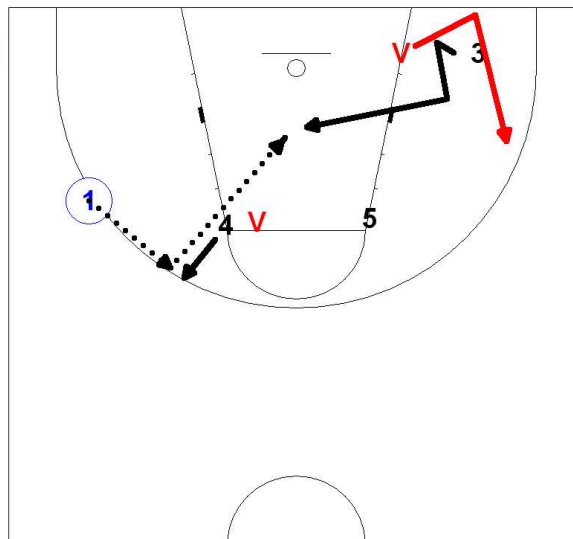
Aggressively forcing the high post player to step outside further away from the basket allows X2 (O2's defender) to go over the screen, forcing O2 to come off of the screen at a different angle, lengthening the distance of the pass and making it more difficult to receive a pass for a shot (**diagram 11**).

LESSON 1  
INDIVIDUAL DEFENCE  
DIAGRAM 11



If there is no pressure at the high post forcing the offensive player to receive the ball out of position, and X2 trails the screen, this encourages O2 to curl, creating a good passing angle (**diagram 12**) and a much shorter distance for the pass.

LESSON 1  
INDIVIDUAL DEFENCE  
DIAGRAM 12



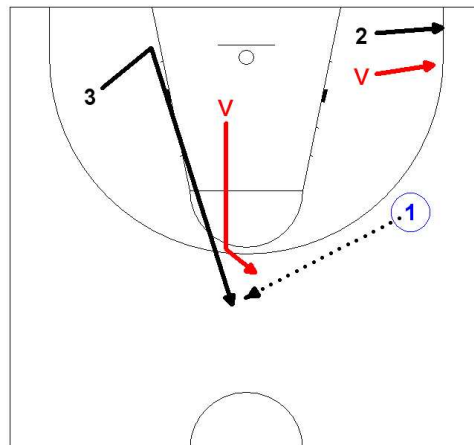
The concepts that we have explained, be they objectives (no easy fast break baskets; no catch and shoot jump shots; no offensive rebounds) how we will achieve these (emphasizing individual responsibility; slowing down the timing of an action; taking away the preferred passing angles of our opponents), our players are continuously have these explained and reinforced to them in order to have the best understanding possible of our defensive tactics and this way practice and play with a very clear mind of what they are doing and why.

There is one last concept that must be explained to our players and connected to our individual defense.

The reference point that we wish to use is the three point line; we wish to extend our defense up to one step past the line and above all consider this line as a limit where we do not allow any dribble penetration inside the line but at the same time we do not want to pressure the ball too far from the basket and therefore over extend our defense. The idea of creating a wall will be constantly reinforced to our players in order to convince them to do whatever is necessary to ensure their opponent does not beat them with dribble penetration, looking however possible to avoid sinking.

If we force opposing players who are not in possession of the ball out of their preferred positions (**diagram 13**) we do not have to excessively pressure the ball when it is further away from the basket.

LESSON 1  
INDIVIDUAL DEFENCE  
DIAGRAM 13



If this does not happen then penetration lanes will open up for the offensive team with consequent break down of our defense.

I am very convinced of the need for a defense to know when it needs to be more aggressive and when it needs to more than anything else contain.

An overly aggressive defense will be broken down by players who pass the ball well and who play well without the ball, a defense which is only concerned with preventing dribble penetration will be broken down by a team with at least two good shooters. Increasing defensive pressure on opponents who find themselves in unfavorable positions and containing an offensive player who momentarily finds himself at an advantage (in space or time) is the key to a successful defense: in the following lessons we will find out how to learn to do this.

**REMEMBER**

- Our individual defense has as its essential objectives no easy fast break baskets, no catch and shoot jump shots and no offensive rebounds

**(Video of a good defense with a contested shot attempt)**

- We want to emphasize individual responsibility, slow down the timing of an action and take away the preferred passing angles of our opponents

**(Video of a good defense which forces the offence to attempt a bad pass)**

- Our defense has as a point of reference the three point line, at which point we wish to create an imaginary wall that is impossible for our opponents to dribble penetrate through

**(Video of a good defense which originates a step beyond the three point line)**

- An effective defense knows when to be aggressive and when it should limit itself to containing its opponents