



## **THREE OF A KIND**

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

#### **Lesson 15: Game Tempo**

#### **Language: English**

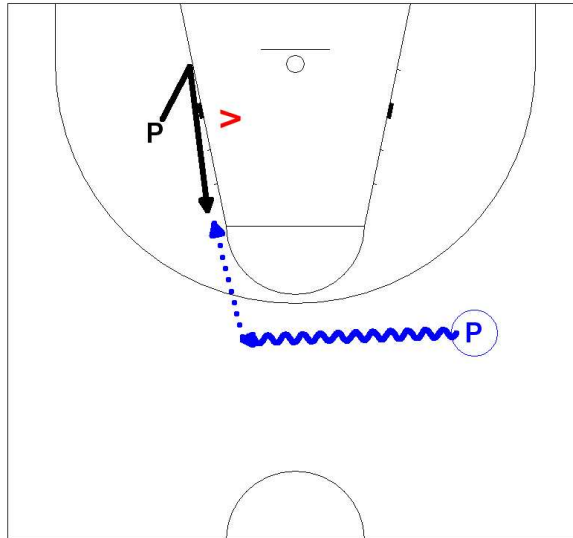
### **GAME TEMPO**

After having talked about the tactical components of a half court offense, I'd like to address the concept of rhythm, which is quite different from the timing to which I have made reference more than once.

With the timing of the action of a player, I refer to making the action coordinated with the teammate's one, so that, for example, a screen is set for another player, while this one is getting open and a teammate is in position to pass the ball. Or, as is illustrated in **diagram 1**, the step-in move in the low post, must occur when the ball handler is in a position to pass him the ball, and not when the ball is still on the help side (**diagram 2**).

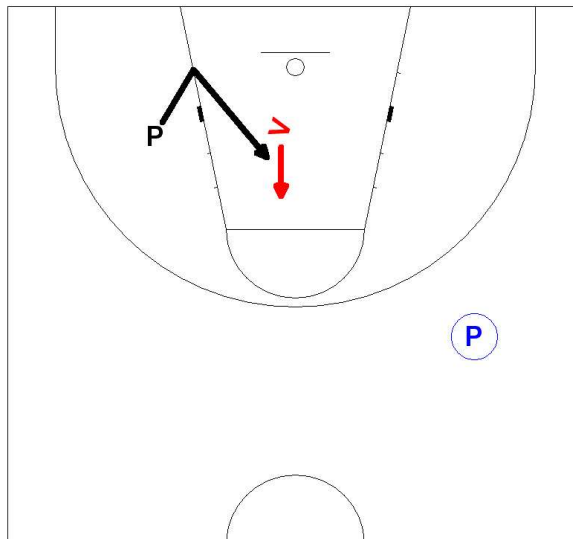
LESSON 15  
GAME TEMPO  
DIAGRAM 01

SI



LESSON 15  
GAME TEMPO  
DIAGRAM 02

NO



The concept of the rhythm of the action, particularly when referring to a game action in the half court, points to the speed at which the offensive player and the defender move. The most evident case is a particularly aggressive and overplaying defense, to which a frenetic uncoordinated offensive game is counterpoised. In this case the offense suffers from the rhythm of the defensive action, resulting in a loss of control, and thus making mistakes caused by a lack of precision.

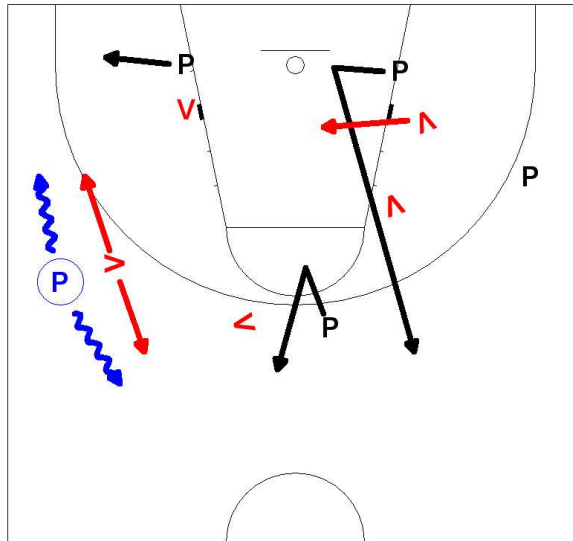
As can be seen in the execution of 2v2 drills in the construction of any offensive philosophy, I think it is essential to explain that the offense must never move at the same speed as the defense.

If the defenders overplay and put too much pressure on the ball, it is vital that the offensive players slow down their moves, use their body to make contact with the opponent, and so change speed to cut, get open, etc.

If they do not do this, the defense has the opportunity to overplay, forcing our players to move away from the positions in which they are more dangerous. An evident consequence, above all among young players, is

that the 5 offensive players move away from the basket more and more, instead of using a back door cut or getting open. When they catch the ball, they are very far away from the basket, and therefore they need more dribbles to play 1v1, favoring the defense (**diagram 3**).

LESSON 15  
GAME TEMPO  
DIAGRAM 03



The need to not adapt your speed to that of the defender is even more obvious when setting screens away from the ball. In lesson 03, we stressed how important it is that the player who receives the screen goes first in the other direction and then cuts back, giving their teammate the time to set the screen. Usually an overplaying defense pushes the player to be too fast in his first movement, making the screen ineffective and even faulty.

Generally, I think it is necessary to teach players, especially the younger ones, that the speed in which they execute the fundamentals is not the only important speed, but also the change of speed in going from one position to the other. It is not so important to pass from a high speed to an even higher speed, but to pass from a medium speed to a higher speed.

If an execution or an attempt at execution of the fundamentals with or without the ball at a speed that does not allow us to control the ball or the body or that does not allow us to have a coordinated game with our teammates harms our precision and balance. It is far better to be precise in the details, because if we continuously look to execute at speed, we increase the number of mistakes exponentially.

Having seen a lot of both junior and senior games, we sometimes notice that one of the two teams is "out of rhythm" that is to say that often it forces offensive solutions, being too fast in taking the shot and causing an increase in the number of mistakes. Or, one might get the idea that one of the two teams "is controlling the tempo better", proposing quick actions alternated with more controlled ones, finding balanced shots and therefore converted with an effective percentage, or guaranteeing frequent occasions of offensive rebounds or easy defensive recoveries without risking an opponents fastbreak.

At a very young teams level it is not rare to observe the case in which both teams are unable to control the rhythm of the game and consequently the game becomes frenetic and full of mistakes.

The concept of tempo of the game has always been very clear for the most expert coaches and to explain it to our players is of fundamental importance to help our team to play better.

When we say that a team has controlled the tempo of the game, we refer to some concepts that are well linked. Let us try to sum them up:

1. The team has played defense, fastbreak and half court offense without pauses, with considerable fluency, passing naturally from one phase of the game to another
2. The team (that is to say the players) have correctly chosen when to shoot during the break and when to play a half court set
3. In the half court set the team has been to obtain good shots without anticipating, but all teams must work in practice to reach a good level in handling the tempo of the game

These three points are the answer that our team gives to three exact questions:

1. When should we run the fastbreak and when should we play half court?
2. When should we shoot in our offense?
3. If we want a up-tempo game, how can we obtain it?

The answer to these three questions, are combined helping us to give a complete interpretation of the concept of tempo of the game.

To find some effective answers, I'll ask the help of three great coaches of modern basketball, who, with their theories have surely had a major influence on the development of the game.

1. When should we run the fastbreak and when should we play half court?

Dr. Aza Nikolic, one of the greatest European basketball experts, often pointed out the need to play long offensive actions after having played a long defensive action. Or even better, try to hit immediately with the primary break and, in case there is not a basket, force the opponents to work on their defense.

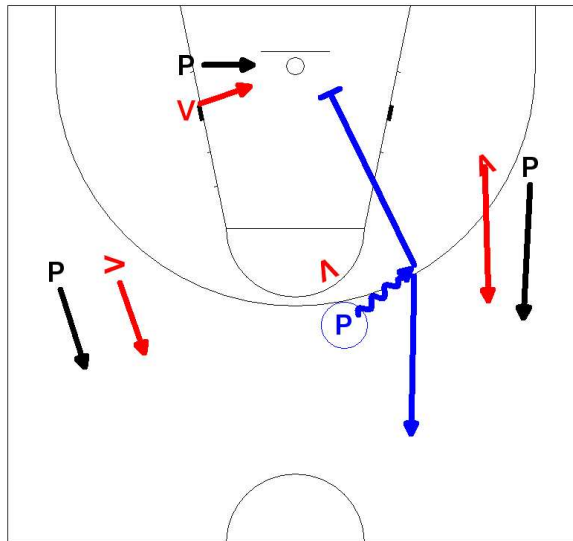
This idea now consists of shooting in the first 8" of ball control during the fastbreak, or in the last 8" (after 16 seconds), is common to many coaches and gives the players a general principle about how to control the tempo.

In this way, we often avoid that the team, after having worked a long time on defense, gets anxious to score at all costs, forcing an offensive situation and obviously making mistakes, then being forced to come back on defense for another 24 seconds.

This often happens in the confrontation between two teams: a weaker but more experienced one, and the other potentially stronger but less self confident. The first one will try to prolong the offensive actions, and not suffer the opponent's fastbreak, trying easy solutions towards the end of the 24". If the opponents do not have a good feel of the tempo of their action, the game could change into a never ending hunt for the easy basket using the fastbreak, resulting in the loss of control of the game.

To improve the link between defense-fastbreak-offense, in practice I often combine these aspects of the game: for example playing 3v3 or 4v4 in the half court, with a fastbreak off a missed shot or off a turnover. The team that defended and runs the fastbreak (**diagram 4**), will have to score or at least draw a foul to keep the ball, else they rest, replaced by another four players. So, by simply taking care of this, a great stress is put on the real value of a steal: the four players who run the fastbreak know that they must distinguish between a fastbreak and work in the half court, with a single goal that values ball possession. The four players who steal the ball know that even if they have made a mistake on offense, with an effective transition defense, and a concentrated half court defense, they can regain the right to restart on offense, or they can rest.

LESSON 15  
GAME TEMPO  
DIAGRAM 04



For this reason in practice, during the drills, I always use a rotation offense-defense rest, because in a game after offense there is always a moment of defensive recovery. We would not be working on concentration if we used drills where the team can rest after the end of an offensive action, as for example, the common 4v4v4 drill.

It is necessary to remember that after a long defensive action, often the team which steals the ball runs into an opposing team that has recovered in balance; and therefore the tactical attitude of the team which has decided to play "a long action", has conditioned the tempo of the game.

We will see under "3." how important it is to have some tactical choices to speed up the tempo. For now it is interesting to notice that some coaches

often stress the use of the fastbreak if there is a stolen ball (consequently taking advantage of a possible defensive imbalance of the opponents), or if the rebound has been taken by a guard who can dribble very quickly into the offensive half court.

These coaches therefore take for granted that if the opponent has kept a good defensive balance, a traditional fastbreak with a rebound, outlet pass, running, is seldom organized. They prefer to pass into a transition offense or a secondary break, instead of trying to force the situation.

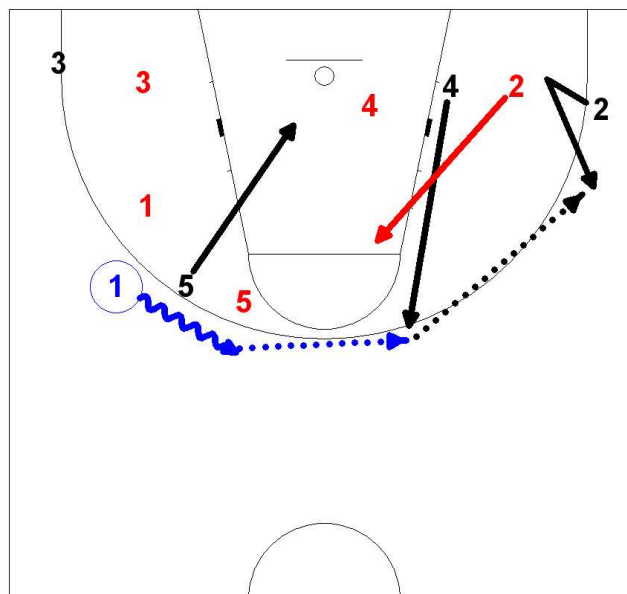
2. When should we shoot in our offense?

The very famous Bobby Knight, former head coach of Indiana University and the Gold Medal winning USA team at the 1984 Olympics, often teaches his players to make four passes before shooting, in order to move the defense and then to try to beat it.

The number of seconds available for the offensive action, is certainly an element to keep into account to value the rhythm of the action in the half court: in NCAA basketball teams have 35" available, a great deal more than the 24" of the NBA and FIBA Rules.

Generally, I think that if the ball is reversed at least once from one side to the other, the defense is forced to move and so it becomes more vulnerable. In the same way, I think it is important to play one time, as an alternative, the inside-outside game, that is to say to pass the ball to a low post and the to reopen the game if possible on the help side (**diagram 5**). This, as mentioned, forces the defense to collapse and then to spread out, giving the offense some spaces to drive to the basket or to shoot from outside.

LESSON 16  
24 SECONDS  
DIAGRAM 05



Executing a certain number of passes, playing to change side, playing with the post "inside-outside", it should not be simply to keep possession of the ball. It is essential that the five players continue to attack, being ready to

exploit a defensive mistake or an opening created after however many seconds. We ask the team not to force anything, especially in the first seconds of the action, but certainly not to renounce to any valid chance to score.

A typical example of this mental approach occurs when attacking a zone defense. We ask our players "not to take the first shot"; that is not to take it at the first pass, preferring to move the zone with some passes and/or dribble penetrations to make it unbalanced and thus creating better shooting or offense rebounding opportunities. Some coaches have their players always make a certain number of passes before shooting, allowing only the lay up as an exception.

Each of us may have particular ideas about this subject: the fact therefore is that to combine fastbreak and half court offense is not a simple thing, and often we could force a solution too early, or making the opposite mistake, i.e. not exploiting a valid chance, while waiting for the time to pass. It is still my idea that a change of side of the ball, or the "inside-outside" game, are more than enough to move a defense, and from that moment on, every good solution must be exploited.

I am absolutely against, forcing 1v1 immediately – the equivalent of wanting to knock down a wall with one's head.

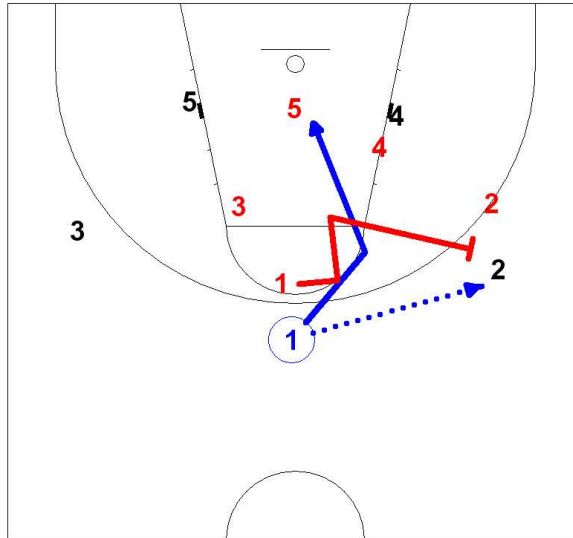
### 3. If we want an up-tempo game, how can we obtain it?

Dean Smith, legendary former coach of the University of North Carolina helps us. Playing a defense that forces the opponent to make frequent mistakes from which we can start our fastbreak.

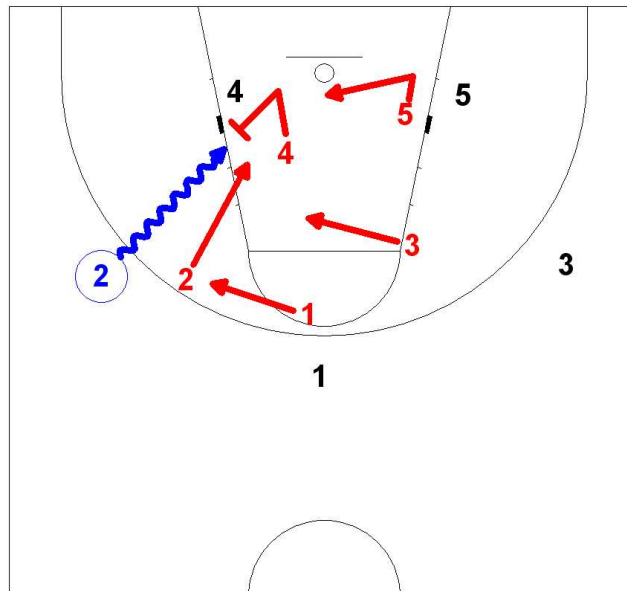
It is necessary to delve deeper into this topic: often playing a very strong defense in the half court is not enough: teams with good fundamentals and organization, if they don't want to suffer from an opponents fastbreak will play long actions of at least 20", actually decreasing the number of possessions for each team, and therefore opportunities to fastbreak. Against teams that have this tactic, it is necessary to have defensive means good enough to force the opponent, either with a double team or other action, to increase the rhythm of the action, more risky for the defense but for the opponents too.

The University of North Carolina is famous for its "scramble defense", that often tries to double team the man with the ball, both if he receives a pass (**diagram 6**) and if he drives to the basket along the baseline (**diagram 7**). This is not the place to get into details on similar defenses with double teams. For us it is enough to know that Coach Smith's goal is to try to steal the ball, cause a dribbling or passing mistake, or forcing the offense to take a hasty shot, if possible with players who are not the first or the second offensive option on the team. In any case we at least obtain that the offensive team decides to shoot sooner, giving back the ball to our team to go on offense.

LESSON 15  
GAME TEMPO  
DIAGRAM 06



LESSON 15  
GAME TEMPO  
DIAGRAM 07

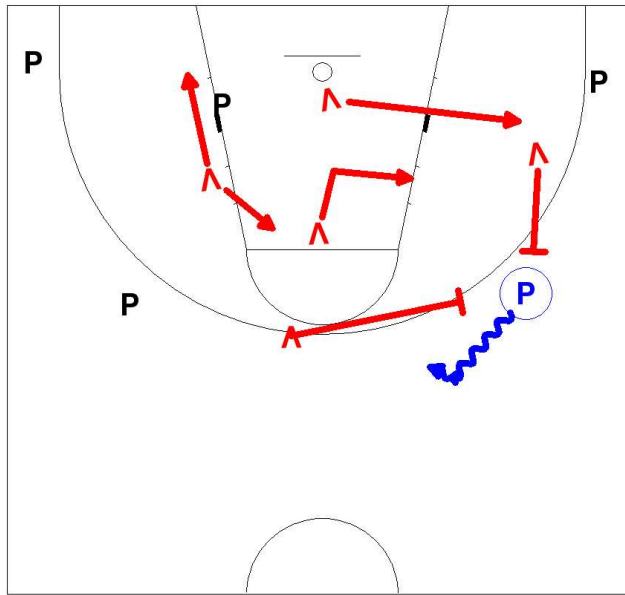


Decreasing the average duration of plays, the number of possessions would increase for the team that wants to play the game with a higher tempo: an aggressive defense with double teams would have at this least secondary effect.

The same result can be obtained with an aggressive full court defense (man to man or zone) or with a half court pressing zone like for example a 1-3-1 with double teams (**diagram 8**).

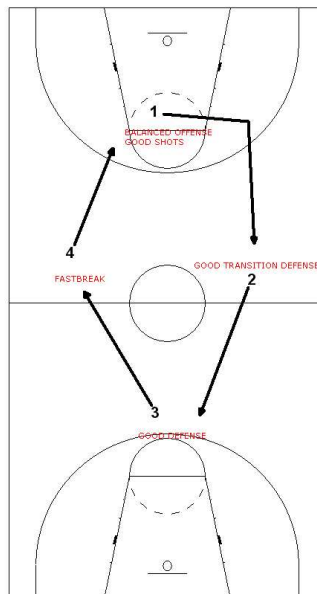


LESSON 15  
GAME TEMPO  
DIAGRAM 08



What I want to stress once more is that it is impossible to solve the question concerning the tempo we want to have in the game if we do not consider in a general way the relation among defense, fastbreak and offense. This relation of these three elements is circular, that is to say that each one of these elements is linked to the others (**diagram 9**).

LESSON 15  
GAME TEMPO  
DIAGRAM 09



If we produce many steals, or we force the opponent to make a mistake, we will have fastbreak opportunities with easy baskets. If we do not score easily, playing a half court set without forcing anything means that we will shoot balanced shots under control, guaranteeing ourselves, in the case of a miss, a good defensive transition without risking an opponents fastbreak.

At this point, the circle closes again, because without giving up any easy baskets, our opponents will have to attack with much more psychological pressure in our half court.

The control of the tempo is therefore a combination of technique and the psychological approach to the game, where confidence and self-control are decisive elements to be better than the opponent.

**REMEMBER**

- Individual action rhythm: never move at the same speed as the defender. It is better to use the change of speed to get open and catch the ball.
- Tempo of the game is a concept that includes the offensive fluency in the half court, offensive and defensive transition, and defensive aggressiveness. To decide which kind of tempo we want and how can we control it, we need to:
  - a. know when to run and when to maneuver in the half court
  - b. when we think it is useful to shoot during the half court offense
- We must have an aggressive defense taking risks if we want to speed up the tempo against a team that wants to keep it slow.
- The fastbreak is born out of a strong defense. A valid defensive balance comes out of a balanced offense.