



THREE OF A KIND

Course 01: Coach Ettore Messina

Lesson 17: Zone Defense 1

Language: English

ZONE DEFENSE

As I have already done so for individual defensive technique I will assume that the basic zone principles and shifts be that for an even or odd fronted zone are known, and I will look to analyze some tactical details that I believe can be particularly interesting.

Zone defense places players in specific areas on the court and requires them to shift depending primarily on the movement of the ball, and also on the movement of opposing players. The individual fundamentals are the same as those applied in man defense: on ball pressure, help side positioning, defending cuts by the offense, blocking out for the rebound. The efficiency of the zone, unless we are content with a mere containment defense that passively waits for the opponent to commit an error, depends on the knowledge and application of the individual and team defensive fundamentals. I have matured as a coach over the years because I have learnt that it is only possible to build a solid zone defense after having learnt how to defend man to man. Defending in a zone there are many times when each individuals responsibilities are unclear, and so a constant verbal communication is vital, as well as the capacity of the players to read what is happening on the court and react accordingly are the keys to a solid zone defense.

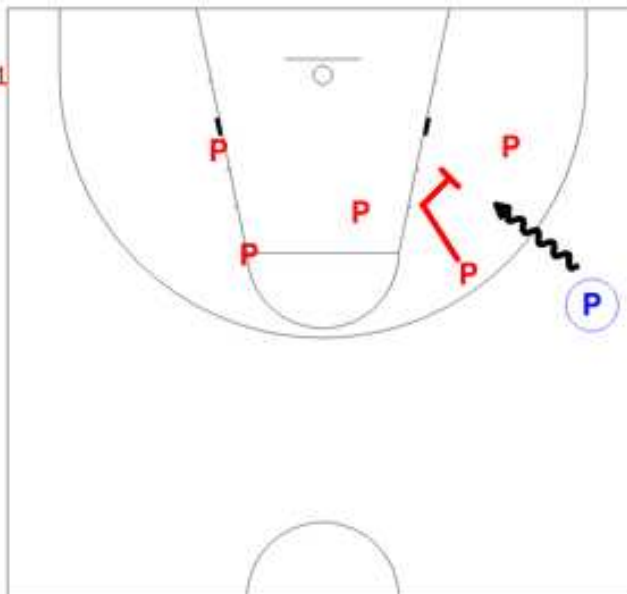
1. INDIVIDUAL POSITIONING

When defending in a zone it is very important to defend and put pressure on the ball because the four teammates are effectively in help positions behind the defender. I think it is also advantageous to position our feet in a way that the ball handler is forced either to the sideline or the baseline (**diagrams 1-2**).

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DIAGRAM 01



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DIAGRAM 02



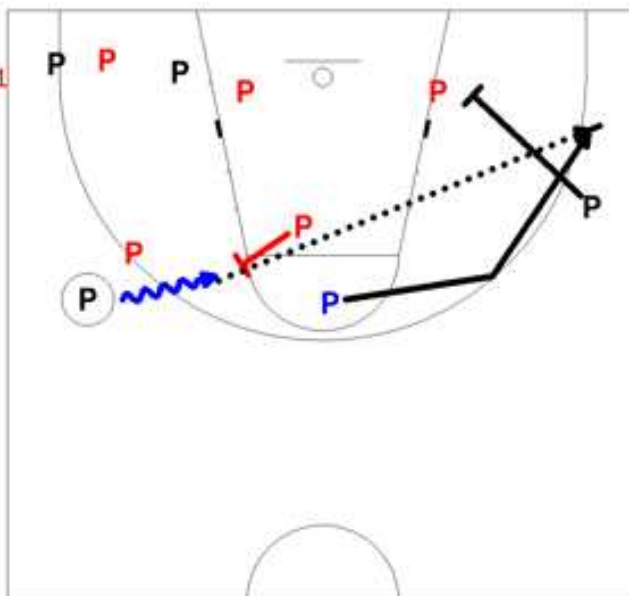
Also important is the ability for the help defenders to react and as we will see below how we defend ball screens, momentarily adjusting our position to no longer be a "wall" for the ball handler. If this is performed well, the circulation of the ball is slowed down, something which is vital when attacking a zone, as well as preventing dribble penetration into the restricted area which if it were to happen would cause the defense to collapse on the ball, leaving many passing lanes open (**diagram 3**).

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DIAGRAM 03

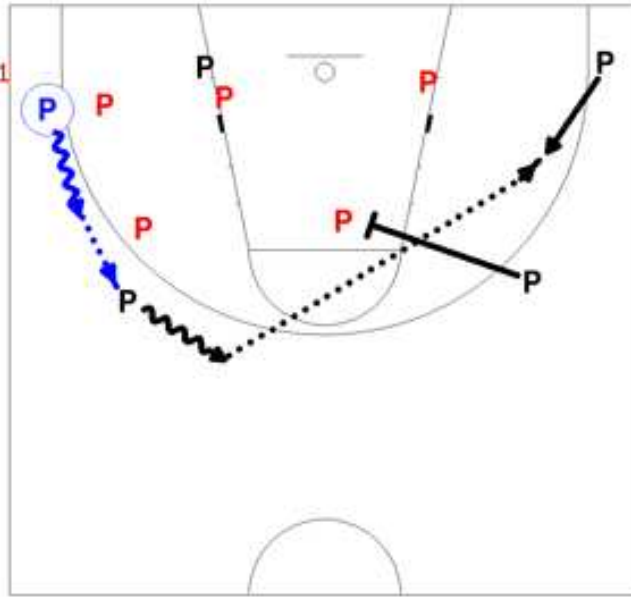


The positioning of the help side defenders should also be looked at in detail. If the area which a player is defending in the zone is empty, that defender tends to concentrate on the position of the ball, and has their back to a corner of the court. If this occurs he cannot always see a screen coming (**diagrams 4-5**) or if an offensive player is about to receive a skip pass (**diagram 6**).

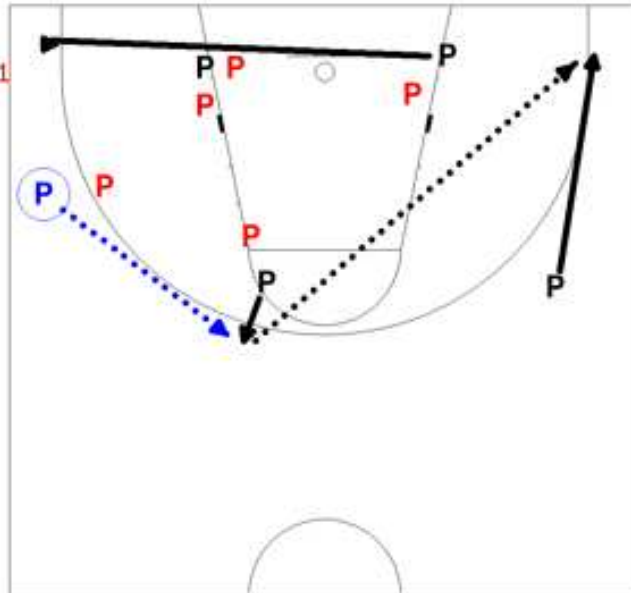
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DIAGRAM 04



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DIAGRAM 05

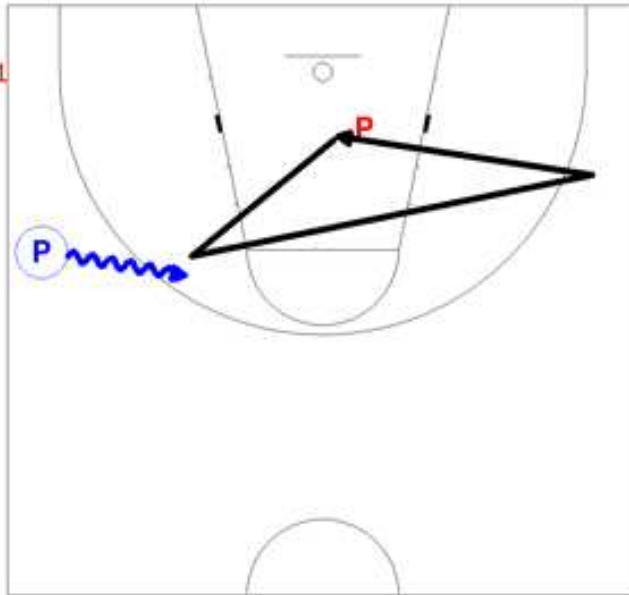


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DIAGRAM 06



For this reason I advise my players when they find themselves on the help side to adopt a position as if there were an offensive player in the corner (**diagram 7**) so that he can always see all of his area and any movements by the offense. As much as possible we try to avoid having our back to the corner or the sideline.

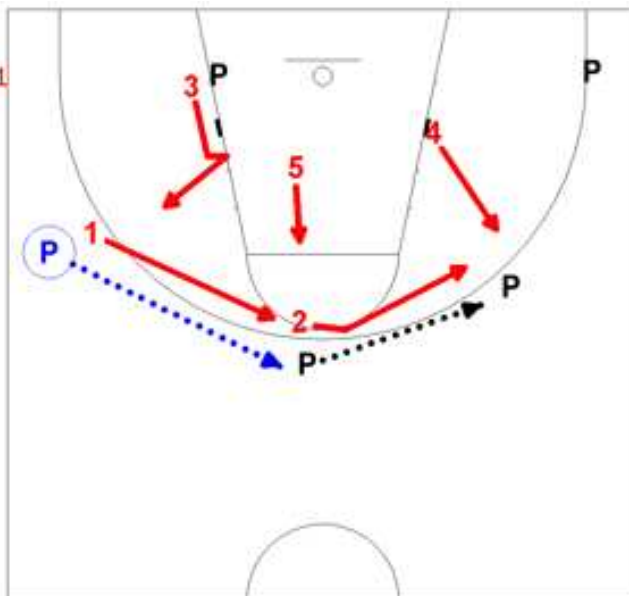
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DIAGRAM 07



2. NEVER HAVE TWO PLAYERS DEFENDING ONE ATTACKER

A zone defense will always be more effective when it avoids situations albeit momentarily of having two players defending one attacker, 1v2. A typical example is illustrated in **diagram 8**. After a quick ball reversal X4 must defend O2 at the free throw line extended until X2 arrives. The slower that X2's shift is, the longer that X4 must be out of position leaving another player (O4) wide open in his area.

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DIAGRAM 08



In these situations a quick defensive adjustment, the active use of defenders hands and arms to disrupt passes, a defensive fake towards a shooter to disrupt his shot and make him put the ball on the floor are all methods to counter a quick ball reversal.

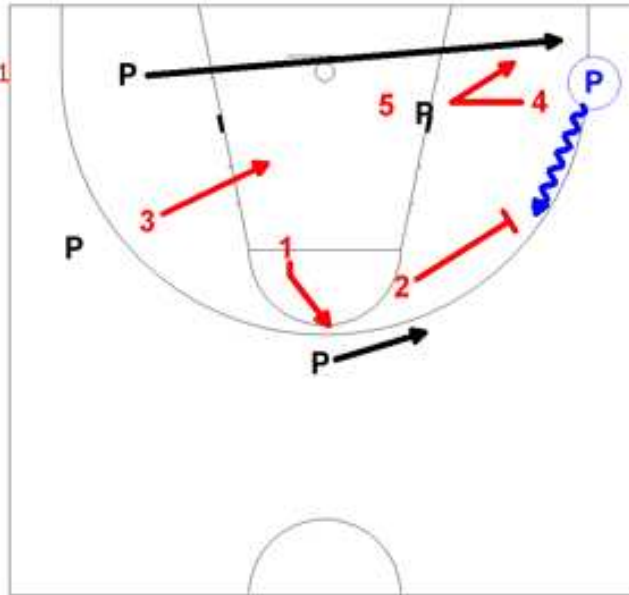
In a more static situation a correct defensive position and the use of active hands allows a defender to disrupt two attackers, particularly if the two offensive players are not well spaced. An example of this can be seen in **diagram 9** where the high post defender is able to defend both the offensive player on the free throw line with one arm and the outside player with the other. The defender in the low post is also able to cover the offensive player immediately behind him and the high post (they are far too close to each other!) and the defender in the corner is able to cover the player in the low post and the other player should he come out to the corner. Every defender is defending "one and a half players" making the pass into the restricted area very difficult and at the same time taking away spaces for any potential dribble penetration.



It is also necessary to avoid having two players defend one attacker when the offense move the ball using the dribble or dribble penetration occurs. Anytime an offensive player dribbles the ball into an area that is the responsibility of another player I believe it is good to use an aggressive movement similar to that made famous by Coach Dean Smith and his University of North Carolina Tar Heels in the "Run and Jump" defense he employed in the 80s.

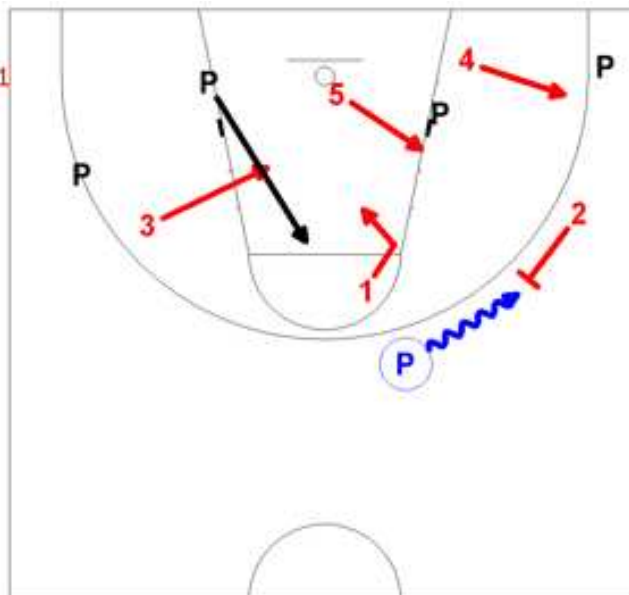
In **diagram 10** an offensive player dribbles to the free throw line extended with the intention of attracting two defenders and free up a teammate either in front of or behind him. An aggressive close out by the defender he is dribbling towards in the new area of responsibility will probably force him to protect the ball losing the opportunity to make the correct pass, allowing his former defender more time to recover towards the new player in the corner.

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DIAGRAM 10



A similar situation, this time against an odd fronted 3-2 Zone is illustrated in **diagram 11**, where the ball handler looks to dribble penetrate into the gap between two defenders and occupy them both momentarily.

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DIAGRAM 11

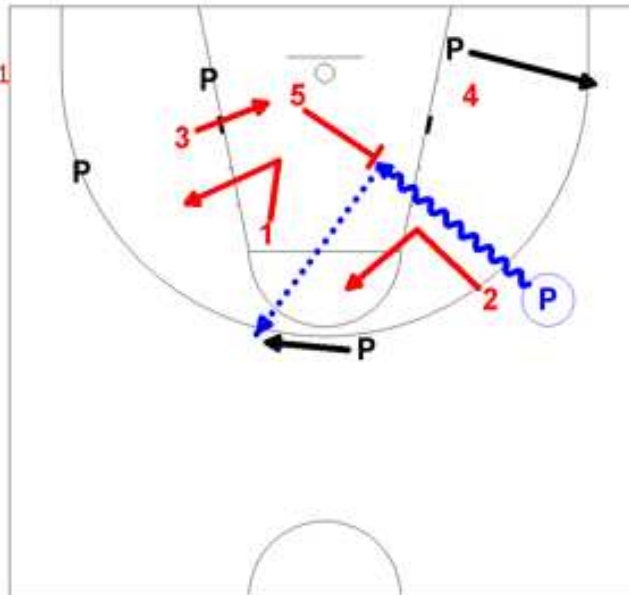


An aggressive switch or exchange of responsibilities allows the defender at the top of the zone to recover to the high post where an offensive player has cut to. The "defensive switch" amongst two defenders on the ball handler must be performed aggressively so that the ball handler does not have any easy passes available.

The idea of never, as much as possible, having two players defending the ball handler has a small element of risk if dribble penetration occurs towards the middle of the restricted area, however it is a more efficient way to defend. As illustrated in **diagram 12**, the moment at which the ball handler penetrates into the restricted area and is defended by the center,

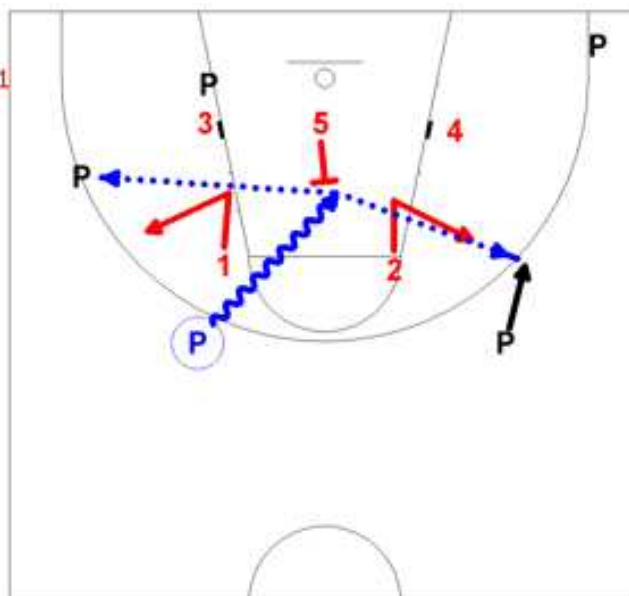
the two outside defenders anticipate a kick out and close out the nearest outside shooters.

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DIAGRAM 12



I want to make clear that in no way indicates that we are not worried that we are not worried by dribble penetration or worse yet that we prefer it. We simply want our players to know that once beaten they follow their player until the help defender is in position, then they will learn to anticipate the kick out in a split second so that they can close out any potential outside shot (**diagram 13**).

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DIAGRAM 13



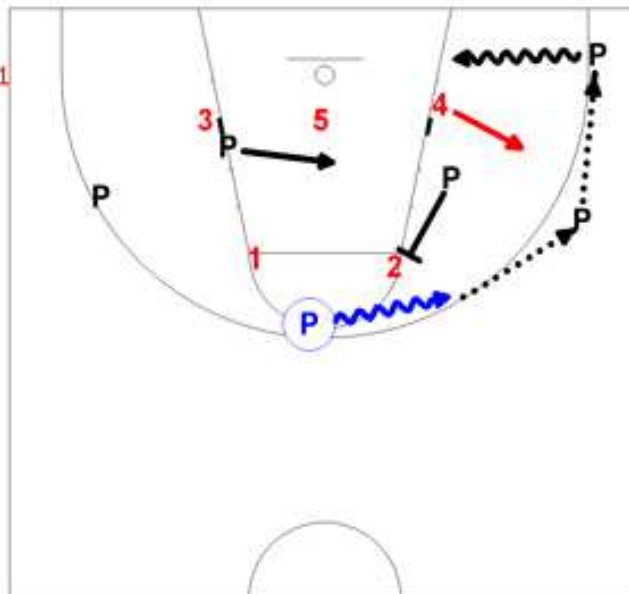
3. ZONE DEFENSE VS. THE PICK & ROLL

In the last few years more and more teams have started using the pick & roll against a zone defense. The idea is to take out a defender with the screen, causing another defender to help and leave his area of responsibility, leaving a shooter open (**diagrams 14-15**).

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DIAGRAM 14

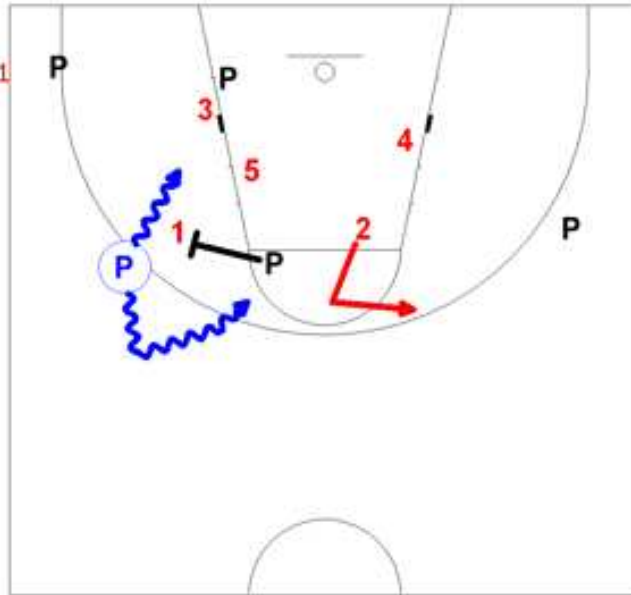


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DIAGRAM 15



If the ball handler is a mediocre shooter then his defender can go underneath the screen with little danger, in all other cases this needs to be defended without having two players on the ball. A good alternative is that of forcing the ball towards the baseline or towards the sideline adopting a very aggressive and defined stance on the ball (**diagram 16**). The goal is above all to restrict the amount of space available to the ball handler forcing him to take a longer path to get to wherever he wishes to, making his dribble less aggressive. With this longer path his defender could even pass underneath the screen, making any help from other teammates unnecessary.

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DIAGRAM 16



In the case of a side pick & roll it is possible to force the dribbler to take a longer path and go underneath the screen as previously described. The alternative is for the two defenders to make an aggressive switch, similar to normal dribble movement without a screen as illustrated in **diagram 17**. Both options can be effective: it is important to have told a team which way the screen should be defended, particularly in the last few seconds of a possession, so that the teams are prepared when facing what could otherwise be a dangerous action.

LESSON 17
ZONE DEFENSE 1
DIAGRAM 17

