



by Dusko Ivanovic

# PICK-AND-ROLL DEFENSE

**Dusko Ivanovic began his coaching career in Switzerland, where he won two Swiss Cups. From 1997 to 2000, he coached the Swiss National team, and the following season he coached Limoges, France, where his team won the national championship, the Cup of France, and the Korac Cup. For the past three seasons, he has been coaching Tau Vitoria, Spain, and has won a King's Cup.**

Before beginning, let me explain my philosophy about players. I believe that instead of accepting players how they are, my job is to try to change the players.

When a new player comes to my team, he has to change and accept my methods of practice and how I want basketball to be played. For a sound defense on the pick-and-roll, the players must have good court vision so they know where the other defenders are located. They need good timing and, above all, aggressiveness.

My teams employ various ways to defend the pick-and-roll, but my main goal is to aggressively contain the ball handler whenever the pick-and-roll is applied.

If the offensive team has two high post players, we force the ball to the side where one of them is set (diagr. 1), and contain the ball on the opposite side where the other post player is stationed. How to defend the pick-and-roll depends on the abilities of the players I have, as well as the talent level of the opposing team. There are now many forwards and centers who are good three-point shooters, which adds an additional concern for our defense.

I would like to now describe four defensive situations. In the first one, let's suppose that there are two high posts. The majority of the players in these positions can shoot well, but,



in my opinion, shooting from these positions is not a major concern that will decide winning or losing (diagr. 2).

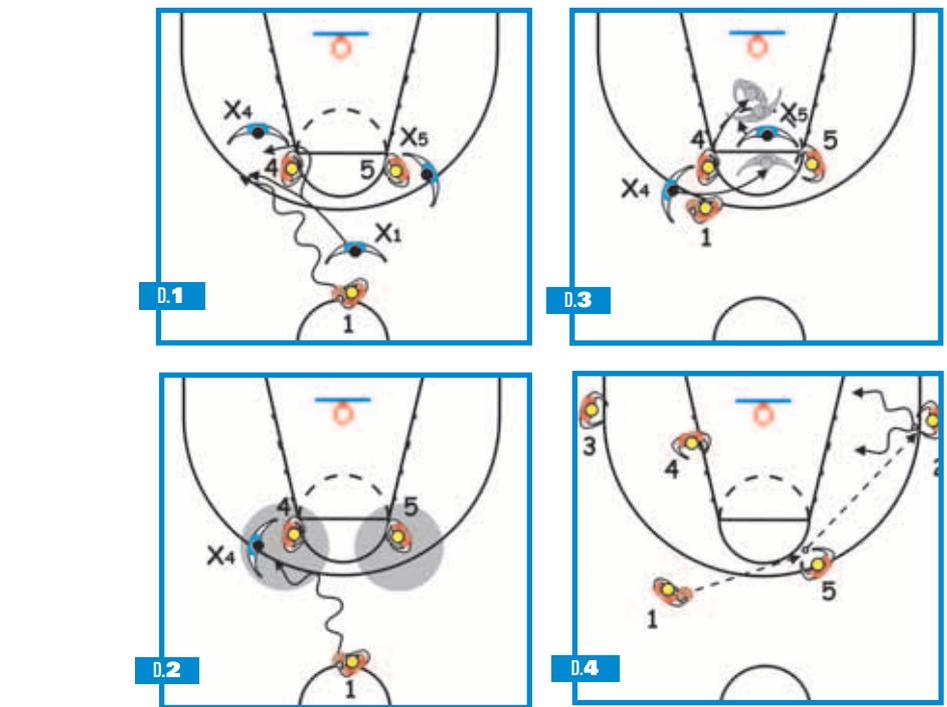
Let us begin with a situation, which many teams play very often: two high posts, two forwards in the corners, and the point guard outside, at the top of the lane.

I do not force the point guard on one side or the other, but he must be attacked by his defender, face-to-face, and he must be pressured, so he has to think about protecting the ball rather than shooting. The ball handler can choose to dribble towards one or the other high post players and the defender must play him very aggressively and force him to change direction at least one or, better yet, two times. When we want to contain the ballhandler, the defender of the high post player must come out vertically and aggressively to the ball: he must be ready, mentally and physically, and anticipate the pick-and-roll and the moves of the ballhandler. I do not want my defenders to jump out horizontally to the pick to contain the ball handler and then follow him. Rather, I want a switch. After the pick, the offensive high post rolls to the basket, and our defender, who guards the other high post, must leave his man and cover the open post under the basket (diagr. 3).

In this situation, the other high post is wide open, with a large open area around him. Our defender, who contains the ball handler, is far away from the open high post and cannot help and recover on him. For this reason, we do not come out to the ball horizontally when we defend the pick-and-roll, but we contain the ball vertically, because our defensive post is only two steps away from the open opponent and he can fall back and defend against him.

The defender, who has already contained the ballhandler, always covers the open high post. He sprints to take his position between both the offensive posts to stop the drive of the ball handler. The defender, who guards the weakside cornerman, does not help if the player on the high post is not a good shooter, but stays with his opponent. When the high post receives the ball, we can let him shoot. Even if he makes a few baskets, this will not hurt us too much.

The defender of the screener must come out to the ball vertically and aggressively contain the ball handler without using his hands. When the ball



handler is contained, we must know, through our scouting, whether or not he is a good or poor shooter. If he is a good shooter, the defender will slide through his teammate, who has already contained the dribbler, and pick him up again. At the same time, when the defender of the ball handler slides through and is behind him, this defender will rotate, sprint, and take position between the two offensive posts.

If the ballhandler is not a good shooter, the defender, who guards him will then slide behind the screener. The defender, who guards the ball handler, is now in the position to defend him in a one-on-one situation. If one of our players is not able to defend against a one-on-one situation, his place is on the bench.

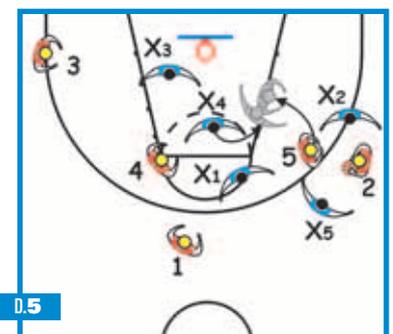
There are many situations which can develop after a pick-and-roll. One of these occurs when the offensive weakside high post receives the ball: he can shoot, but he can also pass to the weakside corner man and set a screen for him (diagr.4).

Here is how we cover this situation: The defender of the ballhandler will guard him aggressively face-to-face and pressure the ball. The defender of the screener will communicate to him that a screen is about to be set, and this defender will take a diagonal position at his opponent's side, opposite to the screen. In this way he will prevent the ball handler from dribbling to the opposite side of the screen-the ball handler

can go only in one direction.

In analyzing games in which the pick-and-roll is played, 70% of the time the ballhandler will drive to the opposite side of the screen.

When we contain ball handler, the other three defenders must rotate (diagr. 5). Our defender of the high post will stay under the basket, regardless of where his opponent is: he is ready to pick the screener up if he rolls and goes in the low post after the pick. He must always be aggressive and very quick to stop the screener before he turns around and faces the basket. However, if his opponent receives the ball before he stops him, he must also prevent him from turning around with the ball and facing the basket: from here, he can see all his teammates and pass the ball to an open one. However, if his opponent receives the ball and faces the basket, our defender will guard him face-to-face at an arm's length distance. If this happens, the defender of the playmaker, will position himself at the top of





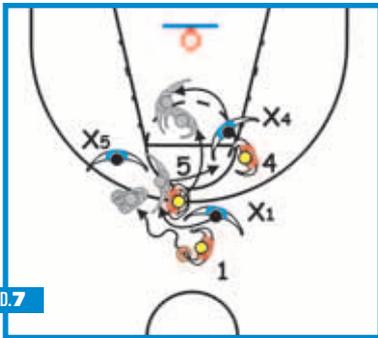
D.6



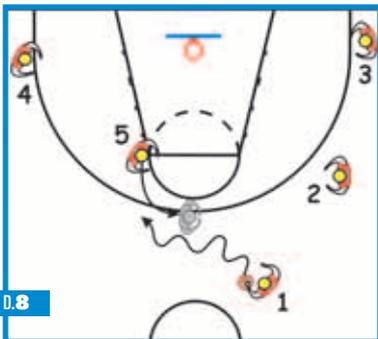
D.10



D.11



D.7



D.8



D.9

the key, not allowing him to receive the ball at the three-point line. If this player tries to receive the ball farther away from the three-point line, then we do not pressure him.

The defender of the weak side corner man will go in the lane, far away from his opponent: this player is not an offensive threat. If the ball is reversed to the opposite side, as soon as the offensive playmaker receives the ball and passes it to the weak side corner player, we rotate again. The

defender of the high post guards his man on the weak side corner. If he is a good shooter, he pressures him to prevent the jump shot. The defender's playmaker will stay with him, and the defender's low post will pick up the high post. The other defender of the post, who contained the ball handler on the pick-and-roll, will slide under the basket and guard the low post. Now let's review how we defend on a pick-and-roll on other side, where there is a high post player, who is not a good shooter. The ball handler's defender, and the screener's defender, who will come out horizontally in this case, switch opponents. The other weak side high post's defender goes in the middle of the lane, ready to help. As soon as the strong-side high post starts rolling out to go to the low post, his defender, a perimeter player, will not follow him, because his opponent is much bigger. Now we make the rotation: the post's defender in the middle of the lane, guards the low post, while the defender (a small player) rotates and guards the weak side high post, who is a good shooter. He guards him in a one-on-one situation and must try to anticipate the pass.

If the post receives the ball, he has two options: beat the defender one-on-one, or slide and take position under the basket, where his advantage is evident because he is bigger. If he goes to the low post, he cannot receive the ball directly because it is not on the same side of the court.

For this reason, the ball handler must change the direction of his dribble if he wants to take advantage of this mismatch, and he has two options: pass the ball to the strong-side low post or pass to the strong side corner man because he is a good shooter. For this reason, we rotate again (diagr. 6).

The strong side corner player's defender picks up the strong side offensive low post, because a forward can guard a taller player. As soon as the strong-side high post starts rolling out to go on the low position, his defender (a smaller player), continues his lateral move and guards the opponent in the strong-side corner.

If one of two offensive high-post players is a good shooter and there is a pick-and-roll on his side, we defend in the same way as I explained in the beginning. However, if the strong-side high post does not roll out to the low post, but instead looks for his own shot because he is a good shooter from this position, and the other high post slides under the basket, our rule is that the defensive posts never switch their opponents in this situation. Now we play our defense in a one-on-one situation.

If I have a player on my team who could not recover after he contains ball handler, here is how we now defend. When the offense starts playing pick-and-roll to that side where our post player (who cannot recover) plays, we force the ball. The defensive guard, who guards the ball handler, will follow his opponent behind his back and try to slide through the top of the screen, while the defensive post player, who guards his opponent on the weak-side high post, will slide in the middle of the lane and be ready to help.

The ball handler cannot change the direction of his dribble and come back because our defensive guard is behind his back and following him. For this reason, the ball handler has only two options: he can either stop and shoot, or attack the defensive post player, who tries to contain him one-on-one.

However, the ball handler can also continue his dribble to the sideline. If he does so, our guard will also continue to follow him and try to take a good defensive position to defend him one-on-one. In this case, we do not make any more switches.

Only in this following situation will we apply weak-side help (diagr. 7). In most cases, the ball handler will attack our post, who already has a good defensive position. In this moment, we must switch our opponents. As soon as the screener rolls to go under the basket, our post, who is in the middle of the lane, will help by picking up the screener on the low post. As soon as the ball handler attacks our post, our defensive guard will recover and pick up

the weak side offensive high post, who is a good shooter.

Let's talk about a frequent situation where one tall player is on the high post and plays pick-and-roll, and the other one, a good shooter, is in the corner, with both forwards on the same side of the court, but opposite to the corner man (diagr. 8). On the pick-and-roll, the screener rolls to the low post, while the ball handler will try to pass either to the low post or to the other teammate in the corner, who is also a good shooter.

How we defend on the pick-and-roll, depends on two conditions: the area of the court where the pick-and-roll is played, and how good a shooter is the ball handler.

If the pick-and-roll is played outside of three-point line, we do not try to force the screener out because a foul could be made. The defender of the screener will take one vertical step forward, aggressively contain the ball handler, and then will slide to take his position under the basket. The defender of the ball handler will slide through behind the screener and pick up his opponent. After the pick-and-roll, each defender will cover his own opponent. The defender of the corner man must always be aware that his opponent is a good shooter and the offense is designed to give him the ball, so he will not help, but instead will guard him face-to-face, while the other two forwards' defenders will take their defensive positions in the lane, far away from their opponents.

If the pick-and-roll is played inside of the three-point line, the defender of the screener will also come out vertically to contain the ball handler aggressively and then he will sprint back immediately to pick up his opponent, who rolls on the low post.

The ball handler's defender, if his opponent is a good shooter, will slide through his teammate and pick up the ball handler again. However, if the ball handler is a poor shooter, he will slide behind the screener and cover his opponent again. When the pick-and-roll is played in this position, the defender of the corner man will go in the lane, ready to help or sprint to the corner.



His reaction will depend on how the defensive guard will slide: if he slides through his teammate, who contains the ball handler, he will stay in the lane and help his teammate. However, if he slides behind the screen, he will not help, but instead, sprint to the corner to pick up his opponent. The other two defenders, who guard offensive forwards will also take their defensive positions in the lane, far away from their opponents (diagr. 9).

There are also many other situations of screens among guards and forwards. It is basic that both defenders cooperate and communicate, and they must think, anticipate, and react at the right moment. As soon as the defender of the screener warns his teammate that the screen is about to be set, the defender of the ball handler must be ready to take position behind the screener. If he takes this position in time, the screener cannot roll out and get open.

Taking his face-to-face position to guard the screener, he will be able to switch with his teammate. The screener's defender will take one step forward, come out to cover the ball handler, and prevent him from taking the outside shot. In this way, he will guard the ball handler face-to-face, and switch opponents with his teammate.

Now I shall explain a situation in which a team will set up on the court with four perimeter players and one tall post. Let us assume the tall post is not a good shooter, but the playmaker is excellent (diagr. 10). These two players play pick-and-roll to get either a three-point shot or play one-on-one under the basket, while the other three short offensive outside players, also good shooters, set themselves on the other side of the court, opposite to the pick-and-roll.

The playmaker's defender now is behind the offensive tall post, and he will do all his best to prevent the offensive post player from taking his low-post position. The ball handler will usually try to beat his tall defender, who guards him now in a one-on-one situation. When the ball handler passes the ball to the low post, we trap. As soon as we trap, the other three short defenders, who guard their opponents on the opposite side of the court, will rotate. Our short defender, who guards the low post, must prevent him from dribbling the ball to the baseline. The defensive post does not set a normal trap, but he will take a face-to-face defensive position and guard this opponent in one-on-one situation.

Here is the rotation as soon as the ball is passed to the low post under the basket: our 2's defender will rotate and pick up 1, the passer, the 3's defender will also rotate



and pick up 2, and, finally, the 4's defender will pick up 3. We shall not guard 4, who plays in the corner, because he is opposite to the ball and he is not a serious threat. As soon as our defensive post, who set the trap, is in a good position to guard the low post one-on-one, his short defender in the trap will sprint in the opposite corner to cover 4, and so our tall defensive post will guard against his tall opponent. All the other short defenders will guard their opponents.

Here is another situation in which 1 is the playmaker, who dribbles the ball down the middle. 2 and 3 are the forwards, who sprint down the sidelines. 1 will dribble towards one of the sidelines or pass to one of the tall post players, who trails and sprints to set the screen on the side of the court where his teammate has the ball. The other tall offensive post player, 5, is the second trailer. He still did not get on the opposite half court because he is usually the defensive rebounder or the player who makes the out-of-bound pass. This is the moment when all defenders must already be on their defensive half of the court and take their defensive positions. Our two defensive posts, who guard trailers, must also be inside of the three-point line. The defender, who guards the first trailer, who is the screener, will not follow and cover him, but he will go in the middle of the lane, between his opponent and the basket. The defender of the second trailer will pick up the screener because his opponent is far away from him. If the screen is set outside and far away from the three-point line, the defense will guard the pick-and-roll without any problem.

The ball handler's short defender will slide behind the screen and pick up his opponent again. However, if the pick-and-roll is set near or inside the three-point line, then the screener's defender will come out vertically and contain the ball aggressively. The ball handler's short defender, warned of the screen, will take a diagonal defensive position and force his opponent to the screen. He must not allow the ball handler to change the direction of his dribble and drive to the opposite side of the screen. Both defenders must not also allow the ball handler to split them and drive between them. As soon as the screener starts rolling out to take the low-post position, the defensive post, who has already taken his position in the lane, will pick him up. The other defensive post, who has contained the ball hand-

ler, will pick up the second trailer, who is now coming down the middle of the court to take his position in the lane.

Once again, I would like to remind you of our defensive rule: the defensive post, who does not contain the ball handler, always picks up the opponent, who goes to the low post, while the defender, who contains the ball handler, always picks up the opponent on the high post position.

The weak-side forward's defender will get in the middle of the lane and away from his opponent, who is not a serious threat. However, if his opponent tries to cut in the lane, he must immediately beat him to the spot, preventing him from receiving the ball in the position between him and basket.

This short defender should also pick up the second trailer if he cuts in the lane and our defender, who has contained the ball handler, is late and cannot cover him in time: he must also try to deny the pass to this player. If the second trailer tries to take the low-post position under the basket, this defender will guard him in front. If the playmaker passes the ball to the weak-side forward, two of our weak-side defenders rotate.

As soon as the playmaker passes the ball to his weak side teammate, his defender will quickly cover the opponent in the corner.

The other short defender, who guards the second trailer in the lane, will sprint to cover the playmaker. Our tall defender, who has contained the ball handler, will cover the second trailer, who has already taken his position under the basket. In this way both our tall post's defenders guard two tall opponents (diagr. 11).

Once again, the rotation of two weak-



side short defenders will be made only if the reversal passes to the opposite side of the court and to the weak side opponent in the corner is made very quickly and if the tall defender, who has contained the ball handler, is late and cannot pick up the second trailer in time.

However, if the tall defender, who has contained the ball handler, is not late and can cover the second trailer in time, the two weak-side short defenders will not rotate. Good timing is very important for a successful defense in these situations.

Pick-and-roll defense must be practiced every day. A good defense depends on the cooperation among defenders and their constant aggressiveness. Some level of confusion is a normal problem in our defense at the beginning of each season because we have many new players on the team.

However, as the season progresses, and the players have gained more experience playing with each other, our defensive play is almost automatic.