



by Zmag Sagadin

# DEFENSE IS A CONSTANT

**Zmag Sagadin coached Celje, Olimpia Ljubljana, and Maribor (Slovenia), Split (Croatia), and Red Star Belgrade (Serbia). He won nine Slovenian national championship, nine national Cups, one European Cup with Ljubljana (he was also selected Slovenian Coach of the Year on nine occasions), and one Korac Cup with Red Star Belgrade. A former FIBA Instructor and President of the Slovenian Basketball Coaches Association, he also coached the Slovenian Men's National team.**

Basketball is a very complex game. Everything is important. The best teams usually have a good balance between their offensive and defensive parts of the game. To have a successful basketball team you must be able to win not only home games, but also games on the road. When you are not playing at home, your team will likely be under additional psychological pressure and will perform in different environment, which is unique in every gym or arena. In addition to referees, there is the crowd, baskets, lights, and a game ball that may not be the same as the ones your team is used to. I believe it is hard, oftentimes even risky, to count on a better shooting percentage than the home team's. Thus, offense is a variable in the game of basketball. However, you can still play great defense and win the battle of the boards. Defense is a constant and wins games. Defense and rebounding together win championships. Championship teams, in most sports, have a strong defense and are comprised of players who never quit. Good defense requires a synergy, teamwork of a group, committed to their team's effort. Furthermore, it takes sacrifice, intelligence, aggressiveness, and discipline of each defensive player. A supportive team spirit and the winning attitude should be learned. My road to a successful defense, and consequently to a game won, leads through loyalty to a variety of principles, rules and defensive patterns. These are:

## TALK

All good defenses are "talking" defenses. With proper communication, players on a game court can help each other, discourage opponents, and avoid misunderstandings. The use of common phrases, such as: "help," "switch," and "screen right (or left)" improves the team's defensive performance through an active verbal interaction. There should be no switching in a defense without talk. Slide and talk.

## STEALING TIME

Whenever possible, teams should pressure the opponent full court to steal shot-clock time, pressure the ball, force the opponent to a rule violation (8 seconds or a turnover), discourage poor ball handlers and passers, and exhaust the opponent. You can always drop back into a zone defense if you want. However, do not foul or try to steal the ball. Instead, steal time and wait for an opponent's mistake to occur.

## DECLARE A BALL-SIDE AND A HELP-SIDE

As soon as possible, force the ball one side to declare a ball and help side. Force the man with the ball to one side, left or right, and try to keep him there (diagr. 1).

## PRESSURE THE BALL - ATTACK OFFENSE

Defensive players must work on the man with the ball. Force the offensive player to dribble where you want, but take away the middle of the court. Primarily, the purpose is not to steal the ball, but to force the opponent to pick up the ball and put pressure on his pass in an area where he is no longer a threat.

## PRESSURE PASSING LINES

There should be no easy passing to a player one pass away. Don't let the opponent easily transfer the ball from side to side. Move with a boxer's glide and be alert for interceptions. Good defensive work of the individual guarding the player with the ball will pre-

vent quick passes (diagr. 2).

## NO MIDDLE

Never allow the man with the ball to penetrate the middle, from either the top or the side. Deny the offensive player to go to the middle and expect him to drive toward the baseline where teammates should be ready to help. Furthermore, it is vital that the defense does not allow any direct drives into the paint.

## NO CUT IN FRONT OF YOU

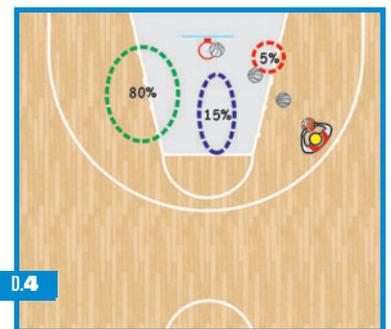
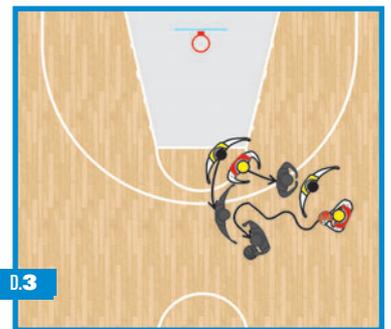
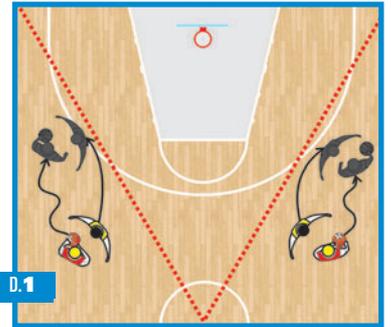
Defensive players must move in the direction of a pass to bump the cutter with his body and help the teammate guarding the man with the ball. All five defensive players must react and adjust their position after every single pass. Move in the direction of the ball.

## FIGHT SCREENS

Be aggressive and don't let opponents screen you away. Discourage the screener by destroying the first screen with a foul. Make sure the defense talks and is ready to help or switch. Try to stop the opponent's pick-and-roll game by defending it without lateral movement. On the screen away, the defender should slide through the screen. There should be no automatic switching since it may lead to misunderstanding about the responsibility for the attacker. Players should talk when defending a pick-and-roll play (diagr. 3).

## CHASE THE OPPONENT'S BEST SCORERS

Overplay the team's best player or players. Make him work hard to receive the ball. The defender should follow him on screens and stay close to the player without taking shortcuts. The goal is to wear out this player and be close to our main threat to prevent him from getting into a scoring series. All teammates should help guarding good scorers by positioning themselves towards him when he has the ball. Players under pressure are likely to become nervous and less effective, especially if he is



fouled with small fouls and denied the open shot.

#### POST DEFENSE

Prevent easy or direct passes to the edge of the paint or inside it. If the opponent's post man is an average player, try to side him. However, if he is a good scorer, you should front him. Do not allow penetrations into the middle; force the player to go to the side.

#### DO NOT FOUL THE SHOOTER

Just play the percentages. With hands straight up, you must prevent the shooter from seeing the rim clearly and challenge his shot. Let him shoot contested shots over the defense's hands, but box him out after.

#### MAKE GOOD/SMART FOULS

Use all four team fouls per quarter to "discomfort" the best opponent's scorers, deny penetrations toward the middle, and fight the screens. The greatest sin is to score a basket and foul the shooter. It is essential to foul smart because we don't want to make any unsportsmanlike fouls.

#### HELP SIDE DEFENSE

When your man is two passes away from the ball, fill the middle, watch the ball, adjust your position, and help as much as you can to stop the ball or force an attacker to pass:

- ▼ Be a disrupter-do anything to disrupt the offense. A player's responsibility should be to intercept or draw a charge on lob pass situations.
- ▼ Read the offense-and be ready to switch, rotate toward the ball side
- ▼ Don't help too much-the amount of help depends on the quickness of the team's defense. Remember: you have to recover and box out your opponents.
- ▼ Help the helper-we don't want any open shots; thus, force the man with the ball to pass to another man.
- ▼ Surprise the man with a ball-if he turns his head and looks away, try to surprise him and steal the ball or double team him.
- ▼ Rotations-rotate whenever necessary to stop penetration and force the attacker to pass. All good de-



fensive teams develop and use at least two principles for rotation.

#### REBOUNDING

The team that controls the boards will win the majority of their games. Good defensive rebounding reduces the number of opponent's shots. Defense should assume that every shot will be missed; therefore, every defensive man should fight for a good rebounding position and box out his man. The team's aim is to push the offense out of the paint or under the basket. When boxing out, intelligence plays an important role. Players should be aware that 80% of all missed shots will bounce to the opposite side they were shot from. In addition, defensive players should master the front and reverse pivot box-out technique to stop the offense from rebounding the ball with his body. In free-throw situations, fight and resist from being pushed by the offense under the basket.

Once near the ball, the player should

grab the ball firmly with both hands and turn in the air with his legs spread. The rebound should be followed by a quick pass. Overall team size is important but size alone will not result in control of the boards (diagr. 4).

#### TRANSITION DEFENSE

Sprint back to ball level, stop the ball, help towards the ballhandler, be ready to switch everything, bump the post trailers (don't let them make a direct cut), foul if necessary. No easy basket, no "coast to coast."

#### "HOW?" IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN "WHAT?"

You can construct your defense on different principles; more important is how your defensive players execute them. Definitely all of them should defend the opponent using the same principles.

#### INVOLVE YOUNG TALENT

Encourage and force young player to earn more time on the floor with hard defense. Whatever he'll do offensively is good but he must play tough defense. Develop his defensive pride and attitude.

#### USE SCOUTING REPORTS

Find out what your opponent is playing offensively or what their best offensive patterns are. Prepare your team to prevent them from executing what they want. Destroy their patterns. Teach your defense to read the offense.

#### SET CLEAR GOALS FOR YOUR DEFENSE

Some good examples: Make your opponent shoot less than 50% for the game, make them score less than 20 points per quarter, do not allow easy baskets, do not make stupid fouls ("basket and foul"), get more rebounds than the opponent, no open three-point shots, prevent opponent's top scorer from scoring a series, make less than 25 fouls, and steal more balls than the opponent.

In preparing the team, spend less time working on the defense than offense, but never pay less attention practicing it and you will develop a winning defense.