



# BASKETBALL PHILOSOPHY

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# 1 Introduction

The purpose of this document is to lay out my basketball philosophy so that I might communicate it to and iterate on it with players, colleagues, coaches, and friends.

## 1.1 Basic Philosophy: Basketball Is Like Jazz

My basic philosophy is that basketball is like jazz. There are five teammates on the court, each specializes in something different, they take turns taking center stage based on their specialty, and meanwhile, the other four players must provide background support. Just like in jazz, there is a flow, rhythm, and tempo to basketball, and just like in jazz, there is lots of improvisation. Just like in jazz, it doesn't matter if you play the wrong note, it just matters how you resolve it.

Different jazz bands may sound very different from one another, just like different basketball teams may play very differently from one another. The purpose of this document is not to catalog all the various ways a basketball team can play, but rather to distill some "fundamental principles" of basketball that would be applicable to almost any team. Thus, this document is not an exhaustive inventory of all basketball knowledge, it is simply a foundation upon which an excellent basketball team can grow and flourish.

## 1.2 Strategy vs. Tactics

Just like a jazz band, the coach needs to decide "how [we're] going to play", that is, the coach needs to set the team's strategy. For a jazz band, it may be that we're going to play *loose and improvisational*. For a basketball team, it may be that we're going to play *with pace and space*. Whatever the strategy is, it's the coach's job to articulate it.

Just like a jazz band, the players need to understand what to do when, that is, they need to understand playing tactics. For a jazz band, it may be knowing how to play *legato*, *staccato*, and *tenuto*. For a basketball player, it may be knowing how to *hedge*, *jam*, and *drop*. Whatever the tactics are, it's the coach's job to teach them.

The purpose of this document is to articulate both our playing strategy and the tactics associated with that strategy.

*"Tactics are knowing what to do when there is action to take. Strategy is knowing what to do when it seems there are no options."* – The Daily Coach

*"Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat."* – Sun Tzu, The Art of War

# 2 Advantage

It's critical to understand the concept of an "advantage" in basketball. The offense is said to have an "advantage" when the defense is put at a disadvantage. The bigger the defense's disadvantage, the bigger the offense's advantage. If that sounds like a tautology, that's because it is. But that's the best way I can think to explain it.

It's the offense's job to create an advantage, extend an advantage, or capitalize on an advantage during any given possession. It's the defense's job to prevent an advantage or close off an advantage the offense has created.

The better the offense is at creating, extending, and capitalizing on advantages, the better the offense is. The better the defense is at preventing and closing off advantages, the better the defense is.

This is advantage terminology in basketball.

### 3 Pace of Play

In general, the specifics of your offense and defense should depend on the pace of play that is optimal for your team. If you are a quick team and/or you play a deep bench, then you will generally want to play up-tempo. If you are a slow team and/or you only play six or seven players, then you will generally want to slow the game down. Obviously, both teams will "have a say" in how fast the game is played. In general, it is a good idea to try to "control the pace of play" in a way that is optimal for your team.

### 4 Communication Standards

All good teams communicate well with each other. Good communication is meaningful – it's not just saying "ball, ball, ball; deny, deny deny"; it's about actually communicating with your teammates in a way that's effective & timely. Having great communication as a team can be like "having a 6<sup>th</sup> defender on the floor" - it's that important.

Two good rules of thumb: (1) communication needs to be *early, loud, and continuous* - this will make the communication more effective; and (2) when possible, there should be a "call and response", that is, team members should acknowledge they understood what was said – without a call and response, no one will know if they're getting their point across; with a call and response, everyone will stay on the same page.

*"Teach your team to COMMUNICATE, not talk. Loud, precise, informative commands with unbelievable urgency. Awesome!" – Coach Z*

### 5 Offense: Simple

Basketball is one of the world's simplest math problems. There are five players on each team, and there is one ball. If two defenders are covering the ball, then one offensive player is left uncovered. If the defense cannot cover the ball one-on-one, then two defenders will have to cover the ball. Ergo, if the defense cannot cover the ball one-on-one, then one offensive player will have to be left uncovered.

In sum, if each offensive player can both shoot and eliminate their defender one-on-one, then as a team the offense will be impossible to guard. If one or more offensive players cannot shoot or eliminate their defender one-on-one, then the coach will have to create a system that hides those players' weaknesses while accentuating other players' strengths.

By-and-large, the offense will want to score in the simplest way possible. That is, the offense will want to “make the simple play”. That’s why the operating word for offense is “simple”. It’s that simple.

*To win a championship, the other team needs to worry about eight or nine players instead of two or three. That’s the only way to win. – Unknown*

## 5.1 Start in transition.

A great transition offense ensures (1) that the defense cannot relax, because the offense is a threat to score right away, and (2) that you maximize the amount of time you have on the shot clock in the half-court.

By-and-large, a good transition offense begins with the best ball-handling guard “C-cutting” up the floor to receive the outlet pass. By the same token, any ball-handler who gets the rebound can push the ball up the floor, which avoids having to make a slow outlet pass. If the outlet pass does not get thrown, then that same best ball-handling guard must fill the lane of whoever is bringing up the ball.

There are many primary break strategies, but my favorite is for the player bringing up the ball to attack the rack middle as quickly as possible. Nothing is simpler than just racking the ball right away.

If you’re a non-shooting big, you’re probably going to want to rim-run and look for the early deep seal. If the ball-handler attacks the rack, then be ready for the dump pass or offensive rebound.

If you’re a wing without the ball, you’re probably going to want to “keep the baseline balanced”; that is “fill any unoccupied corner”. This will stretch out the defense as much as possible. Be ready to catch & shoot.

Here are Coach Z’s transition rules, which are good to consider:

🏀 If we don't kick the ball head, we attack the paint looking for a layup.

🏀 If attacker is cut off, our first look is back to the trail.

🏀 Only dish out to the corners if open for 3

Obviously there’s a lot that goes into having a great transition offense, much more than is articulated here. These are just a few basics that will help ensure that the defense can never relax and that the amount of time on the shot clock you have to run through your offense is maximized.

*“After a stop, try not to call any play if you can. The more random you can make it, the more difficult it will be for defenses.” – Rick Carlisle*

## 5.2 Pass is king.

In finance, cash is king. In basketball, pass is king.

The reason pass is king is simple: when two defenders are covering the ball, the ball must be passed to the open player. If you cannot “pass to where the help came from”, then you cannot extend or capitalize on advantages that have been created. If you can pass “like popcorn popping”, then you can do both.



Passes that are on-time and on-target produce better shots than passes that are not on-time or not on-target or neither. Being able to put two defenders on the ball and then passing on-time and on-target to the open player will put the defense in the most difficult situation to cover in basketball: the long closeout.

*Pass with a ping, catch with a click. – Unknown*

*Don't let the ball get sticky. – Unknown*

*The dot connector is the pass. – Brett Brown*

### **5.3 Catch to shoot.**

Given that long closeouts are the most difficult situations to cover in basketball, on offense, everything plays off your jump shot. If you are not a threat to shoot then you will allow defenses to cover two with one or to stop short when they close-out on you, and you will struggle to extend or capitalize on advantages. Conversely, if you are a threat to shoot on every catch, then the defense cannot defend two with one, they will always have to closeout on you, and you will be able both to extend and to capitalize on advantages.

By-and-large, the most open you will ever be is when you first catch the ball. A sprinting defender on a long closeout travels ~2ft every ~0.1 seconds, so the quicker you can catch & shoot the more open, high-%age shots you will be able to take. This means you will have to start thinking about your shot before you even catch the ball. Doing this will allow you to capture additional milliseconds on your shot release time, which will help create open shots for you and long closeouts for the defense.

*"We don't throw it unless you show it [i.e. your hands]. Need to see 'hungry hands'." – Brett Brown*

*"The most neglected and best scoring move in basketball is the shot fake... it is the simplest and most elementary offensive move, yet still the absolute most effective." – Bob Knight*

### **5.4 React to attack.**

Upon catching to shoot an on-time & on-target pass, you must react to attack. Reacting to attack means that your decision for what to do next is not pre-programmed, i.e. you are reading the defense and taking what they give you. If the closeout is short, shoot it. If the closeout is long, blow by the defender "like ships passing in the night". If the closeout attracts two defenders, swing the ball to the open player. Et cetera.

The simplest way to do this is just to have a genuine curiosity about how the defense is playing you. Having genuine curiosity will allow you to react in an instinctual, rational way. In other words, you will not have time to consciously think through all of your options, but your limbic system will be able to intuit what to do if you begin with a genuine curiosity about how the defense is playing you. The San Antonio Spurs use the term "Point-Five" to indicate that the ball-handler needs to make her decision within point-five seconds after receiving the ball. If you are able to do this, then you will keep the defense on its heels.

It's important to note that, sometimes, a "go and catch" is a good option, too. A go and catch is when you are catching the ball *while* you are on the attack, rather than while you are stationary before the

attack. Far from being pre-programmed, this is a move that anticipates the defense's closeout before it even happens, and takes advantage of it before it even starts. In this way, an on the catch attack is an example of what Larry Bird referred to as "playing to the next polaroid", that is, reacting with rational instinct to anticipated rather than realized stimuli. In this way, it is no exaggeration to say that great basketball players are able to see and react to the future before it even happens.

*"Specific anticipatory 'resonance' mechanisms endow elite athletes' brains with the ability to predict others' actions ahead of their realization." – Journal of Natural Neuroscience, Action anticipation and motor resonance in elite basketball players.*

## **5.5 Sprint to re-space.**

Once you pass to where the help came from, you need to sprint to re-space. Every moment you are not re-spaced properly is a moment where the defense can cover two with one, which is disadvantageous for the offense. Moreover, great spacing will clarify the ball-handler's decisions and allow her to see what's going on. An off-ball shooter who is inside the 3pt-line is said to be "underwater", and they can only "breathe air again" by sprinting to beyond the 3pt arc.

A properly re-spaced unit will stretch the defense as much as possible. Just like in a middle-age torture chamber where prisoners were stretched out by ropes pulling both sides of their body in opposite directions, re-spacing and stretching the defense as much as possible will torture the defense.

As an example, Stephen Curry doesn't pause after passing to suss out options. He is moving into the void along the arc when the pass is still on his fingertips, and he sprints there.

*"Following a drive, re-space to the closest perimeter spot that is vacant & doesn't cross paths with the next drive. If that isn't feasible, respace to the corner and others fill upwards." – Nicolas Scira*

## **5.6 Ball moves → you move**

Don't stay stationary. When the ball is driven towards you, move on the first dribble. When the ball is driven away from you, fill behind on the second dribble. Always avoid being "three in a row" with the ball and your defender.

### **5.6.1 Cut backdoor when your defender's head is turned.**

LeBron James and Dwayne Wade are masters at this type of "opportunistic cut". They tend to generate big advantages via layups, paint touches, or stretching out the defense.

### **5.6.2 Baseline drive → 45 cut; 45 drive → baseline cut**

Keep in mind that the angles of your cut relative to the ballhandler is extremely important. You don't want to cut at a ballhandler that is dribbling directly towards you or directly away from you. In general, baseline drives should be met with 45 cuts & vice versa.

### **5.6.3 Understand where the help is coming from.**

Both the ball-handler and the off-ball players need to understand where the help is coming from. This is a key for all offensive players to stay in sync.

#### **5.6.4 *Bad shooters can be excellent corner cutters.***

Simple X and O solution when you have a “non-shooter” playing: send them to the corner and teach them when and how to cut for layups. This can take a liability and turn them into a weapon.

### **5.7 Shoot your shot.**

Different players excel at shooting different shots. Whatever “your shot” is, not only does your team want you to shoot it, but your team needs you to shoot it. If team members always “shoot their shot” then other team members will be able to predict which shots their teammates will take, which is advantageous for the team.

“Your shots” are simply those shots that you practice over-and-over again, shots that you have confidence in. These are the shots your team needs you to take.

#### **5.7.1 *Fight for space early on the block.***

Sometimes, “your shot” is on the block. In order to best position yourself for this shot, you need to fight for space and seal early on the block. Not only will this put you in the best position to score, but it will also carve out space for your perimeter players to drive. Beware you do not get called for 3-second violations, though. Seal your defender outside of the lane early if you can and “score before you catch the ball”.

Note that, sometimes, it is best to set your defender up by standing on the block facing the opposite sideline with your hands on your knees as if you’re going nowhere. Then when you spring into action for a deep seal you will take your defender by surprise. This is part of the art of the deception in post play.

#### **5.7.2 *Get the ball to the “T” in the post.***

A great idea for post players: dribble the ball to right underneath the front of the hoop, then decide which way to turn. This is extremely effective.

#### **5.7.3 *Get close to get open.***

Coming off a down screen (for example), you are much easier to defend if there is space between you and your defender. If you first hug your defender close, then shake them loose, you will maximize separation. As an example, Steph Curry does this all the time.

#### **5.7.4 *Wait for screens.***

The Boston Celtics pride themselves on waiting for screens. Set your player up, plant your foot, and change direction and speed. Don’t move before the screen is set. This will help maximize your advantage and create the space you need to set-up “your shot”.

### **5.8 Understand the terrain.**

By the same token, it’s critical that every player understands the terrain of the court in order to discern what does and does not constitute a good shot. A 3pt shot is worth 50% more than a 2pt shot, and a 33% 3pt shot earns as many points as a 50% 2pt shot (not accounting for offensive rebounds, which may be more abundant with 3pt misses than 2pt misses due to the longer average distance of the rebound). Thus, even an excellent mid-range jump-shooter does not earn as many points per shot as an average 3pt shooter.

This does not mean that players should never take mid-range jump shots. Sometimes, late in the shot clock or against excellent defenses, a mid-range jump shot is a team's best option. The important thing is to just understand the reality of the basketball court terrain so that players can intuit what does and does not constitute a good shot.

## **5.9 Understand pick-and-roll & DHO “solutions”.**

Pick-and-roll and DHO are such an important part of today's game, and there are as many defensive coverages as there are solutions to those coverages. The contents of these coverages and solutions could fill a book in its own right. Suffice it to say that you're going to encounter both pick-and-roll and DHO, and when you do you're going to want to be really good at them.

Very often, it's not about the speed, it's about the read. Dirk Bauermann talked about making a “pre-snap read” – the ballhandler having vision of the coverage before coming off the screen.

### ***5.9.1 Vs. Hedge, set screen high and/or run Horns Flare***

The screen must be high enough to give yourself the slip when the defender shows

### ***5.9.2 Vs. Under, rescreen or roll into them.***

Yes, it is a foul, but is it? If the defender chooses to go under the screen does that prevent the screener from rolling to the basket regardless of intent?

### ***5.9.3 Vs. Switch, screen below stay below or attack with pass ahead/behind or boomerang (@John Leonzo)***

Screen below stay below:

Hit the on-ball defender on the low-side, and seal them up on the roll. This erases the switch via moving them out of position.

Attack with pass ahead/behind:

- This creates a better passing angle for a feed
- Allows the roll time and space to seal
- This also creates a chance to create an advantage on a skip pass by creating a long closeout
- Once the advantage is created, keep it with speed and space

Very often, this can include flashing for a Hi/Lo look after a switch & subsequent front. This concept is a staple in Euro hoops, and Monty Williams' Suns teams have been fantastic at it.

Boomerang:

- Most bigs who switch are ready to defend a live dribble off the screen - move it and get it back to put them in recovery
- Forcing this big to closeout and defend an un-used dribble is a whole different thing
- Most forwards overhelp severely - they are trained to help and block shots
- Making them do this on the perimeter after a switch creates problems

*“Every time I run pick-and-roll, I’m never thinking about who’s guarding me. I’m always thinking about the help D.” – Chris Paul*

## **5.10 The essence of the game is deception.**

In any great jazz performance, there are moments where the band plays together in a coordinated, planned way that creates a beautiful effect the audience was not expecting. Similarly, in basketball, a team can sometimes play together in a coordinated, planned way that creates advantages the defense was not expecting. These types of coordinated, planned actions can take many forms: set plays, automatic reads, intentional misdirection, etc. Mastering this art of deception together is a fun part of being a basketball team.

The specifics of an offense’s deceptive actions should be based on its players’ specialties. There is no point in creating a weak-side post up for a player who cannot score in the post. There is no point in running an elevator screen for a player who cannot shoot. By-and-large, it is the coach’s job to determine what her players are best at and plan coordinated actions to capitalize on her players’ strengths.

In this way, to me, a great coach is like a great chef. A great coach should be able to combine any ingredients she is given to create the most delicious dish possible. As any great chef knows, it is better to have high-quality ingredients and adjust the recipe to suit those ingredients than to have lower-quality ingredients that fit a certain pre-determined recipe. In the same way, it is better for a coach to have high-quality players and adjust the offensive scheme to suit those players’ strengths than it is to have lower-quality players that fit a pre-determined offensive scheme. This type of top-chef flexibility is the mark of an excellent offensive coach.

### ***5.10.1 Mask your screens.***

Crafty screen-setting keeps defenders off-balance by not making it clear which side you’re screening on, or by “ghost screening” and slipping.

Vs. switching defenses you can screen to get yourself open, or you can screen your own man to get a teammate open.

If you do make contact on a screen, usually you’ll want to hold the screen to create the biggest advantage possible, don’t let the defense off the hook.

It’s important for the screen-receiver to set-up the screen. Do this by (1) moving away from the screen, (2) planting your foot, (3) changing speeds, and (4) coming off the screen shoulder to hip.

### ***5.10.2 Utilize the seal screen.***

It may be dubiously legal, but it’s almost never called, since it looks like a box out or a post-up. It is a great way to prevent help rotations from opposing rim protectors. It’s a technique more bigs could put in their arsenal.

### ***5.10.3 Use back-doors to counter over-aggression, i.e. as a “pressure release”.***

If the defense is over-denying a guard, you can use backdoor actions to counter that aggression. Find the most over-aggressive defender on the opposing team, but that player in the corner, take three hard

steps up towards the wing and then plant your outside foot and cut straight to the basket. This, among other backdoor tactics, will work.

#### ***5.10.4 Occupy the weak-side.***

A good deception tactic is to prevent the defense from helping properly by running actions on both the weak and strong sides of the floor simultaneously. Anything that draws the help defense away from the play is a good thing.

#### ***5.10.5 Consecutive actions cause confusion.***

Consecutive actions (e.g. stagger immediately followed by a pnr) often cause confusion for defenses. Defenders will talk through the first action but often don't on the second action. This usually leads to an open look.

### **5.11 Misc. Offensive Cues**

- “Rim read” – driving to the rim and making the right next play
- “Be tricky” – e.g. with Rondo move
- “Stretch your bounce” – from Villanova MBB, make the most out of every dribble
- “Go & catch”
- “An extra beat for their feet” – give the shooter an extra beat of time to set their feet before you make the pass
- “Own the driving line” – attack the defender’s hips, then get shoulder to defender’s chest
  - [https://twitter.com/JoeyBurton/status/1345785965881798661?s=20&t=Bxg977OrlZ\\_TjWjsd1gMCA](https://twitter.com/JoeyBurton/status/1345785965881798661?s=20&t=Bxg977OrlZ_TjWjsd1gMCA)
- “Body on, ball away” – Put distance between the release point and defender. Helpful when finishing over longer defenders.
  - [https://twitter.com/John\\_Leonzo/status/1285280018281697282?s=20&t=Bxg977OrlZ\\_TjWjsd1gMCA](https://twitter.com/John_Leonzo/status/1285280018281697282?s=20&t=Bxg977OrlZ_TjWjsd1gMCA)
  - [https://twitter.com/tucker\\_thorson/status/1310621944413208576?s=20&t=Bxg977OrlZ\\_TjWjsd1gMCA](https://twitter.com/tucker_thorson/status/1310621944413208576?s=20&t=Bxg977OrlZ_TjWjsd1gMCA)
  - [https://twitter.com/coachgravesbb/status/1259584078422118400?s=20&t=Bxg977OrlZ\\_TjWjsd1gMCA](https://twitter.com/coachgravesbb/status/1259584078422118400?s=20&t=Bxg977OrlZ_TjWjsd1gMCA)
  - [https://twitter.com/tucker\\_thorson/status/1512072704236658688?s=20&t=Bxg977OrlZ\\_TjWjsd1gMCA](https://twitter.com/tucker_thorson/status/1512072704236658688?s=20&t=Bxg977OrlZ_TjWjsd1gMCA)
  - [https://twitter.com/PureSweat/status/1301984630485245958?s=20&t=Bxg977OrlZ\\_TjWjsd1gMCA](https://twitter.com/PureSweat/status/1301984630485245958?s=20&t=Bxg977OrlZ_TjWjsd1gMCA)

## **6 Defense: Move & Cover**

Move and cover is the most fundamental defensive tactic, and perhaps the only defensive tactic. Put simply, move and cover means teamwork. It means individual defenders finding a way to work together, communicate with each other, and mutually support one another. Far from being worried about your player only, move and cover means all five defenders are singularly focused on how to best accomplish the team's mission: getting a stop.

Great move and cover defenses are built with individual building blocks, one block at a time. If individually each defender commits to these building blocks, then over the course of several possessions the defense shall not fail.

### **6.1 Start in transition.**

Transition defense begins on the rise of the shot. Some teams send one player back "to the logo" on the rise of the shot. Others send players > 15ft away from the basket back to the logo on the rise of the shot. Other teams have everyone "scrum in" on the offensive rebound on the rise of the shot. Whatever you want your players to do, you need to have a plan to begin your transition defense on the rise of the shot.

Once the offense obtains the ball, you cannot trot back in transition; you have to get ahead of the ball with an all-out sprint every time. Transition defense is the most chaotic situation to defend in basketball. You cannot put yourself at a disadvantage by jogging back.

The first job in transition is to protect the basket. The basket defender needs to be screaming like crazy directing who should take the ball and what the match-ups are. The voice of the basket defender = having a sixth defender on the court. Even if you are a small, if you are the first player back then you should protect the basket. It is the job of the first big back to "bump" you off the basket to the perimeter.

It's also important to recognize that post defense begins in transition. Whether you are a big or a small, you need to give "lane wood" to anyone who tries to post you up. Don't just let them deep-seal you without a fight. Make their bigs work for every inch in the paint, especially in transition. If you do get sealed deep, "pull the chair" on them and swim around to prevent easy post touches.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> priority is to deal with whatever problems have arisen. To do this, you may have to switch onto the ball or onto a strong-side player. You must communicate this switch by pointing to your player, indicating that someone else needs to take your player while you help out or lag behind the play.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> job is to find your match-up. Don't confuse the order and find your match-up before dealing with the problem. Your match-up will not go through the hoop; only the ball will go through the hoop. Deal with the ball first before dealing about your match-up. This is especially true for the 2<sup>nd</sup> big back, whose match-up may be trailing the play. It's a good idea for the 2<sup>nd</sup> big back to "load to the ball" to help prevent dribble penetration instead of "buddy running" with their match-up who is trailing the play. This will maximize the utility of the 2<sup>nd</sup> big back.

Finally, it is a very good idea for the transition defense to try and keep the ball to the outside 3<sup>rd</sup> of the court in transition. In general, a good transition offense will want to get the ball to the middle of the floor to maximize passing optionality. If you prevent the ball from getting to the middle 3<sup>rd</sup>, you will minimize this optionality.

If you can do this all seamlessly and successfully, then your transition defense will be good.

## **6.2 Always in stance.**

Most defensive breakdowns happen because defenders are standing straight up and they are not in stance. “In stance” does not necessarily mean that players’ knees are so bent that their thighs are parallel to the floor; it simply means that players’ knees are bent such that they are ready to fight in a boxing match. If you are in an athletic stance, with your knees shoulder-width apart, you are “sitting in a chair”, and you are ready to fight, then you are in stance. The mark of a great defender is that they are always in stance.

*When you’re in stance, you give yourself a chance. – Joshua Pastner*

## **6.3 No negative steps.**

Sometimes players get beat not because they’re not in stance, but because they move the wrong foot first. Such “negative steps” are inefficient and give an unnecessary advantages to the offense. You want to be as efficient with your movement as possible and never take negative steps.

## **6.4 Guard your yard.**

The #1 responsibility of the on-ball defender is to “guard your yard”, that is, do not let the ball-handler blow by you into the paint. In order to do this well, you will likely want to be an arm’s distance from the ball-handler with your nose even to the ball-handler’s chest. You will also want to lock into the offensive player’s midsection with your eyes, so they cannot juke you. You will also want to feel for ball screens with your hands rather than looking for ball screens with your eyes because as soon as you look away the ballhandler could blow by you. If every defender can guard their yard well, then the offense will be in big trouble.

## **6.5 “Drop on the dribble” and turn your player.**

You never want to get blown-by on a straight-line drive. If the ball-handler has an advantage on you driving to the rim, you need to turn and sprint and cut them off so that they are forced to use a counter move. Bad defenders ride the ball-handler’s hip all the way to the hoop. Good defenders turn the ball-handler early and often, daring them to make a counter move. This is referred to as “dropping on the dribble”.

## **6.6 Always weak.**

Almost every offensive player has a weak hand. Generally speaking, offensive players are worse at scoring with and passing with their weak hand as compared to their strong hand. Although as a defender you never want to allow dribble penetration, when a ball-handler does get to within 8ft of the rim it is critical that you have forced them to their weak hand. Not only will they be less efficient scoring with this weak hand, but their kick-out passes are far less likely to be on-target and on-time. Therefore, it is



the job both of the on-ball defender and any off-ball defenders who help on the dribble penetration to force the ball-handler to their weak hand inside of 8ft.

Similarly, on a long closeout, you always want to force the offensive player to their weak hand. This will not only be less comfortable for the ball-handler, but it will make your long closeouts predictable such that the help behind you will be able to anticipate where the ball-handler is likely to go.

## **6.7 Move on the pass.**

As soon as you see daylight between the ball and the ball-handler's fingertips, you should be gone. Waiting to see what happens with the pass is slow and inefficient.

### **6.7.1 *Jump to the ball.***

Jumping to the ball is one of the most basic building blocks of basketball defense. This will prevent players from ever face-cutting on you. Players who are coached well always jump to the ball.

### **6.7.2 *Recover to help.***

Whether your help position is in deny, in the gap, or on the midline, you must sprint to your help position as soon as possible. To sprint anywhere else first would be inefficient.

### **6.7.3 *Arrive on the catch.***

If the defender is not arriving on the catch, then the offense has done a good job of creating an advantage. If you arrive on the catch, then no advantage is created.

## **6.8 See both.**

Almost always, you should be able to see your player and the ball. One exception might be if your player is directly underneath the basket about to run off a floppy screen, in which case you can turn your back to the ball, face your player, and watch their eyes to see which way they are going to cut. One other exception is if you are guarding the inbounder and helping underneath the basket on a BLOB. In all other cases, you want to be able to point both to your man and to the ball. If you can do this, then you can see both.

## **6.9 Stunt every dribble.**

In a move and cover defense, off-ball defenders are never stationary. They are constantly "stunting" at the ball-handler to make the ball-handler think twice about driving vs. passing. If off-ball defenders are stunting every dribble, it will cause extraordinary frustration to the offense, and it will help prevent dribble penetration into the paint. *Stunt help is better than basket help in the same way that regular visits to the physician is better than relying on the emergency room.* If off-ball defenders do not stunt, then the offense will generally be free to do what it wants.

## **6.10 Contest with every fiber of your being.**

Shots are less likely to go in if they're contested. The difference between a semi-contested shot and a well-contested shot is huge. Move & cover defenders contest with every fiber of their being. A late hand is better than no hand.

Most coaches teach “choppy steps” on the contest. In my opinion, choppy steps are too slow. Instead, I simply teach a run and stop contest. Use a stride stop to break down your feet naturally. This is quicker and more effective.

Similarly, most coaches teach “high hands” on the contest. Again, in my opinion this is too slow and makes defenders more susceptible to be driven on. Instead, I teach defenders to simply rise up and contest if the offense decides to shoot. This makes the defender quicker and more effective.

It’s also important that you pick a hip to run to. This helps you dictate which way the offense gets to drive (weak hand, baseline, funnel to help, etc.).

## **6.11 Use your superpower.**

Every defender has a superpower: the ability to deter a drive without even defending the ball. This superpower can only be accessed when you are more than one pass away from the ball, and you are standing somewhere near the basket (at the “bottom of the i”). If you are in this position, then the ball-handler will see you there, and your presence will literally be transubstantiated onto the ball, and you will deter the ball-handler from driving. Because you are more than one pass away, you will still have time to recover back to your player in the event of a skip pass. Used correctly, this superpower can be extremely potent.

Like any superhero, you need to know when your superpower is needed and when it is not. If the ball-handler is excellent and/or you are covering a non-shooter, then it is a good idea to shade heavily towards the ball at the bottom of the i (i.e. your superpower may only be effective when you are heavily shaded towards the ball). If the ball-handler is a non-issue and/or you are covering a shooter, then you may not want to be at the bottom of the i at all (i.e. you may not even want to use your superpower). Therefore, you must only use your superpower if the situation warrants it.

## **6.12 Help & recover or help the helper.**

Ideally, the ball doesn’t get into the paint. Practically, that won’t always be the case. When it does, you may need to bring help.

In general, the rules on help are:

- (1) Help should come from the weak side
- (2) Do not help out of the strong side corner
- (3) The first line of defense at the rim comes from the low man

From there, the helper can either recover to their own, or we can help the helper via some sort of rotation.

One common rotation is called a sink, where the top of the “i” sinks down to take away the interior pass. The nearest other helper then has to cover for the sinker by filling and positioning themselves so that they can rotate to whoever gets the ball. This is called a sink and fill.

Following a sink and fill, players can either recover back to their original matchups, or they can “x-out” where they exchange matchups and recover in an X-shaped pattern.

### **6.13 Fight for space.**

Be comfortable with contact. Nobody gets into the paint easily. Nobody gets position on the block easily. Fight for every inch without fouling.

### **6.14 Know when to pull the chair.**

It's no use fighting and fighting if the offense already has good position. Sometimes, you will need to "pull the chair" out from under the offensive player so that they fall out of position and you are free to skirt around them and re-occupy the space you had been fighting for. An excellent defender knows when to fight for space and when to pull the chair.

### **6.15 Don't get screened.**

Screeners are stationary, move and cover defenders are not. *Imagine running a 40-yard dash, and then imagine running a 40-yard dash where you run into a screen. In which race would you run quicker?* The obvious answer is that you are always quicker if you do not get touched by the screen. Never getting screened will save your move and cover unit from all sorts of help and emergency switching situations.

#### ***6.15.1 Feel for the screen, don't look for the screen.***

Especially on the ball, you shouldn't have to turn your head to look for the screen. You should trust that your teammate will call out the screen, and you should use your hands to reach out and feel for the screen. If you turn your head, the ball-handler will likely reject the screen and blow by you.

#### ***6.15.2 "Bully"/"Cancel" ball screens and "blow up" handoffs.***

"Bullying" or "cancelling" a ball screen is when the on-ball defender simply refuses to get screened and just stays with the ball handler. Usually this involves the on-ball defender (1) "on the call, jam the ball; (2) "get skinny", and (3) "forearm over upper arm" of the screener to get over the screen. This eliminates the screen's effectiveness.

Similarly, "blowing up" and handoff is when the off-ball defender simply refuses to allow their check to receive the handoff by going over and "blowing it up".

These are both good, aggressive defensive options to teach move & cover defenders.

### **6.16 Emergency switch when necessary.**

In an ideal world, you would never get screened, but in the real world, emergency switches might be necessary. You never want to leave a ball-handler with a clear line to the basket. You never want to leave an off-ball cutter wide open on the block. Rather than give up an open layup, you should emergency switch. But don't allow emergency switching to become a habit.

### **6.17 Chase shooters on the strong side.**

By-and-large, it is a good idea to "stay connected" to good shooters, and "lock and chase" them as they run off screens on the strong side of the court. This will prevent them from getting their shot off, whereas if you try to "shoot the gap" on a good shooter, they can usually find space to get their shot off. (N.B. you can also "top lock" good shooters to cut-off any passes to them and force them to cut to the basket; this is a more advanced maneuver.)

If the shooter is on the weak side of the court, then you may want to shoot the gap. It is a much more difficult pass to make if a shooter flares to the corner on the weak side of the court, so you can be a bit looser with your coverage if that happens.

### **6.18 Bump basket cuts.**

No offensive player should be allowed to cut to the basket without a bump. By “bump” I simply mean that you get in their way so that they are impeded temporarily. This means that, when two players are defending a tight curl off a pindown and the cutter is being chased, the screener’s defender will need to bump the cutter to give the chaser time to recover and before quickly retreating back to the screener. Similarly, when two players are defending a block-to-block cross-screen, the screener’s defender will need to bump the cutter to prevent an easy look. This bump would give the cutter’s defender enough time to recover and would be quick enough for the screener’s defender to recover back to the screener before the screener becomes a threat.

Obviously the specifics of each particular action may differ depending on the action and the personnel and how the move and cover unit wants to guard it, but in general it is a good move and cover principle to bump every basket cut.

### **6.19 Know your tag responsibilities.**

A “tag” in a move and cover defense occurs when an off-ball defender leaves their player to tag a basket cutter or a roller. A tag is very different from a bump because a bump impedes the cutter’s progress whereas a tag positions the help defender to help on or steal a pass to the cutter/roller if needed.

Like any move and cover principle, your eagerness to tag should depend on personnel. If you are guarding a non-shooter, you should be very eager to tag. If you are guarding a shooter, in some situations you may not want to tag at all.

Your tag responsibilities will also depend on where the ball is and where the ballhandler is headed. A simple rule of thumb is that if the ballhandler is going away from you then it’s your tag. Regardless, a good move and cover defender will always be prepared to tag if the situation warrants it.

### **6.20 Know your double-teaming or “blitz” responsibilities.**

When trapping, your off-ball players become either “interceptors” or “protectors” depending on how aggressive you want to be. Off-ball players need to know whether they are “interceptors” or “protectors” in order to make your blitzing strategy most effective.

### **6.21 Put a hand in the passing lane.**

Whether you are on the ball or helping on dribble penetration, you will always want to have at least one hand in the passing lane. Players who mindlessly help without a hand in the passing lane make a major concession to the offense. Players who always have a hand in the passing lane will be shocked at how many deflections they get.

## **6.22 Wisconsin.**

Wisconsin is short-hand for keeping your hands straight up where the referee can see them (it is so named because Bo Ryan's Wisconsin teams were expert at this). At the NCAA level on the women's side, you get one "hot stove touch" on the ball-handler, and every hand-check after that is a foul. Therefore, any time you are defending a ball-handler, you need to have your hands out so the referee can see them, else you are in danger of having a foul called on you.

What's more, referees are generally terrible at determining when a lowered hand gets "all ball" or "all arm". Keeping your hands straight up is the only way to prevent the referee from calling a foul on you. Your hands should be so high, it should look as if someone is holding you up at gunpoint. The plane of your body should be so straight, it should look as if you are going through one of those airport security x-ray machines. Being in Wisconsin will force the ball-handler to finish the play, which is generally much more difficult than shooting the free throws that would result from a foul call.

The one exception to this would be smaller guards who have very quick hands and a knack for stealing the ball. Over time, I have learned that such guards will be ineffective at Wisconsin, and you are better off freeing them to pursue steals and cause havoc by swiping at the ball when they see fit. This exception should be granted rarely and with extreme caution. In general, most players should be taught to Wisconsin and nothing else.

## **6.23 Defend all the way "into the cave".**

"The cave" is the area underneath and behind the basket. Some players, when they learn Wisconsin, make the mistake of standing straight up like a statue "in front of the cave", and in doing so let the ball-handler skirt around them for a layup. This is a bad use of Wisconsin. Instead, a good defender will defend the drive in Wisconsin mode all the way through to the end, such that the offensive player is forced to finish the play with a defender in front of her. In other words, Wisconsin does not mean that your feet are still. Your feet can still be active while your hands are straight-up in Wisconsin. Defending all the way into the cave in Wisconsin mode is the best way to go.

## **6.24 Draw the charge.**

For some reason, college referees love to call charges. Drawing the charge is huge because it (1) forces a turnover, (2) adds a foul to an opposing player, and (3) often takes away a made basket. Knowing how to draw charges is a must for good move-and-cover defenders.

## **6.25 Block from behind.**

If you do get beat, it's a good idea to block the shot from behind. Don't give up on the play.

## **6.26 Defend without fouling.**

It is critical that the defense be able to defend without fouling. Championship teams are able to do this, and they are able to keep their best players on the floor because nobody gets in foul trouble. Bad teams have bad defensive habits and foul when the game gets tight, causing foul trouble for them and ceding free throws to the other team. It is so critical that players build the habit of showing their hands to the referee and defending all the way into the cave without fouling.

## **6.27 Know your personnel (KYP).**

Before the game even starts, you should understand who the other team's players are and what they're good and bad at. Who are their stud scoring threats? Which of their players are afraid to shoot? Who is a lefty vs. a righty? Knowing the other team's personnel and knowing your own team's personnel will be critical in deciding how your move & cover unit should defend.

## **6.28 Switch likes.**

It is a good idea to have "like groups" that auto-switch actions. For example, your bigs and your smalls could be in their own "like" groups, and they switch all actions, or at least all on-ball actions. This will frustrate the offense.

### **6.28.1 Switch aggressively.**

Switch to deny, switch to force a turnover, switch to take away a 3. When you switch into a size mismatch, switch "on top". This allows you to scam out of the mismatch and not get buried by the big rolling to the rim. Don't just switch passively.

## **6.29 Cut off the head of the snake.**

Generally speaking, a good defensive game plan will take away what the offense does best. This usually means helping early on the offense's best player, though not always. If you are playing LeBron James, for example, you might decide that what LeBron does best is pass, and you might be ok with LeBron scoring 40 points as long as you limit his assists. A great coach will know precisely what "the head of each snake" is and how her move & cover unit should cut it off.

It's important to note that sometimes the best way to cut off the head of the snake is to make the other team's best player work really hard on defense. In this way, you cannot overlook how the defensive and offensive end of the floor are connected to each other in game planning.

## **6.30 Shrink the floor off of non-shooters.**

A non-shooter is someone who is either very bad at shooting or afraid to shoot. Do not cover these players closely; instead, sag off of them to help "shrink the floor".

## **6.31 Defend actions, not plays.**

Very often, coaches are tempted to "run through the other team's plays" and how to defend each one. This is fool's gold because it works against bad teams but not against good teams. Instead of preparing to guard the other team's plays, it is far better to prepare to guard the other team's most common actions. Whether they run wing ball-screens, block-to-block cross-screens, or weak-side flare screens, you are far better off reviewing how to defend these specific actions than reviewing how to defend each and every one of the other team's plays.

## **6.32 Control the point.**

"Controlling the point" is a tennis analogy. It means that you apply pressure and put the offense on *its* heels, rather than the other way around. As a move & cover defender, you should adopt the mentality of the aggressive tennis player. Dictate the possession and prevent the offense from having its way.

### **6.33 Defend with multiple efforts to completion.**

There is inherent messiness in each basketball possession. The probability that all five players will play a perfect possession every time is low. But if all five players commit to moving, covering, and defending with multiple efforts, then the probability is high that you will end the possession with your desired outcome: a stop.

## **7 Rebounding**

Rebounding on both ends of the floor will be absolutely critical to your team's success. Here are a few general rebounding principles I have found to be solid:

### **7.1 Go for every offensive rebound.**

The tradeoff between offensive rebounding vs. transition defense is a much-debated topic in the basketball world. What I know for sure is that the extent of the tradeoff depends on the level of the play. At the NBA level, teams are so efficient at scoring in transition that some offenses have stopped pursuing offensive rebounds altogether in order to prioritize transition defense. This may make sense for that level.

At the NCAA level, however, I have come to believe that the benefit of pursuing every offensive rebound outweighs the cost to your transition defense over time. At a minimum, each offensive player (except the shooter, who will almost always get back) should run into ~15ft on the shot and "split step" as the ball is hitting the rim to give themselves a chance at battling for the offensive rebound. Just like a little leaguer who "forgets to run to first" after hitting a baseball, many of your players may forget to pursue the offensive rebound on a shot. As a coach, you will have to train this habit of into your players. Doing so, I have realized, will be well worth it.

### **7.2 Go for every defensive rebound.**

On the defensive end, all move and cover defenders should be inside 15ft when the ball is coming off the rim. If you are guarding someone on the perimeter, you will want to "check and pursue", meaning check them to make sure they don't get inside of 15ft, and then pursue the ball once you are certain your player is not an offensive rebounding threat. If you are guarding someone who is under the rim, you will want to "box them in" to make sure they remain in a bad position to get the rebound. In all other situations, you will want to "box out" to maintain good rebounding position. Note that, both on a box-out and a box-in, you cannot "displace" your player, because displacement is a foul.

### **7.3 Get to where the ball is going.**

Far from being random, the location of the rebound is reasonably predictable based on where the shot is taken. Longer shots tend to produce longer rebounds. Shots from the corner tend to rebound onto the opposite block. Shots from above the break tend to rebound into the slot area. Knowing where the rebound is likely to go based on where the shot was taken will give you insight into where you ought to position yourself to maximize your chances of getting the rebound. [This Kirk Goldsberry Grantland](#)

[article](https://grantland.com/features/how-rebounds-work/) provides an excellent visual as to where the rebound is likely to go given a certain shot location (<https://grantland.com/features/how-rebounds-work/>).

## **7.4 Pursue with two.**

In general, you will want to pursue the rebound with two hands. This is the “gold standard” of rebounding. In some cases, a player may be particularly skilled at boxing out with one hand while pursuing the rebound with the other. But generally those cases are rare, and the rebound should be pursued with two hands.

## **7.5 Land with a wide base.**

Some players make the mistake, after grabbing the rebound, of landing with their feet close together. This is a bad idea because it will allow the opposing team to swarm you, make you uncomfortable, and force you to turn the ball over. If you land with a wide base then you will occupy all the space you need to secure the rebound and outlet the ball.

## **7.6 Chin it.**

It is a common rebounding trope that you must “chin the ball” after grabbing it and landing with a wide base. In some cases, it may be a better idea to hug the ball and wrestle it away from the opposing team who may be trying to steal it or force a jump-ball. Whatever the case may be, once you grab the rebound and land with a wide base you need to secure the ball by any means possible.

## **7.7 Understand the difference between a good tap vs. a bad tap.**

While pursuing with two is the gold standard, sometimes this may not be possible, and you may need to tap the ball to your teammate. Tapping the ball is an excellent idea when pursuing with two is not possible. But if you tap the ball when you could have caught it with two hands then you give the other team an opportunity that they otherwise would not have had to intercept the tap. Therefore, knowing the difference between a good tap and a bad tap is critical.

## **7.8 Sometimes your best rebounder doesn't box out. That's ok.**

Sometimes, gifted players will simply have a “nose for the ball” and they will not need to box-out. It is tempting as a coach to scold this player for not being a “fundamental rebounder”, but over time I have realized that it is better to just let this player be a beast on the boards and vacuum the glass. As a coach, you need to provide room for your best rebounders to simply make plays while still enforcing a high standard for the rest of your team to box out.

## **7.9 Have your best defensive rebounder defend the other team's best offensive rebounder.**

Sometimes this will not be feasible, because your best defensive rebounder may be big and immobile whereas the other team's best offensive rebounder may be quick and athletic. Obviously, the coach needs to use discretion in such cases as to what the best match-ups are. But over time I have realized that having your best defensive rebounder defend the other team's best offensive rebounder is generally a good idea, especially if they are both big.



## **7.10 Offensive rebounds are great opportunities for kick-out threes.**

You must train your team to look for these kick-out opportunities, else you will miss out on advantages you could have otherwise had.

## **7.11 Don't neglect rebounding free-throws.**

There are specific free-throw offensive rebounding techniques, such as X-ing and swim-moving inside, that are worth teaching to get extra possessions. It is not always obvious that coaches should teach this, but it is usually well worth the investment.

# **8 Press Break**

## **8.1 If the defense is pressuring your point-guard full-court, have the point guard throw the ball in.**

## **8.2 Sometimes the best press break is to give the ball to your point-guard and let them go**

Don't bother setting up a press break if you don't have to. If your best ballhandler can beat the press then let them.

## **8.3 Take the ball out underneath the basket.**

For a pressure throw-in, underneath the basket is the hardest spot to deny.

# **9 Edge Meter**

It is a good idea to create an "Edge Meter", which is a number based on your hustle stat totals divided by the time you spent on the floor. During one or two games, you may make or miss not meet the team's "Edge Meter" standard depending on the luck of the hustle plays you happened to be involved in, but over the course of time your Edge Meter will portray an accurate depiction of your Edge as a player.

Such hustle stats may include fundamental box-outs or box-ins, fundamental closeouts, floor burns, charges taken, jump balls forced, etc. A team's particular Edge Meter formula could weight these stats more or less depending on what they want to emphasize. But the underlying principle is that a player who plays with the right Edge will accumulate these hustle stats, whereas a player who plays with no Edge will not. A player who is willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of the team is the ultimate Edge player.

## 10 Special Situations

The purpose of this section is to catalog some important special situation concepts, which are numerous in basketball.

### 10.1 Timeouts

Personally, I feel that timeouts are best-used to avoid a turnover (e.g. 5-second calls or loose-ball jump-balls) or to advance the ball at the end of a game. To me, these timeouts will always provide a measurable advantage to your team, whereas “strategy timeouts” or “run-stopping timeouts” sometimes work but sometimes don’t. In general, if your team is aware of this timeout philosophy, then they can (1) build the habit of calling a timeout to avoid turnovers when warranted, and (2) know that they will always have to “figure it out” when the other team goes on a run, because the coach is not going to bail them out with a timeout. #1 will always provide a measurable benefit to your team. #2 may look ugly to begin the season or with an inexperienced team, but over time your team will be forced to get better at problem-solving on the fly, which will strengthen your team in the long-run. Some coaches may disagree, but this is my philosophy.

During a timeout, many coaches think about drawing up a play for their offense, but it’s also a good idea to change your team’s defense for one possession to keep the offense off-balance. Very often changing your team’s defense will negate some of the timeout talking points the opposing coach had given her team, which will be of great frustration both to that coach and her players.

### 10.2 End of shot-clock.

End of shot-clock happens often enough that it’s worth having a plan, both offensively and defensively.

#### *10.2.1 Two bad shots are better than one good shot.*

It is important to realize that two bad shots are better than one good shot, so you should always try to take the last shot of the quarter if you can. This means that you will want to release the ball with ~41 seconds left in the quarter (with a 30-second shot clock) to give your team the optimal chance of getting a “two for one” opportunity.

Please realize that, after a made basket, the NCAA clock only stops in the final minute of play, so it might be a good idea to let the clock run before you grab the ball to inbound it to maximize your chance of getting a “two for one”.

On the flip side, if the clock is stopped and the defense is not covering you full court, it may be a good idea to “roll the ball down the court” to shorten the time that elapses during your offensive possession and maximize your chance of getting a “two for one” (note that “rolling the ball down the court” might also be a good Neon Mode game lengthening tactic). Similarly, if you are on defense, it may be a good idea to double the ballhandler to try to speed her up when they are trying to milk clock – this could force a turnover or cause a bad decision.

#### *10.2.2 Changing end-of-shot-clock defenses.*

One strategy I’ve seen is at the end of the shot clock, defenders will tap their head to indicate switching ball-screen coverages. This is something worth looking into.

### 10.3 Neon Mode: Game Extension

If you are losing towards the end of the game, you will want to go into what I call “Neon Mode”, which is where you take more risks and increase the pace of play to try and increase the variance of the outcome. Neon Mode strategies include going for steals, taking early 3’s, and pressuring the other team full-court.

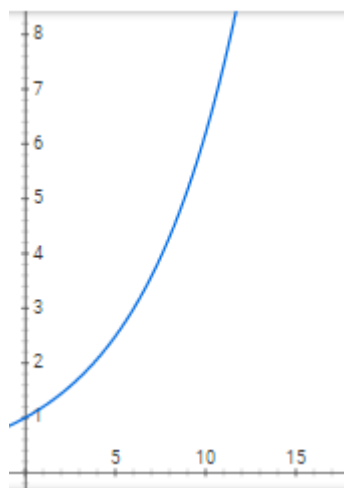
In general, teams that are losing tend to be too risk-averse and do not shift into Neon Mode soon enough. In doing so they miss out on the opportunity to increase the variance of the game, which is a shame. The effectiveness of Neon Mode will depend on your team’s and the opponent’s personnel and style of play, and also on the length of the shot clock. In general, a good rule of thumb is to take 1.2 to the power of the absolute value of your team’s deficit, and enter into Neon Mode at that minute mark (e.g. if you are losing by 10pts, enter into Neon Mode at  $1.2^{10} = \sim 6^{\text{th}}$  minute mark; if you are losing by 6pts, enter into Neon Mode at  $1.2^6 = \sim 3^{\text{rd}}$  minute mark).

Note that Neon Mode has a lot of similarities to the “two-minute hurry-up offense” in football.



**Figure 10.1 Neon Mode increases the variance of the outcome.**

For a team that is losing towards the end of the game, it is a good idea to go into “Neon Mode” in order to increase the variance of the game’s outcome. Doing so will introduce more opportunities for team to win than you would have otherwise had.



**Figure 10.4 Graph of  $1.2^x$ .**

Raise 1.2 to the absolute value of your team’s deficit, and enter into Neon Mode at that minute-mark.

### ***10.3.1 Catching on the way to the hoop.***

If you are on offense and time is running out, one of the most important things is for your team to catch the ball with momentum headed towards the hoop. With a running start, you can advance the ball up the court in less than three seconds. Stationary or moving in the opposite direction, it will take you much longer. This is a good end-of-game Neon Mode principle.

### ***10.3.2 Drawing critical end of game charges.***

As I said before, college referees love calling charges. Whether it is trying to draw an offensive foul before the ball gets inbounded, or taking advantage of an overzealous ballhandler trying to get the ball up the floor, drawing a charge at the end of games can create critical momentum swings (see: Kyle Lowry, J.J. Barea, etc.)

## **10.4 Yellow Mode: Game Shortening**

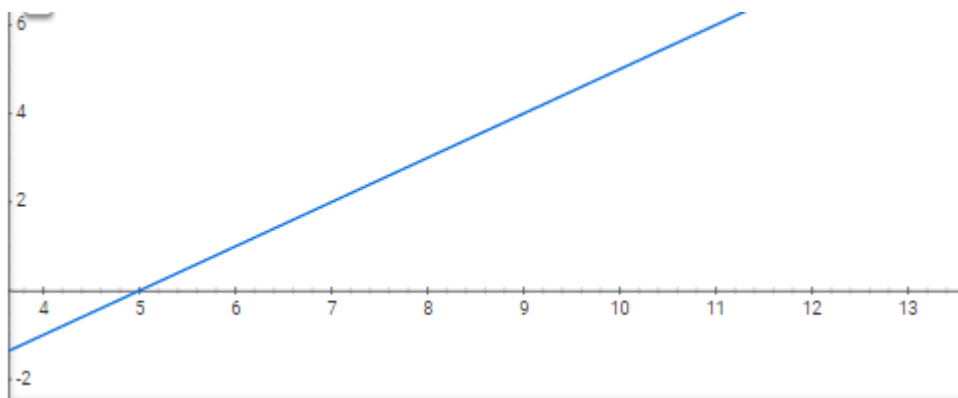
Yellow Mode is the opposite of Neon Mode – if you are in Yellow Mode, then you want to use the whole shot clock and slow the game down as much as possible to eat up as much clock as possible and maintain your lead. Just like Neon Mode, the effectiveness of Yellow Mode will depend on your team's and your opponent's personnel and style of play, as well as the length of the shot clock. If you are an up-tempo team, then shifting into Yellow Mode may seem antithetical to your team's DNA. It's the coach's job to determine when a shift into Yellow Mode is best for the team, but in general I would argue that coaches do not shift early enough into Yellow Mode, and as a result they give the other team a better opportunity to climb back into the game than they would otherwise have had.

In general, a good rule of thumb is to subtract 5 from your team's lead, and enter into Yellow Mode at that minute mark (e.g. if you are winning by 10pts, enter into Yellow Mode at  $10 - 5 = \sim 5^{\text{th}}$  minute mark; if you are winning by 6pts, enter into Yellow Mode at  $6 - 5 = \sim 1\text{-minute}$  mark).



**Figure 10.2 Yellow Mode decreases the variance of the outcome.**

For a team that is winning towards the end of the game, it is a good idea to go into “Yellow Mode” in order to decrease the variance of the game's outcome. Doing so will reduce the number of opportunities for the other team to win than they would have otherwise had.



**Figure 10.4 Graph of  $x-5$ .**

Subtract 5 from your team's lead and enter into Yellow Mode at that minute-mark.

### 10.5 Steal, Trap, Foul vs. Foul Immediately

At the very end of the game, it's critical that, if your team is losing, your team understands the difference between a "steal, trap, foul" situation and a "foul immediately" situation. Foul immediately should be used when time is going to expire and there are no other options. On the other hand, your team's best chance of winning when you are losing at the end of the game is to force turnovers and win extra possessions for your team. That is why, whenever possible, you should go for the steal on the inbound pass, then you should give one or two hard traps to try and force a turnover, before fouling as a last resort. It is unwise for a team to neglect this "steal, trap, foul" tactic and skip right to the "foul immediately" tactic. Steal, trap, foul usually gives you a better chance to win.

### 10.6 Fouling up 3.

If you are winning by 3pts at the very end of the game (when the shot clock is turned off), it is better to foul the other team and give them two free throws than it is to play out the possession and give them an opportunity to shoot a 3pt shot to tie the game. A foul up 3 should ideally be performed while the ball-handler is moving away from (not towards) the basket to ensure they are not in the act of shooting.

By the same token, it's critical to understand that, if the foul up 3 isn't there, it is unacceptable to foul a 3pt shooter at the end of the game. It is far easier to sink 3 free-throws in a row than it is to hit a 3pt shot. Defending without fouling is always critical, but fouling a 3pt shooter at the end of the game is anathema.

### 10.7 Intentionally missing the free-throw.

When the other team is out of timeouts and cannot advance the ball, it makes sense to intentionally miss a free throw if you are winning by 1 or 2 points and time is about to run out ( $\sim < 3$  seconds). This will deny your opponent the opportunity to take the ball out of bounds and run a last-second play.

By the same token, if your team needs more than one point and time is about to expire, then it might be a good idea to miss a free-throw and go for the rebound.

## **10.8 Understand the merits of cherry picking.**

Denver Nuggets head coach George Malone once floated the concept of playing four-on-five on defense, with a regular cherry picker. Malone initially tolerated the idea then finally shut it down, despite pleas to try it for only a possession or two. This is a strategy worth thinking about in certain situations.

Somewhat relatedly, I have always been of the mind that it's useless to box-out a corner 3pt shooter – you might as well fly by them and run up the court to start cherry-picking, because you're very unlikely to get the rebound anyways.

## **10.9 Understand the merits of “changing it up”.**

Texas Tech threw a little bit of everything at the Zags. Some light 2-2-1 pressure to start (they were an excellent transition team), then falling into a 2-3 zone that was really more like a match-up zone. Texas Tech sometimes trapped the first pass when Gonzaga looks to setup a set. This helped them keep Gonzaga off balance.

## **10.10 Going for the win.**

Down 2 with time expiring, it is better to go for the win than to go for the tie. The reason for this is simple: if you tie the game, then you still have to win in overtime. Taking the risk to shoot a 3pt down 2 with time expiring will lead to more wins over the course of multiple games than the opposite strategy.

Obviously, there is a game-theoretic component to this, and you would not want to pass up a wide-open 2pt for a contested 3pt. The point, in general, is that coaches whose teams are losing tend to be too risk-averse at the end of the game, and it would generally be wiser for such coaches to take more risks, increase the variance of the game, and go for the win.

# **11 Game Prep**

There are several questions each coach must answer before going into a game. I will catalog those questions here.

## **11.1 Who can hit a high %age of their midrange shots?**

Put these players on **\*\*MIDRANGE ALERT\*\***

## **11.2 Who is their most over-aggressive defender?**

It's a good idea to back-door this player.

## **11.3 What are their post D coverages?**

When do they double the post, and from where? Do they play high-side? Do they front the post?

## **11.4 Do they switch “likes”?**

Fake DHOs and corner flare screen slips are great actions to use against teams that switch “likes” on defense.

Also Cutbacks are a great way to attack the switch. See this thread:  
<https://twitter.com/PickAndPopNet/status/1313661105051512838>

## **11.5 How do they defend mid ball screens?**

Do they hard hedge? If so, slipping or ghosting is a good option.

## **11.6 How do they defend wing ball screens?**

Is it different than mid-ball screen coverage? If they drop & over all ball screens, set ball screens with the ballhandler driving middle all-day. Very difficult to defend. Technically, those screens should be iced or blitzed.

## **11.7 Who is their best screen setter?**

You will want to prime whoever is defending their best screen setter to call out those screens early.

## **11.8 Can the opposing PG throw a skip pass?**

If not, jump-double the ball as soon as it passes half-court and deny one pass away.

## **11.9 Who are their best & worst help defenders?**

Players that hug their man on the weak side are ripe down-screen/curl targets. Players that are always in stance are probably good defenders. Players that are never in stance are probably bad defenders.

## **11.10 Good coaches have a plan, great coaches have an adjustment.**

^This is a Stan Van Gundy quote. Think about how G.P. Gromacki changed to a switch every ball screen strategy in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of the Nat'l Championship game. Bowdoin had no response/adjustment. Brilliant move. This was a great adjustment.

## **11.11 Losing late in the game after a timeout, what type of defense do they tend to play?**

If they tend to “switch everything” after a timeout late in the game, then you might want to prepare a late-game inbounds play to take advantage of the switching.

See: this play - <https://twitter.com/HalfCourtHoops/status/1159600931564130310>