

Basketball Defenses

Selecting Your Half-Court Defense(s)

Young players must learn how to play man-to-man defense.

Certainly you can win games at the youth level playing zone defense because zones pack the paint and force kids to take low-percentage outside shots. Young kids, without adequate range, are not ordinarily good outside shooters. So you win your youth league and feel great about it.

***IF THAT IS YOUR OBJECTIVE FOR YOUR PLAYERS, OK THEN, BUT
YOU HAVE TO ASK YOURSELF IF YOU HAVE REALLY MADE YOUR
KIDS BETTER BASKETBALL PLAYERS.***

But if you want them to be able to play at the next level, forget wins and losses in the early years and teach them what they need to learn. ***Every good player must learn how to play good pressure man-to-man defense, and learn the principles of team man-to-man defense.*** Once they have learned this, any coach can teach them to play a zone in one practice. Additionally, if your youth league requires man-to-man defense (no zones), you will also help your players offensively... learning how to handle ball-pressure, 1-on-1 moves against the defender, cutting and moving, etc.

It is advised that you to use man-to-man defense as much as possible. If you like playing zones, wait at least until they have played a few years of man-to-man. Stay away from "junk defenses" at this age... box-and-1, triangle-and-2, etc.

First, teach kids the basic man-to-man fundamentals and man-to-man principles...

Important elements in playing good defense:

Defensive Stance and Focus

Your weight should be on the balls of your feet (not your heels), and your feet should be about shoulder width apart. Keep your knees bent and your back straight. Keep your head up, eyes forward, arms out with your palms up and elbows bent a little. Watch the offensive player's belly-button, especially if he/she is quick and hard to stay with. The offensive player can fake you with a head fake, eye fake, arm or shoulder fake, or a jab-step, but the belly-button will always go only in the direction that he/she is going.

Defensive Slides

When guarding your opponent, slide your feet sideways, using quick, short steps, and don't get your feet crossed. Don't hop. If you get beat in the open floor, don't just yell for help... turn and sprint after your opponent. Once you get in front of your man again, get back into your defensive stance.

Close-out on the ball

Defenders must learn to "close-out" on the player with the ball. Once the offensive player receives the pass, the defender should rush toward the ball-handler in a low stance. The last several steps should be quick, choppy steps to stop your momentum (so the defender doesn't dribble around you). Your baseline line foot should be back in order to force the ball-handler toward the baseline. As you approach the ball-handler, snap your shoulders and head back to help slow yourself down.

On the Ball Defense

Over-guard toward the offensive player's strong side. If your man is right-handed, over-guard that side and make him/her go left. If your opponent is on the right wing, drop your left foot back a little toward the baseline and overplay a little toward the offensive player's right side, as this will give you time to react to a move to his/her right. Try to force offensive player to the baseline. Once at the baseline, set the trap, and do not allow any further penetration along the baseline.

Keep the palm of your lead hand facing up. Try to get at the ball from below, not by slapping down it, which results in a foul. Your other hand should be in the passing lane. Slide with your opponent, and try to get him/her to stop the dribble, and then close in and apply pressure.

Don't "reach-in". This causes you to lose your balance and defensive stance, and you become easy for the offensive player to get around. Reaching in also results in fouls and free throws for the opponent. Don't get into the bad habit of reaching-in and taking a swipe at the ball as the offensive player dribbles around you. Instead move your feet, hustle, stay with your man, and prevent him/her from getting to the basket by maintaining good on-ball defensive stance. **If you get beat, sprint after the offensive player and beat him/her to a spot where you can once again resume your defensive stance.**

Basketball Defense - Basic Man-to-Man Defense

MAKE SURE YOUR DEFENSE COMPLIES WITH THE RULES REQUIRED FOR YOUR TEAM'S AGE GROUP. NOT ALL OF THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPLES WILL APPLY TO ALL GROUPS.

Man-to-man defense has each defender assigned to defend a certain offensive player... his or her "man". Sounds simple enough, but great man-to-man defense is much more than that. Defenders two-passes away from the ball drop off their man into "help side" defense. So away from the ball, the man-to-man defense looks and acts a lot like a zone defense, while you have a defender pressuring the ball at all times. Man-to-man defense has the advantage of maintaining pressure on the ball at all times.

This defense may be susceptible to guard dribble-penetration, but this can be avoided by your on-ball defenders learning to become good defenders, your adjacent wing defenders having good help side defense and **you must have a plan for dealing with screens**.

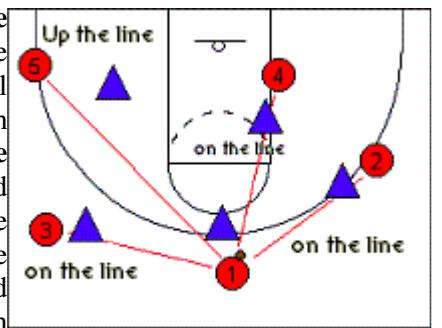
All young players MUST learn how to play man-to-man defense if they are to become good defenders at a higher level. Every player has to learn how to play good on-ball defense, how to move the feet, etc. Even high school teams that prefer zone defenses will be stronger defensively if every player can play pressure, on-ball defense.

Good offense wins games... great defense wins championships. When your offense is struggling, good defense can keep you in the game until your shots start falling. How are you going to catch up the second half if you are down 12 at the half? ... by playing great defense. Simply scoring more baskets won't do it if you allow the other team to score also.

Everyone on the team has to play good defense, because one weak link will cause the entire defense to fail. Playing good defense involves hustle, inspiration and perspiration (sweat!). You gotta want to play good defense. Defensive skills are fairly easy to learn, unlike some offensive skills, and **everyone can learn to become a good defender**.

Man-to-Man Defense - Denial

Clog the passing lane and prevent the player you are guarding from getting the ball, that is, "deny" him/her the ball. When guarding an offensive player who is one pass away from the ball, you should be in denial. **Denying your man the ball, keeps him/her from scoring.** Play the passing lane and stay between the player you're guarding and the ball. Place your foot and hand nearest the ball slightly forward, and turn the palm of your hand toward the ball, so that you can reject any incoming passes. **Be in a position to see both your player and the ball.** If the ball-handler stops the dribble, you have a "dead ball situation" and everyone should be close on their man, in "full-denial". In "full-denial", the defensive players should be "on the line". To explain this concept, imagine a line extending from the ball to the person you are guarding. In full-denial, you should position yourself so that you are on this line, body toward your man, but with head and eyes turned toward the ball, and your ball-side hand up in the passing lane.



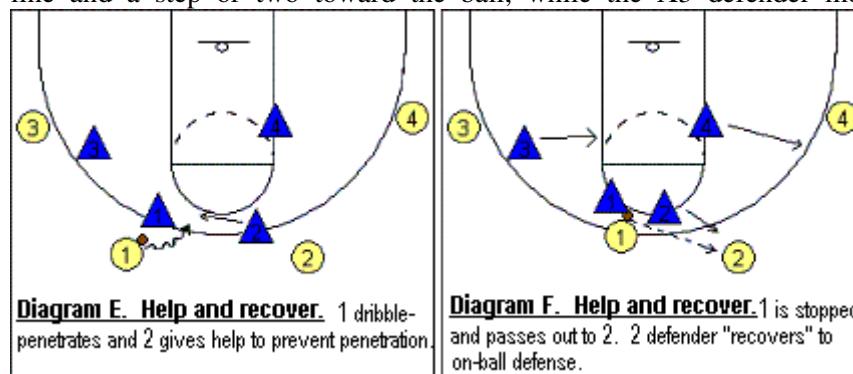
Full denial. Red lines (passing lanes).

If your man is a long distance, or two passes away from the ball-handler, you can play a little "up the line", that is a little ways from the imaginary line towards the hoop.

The distance, or spacing, up the line depends upon the speed and quickness of the defender and the distance his/her man is from the ball. On a long pass, the defender should still be able to move toward the line and intercept the pass. If instead the defender initially played "on the line", his/her man could make a back-cut and get open. Playing a little "up the line" prevents the back-cut, and still allows for the interception.

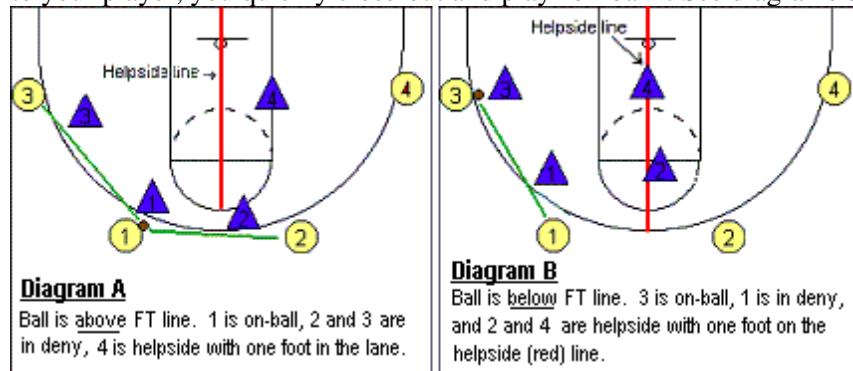
Man-to-Man Defense - Help and Recover.

Diagrams E and F below teach how to give help and recover on the perimeter. Rather than play a "full-denial", defenders one pass away play a little up the line and step or two toward the ball in order to help stop dribble penetration. Here O1 tries to dribble-penetrate. The X2 defender gives help and O1 is prevented from penetrating, and has to dish back out to O2 (Diagram F). The X2 defender then has to rotate quickly out to on-ball defense on O2, and the X1 and X4 defenders are now in deny, a little up the line and a step or two toward the ball, while the X3 defender moves into help-side (Diagram F).



Man-to-Man Defense – Help side Defense

When your opponent is two or more passes from the ball, you should be in "help-side" position. This will allow you to be in position to help your teammates against the ball penetrating the paint. This involves dropping off your man some (but without losing sight of him/her), and sagging toward the ball-side. In the diagrams below, see the imaginary red "help-side line" which goes through the middle of the lane. Many coaches teach that if the ball is above the free-throw line, the help-side defender should have one foot in the lane (Diagram A). If the ball is below the free-throw line, one foot should be touching or staggering the help-side line. Stay between the ball and your man. Be ready to help defend against another player driving or cutting to the hoop, and "help" your teammate who may have gotten beat. Once the ball comes back to within one pass from your player, you get back into deny position. If the ball is skip-passed to your player, you quickly close-out and play "on-ball". See diagrams below.



Man-to-Man Defense - Defending the Low Post

There are three positions the defender can assume when defending the low post player.

Playing behind the offensive post player.

Here the defender plays directly behind the offensive player. This may be advantageous if your post defender is much taller than the offensive player, and has a good chance of altering or blocking the post player's shot. But do not let the offensive player back you down under the basket. Use your legs (use a strong stance with knees bent) and your lower body strength to keep the offensive player out... but do not put your hands on the post player's back as you may get called for a pushing foul.

Full-fronting the low post player.

Here the defender moves directly in front of the offensive post player, between him/her and the ball, and denies the pass. The wing defender should put pressure on the ball in order to make the pass to the low post, or the lob pass, more difficult. Fronting may backfire if the offensive player is taller and can easily seal for inside position and get the high lob pass. Another disadvantage is the defender is out of position for the rebound, and the post player may be able to score just by sealing for inside position and receiving the inside pass, or by getting the rebound and put-back.

Three-quarter (or one-half) front the low post player.

This is probably the best method. Instead of directly fronting the low post player, the defender "straddles" him/her with one foot in front and one in back, standing sideways to the offensive player with one hand in the passing lane. If the ball is below the free-throw line extended (in the corner-wing area), the defender should play on the baseline side of the post player, making contact with the post player's inside (baseline) shoulder, and with the left arm and hand out in the passing lane. If the ball is passed out on top (above the free-throw line extended), the defender should slide chest to chest with the post player and move to the post player's high-side (or lane-side) shoulder, again with a hand up at all times in the passing lane.

Man-to-Man Defense - Trapping (setting the double-team)

When the rules allow it.

In trapping, one defender should first stop the dribbler, often along the sideline or baseline, or in one of the "trapping zones". Trapping zones are those areas where the offensive player definitely does not want to get caught losing his dribble. It's like getting caught in a corner.

Once the ball is stopped, the second defender sprints over and double-teams the ball carrier. They obscure the ball-handler's view, and get into the passing lane. Their knees are adjacent to each other to prevent the ball-handler from "splitting" the trap. The position of their hands should be at the same height as the ball. If the offensive player holds the ball high, to "throw over the top", the hands should be high. If the ball is low, the hands should be low to prevent the bounce pass. Do not reach in! "Reaching-in" changes a good situation into a bad one (now the player goes to the free throw line). Instead, the trapping players should deny the player from getting the pass off and get the 5-second call, or force her to make a bad pass, which is intercepted by one of your teammates.

Basketball Defense - Zone Defense

Zone defense is different from man-to-man defense in that, instead of guarding a particular player, each zone defender is responsible for guarding an area of the floor, or "zone", and any offensive player that comes into that area. Zone defenders move their position on the floor in relationship to where the ball moves.

Zone defense is often effective in stopping dribble penetration and one-on-one moves. Kids must develop their man-to-man defensive skills first. A good youth basketball league will limit the use of zones to the older age groups. On the other hand, some high school and college coaches treat zone defense almost as if using it were blasphemous, or an admission of inferiority! At the upper levels, TRY to assess your team's strengths and weaknesses as well as your opponent's, and the game situation, and use whatever tool you need to try to win while maintaining good teaching.

Basic pointers for all zone defenses

1. Try to keep the ball outside. Double-team the ball in the paint.
2. Be vocal, talk to each other.
3. Move, adjust your position relative to the movement of the ball.
4. Get your hands up and out, to shrink the passing lanes.
5. When the offense dribble penetrates, quickly close the gap.
6. Get to know your opponent and adjust. Over-protect against the best shooters, or the "hot" shooter, and sag off the guy who never shoots.
7. Trap the corners.
8. Especially if you are ahead, don't gamble or get too zealous about trapping the wing and point guard positions. Keep pressure on the ball, but also protect the paint and force the outside, low-percentage shot.

Disadvantages of zone defense

1. If your team is behind, you won't get enough pressure on the ball, and the offense can eat up a lot of time by holding the ball for a good shot. You must go man-to-man in this situation.
2. If the opponent is having a good shooting night, your zone is beaten, and you must consider going to the man-to-man to get pressure on the ball out on the perimeter.
3. There are not always clear-cut rebounding box-out assignments and sometimes the offensive player will slip inside for the offensive rebound and lay-up. See Zone Rebounding for help with this.
4. If you play zone most of the time, and rarely play man-to-man, your players may become complacent on defense and may lose their man-to-man skills. Try to practice man-to-man 80-90% of the time, and zone the remaining 10-20%.

Advantages of zone defense

1. Not all teams have quick, good man-to-man defenders. Or the offense may have a couple of outstanding players too quick to defend individually. Playing a zone can help against mis-matches such as these. You may have a tall, strong, but not particularly quick team. A zone can look intimidating with all your big guys stacked up inside with their hands up.
2. In using a zone, you can protect the paint area and force the opponent to shoot from outside. An example would be using the 2-1-2 or 2-3 zone which places a lot of defense in the paint and invites the offense to shoot from outside. This is a good way to see if the other team can shoot from outside. Not all teams can shoot the outside shot consistently. Even good shooting teams have off nights, especially under tournament pressure.
3. Your team may be in foul trouble, especially your big man. You can help protect him with a zone.
4. You can slow the game and control the tempo somewhat with a zone.
5. Although players must hustle regardless of the type of defense that is being played, sometimes when your team is fatigued, playing zone for a few minutes may help them catch their breath.
6. By changing defenses from man-to-man to various zones, you can keep the offense off-balance and confused.
7. If you use the full-court or half-court press, after the press is broken, it is easy to slip back into a half-court zone defense

Basketball Defense - 2-3 Zone Defense

The 2-3 zone defense is the most common zone defense that is seen. It has the advantage of protecting the inside, the "paint", and keeps your "bigs" inside. Its weakness is that it can be beaten by good outside shooting, with open areas on the wings, point and high post. Read "Zone Defense" for detailed tips on playing zone defense, and Zone Rebounding for tips on rebounding out of the zone.

Oftentimes, people think of the 2-3 zone as a defense that less-athletic teams can use to force the offense to shoot from outside, while keeping the paint protected and your key rebounders inside. It is true that less athletic teams may have more success with this defense as it tends to shut down dribble-penetration and the inside post game. It usually requires the offense to be more patient in getting a good shot, and thus it gives you a way to help control tempo. On the other hand, if you have good, quick athletes, the 2-3 zone can also be a more aggressive, trapping style of defense, creating turnovers and steals... but you must have quick athletic players to employ this type of defense. You can aggressively trap the corners, wings, and occasionally the point guard. Below are situations, with and without trapping. Study the diagrams below to understand the how the zone shifts, or moves.

A critical point

When the ball moves into the corner and the X4 defender moves out to cover the ball, it is imperative that the X5 defender slides over immediately into the low block vacated by X4. If X5 does not get there in time, the offense may get an easy pass into the low block, and a lay-up.

Ball on the wing.

See **Diagram B**. The outside (top) defender on the ball-side will cover the wing. The exception is on the skip pass from wing to the opposite wing, where the low outside defender will initially run out and defend until the top defender can get there... then the low defender will drop back down low. This is also the case on a very quick ball-reversal (**Diagram F**).

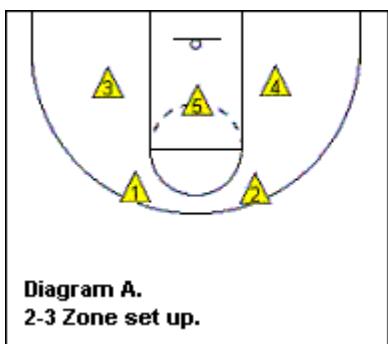


Diagram A.
2-3 Zone set up.

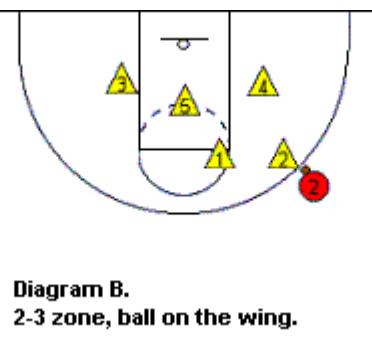


Diagram B.
2-3 zone, ball on the wing.

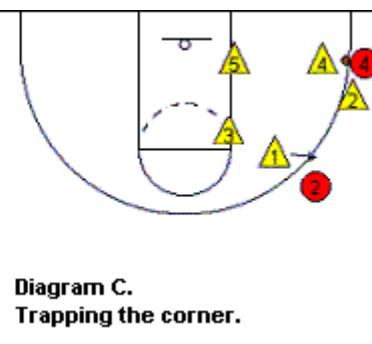
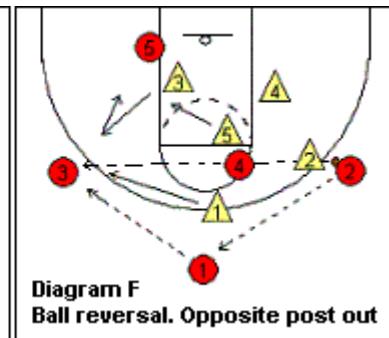
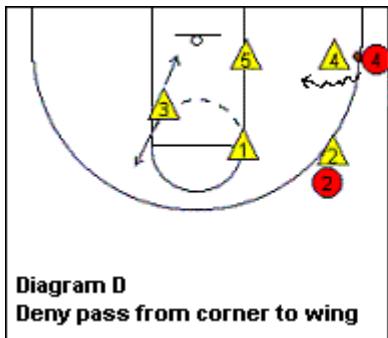


Diagram C.
Trapping the corner.



Ball in the corner or short-corner.

See **Diagram D**. The outside low defender on the ball-side will cover the corner and short-corner. It's imperative that the middle X5 defender quickly drop to the ball-side block area to prevent a inside pass there. Here, X2 denies the pass back to the wing (their best shooter) while X1 covers the ball-side elbow (high post). Depending on the offense's strengths; try having X2 sag inside the paint and help prevent O4 from dribble-penetrating (arrow).

See **Diagram C**. The corner is a trapping opportunity if you have the quickness to do it. In addition to the outside low defender (X4) coming out, the top ball-side defender (X2) will sprint down and trap the corner. X1 will deny the pass back to the wing and X3 covers the elbow (high post). The long skip pass to the opposite wing is covered by quick reversal with X3 sprinting over and X1 dropping to the high post (**diagram G**).



Trapping the Wing - "Fist-2" or "Fist-3"

If you have quick athletes, you can try this defensive stunt. See the diagram to the left. X1 will pick the O1 up high and try to force O1 to dribble to the side of the defensive call... "Fist-2" to the right, "Fist-3" to the left. Start the opposite low defender X3 in the middle almost under the basket, so he/she can quickly rotate to the right block. X4 can start "cheating up" toward the wing. X2 lets the pass go to O2. Then X2 and X4 quickly close-out on O2 and double-team. X1 denies the pass back to O1, X5 denies the high post pass, and X3 denies the pass to the block.

It's "one trap and out". If the offense breaks the trap or passes out successfully, just drop back into our usual 2-3 zone.

Pass into the high post.

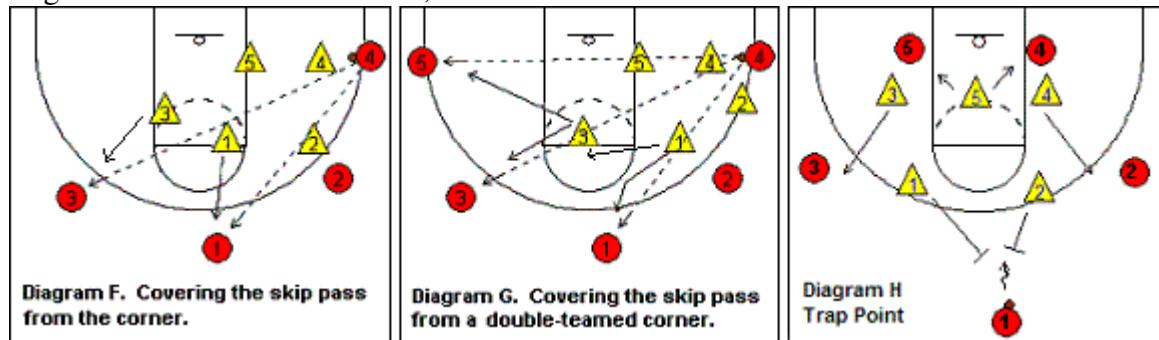
See Diagram E. Have your X5 defender come up to defend this (like a 2-1-2 zone now). But watch out for the underneath cutter in the paint. Your X3 and X4 defenders may have to cheat into the paint when X5 moves high.

Defending the point.

Defending the point is always problematic. If you know that their O2 guard is their best shooter, then have X1 defend the point at first and allow X2 to sag toward their good shooter. And just the opposite applies if O3 is their best shooter. At first you may decide to defend the point loosely, but if their O1 starts hitting some shots, you've got to get pressure there. Never let their point split the X1 and X2 defenders and dribble/penetrate the middle. X1 and X2 really have to move quickly and work hard, and work together in order to cover the point and both wings, and give help in the high-post.

Trapping the Point

Diagram H below shows an aggressive "surprise" trap on the point guard. X1 and X2 run out and trap O1 as soon as O1 brings the ball across half-court. X3 and X4 run out and deny (or intercept) the pass to the wing. This is a gamble, and you may get an interception or a turnover, especially if the offensive set is a 3-out, 2-in (no high post). But this is not something you would do all the time, as it is obvious from the diagram that you could get burned by a quick pass from O1 to the high-post (free-throw line). You might make this a defensive call, like "Red" or "Hot".



Covering the Skip Pass

Covering the skip pass from wing to wing, has been discussed above (Diagram F). A skip pass from wing to opposite corner would be covered by the ball-side low outside defender.

Covering the skip pass from the corner to the opposite wing depends upon whether or not you have double-teamed the corner as in Diagram C. In the usual single-coverage (Diagram D), a skip pass from the corner to the opposite wing is covered by the opposite low outside defender (X3) who has back-side responsibility. Sometimes, a quick athletic X3 can anticipate the skip pass, jump out and intercept it and go for a lay-up. For example, in diagram F, as the ball is passed from the right corner to the left wing, X3 covers the receiver until X1 can rotate over, and then X3 will drop back down low. If the skip goes from the corner to the point, X1 should cover this (Diagram F).

If you have double-teamed the corner (Diagram C), a long effective skip pass is less likely, but in this case would be covered as follows (see Diagram G):

1. Pass from right corner to left corner or wing... cover this with X3 defender.
2. Pass from right corner to point... cover the receiver with X1.

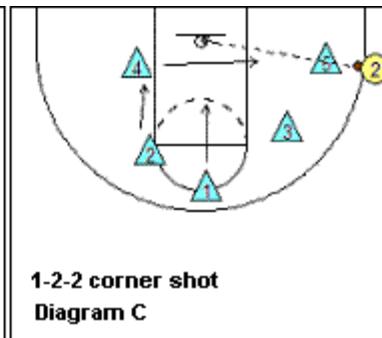
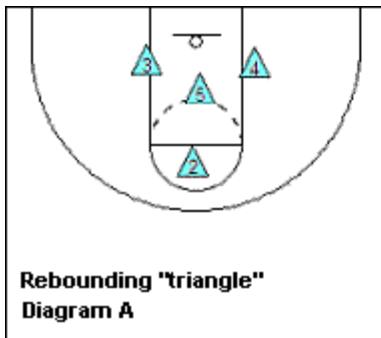
Players sometimes think playing a 2-3 zone defense is easier than man defense, but in fact, to play good zone defense, you may have to work much harder to be effective.

Basketball Zone Defense - Rebounding Out of the Zone

Rebounding out of a man-to-man defense is fairly straight forward, usually with clear-cut box-out assignments. But what about rebounding out of a zone defense? Defensive rebounding can be either a weakness or a strength of the zone defense. On the positive side, you can put your "bigs" inside, keep them there and rebound missed shots. On the other hand, often there are not clear-cut box-out assignments when playing zone defense, especially when the zone is over-shifted or overloaded. Offensive players will try to penetrate the gaps in the zone, not only when trying to score, but also when rebounding. Zone defenses that don't box-out well will give up second and third shots.

Rebounding Objectives

- Fundamentals. The basic boxing-out and rebounding fundamentals are the same, whether playing zone or man-to-man defense. See Rebounding.
- The defender on the ball boxes-out the shooter.
- Weak-side rebounding is extremely important, especially on long shots from the wing or corner. You are trying to force the offense to take outside shots, so be ready to rebound those shots! Someone did a study that showed that approximately 70% of missed shots from the corner go to the opposite side. You always want a weak-side rebounder there.
- Rebounding triangle. Ideally, whenever a shot is taken, the defense should try to establish an inside rebounding triangle with a rebounder on each side of the basket and one in front (see diagram A below). Rebounders should not get too low under the basket, or else the only rebound they will get is the shot that goes through the net! If you are too far under, the offense can nudge you further under the basket and can rebound over your back without actually making enough contact to get the "over the back" foul.
- It is best to have one perimeter rebounder at about the level of the free-throw line... to get the long rebound.
- You must have rules for your zone defensive and rebounding rotations. In most cases, the defensive and rebounding rotations (and box-out assignments) will be similar.
- Defensive rebounders should not only get to a spot, but also "find" the nearest offensive player and box-out.



Zone Rebounding Techniques

You can make your own zone rebounding rotations, and these should be similar to the way you decide to rotate and cover certain areas of the court defensively... the point, high-post, wings and corners. Below are some example rotations. You may choose to do it differently.

1-2-2 (or 3-2) Zone Rebounding

Diagram B shows how the 1-2-2 zone could rotate to rebound when the shot goes up from the wing. The shooter is boxed-out, your "bigs" X4 and X5 are already on the blocks, and the opposite wing drops inside to become the middle of the triangle.

Diagram C shows the shot from the corner. Here, our ball-side post defender closes out on the shooter. The opposite post defender rotates to the ball-side block. The opposite wing defender drops to the weak-side block. The point defender X1 drops to become the middle of the rebounding triangle. Have X3 on the outside to deny or defend the next pass out to the wing.

2-3 Zone Rebounding

Diagram D shows how the 2-3 zone rotates when the shot goes up from the top. It's fairly straight forward with the "triangle" already in place, and the opposite top defender slides in to the free-throw line for the longer rebound.

Diagram E shows the shot from the wing. The shooter is boxed out and again, the triangle should already be in pretty good position. The opposite wing defender again slides into the free-throw line area.

Diagram F shows the shot from the corner. Our ball-side post defender closes out on the shooter. The middle low defender rotates to the ball-side block. The opposite post defender is already in position for the weak-side rebound. The opposite wing defender drops inside to become the middle of the triangle. X1 stays on the outside to deny or defend the next pass out to the wing.



Drills

You can devise your own drills by modifying the "War Drill", (See Team Drills) putting your defenders into the zone, and then shooting the shot from specific locations, the top, the wings, the corners, high-post, etc. Make sure defenders are rotating, "creating the triangle", and boxing out effectively. You can also just do your standard half-court zone defense 5-on-5 drills that you probably do every day, and have one of your parents watch the rebounding and boxing-out assignments, stopping and pointing out errors.