

Defensive Transition

It's About Time?

by Alan Lambert

Introduction

In my forty some years experience as a player and coach, one area of the game looms in my mind like a man sinking in quicksand. What I'm talking and today's teaching topic is defensive transition. Few players do it with enthusiasm. Failure to do it costs your team easy points. More commonly it is one of the primary causes of infighting amongst teammates because someone's mistake or failure to get back leads to that easy score.

To be perfectly honest there may be nothing the game that takes more energy and optimism out of a team's play than failure to get back and stop your opponents transition. So why do I choose this subject as this month's Playground Pointer? Primarily because I want to show you player's and coach's that it's not about stopping every fast break. It's about making the effort every time and stopping some of the breaks. It's really about time don't you think.

Most teams average between 20 turnovers a game. A turnover leads to a fast break shot attempt about 3/4th of that time, meaning about 15 break opportunities for your opponent. If you add on another 10 fast break opportunities off of missed or made shots that is a lot of open court high percentage scoring chances. If you could discourage or stop even 20% of these transition opportunities resulting in no shot off of transition, you may prevent your opponent from scoring at least 10 points. Ten points is a lot to spot a team to begin a game, so why would you do it during the course of a game. I hope you see where I'm going with this. A consistent effort to stop transition combined with your players understanding and being able to prevent these additional scores will more than likely take you from a .500 team to a .750 winning percentage team. Enough improvement to get you into the playoffs with a chance for the trophy.

The Man in the Mirror

I believe stopping transition begins in the heart of every single player on your team, most of all YOU. If you take a "get tough, they're not going to score on me attitude" it become contagious and your team takes pride in getting back and stopping the break. If your attitude is, I can't get back and I'm going to conserve my energy, you'll almost certainly get what you earn, a spot on the bench, or as a team out of the play-offs. It begins with you. Instead of point a finger at your teammate, you become the stopper, the one they can count on to stuff your opponents break. You become the man in the mirror. The tougher you get, the tougher your team gets. Take pride in our ability to stop your opponents fast break no matter how much they like to run and you'll be a winner for it.

It takes more than just willpower as you almost certainly know. It takes know-how. For me stopping transition is all about one thing; time...time..time! I will teach you subsequently about some techniques for stopping transition but you must implant in that "calculator in your head" the concept that buying time is the most important and fundamental aspect of stopping transition. Conversely your opponent is going to want to run it up your nose so you can't get back. This battle is what defensive transition is all about. The most common mistake players make in the open court in trying to stop transition is to gamble to steal or stop the ball in the open court. They rolls the dice versus playing percentages. Taking calculated gambles can work fine when you are in pressing situations where your teammates are familiar with rotations and responsibilities if you get beat. But in the open court with uncertain numbers your primary goal is to delay the advancement of the ball in any way possible without giving up the basket to "buy time for your teammates to recover and match up" so that each has a man covered reducing the chance of a high percentage score in transition.

If I Could Have Time in a Bottle

If I could package up the art of defensive transition and put it in a bottle for you to drink it would contain the following ingredients. *First it consists of "defending of the basket".* If you are the first defender back, you must sprint to the basket area and attempt to take up the most direct path of any attacker who has the ball and can advance it for a score.

Secondly, don't commit yourself to stopping the ball off the dribble in the open court because you are the last line of defense. This is called ball containment. If you can force the fast break team to make 3 or more passes you have a good chance of getting defensive help to deter or stop the fast break. Most of you have played trapping presses and containment presses. Think of stopping open court transition against you as a containment press. You want to "buy time".

If you are not the first defender back as safety you may be in a position while retreat to the "fort" to deter any quick forward passes up the court. *Most organized defensive transition schemes involve getting a sprinter out to discourage the long quick pass up court.* If you are sprinting back in transition

and there are at least two defender back, you should either 1) be attempting to discourage any passing lane up the court to an attacking player, or 2) be working to deter the ball from being dribble in a direct line to the basket. In most cases it is more important to get back and discourage those passing lanes when you have at least two defender already back in tandem safety position.

Since containment is critical to stopping the fast break *any time you are in a position to discourage advancement of the ball directly force a diagonal dribble*. Equally important is to stop any open court penetration of the ball behind you (remember containment is the second most important goal).

Finally you must *communicate with your teammates on defense what you are doing*. Often defending the basket and containment break down simply because of poor communication. "I've got yours, you take mine" should be stitched on the lips of every player on your team. Don't just say it, point out who each of you are covering to help give visual signals to your teammates to reduce open court confusion.

Whenever possible in getting back attempt to cover up players by position so that you don't end up with a guard covering a center on the secondary break, or a center covering a penetrating forward on the wing. The match-up by position concern however must always be secondary to maintaining basket defense and containing the ball. Until these two items are taken care of everyone must sprint back to the basket and locate a player. In fact many teams will teach sprinting back to almost zone positions such as a 2-2-1 or 3-1-1 to prevent the fast break.

Additional Tips

Once you and your team become adept at getting back to the basket you can begin to develop more organized methods of stopping transition. The most common is to put a jammer on the rebounder (on a missed shot) or inbounder (on a made shot) to discourage the quick outlet of the ball up the court. Then work on denying the first outlet receiver. Third or fourth defenders back (aside from the jammer) can be use to prevent or stuff the long side line passes up the court or clog the middle of the court. Rapid ball advancement by the pass is the defensive transition team's worst enemy aside from losing containment.

Finally, when transitioning back if you are behind the ball, catch up and get ahead of the ball whenever possible. When not, try to sprint to deflect a ball out of a dribblers hand from behind. Rick Pitino's teams have made a living off of this type of play. When beat, never give up. Always look at it as an opportunity to defender from behind the ball. More importantly in transitioning back is to fill the middle of the court. The more defenders you can get into the middle of the court the less chance a team has of attacking right down your throat. Remember the fastest time between to points is a straight line. Make the attacking team change angles, pass the ball laterally, or even backwards if necessary. All of these things contribute to buying time.

So What's Left?

I have talked about the importance of time, defending the basket, containment, stuffing the long pass up the court, jamming the outlet pass, and clogging up the middle of the court. Let me leave you with one simple piece of advice which will improve your defensive transition. When left with the choice between giving up a lay-up or giving up a short jumper always force your opponent to take the lowest percentage shot possible. Let me repeat myself. Position yourself so that if you must give up a shot because of numbers you force your opponent to take the lower percentage shot. If a team scores 95 percent of the time on a lay-up in transition and 70 percent when the PG must pull up at the elbow because of too much lane traffic, you make the choice.

Remember the example I used at the start of today's Playground Pointer. If your opponent has 20% less transitions because of your efforts, based on what I have taught you today, they have five less chances to score (10 points). With the 20 remaining transitions if you can force them to shoot 50% shots instead of 95% you will save you most likely will save another 10 points. Now by simply hustling back, protecting the basket, containing the ball, and forcing a low percentage shot you have take away as many as 20 points a game from your opponent. If your team is losing and losing big, look to your defensive transition game. If you team is losing close games, look again at your defensive transition. You see, it's about time!