

How to Play Basketball Defense

Nobody knows why; but, efforts to strengthen defensive skills seem to go into hibernation every summer. Players think it a necessary evil ... you pass through ...on your way to a score. I hope you don't feel this way. Use some of the summer league or playground pick-up games to work on these skills.

Basketball Defense

There are about six or seven major points that you should be aware of when playing ball defense. These major points concern your position in the private area of a player with the ball. This is the area in which a defender must be in to worry the player with the ball.

The defender must make dribbles, passes, or shots difficult. This area is often referred to as "his bubble." These major points are: body weight, position of the hands, faking, forcing, slapping (or stealing), and a self commitment.

The last is more important. If you aren't committed to stopping your man, none of the other points matter. Begin, with a sincere desire to be known as a good defensive player. If you have this, then the six points that follow, will help.

Body Position and Weight

Most coaches seem to want players to get in a lower crouch than players want to do. Most players, it seems, want to stand erect. So, how low should you be? A good rule to follow is this:

Make sure your head is always lower than the head of the guy you are guarding.

If you stay lower than him, you will be more ready to move than him. If he lowers his head to drive, you need to lower your head even more to stay in front of him.

Players get blocking fouls when their knees are OUT. If you will examine a little further, you will see that their heads were up, too! At the moment of the block, the defender's head is likely higher than the dribbler's.

Besides being lower than your man, you should have your weight back. Be ready to move when he moves. Get in your man's bubble and have your weight back.

Players often stay away from their man. When the man fakes or looks to shoot or pass, it's only then, they move forward. So, what happens? You get to the bubble (to the man); but, your weight is forward so that you can not possibly beat him to where he is going.

Imagine trying to win a hundred yard dash. One guy is in the starting blocks ready to burst forward. You start several feet in front of him; but, you have to touch the starting line when the gun goes off. Obviously, you would be several steps behind after ten yards. Apparently, this isn't as obvious to some basketball players. In games at all levels, players stay too far from their men. At times, they lunge forward, and the guy with the ball blows right by them.

Why do players allow this to happen? If you want to win a race, you have to lean in the direction of the finish line. In basketball you have to lean in the direction of the basket. This is the finish line your guy wants to beat you to!

Get in His Bubble

"Bubble" is not a term used by all coaches; however, the term is useful to remind YOU to play in a GOOD defensive position. Unless your coach gives you some other rule, Good Defensive Position means not so close that the player, with the ball, can step by you with ONE step. Yet, you want to be close enough that you could slap the ball if he should hold it in front. In other words, be close enough to bother him. Make him worry. Make him think you will touch his next pass, block his next shot, or steal his next dribble.

To play good defense you must consistently be in that bubble. Even along with playing good helping defense, you should be able to get in your man's bubble EVERY TIME he gets the BALL. Strive to get there the moment he gets it. If you can do this, YOU will be a constant irritation. This is exactly what you want to be.

You can not expect to be a good defensive player if: one day, you try stealing the ball ALL THE TIME because that player IS NOT TALENTED; then, the next day, you stay far away because he is MORE TALENTED.

Why should you be in his bubble if he is forty feet from the basket? Well, that's so You can bother his ball handling. Make it difficult for him to take the ball exactly where he wants it, or to make the exact pass at the **exact time** he wants to make it.

If YOUR COACH tells you NOT to pick him up UNTIL he's within shooting range, **DO WHAT HE SAYS!** But, if he DOESN'T GIVE YOU a rule, OR it's a SUMMER LEAGUE or PICK-UP GAME, ... GET IN HIS BUBBLE ... AND ... STAY THERE!!!

Now, use common sense! I don't mean for you to be beside your man ALL THE TIME. DO NOT BE THERE when the BALL is on the OTHER SIDE OF THE COURT. When things are this way, YOU need to be in a position to HELP A TEAMMATE. REMEMBER: The CLOSER the BALL to YOUR MAN, the CLOSER YOU MUST BE TO HIM. This is because the moment he gets the ball, YOU WANT TO be IN his bubble, ... NOT ON YOUR WAY, there. Be where you can WORRY him. Make him think to himself, "Oh, no! Here you are again!"

To be effective you don't have to block a shot or deflect a single pass. If you are merely in position all night long where you CAN, ... AND he can't GET AWAY from YOU, ... YOU will be a great defensive player.

Dictating the Way the Ball Goes

A player with the ball can do three things:

1. He can SHOOT.
2. He can PASS.
3. He can DRIBBLE to the RIGHT or LEFT.

Your bubble defense and hand position makes the first two difficult. YOU will be showing your smarts by taking two of these three options away from him. Then, YOU can battle him for the third.

He still might shoot or pass; but, either will be difficult. This is what DEFENSE is ALL ABOUT! Thus, making those first two difficult, this leaves only the dribble to the RIGHT or LEFT. So, if YOU OVERPLAY to one side, forcing him to his LEFT or RIGHT, you take away HALF of HIS THIRD OPTION. He can only try to beat you the direction YOU DICTATED.

During the regular season, the type of defense YOUR COACH uses, will determine which option you leave open. LISTEN to him! In the meantime, during SUMMER LEAGUE play or Pick-Up Games, PRACTICE MAKING HIM KEEP THE DRIBBLE IN HIS WEAK HAND. In other words, if he's LEFT HANDED, slant him on that SIDE, or, he's RIGHT HANDED, do the opposite.

The advantage of this type of defense is that you DO NOT have to be PREPARED for "EVERYTHING." You DON'T EVEN have to worry about FAKES. You know what the player is going to do.

Either he is going to take a bad shot or he must make a good pass by YOUR hand. If he does neither, he must force the ball in the direction he is being over-played. Chances are, he will choose to try to beat you in the one thing YOU ARE PREPARED FOR! This will happen nine times out of ten.

By dictating the action, not only do you make your own job easier; but, it will be easier for your TEAMMATES. When they see in advance where the battle is to be fought ... where the ball is going to be taken ... they have a better chance of getting into effective HELPING position.

Position of the Hands

All coaches urge "HANDS UP!" They want you to do this because it distracts the offense. YOU are in a better position to guard against a shot or deflect a pass. Players, invariably, want to play with their hands at their sides.

This is understandable. It's easier to move with hands at your side. In guarding the ball, there are times you want your "Hands UP" and there is times, they are better "Down."

If you are guarding a dribbler, YOUR hands DO NOT have to be up. They should be DOWN, faking at the ball, or HELPING YOUR BODY to stay on BALANCE and in POSITION.

The difference regarding your hands comes when YOU are guarding a player who has the BALL, but has not yet dribbled. If that player is out of shooting range, YOUR HANDS can be down at WAIST or KNEE level. One of them to the side and the other stretched out to the ball handler's belt buckle. The out-stretched hand should be the same as whichever foot is forward. The out- stretched hand should be PALM-UP. This is so you are always prepared to SLAP-UP anytime the ball is held out front.

If the player with the ball is in SHOOTING RANGE, you should have ONE HAND UP, almost touching your shoulder. Keep it poised to JAB UPWARD. This lets the player know that YOU ARE PREPARED TO BLOCK HIS SHOT (although, really ALL YOU ARE TRYING TO DO is DISTRACT him by getting your hand up near the ball and your ARM in FRONT of HIS FACE.

NEVER RAISE YOUR BODY UP TO BLOCK THE PASS OR SHOT OF A PLAYER WHO HAS NOT YET DRIBBLED! Stay low. Keep your weight back. Stay in that bubble. SLAP UPWARD from the waist if he is OUT OF SHOOTING position, or SHAKE YOUR HAND over the shoulder if HE IS IN SHOOTING POSITION.

When a Dribbler Gets By You

There are two possible reactions to this. The most common, it seems, is to turn and watch his butt grow smaller as he gets further down court. The other is what you should be doing, once you realize he has you beaten.

React to this, immediately. Turn quickly! Get down low where you could bite his butt, if it were sticking out. If you get yourself into the habit of this second reaction, you will get a lot of steals. This is especially true if you have been slanting him on his strong side. Here is the reason. Once he thinks he has you beaten, the tendency is to put the ball back into his strong hand. This would be the side you would be on. It's very possible that the first dribble with his strong hand will be right in front of your face. You can pick his pocket here without fouling. You don't have to reach across his body.

There is a reason more steals, like this, are not made. Players, so lackadaisical on defense to let themselves be beaten, are usually too slow-thinking to recover. It don't even occur to them to "bite him in the butt." Instead of thinking about the next play, they are thinking about the last.

This maneuver is so good you can use it on purpose. It might get you a "game winning steal, some night." Because of the psychology of the moment, especially, if your team is behind and needs a steal, it has a better chance of working in the closing minutes of a game. This is because the opponents think more of protecting their lead than trying to extend it. Their chief concern is to run out the clock.

If you use this on purpose, early in the game, there is a good chance it won't work. If it doesn't, your coach will probably take you out of the game. So, with this in mind, save it for the end of a game. DEFENSE WHEN YOUR TEAM IS BEHIND LATE IN THE GAME ...

The rules are different when you're behind. Now, you DON'T get anything for staying between your man and the basket and playing "solid defense." The clock will soon run out ... and YOU lose. It is at this point that many players fail to adjust. The things you need to be doing, NOW, is to discourage PASSES more than SHOTS.

Often, at the closing moments of games, you can hear the coach shout, "Go get 'em! Go get 'em!" Yet, nobody really gets anyone.

The defenders let their men receive the ball; then, make a show of useless hustle. They crowd their man, huff and puff, and reach in to swat the ball. This type of show doesn't fool anybody.

IF YOU WANT TO PLAY GOOD DEFENSE, in these closing minutes, YOU MUST MAKE IT DIFFICULT, preferably ... IMPOSSIBLE ... for YOUR MAN to RECEIVE a pass.

There is a Time For Fouling

By this time, you have reached a point of desperation. Simply put, YOU are hoping for LUCK! This is the time to foul; however, make EVERY attempt look like you ARE GOING FOR THE BALL. You don't want any intentional fouls called.

This point in time will come less often if YOU REALIZE what adjustment on defense you need to make BEFOREHAND. If you KNOW that the OBJECTIVE is to deflect, intercept, or stop PASSES. If anything, give up the RISKY LOB or backdoor BOUNCE PASSES. If you do this, you will get your SHARE of COMEBACKS.

It's easy to find excuses when you are tired and discouraged. You should NEVER GET BEAT TO THE BALL. DIVE FOR IT! Please, do not use excuses. They never win games. Good players KNOW their job is to PREVENT PERIMETER PASSES, in spite of screens or other diversions. They know that HUSTLE, once their man gets the ball, IS TOO LATE.

When your team is behind, toward the end of a game, it takes GUTS! Stick to your man and DON'T let him TOUCH the ball. If anything, force him to get a lob going AWAY from the passer.

Sure, he may score. You have to take chances. If you stand back and LET your man break out and receive passes, you will surely lose. Realize that a team protecting the lead won't throw a backdoor lob, unless, there is a man WIDE OPEN. Thus, you have the advantage. You know what type of passes they would like to throw. Don't let them! Prevent your man from catching a pass while moving toward it.