

Ten Defensive Principles

by Patrick Suessmuth (Originally published in Winning Hoops, January 2001)

They say, "Defense wins games." (P.S. I'm not sure who "THEY" are, but it is probably winning coaches.)

I've learned defense does win games, maybe because defense is quicker to teach. It certainly is easier to learn and apply than many of the offensive skills.

The ten defensive principles that follow are the framework I currently use to teach defense to beginning basketballers. With these novice players I introduce each principle in turn, hoping to see mastery of it before going on to the next. Please feel free to use, modify and adapt these so they fit your own personal style.

Oh - Oh! Since I originally wrote this article I have discovered a critical precursor to the first principle. I have labeled it the ZERO Principle because without it all defensive principles tend to collapse and become useless. A beginning basketballer taught me this one.

Zero Principle - Know Who Your Check Is

If one does not know the person one is supposed to be checking then all is lost. So before doing any of the other principles that follow please make sure each and every player know who they are checking and hence where to apply the defensive principles.

First Principle - Wet Blanket

This is where defense begins. The first thing to establish is that each player must always know whom the person they are to check is. Once this is established the wet blanket principle is applied.

Young players never having had coaching, are unlikely to follow their check. They tend to follow the ball or lose their focus on what they are supposed to be doing on defense. They tend to run around in a random thither and yon pattern.

To overcome this initial defensive problem I simply instruct new players, who are slightly "clueless" on basketball to, "Cover their check like a wet blanket at all times on defense."

I expand this wet blanket idea with the following additional thoughts:

- A. Defense is HUSTLE, Hustle, Hustle. WORK, Work, Work...and WANT, Want, Want.
- B. Be in your check's face whenever the other team has the ball (over center court). Be able to touch their belly button at all times.
- C. If you work twice as hard on defense as you do on offense you will usually be on the winning team. Defense is hard work and if you don't work hard your defensive skills will suffer accordingly.
- D. Winning teams are built around tough, tenacious defense.

Second Principle - Between

Once you have your novice defender covering his/her man like a wet blanket, you're ready for the first adjustment. It's simple. We all stress it. Show the learning defender that covering your man like a wet blanket is always done in a way that places you, the defender, **between** your man and the basket **at all times**.

With beginners, after I have told them this second principle, I get them to show me what I mean by these first two principles by giving a player a ball near the basket and asking various people to defend him/her in various spots using the first two principles.

Third Principle - Stance

Butt down, hands up.

Or...

Knees bent, hands up.

I like the first better than the later. The first they remember easier. It is clearer to beginning players, especially if they have the usual listening and hearing problems. It's closer to their own language.

In developing this principle I ask the players, "How sprinters start races?" The answer is low down in a crouch. "Why?" gets, "It gives them more initial power and greater initial speed...and that is what we need on defense. Power and Speed. Being low and balanced, and on ones toes, gives you 50% more speed than if you are standing up straight.

Why hands up? It's my preference. I want the left hand up against right hand shooters to be in the way of an attempted shot, and I want the other hand in the offensive player's face if at all possible. My coaching style isn't trying to block passes; I'm after shooting interference initially.

Fourth Principle - K-P (Key Prevent)

Once upon a time K-P was labeled **MOLEST**. I had to change it. My "lady/girl" players didn't like the connotations involved in this word, even though it is easier to remember.

The concept here is block the slash/cut, i.e., don't let your check cut across the key or cut anywhere else for that matter. Prevent the cut. Step in your check's path. Take/initiate the bump that will occur.

Be rugged.

Contest your checks right to go into or across OUR key. In other words – prevent them from getting in our key physically. (Yes it is legal. Use it.)

Fifth Principle - Force Left

If your check is naturally right handed, make your check use his/her left hand, i.e., **force left**. To do this, defend so you are taking away the person's path toward their right. Give them a path to use their left hand. This means...

You defend so you will know what the offensive person is likely to do, i.e., go left.

In initially teaching this force left principle, have the person doing the checking be really overextended on the right hand side of their check. Anything less than this does not get the force left concept across. Also stress that if force left is done properly, the person being checked, in going to their right, will go sideways across the court or toward their backcourt against a good force left. The sideways – backward move is not offensive in nature and gives the checker time to move and regain their defensive balance/stance.

When the offensive player is equally good with both hands this principle changes to line force, i.e., force the check toward the nearest sideline or baseline using them as an extra defender.

Sixth Principle - Help

The ball scores, not your man.

One can use the Shell Drill to teach this Help Defense principle, but, for me, this drill hasn't worked. It's too complicated for beginners with too many people standing around doing nothing.

I stress when your check does not have the ball move to a position where you can **help** the person guarding the check with the ball.

If the ball goes down the side of the court, everyone should be on the ball side (strong side) of the court, i.e., over the centerline dividing the length of the court. (Again, I teach this by an over-emphasis on moving to the help side. Without this over-emphasis the kids seem to miss the point.)

The purpose of moving defensively off your check and toward the ball is to help your teammates defensively if their check gets around their wet blanket on a drive toward the basket.

Stressing that you want five defenders always checking the ball, all the time helps. This means you should be able to see five defenders checking three offensive players at all times.

Seventh Principle - Deny

Basic Deny

This means the defender positions him/herself:

- On the strong side, i.e., ball side of their check when someone else's check has the ball
- Between their man and the basket but semi in the passing lane
- Has an arm extended so a hand is in the passing lane with the palm toward the ball, and...
- Positioned so they are facing their man. One does not defend by facing the ball. This would mean you would have your back to your check and could not (1) react quickly enough to what they are doing and (2) see your check well enough to provide the defense (wet blanket) necessary.

To teach this I use a pair of point guards, side by side, not behind each other, at the top of the key with a ball each. There are two receiving lines one on the right side and the other on the left side. These receivers V-cut from the foul line extended position on the three point line. Each line has a defender checking the receiver who is about to V-cut. The defender must blanket their check and deny all passes. I stress getting the deflection. I'm not looking to get stolen passes. Stolen passes are a bonus defensively if they happen, and a big negative turnover if the point guard has (in this drill) made such a bad pass.

Front(al) Deny

This occurs with post players and others when their check is more than a half court away from the ball. Defenders should position themselves fully between the BALL and their MAN. Look to steal or deflect a long pass. The fronting distance is dictated by the passer's capability. As the distance of the ball from your check decreases, you decrease your distance from your check until eventually you are playing a basic blanket deny.

Eighth Principle - Box Out/Rebounding

Every checker, on **every** shot will box out his or her man. (Needless to say people should be calling, "SHOT" every time their man shoots.)

Teaching boxing out and rebounding I leave to you. I tease my teams by saying if everyone turns and puts their butt into their check's belly and holds this position for a two count, then, many a perfect rebound will occur.

(A perfect rebound is a shot ball that hits the floor and we pick it up on the bounce because none of the offensive team could get around our players butts. We had the offensive players all solidly boxed out.) P.S. This helps make a short team tall, especially if they use their butt and legs to push their check out away from the basket.

Ninth Principle - Never Switch

Controversial this principle is. Some coaches disagree with this concept. I use it with players once they have to start to cope with effective picks because I do not want my players to quit when they encounter a pick.

Switching is OK once people have learned to fight picks.

Here are the points I teach under this principle:

- Fight/Squeeze through the space between the pick and your check, i.e., go over the pick
- Step over or around picks set on you

- Slide through/Go between the pick and your teammate who is defending the pick, i.e., go under the pick
- Push the pick out of the way
- Use an arm bar to keep the pick from getting too close to you
- Spin off picks
- Call. “Double” on picks and double team the person with the ball. This “Double” call is made by the person whose check is setting the pick
- Work to never need a switch. Take pride in this aggressive defensive aspect of your game. Avoid switches as they don’t work if the pick is well set and executed properly
- Switch only if all else fails.

Tenth Principle: Communicate - Communicate - Communicate

Talk constantly to your teammates on defense (and on offense too). Tell your teammates what you see. Tell your teammates what you're (going to) do.

Things to say:

“Right – Chris.” (Tells Chris there is a pick on his/her right side.)

“Left – Chris.” (Tells Chris there is a pick on his/her left side.)

“Clear.” (Tells the person defending a check with the ball that there are no picks near them.)

“Double.”

“Ball.”

“Shot.”

“Dead. Dead. Dead.” (You are checking a person with the ball who has used their dribble and must now pass or shot.)

“Slide.” (Call this and help your teammate to get through between you and your check. It is fair to pull/push your teammate to help them get through faster.)

“I’ve got his left/right.” (Use this when you’ve dropped off your check into help mode. It indicates you are taking a potential drive away toward the left/right side of the basket. This allows your teammate to adjust their defense accordingly.)

“Help.” (Alerts your teammates that you have lost your check on his/her drive and need someone to help you defensively by picking up your check.)

Good luck in teaching this principle. I have yet to succeed in getting a good “talking defense” (let alone any significant talk on offense).

Danger...

if you effectively (conscientiously) apply all these principles to your check in game situations, you can, with hard work destroy their game, i.e., destroy their ability to score.