

Man-on-Man Defense

We would like to inform you all that after much review and research, NVBC would ask you all to ensure that teams are taught man-on-man defense as the primary match and training defense, particularly at the most junior levels. We would strongly prefer not to see zone as the primary team defense, as although it may be effective as a defense at younger levels and lower gradings, it does not teach our young players the correct defensive accountability and will severely impact on their ability to improve and progress as players.

Coaching zone as the primary defense is coaching for the result, not the development of the players and teams.

We understand that this can be a difficult and somewhat emotive directive for some of you and to that end I am happy to discuss this further with any of you who may find it difficult to comply. This is a decision we have reached for the good of the long-term development of our players and is not taken at all lightly. We understand games may be lost in the short term but the bigger picture remains development.

Please note that we are not "banning" zone in all its forms.

Zone defense is a valid and at times necessary tool particularly if players are stressed, hot or tired from lack of subs. It is also desirable as an alternative on occasion to slow down opposition scoring. We just don't want to see teams using it as their primary offense on a week-to-week basis! I will be following this up with some very useful information on the correct coaching of man-to-man defense, particularly as regards, denial and help defense. As with all aspects of the NVBC Development Program, we want to ensure that we are helping, not hindering your job!

PS Below is an article from a US Development Coach, which gives a great overview of the results of our research into this issue.

"You might qualify this article as biased, but I have developed this opinion over many years of experience. For what it's worth, I believe youth basketball programs should utilize man to man defense exclusively. This is not because I believe it is the best defense to play (even though I do), but because it is the best developmental defense to play.

What Defensive Skills Does Man to Man Teach You?

Let's think about it. First, to play man to man you have to teach basic defensive fundamentals that are needed for any defensive scheme. You have to learn defensive position. You must keep your feet spread shoulder length, be balanced, keep your hand in the dribbling lane, slide without crossing your legs, and learn to drop step when a player reverse dribbles. You also have to learn to give defensive help, rotate to the ball (depending on your level of sophistication), deny passing lanes, front cutters, and utilize a variety of other skills. All of these are also used when you play zone, but are much more teachable through man to man. You can teach each skill individually and build up to the whole picture.

I believe these skills are best mastered at an early age. Once they are mastered through repetition, then if the high school coach plays zone, players have the skills to fit in. If the high school coach plays man to man, the players are ready as well.

How Does Man To Man Help Develop Offensive Skills?

Younger players should develop their ball handling, passing, and driving skills at an early age. Playing against zones encourages younger players to shoot too far out from the perimeter, which creates improper shooting form. Playing against man to man will encourage players to dribble under pressure with their heads up, drive to the basket, "dish off" to open players, utilize screens on and off the ball, fight for inside position, and develop their peripheral vision to see the entire court. They also have to develop court awareness.

I have seen so many programs where all types of zones were used. Coaches practiced the strategy of playing the zone and the strategy of beating the zone more than practicing fundamentals. As I mentioned, most shots came from the outside-too far outside. So many players get their elbow out to the side and "wing it up there." Bad habits are formed.

When only man to man defenses are allowed, coaches have to focus on the fundamentals mentioned above. They have to work on pick and roll and how to defend it, how to dribble drive to the basket, and pass under pressure. Practices are much more developmental for younger players when man to man defenses are used.

When Are Zones Appropriate?

Zones definitely are appropriate at higher levels such as high school and college based on the abilities and skills your players have, your comfort level in teaching one defense over another, and the strengths and weaknesses of your opponent. In fact, zones are more effective at the secondary level because the players have developed the defensive skills playing man to man at a younger age. They are now ready to play a more effective zone.

I am not against zone defenses, only when they are employed at an early age. In summary, here are the advantages of playing man to man in youth programs:

- They are developmental and teach both basic offensive and defensive skills*
- They focus on team defense, helping out, and recovering*
- Players need to develop basic offensive skills to play against man to man defense.*
- Coaches conduct practices based more on basics than on strategy*
- They are competitive and foster a competitive attitude*
- They are more fun to play and play against*
- Man to Man defense fosters enthusiasm, excitement, and a more active brand of basketball."*