

## Coaching Points

Players should always rotate to maintain the three-out, two-in setup. Make sure players spread out the defense with proper spacing; there should be about 10 to 12 feet between each offensive player. When in doubt, basket cut. The player with the ball should cut to the basket after passing to a wing or corner.

## Attacking a Zone Defense

Teams play zone defenses to keep defenders close to the basket and cut down on layups. Teams may also play zone because it's easier to teach than man-to-man defense because players cover an area rather than chasing another player. Zone defenses enable teams to hide players who are slower or do not play man-to-man defense well. A zone is especially effective against offenses that rely on one or two strong players to attack the basket. Zone defenses can close off opportunities to offensive players who want to dribble and drive to the basket. This can frustrate a young team and compel them to heave brick after brick at the basket from far outside their shooting range. Not a pretty sight. To prevent a massive migraine and an 0-for-78 shooting night by her team, a coach needs to keep herself and her team calm, and emphasize three key strategies for beating a zone.

- 1. Be patient.** Against zone defenses, impatience can lead an offense to heave up shots that will make a coach turn three shades of red. Most kids can't wait for anything, let alone something as much fun as taking a shot in a basketball game, so teaching patience against a zone will require a lot of practice . . . and patience. But the players need to learn that it will take several passes and several ball rotations each time down the floor before a good shot presents itself against a tightly packed zone. Remember, there is no shot clock in youth basketball, so there's no limit on how long a team can work the ball.

You can help the offense get in the proper mindset by offering timely reminders: *Slow down*, *Patience*, and the old reliable, *What's the hurry?* Unless time is running out in a close game and the team desperately needs a basket to catch up, players need to recognize that running an offense is not a race. This is something that should be worked on in practice; it will help the players realize that passing the ball and working patiently for a shot is what smart offenses must do to break down a zone defense.

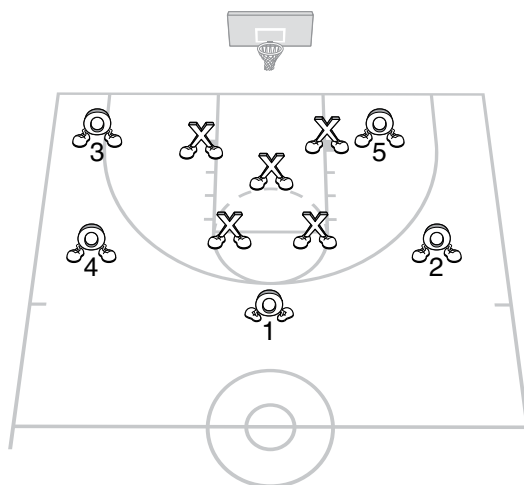
2. **Attack the “gray areas.”** The gaps between defensive players can widen when the zone defense moves, and these represent where the defense is most vulnerable. Offensive players should step into gray areas to receive a pass or shoot the basketball. They can also drive to the basket by cutting through the gray areas. When that happens, two defensive players sometimes collapse to stop the penetration, which allows for a pass to an open offensive player.
3. **Keep moving the ball.** Zone defenses are effective against teams that do not use both sides of the floor. Teach your team to reverse the ball from one side of the floor to the other several times to spread out the zone. The more your team rotates the ball back and forth, the larger the gray areas will become as the defense stretches out. In practice, have the kids work on passing the ball at least three times each possession.

To accomplish these strategies for attacking a zone, the offensive team should create a staggered front, depending on how many defenders are up top.

## Attacking With a Three-Guard Set

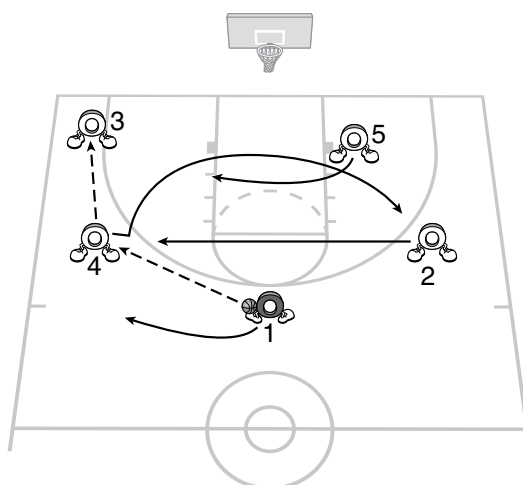
If the defense is set up with two players up top in a 2-1-2 or 2-3 zone, attack with a three-guard set: one point guard (1) and two wings (player 2 on the right and player 4 on the left), as shown in figure 5.7. Player 5 will be in the low post on the same side as 2. Player 3 will be in the opposite corner on the same side as 4.

The point guard (1) does not cut toward the basket, but keeps moving in the area across the top of the key so he can pass the ball to the wings and rotate the ball to the opposite side of the court. The two wings and the forward and center work together to create movement and scoring opportunities. As shown in figure 5.8, player 1 will pass to 4 on the wing, 4 will pass down to 3 in the corner, and 4 will cut toward the basket through



**Figure 5.7** Setup for attacking with a three-guard offensive set.

the lane and rotate out to the weak-side wing. After 4 has cut through, 5 and 2 will cut toward the ball in search of gray-area weak spots in the zone. Their hands should be outstretched, ready to receive a pass from 3. Player 2 proceeds through the free-throw line area and continues to the opposite wing, which 4 has vacated. Player 5 flashes the lane and looks for a pass while moving from the low block to the opposite low block. Player 1 moves to an open spot on the strong side of the floor above the free-throw line in case 3 is pressured and can't find an open cutter.

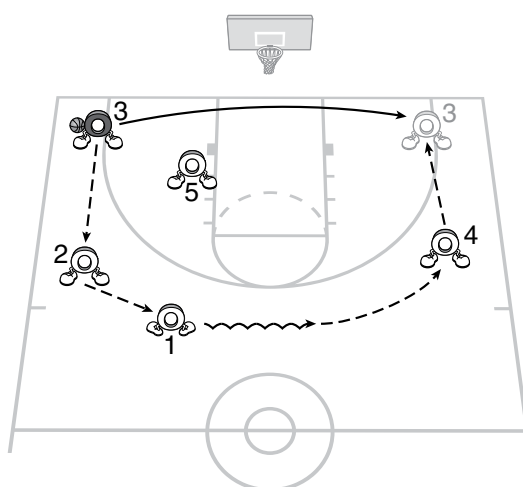


**Figure 5.8** Player movement for the three-guard attack.

Once the weak-side wing cuts across to the strong side, 1 moves back to the point.

The idea is to attack from the weak side; the weak-side cutters can take advantage of the defenders' attention to the ball side and find gaps in the zone, where they can receive passes and convert them into scores. The weak-side elbow at the free-throw line can be particularly vulnerable and presents a scoring opportunity for the weak-side wing on a skip pass. If the cutters are not open, quick ball rotation can create an open shot for the corner player (3). After passing the ball to a post player, wing, or point guard, 3 should run the baseline to the opposite corner while the rest of the team rotates the ball to 3's side of the court.

This scheme plays out in following manner. After 3 passes to one of the cutters from the weak side (2 or 5), 3 runs the baseline to the opposite corner, on the same side as 4 (figure 5.9). The player who receives the pass from 3 (usually 2)



**Figure 5.9** Weak-side attack by reversing the ball.