

# THE "TRIANGLE AND TWO" DEFENSE



by Tab Baldwin

**Tab Baldwin came to New Zealand in the late 1980s with the goal of leading Otago from the national second division into the NBL (National Basketball League) of New Zealand. From 1995 to 2000 he coached Auckland, winning five NBL titles and three Coach-of-the-Year awards. Baldwin became coach of the National team in 2001 and guided the Tall Blacks to the FIBA 2002 World Championship semifinals. Baldwin also coached New Zealand in the 2004 Athens Olympic Games.**

Coaching basketball should be fun. It should also be a cooperative effort of a coaching staff and their players. A team comprised of a great coach and a reluctant team will fail to play with style and imagination whereas a team with a creative coach working with an intelligent team committed to one another and quality play can bedazzle and befuddle opponents far superior in talent.

This was the formula that the New Zealand Tall Blacks tried to employ heading into the 2002 World Championships. We knew that we were out manned in terms of talent and experience but we also believed to the core of our being that a cohesive and unpredictable team could produce success against much more fancied opponents. Our intention was never to be overly complicated in terms of our playing systems. However, because we were going to rely on multiple offenses and defenses and our preparation time was always going to be severely limited, we did need to put a premium on the selection of intelligent players as opposed to selecting strictly along the lines of talent. Fortunately, because of the fine work of some of our provincial coaches in New Zealand, most of our highly talented players also came to us with a good basketball brain.

So, very early in our preparation, we decided



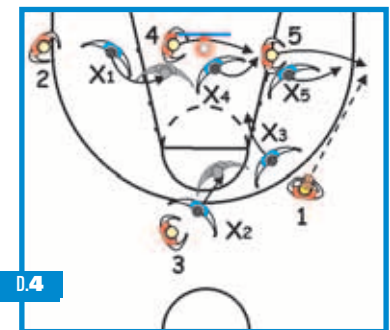
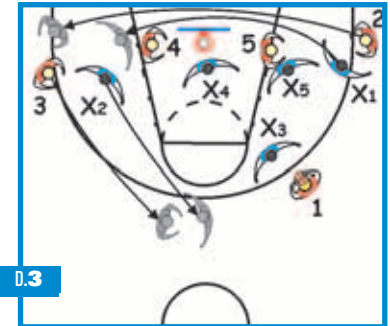
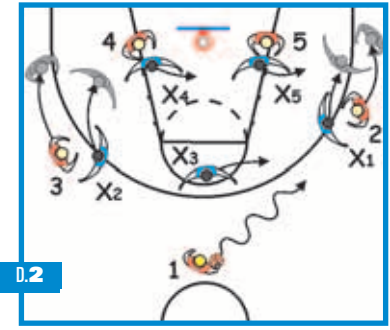
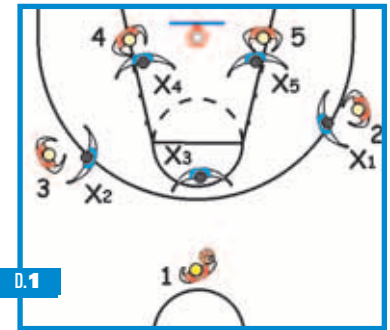
that playing intelligently and using a full range of offenses and defenses would be one of the main pillars upon which we would build the strenght of our team. In using this approach we knew that our team would have to be very adaptable to the ebbs and flows of games and that we, as coaches, would not always make the right call but that we would always have other options to go to if needed.

More importantly, we knew that we would be able to test the adaptability of our opponents. This aspect of our team was certainly a factor in turning a seventeen point third quarter deficit to russia into a nine point win and reversing a 12 - 35 first quarter scoreline against China into ultimate victory. As much as having

a diverse system meant to our ability to recover from bad patches in games was the knowledge that having diversity meant we always had other options as to how we would play the game. This became the foundation of our belief system: every game is winnable, we just have to use the right strategy at the right time and then play our butts off.

One of the weapons that we employed in our system diversity was the "triangle and two" defense, a renowned type of "junk" defense that I gave used off and on for many years.

The "triangle and two" defense, like many junk defenses, can be employed for a variety of reasons. One belief that I hold very strongly about junk defenses is that they cannot be



The above points outline the strenght possibilities this particular defense offers to your overall defensive package. However, as I said, if you overexpose this defense to an intelligent and unselfish opponent then you will find that the inherent weaknesses of the defense will ultimately be exposed. Essentially, because it is difficult to maintain good ball pressure with this defense, it becomes vulnerable to quick ball movement and weak side seal/screen actions.

The fundamentals of the "triangle and two" defense are actually quite simple but it is a defense that requires a fair amount of practice if you hope to have consistent success using it. When practicing the defense make sure that you run different types of offenses against it and allow the offense several at-

used for extended periods of time in a game. We generally hold to the truth that the junk defense can be effective for no more than four-six possessions consecutively.

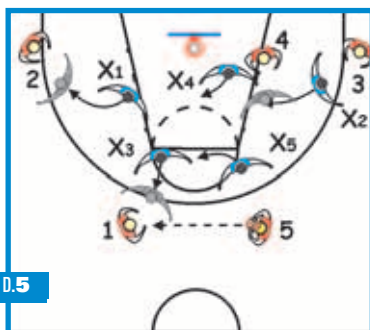
As I said, we use the "triangle and two" defense for any of several reasons. The primary reason we will use the defense is to attack an opposition line-up that lacks a third quality perimeter shooter. Even if your opponent can move an interior player outside to become a third shooting option, the defense can still be very effective with only a simple structural adjustment. We will also use the defense for these other reasons:

- ▼ To disrupt an opponent's scoring run by changing to an unorthodox defense (this

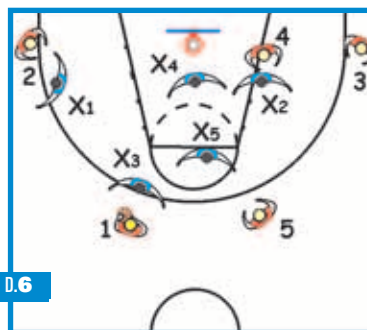
can sometimes take the place of a timeout or a substitution).

- ▼ To take an opposition team away from a well executed offensive sequence that is giving either our man-to-man or conventional zone defense trouble.
- ▼ To shut down a specific player who has found a hot scoring streak. This can apply to an interior player as well as a perimeter player.
- ▼ To shut down an effective penetrating guard who is creating easy scoring opportunities with the drive and dish.
- ▼ To negate the sideline or point pick and roll play being used so effectively in today's international game.

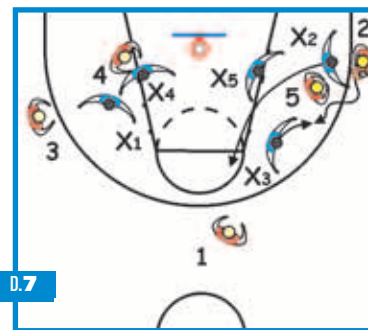




D.5



D.6



D.7

tempts to attack the defense. This will allow the offense to “learn” the defenses vulnerabilities and consequently the defense will have to “learn” to adjust. Once players playing this defense can make adjustments without specific instruction, the defense becomes that much harder to break.

In outlining the defense, I will focus as much on rules and guidelines as I do on diagrams. Because there are inherent positional weaknesses in the defense, the players must become excellent at communication. There are many times when the “rules” of the defense are broken but this may force the offense into just one more pass that may introduce the pressure of the 24-second shot clock. So, as you begin to follow the diagrams always keep in mind that communication, effort and intelligence will mean more to the success of the defense than close adherence to the “rules” of the defense.

The basic formation of the defense is shown in diagram 1.

X1 and X2 will defend their players (1 and 2 to be referred to from now on as shooters) man-to-man. The man-to-man component of the defense can be either full denial or more passive, help oriented defense depending on the respective philosophy dictated by the opponent’s capabilities. X3, X4, and X5 play a triangular zone with the following coverages and responsibilities:

X3 - Mid-post extended to the high post on both sides of the floor. This player should not extend beyond the three-point arc. He also must switch all ball screens in his coverage area and help on dribble penetration by either of X1 or X2’s assigned men.

X4, X5 - Mid-post extended to the baseline on the perimeter. Front the low post when the ball is on the ball side wing and play behind the opposite low post when the opposite low post defender is extended. These players must talk constantly as they can see the entire floor and defensive responsibilities can change quickly. “Area Defense” - To understand how the triangle zone operates, you must understand the concept of “Area Defense”.

When one of the players playing the triangle zone has the responsibility of defending the ball in his area, he must use the following defensive techniques:

▼ Constant foot movement varying the pres-

sure on the ball and not allowing the player with the ball to establish any rhythm in his shot or break down the defender with one-on-one moves.

▼ Do not allow penetration off the dribble.

The ball is positioned on the wing (3) in a non-shooter’s hands (diagr. 2).

X3 - Plays “area” defense not allowing 3 to penetrate or shoot in rhythm but will not consistently pressure the ball either.

X5 - Fronts the low post and X4 will zone the midline defending the weak side post as well as offering backside help to 5.

X1, X2 - in this diagram, X1 is denying on the strong side while X2 is staying close to 2 and not offering any help side defense. Both could be playing off of their men and only pressuring 1 and 2 when they have the ball.

The ball is positioned in the corner in a non-shooter’s hands (diagr. 3).

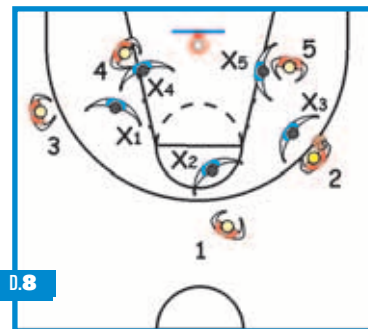
X5 - Plays “area” defense as X3 in diagram 2. By playing “soft” on the ball, he makes the postfeed to 4 a difficult pass.

X4 - Comes across the three-second lane to play behind 4 in low post defense. If the ball is passed into the low post then X5 should hedge down but not apply a hard double team. X3 must drop lower on the weak side and be prepared to close out on any reversal pass out of the low post. X1 and X2 can provide some positional help until the ball is passed out of the post.

X3 - Plays below the free-throw line and on the weak side of the midline. X3 often has the responsibility of reading the eyes of the ball handler and closing out on passes out of the corner. This pass could be thrown to the wings or to the top and any of those passes become the responsibility of this man.

The offense has positioned 1 and 2 in the corners and put two perimeter players at the top in guard slots. This is done offensively to try to force X3 to guard two players at the top and create a better penetrating lane for one of the offensive players (diagr. 4).

As soon as we identify that the offense is doing this systematically, we simply invert the triangle zone and bring one of forwards (X4 or X5) to the top. We will stay like this as long as the offense uses this attacking method. The



D.8

forward at the bottom of the triangle zone (X5) will play the remaining offensive player basically man-to-man.

The key to getting the inversion quickly and accurately is to be constantly communicating and identify this offensive maneuver early.

Finally, the defending of the screen and roll for either one of the shooters is shown in diagrams 5, 6, 7, and 8.

The screen occurs at the top of the key for 1. The defense simply executes a switch with X3 picking up (and staying with 1) and X1 assuming X3’s responsibilities in the triangle zone as shown in diagrams 5 and 6.

We see the same screening action out of the corner for 2 in diagram 7. As X3 calls the switch on the screen, X2 responds by sprinting to the X3’s area of responsibility leaving the corner area for X5 to cover.

Note: if 5 executes a re-screen and 2 reverses and dribbles back to the corner, then X5 will need to switch onto 2 and X4 will have to provide help in the low post on 5’s roll to the basket.

X2 - has taken on the responsibility of X3 in the triangle zone and X3 is now playing 2 man-to-man (diagr. 8).

As stated at the beginning of the article, the triangle and two combination defense is not without its weaknesses. If an offense is overexposed to this defense it will learn how to break it down. However, using the defense in a limited way and knowing that it is always there means that you have one more weapon to disrupt a talented opponent and exert some control over how your opposing coach is allowed to use his lineup and tactics.