DEFENDING THE PICK-AND-ROLL

by Bob Ociepka

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The pick-and-roll play is a great offensive weapon, used by all NBA teams and one of the most difficult actions for teams to stop. Pick-and-rolls are run in transition as drags and step-ups. They are run on the half court on the side, in the middle of the floor and off the elbow. The picks can be stationary or off movement, and they can be set plays or random actions. As you can see, pick-and-roll plays can cause a strategic nightmare for coaches just in looking at the numerous actions that a team can present. Now, add to the mix the great players involved, and you further complicate matters. Do you defend a side pick-and-roll involving Kobe Bryant and Shaquille O'Neal the same way you play Chauncey Billups driving off a screen set by Rasheed Wallace? How about a high screen-and-roll (in the middle of the floor) with Jason Kidd attacking as opposed to Andre Miller? These are just some of the dilemmas facing NBA coaches as they prepare game plans and get their teams ready to face their opponents.

Obviously, there are many pick-and-roll actions and many techniques coaches will devise to attempt to stop these plays. Teams will trap, slide under, force the ball to the baseline or switch to name some of them. Coaches have important decisions to make and these decisions fall into a few categories. Some coaches have specific thoughts on how they will play pick-and-

rolls and will not vary from their plans, no matter who the opponent is, and which players are involved. For example, some coaches will trap every side pick-and-roll with the thought that, by using the same technique, their players will get better and better at the execution and over the course of a season become very good at containing this play. This style of coaching makes game planning more simple as both coaches and players know that the side pick-and-roll will be trapped. Coach Pat Riley had success with this strategy in New York, so we know that this style works.

Other coaches adjust their techniques depending on which players are involved in the play. For example, a coach may feel that if the player with the ball is a non-shooter, the best strategy is to go under on the pick, with the worst-case scenario being that a below average shooter takes a jump shot and, if the player with the ball is an excellent shooter, then the trap should be employed. So, different strategies are employed in the same game versus different players. This strategy might be used by a team facing the New York Knicks, where a coach would say that, if Stephon Marbury is involved in a pick-and-roll, we will trap it to get the ball out of his hands and, if Franck Williams has the ball, we will go under.

Other coaches may change their strategy game to game, trapping versus one team and turning the pick-and-roll down versus the next opponent.

The Milwaukee Bucks under coach Terry Porter ascribe to the second scenario and utilize game plans based on the opponent's personnel. The techniques taught are a limited number and drilled regularly so that ideally they can be effective even if changed game to game or with a given game. This article will describe some of the techniques the Bucks have used to defend side and high pick-and-rolls.

DEFENDING THE SIDE PICK-AND-ROLL

TRAPPING THE PICK-AND-ROLL

Trapping the side pick-and-roll involves an aggressive action and there must be communication between the player guarding the ball and the player who is defending the screener. So, the first thing we say is "TALK." The player on the ball cannot be

beat down the sideline and must influence the ball to the screen. He must get into his man and move aggressively going over the top of the screener and form a trap with the screener's man. After talking, the defender on the screener must move with his man and jump out to double team the ball. The screener's defender is better off getting out early, rather that jumping out late. We don't want to surprise man with the ball! The two defenders must ensure that there is no space between them, which would allow a player to "split" the trap. Players such as Steve Nash from Phoenix and Jason Kidd of New Jersey are two examples of players who are very good at splitting traps, which might require a different technique. The goal of the trap is to stop the ball, force a turnover or make the dribbler retreat toward halfcourt. Once the ball is trapped, rotations are involved as the ball is passed.

As the pick-and-roll takes place, the weak-side defenders must sag off their men ready to move and rotate depending on the direction of the pass. If the pass out of the trap is made to the screener (roll man), the Bucks will rotate the opposite big man to cover him. Some teams will send whoever is positioned low as the rotator. In diagram 1, as the trap takes place between X1 and X4, X5 cheats over (in the NBA based on the zone rule we call it a "2.9" as a defender cannot stay in the lane without contacting an offensive player for 3 seconds.) On the pass to 4, X5 rotates to cover him. X2 ha sagged off the top to give support in case the ball escapes the trap. X3 is off his man and must sink into the lane to take out a pass to 5.

Diagram 2 illustrates the movement of X4 coming out of the trap. As the ball is passed, X4 must sprint to the front of the rim and, in this case, take 5 and kick X3 back out to his man in the corner.

If the ball is advanced across the top out of the trap, X5, who has "2.9ed", recovers back to his own man, after buying some time for X4 to get back to the roll man. X3, X4 and X5 must all work together, if the ball is advanced, as X3 cannot leave the posted player until X5 can get back, and X5 cannot leave the basket for a free roll by 4, until his man starts to get back (diagr. 3).
All players must worl quickly and aggressively to make this action work. During the past season, Milwaukee game plans have sought to trap pick-and-rolls involving players like Baron Davis of New Orleans and Steve Francis of the Orlando Magic.

D.5

D.6

D.7

D.8

PUSHING THE SIDE PICK-AND-ROLL DOWN

Another technique used by the Bucks is to "down" the pick-and-roll and not let the ball get to the screen. Using the same offensive alignment from above, X1 forces the dribbler away from the screen, not allowing a straight line drive. He must keep the ball away from the middle, but still cut the dribbler off by the baseline hash mark. Again, talking is crucial. X1 cannot "down" the pick-and-roll, until he hears the call from X4, who must drop off the screener toward the lane to help on a drive. X2 sags off his man at the top and is ready to rotate on a pass out, if the screener is a good shooter. X3 must be up the floor, ready to rotate, if X2 goes, and X5 must be prepared to defend 3 in the opposite corner on a full rotation, which is shown in diagram 4. This technique can be used to keep a good penetrationg guard out of the middle of the floor and might be used on a pick-and-roll involving Jason Kidd and Kenyon Martin.

If the screener is a non-shooter, or someone the coach feels is not dangerous, the defense would not rotate to him. In diagram 5, the defense uses this approach after the ball is "downed". X2 "stunts" (fakes) at 4 to buy time for X4 to recover to is man and everyone stays with their own men and no rotation is involved.

DEFENDING THE HIGH PICK-AND-ROLL

Two techniques the Milwaukee Bucks use versus high pick-and-rolls are "show" and "weak."

"Showing" on the screen is designed to keep the ball ot of the lane off the dribble and also to get out aggressively to deny an open jump shot to the man with the ball. "Weak" is used to force the dribbler to his off hand and take away his strength.

SHOW HIGH - LOW (WITH SCREENER ROLLING)

Once again, the defender must "talk" and call out the screen so that the defender on the ball knows the pick is coming and can force the ball to the pick. X1 must get into the ball and not back off. He forces the ball toward 4 and X4 must "show up" the floor. He cannot show late or flat off the screen. By "showing up" he forces the ball out on

the floor. This allow space for X1 to slide under his teammate X4 and recover to his own man. He cannot go under the screener (diagr. 6). Many NBA teams will use a rolla and replace stratedy. All baseline defenders must be up the line off their men, ready to help and, in X5's case, pick up the roll man. X5 must pick up 4 on the roll above the broken line so he is denied a deep catch. X4 recovers high, after showing and picks up 5 on his cut. X2 is up the line supporting and ready to help in case there is a break down on the show coverage. X3 is up the line and "stunts" to 5 as he cuts high to buy time for X4 to pick him up. The Bucks used this strategy to attempt to contain Mike Bibby who is dangerous shooting behind screens and getting into the lane.

SHOW HIGH - LOW (WITH SCREENER POPPING)

Diagram 7 shows the recovery of X4 if his man pops instead of rolling. In this case, X3 must again "stunt" and provide help to buy time for X4 to get back to his own man. In some cases, if this is a great shooter involved, X3 may rotate to him. Chauncey Billups attacking off a screen set by Rasheed Wallace was especially challenging in the playoffs this season but Damon Jones and Joe Smith were able to defend the action through hard work, communication and effort.

"WEAK" VERSUS HIGH PICK-AND-ROLL

If the ball handler is a strong left-handed attacker, the Milwaukee Bucks may elect to influence the ball to the right or to the opponent's weak hand. In the given name, the plan may be to "weak" all high pick-and-rolls, so the lefty's are forced right and the right-handers are forced left. In diagram 8 the weak technique illustrates forcing the ball to the right. This defensive strategy was used versus Damon Stoudamire of the Portland Trail Blazers, who is a great attacker if allowed to penetrate to his strong left hand. X1 must influence the ball right, but cannot allow a straight line drive. X4 sags off his man to support and help protect against a drive. X4 helps and recovers back to his man as he pops X3 "stunts" to help buy time for his teammate's recovery.

As stated in the initial paragraph, there are numerous ways to defend pick-and-rolls and the wide variety of these attacks. The above diagrams illustrate some of the ways Coach Porter has attempted to stop these actions. It goes without saying that the best-designed techniques cannot always stop the best players in the world. The goal of the Milwaukee Bucks and most NBA teams is to force a guarded, contested shot with all our players on the same page, talking, working together and helping each other.