Using The 1-3-1 Zone Defense
To Stifle Your Opponents

Unique looks force offenses to change their approach

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The 1-3-1 half-court zone defense is a great way to disrupt opposing offenses. It can be utilized effectively as your base defense or for special situations.

Benefits Of
The 1-3-1 Zone

1. Teams have to prepare for you.
   The majority of coaches spend most of their time in practice working against or on man-to-man defense. Although the use of zone defense has become more popular in recent years, man-to-man is still the most common defense teams face. Even if you do see a lot of zone teams, they more commonly play variations of the 2-3 or 3-2 zone. The 1-3-1 half-court zone is a defensive look that teams do not have to see on a regular basis. Because of their unfamiliarity playing against the 1-3-1, your opponents must spend a considerable amount of time preparing to face you, while limiting the amount of work they can delegate to other facets of the game.

2. There are few ways to attack the 1-3-1 zone.
   There are two major reasons why there are a limited number of ways to attack the 1-3-1: There are only so many variables when it comes to defensive rotations and since coaches don't play against it frequently, a lot less time is spent figuring out how to break it. Since there are a lot less ways to attack the 1-3-1, you don't have to spend as much time preparing your defense from game to game, allowing you to focus on other parts of your game plan.

3. It makes it easy for your team to fill your fast break lanes and run in transition.
   If you run a numbered fast break (Nos. 2 and 3 run wide, No. 5 rim runs, etc.), the 1-3-1 allows you to get into your primary break lanes a lot quicker since you're already in set areas within your zone defense.

4. Rotations and alignment can be modified easily based on the strengths of your personnel or the scouting report of your opponent.
   There are many different alignments and adjustments to make to your 1-3-1 to get the most out of your defense. Different alignments and rotations can be effective to maximize the strengths and hide the weaknesses of your team. Changing the look of your 1-3-1 is even better for taking away the strengths and exploiting the weaknesses of your opponent. Several ideas for adjustments to your 1-3-1 are detailed later in this article.

5. The 1-3-1 zone works especially well against:
   • Teams that rely heavily on dribble penetration.
   • Teams that run a lot of different man-to-man offensive sets.
   • Teams that don't have a lot of time to prepare to play you (travel tournaments, second game of a Friday/Saturday doubleheader, etc.).
   • Teams that have one or two great individual players (flex or trap adjustments).
   • Poor shooting teams, as the 1-3-1 forces opponents to take outside shots, thus lowering shooting percentages.
   Just like with any offensive or defensive strategy in basketball, there are several problems inherent in using the 1-3-1 half-court zone. Some of the biggest issues are:
   • Defending great shooting teams, especially in the dead corner spots.
   • Rebounding.
   • Transitioning back on defense into your zone.
   • Complacency that playing zone defense often brings.
   The aforementioned issues, although common, are addressed successfully through time at practice.

The Basic Alignment

Diagram 1: Setting Up.

Head (H): The head is responsible for creating havoc at the top of the zone. He needs to disrupt the ball handler, take away ball reversals and help protect the middle of the court. The head should be one of your longest, most athletic players since he is the most active in the zone.

Tail (T): The tail is the back end of the zone and is responsible for protecting the dead corners, the baseline and, at times, the strong-side blocks. This needs to be a quick player who effectively covers a lot of ground.

Wings (W): The ideal wing player is long and athletic. Wings need to be this way so they can take up a lot of ground and shrink the court. One of
the reasons certain college teams are so successful using the 1-3-1 is they recruit long and active players who flourish for them on defense. Wings need to be able to cover a lot of space, contest shots and cover the weak-side block.

**The Basic Rotation**

**Diagram 2: Pick-Up.** Adjust the pick-up point of the ball based on your personnel, desired amount of ball pressure or scouting reports.

**Diagram 3: Trap.** As the ball moves across half court, H and the strong-side W are in a soft trap. The rules on the ball here are:

- Play a soft trap (two-to-three steps off the ball).
- Play on the outside shoulder of the ball handler, forcing him or her to the middle of the court (takes away sideline passes and penetration, which is key).
- Have active hands—make them lob the basketball or throw weak bounce passes (allows the defense to rotate more effectively). Don't allow them to make direct passes.
- M is in a direct line between the ball and the basket, usually protecting the strong-side elbow.

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• T protects the strong-side block
• The weak-side W protects the weak-side block.

**Diagram 4: Opposite Side.** The rotation stays the same when the ball is brought by the offense on the other side of the court.

**Diagram 5: Skip Pass.** In the event of a skip pass, H sprints to the top side of the ball. The weak-side W sprints to the baseline to protect the weak-side block, and the new strong-side W closes out to the basketball.

- Closeout an arms-length away and then take two to three steps off to fall into the soft trap.
- Don’t run at a direct angle at the pass receiver. If this happens the player is not in position to protect the sideline. The angle of approach on the closeout is key—change the line of the sprint so the player is able to closeout on the outside shoulder of the offensive player with the ball.

- M moves to the line of the ball and protects the strong side elbow.
- T sprints to the strong-side block.

The tail needs to move on the airtime of the ball. A great term to use is “beat the pass to your spot.” Instead of reacting and moving, once the pass is received, players need to anticipate the catch and be in the proper spot by the time the receiver of the pass catches the basketball.

**Diagram 6: Passes.** On wing-to-corner passes, the left W sprints to the outside shoulder of the corner player (soft trap rules). T closes out and takes away the baseline at an arms-length away. M covers the strong-side block and H sprints to protect the strong-side high post.

**Diagram 7: Repeat.** Use the same rotation on both sides of the court. Use a soft trap in the corner and provide protection in the post to prevent the penetrating pass.

**Diagram 8: Eliminate The Pass.** Two passes that are hard to complete and have to be taken away are the corner skip and the diagonal wing-to-corner pass. These actions put a strain on the rotation of your defense so allowing them to occur is not an option.

In case your defense breaks down and these types of passes make it through, here are the rotations.

**Diagram 9: Wing-To-Corner Skip Pass.** The weak-side W needs to adjust his or her angle of approach and closeout to the baseline side of the pass receiver until the tail is able to recover. Once the tail recovers, the wing adjusts positioning to the top part of the offensive player’s outside shoulder.

H sprints to cover the strong-side elbow while the weak-side W sprints to protect the weak-side block. M sprints to protect the strong-side block.

**Diagram 10: Corner-To-Corner Skip Pass.** Rotations on the corner-to-corner skip pass are very similar to the wing-to-corner diagonal skip pass, though this pass is rarely completed, especially if the tail and the weak-side wing are in position and doing their jobs correctly.
**Versus Dribble Penetration**

**Diagram 11:** Penetration From The Top Slot. M is in charge of stopping the ball. The ball-side W and the tail try to poke the ball away from behind as they converge on it.

**Diagram 12:** Penetration From The Corner. Middle protection is the same, except in this case the head is stopping the ball as he or she is protecting the elbow due to the rotations of the defense.

Baseline drives should not happen if the tail has correct positioning. If that player gets beat, block protection is the second line of defense.

**Rebounding In The 1-3-1**

One of the disadvantages of running the 1-3-1 half-court zone is that often times teams have trouble rebounding out of it. Practice rotation and rebounding out of the 1-3-1 on a consistent basis to make sure there is no confusion come game time.

**Diagram 13:** Shot From The Wing. M, T and W box out their respective areas. At the same time, H sprints to the weak-side elbow, as that is where most offensive rebounds occur against the 1-3-1 zone.

**Diagram 14:** Shot From The Corner. If a shot comes from either corner, H protects the opposite elbow. The ball-side W protects the ball-side elbow and the weak-side W, T and M block out their respective areas.

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Adjustments To The 1-3-1

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Diagram 15: High Corner Hard Trap. H and the ball-side W trap the ball as soon as it crosses the half-court line. T takes away the sideline pass, and the weak-side W takes away the skip pass option. That leaves M to secure the middle outlet pass option.

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Diagram 16: Dead Corner Hard Trap. As soon as the ball is passed to the dead corner, the ball-side W and T to trap it hard. M plays the passing lanes between the high-post elbow and the ball-side block. H plays the passing lanes between the middle and the sideline pass, and the weak-side W takes away the skip pass option.

There are four key points your team must know when pursuing a successful trap:

1. You can trap both the top and the dead corner in a possession or just one or the other.
2. Trap with active hands and never let them rest at your side.
3. Don’t bait out the offensive player being trapped by fouling him or her when you try to steal the ball. Most steals should come from picking off passes and pass deflections.
4. Don’t cover the outlet passes straight up. Defenders looking to steal the pass should try to bait the ball handler into throwing the ball into the passing lane that they are patrolling. Be off the lane enough for the ball handler to think the pass is open but close enough where you can get there to intercept it. Be physically off the passing lane but mentally in it.

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Diagram 17: Flexing Back. This adjustment is primarily used against teams that don’t shoot very well but also is utilized in a variety of ways based on the information derived from your scouting report.

The “soft trap” becomes even softer as the defenders sag off the ball handler. When the ball is at one of the top spots, the strong-side W is positioned in line with the top of the key, or even one more step off.

H is at the help line. All of the other defenders play the same positions.

Diagram 18: Corner. If the ball is in the corner, T plays an arm’s length away from the offensive player. The ball-side W is in line with the free-throw-line extended. Everyone else plays regular rotations.

Individual Personnel Adjustments

Adjust your 1-3-1 half-court zone based on scouting reports on individual players on the opposing team. Here are some tips for scouting adjustments:

1. Hard trap on weak ball handler—regular defense or flex everything else.
2. Flex on everyone but regular defense on certain shooters.
3. Soft trap on the right side of the court and hard trap on the left side (if the team is loaded with players who generally struggle with their weak hands).
4. Trap a team’s best player to get the ball out of their hand—regular everyone else.
5. Flex towards a team’s best player to deny them the ball.
6. Trap the best player and after the pass, flex back toward them.
7. There are many other adjustments that you can make—be creative based on your personnel and scouting your opponent.