2-1-2 ZONE DEFENSE
Giampiero Ticchi began his professional head coaching career in 2000/2001 with Rimini in A2 (the Italian second league). He followed this with two years as the head coach of Castelmaggiore, also in A2. For the 2005/2006 season, he coached Faenza, a top team in the Italian women’s first division. He returned to Rimini in 2006 and stayed at the helm until the end of the 2007/2008 season. In 2007, he won the A2 Coach of the Year award. In 2008, Ticchi was named head coach of the Italian National women’s team and the squad won the gold medal at the 2009 Mediterranean Games.

At the beginning of the season, when you prepare your defensive system, you have to always think about the construction of one (or more) zone defenses.

You must find a zone defense to teach, based on your players’ technical and physical skills. Obviously, the zone defense can’t be your principal defensive set, but it can be a fundamental weapon to utilize during the game. Sometimes, during a game, you can use the zone defense in tactical situations, like throw-ins or after a free-throw, but other times you can use the zone defense when the man-to-man defense doesn’t work effectively.

**WHEN MUST THE ZONE DEFENSE BE USED?**

We can use the zone defense when:

- We want to change the game rhythm.
- When there’s a big physical gap between our players and the rivals and when we are in trouble with the mismatches.
- When the offense has only perimeter players, also shooters, but doesn’t have players able to attack the basket with the dribble.
- When we are in trouble with high- and low-post plays.
- When we are in trouble defending pick-and-roll situations.

It’s very important to choose the right moment to use the zone defense; the first three or four defensive plays are fundamental to infuse confidence into our players and to take confidence away from our rivals as they go through their offensive sets.

If you think that your zone defense can succeed in troubling your rivals, you must not change your zone defense after the first shot made by your rival. Be sure to give your team the time necessary to understand how the opponent moves so your team can make the right defensive countermoves.

**WHEN TO CHANGE THE ZONE DEFENSE**

We change our defensive setup when certain things happen during the course of the game: When we allow too many offensive rebounds or too many penetrations; when the offense attacks and effectively uses the “inside/outside” play; and when there is not enough communication or confidence on defense.

**2-1-2 ZONE DEFENSE**

To follow are the features of our defense. Our defense is divided in three sections:

- **First line:** generally occupied by the playmaker and the shooting guard; they are responsible for the external frontcourt and the high post.
Second line: occupied by the wings; they are responsible for the side areas near the baseline. They also have to help in the painted area and defend in the low post.

Middle: Our center is responsible for the painted area (diagr. 1).

I will now review all of the positions and the players’ movements when they are defending on the ball, and far from the ball. I will also describe some drills to make the defensive movements more automatic.

We generally use drills to improve the collaboration between the defensive lines, simulating possible game situations whenever possible.

In all of these drills, it’s critical to emphasize the use of the voice to call out ball position and movement, and to make sure that the players’ make good use of their arms to hold their position and make it
difficult for the offense to pass from one part of the court to another.

**DRILLS**

1. **First Line Communication**
   The two players of the first line defend against the offense overloaded with three players set on the perimeter. With the ball on the side, the players of the first line have to “push” the offense near the baseline (diagr. 2).

2. **Collaboration Between the First and the Second line**
   The ball goes from an external player to another and the defenders have to move themselves together. This automatic “help and recover” system with the second line defender is very important. The second line defender on the strong side must help when the wing receives the ball, and continue to help until his teammate has recovered.
   The help must succeed in preventing an easy shot, in maintaining the position against the one-on-one play of the wing, pushing him near the central lane (where the defense helps better).
   When the defender notes that his teammate on the first line has successfully recovered, he can move back to defend his original spot.
   I don’t recommend making a direct move to the starting position, but I suggest that the player makes a “banana cut,” which will help prevent penetration into the middle.
   The fundamental thing, as always, is for players to communicate and let each other know when they are back in their starting position (diagr. 3).

3. **Collaboration Between the First Line and the Middle**
   The first line defenders have to keep the ball from getting to the high post. I prefer (but I don’t demand that the players do this) that the defender stays open, up towards the ball so he can occupy more space and recover more quickly. He has to try to keep from being boxed out by screens for the shooter that are set by the post on the weak side.

   When the high post receives the ball, the first line defenders don’t have to defend him anymore. The defender in the middle will defend against him.
   The first defenders will not guard the ball, but they will guard the shooters on the perimeter and take care of all cuts near the basket that are made by external players (diagr. 4).

4. **Collaboration Between the Second Line and the Middle**
   We must not allow passes to offensive low post, trying always to anticipate them. It’s also important the mechanism to defend in the corner with the man in the middle, who anticipates the low post at three-quarter, giving his back to the midcourt line. If the low post sets himself in a middle-post position, I recommend that the defender anticipates the offensive player at three-quarter, giving his back to the baseline (diagr. 5).
5. “Help-and-Recover” Drill

I try to practice against some of the situations that we often find ourselves in when we use the zone defense. For example, when the offense is overloaded, the second line defender must help by leaving an offensive player open in the corner. In this case, it’s important to recover to avoid a three-point shot from the player on the wing; we must occupy the proper space to succeed in defending against a one-on-two situation in the best possible way.

As we have already seen, we allow the possible penetration near the central lane and, at the same time, we go to defend on the passing line toward the corner. Doing this, we try to avoid an easy pass to the offensive player, who is now open in the corner (diagr. 6).

Another common situation occurs when the ball is passed in the corner, after the pass is made, the player then cuts in the middle. Who receives the ball then replaces, dribbling, the teammate who has passed him the ball. In this situation, the communication between the defenders is essential; the defender who guards the man with the ball set in the corner remains with him until the first line defender tells him to go back to defend in his proper area. At this point, the first line defender will guard the player with the ball (diagr. 7).

After having practiced against some of the most common game situations, let the defense play against an overloaded offense. This is a very useful exercise because it will prepare the team for situations that they will see during the game, when the offense is overloaded.

Playing against an overloaded offensive is funny and competitive; I make great use of it during training camp workouts. In the 6-on-5 drill, keep the offense set in precise positions (without trying to score). The defense has one less player and the offense can move itself using several cuts (diagr. 8 and 9). During 5-on-5 drills, we closely examine defensive situations that help us keep the ball from getting to the high or low post (very dangerous positions because they create advantages for the offense), and try to learn how to behave if the offense receives the ball in these positions.

If the ball goes in the high or low post, I ask the defenders far from the ball to match themselves with their nearest rival; every time the ball goes in the high or low post, our defense becomes a man-to-man defense.

It’s not possible to introduce this idea when you build your defense, but you can do it afterwards (diagr. 10, 11 and 12).

6. Avoid the Catch on the Cuts

We spend a lot of time working against cuts. Our aim is to avoid easy catches on the cuts in the painted area (diagr. 13). Many teams use ball-screens to attack the zone defenses and when you have high screens on the ball, here is what your players must do:

- The defender on the ball must avoid the penetration from the central lane (rule for the first line defenders).
- If the player with the ball uses the screen successfully, the defender on the ball follows him to avoid an easy basket.
- The defender in the middle must defend against penetrations, while his first line teammate must never defend on the ball. He has to worry about what might happen on the weak side (diagr. 14).

We use many drills that emphasize boxing out. Rebounding is one of the potential weak points with a zone defense and players have to become conditioned to get in position right away after a shot is taken so they can get the rebound. In addition to this, we work a lot in running into the fastbreak after the rebound. Using the zone defense, we succeed in creating many easy fastbreak opportunities, because our rivals (after having attacked a zone defense) are not able to quickly match themselves with us during their defensive transition (diagr. 15).

SUMMARY

Every zone defense can be shaped to fit the particular talents of your team; find the one that you think is best. If you are not sure about teaching a specific type of zone defense, because you think that zone defense doesn’t fit with your teams’ technical skills, then surely that zone defense won’t be effective.