

MORE THAN A DEFENSE, IT'S A 'PACK' MENTALITY

# BASKETBALL COACH WEEKLY

Learn • Train • Develop • Enjoy

## SPECIAL REPORT

# HOW TO COACH THE PACK LINE DEFENSE

ELIMINATE DRIBBLE PENETRATION,  
CONTEST EVERYTHING

**BOOST  
COMMUNICATION,  
CLOSEOUTS**

**PROTECT  
THE LANE**  
DENY EASY SHOTS  
AT THE RIM

**IS THE PACK  
LINE FOR YOU?**

**KNOW THE 7  
PACK-LINE 'NOS'**

✓ THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA LED THE NATION IN REGULAR-SEASON SCORING DEFENSE LAST YEAR USING THE PACK LINE



DRILLS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR PACK LINE DEFENSE

# Pack A Defensive Punch



Pack Line Defense - Basketball Coach Weekly special report

**Basketball Coach Weekly**  
9325 SW Iowa Drive  
Tualatin, OR 97062

**Editor-in-chief**  
Michael Austin  
michael.austin@basketballcoachweekly.com

**Contributors**  
Jim Boone, Dan Munson,  
Chris Mack

**Illustrations**  
Mike Renwick

**Pictures**  
Action Images

**Production**  
Matt Boulton, Julie Lifton

**Publisher**  
Kevin Barrow  
kevin.barrow@greenstarmedia.net

**Customer Services**  
Duncan Heard  
duncanh@basketballcoachweekly.com

**Managing Director**  
Andrew Griffiths

To advertise contact  
Elisabeth Cammell at  
advertising@basketballcoachweekly.com



(c) Green Star Media Ltd.  
All rights reserved.

Click [here](#) to read the full disclaimer.

To subscribe to Basketball Coach Weekly please contact Duncan Heard at Green Star Media Ltd, Meadow View, Tannery Lane, Bramley, Guildford GU5 0AB, UK.

You can contact Duncan via Skype at basketballcoachweekly or via email at duncanh@basketballcoachweekly.com

## Sideline Stories

Get back in transition. Guard the ball. When off the ball, be in position to help on penetration by staying in the pack. Contest every shot. Do not allow any easy baskets. There's the Pack Line Defense in a nutshell.

Of course, it's so much more than that. While doing a deep-dive into this style of play, I've found coaches who employ the Pack Line see it as more of a program's culture rather than a defensive philosophy.

Pack Line teams are tenacious. They care more about the unit rather than the individual player. They are dedicated to defending as a pack and are not selfish enough to take chances, which could endanger the defense. It's a "pack" mentality.

The Pack Line starts with getting back in transition and slowing the ball. "We often send two guys back to stop penetration as we place a huge emphasis on not giving up easy baskets in transition. You must get your defense set," says Dan Munson, head boys coach at Catholic Central High School (Portland, Ore.), who is 63-22 in three years at the helm of the Rams and a huge believer in the Pack Line.

**"Pack Line teams are tenacious. They care more about the unit than the individual ..."**

Jim Boone, who has won 467 games in 28 years on the Delta State University (Miss.) bench says after stopping transition offense, the Pack forms by having one defender guarding the ball while the other four defenders, "are already positioned in help."

The "help" is located within an arc inside the 3-point line roughly 16 to 17 feet from the basket. "We simply want to force our opponent into contested two-point shots. We cannot prevent the offense from getting shots but we can influence the type of shot they get."

What I love about the Pack Line at your level is it eliminates what today's player



Delta State's (Miss.) Jim Boone uses the Pack Line and has won 467 games in 28 years

wants to do — dribble hard and attack the rim. The Pack takes away that option. Now, you have offensive players forced to go to their second or third scoring options, and that gives you an advantage on defense.

Plus, let's face it, you typically aren't seeing players who routinely can drill 3-pointers throughout the course of a game. If the Pack Line has a weakness, it is outside shooters being free from long range. But, you'd rather see a team

launch low-percentage jumpers than score high-percentage layups at the rim.

Look at the following pages and see if this defensive style of play is right for your team. Build a pack mentality and don't allow the opposition to dictate what it wants to do.



Michael Austin  
Editor-in-chief

### In this report...

#### 3 IS THE PACK LINE RIGHT FOR YOU?

Ask these 4 questions then understand the 7 NOs of the Pack Line

#### 4 BEAT MORE ATHLETIC TEAMS

The Pack Line eliminates dribble penetration and keeps talented post players off the block

#### 5 GUARD THE WING

The on-ball defender's goal is to keep the defender in front of him but help defense is available

#### 6 STOP DRIBBLE PENETRATION

Help defenders must be ready to stop dribble penetration, even when it occurs near the baseline

#### 7 PACK 'EM IN!

The Pack Line's principles can be applied to most defensive philosophies

#### 8 2-ON-1 RETREAT & CLOSEOUT

Have players do more than jump to a ball handler when closing out — they must shift, move and challenge

#### 9 4-ON-4 CHANGE DRILL REQUIRES CHATTER

Great defenders communicate — force players to do so by frantically changing their drill responsibilities

#### 10 PROTECT THE POST

Many Pack Line basics begin with perimeter defense but concentrate on the post as well

#### 11 PUSH OUT OF POST BOX

Teach post defenders the proper positioning and movements to successfully guard the block

#### 12 'WALL UP' & WIN

Instruct players how to show the referees their hands but use the hips to force offensive players off the block



Direct drives to the hoop are not allowed when defending with the Pack Line — all help defenders must step up



# Is The Pack Line Right For You?

Ask these 4 questions then understand the 7 NOs of the Pack Line before jumping into it

It's not easy to change course when it comes to your overall defensive philosophy. But ask yourself these four questions about your current defensive plan:

1. Can you beat the best teams in your league or conference with your defense?
2. Can you win on the road?
3. Does your defense improve as the season progresses?
4. Will your defense allow you to advance in postseason play?

Based on my experience, the Pack Line allows you to do all these things. It's not simply a philosophy but a mindset you must develop. It's not easy ... but neither is beating the best teams, winning on the road, improving throughout the season or advancing in the postseason.

If you make the move to the Pack Line,

start by knowing your NOs. There are seven of them and they are the foundation for this defense's success.

1. **No Paint.** It's simple. The ball doesn't enter the painted area (the lane) by pass or dribble. This means your help defense has to be stellar and convincing your players in selling out to adhere to this rule.
2. **No Baseline.** Defend the baseline or you allow the court to open for the offense and the paint becomes at risk to cutters.
3. **No Rhythm Shots.** Challenge everything. Close out hard under control with a hand up. Make every jump shot a contested one.
4. **No Direct Drives.** Defenders need to slide, move, hustle and sprint if necessary to keep a dribbling ball handler from having a direct path to the rim.
5. **No Fast Break Layups.** Get back in transition. If your players can't do this, then the Pack Line isn't going to work. Hustle is critical. As mentioned, the Pack Line is a mentality — play hard or don't play it. If you have to foul, so be it but do not allow an easy transition layup.
6. **No Second Shots.** Get a body on everyone. When you are trying to beat the best teams in your league or move on in the postseason, you can't give talented teams more chances to score.
7. **No Unnecessary Fouls.** Aggressive defense doesn't mean fouling. Teach how to slide, disrupt, distract and confuse opponents without having to reach, slap or push. Good teams typically possess good free throw shooters and you don't want to give up easy, uncontested opportunities to score points against you.

**Words & activities by:**  
Jim Boone,  
head men's  
coach, Delta  
State University,  
Cleveland, Miss.

There are no easy shots at the rim against a Pack-Line Defense



# Beat More Athletic Teams

The Pack Line Defense eliminates dribble penetration and keeps talented post players off the block - use it when you are at a talent or athletic disadvantage

The best men's basketball Division I defense in 2013-14 belonged to the University of Virginia. It guided the Cavaliers to the ACC regular season title (its first outright title since 1981) and, as of early March, the Cavaliers led the nation in points allowed per game by a wide margin (54.8 points with the second-best team, Clemson, allowing 56.8).

The key to Virginia's defensive prowess? The Pack Line Defense. It's a philosophy head coach Tony Bennett has used throughout his career, as did his father, Dick, during his successful coaching days (UW-Green Bay, University of Wisconsin and Washington State).

It all starts with transition defense. Pack Line coaches must convince their players to sprint back on defense after a missed shot. If the offense pushes the ball and the pack doesn't set up in time, the defense is rendered useless.

Once players realize the critical importance of transition defense, then the half-court Pack Line concept is simple to understand (although more difficult to execute): create chaos and confusion with relentless on-ball pressure knowing help defense always is available as the other four defenders are inside the "pack" - a space extended from the basket to 17 feet on the perimeter.

For less-athletic teams, this type of defense works as it eliminates dribble penetration by talented point guards. So many successful offenses revolve around a ball handler penetrating deep into a defense, which creates in-close scoring chances and opens the perimeter for uncontested shots.

The Pack Line offers help defense at every turn. With four players stationed within 17 feet of the hoop, higher-percentage shots aren't as available to

the offense. Plus, it lessens the damage inflicted by a talented post player as you have multiple defenders in close proximity to double-team if necessary. The main weakness is it allows some open perimeter shots. But, it's a trade-off you have to make in better defending dribble penetration and post play.

The following two pages provide the basics of how the Pack Line works (the red line inside the 3-point line is the pack line, some coaches tape this line on the practice floor so players see the physical barrier and where they need to be). Just like with most defensive concepts, when executed at the collegiate level, there are many more layers, responsibilities and techniques needed to be successful. But, for youth and high school coaches looking to slow down more athletic opponents, the Pack Line Defense basics are a great place to start.

**Words by:**  
Michael Austin



# Guard The Wing

The on-ball defender's goal is to keep the defender in front of him but help defense is available if dribble penetration occurs

## SET UP

The red curved line just inside and mirroring the 3-point line distinguishes the "pack" area. If a defender is not on the ball, then he is inside the pack. The boxed area is the "post" and the goal is to keep an offensive player from catching a pass with both feet in here [1].

## HOW TO PLAY

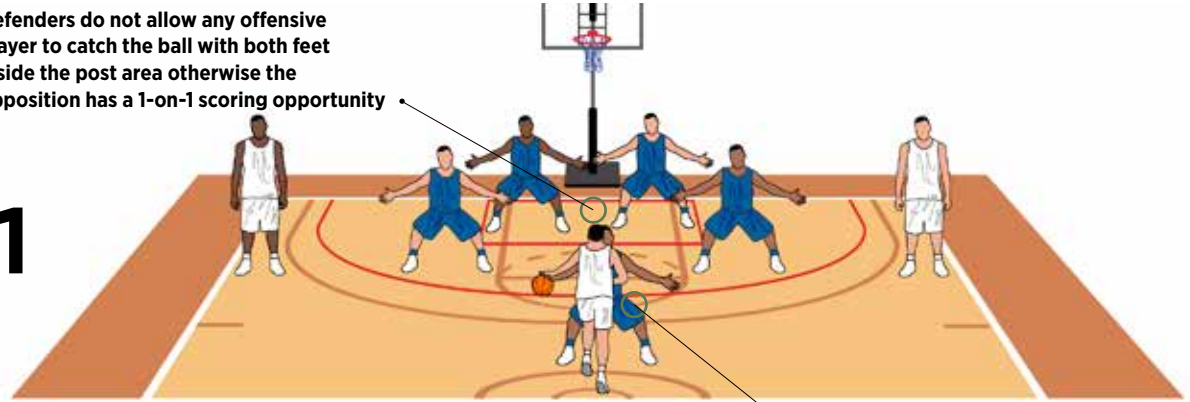
The on-ball defender plays tightly on the ball handler. The goal is to cause chaos and confusion for the ball handler with the knowledge that help defense is available if beaten. In this instance, the ball handler dribbles hard to the left with the on-ball defender trailing. The player at the top left of the pack comes out to stop the penetration as the on-ball defender sags back into the pack. The post defenders front their responsibilities if those offensive players are in the post area [2]. The pass is made to the wing, so the new on-ball defender jumps to the wing as the other defenders shift inside the pack [3].

## TECHNIQUE

If the ball handler picks up the dribble outside the pack line, then all defenders go into full-deney mode. Otherwise, they remain in the gap and available to provide help defense, which cuts off dribble-drive opportunities and cuts down high-percentage shots.

Defenders do not allow any offensive player to catch the ball with both feet inside the post area otherwise the opposition has a 1-on-1 scoring opportunity

1



The on-ball defender tightly guards the ball handler with all other defenders inside the pack area (about 17 feet and in from the basket)

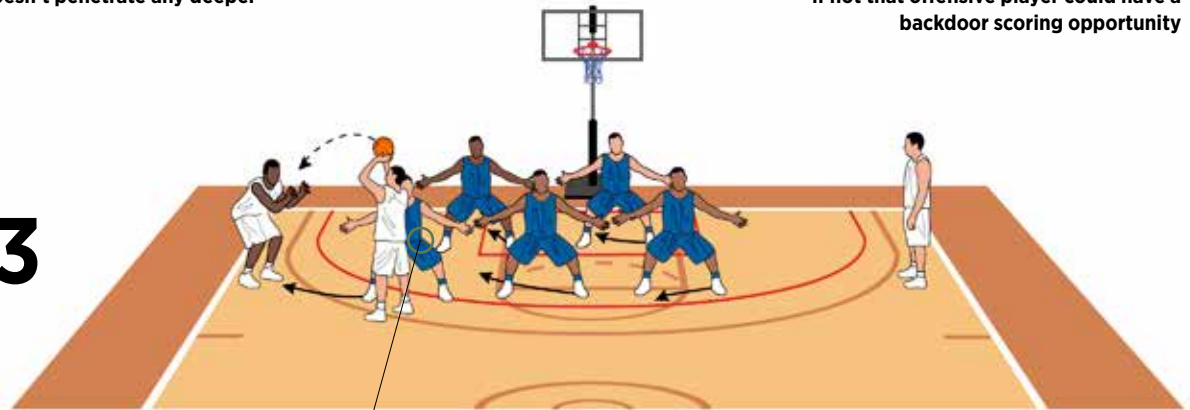
2



This defender steps outside the pack and provides help defense so the ball doesn't penetrate any deeper

The weak-side defender shifts into the gap but keeps an eye on the weak-side wing - if not that offensive player could have a backdoor scoring opportunity

3



After stopping the dribble penetration, this wing defender jumps to cover the ball when passed to the wing



# Stop Dribble Penetration

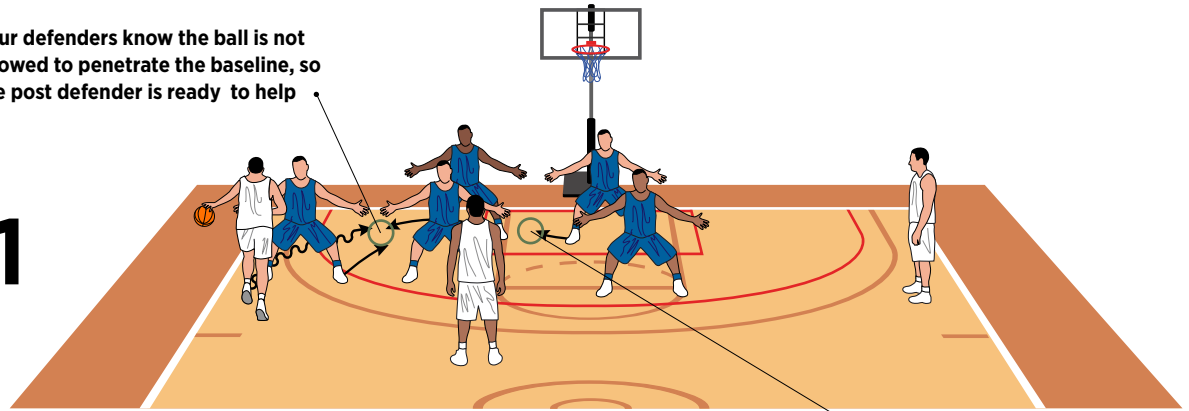
Help defenders must be ready to stop dribble penetration, even when it occurs near the baseline, then back toward the top

## SET UP

The ball is located on the wing with the on-ball defender tightly guarding. The post defenders front their responsibilities if those offensive players are inside the box. The weak-side wing defender cannot lose track of the weak-side offensive player. If he does, a backdoor cut and easy score becomes possible.

Your defenders know the ball is not allowed to penetrate the baseline, so the post defender is ready to help

1

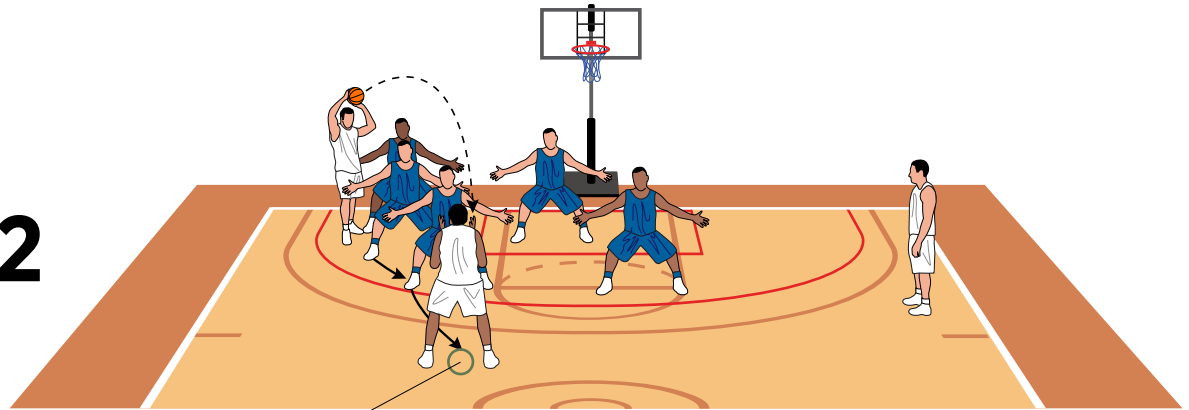


The weak-side post defender slides over and puts a body on the offensive player in this area

## HOW TO PLAY

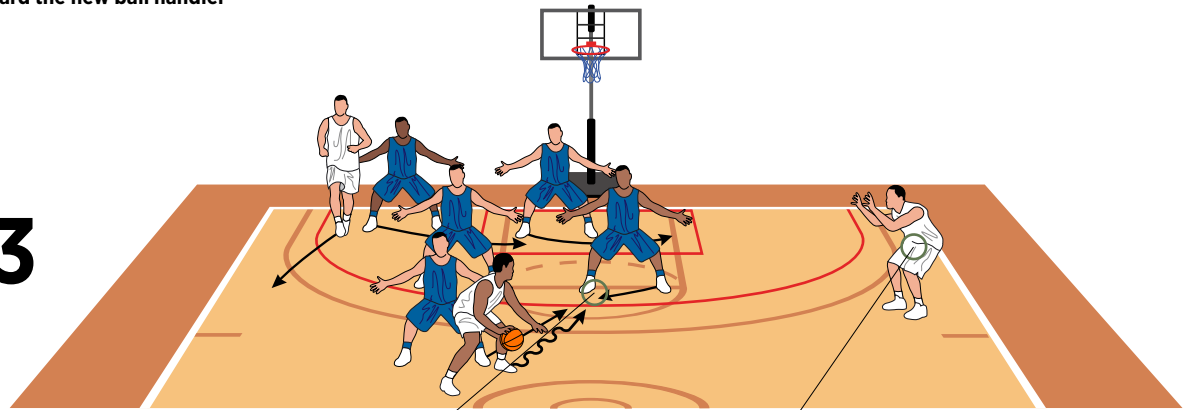
The ball handler drives toward the baseline and is met by a post defender. The weak-side post defender slides over to disrupt a possible post-entry pass [1]. The ball handler picks up the dribble and fires a pass back to the top. The top-left defender jumps outside the pack to guard the ball. The initial on-ball defender shifts to the left-top spot [2]. On the catch, the top offensive player sees an opening and tries to dribble into the middle of the defender. The ball handler is met by the top-right defender in the gap. The post defenders shift in front of their offensive responsibilities [3].

2



The defender closest to the ball jumps out of the pack to tightly guard the new ball handler

3



With a shifting defense, the offense looks to penetrate the middle so this defender slides over and stops the ball handler

Here is the weakness - this player is open on the wing - the new on-ball defender must hustle to close out on this shot

Player movement → Ball movement - - - → Dribble ~~~~~ → Shot →

Delta State's Jim Boone is a coaching mastermind who employs the Pack Line Defense to limit opponents' high-percentage shots



# Pack 'Em In!

The Pack Line Defense suffocates offenses with on-ball pressure and tremendous help, its principles can be used in most defensive philosophies

**W**e employ the Pack Line Defense at Delta State University. We believe that our system of defensive play will significantly lower our opponent's field goal percentage, improve our rebounding and reduce the offense's ability to score easy baskets or to be fouled.

The Pack Line Defense is not just an X's and O's proposition, it is a culture and a way of thinking. It is a mindset. Everything we do, every decision we make, who plays and who we recruit, is made with how it affects our defensive play.

The essence of the Pack Line Defense is simply one defender guarding the ball, while the other four defenders are "already positioned in help." We simply want to force our opponent into contested two-point shots.

There are three important keys to teaching and understanding the Pack Line Defense.

1. Pressure the ball
2. Non-ball defenders must be positioned so they are already in help
3. We cannot prevent the offense from getting shots but we can influence the type of shot they get.

There are five main areas of daily maintenance when focusing on the Pack Line: conversion, low-post defense, pressure on the ball, closeouts and rebounding.

*Editor's Notes:*

- Jim Boone has won 467 games in 28 seasons on the bench, including stops at California (Pa.), Robert Morris, Eastern Michigan, Tusculum, West Virginia Wesleyan and now Delta State.
- Last season Delta State posted a mark of 26-7 and advanced to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Division II Men's Basketball Tournament.
- Last season Delta State only allowed

65.8 points per game with its Pack Line Defense, which was good for 14th overall in Division II men's basketball. The squad also finished ninth overall in rebounding margin with a +8.6 in the category.

- Despite playing such an intense style of defense, Delta State only committed 15.2 fouls per game in 2013-14, which placed the team ninth in all of Division II men's basketball.
- "Coach Boone has established himself in the coaching community as one of the nation's premier teachers. I have tremendous respect for Coach Boone. He is an outstanding basketball coach, and his basketball programs are synonymous with excellence." - Herb Sendek, Arizona State University (as provided by Delta State's athletic department).

**Words & activities by:** Jim Boone, head men's coach, Delta State University, Cleveland, Miss.



# 2-On-1 Retreat & Closeout

Closing out is more than just jumping to a ball handler, it requires shifting and moving with the ball and challenging shots

## WHY USE IT

Many defenders understand the concept of guarding the ball but they relax a bit when it is passed away - this drill forces them to move throughout an offensive progression.

## SET UP

A coach is at the top of the set with a ball. The offensive player is on the wing outside the 3-point line while the defender starts at the elbow.

## HOW TO PLAY

The defender starts in a slightly closed stance and when the ball is passed to the wing, the defender closes out and seeks leverage [1]. The offensive player passes back to the top and the defender jumps back into the pack (to the elbow), then to the ball with active feet. Do the wing pass and return pass twice [2]. On the second pass back to the top, the coach drives the ball toward the wing as the offensive player flares to the corner. The defender attempts to stop the ball with the near arm and leg, then closes out to contest the shot vertically [3].

## TECHNIQUE

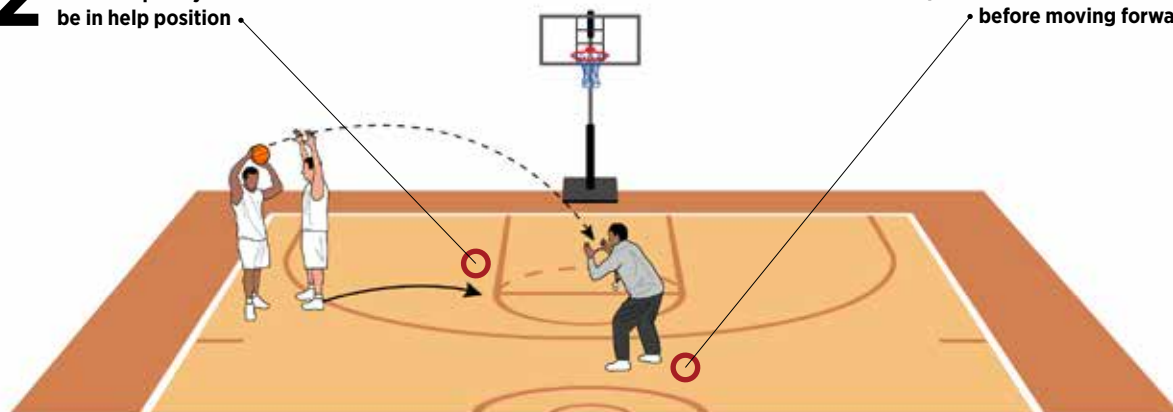
The defender does not cheat high before the pass back to the top. He or she must jump back into the pack as this is the positioning required to defend the new ball handler in the Pack Line.

**1** Start in a slightly closed stance at the elbow with the ball at the top - this simulates being prepared for a dribble drive but ready to guard the wing



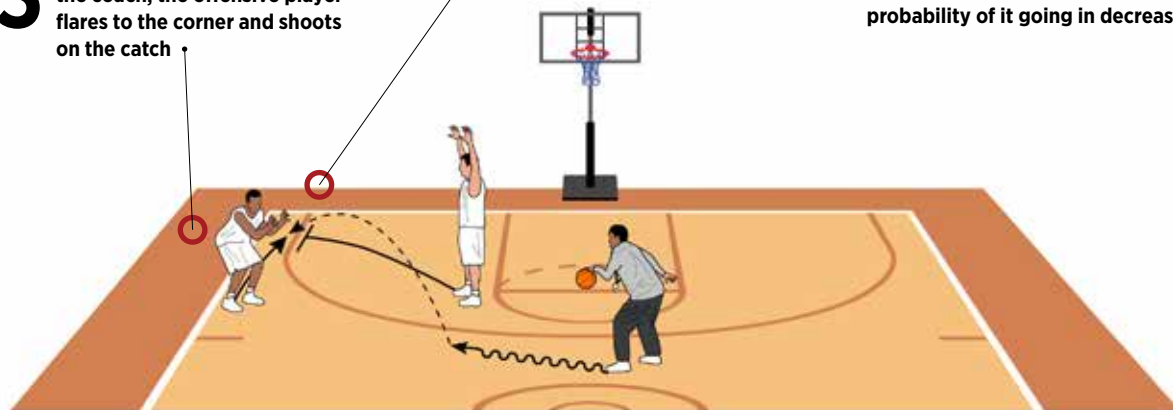
**2** On the pass back the defender retreats quickly to the elbow to be in help position

Complete the pass to the wing and the pass back to the coach twice before moving forward



**3** On the second pass back to the coach, the offensive player flares to the corner and shoots on the catch

The defender doesn't expect to block the shot but does want to influence it so the probability of it going in decreases



Player movement →

Ball movement - - - →

Dribble ~~~~~ →

Shot →



# 4-On-4 Change Drill Requires Chatter

Great defenders talk to each other - force players to communicate by frantically changing responsibilities in the middle of the drill

## WHY USE IT

Not everyone on your team is inclined to communicate loudly but it is required to be a disruptive, cohesive defensive team. Success in this drill comes from talking and shifting as player responsibilities shift.

## SET UP

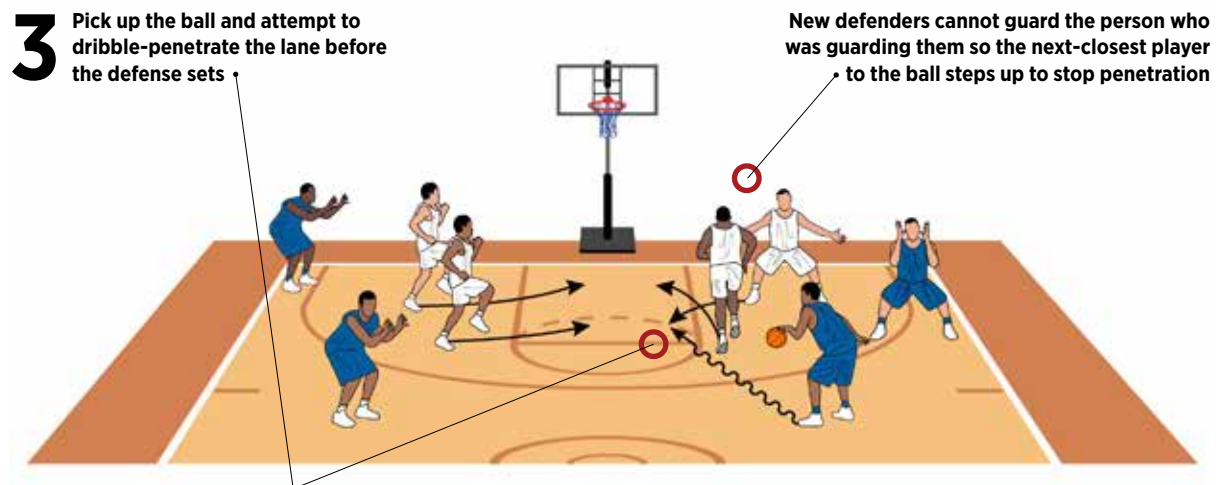
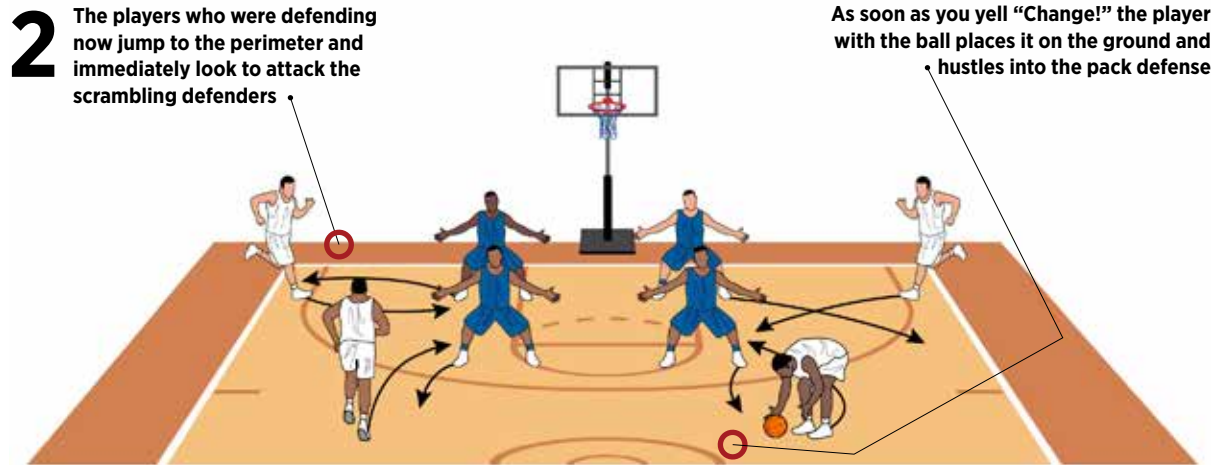
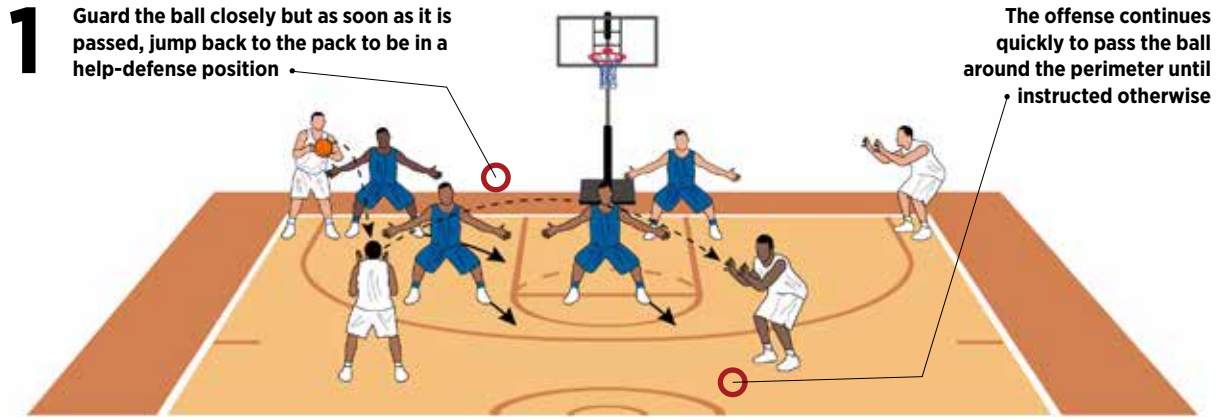
Start in a traditional shell drill look (4-on-4). The offense passes the ball around the perimeter.

## HOW TO PLAY

As the offense passes, defenders explode out of the pack to guard the ball. When the ball is passed, the previous on-ball defender jumps back into the pack [1]. With no warning, yell "Change!" This indicates for the teams to switch roles. The ball handler places the ball on the ground and the offensive players (white jerseys) shift into a pack defense while the defenders (blue jerseys) jump to the perimeter and play on offense [2]. The new offense looks to attack and the new defenders are not allowed to guard who previously was guarding them. The closest defender tries to stop the ball while the other three get to the paint [3].

## TECHNIQUE

Defenders have to talk on the change or the offense scores easily. The first goal is to stop the ball and all defenders know not to allow any layups.



On a post catch, the defender moves from a three-quarter high to a jump-behind post position



# Protect The Post

So much of the initial Pack Line fundamentals focus on the perimeter but pay particular attention to post play so you don't get burned for easy buckets

**Editor's Note:** Chris Mack has discussed his Pack Line Defense at various coaching clinics and the following text and drills are based off those presentations and notes.

Chris Mack's Xavier teams play with purpose. Everyone knows what a Musketeers' squad brings to the table — tenacious defense.

Mack believes in the Pack Line and engraining this philosophy into his players' mentalities. Xavier has won 111 games during Mack's five years as head coach, including two Atlantic 10 regular season titles and two trips to the NCAA Tournament Sweet 16.

Watch Xavier play defense. It's one of my favorite things to do when scouting styles to include in *Basketball Coach Weekly*. All players are aggressive. They pressure the ball and know where to be off the ball.

And while so much of the Pack Line

discussion revolves around defending the ball on the perimeter so it doesn't enter the lane, Mack's teams do a tremendous job pushing post players away from the hoop.

Mack suggests coaches tape down a Post Box every day at practice. This box (shown in both sets of drills on the following pages) is a rectangle situated a foot and a half outside the lane on each side and stretching up to the second lane-line hashmark.

When guarding offensive post players, Mack wants his defenders to be positioned three-quarters on the high side with the outside arm extended to cut down on the post passing lane. He then wants the inside arm in the back of the offensive post player. Use a clenched fist to strengthen the arm bar and push players off the block.

Mack's post-defense "Golden Rule" is never to give up post feeds from the

top as the defender always needs to be "on the line, up the line" when the ball is positioned at the top of the set.

On a post catch, the defender "pops back" going from the three-quarters on the high side to moving behind the ball handler while keeping a boxer's stance.

When the offensive post makes a move, the defender "walls up," which means showing hands to the referee while using the hips to push the defender out of position. And, when the shot goes up, the defender does not leave his or her feet. Mack says being in the air encourages referees to blow the whistle and picking up a foul is not worth the risk of possibly blocking the shot.

The drills on the following two pages cover these movements and prepare your players to guard the post. Focus on defending the post, so your players know the Pack Line is about more than just guarding the perimeter.

## Words by:

Michael Austin

## Drills by:

Chris Mack, head men's coach, Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio



# Push Out Of Post Box

Offensive post players want to settle in on the block — your defenders play three-quarters on the high side and use an arm bar to keep this from happening

## WHY USE IT

A Pack Line Defense struggles if the offense routinely gains deep post position near the hoop. Work on the proper technique and execution so defenders know how to guard on the block.

## SET UP

Tape off the Post Box on the floor, which is one and a half feet off the lane on both sides running up to the second hashmark. Three perimeter players are aligned outside the 3-point line. Two players are on the block — one offense and one defense.

## HOW TO PLAY

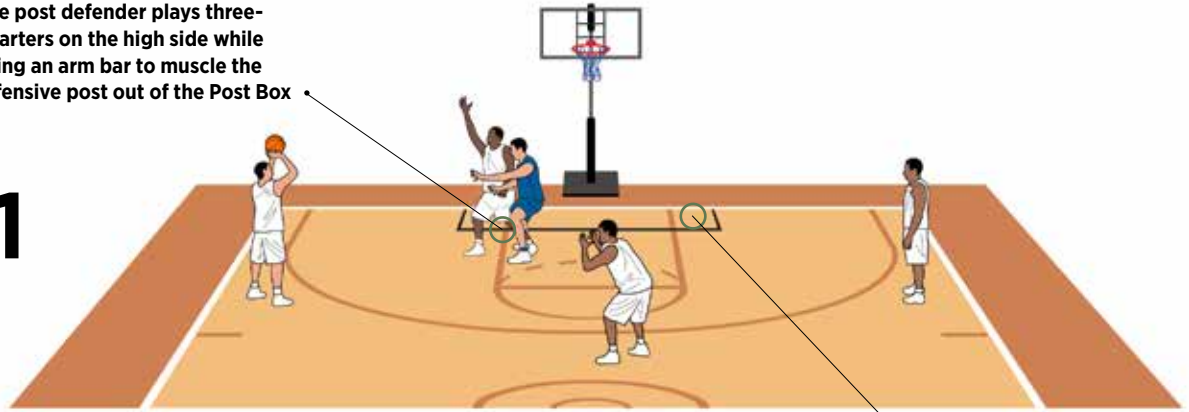
The ball is on the wing. The offensive post tries to get position inside the box while the post defender plays three-quarters on the high side and uses an arm bar to force a catch outside the box [1]. On the pass from the wing to the top, the post defender plays “on the line, up the line” as the offensive post tries to leg whip and seal [2]. On the pass to the opposite wing, the defender uses an arm bar and comes to three-quarter on the high side to keep the offensive post out of the box [3].

## TECHNIQUE

If the post defender comes too high on the cut, he or she is susceptible to a lob pass. Stress using the hips to push the offensive player away from the hoop.

The post defender plays three-quarters on the high side while using an arm bar to muscle the offensive post out of the Post Box

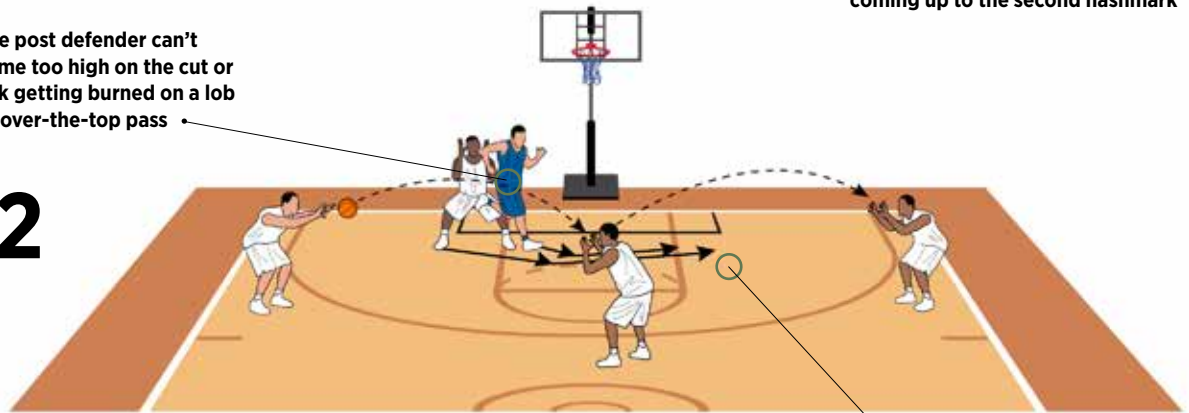
1



Tape off the Post Box every practice — it's one and a half feet outside the lane on each side coming up to the second hashmark

The post defender can't come too high on the cut or risk getting burned on a lob or over-the-top pass

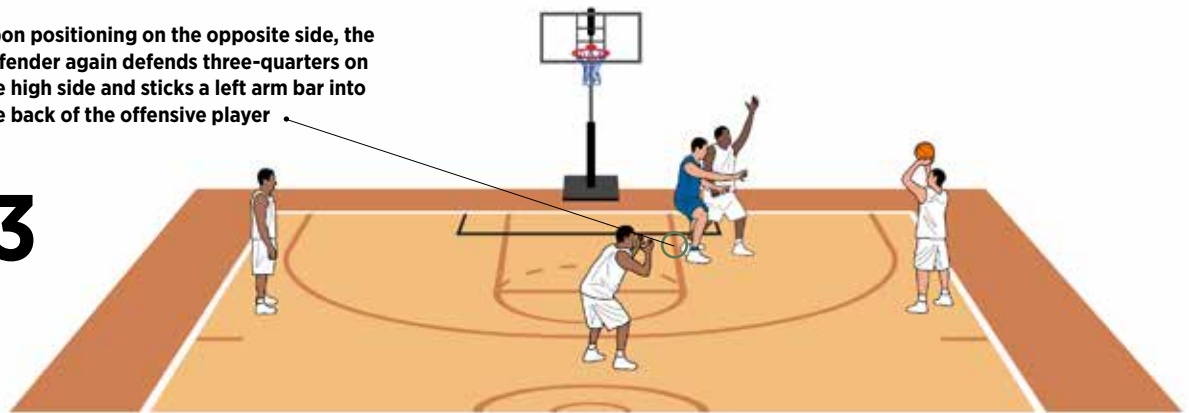
2



The offensive post uses a leg whip and tries to seal the defender to gain position

Upon positioning on the opposite side, the defender again defends three-quarters on the high side and sticks a left arm bar into the back of the offensive player

3





# 'Wall Up' & Win

Referees call fouls when a player's hands are in an offensive player's space, keep them high and walk through the the post with the hips

## WHY USE IT

Even when giving up an offensive rebound, Pack Line defenders have an opportunity to make it difficult for the offense to score. Practice the "Wall Up" skill to gain control in close.

## SET UP

The Post Box is taped off. Place two offensive rebounders in the box with a defender split between them but a step outside the box. You or another coach has a ball just inside the free-throw line ready to shoot.

## HOW TO PLAY

Shoot the ball off the backboard slightly to the left so it bounces to the left side of the rim. The defender moves into the box trying to gain position [1]. The offensive rebounder grabs the ball. The defender moves into "Wall Out" mode by showing hands to the referee while bodying the opponent with the hips. The ball handler makes a few pivots but does not shoot, then passes back to you [2]. Shoot to the right side and have the defensive rebounder go through the same motion [3].

## TECHNIQUE

The defender doesn't leave his or her feet. After running through several times, have the defender try to take a charge.

The defensive rebounder battles the offensive rebounder as the ball bounces off the rim with both players in the Post Box

1



Once the offensive rebounder secures the ball, the defender uses a "Wall Up" technique by showing hands to the ref while pushing the ball handler out of the box by using the hips

2



The offensive player tries to get into shooting position by utilizing a few different pivots against the defender

3



The defender quickly moves back into position as the coach shoots quickly to the right, setting up the other offensive rebounder to grab the ball

