Basketball Defense - the Pack Line Defense (Sagging Man-to-Man)

The pack-line defense is a variation of man-to-man defense developed by Dick Bennett for the Washington State University Cougars. Something similar has been used by Tom Izzo at Michigan State and also Sean Miller of Xavier University.
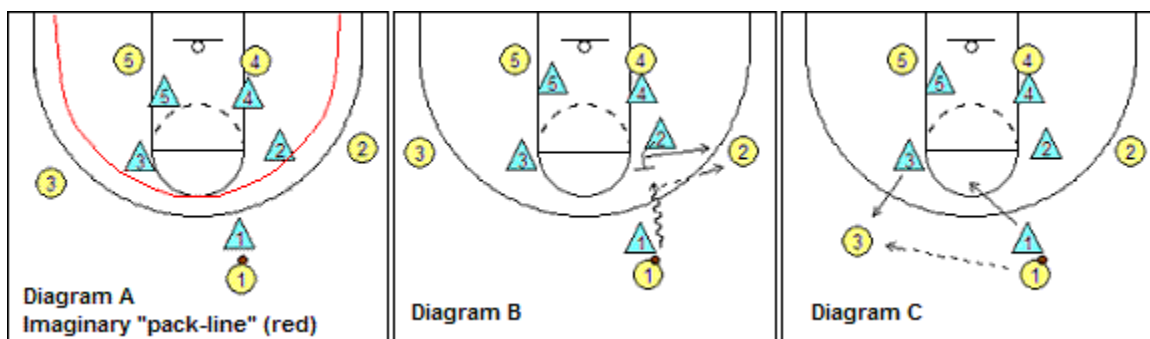
First understand the basic tenets of pressure man-to-man defense. There is probably no reason to use the pack line defense if you have excellent, quick athletes who are good defenders... just keep the intense pressure on, using the standard pressure man-to-man defense. On the other hand, the pack line defense will perhaps help less talented teams "hang in there" with better teams, and can also help a team having difficulty preventing point guard dribble-penetration.

The "pack line"

The pack line man-to-man defense is also called a "sagging" man-to-man defense. The idea is to clog the inside, protect the paint, and prevent dribble-penetration. Instead of defenders (whose man is one pass away) playing on the line in denial, they will sag back inside the imaginary "pack line". The pack line is an imaginary line two feet inside the 3-point arc (see diagram A). You will usually have one defender pressuring the ball outside, and the other four defenders inside the pack line. This allows the pass on the perimeter, but closes down the gaps and prevents dribble-penetration. The prime goal, as in any defense, is to stop the ball.

Pressure the ball

When the ball is on the perimeter, tight, harassing pressure should be applied by the defender. He/she must stop the ball, make the ball-handler uncomfortable, and make it difficult for the ball-handler to see the floor. The on-ball defender does his/her best to contain and pressure the ball, but if he/she is beaten, the pack line gapping defenders are there to give help and stop the ball. So the on-ball defender can have some confidence and trust that his teammates will be there to help, even if the opponent is a little quicker.

Diagram A
Imaginary "pack-line" (red)

Diagram B

Diagram C

Stopping the gaps

It's pretty hard to do all three things... deny, help and recover. In the pack line defense, gapping defenders only have to help and recover, and it is easier because the defender is already in position to give help. Gapping defenders are inside the pack line in a "ball-you-man" position, and must re-position themselves as the ball and the offensive players move. There is one instance wherein all players go into complete deny, and that is when there is a dead ball situation (the ball-handler has used up his/her dribble). Everyone will yell, "dead, dead, dead" and deny the next pass, looking for the 5-second call.

Notice in diagram B above that X1 is pressuring the ball, while the remaining four defenders are inside the pack line. As O1 attempts to dribble-penetrate, the X2 defender slides in to help stop the
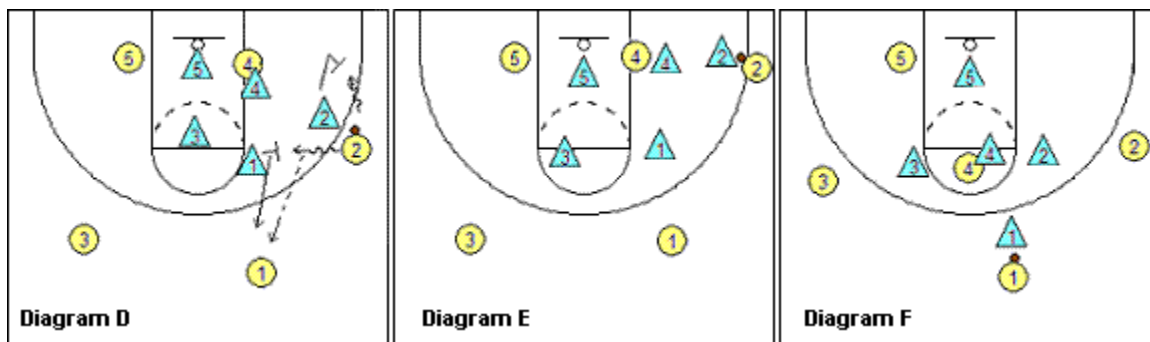
dribble, but then immediately recovers to his own man O2, when the pass is dished back out to O2. In stopping the seams (gaps), the idea is that X2 will fake a trap on the ball just to stop the dribble, but instead of actually trapping, once the ball is stopped, will immediately recover to his man (assuming the pass goes there). Importantly, a gapping defender should always be able to see his own man and never turn his back to his man. Otherwise, his man could flare cut or back-cut uncontested.

Close-out with "high hands"
In diagram C above, the ball is passed to O3. O1 immediately drops back inside the pack line. X3 quickly closes-out and applies pressure on the ball (O3). Defenders should close-out with hands high in order to contest the outside shot, and then assume the usual defensive stance when the ball is put on the floor, or the initial shot is stopped. Yes, it is possible that the offensive player may attempt to dribble around the closing defender, but then we have the seams stopped with our other four defenders. Also, when closing out, this does not mean "flying" or leaping at the ball. The defender must keep his feet on the floor and contain the ball. Once the defender has closed-out on the ball, he/she maintains good pressure on the ball.

Deny baseline
Another thing that is different from standard pressure man-to-man defense is that in the pack line defense, the ball is not forced to the baseline, but rather the baseline is denied. The ball is not actually forced to the middle... it's just that the baseline is denied. In diagram D, X2 overplays to prevent the ball from being dribbled baseline. If O2 dribbles into the top gap, X1 will help stop the seam. As the ball is passed out to O1, X1 closes-out with high hands.

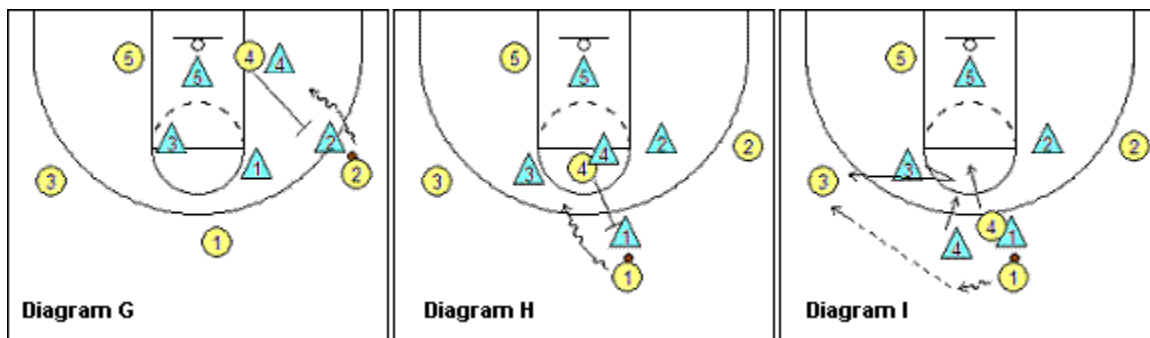

Diagram D   Diagram E   Diagram F

Post defense
In defending the low post, defenders should be full-fronting when the ball is at the top (diagram C), or in the corner (diagram E). When the ball is on the wing (diagram D), a 3/4 front from the top side is used by many coaches. This works with this defense because the wing defenders deny the baseline. If the ball does get into the post, you must decide whether you are going to play this with your post defender sliding between the ball and the basket and playing this 1-on-1, or whether you want to double-team with either the opposite post player, or a perimeter player. This may depend on your opponent... a strong post player, double-team the post. A weak post player and good outside shooters, play the post 1-on-1. Remember that denying and defending the low post has more to do with hard work, aggressiveness, determination, and being tough than technique.

In defending the high post, try to deny that pass as well by 1/2-fronting. The defender must be careful however, not to get pinned outside and get beaten by the lob pass. Notice in diagram F that the pack line defense tends to clog the high post fairly well due to the position of the gapping wing defenders.

Pick and roll screens
The pick and roll is fairly well-defended, as the paint area is clogged with defenders. In diagram G, there is a pick and roll on the wing. Diagrams H and I show a pick and roll with the high post player stepping out to screen and roll. X4 "shows" over the top of the screen to stop the ball and then recovers back to O4. Notice that X3 is in a position to help X4 in stopping O4 cutting inside off the screen. X3 then has to be able to recover to O3 if the pass goes there. Optionally, X2 (instead of X3) could give the initial help on O4 until X4 recovers. As in any defense, communication is key in dealing with screens.

Diagram G   Diagram H   Diagram I

In summary, the pack line defense will help a less-athletic team compete with a stronger, quicker team. And you still can use a full-court press, but then drop back into the half-court pack line defense. There are some disadvantages, however. If you play at a level where there is no shot clock, the offense can take as much time as they want, until they get the good shot, and you allow them to dictate a slower tempo. With the shot clock rule, as the offense gets deeper into the shot clock, there is more urgency to shoot, and the pack line defense is more effective here.

Also, if you are behind late in the game, the offense can "run the clock", unless you come out and start denying passes. So the pack line defense is a problem here. Now you are caught in a situation of having to play deny defense with more pressure on the outside, and this is often difficult to do when you are not used to playing that way. In fact, it is usually easier for a typical pressure-deny man-to-man defense to drop back and play the pack line defense, than vice-versa.

Some teams might want to use both... the usual man-to-man pressure defense (call it "Red"), and the pack line defense (call it "Blue"). Using the pack line defense can help a good man-to-man team that is having difficulty stopping a good point guard and dribble-penetration.
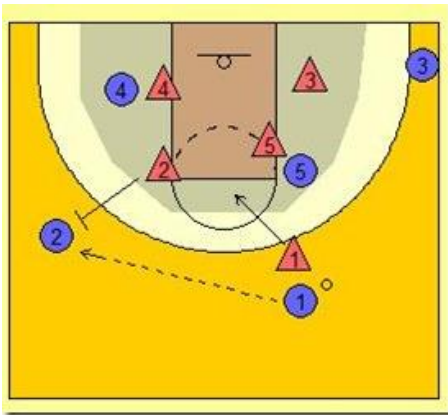
Tony Bennett and the pack line defense

Thursday, April 23 2009 by Ben

With all the hoopla surrounding the Virginia football team's transition to the spread offense, I'd like to take a few moments to educate Virginia fans about what Tony Bennett's quasi-unique defensive strategy, known as the pack line defense, entails. With the help of Coach Bru from favorite web site of mine, Xs and Os of basketball, I'll take you through a highly simplified version of it.

The pack line defense was developed by Dick Bennett, Tony's father, and gained prominence when the elder Bennett used it at Wisconsin in the 1990s. It has a couple of names and is sometimes called a "sagging man-to-man" defense.

I started out calling this strategy "quasi-unique." That's primarily because the pack line shares a lot of principles with your typical man-to-man defense: each defender is matched up with an offensive player; there's a significant amount of defensive pressure placed on the ball handler; there's rotations when an offensive player beats his defender off the dribble, etc.

Below is a diagram of a team playing the pack line defense. (They're the triangles.)

The outline of gray area on the court is known as the pack line: defenders who are not guarding the ball are supposed stay within this area at all times. This principle is often referred to as "keeping everyone on a string."   Essentially, the defense is trying to conserve the amount of space between the defenders at all times.

For example, look what happens when offensive player #1 (O1) passes the ball to offensive player #2 (O2). Defensive player #1 (D1) sags back to the free throw line as D2 goes out to meet the ball handler.

Traditional man-to-man does not always feature as much help defense. Often, man defenses will try to prevent passes that are close by, known as being "one pass away." Given the preponderance of Dave Leitao's defensive sets were predicated on low-risk/plain vanilla man to man - after all, Virginia ranked 235th in steal percentage last year - this may not be a dramatic change for the Wahoos.

The pack line defense also makes doubling in the post much, much easier. The second figure below diagrams a catch by the center (O5) on the block. As you can see, another post player (D4), comes over to double-team. This leaves his man (O4) open. Because the defense is so packed in, D2 does not have to go very far to keep O4 from getting the ball.

Doubling the post leaves 02 open on the outside. However, O5 has got to find him across the court and through a double team of the two biggest defenders on the court. It's a gamble, for sure, but a calculated one that might pay off.

Less athletic teams playing this defense can "ugly up" the game and contend with more athletic teams. Seeing as how the ACC has athletes in spades (and the current Virginia

roster really doesn't), it should keep Virginia within striking distance of their ACC foes next season.

For example, I think this defense would do wonders against Wake Forest. The Deacons athleticism makes them a hard match-up but their three point shooting leaves something to be desired. The pack line defense would keep them honest.

In sum, I think this defense is an outstanding fit for Virginia's current roster and going forward, especially because the Wahoos are always going to be at a disadvantage in recruiting to schools like Duke and Carolina. That doesn't mean we can't compete on the court with them, but it's always going to be an uphill battle on the recruiting trail.

However, don't take my word for how great this defense is, take coach Bru's assessment of Washington State's defense versus Winthrop in the 2008 NCAA tournament:

A breakdown of the pack line defense featuring the Virginia Cavaliers

with 4 comments

Tony Bennett's teams have been very strong defensively, despite a lack of athletic wings and dominant shotblockers in the majority of the past 5+ years. Bennett relies on the packline defense to compensate for his teams weaknesses, which is a man to man defense with a few specific principles. The defense will put heavy pressure on the ball when it is beyond the three point line but the help defense will sag below the three point line, taking away dribble penetration.

Since the gap in athleticism of the guards makes it difficult for the primary defenders to stay in front of the ball, the help defense has to work extra hard to discourage penetration. The primary defender will put heavy pressure on the ball to make it difficult on the ball handler, with the knowledge that their teammates are available to help if they get beat off the dribble. This forces the defense t0 leave the three point line open, allowing teams to shoot well from beyond the arc against Bennett coached teams historically (range of 33.1% to 36.3% in the 5 years prior to 2011–12).

You can see in the following frames how Virginia packs their defense below the three point line. This clogs the space below the arc and helps defend against dribble penetration.

This forces teams to pass the ball around the perimeter or get stuck in traffic when they try to dribble through the lane. The defense likes to put hard ball pressure on the ball handler to make it more difficult to pass or drive and they know they have help behind them if their man gets by them. This puts a ton of pressure on the help to slide over, cut the penetration off and recover to shooters.

The three point line will be open often times against this defense due to the emphasis on denying penetration. The defense has to concentrate on closing out strong but in the ACC, many teams have shooters that can bury

these open looks, negating all the hard work the defense did to deny penetration. While the defense would much rather allow a three point shot than an open layup, teams have hurt Bennett coached teams in the past by shooting well from this spot on the floor.

When the packline defense is working it either forces the offense to pass the ball continously around the perimeter, with no lanes to drive, or provides help on penetration to cut off the lanes to the rim. In the following video, watch the packline offense work for Virginia as they pressure the ball to deny penetration, force Michigan to swing the ball around the three point line without any lanes to dribble through and help on the ball when a player does get below the three point line.

Now, let's briefly discuss how to beat the packline defense. As we talked about above, the three point line is an area on the court where offenses can find open shots. Also, since the defense is often utilized to mask less athletic defenders on the perimeter, teams can find space to drive if they move the ball. One area that is often open is the baseline if the defense makes a mistake, as a principle of the packline defense is to deny the baseline. If a defender does not take away the baseline (as we see in the first clip below), the defense is not set up to be in position to help.

In the second clip, we see how guards can break down their defender off the dribble and find gaps in the defense. The guards of UVA (as is often the case of teams that utilize this defense) are a bit slow-footed and have trouble staying in front of dribble penetration, which can leave the defense exposed. When the help does not come in time, the ball handler can have an open lane to the rim.

When the packline defense is not working well, teams will be able to get to the rim easily without much resistance from the defense. It starts with a lack of ball pressure, allowing the ball handler to put some space between himself and his defender to break the defense down off the dribble. The help will be out of position, either due to the position of the ball or a mistake in rotation. The follwoing video shows a few breakdowns of the packline defense that UVA suffered against Michigan, which allowed penetration to the rim.

The packline is a fine defense to employ with below average guards, as it will allow teams to better defend when they get beat on penetration. However, a single mistake in positioning can give the offense an open lane to drive against the slower guards, which many teams in the ACC can take advantage of, as well as the openings around the three point line. Bennett has had his two worst season defensively in his two seasons at Virginia, as ACC teams are naturally built to take advantage of this defense's weak points. Time will tell if this defense can work at Virginia but it has been in the bottom half of defensive efficiency in conference games in both years of the Bennett regime.

Tony Bennett (no, not that Tony Bennett) is one of many coaches who uses the defense created by his father.

It had been a back and forth game between the Michigan Wolverines and the Virginia Cavaliers. The #14 ranked Wolverines had come to Virginia to play as a part of the 2011 Big Ten-ACC Challenge, and they were now in a dog fight against the unranked Cavaliers. With twelve minutes to go, guard Zack Novak hit a jump shot to put Michigan up 41-38. But the fight was over; the Wolverines wouldn't score again for almost six and a half minutes, when a Tim Hardaway jumper made the sore 43-53. Michigan scored six more times in the remaining five minutes after the Hardaway shot, but it wasn't nearly enough to win. The final score was 70-58. The highly rated Wolverines had fallen to an unheralded team. Coach John Beilein had watched for 40 minutes as his beautifully choreographed motion offense had been chopped to bits by the Virginia defense.

*It's [the Virginia defense] always going to be good as long as that man is coaching this team. I'm not crazy with scoring 58 points, but not a lot of teams may score 58 against them. -- John Beilein (**ESPN.com**, November 29, 2011)*

Except for the most experienced viewer, understanding basketball in real time is next to impossible. In basketball, stuff happens too quickly to really allow us to understand the action while it occurs. This hurts our understanding of the game. Making matters worse, the pace of basketball doesn't lend itself to the detailed dissection of plays in the way that football does; in may ways it is easier to be an educated football fan than it is to be an educated fan of basketball.

My interactions with readers on Burnt Orange Nation over the last several years have taught me that there is a great deal of mystery surrounding basketball defense. While most viewers can recognize the difference between zone defense and man-to-man defense, I have the sense that there isn't much understanding of team defensive principles beyond this one difference. I want to help.

This post highlights a few aspects of team man-to-man defense. My aim is to highlight a few of the differences between some of the various styles of man-to-man defense played in college basketball, and to point you to a few of the consequences of these differences. This is not meant to be a detailed description about basketball defense targeted at coaches. This is intended for viewers. The hope is to give you, the basketball viewer, a few different things to look for during games, and to get you to start thinking about this stuff as you watch basketball.

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In 2000, Dick Bennett coached the Wisconsin Badgers to a surprising run to the Final Four. Not once during the 1999-2000 season did the Badgers appear in the AP poll. As an 8 seed,

Wisconsin easily beat Fresno State in the first round, creating a second round match-up with the #1 seed in the West, the Arizona Wildcats. Lute Olson's Wildcats were loaded, with future NBA players Gilbert Arenas, Luke Walton, and Richard Jefferson, as well as talented point guard Jason Gardner. Wisconsin beat Arizona, holding the Wildcats to 39 percent shooting, and slowly squeezing them to death with what we now call the Pack Line defense.

Burned out, a year later Bennett suddenly resigned as head coach of Wisconsin. He resurfaced in a few seasons, and coached Washington State for three years before retiring and being replaced by his son Tony. Over his long career, Bennett's most famous feat as a coach was that 2000 NCAA tournament run. But Bennett's legacy will always be the Pack Line defense. That is because the Pack Line has spread like wildfire all over basketball. When the Boston Celtics won the NBA championship in 2008, they did it by adhering to many of the Pack Line principles. Butler's two NCAA tournament runs were fueled by Brad Stevens' version of the Pack Line. Sean Miller implemented the Pack Line at Xavier (where it is still used), and later at Arizona. And the Pack Line has spread across high school basketball through the DVDs of Dick Bennett and other Pack Line enthusiasts.

So what exactly is the Pack Line? To see it in its purest form, it is best to watch a team coached by a member of the Bennett family. Dick's son Tony now coaches the Virginia Cavaliers. According to the Ken Pomeroy ratings, the Virginia defense was the sixth best in college basketball last season. Last season, **Joshua Riddell wrote a very nice description of Virginia's defense**. I am not going to attempt to go into the depth that Riddell did with this defense. But I do want to show you a few of the basic ideas, and show you how to recognize it.

The image below shows a single frame taken from a game between Virginia and North Carolina last season. North Carolina, in the light blue jerseys, has the ball. I have indicated the man with the ball, who is near the upper left corner of the image. To give some context, the Tar Heels are preparing to set a ball screen.

This image shows a few characteristics of the Pack Line defense. With careful study, you can learn a lot from a single photograph. First, I want you to look at the man defending the UNC player with the ball. Notice how his feet are set. His toes are pointed towards the mid-court line, and the plane of the defender's body is almost parallel with the baseline. This defender is not directly on a straight path between his man and the basket, the way that you were taught to defend in grade school. Instead, he is making sure that his man does not beat him by driving towards the sideline, ultimately getting to the baseline. Bennett's defense forces dribble penetration towards the middle, where the help defenders are. If a player is beaten to the outside, it generally results in disaster.

And now let's talk about those help defenders, or at least one in particular. I have labeled the other perimeter player for UNC as being "1 pass away," meaning that only a single pass from the ball handler is needed for him to get the ball. I have also labeled his defender. Notice that this defender is roughly 17 feet away from the basket. This is the classic characteristic of the Pack Line defense. The off-ball defense is never supposed to extend more than this distance from the basket. As a result, dribble penetration into the lane is difficult. The man guarding the ball is forcing the ball penetration to the middle of the floor, while the other perimeter defenders are crowding near that middle.

This is a very powerful idea; a well run Pack Line defense allows a team to protect the rim without a shot blocker. Virginia is a good example of this. Virginia lacked a dominant shot-blocking center last season, and yet held opponents to 45 percent shooting on two point shots. They did this by limiting chances at the rim in half-court situations.

Nothing comes without a trade-off. In the case of running the Pack Line, a team is conceding that first pass. Denying this pass creates an opportunity for a turnover, which Pack Line teams do not pursue. Denying this pass also can force the offensive player to move away from the basket to open up passing lanes, disrupting the spacing of the offense. And of course, it puts a premium on closing out when the ball is passed to a dangerous shooter. Pack Line teams stress these close outs; one of the easiest ways to recognize a Pack Line defense is to watch the way that defenders close out. Close outs always occur with the defender holding his hands high above his head, to contest jump shots.

What if a defense doesn't want to be so passive? At the other extreme of man-to-man defense is the ball denial approach taken by teams like Duke and West Virginia. This style of defense is meant to disrupt the offense, whereas the Pack Line is meant to stifle it. If the Pack Line approach is most closely associated with Dick Bennett, the father of the modern ball denial defense is probably Bobby Knight. And Knight's most famous pupil, Mike Krzyzewski, has taken this approach to defense to new heights, in part by recruiting the fastest perimeter defenders that he can find, as well as by extending the defense further away from the basket.

The photo below, taken from a game between Duke and Maryland, illustrates some significant differences between this style of play, and the Pack Line. In this case, Maryland has the ball, which is in the hands of the offensive player in the upper left corner of the image. Maryland has things spaced similarly to the image above, although the players are spread a few feet farther from the basket. The type of pressure Duke applies tends to move the offense a bit further out, so this is quite a common situation. Just like in the image above, the offense is preparing for a ball screen.

Let's start with the man guarding the ball. Notice which way he is facing. His toes are pointed towards the sideline, and his back is perpendicular to the baseline. He is turned exactly 90 degrees from the way in which the on ball defender stands in the Virginia defense. This has a very specific effect; it

forces the offensive player towards the baseline, and prevents him from dribbling into the middle of the floor. Recall in the Pack Line, this situation is exactly what you are trying to prevent. Because of the sagging defender, the help in the Pack Line comes most easily in the middle of the floor. In the pressure defense of Duke, the help will come along the baseline, from a player on the other side of the court.

With the ball being forced away from the middle, the defender guarding the perimeter player one pass away from the ball denies this pass. This has several benefits. First, it creates turnovers. This particularly happens when the ball is forced towards the baseline, and the dribbler is cut off by help defenders. In these situations, there are often dangerous passes that can be turned into steals. But in most possessions, the ball isn't stolen. In these cases, this denying defense still has some advantages. It tends to push the offense farther away from the basket than it would normally like to operate, disrupting its spacing and rhythm. Additionally, this type of defense helps with limiting three point attempts. Duke excels at preventing opponents from attempting the three, and this style of defense is a big part of the reason why. With pressure on players away from the ball, there is less need to close out after a perimeter pass.

The downside of this type of defense is that it puts a premium on having very good on-ball defenders. Duke's defense struggled last year, as the level of on-ball defense was well below its typical standard. There is still help in this defense, but the help is further away, and by the time helping defenders rotate over, the attacking player can get deep penetration. With rotations often coming from big men, it makes it harder for these players to box out on rebounds. Duke, for all of their talent, is in most years just average at defensive rebounding. Pack Line teams, like the ones coached by Bennett, the Xavier teams, or Brad Stevens' Butler teams, are usually among the best defensive rebounding teams in the country -- in part because the defense limits penetration and relies less on help from the big men, leaving players in better position to rebound.

Many teams fall in between these two extremes. Texas coach Rick Barnes doesn't make coaching DVDs, so we only can infer his approach to defense by watching. Barnes' adaptability is one

of his strengths as a coach -- he is not a "system" coach. In some years, when loaded up with incredibly gifted perimeter defenders like Avery Bradley and Dogus Balbay, Barnes has gone to a full ball denial approach, as described by this **X's & O's of Basketball** post. Not doing so would have defeated the whole purpose of having a player like Bradley, who laughs at your attempts to screen him.

From what I can tell, in most years Barnes has not played a full out ball denial defense. The photo below shows an early defensive possession of the young Longhorns from last season, in their first game against Boston University. This photo was captured shortly after Texas had recovered from a ball screen set by Boston, so it is hard to get a clear read on the intention of the on-ball defender, as he is still in recovery mode. If you watch**the video of the entire possession**, you will see that at the very start of the possession that the on-ball defender was forcing the ball handler slightly to the baseline, but was mostly defending straight up.

The most interesting thing about the photo below is the location of the defender one pass away from the ball. Note where he is. He is not in full on ball denial mode, like Duke. He is also not 17 feet from the basket, like Virginia. He is sort of in the middle. This provides a compromise between the two defensive styles. If the offense throws a sloppy pass, this defender is in position to take it away. Otherwise, he is capable of both providing help on a driving defender, but is also in good position to prevent a three point shot, and is forcing the offense to set up further away from the basket.

There is no right answer. All of these approaches work. Championship teams have pressured the ball. Other champions have played back, allowing the pass on the perimeter.

Now it is time for a test. The image below is taken from the Final Four match-up last season between Kentucky and Louisville. Louisville has the ball. The man with the ball is #3, Peyton Siva, in the lower right hand corner of the screen. Take a look at the alignment of the defense. What do you see? What sort of strengths and weaknesses does this defense create? Is it suited to the team playing it? You can post your answer in the comments section below.

4-10 ALL-TIME VS #1 SEED IN TOURNAMENT
4 LOUISVILLE 2   1 KENTUCKY 2   FINAL FOUR   1ST   18:59   24

First Line Of Defense

The system developed by Dick Bennett two decades ago has his son Tony's Virginia team on the brink of its first NCAA tournament bid in five years

LUKE WINN

The basketball coach at Virginia 30 years ago, Terry Holland, was flush: He had 7'4" center Ralph Sampson—a singular player who was so talented that he declared himself "the next stage of basketball development"—and the nation's No. 1 team, which was headed toward a No. 1 seeding in the NCAA tournament. The coach of the Cavaliers today, Tony Bennett, has a Sampson-sized challenge: His 7-foot center is out with a broken ankle, his righthanded shooting guard is hindered by a broken left hand, and his 22--8 team, which is clinging to UVA's first big-dance bid since 2007, has only one real option on offense: senior forward Mike Scott.

Bennett didn't inherit the anxiety that drove his father, Dick, out of the game shortly after taking Wisconsin to the Final Four in 2000, but he is the caretaker of a defense created by his father to help overcome competitive disadvantages. The Pack-Line defense is a containment system in which one man pressures the ball and the other four stay in help position within an imaginary 16-foot arc around the basket. Virginia deploys it well enough to rank first in the nation in fewest points allowed per possession (0.87). But what the Cavaliers do, Tony says, isn't groundbreaking. "It's just about having an iron will and saying we won't budge on certain things defensively."

Bennettball demands stubbornness; its rules are called "nonnegotiables." What's unusual about this system, which has spread to high schools and colleges around the country, is that to become a Pack-Liner, Dick Bennett had to do more than budge: He had to ditch the system that first made him famous.

IT'S 1984 AND Dick Bennett, 41, is standing in front of a dusty chalkboard. At the top he has written STOP BALL and underlined it. Drawing attention to himself isn't his sort of thing; he was talked into making this instructional video by his assistant, Rod Popp, who's working the camera. Bennett is the reigning NAIA coach of the year, having taken Wisconsin--Stevens Point to the national title game, but he has no expectation that the tape, *Pressure Defense: A System,* will spread very far.

Bennett tells the camera that defenders in this man-to-man system must apply intense pressure and gamble with reckless abandon—a curious order from someone whose teaching style is painfully thorough (the video will run 82 minutes) and whose yellow UWSP polo shirt is neatly tucked into his blue polyester coaching shorts. He's a tightly wound man with a blueprint for suffocating "oh-fenses," as he occasionally says in his Nordic Wisconsinese.

This early version of Dick Bennett D aims to force 20 turnovers per game by following these rules: All five defenders must sprint back to prevent transition baskets. The ball is pressured as soon as it crosses half-court, and off-ball defenders are always in denial mode—"on the line and up the line," Bennett says—in the path of potential passes. (The players in the

practice footage he splices in, including a young Terry Porter, hop around like trained jackrabbits.) There is no switching, only early help and quick recovery. The ball must be pushed to one side of the floor and then to the baseline, where a help defender is dead-fronting the post. Once the defense has ganged up on that side, the ball cannot be allowed to swing back around the perimeter.

"If you can get the ball on the baseline, eliminating ball reversal is a pleasure," Bennett says. "That's where you're gonna create tremendous turnovers." His earnestness is what makes this the tape's most precious quip, although Bennett's piece of chalk leaves a more lasting impression about 20 minutes into the video. During a vigorous drawing of a court diagram, it snaps in half, causing a brief crack in the coach's demeanor. After a chuckle he quickly gets the lecture back on track, but for years he'll hear broken-chalk jokes from coaches he's just met. That's evidence that his VHS went the pre-Internet equivalent of viral.

Where did the video spread? Where *didn't* it spread? Bob Hurley of St. Anthony's in Jersey City received a copy at a Marquette clinic in 1985. An instant convert, Hurley implemented the defense during his son Bobby's freshman season and used it to win 15 of his 24 overall state titles and induction into the Naismith Hall of Fame. Iowa-based Championship Productions bought the video for wider distribution, and in an SI poll in the '90s, college coaches said Dick Bennett was one of the men from whom they most wanted to take a clinic (along with Bob Knight, Mike Krzyzewski and Rick Majerus). When Pat Riley became the Miami Heat coach in '95, he cited Bennett as an influence on his aggressive Knicks-era defenses, even though he and Bennett had never spoken. The sideline fraternity knew Bennett as a professor of pressure, but a national audience will meet him as a purveyor of something else.

It's March 17, 1994, and Dick Bennett is a Division I coach in an NCAA tournament first-round game in Odgen, Utah. This isn't his first national TV appearance; he took Wisconsin--Green Bay to the dance three years earlier, when Tony was its star point guard, and nearly knocked off Michigan State. Now the Phoenix is a No. 12 seed, pitted against No. 5 Cal, an up-tempo scoring machine with Final Four aspirations and a soon-to-be No. 2 overall draft pick, Jason Kidd, at point. CBS tells viewers that Bennett is a "guru," but it's an indication of his employer's lack of prominence that analyst Ann Meyers refers to the school as "Green Bay Wisconsin" for the first six minutes of the game. By the time she corrects herself, the Phoenix has a 6--2 lead and two things are evident: Kidd's Bears are flummoxed, and Bennett's new defense has taken a philosophical 180 from the one that earned him guru status.

After the Phoenix sprints back in transition, the team builds a wall in front of Kidd to keep him away from the paint. Gary Grzesk, a 6'5" sophomore guard, is the primary defender on Kidd and becomes the game's quiet hero. Once the defense is set, the player on the ball applies pressure—but his teammates don't. Instead of denying "on the line and up the line," they pack themselves in a 16-foot arc around the basket and constantly reposition themselves, either as helpers who shrink Kidd's potential driving lanes or as angled post-fronters who prevent feeds from the top of the key. (Cal coach Todd Bozeman says it's almost as if the Green Bay defenders are "in the lane posing for a team picture.") The players are content to let the ball rotate, but they refuse to let anyone drive baseline, because post defenders aren't in position to help. No one ventures outside the pack line unless his man is about to catch a pass, at which point the defender closes out with a vengeance, his hands high to prevent a rhythm jumper, while the passer's man retreats to the pack. Gambling for steals is kept to a minimum, in favor of forcing a contested shot and sending all five men to the glass to end the opponents' possession.

How well did the Pack-Line D work on that St. Patrick's Day? The Bears did not get a field goal until almost midway through the half. Kidd was held to 12 points on 4-of-17 shooting. And UWGB pulled off the greatest upset in school history, 61--57.

Tony was watching from a sports bar in Charlotte, where he was an against-the-odds NBA success as a backup guard for the Hornets. He saw this coming. When he was a junior at Green Bay in 1990--91, Dick started to doubt that all-out pressure was right for a D-I David that would always be at an athletic disadvantage when it faced power-conference programs. The north-south driving offenses that had come into vogue were tough to stop with slower defenders, and the Phoenix was getting caught out of position and giving up too many offensive rebounds. Dick reluctantly sought out a system that would neutralize the talent gap, and as an experiment he taped down a pack line on UWGB's practice court.

Tony's teams were the guinea pigs, but Dick didn't fully make the pushing-to-packing conversion until after his son turned pro in 1992. A few years after his NBA career ended in '95, Tony became an assistant to his father, who had moved on to Wisconsin. There the pack line was painted on the practice floor. Disciplined defenders are the key to Bennettball, and that season's pack leader was the unscreenable Mike Kelley, who guided the 1999--2000 Badgers to the Final Four.

Tony's Virginia team has a player in the same mold as Grzesk and Kelley. Junior guard Jontel Evans is a 5'11" self-proclaimed "pest" who leads the Cavaliers in steals with 48.

The most difficult part about doing a Pack-Line D story is that the Bennetts pressure you *not* to do a Pack-Line D story. They just don't believe it's a worthy topic. "The Pack Line isn't revolutionary," Tony says. "It's a basic containment man-to-man, built on simple rules that my dad put together. I wouldn't want to waste your time."

From Dick, more of the same: "We're very respectful of the work that's gone into developing defense," he says, "and the last thing that I want is to be thought of as an inventor of a defense that's been played in many variations." He adds that he didn't even coin the term *pack line*—that came from a marketing guy who talked Bennett into making a DVD on the new system.

So, in order to do a story on the Pack-Line D, you must assure the Bennetts that you *won't* say it's sui generis. Everything in modern basketball is built on something else, and Bennett stresses that he was influenced by Bob Knight's helping man-to-man at Indiana, Lou Henson's ball-line defense at Illinois, and Colorado State's Boyd Grant's emphasis on the importance of a player's keeping his hands high while closing out. Bennett selected the pieces that best fit his team, made a set of rules and drilled his players incessantly. He may not have been an inventor, but he has been a shrewd editor and an even better teacher.

His 2005 Pack-Line DVD became one of Championship Productions' best sellers and helped the defense gain traction outside the Bennett family. (Dick's daughter Kathi teaches it at Northern Illinois, and his brother Jack did the same at Stevens Point.) Arizona coach Sean Miller's father, John, a high school coach in Beaver Falls, Pa., admired Bennett's methods. When Sean got his first head coaching job, at Xavier in 2004, he implemented the Bennett's D and used it to reach the 2008 Elite Eight. Now, with the Wildcats, Sean has made the Pack Line the third most efficient D in the Pac-12. According to Synergy Sports Technology, Arizona is the nation's fourth-best team at defending jump shooters. Miller's successor at Xavier, Chris Mack, stuck with the Pack-Line, and Northern Iowa's Ben Jacobson used a hybrid of it to upset No. 1-seeded Kansas in the 2010 NCAA tournament. Butler used Pack-Line principles in its recent back-to-back runs to the national title game, although coach Brad Stevens has reconfigured his defense, as Bennett had before him, into something that will inspire a future branch of coaches.

College basketball's steady de-acceleration since the '90s has less to do with stalling offenses than with the rise of containment defenses. Virginia plays at the 339th slowest pace in D-I because the Pack-Line is next-to-impossible to score on early in the shot clock. By limiting the number of possessions, Pack-Lining can fuel Cinderella runs but also produce aesthetic atrocities, like the 53--41 Final Four grudge match that Dick Bennett's 2000 Wisconsin team lost to Michigan State. That the system's highest-profile showcase was widely panned as a peach-basket-era grinder does not bother Tony Bennett, whose Cavaliers could be in the bracket as a No. 8 seed, just like his dad's Badgers. Says Tony, "I'd love to get to the Final Four and have them say that about me."