Our 12 points of an effective Match-Up Zone Defense

1. You must use both man to man and zone defensive principles.
2. Each man has area responsibility and man responsibility.
3. Each player must use man-to-man defense, area defense, and help defense.
4. Two defensive men must constantly defend three offensive men.
5. Offensive alignment will dictate defensive alignment.
6. Defensive players adjust to both the man and the ball. Neither has priority. Both are of equal importance.
7. Each defensive player checks the ball, a man, and “part of the other four.”
8. “Communication” is more important for the back three players than for the guards.
9. The key to the front line defense (guards) is “movement and adjustment.”
10. The key to the back line defense (center and forwards) is “communication and adjustment.”
11. To be effective in the match-up zone one man must consistently and effectively defend two—two defend three—three defend four—and four defend five.
12. Key word is still “adjust.”

Why should a team play a zone defensively? A team should look to play a zone if their opponents can’t attack it consistently, you can’t guard the opponent man-to-man, you need to control an excellent penetrating guard, and finally, you can sandwich or front and back the post player.

The rules of our match-up are simple and go hand in hand with our other defensive schemes.

Match-Up Rules

1. Continually point to your man and talk to your teammates.
2. Guard someone: don’t have two defensive players on the same offensive player.
3. Defense takes the shape of the offense’s alignment.
4. Keep bigs in and smalls out.
5. The post player comes out in emergencies only…as when the offense has five players along the perimeter or if we have to defend an excellent perimeter shooter.
6. Help side defenders straddle the weak side lane line. The offense will screen away and will send offensive players away so in our Match-Up, we assume all offensive players are good shooters.
7. Guards dig into the post to help force the ball back out onto the perimeter.
8. Switch everything to keep bigs in and smalls out…however, we don’t switch the dribble.
9. Pressure every shot without fouling: change or alter the shot.
10. Only guard to the “arc”. This allows us to protect the paint and high post area while giving help in the post.
11. Do not deny passes out to the perimeter, but do pressure the ball.
12. Block Out, Pursue, Chin the Rebound, Outlet…”BOPCRO”

With this defense, we stress man-to-man techniques as we do with all of our schemes. While this is a zone, it also has the components of a man-to-man defense and teaching the same techniques and skills to all of our players for all of our schemes saves valuable practice time.

Some of you might wonder why we don’t just run a packing man-to-man defense or a straight switching man-to-man defense. Our reasoning is that in a straight man-to-man defense you can determine who you guard defensively, but not where you guard. In a switching man-to-man defense, you can’t determine who you guard defensively, but you can determine where you guard. In our match-up zone, we can’t determine who we guard, but we can determine where we guard.

In this defense, we watch for the swing pass and we switch everything. We try to pressure the ball without fouling. We don’t use the word “block” because when players hear that word, they tend to want to unload their arm and hand on a shot and get called for the foul. Finally…no second shots allowed.

Here is our initial line-up (in Diagram 6 >>>>>).
In the Match-Up, defensive players must play with their butt to the baseline when not guarding the ball. This allows them to see the floor and straddle all screens. We stress man-to-man techniques for those guarding the ball. As with all of our defenses, players must POINT and TALK on the floor… communicate! We want our players talking to the ball and to the man in front of them. Our guards are responsible for passes along the top of the perimeter (Diagram 7).

The weak side guard will drop back and help in the high post area to take away flash cuts to the high post. Once the ball has been passed or dribbled down towards the baseline area, the nearest post defender comes out to guard the ball (Diagram 8). On passes or dribbles that advance the ball towards the baseline, our #5 man will look to front the post player on the ball side. #4 will play behind the post while #2 straddles the lane in case the offense swings the ball to the opposite side (Diagram 9). #1 looks to defend the reversal pass as well as any cuts to the ball side high post area.

How do we defend weak side cutters to the short corner and weak side wing area? (Diagram 10) It is our philosophy that we want to move as few defenders as possible from their assignments. We want #4 will follow the cutter while #2 drops to take weak side low post area (Diagram 11). #4 will play his cutter with proper man-to-man techniques when the ball is on the wing or up top.
We do not want to keep two forwards on the same side of the floor any longer than possible however. #3 and #4 are both on the same side of the floor (Diagram 11). In order to get the extra forward off the same side of the floor, we make the following adjustment when the ball goes short corner (Diagram 12 >>>>>).

On the pass to the baseline, #3 will drop, #1 will slide over and #2 will slide up (Diagram 13). Now we are back in our initial formation with only one forward on each side.

Teams will also make ball side cuts (offensive players don't cross the mid-line of the floor). When this happens, cutter (Diagram 14 >>>>>). That they always defense the cutter on the ball side.

When teams choose to send cutters down the middle floor, there are no set rules. Rather, communication is the key. The guard releases his man and the post defenders and guards make simple adjustments on who guards the cutter based on where he goes and ends up (Diagram 15). Note that if the cutters go ball side, the guard defending takes the cutter.

When teams go to a 1-4 offense with a strong ball handler. We will send the ball side guard up with the second guard helping to cut off the dribble (Diagram 16 >>>>>).

On out of bounds plays, we do some things differently. Below is how we defend during an out of bounds situation (Diagram 17). Imagine that the low post players have screened for the guards so the guards could pop outside. We believe that our guard, #1, must take the first pass to the corner when we are in our zone. We do not want a forward to take the
first pass. Our forward will take the second pass. This protects our defense against teams
who look to create a play for the inbounder.

When we press, knowing we are going to the Match-Up in the half-court, we always
match up man-to-man with our smaller players up front...3-on-3, 4-on-4 or 5-on-5. We
don’t have set rules in this press situation.

Finally, all of our teaching on the Match-Up is done five-on-five. We do not do any
breakdown drills other than those that teach basic man-to-man skills and techniques.