Breaking down Wooden's 'West Coast Offense'

By Fran Fraschilla

One of the best compliments a coach can receive is when another coach "borrows" his offense and names it after you or your school. It has been 27 years since John Wooden's final game, the NCAA championship victory over Kentucky in 1975. But, the "UCLA High Post Offense" is, still today, one of college basketball's most popular offenses and timeless in its effectiveness.

Although Georgia's Jim Harrick never worked for John Wooden, he was an assistant coach under Wooden disciple Gary Cunningham at UCLA, where he absorbed the Bruins' philosophy, including the high post attack. He passed on the UCLA system to former assistant coach and current Alabama coach, Mark Gottfried.

This man-to-man offense is run out the 2-3 set (also known as a two-guard front). It brings the defense away from the basket, can be run to both sides of the court, and has a variety of options or "reads". In addition, the two-guard front keeps the pressure off a team's point guard from having the ball in his hands all the time. And, finally, it is an effective offense to post up a team's big guards.

Here is a look at the UCLA High Post Offense's basic plays with a few reasons why it is remains an effective attack.

The Alignment: Here you can see the 2-3 high post alignment and why we call it a two-guard front. Notice the spacing of all five players away from the basket.

The Entry Pass: On the guard-to-guard pass, the small forward (4) makes what we call an "L Cut" on the wing to get open to receive the pass. The post man, or center, (5) moves to the elbow on the ball side.
The Guard Cut: The off-guard (2) makes another familiar cut in today's game -- the "UCLA Cut" -- off of post man's screen (5) and posts up. Again, this is an excellent way to post up a big guard like Georgia's 6-foot-4, 235-pound Ezra Williams. As this happens, the small forward (3) moves to the opposite block and the point guard (1) slides to the foul line extended.

The second part of this motion is on the pass to center (5) at the high post. The power forward (4) down screens for the off-guard (2), while the small forward (3) posts up on what we call a "duck in" move. Notice, that if X3 is caught on the inside, the center (5) will reverse the ball to the point guard (1), who has a great angle to feed the small forward (3) in the post.
One thing to watch is if the center (5) is overplayed at the high post. If this happens, it's the job of the point guard to "read" and cut to the ball to become the pass outlet.

As this happens, the small forward and center set a double-down screen for the off-guard and small forward sets up at what we call the "pinch post" -- on the opposite elbow. It's now time for the off-guard to come off the screens looking for the jump shot.
Now, if the off-guard doesn't free himself for a shot, the point can pass out to the small forward (3) and run a "two-man game" with the small forward (4). In this example, the small forward hands the ball back to the point guard, who drives to the basket.

If the point guard isn't able to pass to the small forward (3), he can use small forward's screen in a "screen-and-roll" play.
Reacting to “Overplays”: What if the wings are overplayed by the defense? Well, if the guards cannot pass to the wings, it’s time to use a dribble entry. Here, the point guard dribbles to the wing as the small forward cuts to the post.

Another option when the wings are overplayed is for the small forward (3) to screens across for his power forward (4), and the center (5) then down-screens for small forward. This is what we call a “screen-the-screener” triangle play.
If the guard-to-guard pass is overplayed, it's up to the power forward to be aware of what's happening and anticipate his next move. It's the power forward's responsibility to flash from the opposite wing to the ball and, when he receives the ball, the off-guard (2) cuts back door for the lay-up. The old-school coaches call this the "blind pig" play. It's an offensive option that allows an opening for the point to pass to the off-guard (2). Again, the power forward must anticipate this happening.

The "X Cut" Off the High Post: The guard who passes to the center (5) at the high post, cuts first and the wing (3) on his side clears to the other side of the court.
The next move in this set is for the off-guard to cut off of point -- the "X Cut" -- and take a handoff from center (5), clearing out the entire side of the court for a 1-on-1 opportunity.

The Guard Around: In this set, the off-guard (2) passes to the power forward (4), follows the pass and receives the handoff back from the power forward, as the small forward clears out to the ball side corner. Once the power forward hands the ball off, he cuts off the center's screen to the basket and looks for the lob pass from the off-guard.
If the lob pass is not open, the center simply screens on the ball for the off-guard, who drives to the lane. He can go all the way to the basket, pass to the point, if his defender leaves to help, or to the power forward, if his man leaves to help.
Above are all some of the basic plays of the "UCLA High Post Offense." The beauty of this offense is in its court balance, spacing and opportunity to involve all five players in the attack -- all things John Wooden preached.

Fran Fraschilla spent 23 years on the sidelines as a college basketball coach before joining ESPN this season as a broadcast analyst. He guided both Manhattan (1993, 1995) and St. John's (1998) to the NCAA Tournament in his nine seasons as a Division I head coach, leaving New Mexico following the end of the 2001-02 season.