BASKETBALL BY PRINCIPLE:
The READ & REACT OFFENSIVE SYSTEM

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I know that the phrase “thinking outside of the box” is overused and worn out. Critics will say to me that there’s “nothing new under the sun” when it comes to basketball. Well, I’m not talking about a new way to shoot the ball, or dribbling with your elbows, or playing defense on all fours. I’m not talking about a new way to use ball screens or a different twist on the last hybrid of man-zone defenses. I’m talking about a new approach to developing players, teams, and even coaches.

In order to understand the advantages of The READ & REACT OFFENSIVE SYSTEM (from here on abbreviated R&R), we need to agree on the nature of the problems that the R&R System is meant to solve. The frustrations with these unsolved problems are what led me to develop the R&R Offensive System:

MY FRUSTRATIONS WITH THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM
When I entered the coaching field, I had a very simple goal: Continue to enjoy the game that I had been playing, while teaching others how to play it. Pretty lame, huh? No Hollywood director’s going to make a movie out of that! It goes without saying that I wanted to win; I wanted to win every game and championship that was possible. But I wanted that “Road to the Championship” to include the day-to-day joy of teaching kids how to play the game.

NOT ENOUGH TIME TO TEACH THE GAME
I found out quickly that I could teach math to anyone at anytime of the year, but when it came to high school and college basketball in America, it was ILLEGAL to teach before a certain date. Oh sure, I could work with at most two players at a time. So if I wanted to teach 12 players per day as a high school coach, then at 2 per hour, I would spend an extra 6 hours per day after school! That puts me home at about 10:00 pm! And people wonder why coaches dress funny…

So when can I begin? Oh wow, three weeks before the first game! Of course, with tryouts included, that means I’ll have about twelve or thirteen practice days before we begin to tally those Ws and Ls that will determine whether I have job next year or not. Of course, when I was hired, an administrator assured me that wins and losses were not a factor in my employment. Yeah, right. This is the same suit that told me my summers would be free!

And so, every season began the same way: Begin with the fundamentals and then as they master them, move into the principles that allow them to play as an orchestrated team. But with about 5 days of practice left, Desperate Realization would set in. Not only has there not been enough time for my players to grasp the fundamentals and principles of the game, they also can’t break a press, get the ball in-bounds, run a primary fast break, secondary fast break, man offense or zone offense. Not only that, when I explain the multiple defenses that we’re going to run, they give me the same look as a cow looking at a new gate!

So, with only 5 practice days left before our first game with our powerhouse cross-town rivals that our girls coach has scheduled because she’s loaded with talent and will surely win, I resort to what my high school coach did: I drop all pretenses of teaching the game and drill my players to run plays like a bunch of robots.

And sure enough, my players became very good at running plays but not learning how to play. Once we got into post-season tournament play, all of my tricky plays were scouted and you can imagine the rest. When little Johnny can’t pass from point A to point B, then he passes to anyone (hopefully with the same
color jersey) who uses his 1-on-5 skills to force up a shot. I then pray that my football players, who are just now getting used to a ROUND ball, can rebound some of the misses and put them back in.

Do I sound like I was frustrated? I needed the summers “off” in order to recover and convince myself that I could do a better job the next year. Every spring I was even more motivated to go to every coaching clinic my 1975 Ford Maverick could get me to. I would take copious notes on the 15 set plays and quickhitters of the current NCAA champion who used them to win with his 18 former high school All-Americans that he had hand-picked to fit his now famous “Fabulous Fifteen Set Plays and Counters Offense.”

I was so sure that little Johnny and teammates back home could run this championship offense with its 100 counters to trapping, helping, rotating man-to-man defenses. Of course, next year, 19 of my 20 opponents would run zones!

MOST PLAYS DON’T WORK ANYWAY! (Or, HOW I REACHED MY TURNING POINT)

In the mid-to-late-90’s, three incidents came together to create a turning point in my thinking.

1. After a rather average season, my assistant asked me if I was happy. I replied, “Not particularly.” He asked what I would do differently if I could scrap our entire program and start all over. I said that I would teach our kids how to play the entire game by principle. He then asked, “Why don’t you do it?” The honest answer is: I didn’t know how. I had a lot of pieces; a lot of 2-man and 3-man game principles, but not the entire thing. That seemed like a pretty tall order: to create a seamless offensive system that would encompass transition, man-to-man, and zone without contradiction. Also, it could not be limited to only one “set” like 5 OUT, nor could it be limited to only one type of player, or to a particular style of play.

2. Using the previous season’s videotapes, I charted all the points we scored from free throws, offensive rebounds, fast breaks, set plays, broken plays, etc. and found an unsettlingly ratio. 80% of our points came from broken plays, transition, and other PRINCIPLED basketball. We only scored the way our set plays were designed about 20% of the time. But in practice, the ratio was the opposite: we spent 80% of our time on set plays and less than 20% of the time on PRINCIPLED basketball. I had to ask myself why I was spending 80% of our time on only 20% of our point production?

3. At about the same time, I experienced some success with a team built around 6 players who played together from 7th grade to 12th grade. Their 5-year record was 125 wins and 13 losses. Were they talented? Yes, but not to the extent you might think. Only two went on to play at the college level. Their real talent was their coordinated effort. They “knew” each other. They moved like a school of fish. Was I responsible for this? Had I suddenly become a coaching genius? No. Our success was due mostly to the fact that they had played together for 6 years. In fact, each year of their career was characterized by fewer plays and more principles.

WHY DON’T THESE PLAYERS KNOW MORE WHEN THEY GET TO MY LEVEL!!!

Why do the players entering my program have such an incomplete set of skills? Why don’t they know more? Why do I have to start all over with every new player? Here’s why:

Let's step back and take a look at the big picture: In the USA, there is no unifying system of teaching the game to players from their youth up. And because of that, a 10 year old might have 10 or 12 different coaches by the time they’re 18. This can create problems like the following (I can speak confidently about these problems because I did each of the below at some point in my career):

1. Each coach might teach different things that often don’t build on each other from year to year, and sometimes the things taught might even contradict each other.

2. Some teach too much too early and overwhelm the kids. The players become “Jack of all trades and masters of none”.

3. Some teach only what was taught to them by their former coaches. This would be OK if their former coaches were great teachers of the game. But what if they weren’t? A poor technique might be passed on from generation to generation just because “it’s what my coach taught me.”
4. Most of the time, each coach starts over and tries to teach the game from the ground up. But with
time limitations, each coach can only get so far. Therefore the player only develops so far.

Instead of each coach at each level starting over and teaching the game from the ground up, I have a
vision of coaches, at each level, standing on the shoulders of those before them.

But before we get too deeply into my vision, we have to admit that part of the problem is not simply a
matter of what’s been going on in the past. Another part of the problem is that most of the youth coaches
in our country are simply parents who see a void and want to help. So, what do they teach? Where’s their
curriculum? I really feel for these “parent/coaches”: Here’s a ball, 12 kids, two goals and you’ve got one
hour, twice per week. Teach them how to play right now, because games will begin in a couple of weeks.
What an impossible task!

Can you imagine if we tried to run a school this way? Give a group of first graders to someone who’s not
a trained teacher, has no curriculum and can only teach a couple of times per week for only a few
months? How could we expect them to get to the second grade? And if they do, second grade starts over
with a different system! It’s no wonder that even at our highest levels of basketball, you see 4 players
standing and watching one teammate play one-on-one until he or she forces up a shot against 3
defenders! That’s what they were doing on the playground in the first grade, AND that’s what they’re still
doing in the 12th grade!

You see, under our current system, as each player gets a year older, it usually means a change of teams,
a change of coaches AND therefore, a change of systems. But what if all parties involved were teaching
the game via the same basketball system? What if this system had layers of skills and levels of game
principles that coincided with the players’ age or years of experience in the system? Imagine what would
happen if each coach at each level were on the same page, using the same terminology: Each coach
would not have to start over. He or she could pick up where the previous coach left off and add the next
layer of skills and principles. In this manner, we could truly stand on each other’s shoulders and our
players would reach new heights.

And can you imagine what the coaches at higher levels could do when they apply their knowledge of the
game to players brought up through this type of system? I know for a fact that we don’t see what many
coaches have up their sleeves because the players they inherit or recruit have a mish-mash of incomplete
skills, habits, fundamentals and game principles. The coaches are forced to try to catch players up or fill
in missing gaps in their games or their fundamentals. Many times the coach must settle on an offense that
can best be defined by what their players can’t do!

THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEMS: THE READ & REACT OFFENSIVE SYSTEM
I have a solution to these problems called the READ & REACT OFFENSIVE SYSTEM. And I propose to
you that with my system, any coach can teach any group of players to play offense by principle only.
While developing this system, I had to ask myself, am I being unreasonable? I don’t think so. Consider
this: Players are expected to know how to play one-on-one or two-on-two by principle, but not 5-on-5.
Why is that? We expect them to play 5-on-5 defense by principle. Why not offense?

I admit there’s a certain amount of CHAOS in the game. But it’s what makes the game exciting and
unpredictable. Can we train our players for it? If not, then how do coaches get players who “just know
how to play”; who have “basketball savvy” or a “high basketball I.Q.” If you’re a coach at the college or
higher level, then you recruit them. If you’re coaching below the college level, then you wait and hope. For
the most part, that makes us opportunists, not teachers.

I honestly believe that most coaches want to develop their players to have “that high basketball I.Q.” The
R&R System will teach your players how to play and develop their basketball I.Q., and at times the R&R
system will make a player appear to have a high hoops I.Q., even if he actually doesn’t. No longer will you
have to wait or hope that you accidentally get some players with basketball savvy.
It is possible that the entire R&R Offensive System could be taught to high-level players in a single season. But it could also be taught to our youth; a layer at a time; a year at a time. Can you imagine what our basketball games would look like in a few years if all organizations that deal with different age levels began to teach R&R to all of their teams? The 10 year olds get the first 2 layers, the 11 year olds add the next layer, so forth and so on. The players would have an entire season to “cook” the skills and principles of that particular year until they become “habits of play.” By the time a player was age 15 or 16, R&R would not be AN OFFENSE. It would simply be “offense”; how players play anytime and anywhere!

**IS THIS ANOTHER MOTION OFFENSE?**

Motion offenses are principled offenses, but most demand a high basketball I.Q. and a complete set of skills by all of the players in order to run it. In the traditional type of principled offense, the players without the ball have an almost infinite amount of options depending on where they are, what the ball is doing, and what the situation is. Most players suffer paralysis by analysis and do nothing; at least nothing good.

The R&R System removes the thought process from the movement of the players without the ball. Each player has one and only one reaction to what the ballhandler does. Let me say it another way: each player without the ball READS the teammate with ball and REACTS accordingly with one predetermined movement. This means that the entire offense is built upon very simple, very teachable 2-PLAYER READS & REACTIONS.

Let me illustrate how 5-player coordination can be built from just THREE simple 2-player habits. Remember, this is only a piece of the dribble penetration part of the R&R offense. The real strength lies in the synergy created from combining the passing, cutting, penetrating, screening, and post play habits of the offense.

First, let’s look at the THREE simple READS that can be drilled to the point of habitual REACTION:

**(EDITOR’S NOTE: All Diagrams can be found on page 6 of this handout)**

**Diagram A (Drill A): PERIMETER CIRCLE MOVEMENT:**

- READ: If the ball drives RIGHT to the goal, then players without the ball CIRCLE to the next spot on their RIGHT. If the ball drives LEFT to the goal, then players without the ball CIRCLE to the next spot on their LEFT.
- In the diagram, #1 drives baseline going RIGHT. #2 and #3 illustrate the CIRCLE MOVEMENT required. Notice that #2 rotates into the spot that #1 vacated.
- #1 pretends to be stopped and pitches to #3 or back to the SAFETY VALVE position filled by #2.

**Diagram B (Drill B): THE OPPOSITE CORNER NATURAL PITCH FOR BASELINE DRIVES:**

- Whether the ball is driven baseline from the wing or corner, the opposite corner must be filled by THE CLOSEST PLAYER TO THE CORNER on the opposite side of the floor. In this diagram, the opposite wing #2 mirrors the baseline drive by #1.
- In Diagram C, if #4 is not already in the corner, he or she must READ the baseline drive by #1 and flatten to the corner.
- #1 must avoid the charge in the lane and pass to the opposite corner (usually behind the backboard).

**Diagram C (Drill C): POST SLIDE DRILL: Post Reaction When the Ball is Driven into the Lane BELOW the Post:**
#1 drives baseline BELOW post player #4 or #5 or both; Regardless of which side the post(s) are located, they must READ the drive and REACT by sliding up to the FT line elbow.

#1 pretends to be stopped from scoring and passes to the post for the shot.

Note: Even though the diagram shows three players, the REACTION stems from a two-player READ: the post player and the ballhandler.

MOVING TO 5 PLAYERS: WILL THE 2-PLAYER HABITS CONTRADICT EACH OTHER?

Now let's apply these three simple HABITS, that is, three simple 2-PLAYER READS & REACTIONS to a team of 5 players. Will the players need more instructions other than their 2-player Read & React habits? Will their individual slides destroy their other teammates' spacing and opportunities to score? Furthermore, will these slides work without contradiction in the three most common sets: 5 OUT, 4 OUT – 1 IN, and 3 OUT – 2 IN? Let’s find out…

Diagram D: 5 OUT: #1 drives baseline going right. Each player reads the drive and reacts by habit: #2, 3, and 4 circle RIGHT to the next perimeter “spot” (Drill A). #5 stays in the corner for the natural Pitch (Drill B).

Diagram E: 5 OUT: From the penetrator’s viewpoint (#1), the following “windows” are filled by teammates:

- NATURAL PITCH OPPOSITE CORNER: filled by #5
- 45 DEGREE PITCH: filled by #4
- 90 DEGREE PITCH: filled by #3
- SAFETY VALVE POSITION: filled by #2

Diagram F: 4 OUT-1 IN: #1 drives baseline going right. Each player reads the drive and reacts by habit: #2 and #3 circle RIGHT to the next perimeter “spot” (Drill A). #4 flattens to the corner (Drill B). #5 slides up the lane to the FT line elbow (Drill C).

Diagram G: 4 OUT-1 IN: From the penetrator’s viewpoint (#1), the following “windows” are filled by teammates:

- NATURAL PITCH OPPOSITE CORNER: filled by #4
- 45 DEGREE PITCH: filled by #5
- 90 DEGREE PITCH: filled by #3
- SAFETY VALVE POSITION: filled by #2

Diagram H: 3 OUT-2 IN: #1 drives baseline going right. Each player reads the drive and reacts by habit: #2 circles RIGHT to the next perimeter “spot” (Drill A). #3 flattens to the corner (Drill B). #4 and #5 slide up to the FT line elbows (Drill C).

Diagram I: 3 OUT-2 IN: From the penetrator’s viewpoint (#1), the following “windows” are filled by teammates:

- NATURAL PITCH OPPOSITE CORNER: filled by #3
- 45 DEGREE PITCH: filled by #5
- 90 DEGREE PITCH: filled by #4
- SAFETY VALVE POSITION: filled by #2

RESULTS: If you haven’t noticed, compare Diagrams E, G, and I. The same “windows” have been filled regardless of the “Set”.

a. Spacing is preserved and is consistent. Therefore the defense is stretched.

b. The penetrator has room to get to the rim and score.

c. The penetrator KNOWS EXACTLY where his or her teammates will be, regardless of what formation the team is in. From the penetrator’s standpoint, there’s no need to hunt for an open teammate: if help defense blocks the goal, then pass to the spot where the help defense came from. It’s that simple.
d. It’s a rehearsed read and a rehearsed pass and a rehearsed shot, regardless of which teammate is open.

e. Regardless of formation, there’s always one or two players in position to be back on defense.

NOTE: This “Baseline Drive Scenario” illustrated in the diagrams is one small piece of the R&R offense. It is an example of 5-player coordination derived from 2-player habits. At the risk of being repetitive, I’ll say it again: the rest of the offense is built the same way without changing or contradicting the three habits obtained in Drills A, B, and C.

ADVANTAGES OF BUILDING AN OFFENSE IN THIS MANNER:
As illustrated in diagrams A, B, and C, the 2-PLAYER READS & REACTIONS that make up the offense are taught through a series of drills. These drills (that come with the R&R offense DVD package, even down to the detail of how to rotate through each drill) can be run by 5 players, 4 players, 3 players, and as few as 2 players and 1 coach. What good is that? These drills can make up your entire pre-season or off-season workouts! Not only will your players be getting in the needed reps for shooting, dribbling, passing, screening, etc., but you’ll be building your offense at the same time. In this manner you can have 90% of you man-to-man and zone offense engrained in your players before your season begins!
These 2-PLAYER READS & REACTIONS must become HABITS in order for the offense to work. Habits do not require thinking. They require repetition. The advantage is obvious: anyone can be taught a habit with enough drill and repetition.

Once these HABITS are instilled in your players, the READ & REACT OFFENSE will never require the players to break those habits as the system is developed to higher and higher levels. If your players learned these habits at age 10, they'll be the same habits needed for the offense when they're 20-years-old!

The glue that ties these 2-PLAYER READS & REACTIONS together into a coordinated 5-PLAYER Offense are contained in a few simple rules described as LAYERS in the offense. These layers build upon each other, which means:

1. New layers will not contradict previous layers.
2. The sum of the layers is greater than each layer in itself. This means we’re building coordination of the whole offensive game, not just some specialized parts.
3. Each new habit of each new layer dovetails into the previous habits learned by your players. It’s a progression and it’s easy to explain “why” to your players. When players and coach are on the same page, good things happen.
4. A team can begin to play together and experience success with as few as the first 3 layers of the 17-layered system! In other words, mastery of the whole is not required in order to see immediate success.
5. A player who has mastered the first 3 layers (as an example) can still play with a teammate who’s mastered the first 5 layers. The less-developed player will not hinder the abilities of the more developed player. Now your team is no longer only as strong as your weakest link.

What will you have when your team has successfully learned the R&R System:

1. You'll have a FRAMEWORK out of which your players can play in any situation.
2. No opponent can scout you successfully again.
3. You'll have an offense that only gets better with time.
4. Your defense will be better than ever because they can’t “play the play” during practice! They must honestly defend each moment in practice.
5. You'll have an offense that allows players to naturally hide their weaknesses and play to their strengths.
6. Your offense will accommodate any style of play and any combination of players. If you have a strong inside game, then you never play 5-OUT. On the other hand, if 5 guards are your best players, then no problem: Having one or more dominant post players is not required.
7. If you like or need set plays, then run them. They will not hurt the R&R offense. Look at it this way: If your play doesn’t work (and we know how many times that happens in a game!), then your players aren’t lost. They can take advantage of whatever opportunity is there, or whatever the defense has taken away, and still play together in a coordinated 5-player attack.

To conclude, the READ & REACT OFFENSIVE SYSTEM should be the bedrock of every team’s offense. The coaches already using it will tell you that the reason they like it is the same reason the players like it: “In the final analysis, it's just basketball”. Players have a chance to “be all that they can be”, and coaches will have the methods, drills, structure and most importantly, the time to teach the game they love.