Ball Skills and Footwork

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Introduction to Ball Skills and Footwork

This study guide on ball skills and footwork will cover a plethora of offensive and defensive notions. Ball skills refers to all types of ball handling predominately dribbling and passing, and the footwork discussed in this study guide will be centered around dribble penetration and on the ball defense.

The Most Essential Skills

The *Skill Development Study Guide* on shooting described the shot as the most difficult fundamental to coach. This study guide will explain why ball skills and footwork are the most essential skills for a player to have at any level of play.

The turnover margin in basketball has a significant correlation between a team winning and losing. Most turnovers are a result of poor dribbling, passing, or footwork. Coaches hold a premium on players with ball skills and sound footwork because those players are a liability on offense. A player not capable of handling the basketball will not be given the opportunity to control the ball in a team's offense because of his increased potential of turning the ball over. The result is an offense forced to play 4 on 5 because the defense does not need to account for the player who does not handle the ball in the offense due to his inferior ball skills. Coaches need players who are a threat to handle the basketball and put pressure on the defense, which is why good ball skills and footwork will guarantee an athlete's playing time.

Important Dribbling Principles

This section on important dribbling principles will cover a couple of topics central to being effective with the dribble.

Pound the Ball

When a player dribbles the basketball, it is important they do not bounce the ball off the ground but instead pound the basketball into the floor. The ball handler should have the mentality of trying to put a dent in the court from the power behind his dribble. It is important to pound the dribble in order to minimize the gaps of time the ball is not controlled by the player's hand. The harder the ball is dribbled the faster the ball reaches the floor and the quicker it bounces back to the player's hand, which gives the ball handler more control. Additionally, the ball becomes more difficult to steal. The on ball defender may slightly tip the ball, but if the ball handler is pounding his dribble the ball will not change its trajectory.

The player must use his entire arm to pound his dribble. Young players often make the mistake of dribbling using only their wrist, which makes the ball easier to steal. A good ball handler not only uses his wrist, but also fully extends his elbow and generates power from his shoulder.

The Crossover

This study guide is not designed to go into great detail and describe every kind of crossover from between the legs to behind the back. This section will simply point out key elements in effective crossovers.

A crossover is one quick dribble which generally switches the ball from one hand to the other and results in the player changing direction. A good crossover dribble is always low, below the knees, and, as the definition states, very quick. While a good player should pound every dribble, there must be additional power behind a crossover which "rips" the ball across the ball handler's body. Furthermore, great crossovers incorporate deception. This sense of deception is often accomplished from the ball handler taking and exaggerated step in the opposite direction of the crossover. For example, if a player is executing a standard right to left crossover he will attack his defender with his right foot before planting the same foot and pushing off to change direction to the left. A savvy ball handler will also learn how to make fakes with his head, shoulders, and eyes to compliment his crossover.

Dribble Drive Concepts

The topics in the following sections break down catching the ball on the perimeter, and performing a dribble drive to the paint. It is important to remember basketball is a game which values an economy of motion. These sections will illustrate the value of efficiency in a player's dribble drive.

The Shoulders Game

The shoulders game is played between the offensive and defensive player before the ball touches the floor. As soon as the offensive player catches the ball his goal is to get his shoulders lower than his defender's. The player who drops his shoulders the lowest normally wins because he is the quicker player based off his greater knee bend. It is worth nothing the shoulders game cannot be won by bending over at the waist, but only from keeping the back straight and bending at the knee. The shoulders game is a manifestation of the low-to-high theory.

The Quick First Step and Shoulders-Hips

It is common to hear an individual comment on a basketball player as having a quick first step. Although these players may be naturally quick athletes, they have learned to maximize their stride on the first step. A common theme in basketball is minimizing the number of steps it takes for a player to move from one spot to another. The fewer steps a player takes the more efficient they become and often quicker. Therefore, a quick first step is actually the result of taking a large step covering significant ground.

In addition, an advantageous first step goes shoulder-hips. This concept means the ball handler attacks his shoulder to his defender's opposite hip. When a player goes shoulder-hips, it is difficult for the defender to slide his feet in front of the drive, and provides the ball handler with power and balance.

Separating with the Dribble

The last section covered how a big first step creates an advantage and how shoulder-hips provides power to the drive. This section will explain how the dribble is used to separate from the on ball defender.

After the ball handler takes his first step attacking his shoulder to his defender's hip, he must utilize a reach dribble to create separation from his defender. A reach dribble is when a player reaches his arm out in front of his body and pushes the basketball away from his body. The frequent mistake made here is the ball handler placing the dribble right off his own hip and not out in front of his body. When the player dribbles the ball right next to himself, he is caught waiting on the ball, slowing him down, and is more susceptible to having the ball tapped out of his control from behind. Similar to a player's desire to minimize his steps, a player wants to eradicate useless dribbles which cause him to be stagnant.

Body-to-Body Drives

Body-to –body drives emphasize the principles outlined in the shoulders-hips section. When a player attacks his defender's hip he does not want to leave a space between him and his defender. Once the offensive player gets even with his defender, meaning the on ball defender is on the ball handler's hip, the ball handler has an advantage. The ball handler can capitalize on this advantage if he drives in a straight line to the rim. If the ball handler bows out his drive and does not go straight to the hoop, the defender is given extra space and time to recover and stop the drive. Straight line drives put a great amount of pressure on defenses because they force help to come stop the ball. When help is forced to stop the drive, defensive rotation begins and the offense has a numbers advantage because there are two players on the driver.

The Jab Step

The jab step is used to get the defense off balance and provide space for the ball handler. A player with a superb jab step has developed outstanding footwork and learned to control his pivot.

4 Inches

Players generally are more comfortable and more effective when their non-dominate foot is their pivot. For example, right handed players normally plant their left foot as a pivot and jab with their right (this is reversed for left handed players.) The player should maintain low-to-high principles on the jab step and keep his body centered over his feet. It is important for the player not to throw his body out over his toes because this will cause him to be off balance and slow to change direction. The goal is to get the defender off balance, not yourself. In order to maintain balance, a ball handler should not step more than 4 inches on any jab. A larger step would create a base which is too wide and cause the player to be slow to react.

Hip to Knee

Hip to knee refers to the ball fake that should accompany a jab step. A player should catch the ball and get into triple threat and put the ball into their shooting pocket at the hip. When a player jabs he should quickly rip the basketball from his hip to the knee with which he is jabbing. This hip to knee movement should simulate the ball handler preparing to dribble. In order to improve the jab step, a player must learn to use their shoulders and head to add additional fakes to freeze the defender.

The Eyes Game

The eyes game was alluded to earlier in the crossover section. This is a game the offensive player plays in order to get the defense guessing on what might happen. If a player makes a jab to the right he should also look the defender off with his eyes, focused to the right, before changing direction to the left.

The eyes game can be utilized in many different ways other than the jab step. For example, a player can put his head and eyes down to the ground on his drive to have defense anticipate him driving hard to the rim, then pull up for a jump shot. The opposite can work as well, the player can fix his eyes on the rim to make the defense assume a shot before he drives hard to the paint. The eyes game is also used effectively in pass and shot fakes.

Defending the Drive

Now that the offensive strategy for dribble penetration has been explained, it is appropriate to discuss how to defend a player one on one. The topics which will be covered include: proper defensive stance, closeouts, defensive cushion, and where to force the ball handler.

Defensive Stance

As mentioned earlier, the on ball defender plays the shoulders game with the ball handler. Players often hear their coaches tell them to get lower, but what does this really mean? Player may become confused about how low is low enough. The shoulders game solves this dilemma and requires the defender to drop his shoulder below the shoulders of the man he is guarding. After a player is low, he should make sure his feet are slightly wider than his

shoulders and his weight is on the balls of his feet. The player's butt should be down, back straight, and his eyes should be focused on the ball handler's belly button.

In the event the ball handler drives the defender, should slide his feet to a spot ahead of the driver without crossing his feet. When a player crosses his feet there is a possibility of tripping himself. It is important a defender does not gallop and bob his head up and down. The defender's head should stay level ensuring he stays low. A common mistake defenders make guarding the drive is sliding to where the offensive player is instead of in front of where the offensive player will be. If a defender slides to where the ball handler is, he will be late getting to the spot, and the driver will already be passed him.

Hands High, Arms Wide

The toughest part of defense is the closeout. A closeout occurs when a defensive player is forced to sprint out his man with the ball from helpside defense. When a player closes out a ball handler, who still has his dribble, the defender must sprint the first 2/3s of the distance between him and the ball. The last 1/3 of the distance the defender must drop his butt, and chop his feet slowing his momentum. The closeout defender should have his hands high to contest a potential shot, but as soon as the ball handler dribbles, the defender should drop his arms wide into potential passing lanes. This is the essence of Hands High, Arms Wide. When a player closes out his arms should be straight up with his shoulders back and back straight to maintain balance.

Force the Long Two

All shots are not created equal, some shots are harder than others and some shots are worth 3 points and others are worth 2 points. This is important to remember when playing on the ball defense. A good defender dictates what kind of shot the offensive player takes. For instance, the goal of a defender guarding a player on the perimeter is to guard him tight enough to run him off the 3pt line. The defense does not want to give up 3pt shots in general for the simple fact that they are worth more than 2pt attempts. However, the defense does not want to give up layups either because these are such high percentage shots. This is why the goal of a defender should be to only allow the long two, it is a lower percentage shot than a layup and worth less than a 3pt shot. This is done by guarding ball handlers tight on catches behind the 3pt line and backing off, giving them cushion, when they dribble. This cushion makes it easier for the defender to keep the offensive player from driving by them for a layup and entice the ball handler to take a low percentage 2pt shot.

This is why every great perimeter scorer in the NBA has been blessed with a great mid-range game. This applies to Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, and currently Kevin Durant. These players excel by taking advantage of the opportunities defenses give them

Push Areas

Similar to forcing the long two, push area are designed to funnel the ball handler into a desired position for defense. These push areas are ones generally accepted by coaches, but it is important for players to follow the defensive strategy installed by their current coach. These push areas follow the personal defensive philosophy of the author, and may potentially conflict with other views.

A defensive player funnels a player to a push area by shading the ball handler to the side of the offensive player's body opposite of the push area. To illustrate, image a right handed player with the ball at the top of the key. Whenever a player is guarding the ball at the top of the key, the defender should force the offensive player to his weak side. In this case, the player's weak hand is his left, so the push area is towards the left wing. The defender then shades the ball handler to the right side of the offensive player's body to force the drive to the left wing or push area.
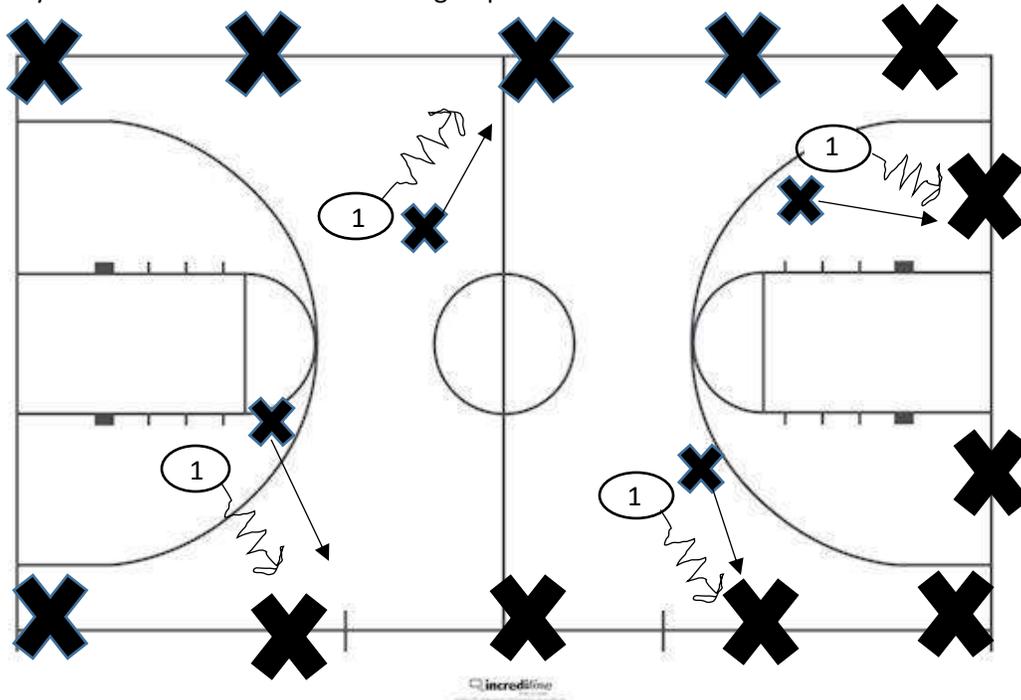
The location of push areas on the floor changes with the location of the ball handler. For instance, whenever the ball is on either wing, the push areas are in the deep corner and short corner on the baseline. However, if a great player has the ball on the wing, the defense wants to push the star player to the middle to force him into the crowds. It is easier for a great player to isolate a defender going baseline than going middle because there is less help.

Important Passing Principles

A player increases his passing skills as he becomes more comfortable with the ball, and most of all, as his knowledge of the game increases. It is common to hear a player described as having great vision or court sense, but these things are not a result of physical skills as much as mental ones. It is the understanding of how defenses react in certain situations and awareness of where your teammates are and will be that leads to great vision. Knowledge of the game is the best developed from playing and

watching basketball, and for this reason, this portion of the study guide surrounding passing principles is somewhat abbreviated.

Types of Passes

While there are many forms of passing the ball including over-head pass, baseball pass, and others, this study guide will concentrate on the two most popular: the chest pass and bounce pass. The chest pass is the most widely used form of passing because it is the quickest and most efficient. The key to remember when throwing a chest pass is to throw the ball through the recipient's chest and not to his chest. The pass should be on a line with little or no arc. The ball must get from passer to teammate as fast as possible in order to reduce the chance of a steal by the defense. The longer the ball is in the air, the greater the amount of time provided to the defense to shift into position. The bounce pass should be thrown with ample velocity as well for the same reasons. The ball should hit the floor 2/3s of the way to the recipient of the pass. This ensures the ball does not bounce too high or too low to the passer's teammate. The bounce pass is used most efficient for a pass made through congestion and in transition.

Entering the Post

Passing the ball from the wing into the post is becoming a lost skill particularly at the high school level. Often players do not even look at a post player, with position on the block, out of ignorance. When the ball finally is thrown inside it is often tipped or off target causing the post player to lose his position. A good post player will always give the ball handler a target to establish where he want the pass thrown. It becomes the ball handler's job to deliver the pass to the target provided. Often players ignore the target given to them and throw a pass merely in the vicinity of their teammate. Coaches often encourage a

bounce pass into the post, but this causes the post player to catch the ball low to the ground which compromises his height advantage. When a post player catches the ball at his knees, it is easy for guards to double down on the post and rip the ball out. For this reason, it should be encouraged to throw the ball in high to the post whenever possible so the post can catch the ball high, and keep it high, as he makes his move to score.