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PICK & ROLL: THE COMPLETE COACH'S REFERENCE

The whole pick-and-roll guide in one place: the ball-screen mindset, the coverage menu and when to use each one, a six-step teaching progression, what the analytics demand, and how it all changes for junior players. The overview has the short version.

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Synthesised from 1,158 unique pick-and-roll passages across 225 episodes of The Basketball Podcast, 67 of them with five or more ball screen mentions. Contributors include NBA and WNBA head coaches and assistants, EuroLeague and NBL coaches, and skill development specialists.

OFFENSIVE PHILOSOPHY: THE BALL SCREEN MINDSET

The most consistent theme from offensive coaches: the ball screen is a tool for seeking and exploiting advantages, not a play to be run.

> *"Ball screen, dribble handoff: these are our meat and potatoes. But they're not a system. They're a way of finding advantages and letting our players read and react to what the defence gives."*
>
> College head coach, Stanford background

Direct to ball screen

Limits decision-making for the ball handler and forces the defence to react quickly. Favoured by coaches who believe pace and directness create the most chaos for on-ball defenders.

Movement before the screen

Pin-downs, flares, dribble handoffs, and ghost actions before the ball screen can free up the ball handler and create better angles. Favoured in the college game where athletes have more time to read.

Spain PnR: the hardest action to guard

The back pick on the defender of the ball handler as the screen is being set eliminates the hedge/show option. Works especially well with shooters spaced in corners, forcing the defence to make two simultaneous choices. One NBA championship assistant: 'Once you've got shooters spread, a Spain action with a good roller is almost unguardable.'

Multiple NBA assistants, NBL, and European coaches

> **Screen angle: the most undercoached element**
>
> *Where the screener's feet are set, what direction the angle puts the defender: these change the entire read for the ball handler. A well-angled screen opens three reads. A poorly angled screen gives one. Teach your screeners to set screens the way your shooters learn to shoot, with precision and purpose.*
>
> WNBA head coach, 15+ professional years

DEFENSIVE COVERAGE SYSTEMS

More total podcast time was dedicated to defending the ball screen than any other topic. The coverage menu every coach is choosing from:

COVERAGE	WHEN TO USE IT	KEY RISK
Drop / Sag	Protects the rim; gives up the pull-up. Use when screener is not a shooting threat.	Gives up mid-range pull-ups; slow recovery = roller layup
Hedge / Show	Forces ball handler to use dribbles retreating. Effective with quick bigs who recover fast.	Requires exceptional big mobility; slow recover = open corner 3
Flat Hedge / Cup	Compromise: big meets ball handler at lower height, recovers faster. Common in WNBA.	Good pull-up shooters can get clean mid-range
Ice / Force Sideline	Push ball handler to sideline, big walls baseline. Effective on sideline sets.	Strong off-hand can exploit; pistol/DHO counters it
Switch	Eliminates all gaps; creates mismatches. Popular with positionless rosters.	Skill/size mismatches; requires all 5 comfortable switching
Trap / Blitz	Forces quick decision with double team. Highest-turnover coverage by analytics.	4-on-3 if trap is broken; requires elite rotation discipline
Go Under	Defender goes underneath; concedes pull-up to take away drive.	Never use against elite three-point shooters

> **Build PnR defence into your shell from day one**
>
> *Ball screen is now so dominant it should be embedded in your shell defence from session one. Start 4-on-4 with side pick and rolls from day one. Your players will never understand where to be in help unless they first understand how ball screen changes all the positioning.*
>
> NBA coach

> **Four questions that determine your coverage**
>
> *1. Can your on-ball defender fight over without getting lost? 2. Is your big quick enough to hedge and recover, or will they give up corner threes? 3. Does the ball handler punish the pull-up or the drive? 4. Are their shooters spaced in a way that punishes your rotations? Answer these honestly and the coverage almost picks itself.*
>
> An NBA assistant coach and a WNBA Coach of the Year

TEACHING PROGRESSIONS

The most commonly described teaching sequence for offensive ball screen concepts:

STEP	FORMAT	WHAT YOU ARE DEVELOPING
1	2-on-0	Ball handler and screener timing; screen angle; the decision to use or reject
2	2-on-1	Ball handler's read based on a single changing variable (defender on ball)
3	2-on-2	The core two-man game: roll vs. pop read, lob vs. short roll, reject vs. use
4	3-on-2 / 3-on-3	Adding a third player introduces kick-out reads and the corner decision
5	4-on-4 shell with PnR	Full rotational defence; where each off-ball defender is on every coverage type
6	5-on-5 live	Full game conditions; connect the practice rep to the competitive situation

> **What an elite ball handler sees out of a ball screen**
>
> *Step 1: Before the screen is set, read where the big's defender is: hedge, drop, or switch? Step 2: As you come off, read the on-ball defender's shoulder. Step 3: Read the roller's defender: tagging, chasing, or switching? Step 4: Read the corners: where is help coming from? This reads as four steps but at elite level happens in under a second.*
>
> A coach with Australian national team and WNBA experience

ANALYTICS AND THE PICK AND ROLL

> *"In 2020, the best half-court offence in the NBA was Dallas at 1.02 points per possession. The worst transition offence was the New York Knicks at 1.03. Every ball screen you run in the half court runs against that benchmark."*
>
> NBA assistant coach

- Layup from roll / lob to roller = highest efficiency shot in basketball (if open)

- Corner three off kick-out from PnR = one of the three most efficient shot types
- Mid-range pull-up off PnR = least efficient shot type: the 'long two' problem
- Best offences convert ball screen reads into rim attempts or kick-out threes

FOR YOUTH COACHES

3-ON-3 IS THE IDEAL TEACHING FORMAT

Three-on-three gives you one ball handler, one screener, one kick-out receiver: the exact structure of a ball screen situation. High repetition, representative decisions, manageable for coaches to observe. Multiple coaches said they would run 90% of their ball screen teaching in 3-on-3 before going to 5-on-5.

Multiple coaches: NBA, international, college, and youth

TEACH THE VOCABULARY BEFORE THE READS

Before teaching hedge vs. drop vs. switch, players need to be able to see the screen happening. Simplified progression: first FEEL the screen (physical contact cue). Then LOOK before using it. Then READ what the screener's defender is doing. Only then introduce coverage-specific reads.

FIBA coaching education research

FROM UNDER-16: THE ANSWER TO A SWITCH

Once players can feel the screen, look and read, teach what to do when the defence switches. Attack it straight away, before the big settles in front of the ball. If a small ends up on your screener, the screener pins them on their back and goes to the front of the rim, and the ball goes back to the wing and then inside.

Nick Nurse, FIBA clinic

The most important idea about pick and roll, across all 225 episodes

The pick and roll is not a play. It is a principle: create a two-on-two advantage and let your players read what the defence does about it. Coaches who teach it as a sequence of steps get players who execute steps. Coaches who teach it as a problem-reading tool get players who can play basketball.

RELATED GUIDES

Part of The Basketball Podcast Library. See also the guides on off-ball screening, transition and game-based practice, or browse all coaching resources. Back to the pick & roll overview.

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