

# Zone Buster Manual

*A guide to implementing the “No Zone” rule  
in U12 and U14 competitions.*



## Using this Guide

This guide is designed to assist with the implementation of Basketball Australia's "no zone defence" rule in U12 and U14 competitions. It provides:

- Explanation of why the rule is important;
- Practical examples to determine whether or not a team is playing "zone";
- Guide for the supervisors ("zone busters") who implement the rule.

Basketball Australia would like to thank the following people who have provided particular assistance in developing this guide:

- Mr Chris Riches, Development Manager, Basketball Queensland
- Mr Marty Handson, Country Development Manager, Basketball Victoria Country Council
- Mr Peter Lonergan, NITP Head Coach, Basketball New South Wales
- Brad Dalton.

This guide has a companion video resource, which will help "zone busters", parents, coaches and players understand how the rule is implemented.

This guide, and the accompanying video resource, may be freely reproduced, copied and distributed.

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## Part 1 – What is the “No Zone” rule?

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Basketball Australia has implemented a “no zone” rule at the Australian Under 14 Club Championships. Basketball Australia recommends that this rule be implemented in all U14 (and younger) competitions.

### ***Definition – Zone Defence***

Any defence played in the half court which does not incorporate normal man to man defensive principles shall be considered to be a zone. For this purpose, trapping defences which rotate back to man to man defensive principles are acceptable.

### ***Violations of Man to Man Defence***

The use of man to man defence is integral to the championships and accordingly, specific observers will observe games for the purpose of determining any team that is not executing acceptable man to man defensive principles.

Violations of the “no zone” rule will generally fall within one of the following categories:

1. One or more players were not in an acceptable man to man defensive position in relation to the player they are guarding and the player with the ball;
2. A cutter moved all the way through the key and was not defended using acceptable man to man defensive techniques (for example, “bumping” the cutter, following the cutter or switching);
3. Following a trapping or help and recover situation the team made no attempt to re-establish man to man defensive positioning;
4. The team zone pressed and did not assume man to man defensive positioning once the ball had been advanced into the quarter court.

### ***Penalties for use of Zone Defence***

An official observer (“zone buster”) is appointed to each game at the championship and will be introduced to the Head Coaches, Scoretable Chairperson and Referees prior to the game.

### **Speak to the coach**

During the game, the “zone buster” may speak to the coach if they are concerned that the team (or any player) is not playing to acceptable man to man defensive principles. It is preferable that the zone buster speak to the coach prior to any penalty being imposed, however the deliberate and pre-meditated use of a zone defence at a critical time in a game may be penalized immediately.

### **Technical Foul**

If the “zone buster” believes a violation has occurred (ie a team or player is not playing acceptable man to man defensive principles) they will ask the Scoretable Chairperson to request at the next dead ball, the referees to charge a Technical Foul – Personal Unsportsmanlike on the head coach of the offending team.

Importantly, the referee does not have to determine whether or not a violation occurred. That decision rests solely with the “zone buster”.

### **Second Technical Foul – disqualification of head coach**

If the same team incurs a second violation, a technical foul is called and the head coach will be disqualified from the game.

### **Third Technical Foul – disqualification of assistant coach**

If the same team incurs a third violation a technical foul is called and the assistant coach will be disqualified from the game.

### ***Violations throughout the Championship***

If a team has been penalized for playing “zone defence” in two or more games during the Championship, the Championship Technical Committee may take further disciplinary action including, but not limited to, disqualification and loss of points.

### ***Benefit of the doubt with Defensive team***

This rule has been introduced for the development of individual and team skills. It has not been introduced to penalize:

- Lazy defence;
- Poor coaching;
- Tired players;
- Poorly executed man to man defence.

Accordingly, if there is any doubt as to whether or not a team is playing acceptable man to man defensive principles, the benefit of the doubt will be given to the defensive team.

## Part 2 – Why has the rule been introduced?

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The “no zone” rule was introduced to the Australian U14 Club Championships in 1996, after considerable discussion by both Basketball Australia’s Coaches Commission and Junior Commission.

Prior to the rule being introduced the views of coaches from around Australia were canvassed, with the majority of those coaches supporting the exclusive use of man defence at U14 and younger age groups. Coaching resources produced by FIBA (basketball’s international body) also support this view.

Prior to the rule being introduced a number of teams at the U14 Championships played zone defence and research indicated that proportionately few players from these teams (even when those teams had been successful) went onto national development programs such as the Australian Junior Camp.

The defensive principles of rotation, “help and recover”, containment, vision of the entire court and positioning relative to both your player and the ball are important fundamentals that underpin most, if not all, defensive philosophies.

The rationale for the introduction of the “no zone” (in the half court) rule is that zone defences at those age groups can limit the development of individual and team skills. For example, driving opportunities are limited and players often do not have the muscular strength and coordination to shoot, with good technique, from the perimeter or throw “skip” passes. This reduces the need for defensive skills such as “closing out” and positioning.

Whilst the “no zone” rule focuses on the defence, it was introduced to enhance the development of both offensive and defensive skills. Indeed, as you will see later in this manual – it is up to the offence, through ball and player movement, to “prove” that it is a zone defence.

It is important to remember that the “no zone” rule applies only in the half court and zone presses and trapping defences are allowed, if they fall back to man to man principles in the quarter court.

### Part 3 – How is the Rule Implemented?

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#### *Not a decision for the referees*

It is not for referees to adjudicate whether or not a zone defence is being played and at the Australian 14 Club Championships an independent “zone buster” is appointed to each game. This person needs a reasonably high level of knowledge as it can at times be difficult to determine whether or not a team is playing zone defence.

The “zone busters” must also have the experience and confidence to speak with team coaches to explain any concern they have regarding the defence being played. Such discussions can avoid most situations (a technical foul is a last resort) and the “zone buster” must have a good understanding of man to man principles.

Basketball Australia does not recommend placing the responsibility for determining whether the defence is acceptable upon the referees. They have enough to do!

#### *An honour system?*

It is a reality in many competitions, particularly at local association level, that it would be impossible to roster a “zone buster” to every game. Indeed, even at the Australia Championships, one “zone buster” may be responsible for two or three games. However, at local level even this is often not feasible.

Any association or competition though can adopt the philosophy that zone defence should not be played at under 14 level. If it is made a rule of the competition, most coaches are unlikely to deliberately breach the rule by playing a zone defence in the half court. Accordingly, an “honour” system can be highly effective.

If there are concerns about the defence played by a particular team during the season, then a “zone buster” could be asked to observe the team. If the team is playing a zone defence (or at least not playing acceptable man to man principles) it may be valuable to provide education for the coach on how to teach acceptable man to man principles. At local level, where the coach may be a mother, father or older brother or sister, it would not be surprising if they needed some help.



**Part 4 – What is a “Zone Defence”?**

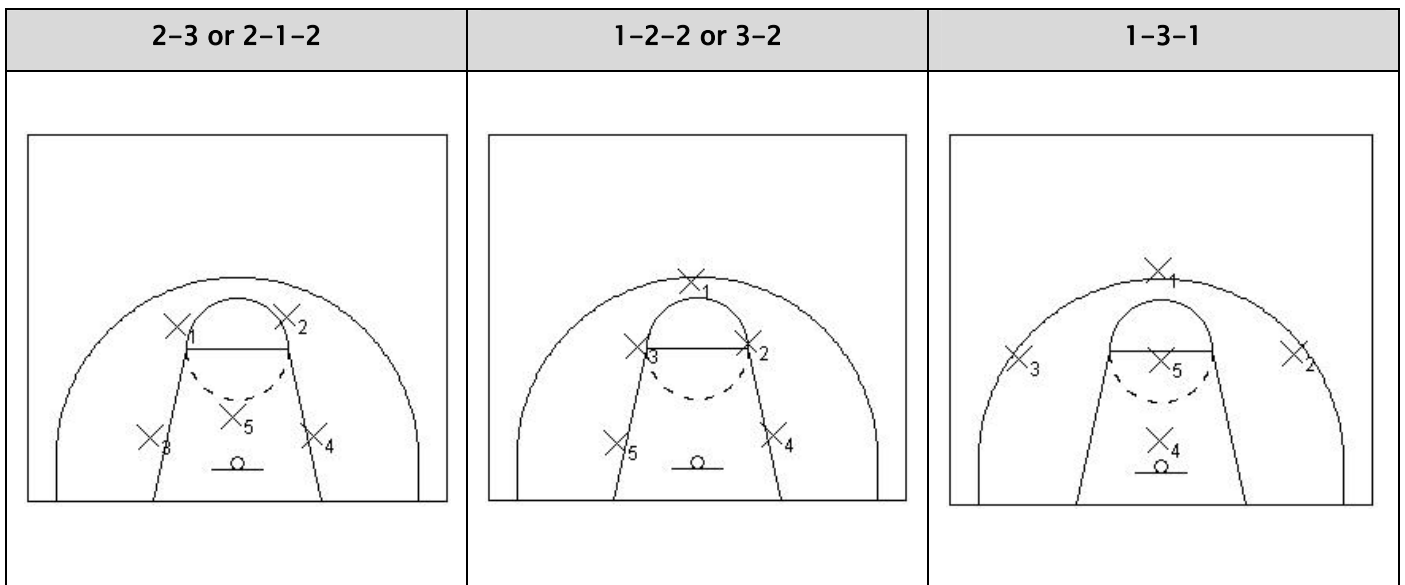
***Guarding an Area***

Zone defense is a form of team defense where each player becomes responsible for defending both an area of the court, and any opponent who may be in that area. When five players work together in a zone it can become a very formidable defense.

Zone defenses are primarily designed to protect the area near the basket. This essentially means that the offensive team will be forced to take lower percentage, perimeter shots”.

***Common examples***

There are a number of common zone defence alignments, such as:



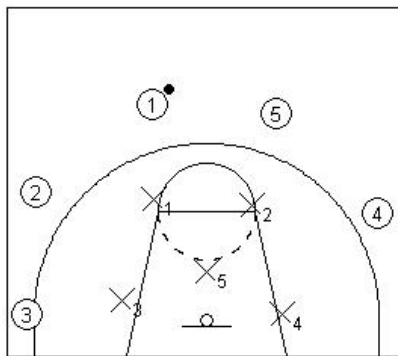
These defenses when played in the quarter court stay typically within the boundary of the three-point line and primarily clog the keyway area. This often forces the offensive team to shoot from the perimeter (and indeed are designed to have this effect), which can be detrimental to the technique development of younger athletes. It also reduces driving opportunities which hampers the development of close-out and rotation skills.

***Guarding Many or Guarding No One***

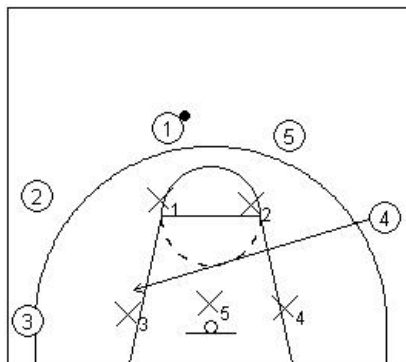
The result of the zone defence is that one player may be responsible for guarding a number of players, or may not have anyone in their area at all.

For example, in the diagram below, the following defensive assignments would probably apply, if the defence were in zone:

- $X_1$  would guard  $O_1$  or  $O_2$  if they receive the ball
- $X_3$  would guard  $O_3$  if they receive the ball
- $X_2$  would guard  $O_4$  or  $O_5$  if they receive the ball
- $X_4$  and  $X_5$  have no particular defensive responsibility



It would be particularly obvious that  $X_4$  is not guarding a specific player if  $O_4$  were to cut.



We will come back to the importance of offensive movement in determining if a zone defence is being played.

Commonly  $X_4$  and  $X_5$  will “ball watch” rather than maintaining vision of their area (as there are no players in this area). This is poor defensive technique, which is accentuated by playing a zone defence. In man to man defence, whilst some players will undoubtedly “ball watch” there is always a clear responsibility for who they should be seeing.

## Part 5 – Guidelines for Zone Busters

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### *What to do first:*

At the beginning of the game introduce yourself to the head coaches and ask if they have any questions regarding the “no zone” rule. Explain that during the game if you have concerns about a defence being played, you would like to bring that to their attention. Ask them whether you should speak directly to them, or to their assistant.

You should also introduce yourself to the referees and whoever is doing scoretable, so that if you have to impose a penalty they know who you are!

### *Speaking to the Coaches*

Many problems during a game can be resolved by politely speaking with the coaches. For example, “Player X needs to show me that they are playing man to man”.

Be prepared to be specific as to what your concerns are. For example, if a defensive player is standing in the middle of the key and not sufficiently reacting when their player cuts, tell the coach that. It may be the player is tired, playing poor man to man or they could be playing a zone.

Keep your conversation as short as possible and don’t get into an argument with the coach. Explain your concern and hopefully they will then speak to the player. You should be prepared to discuss with a coach after the game if they want clarification from you, provided that they are polite and professional in approaching you.

### *Guidelines for watching the game*

#### **Onus of Proof**

1. The onus of proof lies with the offensive team, which means that they must pass the ball and move so that you can determine whether or not they are playing man to man principles.
2. If the offensive “big” stays on the weakside, their defender can legitimately stay in a “split line” position.

#### **Watch a Number of Play Phases**

3. Often the ball is shot or turned over before you can properly determine if a team is playing a zone.
4. You cannot judge a zone from one offensive or defensive phase. You will need to watch a number of game phases before determining if the defence is playing appropriate man to man.
5. Do not guess. If you are unsure, let the play continue and keep watching.

**Don't worry about the full court**

6. The rule is only concerned with playing man to man principles in the quarter court (effectively the three point line). Teams can play any defence they want in the full court.
7. Just because a player or a number of players run back to their defensive key does not make it a zone defence.

**Don't penalize bad man to man defence**

8. The intention of the rules is to teach good defensive principles and avoid passive, stagnant defences where a big player gets hidden. The rule is not intended to penalize:
  - a. Lazy or poor defence
  - b. Poor coaching
  - c. Tired players
  - d. Player's lost in defensive rotations

**It does not have to be aggressive defence**

9. The rule does not require teams to be playing "denial" defence, where every pass is contested.

**What is the team trying to do**

10. Do take into account the intention of the defensive team – what is the coach telling their players to do?
11. Do take into account the time and state of the game. The deliberate and pre-mediated use of a zone defence at a critical time in the game should be acted upon immediately.
12. Do NOT take into account the opinions of players, coaches or spectators

**Teams can Trap**

13. Teams may trap in the quarter court and may stay in a "zone" alignment for one pass, after which all players must resume man to man positions. For example, on the trap, 2 players are on the ball and the remaining 3 players may rotate to protect the basket. As 3 players are now guarding 4, they will legitimately "zone".

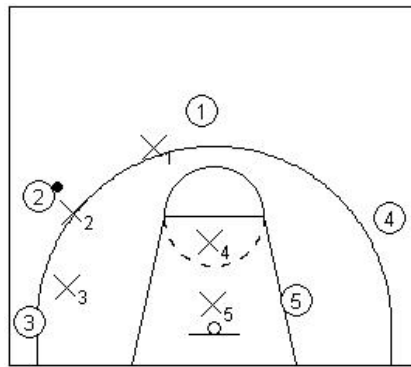
## Part 6 – The “Xs and Os” of proving it’s a zone

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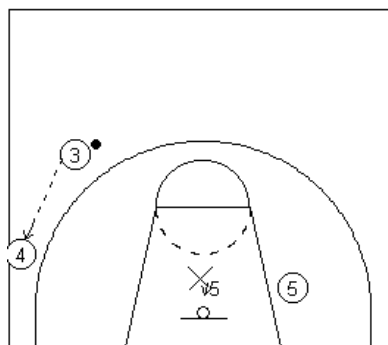
### *Moving a Split Line Defender*

A basic principle of man to man defence is that they closer the player you are guarding is to the ball, the closer to them you need to be. Conversely, the further away they are from the ball, the further away you can be.

When players are on the weakside (opposite to the ball) a man to man defender will adopt a split line position – in the middle of the court. In the diagram below, both X<sub>4</sub> and X<sub>5</sub> are playing on the split line.



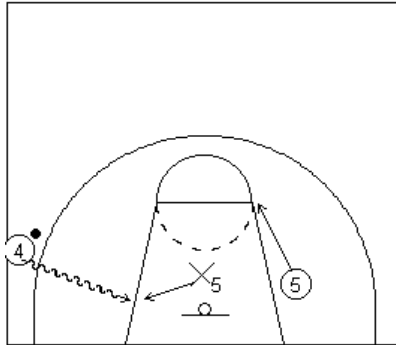
Below are some examples of situations, where it might look like the defense is playing zone, but the offence has not done enough to “prove” zone.



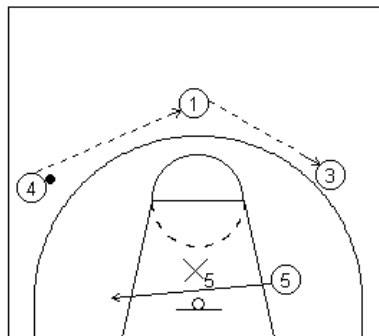
When O<sub>3</sub> has the ball, X<sub>5</sub> can adopt a “split line” position in the middle of the key. If the ball is passed to O<sub>4</sub>, X<sub>5</sub> can maintain this split line position.

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If the ball stays on one side and O<sub>5</sub> stays still, X<sub>5</sub> is adhering to man-to-man principles even though they are just staying in the middle of the key.



Having O<sub>5</sub> cut from low to high can be a useful way to prove a zone. However, the timing of the cut is important. If O<sub>4</sub> has already started to drive to the basket, X<sub>5</sub> can rotate to help and not react to the cut by O<sub>5</sub>.

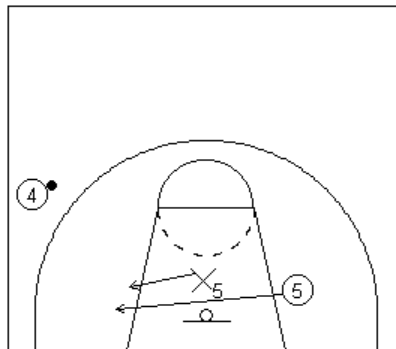


Moving the ball from one side of the court to another can be effective in establishing whether a defender is playing a zone.

However, if O<sub>5</sub> also cuts from one side to another, X<sub>5</sub> can maintain a “split line” position in the middle of the key although X<sub>5</sub> should make some movement in reaction to the cut (eg bump the cutter).

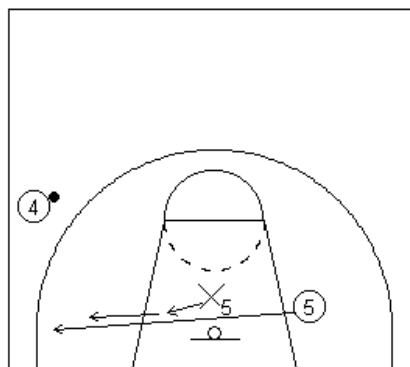
To prove a defender is playing zone defense requires specific movement from the offence. Here are some ways to do it:

**Cut to the ballside**



Once you have identified a defender that you think might be playing a zone, have a player cut to the ballside. This will require movement by the defender and they cannot stay on the split line.

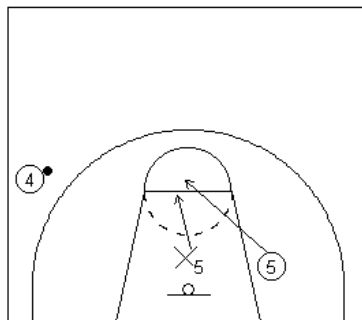
**Move to the perimeter - ballside**



If the offensive player cuts to a post position, it may still be difficult to determine what defense  $X_5$  is playing as many teams guard a post player from behind.

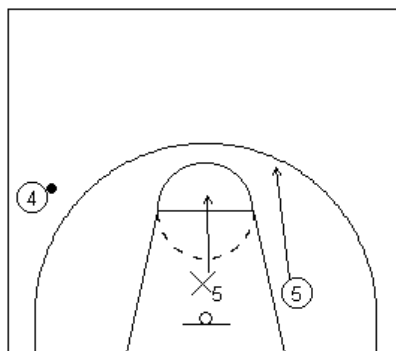
By moving to the perimeter,  $X_5$  must leave the key - they do not have to be in a denial position, but they must be outside the key.

**Cutting from low to high**

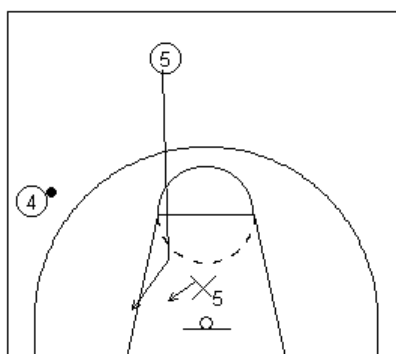


Having a player cut above the foul line forces the defender to step away from in front of the basket.

Although the defender may stay on the split line, if the offensive player cuts as high as the top of the circle, the defender must clearly react to the cut (as shown below).



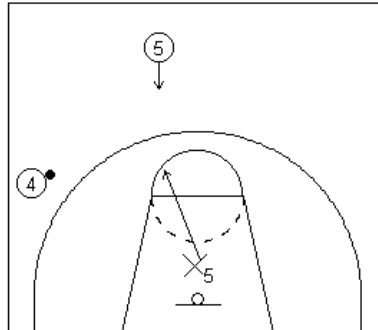
**Have player trail high in transition**



Quite commonly, a team's centre (X<sub>5</sub>) will run back to the basket once their team has lost possession. If the player he is guarding also runs straight down the court into a post position, then X<sub>5</sub> can stay in the key!

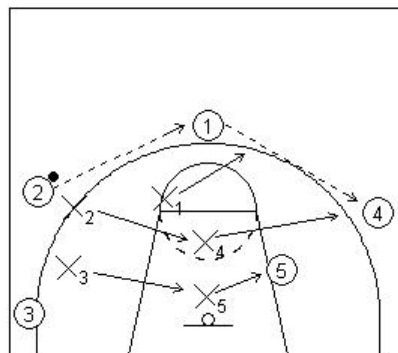


However, if O<sub>5</sub> “trails” the break and stays high then once the ball reaches the wing, X<sub>5</sub> must move away from the basket.



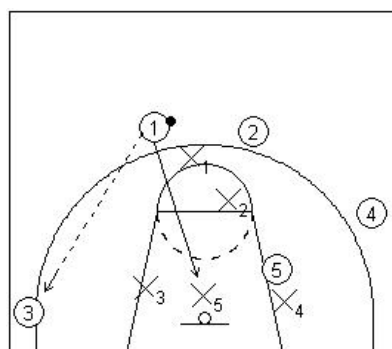
**Reverse the Ball**

Simply reversing the ball from one side of the court to the other requires the defence to move. This movement can help to identify who each defender is guarding (or whether they are playing a zone defence).

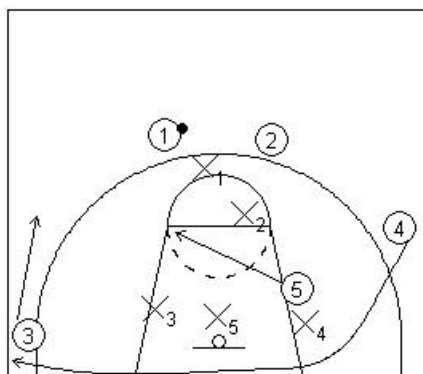


**Pass and Cut to the Basket**

If the person passing the ball then makes a strong cut to the basket, it will quickly be obvious if there defender does not follow them. Here if X<sub>1</sub> stays at the top of the key after O<sub>1</sub> “passes and cuts”, it would indicate X<sub>1</sub> may be playing a zone.



*Overload the Ball Side*



By having players cut to the ballside, the defence needs to adjust. If  $X_4$  was to stay where they are, it would not be apparent who they were guarding!