



**FIBA**

We Are Basketball



by Fred Horgan

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It wasn't that long ago when basketball officials around the world were first introduced to the philosophy, "referee the defense". As with all many concepts, it was seen as the answer to one of the most difficult officiating circumstances in the game, that of determining responsibility for contact in block/charge situations, and as a result instructors were suddenly putting additional stress on one key question common to all contact situations: "Who got there first?"

For quite a while this concept seemed to work very well. It was easy to appreciate that when an offensive player is unaware (and therefore unprepared for) the position of a defensive player until the



# REFEREEING THE DEFENSE



moment of contact, the defensive player had an appreciable advantage. The key consideration was therefore a simple one: that of whether or not the position taken by the defensive player was legally set and, subsequently, legally maintained.

The effect on the game was almost immediate. Good defense began to be

rewarded like never before, particularly in situations where the defensive position was adjacent to an end line or in contact situations that might occur in the restricted area. In recent years, however, it seems that "referee the defense" has been tainted a little because many newer officials (and, maybe, a few older officials too!) have interpreted "referee

the defense" to mean, "don't let the defense get away with anything".

Far too often, the defensive player is the one penalized despite the fact that he or she did absolutely nothing more than maintain a floor position or path that was rightfully his or hers anyway.

In this regard, three special areas of concern come to mind: 1) post play 2)

maintaining a legal position, while guarding a moving player 3) shots for goal (or attempts to gain a rebound) attempted from immediately beneath the backboard.

**POST PLAY**

Fair and consistent officiating of post play contact is crucial to general game management. When things go wrong, the first warnings that excessive contact might not be far away usually can be detected at a post position.

When two or more players in close physical proximity and in relatively stationary positions are both intent on receiving or denying a pass or on releasing or defending a shot for a goal, there most certainly will be contact. It is in such circumstances that officials must first remind themselves that contact isn't necessarily a foul and that much of the contact in a post area will be incidental for the simple reason that neither player had been disadvantaged by that contact. On the other hand, contact that places the contacting player at an unfair advantage or that places the contacted player at an unfair disadvantage must be penalized. The difficulty, of course, is in the judgment of what contact is "fair" and what contact isn't.

The solution rests in two principles: (a) see the whole play, and (b) look for spaces between the players involved. "Seeing the whole play" is a matter of

being aware of when a player, especially a defensive player, has assumed a legal position (that is, a position to which he or she is entitled). "Looking for spaces" is a constant necessity, if one is to actually see when contact does occur. By observing both of these principles, an official is prepared to make a reasonable judgment as to whether a foul should or should not be called.

When such contact does occur, officials normally have no trouble with deciding whether the specific contact merits the charging of a foul. The problem lies in the determining of responsibility for that contact, and we too often unfairly put the blame on the defense.

If the offensive player pushes the defense out of position, the foul is offensive. If contact is hard enough to compromise the balance of the defensive player and, consequently, allows the offense to receive a pass or to release a shot for a goal, it's an offensive foul. As officials, we have a responsibility to have a closer look at contact on the post and to be sure the correct person is being penalized.

**MAINTAINING A DEFENSIVE POSITION**

There seems to be a problem around the basketball world in understanding the difference between "establishing" a legal guarding position and "maintaining" that position. It's helpful if we remind ourselves that first we estab-

lish and then we maintain.

To establish a guarding position, the guiding principles are clearly presented in article 44 of the FIBA Rulebook.

Two such principles are essential: the defensive player must have both feet on the floor, and must be facing his or her opponent.

No unnatural extension of the arms or legs is permitted. If contact occurs on the torso of the defensive player, then the offensive player is responsible.

Once a guarding position has been established, the defensive player is permitted to maintain that position, and it is only natural that the player might have to move in doing so. He or she can move backward or move laterally in response to the path chosen by the person being guarded.

The concepts of "seeing the whole play" in the sense of "who got there first" is still crucial, but there is no provision that says the defensive player must have both feet on the floor at the moment of the contact. Indeed, both feet could conceivably be off the floor in maintaining a position, but if the contact is on the torso and if the defensive player moved in front of (as opposed to into) the offensive player then the foul is on the offense.

Too often in situations when a guarding position is being maintained, the foul is charged to the defense, with the erroneous explanation that both feet weren't on the floor when the contact occurred.

**SHOTS FOR GOAL FROM UNDER THE BACKBOARD**

The above principles apply equally to the situation where the offensive player finds himself or herself in an awkward position below the basket and under or even behind the backboard.

It is blatantly unfair if we allow a player with the ball or contesting a rebound to use his or her body to dislodge a defensive player, who is in a completely legal position. When a foul is called, it is too often charged against the defense.

"Referee the defense" is still a very good philosophy provided:

- 1) We see the whole play;
- 2) We take note of who was the first to get to a specific position on the floor, and
- 3) We watch for contact that places one player or another at a disadvantage.

In fairness, let's also be sure to call it both ways!

