



by Fred Horgan

CONTACT: THE PRINCIPLE OF "OFFENSIVE THREAT"

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Six decades ago, a new and innovative philosophy of officiating was introduced to players, coaches and officials around the world. It had been originated by Mr. Oswald Tower, a leader in basketball and basketball officiating for many years, and polished by John Bunn, renowned coach and basketball builder.

The philosophy, called "The Tower Philosophy", was basically very simple. Contact, it said, is not necessarily a foul. Contact does become a foul when the player, who is contacted, is placed at an unfair disadvantage by that contact, or the player responsible for the contact gains an unfair advantage in doing so.

It wasn't very long before a number of principles were developed in the hope of clarifying the Tower Philosophy. These principles have remained essentially intact until the present time and continue to be reflected in Article 44 of the FIBA Rulebook. With time, the Tower Philosophy underwent a name change and became "the advantage/disadvantage principle", but the philosophy itself remained intact. In fact, it continued to grow in

popularity and eventually would include not only contact but also violations (Article 32.2).

As the skill and speed of world-class players continued to grow, however, two problems relative to consistent officiating also became apparent. First of all, many officials were becoming too lenient with the advantage/disadvantage principle, sometimes even using the concept as an excuse to justify not blowing a whistle on occasions when a foul or violation definitely was the proper decision. Secondly, not only newer officials, but experienced ones as well, were becoming confused with the challenge of determining under what circumstances contact should be considered "an unfair advantage" and when to judge similar contact as incidental. The presence of ten, quickly moving players in the limited space that is a basketball court made the rendering of accurate and consistent decisions very difficult. Additional guidelines would be a tremendous help.

In an attempt to address this need, a new principle was introduced, which became increasingly popular with rules clinicians and referee instructors, whose responsibility it was to promote a reliable and constant application of the rules. This new concept, designed to complement rather than replace the advantage/disadvantage principle, was called "The Principle of Offensive Threat", or simple "offensive threat".

The basic assumptions of the Principle of Offensive Threat are as follows:

1. The periods of a basketball game that are the most exciting for players and fans are those situations, which involve offensive maneuvers leading to attempts to score field goals. A game can become very boring when it is dominated by lack of action and passive play. On the other hand, games that involve "end-to-end" action, aggressive offense and equally aggressive defense are, by far, the most memorable. The reality is that it is the offense, in its attempts to advance the ball, and ultimately, score a field goal, that generates reactive defense and the resulting excitement that is basketball at its best.

2. As a team moves the ball from its backcourt to its frontcourt, the anticipation that precedes an attempt to score increases. This anticipation is what is referred to as "offensive threat". In the backcourt, under normal circumstances, this anticipation is minimal, but, as the ball moves closer to the centre line and into the frontcourt and the opponents' basket, the offensive threat grows. This is also the time when defensive alignments become more active. Where there is active offense balanced by active defense, there is also a heightened sense of offensive threat. Offensive threat is at its highest when the ball is in the vicinity of (or moves into) rectangle 5.

3. As the ball moves from the backcourt to the frontcourt, the accompanying

awareness of a growing offensive threat creates five zones, based on the anticipation of an approaching shot for goal. These five zones are: a) the backcourt (not including the centre line area); b) the area on both sides of the centre line (where, under normal circumstances, defensive pressure is first encountered); c) rectangles 1 - 2 - 3 (especially deep in these areas); d) rectangles 4 and 6 (where perimeter shooting will often take place); e) rectangle 5 (with its post play, "inside" shots for goal, rebounding and inevitable congestion of players).

4. Where the ball is located relative to these five zones will influence an official's decision as to whether a potential infraction should be penalized, or should, instead, be judged as incidental to the play. In other words, the location of the ball and, therefore, the degree of offensive threat can very well be a guideline in deter-

mining if the advantage/disadvantage principle has been violated.

5. Most officials will agree that, in a situation where the ball is in the backcourt and when minimal defensive pressure is being applied, the advisability of interrupting play because of unintentional contact is questionable. This is not to say that contact will never be judged a foul if the ball is in the back court; unsportsmanlike contact will always be judged as a foul, as will advantageous contact by either the dribbler or the person guarding that dribbler. It should also be noted that increased defensive pressure (three or more defensive players in the offensive team's back court) could itself create an offensive threat situation. It's the nature of the game that active defense generates reactive offense.

6. As the ball is moved out of zone (a) and through the other zones, offensive threat grows. This is on the assumption, of course, that an accompanying in-

crease of defensive pressure is being encountered as the ball moves from zone to zone, something that will happen under normal circumstances. As offensive threat increases, the likelihood of a team's gaining an unfair advantage through the causing of contact also increases. In these situations it is crucial that the official "see the whole play". It is not contact itself that is a foul but rather the effect of that contact insofar as it creates an unfair advantage (and therefore unfair disadvantage) as a result.

The offensive threat principle can therefore provide a very real assistance in deciding whether or not specific contact should be penalized as a foul. The fact remains, however, that it is only with experience, not only through active officiating, but also through observing as many games as possible, that an accurate and consistent grasp of the advantage/disadvantage principle can be gained.

