

Coach Steve Pavlovic's

## The Man-to-Man vs. Zone Defense Debate

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## **The Man-to-Man vs. Zone Defense Debate**

I am a proponent of man-to-man defense. It's not that I don't like zone defenses. I feel there is a time and a place for them. I just feel that if you want to teach players how to play defense the right way, start them off the right way. We have many discussions about this topic in our athletic program, some very spirited! There are pros and cons to both sides of the issue. Let me explain to you why I think man-to-man (or person-to-person, to be politically correct!) is the better of the 2 choices.

There are 5 main reasons why I think man-to-man defense is better than a zone defense:

1. Players develop their footwork
2. Defenders know who they have to block out for a rebound
3. More pressure is applied to the offensive team
4. Teach players how to sag and help out on defense
5. When you do show them a zone, your team will play it much better

Now let me go through each of these points and convince you that man-to-man defense is the way to go!

### **Players develop their footwork**

In man-to-man defense, players will learn how to shuffle without crossing their feet, as well as learning how to drop stop. This develops the

leg muscles and helps create quicker movement. It also shows the defense how to move to cut off an offense player driving to the basket.

In a zone defense, players only guard an area. They don't need to work on the footwork like they do on man-to-man defense. But that makes it harder if a team is trailing late in the game and needs the ball back.

### **Defenders know who they have to block out for a rebound**

When a shot goes up, you are supposed to block out. Just who do you block out? In man-to-man defense, this is easy. It's the person you are assigned to guard. As long as you have not lost your person, you know exactly who you must keep off the boards.

In a zone defense, you're responsible for an area. So when a shot goes up, you need to find a person in your area to block out. What if there are 2 people in your area? Then you need to block one out, and hope someone comes over from another area to help you. If not, it could be an easy rebound and basket for the other team. If there is no one in your area to block out, then you need to see what area needs help.

### **More pressure is applied to the offensive team**

Man-to-man defense is a much more aggressive style defense. You can come out farther on the ball and apply pressure, while having weak side defenders sag in the lane and help out. By changing the matchups, you can keep your best defender on the other teams best offensive player.

In a zone defense, you can apply pressure, but you have to make sure the defensive set is not expanded too far. If it is, you can leave large lanes open to the basket. This can result in easy drives to the basket for easy lay-ups. You can assign a player or 2 to pressure the ball, but this either puts a lot of

pressure on them or their teammates that are left in the zone. Many times I seen teams have the 2 guards chasing the ball on defense, while the forwards and center stand in the lane doing nothing. While this may work against some teams, it usually fails miserably as the players get older.

### **Teach players how to sag and help out on defense**

In man-to-man defense, players are taught how to watch the player they are guarding and the ball. They are taught about sagging into the lane when their player is 2 or more passes away from the ball. This skill means an opponent should never drive through the defense uncontested.

In a zone defense, players many times get complacent. They are used to guarding an area on the court, not watching out for someone driving down the lane. The zone mentality many times takes over, and they guard only their “zone” on the court. Most times players are taught to rotate and sag in on a zone when the ball moves around the outside perimeter. This is fine, but they must be taught how to react to what’s going on around them.

### **When you do show them a zone, your team will play it much better**

I think this is the biggest factor in choosing man-to-man defense over a zone. Starting a team out in man-to-man helps build a solid defensive foundation. These skills will carry over with them, so they will eventually play a better zone defense when you show it to them! They will understand how to sag and help out. They will understand they can’t just stand around when a shot goes up. They will be prepared to move and cut off an opponent driving to the basket. All of this will help your team become a great defensive team.

So what about if you start your team in a zone? Well, I'll give you one thing, it is easier. Just place them on the court and tell them to guard a spot. But is that really teaching them how to play defense the right way? That's my main reason for playing man-to-man defense. I want my players to learn from the bottom up. I also know that when I show them a zone defense at the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade level, I can slow them down and get them to cover an area. If I start with a zone and try to get them to play man-to-man, it's going to be hard to get them to move after a player, when they are used to standing in one area!

So think about this when it's time to decide on a defense for your team. You may not win as many games when the players are young, but they will benefit as they get older. They will be able to play any defensive style and be successful!

*Steve Pavlovic is a youth basketball coach at St. Cyril and Methodius Catholic School in Lemont, Illinois. He has coached for the past 24 years, being at all levels from 4<sup>th</sup> grade through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The last 8 years he has also been basketball coach coordinator, a position that involves supervising basketball coaches to make sure they are following the program skills guidelines and help them with any problems. He is also the author of "Coach Steve Pavlovic's Score More Hoops", a self-published ebook on basketball shooting. You can visit his site at [www.scoremorehoops.com](http://www.scoremorehoops.com)*

