

better than a layup

Challenging Basketball's Conventional Wisdom



Attacking Full-Court Pressure

How To Defeat Florida's Combination Press

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Author's Note

I wrote this essay on the eve of the 2013-14 NCAA Division I basketball tournament. Billy Donovan's Florida Gators enter the tournament as the #1 seed in the field of 68. To a great extent, how far they advance in the tournament will depend on their full-court press and whether their opponents are able to neutralize its impact or even turn the press to their own advantage.

To that end, I probe the nature of full-court pressure and present the most important principles and tactics used to defeat such defenses. Against this broader backdrop, I then explore Florida's specific style of press and outline a strategy to defeat it.

The essay is not meant to be exhaustive. I leave out many of the specific tactics necessary to build a full-functioning, comprehensive press attack but I provide enough detail for a reader to visualize the Florida press and an offensive scheme capable of defeating it.

At a future time, I intend to compose a more comprehensive treatment of the general subject. When complete, I will post it at *betterthanalayup.com*.

-- Mark S. Seeberg
March 19, 2014

Introduction

Defeating full-court pressure begins with understanding the true nature of pressing defenses and adopting an aggressive strategy of attack that seizes the initiative from the defense.

First, understand that once the ball is inbounded, *all presses are the same*. Before the throw-in they may look different – man, zone, combination, 3-1-1, 2-2-1, degree of pressure, full-court, three-quarter court, etc. – but in reality they are the same, or more accurately, they can be attacked in such a way *as to render them the same*. You don't need different press attacks for different presses. The key is learning the underlying attack principles by practicing “live,” five-on-five every day of the season. That's what creates the confidence and the skill to attack full-court pressure and score points against it.

Second, it is an insult to be pressed. When confronting full-court pressure far too many teams seem content to cross the ten-second line instead of attacking the basket. Perhaps it's a lack of confidence or a perceived shortage of ball handlers, but whatever the reason, you don't get points for merely crossing half-court. Generally, such an approach invites greater pressure and indecision, culminating in one or more catastrophic breakdowns as the game proceeds. Beating full-court pressure starts with the heartfelt belief that it is an insult to be pressed and consequently... *a willingness to accept pressure in the backcourt so that you gain an advantage in the frontcourt*. Your goal is punish the press by scoring points against it.

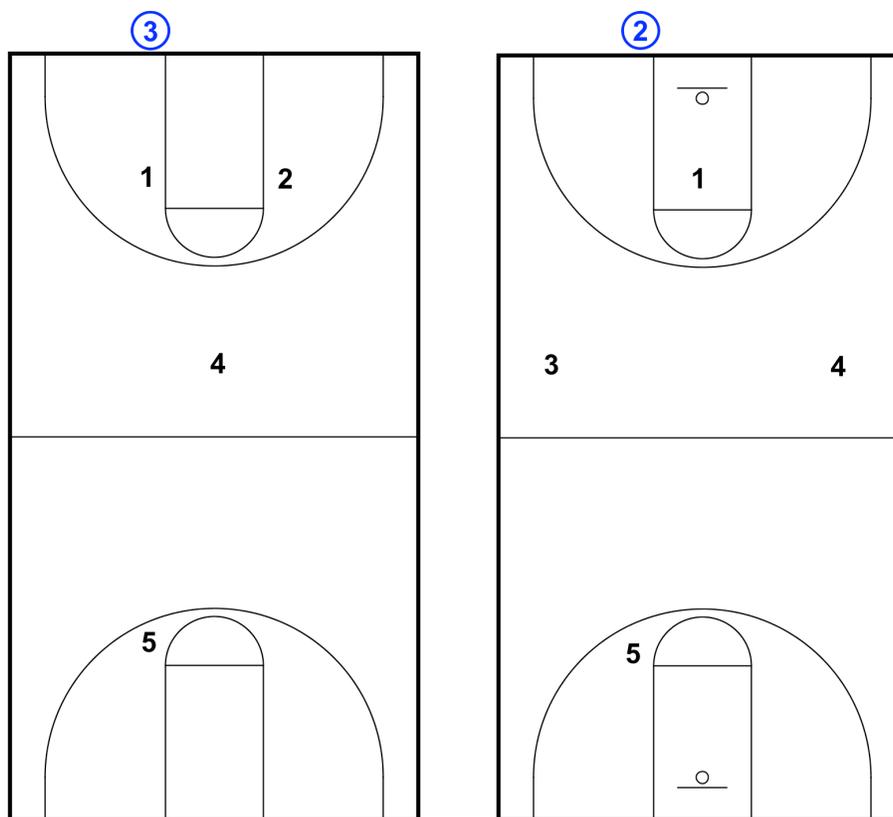
Once those two essentials are in place you are in position to make a strategic choice. “**Green**” or “**Red**”? Do you want to beat the press *before* it sets up by fast breaking after made baskets and free throws or do you prefer to *let the press set up*, encouraging the traps to gain a numbers advantage at the basket? The circumstances of the game and the respective talent on the floor will dictate your choice.

For the sake of this instructional piece, let's presume that you've decided to let your opponent set up his press before you begin your attack. Let's also presume that you can successfully put the ball into play – that you've mastered the tactics of inbounding the ball with regularity. *(In a future, in-depth essay I will present the techniques to successfully complete the throw-in with confidence and consistency. I don't want to clutter or complicate this shorter piece with that level of detail.)*

Attack Principles

1. Let press set up. Don't rush the ball inbounded. Don't be in a hurry to pick up the ball after your opponent scores. When possible, let the official retrieve it. You have five full seconds after the ball has been placed “at your disposal” usually by the official bouncing or handing you the ball. Give your teammates time to get into position.

2. Spread the floor. The court is 94' by 50.' That's 4,700 square feet. Make your opponent defend the entire area by aligning your players across breadth and length of the floor. Don't congest the backcourt by bringing five attackers forward. Instead, spread them out. Here are two examples of useful attack formations.



Personally, I prefer the second. Its strength is the pressure it places on the defense “across the floor,” making it very dangerous for the defense to concentrate or “bunch up” its players on the ball near the end line.

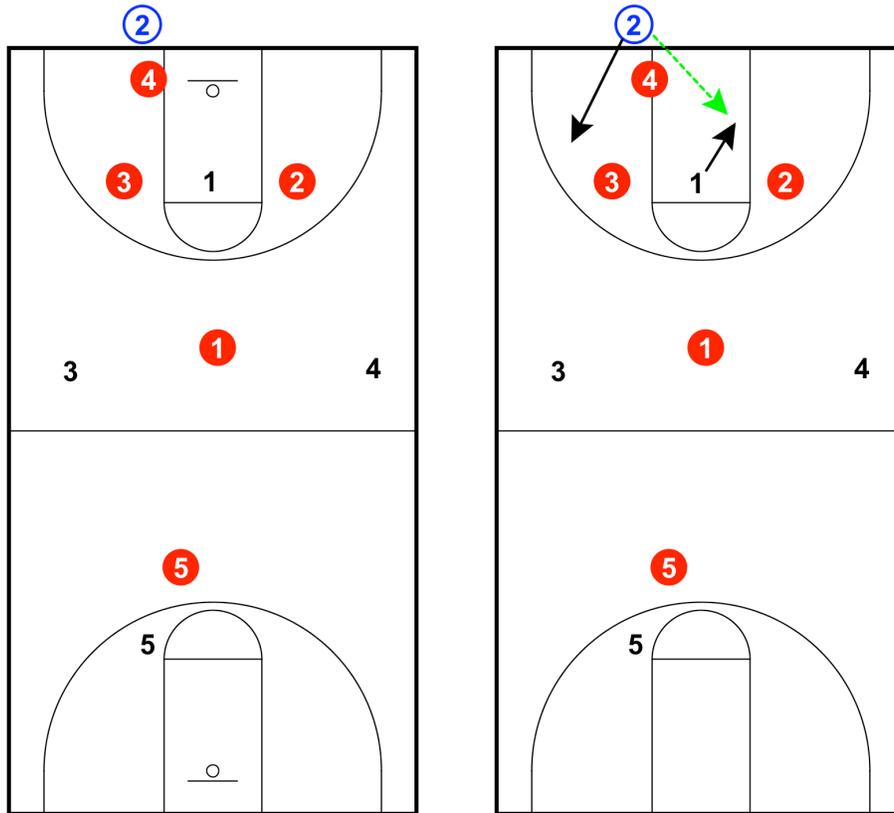
Consider the position of the “deep man” – most often your center or big man, or the least mobile and poorest ball handler in the lineup. By positioning him near the basket you accomplish two ends. First, regardless of his skill level he is an immediate offensive threat: he *must* be guarded even if he is the weakest player on the floor. Secondly, the alignment creates space, removing a defender from the backcourt and requiring the defense to guard the 94’ length of the court.

Note, also, that by resisting the temptation to place more than one primary receiver near the end line you further isolate the midcourt attackers, making it easier to inbound the ball to them if the primary receiver cannot get free. *(Again, in a future essay, I will detail the tactics required to inbound the ball using this formation. With practice, it’s actually fairly easy to free the single primary receiver for the throw-in even when double-teamed, and if denied, to free one or both of the midcourt attackers. They align about five feet from the half-court line but when necessary can move up if the defense grows overly aggressive.)*

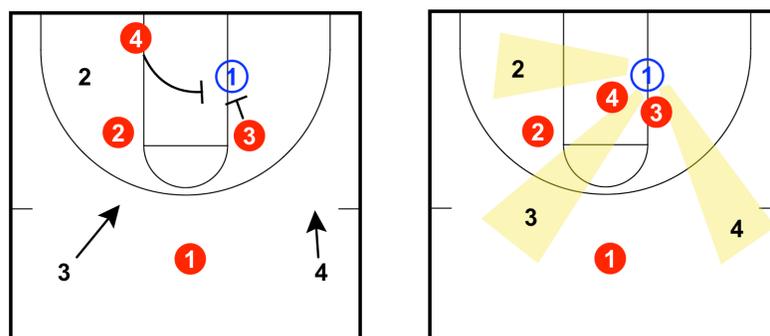
3. Form an *attack box*, adjusting its basic shape relative to the position of the ball as you advance up the floor. It makes little difference whether the press is zone or man or a combination of the two as all presses have the inherent potential to morph into a combination press, and therefore can be attacked in the same basic manner. It’s easiest to demonstrate this principle and

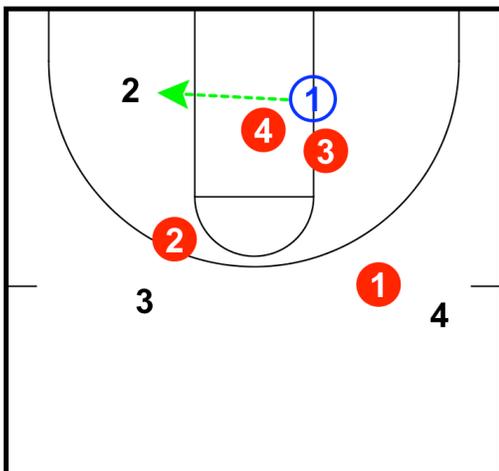
those that follow by applying them first against zone pressure, then man-to-man, and finally, a combination or full-court matching zone.

Let's examine a 3-1-1 or Diamond and One press. Once the throw-in occurs, the receiver turns toward the defense and prepares for the trap. The in-bounder steps parallel about 15' away and the *attack box* is formed.

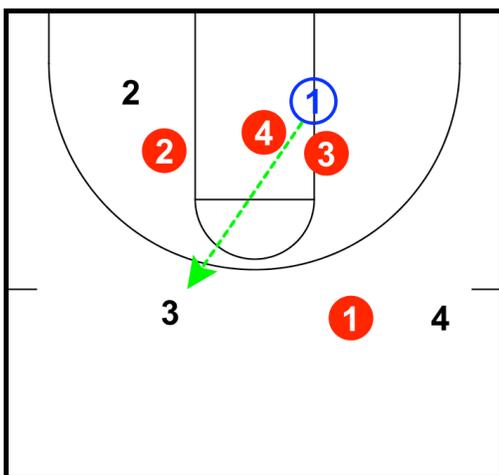


Simultaneously, the offside midcourt attacker – *the man away from the ball* – steps to the middle, altering the shape of the original box. All of this movement occurs simultaneously and quickly. There are now two defenders on the ball, leaving the remaining two defenders to guard three attackers. If we space properly, we have created three potential passing lanes and the two defenders must choose which to choke off.

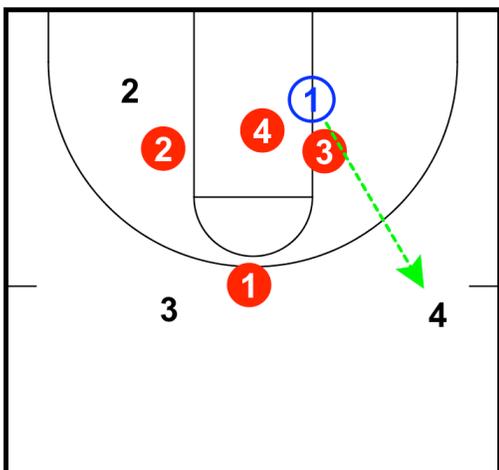




Pass to parallel guard

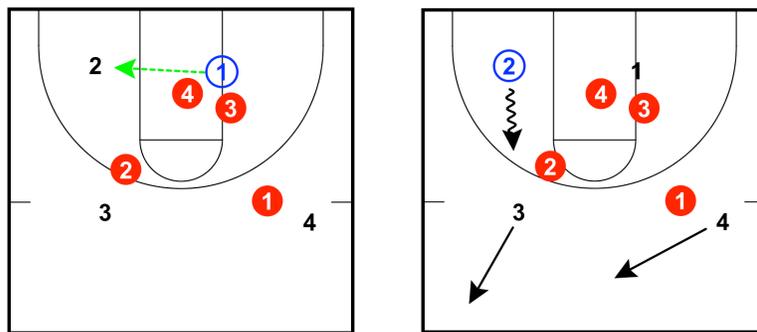


Pass to middle attacker

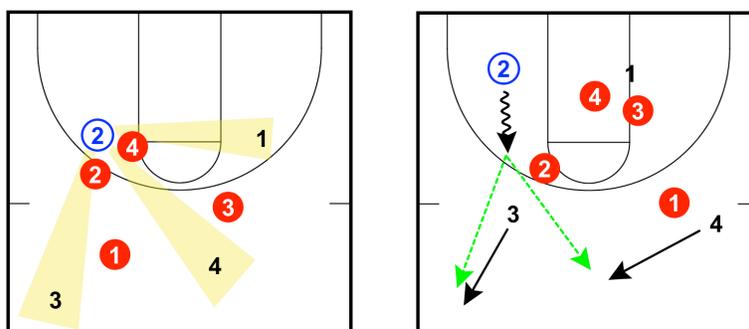


Pass to sideline attacker

Imagine that the defenders have denied the passing lanes to our middle and side attackers. As illustrated below, the ball is simply reversed to the parallel guard who begins to advance the ball up the floor until he, too, is trapped. As the ball is in flight from one guard to the other, the midcourt men exchange positions: #3 moves back to his sideline and is replaced in the middle by his midcourt teammate, #4, who now finds himself opposite the ball.

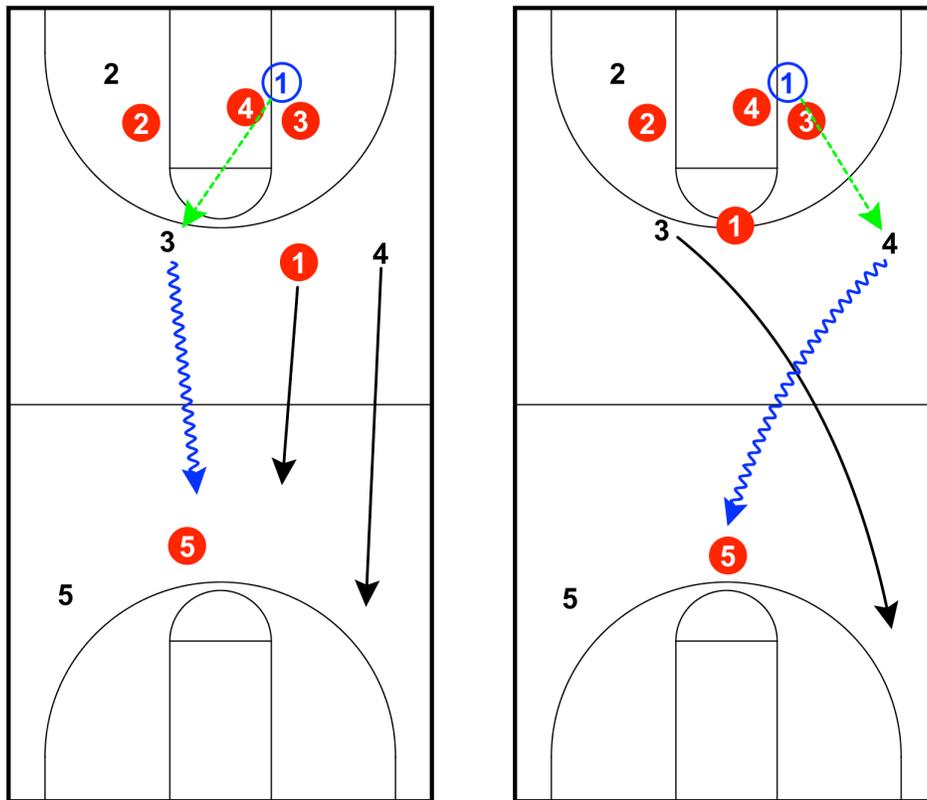


Note that as the dribbler advances the ball up the floor, *the attack box must move with him*. Consequently, as #3 and #4 exchange positions they must do so *at an angle* so that they maintain their spacing relative to the advancing ball and to one another. Each step of the way the three potential passing lanes are preserved.



The key in every scenario is proper spacing to prevent the two back line defenders from successfully guarding the three attackers. If the space between attackers becomes too great, the distance the pass must travel necessarily lengthens and, correspondingly, the time it takes for the ball to reach the intended receiver. One defender can now cover two attackers and the numbers advantage is lost.

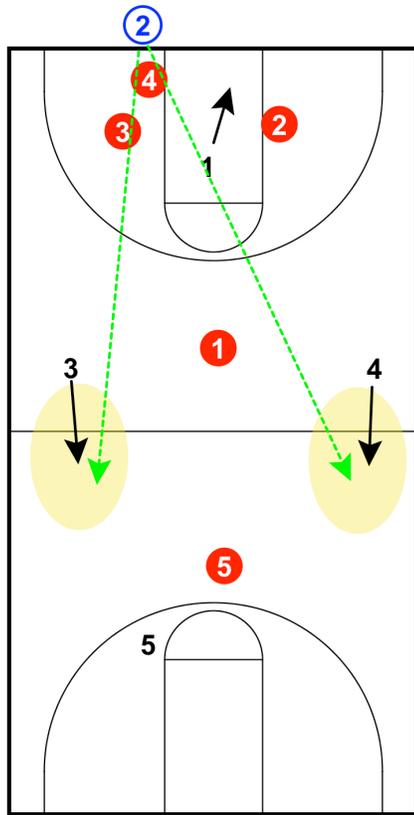
The attackers advance up the floor as fast as the defense permits, every step of the way looking to turn a trap into a numbers advantage at the other end of the floor. The *attack box* moves up the floor with the ball. With patience and bit of guile, the attacking guards will eventually throw the ball “over the trap” to the middle or sideline attacker who will then advance on the basket, creating a 3-on-2 or 2-on-1 advantage.



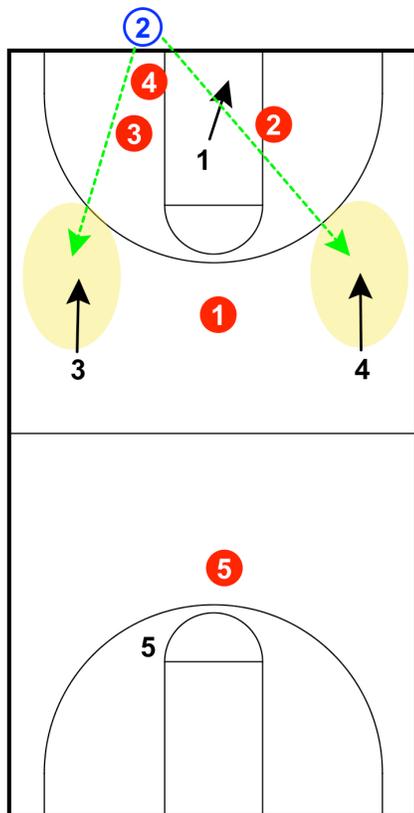
4. Don't drift. This is a recurring problem in most press attacks. The human tendency is to “move away” from one’s defender in the illusion that you will become “more open.” In reality, the opposite occurs. I promised not to cover the inbounds pass in this essay, but the following illustrations are particularly apt.

Very often, either by design or through carelessness, the front line of the defense will grow increasingly aggressive or bold, exerting greater and greater pressure *closer* to the end line. If the backline attackers *drift down the floor*, the defense is rewarded because the lone midcourt defender and his deep teammate can guard both midcourt attackers and the offensive deep man. A pass over the top of the defensive front line must travel *too far*, giving the midcourt and deep defenders a chance to contest or even intercept it.

But, if instead of drifting down the floor, the midcourt attackers *follow* the front line toward the baseline, they *shorten* the passing lane, making it impossible for the midcourt defender to reach the ball. The pass goes over the frontline and we have created an immediate 4-on-2 break.

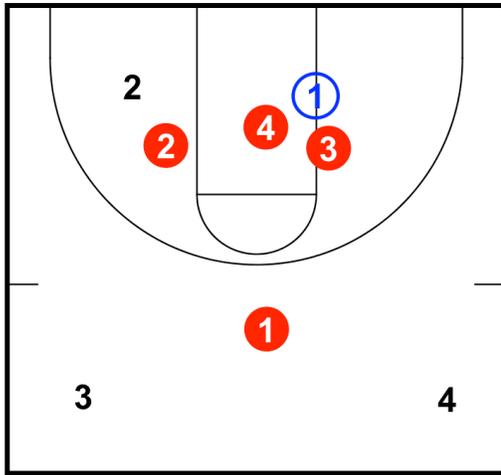


In this illustration, the two midcourt attackers have “drifted” away from the ball in the illusion that they will become “freer” and “more open” by moving farther from the ball. Actually, they’re “less open” as any pass to them will take greater “air time,” giving the defenders #1 and #5 an opportunity to pick off the pass. By drifting away from the ball, they’ve effectively placed a “sixth” defender on the floor – time.

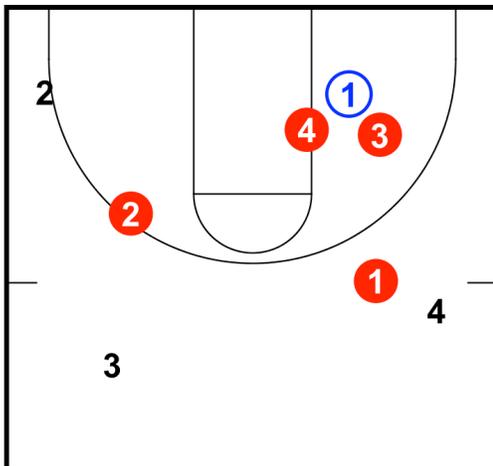


In this illustration, the opposite has occurred. As the front line defenders grow more aggressive, moving closer to the baseline, the two midcourt attackers move with them, maintaining their original spacing. This shortens the passing lanes, making it virtually impossible for the single midcourt defender to guard both midcourt attackers. The inbound pass goes over the front line and the offense has immediately created a 3-on-2 break.

The general rule, then, is “don’t drift.” When your defender moves up, you move up with him, staying *close enough behind him* to receive the ball.” If your defender retreats, you retreat with him. This principle applies everywhere on the floor.



In this illustration the two midcourt attackers are *too far* from their trapped teammate. They never adjusted their positions in relationship to the ball. The lone midcourt defender can effectively guard both of them. #3 must step up and to the middle, while #4 simply steps up. This will force the midcourt defender to make a choice.



In this illustration the offside guard and midcourt attacker are *too far* from their trapped teammate. Like the diagram above, they never adjusted their positions in relationship to the ball. Both must step in the direction of the ball, forcing defender #2 to make a choice.

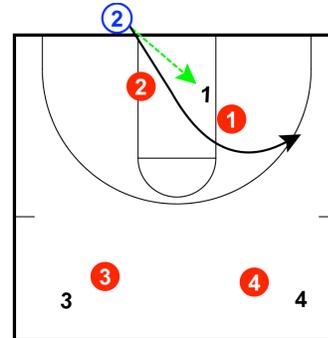
The challenge, particularly for younger, less experienced players, is learning to adjust their positions as the ball and the attack box *move up the floor*. This isn’t something you master by studying a playbook. It can only be learned through daily, “live” four-on-four or five-on-five experience. You learn the game and grow in confidence *by playing the game*.

Note: If you watched Kentucky battle Florida in the recent SEC Championship game, you may have noticed that Kentucky’s players continually drifted down the floor, stranding their dribbling teammate to confront one trap after another. Each time, they were forced to return to the backcourt to relieve the pressure. While they seldom lost the ball, they never seized the opportunity to create a numbers advantage at the offensive basket by forming the attack box and adjusting their positions within it in relationship to one another and the ball.

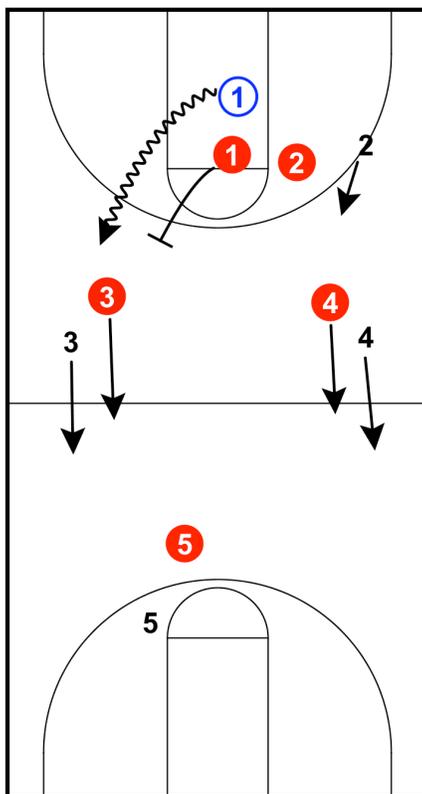
5. Move quickly but don't rush. Let the defense name the offensive opening. Most mistakes against full-court pressure occur at the end of the dribble. Don't give up your dribble prematurely, and when you do, don't be anxious to get rid of ball. Tease the defense – fake one way, throw the other.

Now, let's turn from attacking full-court *zone* pressure to full-court *man* pressure, applying the same five attack principles.

Spread the floor: set your alignment and prepare for the throw-in. In this case, you're facing an "even" or two-defender front. After completing his pass, the in-bounder *splits* the defense to give his partner an open path to dribble the ball up the floor. He then *loops back* so as to stay parallel in case the defenders suddenly trap the dribbler.

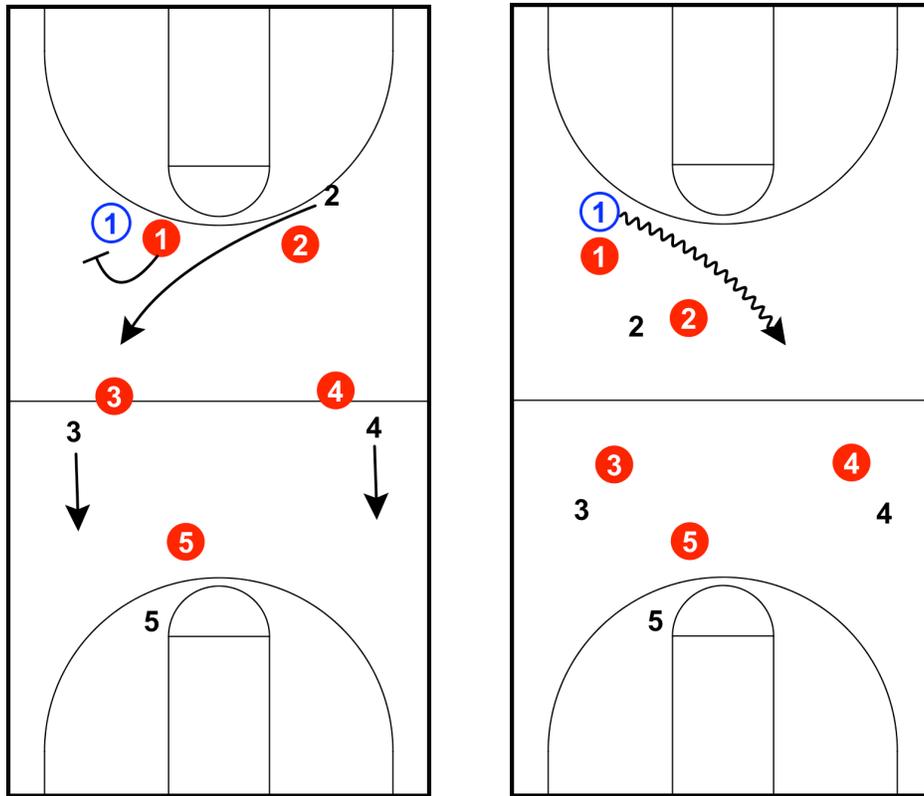


Note: When employing our preferred alignment against a three-man front, you are very likely facing a zone press. After the throw-in, the in-bounder steps lateral to ball 15' away, anticipating the trap. But when confronted by a two-man front, you are either facing a 2-2-1 zone press or a man-to-man press. Unless you've scouted your opponent and know with a fair amount of certainty what you're facing, splitting the defense and looping back will quickly tell you the type of press. Generally, look to dribble ball up against man pressure with your midcourt attackers moving up floor in proportion to the guards.

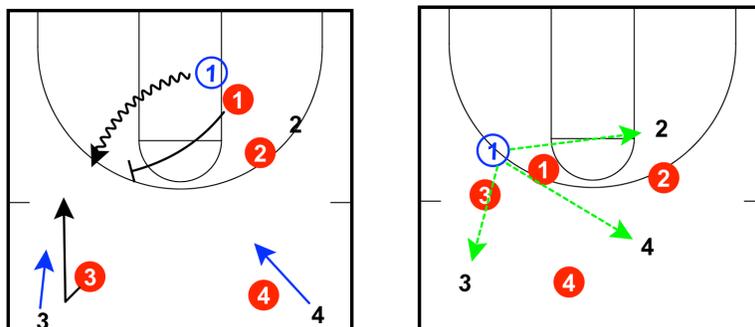


The splitting guard action serves as a semi-screen giving the dribbler room to maneuver. Basically, the ball is advanced up the floor by dribbling with the *attack box* proceeding up the floor in the same manner as it does when facing a zone press. The same rules apply.

Before the throw-in the midcourt attackers are in position to relieve a tightly contested primary receiver. Once the ball has been inbounded, they move up the floor bringing their defenders with them. If the defenders stop and reverse back to the ball, the midcourt attackers go with them.



When the dribbler begins to run out of space, his partner splits the defense once again and loops back to protect against a sudden trap. If a trap occurs, the man press has morphed into a **combination press**, integrating the best elements of both man and zone pressure. All of our zone attack principles now apply and the attack box is in place to respond. This is why the “do not drift” rule is so important. When a man-to-man defender – the offside guard or the onside midcourt defender – suddenly reverses direction to trap the ball, the attack box must shift accordingly. Again, all presses are the same because the response of the offensive attack box *renders them the same*.



Defeating Florida's Full-Court Press

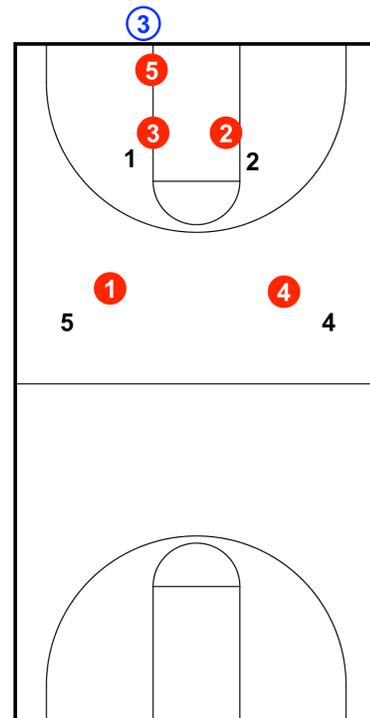
The Gators employ a full-court matching zone or combination press. Essentially they will match your offensive alignment, trapping you immediately or retreating with man pressure until a time and place of their choosing. They are extremely quick and experienced, and will often mask their intentions by varying the level of pressure and the direction from which they choose to exert it. They hope to breed indecision, confusion, and short periods of panic resulting in a flurry of turnovers and quick scores or fatigue that over the course of the game will ultimately lead to turnovers.

How to attack? Apply our four basic principles, coupled with the following adjustments and tips.

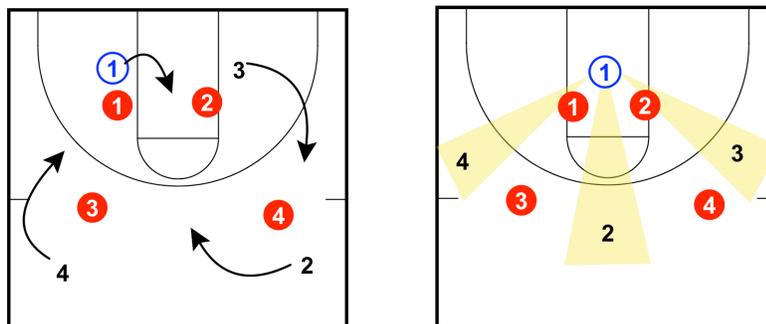
1. Do *not* align your attack formation in the following manner.

Florida will match the offensive alignment, creating congestion and confusion in the backcourt. They will use these circumstances to aggressively pressure the in-bounds pass, attempting to trap the ball very close to the end line. If that fails, they will fall back man-to-man. Then, when the opportunity presents itself, they will morph into a 2-2-1 press and attempt to trap the ball along the sidelines. Throughout, Florida will take the initiative.

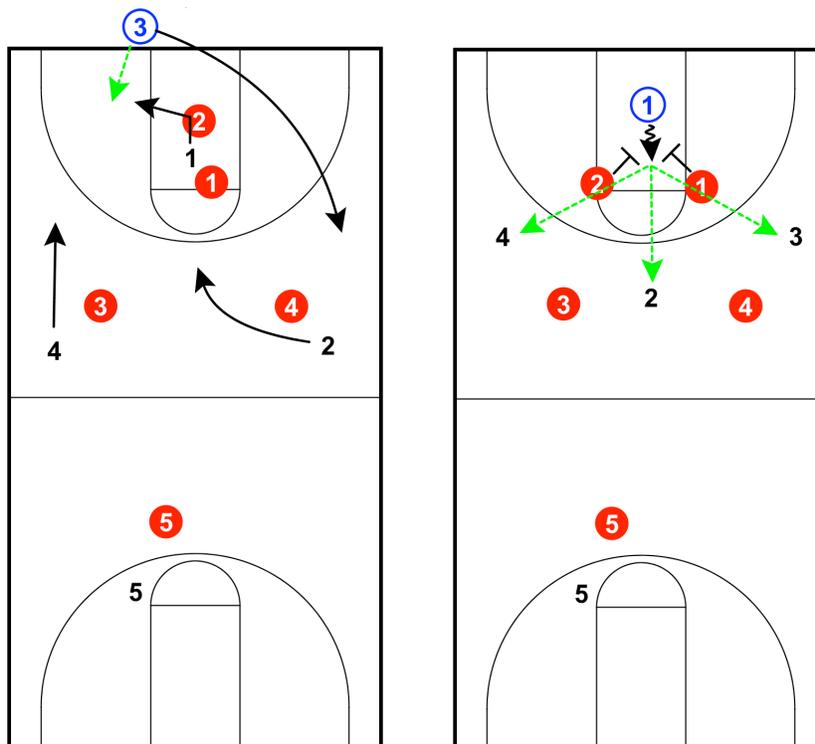
Consequently, you are better off spreading the floor immediately. The attack formation recommended in this essay utilizing one primary receiver and two midcourt attackers reduces the variables and leads to quicker offensive decisions. Essentially, it reduces the press to a 2-2-1 that can be exploited using the tips that follow. This shifts the initiative from Florida to you.



2. *Tilt* the attack box to form a *diamond*, placing your quickest guard in the midcourt center.

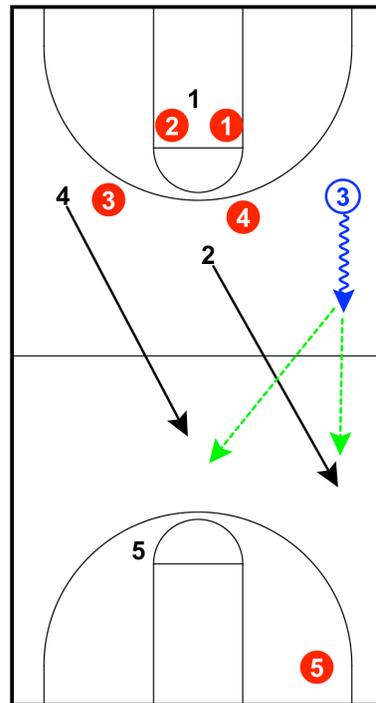
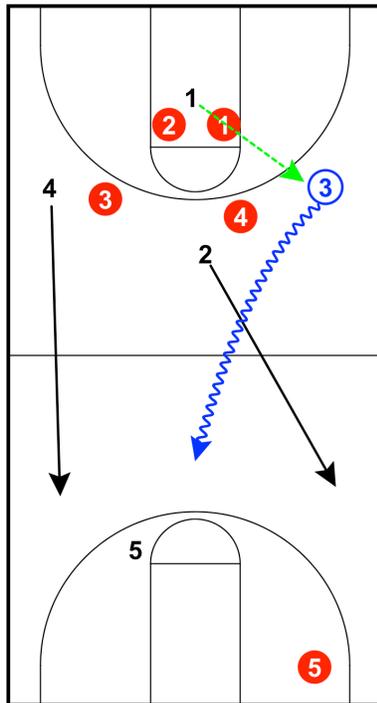
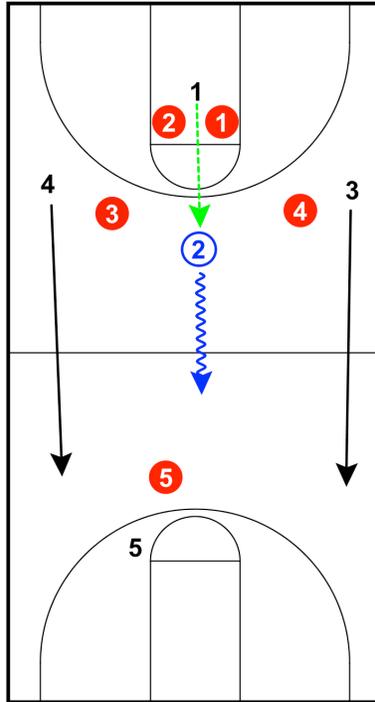


Our customary attack box will force Florida's matching zone press into a 2-2-1 alignment that is extremely vulnerable in the middle of the floor. By simply *tilting* the box to form a *diamond*, you place tremendous pressure on the midcourt defenders. Essentially you will attack with a 1-3-1 alignment, **but by moving the wings closer to the ball – thus creating the diamond shape** – you will stretch the midcourt defenders to the breaking point. They will not be able to cover all three of your midcourt attackers simultaneously.



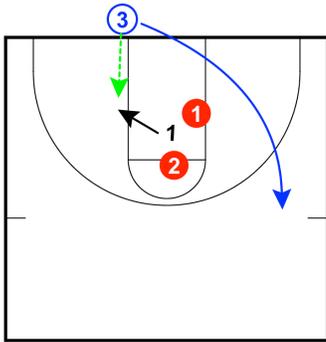
Note how #2, our off guard and likely our most dangerous offensive threat in terms of quickness, maneuverability, and ability to *attack the rim*, has exchanged his inbound duties with #3, our small forward or swing man. This change in position and responsibility places #2 *in the middle of the zone* where he can do the most damage. A pass over the top of the front line defenders leads immediately to one of several 3-on-2 or 4-on-3 scenarios.

See the illustrations that follow.

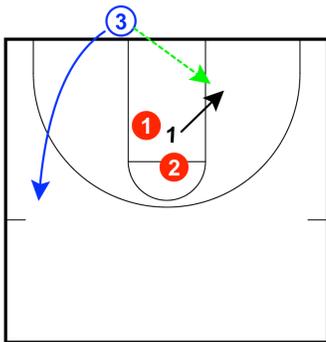


Note that when the pass over the trap goes to the wing attacker, #2 breaks to the deep ball side. This forces his defender to make a hard choice.

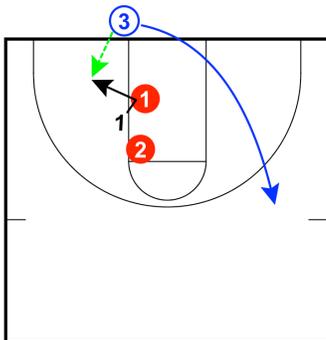
3. Be prepared to modify the position of the in-bounds receiver to ease movement to the middle.



Florida likes to force receivers to the *short side* of the floor, in this case to the primary receiver's left. If they permit you to line up in the middle of the lane near the free throw line, do so as when you break to the short side to receive the pass, you will be closer to the middle of the floor.

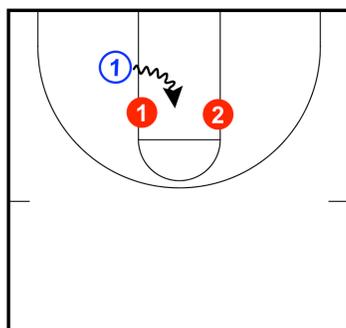


However, they may use your position in the middle of the lane to *push* you to the *wide side* of the floor. This makes the inbounds pass more difficult as the position of the backboard will force a "flatter" pass closer to the end line. It also changes the preferred path of the in-bounder.

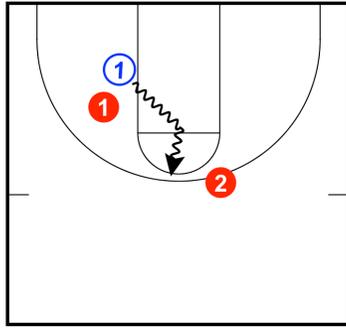


If so, align along the lane, eye-to-eye with the in-bounder. Though you will receive the ball on the short side, you will likely do so in an area farther from the end line with an opportunity to drag the ball back to the middle of the floor.

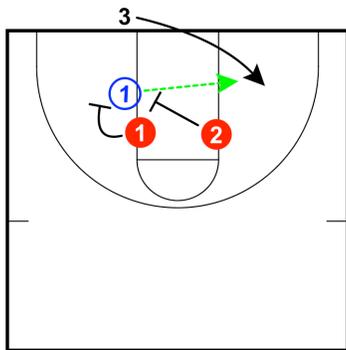
4. Do not be distracted or fooled by the different ways Florida exerts pressure during the throw-in. Stay focused. If you keep your head, it's really all the same.



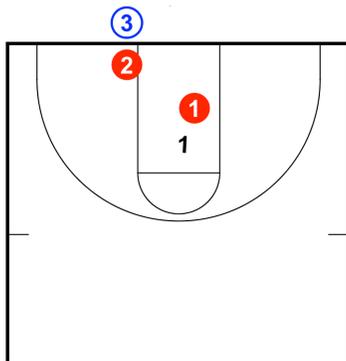
If the front line permits the throw-in and "waits" for you, then dribble the ball toward the middle of the floor and into the "pocket" between the two defenders. Coax them into a trap. If they retreat, then continue your dribble up the middle of the floor, always anticipating the trap.



If one defender retreats or slides laterally, dribble toward him, then back to the center, then back at him again, all the while attempting to tempt the two front line defenders to form a trapping pocket.



If trapped immediately and aggressively, be prepared to return the ball to the in-bounder as he enters the floor.



During the throw-in, they may contest the in-bounder, then match him as he enters the floor or immediately trap the receiver. The options illustrated above then come into play.