# better than a layup

*Challenging Basketball's Conventional Wisdom*

# Matching Zone Challenges

Problem Sets, Situations… & Solutions

A Supplement to Part I

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## Author's Note

This essay explores several challenges to Gene Sullivan's matching zone defense. I developed it in response to several coaches who enjoyed my original 2014 piece on the subject and inquired when I might present the intended ***Part II*** – a full-blown piece focusing on defensing special situations and employing contemporary trapping tactics to further disrupt the offense.

Since ***Part II*** is not yet available I thought I could at least be responsive to these requests with this brief **Supplemental**.

I hope that they and other visitors to *betterthanalayup.com* find the piece helpful.

-- Mark S. Seeberg
January 1, 2017

## Introduction

In my 2014 instructional piece, *Rediscovering Gene Sullivan's Matching Zone Defense,* I introduced readers to the innovative match-up Sullivan pioneered in the late 1950's, used with great success in the Chicago Catholic League during the 1960's, and introduced to the college ranks when he became Johnny Dee's top assistant at Notre Dame during the Austin Carr era. The essay covered the philosophy behind the defense and delineated its basic rules: where to initially place defenders based on their respective size and "defensive reach," how to rotate and match various offensive alignments, and how to defend an array of offensive maneuvers – dribble penetration, screens, flashes, shallow cuts, and deep or penetrating cuts.

In this supplemental piece I would like to explore several offensive formations and maneuvers that require adjustments to these rules. The need to adjust occurs when the offensive attack places the established rules in conflict, resulting in confusion and indecision among the defenders. Because the matching zone is truly a team defense, indecision cripples its effectiveness. It is important, then, to anticipate these situations and, through repetitious practice, train the defenders to "see" or recognize such situations as they occur and react instantly.

In particular, I will present several situations or scenarios where one or several of the following problems may emerge:

(a) exceptions to the rotation or matching rules;

(b) mismatches forcing big defenders to the perimeter, leaving smaller defenders to guard the interior;

(c) difficulty determining the "deepest offside defender" whose quick footwork is needed to deny a penetrating cutter, or whose distance from the cutter is too great to execute the exchange in a timely fashion;

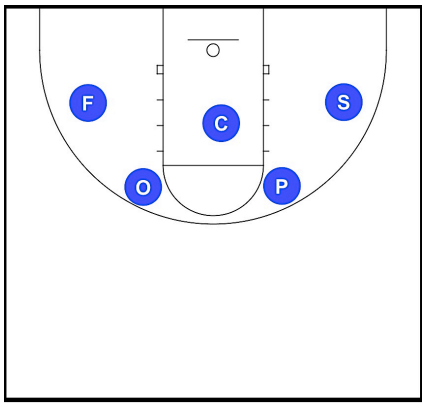
(d) difficulty in rotating quickly enough on the backside to protect the rim;

(e) and finally, ways to defense the corner in the era of the three-point shot.

## Confusing Sets or Offensive Alignments

To provide some context, let's repeat the basic rules for rotating and matching an offensive alignment.

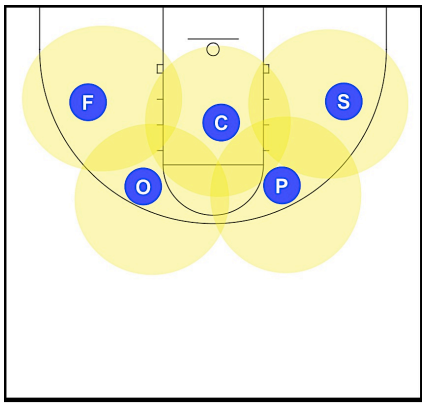
Recall that we begin by setting our defense in a 2-3 or 2-1-2 alignment. We are in crouched, flexed positions, "ready to play." Our backs are squared to the end line, our arms extended and spread. We are clearly showing "zone." The initial 2-3 alignment places each defender in a particular spot on the floor based on each man's particular size, strength, speed and likely defensive range.



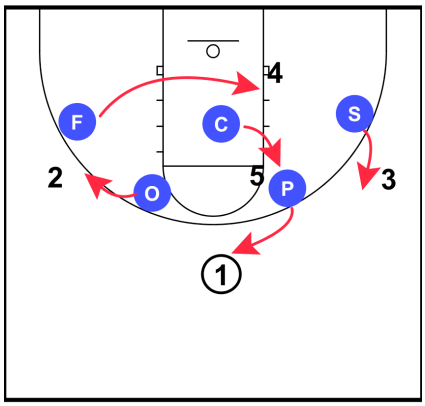

- X1 or **P** is our quickest guard, likely our point man.
- X2 or **O** is our shooting or "off" guard.
- X3 or **S** is our smallest or most mobile forward – our "swing man."
- X4 or **F** is our bigger, likely less mobile forward.
- X5 or **C** is our center.

The position of each player in the initial 2-3 set is especially important when facing an opponent whose the offensive alignment forces us to rotate to find our match-ups.

If our opponent attacks our zone by mirroring our 2-3 alignment, then the match-ups are apparent. Each defender simply matches the opponent who arrives in his assigned zone or area of responsibility.




But if our opponent attacks our 2-3 zone with a *different* formation, we rotate ***clockwise*** to match his alignment. For example, suppose the offensive team uses a 1-3-1 alignment. The clockwise motion of our defenders is important for it insures that the position each defender assumes in our new alignment is best suited to his size, strength, speed, and range – that is, the position most analogous or closest in suitability to his *original* position in our initial 2-3 set.




In this illustration the clockwise rotation has placed our **P**oint defender – likely our smallest, quickest defender – at the top of the zone while our **O**ff guard and **S**wing man have rotated to wing positions where they will complete our perimeter defense. Our **C**enter and strong **F**orward match the interior attackers.

As noted in my original piece on Sullivan's defense, one of its strengths is keeping defenders in those areas of the floor appropriate for each man's relative size and "defensive reach." Big men guard the interior, small men the perimeter. Unlike a true man-for-man defense, the matching zone minimizes the possibility of a guard being posted up by a much larger man or bigger men having to guard men away from the basket.

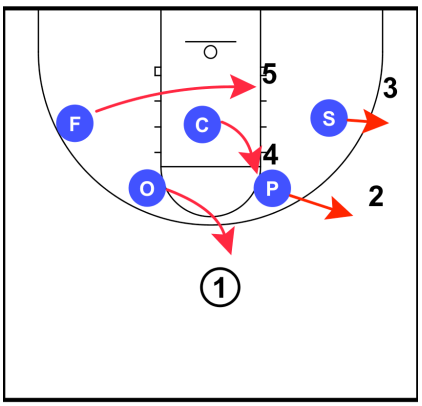
The rotation is keyed by **P**'s recognition of the offensive front:

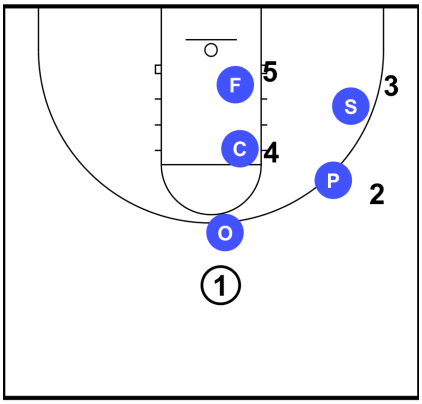
- If presented by a two-guard or ***even*** front he "stays" in his initial position. No rotation is necessary. Our defensive guards match the two-man front while the backline players find and match the opponents closest to them.

- But when presented with a one-guard or ***odd*** front, **P** decisively steps out and quickly matches the offensive point man. His step-out triggers his teammates' clockwise rotation.

**But specific formations – particularly "overload" sets – create exceptions to the clockwise rotation rule** that can cause confusion and indecision, sometimes resulting in mismatches.

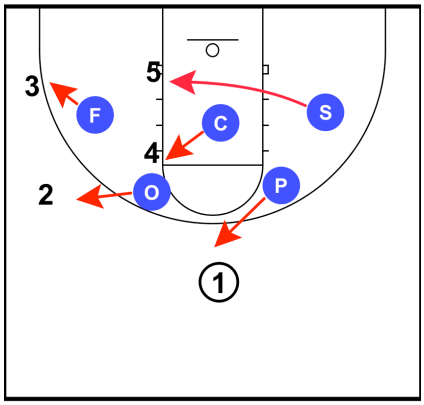
For example, imagine that your opponents see what they believe is a standard 2-3 zone and immediately counter it by aligning in an overload formation to the right of the basket. Matching the formation is fairly straightforward and intuitive but presents an exception to the clockwise rotation rule. The three backside players – **F**, **C**, and **S** – rotate clockwise but the two topside defenders, **P** and **O**, effectively move *counter-clockwise*, stepping in the direction of the offensive alignment and matching their natural counterparts.

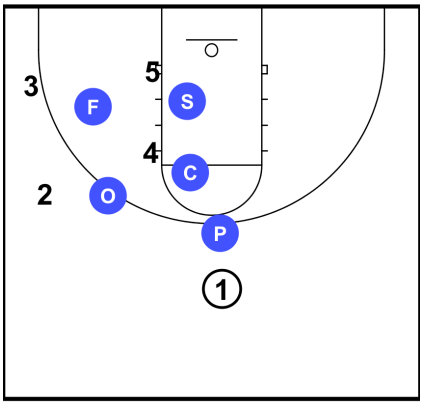



With this mild adjustment in the clockwise rotation rule, we maintain the integrity of the defense: our bigs are matched with their bigs; our perimeter defenders are defending the perimeter. It's a pretty simple and straightforward tactic.

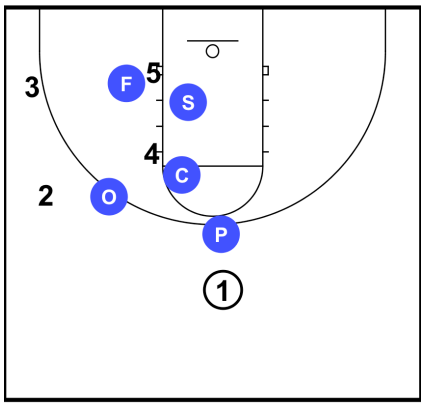
But, now, reverse your image. Imagine instead that the offense has aligned in an overload formation to the *left of the basket*. If we respond as we did in the example above, a potential problem emerges. Our small forward, **S**, is now matched to an attacker in the low post who very likely is bigger.



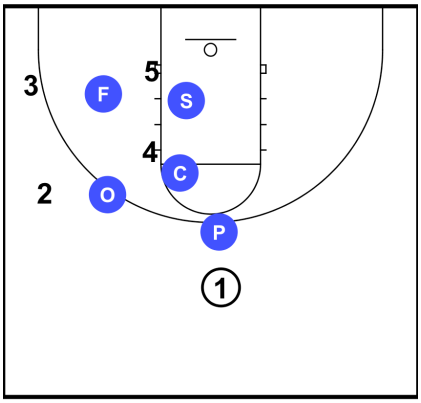




The simplest way to counter this potential weakness is to rely on the *zone elements* of the defense.

There is no immediate need to closely guard the corner attacker, #3. Instead, **F** should front the low post or move only to the short corner. In either case, these positions support our undersized small forward, making it difficult for the offense to enter the ball to the low post.

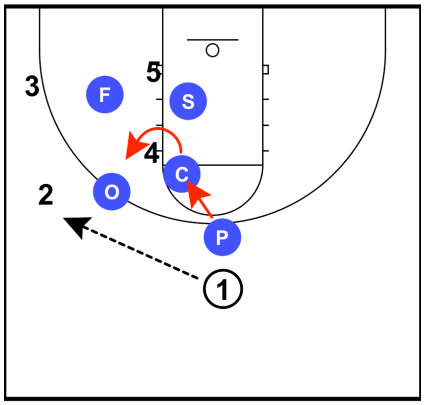


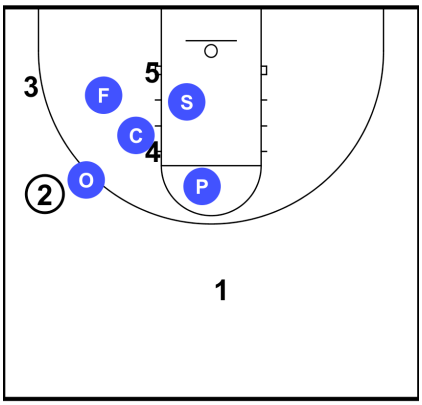

**Front Low Post Option**




**Short Corner Option**

When the ball is passed to the wing, we adjust accordingly. **C** executes traditional denial footwork and shifts to other side of the high post, supported by **P** who steps in the direction of the pass and drops toward the basket. **F** maintains his position, fronting the low post or protecting the short corner, or shifts between these positions as the situation warrants.

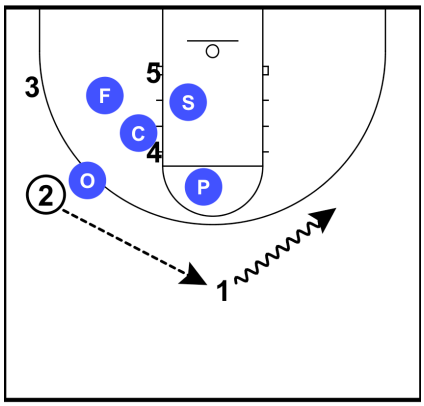


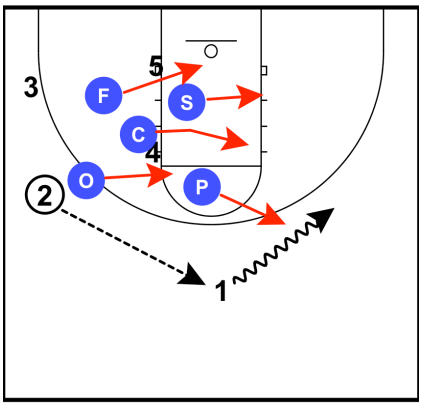




The zone elements of the defense protect our small forward, **S**, matched with a bigger opponent in the low post. Roughly speaking, from the free throw line extended to the baseline, we outnumber the offense, five to four.

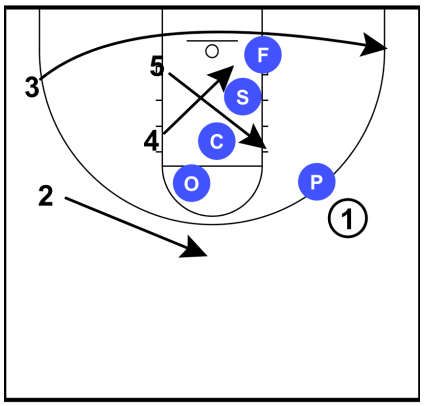
**N.B.** *What happens, though, if the ball is passed to the corner attacker? We'll discuss later.*

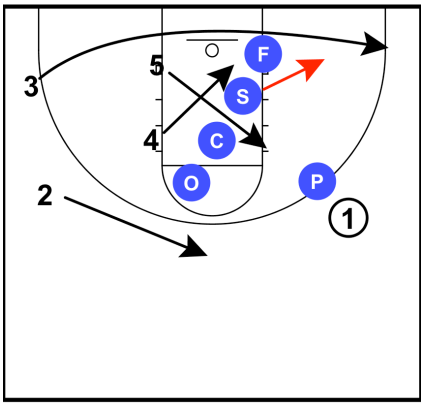
If the ball is reversed with the overload shifting to the right side of the basket, we simply maintain the matches we have already established and follow the basic rules of the defense. As the ball moves to the other side of the basket, we move with it.

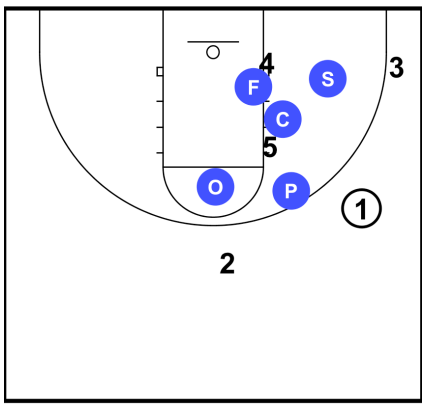



As the ball moves across the floor from left to right, **F** becomes our "deepest offside" defender and takes the cutter toward the opposite corner, *or alternatively,* takes the cutter to a point where he can "bump" him to **S**. The defenders have now returned to their normal starting positions.




Now, let's add some complexity to the analysis by probing three questions:

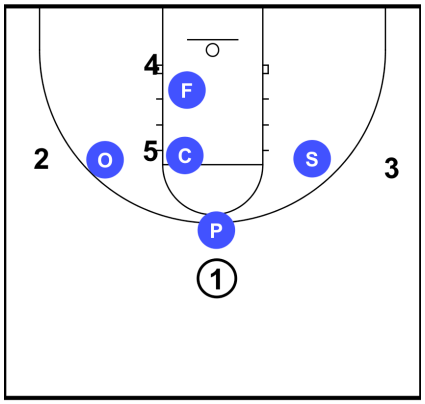
- What happens when the offense begins its attack in from a standard 2-1-2, 1-3-1, or 1-2-2 set and uses one or more cutters to create an overload, attempting to outnumber or confuse the defense?

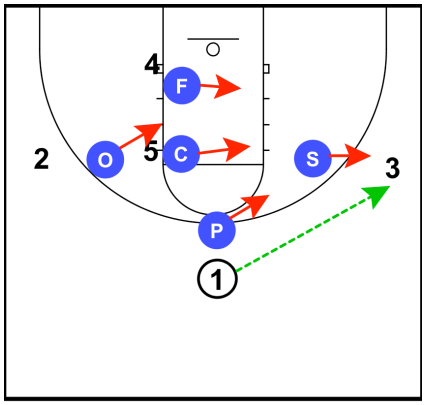
- What happens when a “shallow” cut morphs into a “penetrating” one?
- What happens if the ball arrives in the corner?

## Confusing Cuts or Maneuvers

While an attack that immediately begins from an overload formation may force us to adjust our matching rules, the cutting action that originates from a standard 2-1-2, 1-3-1, or 1-2-2 set, then morphs *into* an overload poses a greater range of problems for the match-up zone.

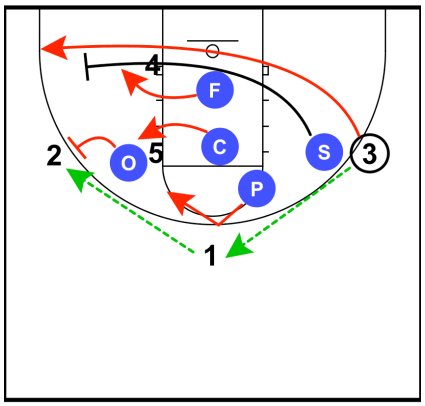
Let’s begin with a relatively simple situation: a standard 1-3-1 zone attack using multiple cutters to create a succession of overloads as the ball swings from side to side and back again.

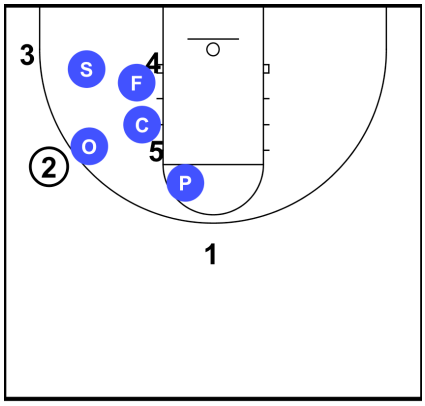



**Our defense matches the offensive set, then moves into blocking positions as the initial pass takes flight**

- From their 2-3 zone alignment the defenders rotate clockwise and match the offensive set.
- As the ball is passed from the point to the wing, the defenders step in the direction of pass and block the interior, anticipating cutters moving toward the ball.



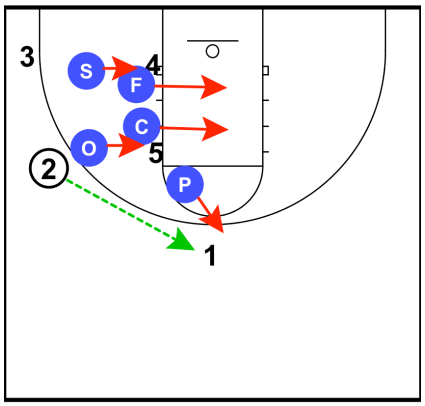



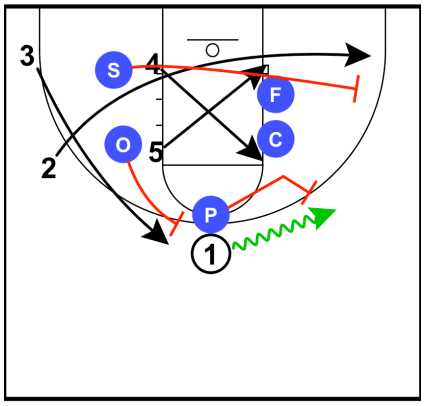

## Wing cut forming an overload as the ball swings to opposite side of floor

- As the ball swings to opposite wing, **S** becomes the deepest offside player. He matches **3**'s cut across the defense to the opposite corner.

- **P** checks **1** as he receives the return pass, then steps down and in the direction of the next pass to help protect the gap.

- **O** contests **2** with **F** and **C** denying the interior



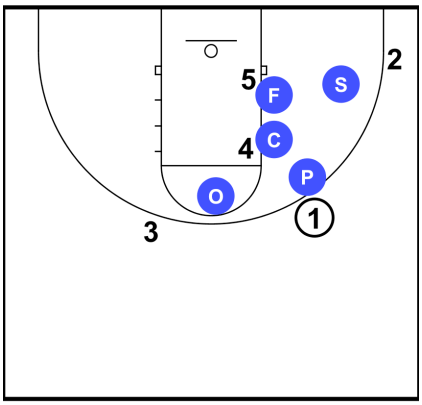

## Reversal & drag to opposite side of floor followed by wing and scissor cuts

- As ball moves back to the point, the defense slides with it, moving into positions to check any subsequent cuts.

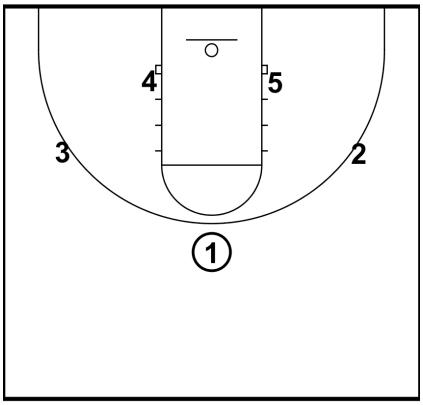
- **S** becomes the deepest offside defender so he matches **2**'s cut along the baseline to the opposite corner.

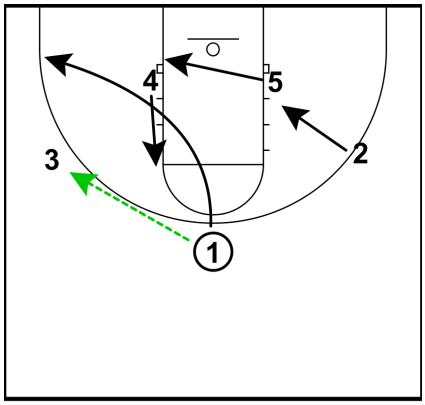
- **O** exchanges the cutter with **S**, picking up **3**, "the next man away," as he cuts to the vacated point

The defenders have successfully matched the offense's movement into an overload in a fairly straightforward and simple manner, observing all the basic rules of the defense.

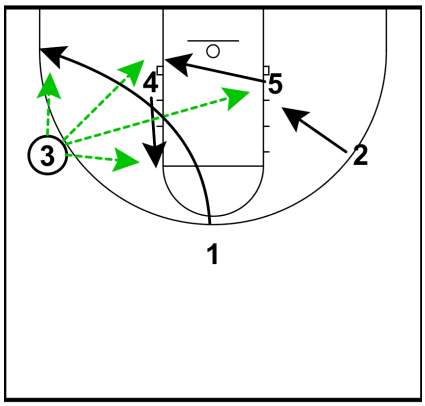



So far, so good, but now, let's explore to a second, more complex scenario: **a 1-2-2 attacking alignment featuring a series of cuts, resulting in an overload.** Here's the set up.

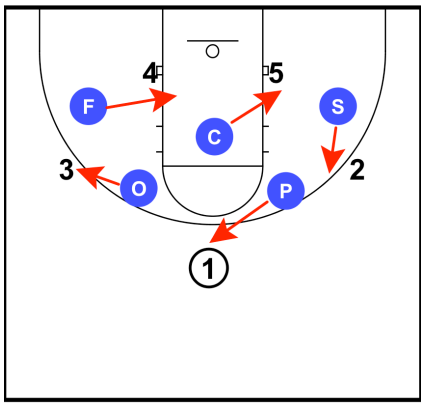


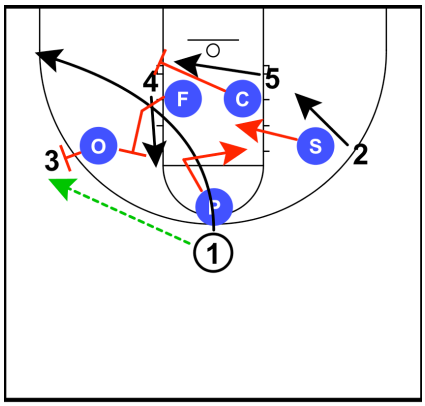



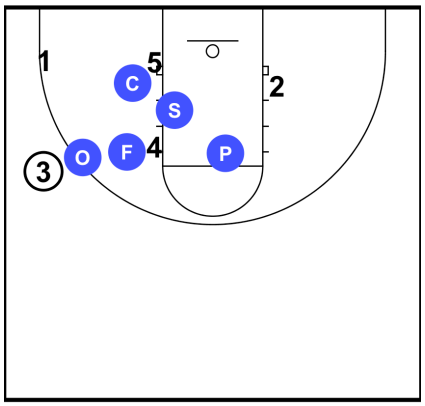

As the ball is passed from the point to the wing, **4** flashes high with **5** filling his spot at the low post. Simultaneously, **1** makes a deep or penetrating cut toward the basket then swings to the ball side corner. **2** attacks the rim from the backside. The defense faces four possible passing lanes.



Let's trace the sequence of steps needed to effectively counter this movement.




## Rotation & Match-ups

- The defenders begin in their traditional 2-3 set, then rotate clockwise to match the offensive alignment.

- As the ball moves to the wing, the defense slides with it, moving into positions to check any subsequent cuts.

- **F** and **C** contest the two interior flashes while **O** closes on the ball.

- **P** checks **1**'s penetrating cut then attempts to rotate down and away to pick up **2**.

- With the pass to the opposite wing, **S** becomes the "deepest offside defender" and is responsible for checking **1**'s cut to the corner.

- But given the angles and speed of the cuts can **P** and **S** complete their complimentary assignments?

The offense's initial alignment combined with the sequence and direction of the cutters places the defense in a highly vulnerable position.

As the *deepest offside defender*, **S** is expected to match **1**'s cut through the lane and out to the corner, but he may not be able to get there in time even if **P** successfully slows **1**'s first few steps. Both the angle of the cut and the likely congestion in the lane complicate the intended release and match-up. **1** may end up in the short corner or corner with an uncontested jump shot.

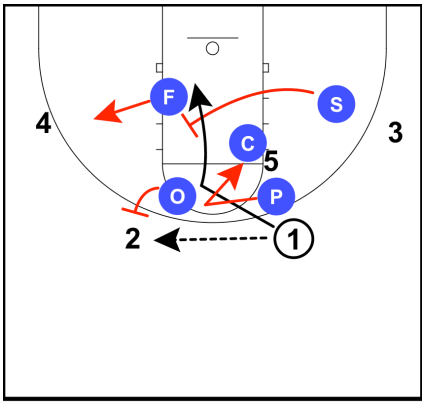
Ironically, the more successful his effort to impede **1**'s cut, the more vulnerable **P** becomes as he attempts to *rotate to the next man away*, in this case**, 2**, who is cutting sharply to the backside rim. Can **P** both slow the cutter and drop to the rim in time to prevent the lob pass for a dunk or layup?

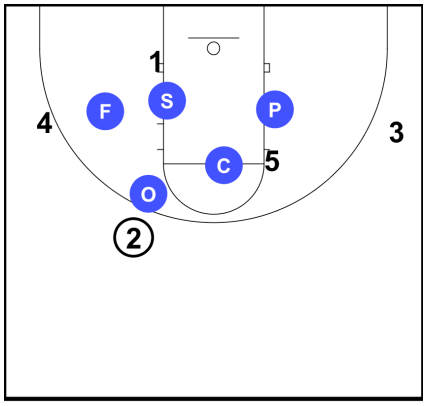
Obviously, perfect timing is required for the offense to exploit these vulnerabilities but they're vulnerabilities nonetheless.

Seeing the same dilemma unfold from a 2-1-2 set provides a different perspective and may help us to recognize a possible solution. Consider the following scenario.

## Stay or Release?

When deploying a two-guard or even front the offense can create confusion by running its offside guard across the face of the defense with a shallow or splitting cut followed by a deep penetrating cut once he has reached the ball side of the defense. If the defenders apply their "deep penetrating cut" rule in which the cutter is delayed, then released to the "deepest offside defender" they place themselves in a very difficult position. Here is how this defensive response is intended to unfold.

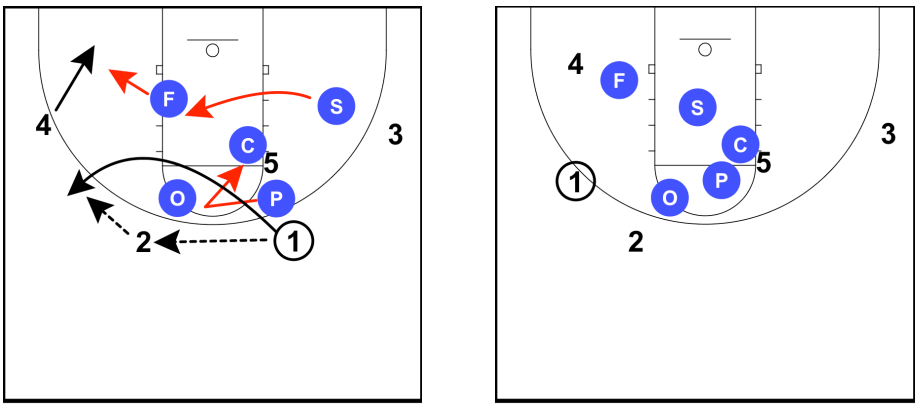


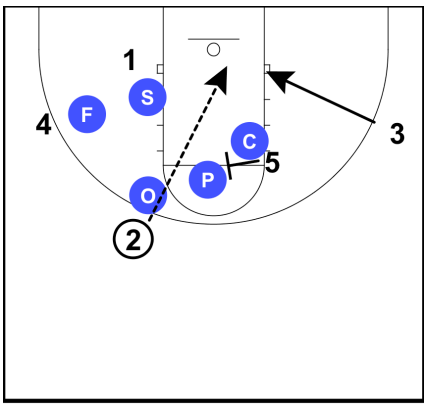

**P** checks the cutter, releases him to **S**, and then rotates away and down to the backside of the defense to match the "next man away." Unfortunately, diagramming this action on paper and actually executing it are two different things.

First, as the guard passes the ball to his teammate and begins his cut, **P** does not know whether he intends to penetrate or loop back to the perimeter. Is this a "shallow cut" requiring **P** to stay with the cutter or a "penetrating cut" requiring him to check, release, and rotate away? Which rule applies?

If **P** releases the cutter and he loops back to the perimeter, he will be wide open for a return pass and uncontested jump shot. There is simply no way **S** can simultaneously deny the anticipated onside penetrating cut and the looping action back to the perimeter. Applying the "deep penetrating cut" rule places **S** in no-man's land.




Secondly, even if the cutter makes the deep penetrating cut and is successfully checked by **S**, the backside of the defense is now exposed. The offside forward – **3**, in this example – has a clear path to the basket to receive a diagonal pass.

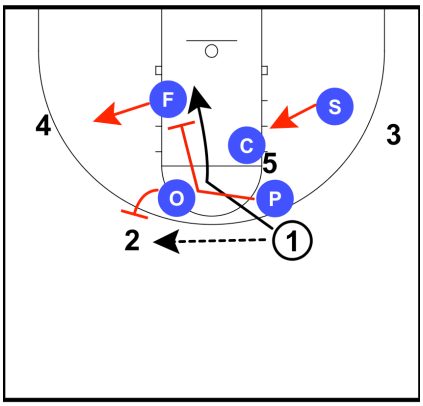


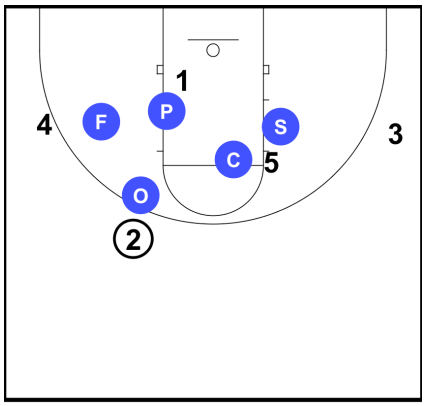

**P** cannot be expected to delay the cutter, then rotate away and down *quick enough* to match **3**. It is too far to go and too easy for the offensive high post to screen or block his path. There is only one viable option for defending this situation: **P** must "stay" with cutter.

> **N.B.** An argument could be made that **C**, matched with the offside high post, should loosen and drop to the basket, in effect, switching assignments with **P**. I think that if we could ask him, Gene Sullivan might respond, *"Look, the defense is both a man and a zone. Don't over analyze; zone the backside."*

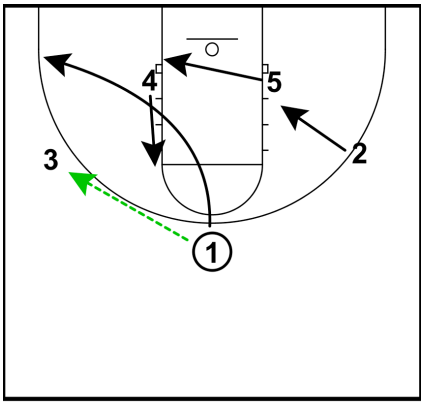
In conclusion, when facing a two-guard front where the offside guard cuts to the onside across the face of the defense, the "shallow cut" rule trumps the "deep penetrating cut" rule. **P** continues to

stay with the cutter even if he continues his original penetrating direction and moves toward the baseline.

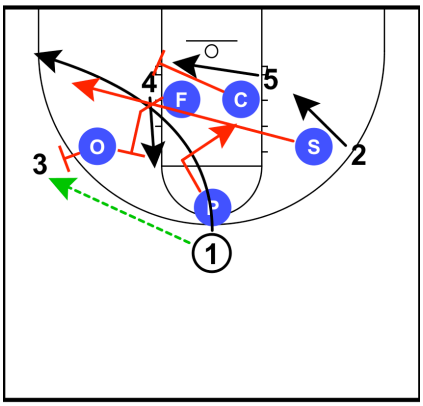


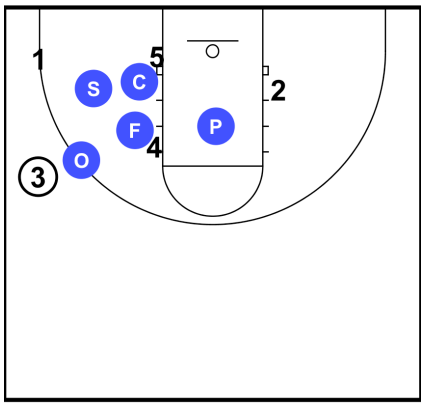



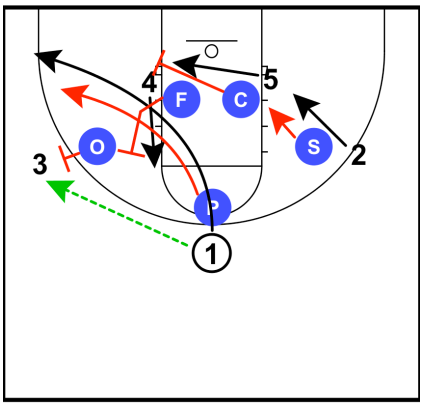

Armed with this perspective, we can see that our original 1-2-2 scenario is essentially the same situation. The change in offensive alignment simply *tilts* the movement and alters our view of it. For all practical purposes, **1**'s movement is a "shallow" cut.

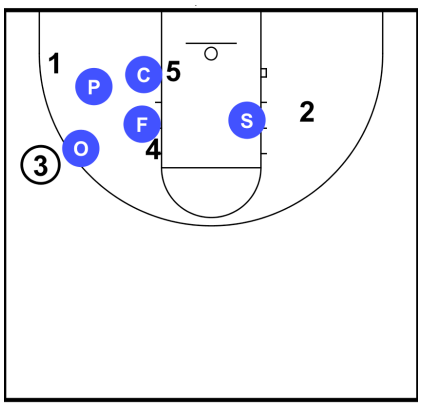



We can choose to treat it as a deep or "penetrating" cut with **P** checking the movement and releasing the cutter to **S**, but if we run into difficulty we can issue a "stay" call.






## The Problem of the Corner

When Sullivan first designed and employed his matching zone, offenses generally avoided the corner, as it was perceived to be a weak operating position. First, the end line and sideline severely limited the corner player's range of movement and made him susceptible to a trap. Secondly, the distance from the basket and the visual angle made effective jump shooting difficult for most players. Thirdly, there was no three-point shot to compensate for the lower shooting percentage.

For these reasons, Sully didn't worry much about defending corner players. Generally, his corner defender stayed in the short corner where he could help choke off passes to the interior.

The era of the three-pointer makes the corner a bit more attractive. There are at least four options for defending today's corner player within the confines of Sullivan's matching zone:

• If the cutter moving to the corner is a willing and capable shooter, check him as far as the short corner and stop. If the ball is passed to him, close aggressively.

• If the cutter moving to the corner is **not** a willing and capable shooter, hold your ground in the short corner.

• On a pass to the corner, close aggressively and convert to man defense, denying all passing lanes.

• On a pass to the corner, aggressively trap and rotate.