

License to Drive

The Dribble-Drive Motion offense is based on creating greater opportunities for perimeter players to penetrate. It also requires a coach who is willing to loosen the reins.

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To hear Vance Walberg tell it, basketball's hottest offensive craze started with a seed of an idea that grew into a forest. As a high school boys' coach almost a decade ago at Clovis West High School in Fresno, Calif., Walberg had a gifted point guard named Chris Hernandez, who was equal parts supreme intelligence and blurring quickness. Hernandez, who went on to star at Stanford University, had a knack for taking the ball to the basket, so to open more paths for him Walberg began moving the post player away from the ball side to the weak side.

Opening the lane for Hernandez also opened Walberg's eyes to what an offense predicated on driving the ball to the basket could accomplish. Each year he added new twists and countered opponents' defensive tactics against it until he came up with what is now called the Dribble-Drive Motion (DDM) offense.

"The philosophy behind the offense boils down to one question: If there are eight seconds on the clock and you have the ball down by one point, what are you going to do? You want to get to the rack," says Walberg, former Head Men's Coach at Pepperdine University who this summer accepted a position as an Assistant Coach at the University of Massachusetts. "That gives you the best chance to score an easy basket or draw a foul. If it works so well in that situation, why not go with that philosophy for the entire game?"

The idea behind the offense is simple: four players spread out around the perimeter and whoever has the ball attacks the defense with the dribble while his or her teammates move to fill the open spots on the perimeter. The driving player either beats the defense and attempts a layup or draws a double team, which dictates they kick the ball out to an open teammate who either takes an uncontested three pointer or initiates their own sequence of options by penetrating to the basket.

Nowhere has the offense been showcased better than at the University of Memphis, which rode the attacking style to the 2008 NCAA Men's Division I National Championship game. Then Memphis Head Coach John Calipari coined the phrase Dribble-Drive Motion.

With its cache of slashing, athletic guards, Memphis racked up gaudy offensive numbers and the most wins in the program's history. But it doesn't take a backcourt filled with blue-chip recruits to run the DDM, as NCAA Division III and high school teams are also finding success with it. In this article, we'll discuss why the offense works so well, what it takes to run it, and the best way to teach the DDM to your players.

Attacking Advantages

Walberg, who taught the offense (which he originally called AASAA—for Attack, Attack, Skip, Attack, Attack) to Calipari, has a lot of numbers in his head to reference why this offense works so

well. For Walberg, points per possession is an extremely important statistic illustrating its efficiency.

“We figure players shoot about 60 percent once they make it into the lane, which equals about 1.2 points per possession,” Walberg says. “If a team makes 35 percent of their three pointers, that’s 1.05 points per possession. If you get to the foul line, where your team shoots 70 percent, that’s about 1.4 points per possession. In contrast, when you take a 10- or 12-footer, which most teams probably hit between 26 and 30 percent of the time, that nets only 0.6 points per possession.

“When you’re taking it to the rack all the time, you also get the other team in foul trouble—so even on nights when your team is not shooting well, you still have a chance to win,” Walberg adds. “If you do the math you can see why going to the rim is the best approach.”

The DDM offense is designed to attack and react in two specific zones: the “drop” zone around the foul line and the area under the basket. The first goal of the player driving from the perimeter is to get to the rim for an easy layup, but in many cases their penetration is cut off at the drop zone, and they’re forced to make a decision. While the ball handler is driving, his or her teammates move along the perimeter to fill in open spots created by the defense’s reaction to the penetration.

Because the players at the top of the three-point line will drive the most, they need to be the best decision-makers. The center is posted on the low blocks, and moves to the opposite side from where the ball is.

A common ball entry might involve having the point guard dribble from the top of the three-point line into the lane until he or she gets stopped by a defender. As the player is driving, the shooting guard rotates to fill in the top spot and another wing player slides up to cover the shooting guard’s former spot. As the stalled point guard passes back out to the perimeter, he or she continues through to the newly opened spot in the corner, and the sequence starts again. By keeping the same rotation every time, players quickly learn where everyone is moving on the floor even without having to look.

For University of Massachusetts Head Men’s Coach Derek Kellogg, the offense is easy to teach because instead of making athletes memorize plays, it allows them to play instinctively. “The greatest thing about this offense is every time a player moves with the ball, they know where their teammates are going to be,” says Kellogg, who was an Assistant Coach at Memphis last season.

Christian Aurand coached his Simi Valley (Calif.) High School boys’ team to a 26-2 record last season using the DDM offense. He says its effectiveness lies in reducing the game to the most basic skills.

“If you asked what the easiest shot in basketball is, most people would say it’s a layup,” Aurand says. “There’s a reason why coaches don’t want all their players taking 15-footers, but every player should be able to make a layup. The second easiest thing is probably finding an open player to pass to. Those are the concepts this offense is based on, and they’re some of the simplest parts of the game to execute.”

Unlike traditional screen- and passing-based offenses where the intention is to work a system until holes are found in the defense that lead to open shots, the DDM offense is designed to force the

defense to decide which holes it is willing to leave open. “The offense exploits the defensive tendencies,” Aurand says. “On defense, all coaches teach their players to slide over and help when a teammate is beat off the dribble. When a penetrator takes his man off the dribble, he’s going to draw in help-side defenders, leaving a teammate open for either an open three-point shot, a layup, or an uncontested drive to the basket.”

Because defenders are on their heels dealing with the penetration, they often end up fouling the driving player, sending them to the free throw line. “The drive is the toughest thing to guard against in basketball because unless the defender is very fast, it’s hard to slide their feet and cut off the penetrator without committing a blocking foul,” says Sal Buscaglia, Head Women’s Coach at Robert Morris University. “And because referees call the hand check more often now, you’ll draw a lot of those fouls, too.”

Aurand notes that penetration has other benefits. “Going to the basket more frequently this year allowed us to make more free throws than our opponents even attempted,” Aurand says. “The extra possessions we get by making the game move so quickly allow us to shoot and make a lot more threes.

“This offense gives you plenty of open looks, which is nice if you have good outside shooters,” he adds. “The fact that we had a team that was 6-foot-4 and under and still lead the state in scoring is a testament to its effectiveness.”

Teaching It

For players today, transitioning to the DDM offense may not be that difficult. “It isn’t a big of a change for many players, especially those with experience playing in AAU,” Kellogg says. “Most of those teams don’t have the time to really practice and put in the offensive structure seen in a traditional basketball program, so they rely on the kids’ individual talents.

“A lot of kids are tailor-made for this style of play,” he continues. “You just have to get them to play together and realize the overriding concept of what you’re trying to do. All you really need to teach them is not to over-penetrate, but instead dribble to a certain place on the floor and look to make a play.”

Finding the right balance of aggression and discipline might be the hardest thing to teach. Herb Welling, Assistant Boys’ Coach at Omaha (Neb.) Central High School and author of a series of teaching videos on the DDM offense, says players need to be encouraged to have an attacking mentality but cautioned to stay in control.

“They always need to think attack, attack, attack,” Welling says. “But that doesn’t mean going full speed ahead into the teeth of the defense. The ability to change speeds is very important so they can stop and go or take a step back and create some space, then explode past the help-side defender who comes over to fill that space.”

Aurand also finds that players sometimes need to be taught the fine line between running a fast-paced offense and a sloppy one. To do that, he places a greater focus on teaching and practicing the basic ball handling and passing skills needed to effectively run the DDM offense.

“Changing the culture is one of the most difficult parts about starting out,” Aurand says. “When most teams play fast, they tend to make a lot more mistakes. Your team has to understand that you can play fast without getting out of control.

“To do that, you have to make sure they all have solid ball handling skills,” Aurand continues. “In a traditional motion offense they’re used to moving the ball through passes, and here you need to be able to beat your man off the dribble.”

To get his players thinking about the offense early on, Kellogg encourages them to make it part of their offseason skill work. “My first day at UMass I met with the team and explained what we would be doing and showed them the concepts behind it,” Kellogg says. “That way if they played pickup games during the summer, they could work on some of the offense’s fundamentals and train their minds to constantly think of ways to attack using this style.

“That was one of the best things we did at Memphis,” he continues. “After we showed them the system, whenever the players got together for pickup games they would play exactly as we played in our workouts. Being proactive about teaching the offense gave the players a good perception of what we were trying to do. When people saw our players in workouts and pickup games they would comment about how those looked just like real games.”

DDM Drills

Because the DDM offense doesn’t rely on players memorizing complicated sets or plays, coaches find that practice time is best spent working on the necessary fundamentals: dribbling, passing, and layups. “It’s a throwback for most coaches, but you just need to work on skills,” Welling says. “You’ve got to devote 45 minutes every day to shooting, individual dribbling skills, and decision-making. Everyone on your team has to be able to dribble penetrate with their left and right hands and finish with either hand.”

To teach this, John Robic, former Assistant Men’s Coach at Memphis, says it’s best to start simple. “The most important thing is to begin with the basics,” Robic says. “It makes it so much easier to implement when you break it down rather than trying to put everything in at once. Just teach the general concepts first.

“The main premise behind the offense is trying to shoot a layup every time your team comes down the floor,” he adds. “We want to get the ball to the rim every chance we get, so it’s important to start by running basic layup drills that teach players to finish with contact at the rim.”

Kellogg says this simple skill most players learned when they first picked up a ball can’t be emphasized enough. “Players need to be able to take contact and finish layups, because that’s how the majority of your points are going to come,” Kellogg says. “If you watched our Memphis team, all of our players were great layup shooters, and that’s become something of a lost art in the college game.”

To practice finishing with contact, Buscaglia uses a drill in which players drive the perimeter then dish it off to a post player, who must make a shot while withstanding contact. “We’ll put four offensive players on the floor—three on the perimeter and one in the block—and have the three outside players run the weave and drive the ball to the drop zone, stop, and kick it back,” Buscaglia

says. “We’ll let them know when to drive by saying, ‘drive,’ then say, ‘dish’ when we want them to pass in to the post player.

“A coach standing inside the foul line with a blocking pad then hits the post player as soon as the ball is caught. This forces the post player to catch and react while the pad is hitting them,” he continues. “It’s a great drill to practice not only dishing the ball, but for the post player to learn how to catch and finish when there’s physical play.”

Another effective layup drill is one that starts with two offensive players—one player dribbles to the drop zone, stops as if covered by a help-side defender, and kicks it back to his or her teammate on the perimeter who then decides to drive or shoot. After players have mastered finishing layups and passing, two defenders are added to the drill.

After that, coaches run the same drill using three offensive players with no defense, then add three defenders after the skills are mastered. This progresses until a full five-on-five matchup is on the court. “This helps teach the player with the ball to see the floor and find the open teammate, which is so much easier to do with fewer players on the floor,” Aurand says.

To teach players quick decision-making and when to change direction and pace, Buscaglia adds a wrinkle to his normal dribbling drills. “In our first sequence, we do normal ball handling drills up and down the court, practicing different dribbles like the crossover, hesitation, and spin dribble,” Buscaglia says. “Then, we do the same thing with the players dribbling around chairs. After that, we have each player dribble down the court while the coach calls out different types of dribbles, forcing the player to react quickly. That helps them learn to react quickly to what’s happening on the floor.”

Players also need to learn to help create space between themselves and the defender. To accomplish this, Aurand teaches what he calls the “W” dribble. “If you’re guarding me and I am not able to beat you to the basket, I would put on the brakes and pull my foot back while keeping my toes pointed toward the basket,” he says. “That hesitation stops the defender and suckers them in to fill that space between them and the dribbler. When the defender does that, the ball handler dribbles hard past the defender to the basket.

“Many coaches teach the spin dribble to help get past a defender, but I feel like that tends to make the player lose vision and turn the ball over,” Aurand continues. “In fact, if any player does a spin dribble during our practices I blow the whistle and call it a turnover even if they didn’t travel or lose the ball.”

Much of the success of the offense relies on the players’ ability to focus on the fundamentals when the game speeds up. So during Buscaglia’s practices, he lets players know he notices when they do the little things right.

“Keeping score during practices is very important because it increases the competitive level and also helps players learn the nuances better,” Buscaglia says. “We not only track points and rebounds, but also watch to make sure the correct fundamentals of the offense are being used. If a player makes a correct read of the defense, we award a point for that too.”

Floor Generals

Coaches, by nature, are more comfortable when they're in complete control of game situations. Most are used to dictating the offense by drawing Xs and Os and calling plays from the sidelines. But in order to get the most out of the DDM offense, coaches must be willing to cede control to the players on the floor.

"You have to be patient and find out what does and doesn't work for your players," Robic says. "You're really taking a chance because for the most part you're taking the decision-making out of your hands and giving it to the players. For some coaches this can be hard to do."

In the early stages of teaching his team the offense, Buscaglia says there were times it didn't always come together as smoothly as he'd hoped. But he says it's important to keep faith and explore wrinkles and alterations that fit the skills of your personnel. At Robert Morris, that meant positioning the power forward at the top of the key to set blur screens and run general interference for the player with the ball.

"Even if you have some players who struggle to fit in this offense, don't give up," Buscaglia says. "Do some research to see what variations other teams are using and realize that just because one school is successful running it a certain way doesn't mean that way will work for you, too."

But for coaches who do embrace this open style of play, the benefits are well worth it. "You really have to open up your mind as a coach and let the game go a little bit," Kellogg says. "Once we did that at Memphis, three things happened. First, our attendance rose because people loved watching the way our team played. Second, our recruiting went through the roof—kids wanted to be involved in a style of play where the coach takes off the reins and lets you go. And third, we won a lot of games."

SIDEBAR

Plugging In Personnel

Odds are good that your team doesn't have a superstar like Derrick Rose, the 2008 NBA number-one draft pick whose highlight-reel drives helped lead the University of Memphis to 38 wins last season. But you don't really need one, either. University of Massachusetts Head Men's Coach Derek Kellogg says any team with a few good ball-handlers and shooters can succeed in the Dribble-Drive Motion (DDM) offense.

"Obviously the better players you have, the better the offense will look," says Kellogg who was an Assistant Coach at Memphis last season. "But you can get five to 10 percent more out of any team by using an offense like this."

The offense can also counteract a team's physical shortcomings. "It allows you to overcome size deficiencies," Kellogg says. "You don't need a 6-foot-10 center to succeed. It's a great equalizer because a smaller team running this offense could match up favorably against a team with bigger, stronger players."

Because the offense requires quickness and speed, it is a good fit for teams with smaller lineups. Herb Welling, Assistant Boys' Coach at Omaha (Neb.) Central High School and author of a series

of teaching videos on the DDM offense, says the scheme is a sharp contrast to sets that rely on screens to free players for open looks.

“You don’t have to be physically strong to run this,” Welling says. “When I think of screening and motion teams, I envision big football players setting screens and getting people open. But what do you do when your 160-pound guard is supposed to screen their 220-pound forward? A lot of us just don’t have those big bruising types who can set crushing screens. This offense lends itself to getting smaller, quicker players open. There have been some years where we have only one post player on the floor.”

The type of players who fit well in the offense—quick, with good ball handling skills and the ability to finish at the rim—reflects the changes in the game, Walberg says. “When you look at traditional passing-based offenses, they were basically designed in the 1950s and 60s when the pace of the game was much slower and the athleticism of the players wasn’t as great,” Walberg says. “The game has evolved so that if you have a great point guard who can drive to the basket and finish, you don’t want to have him just pass to the post and go away from the ball.”