

Should You Run the Fast Break?

The Action Deck Holds Some Hidden Clues

By Anthony Giacobbe Jr.

Strat-O-Matic Basketball, like NBA basketball, is a game of two-part strategy: Which players are on the court and what those players do on the court. Matchups and positioning are as important as passing or shooting. Equally important in Strat is the decision to use a normal offense or a fast break offense.

The way in which the game simulates these two different offenses will have a dramatic impact on a team's success. When used with the right players, the fast break is a lightning-quick, effective way of making the opposing team suffer dearly for a missed shot. Each play is a potential four-point turnaround. But if used with poor players, the fast break is a recipe for a complete disaster of turnovers and missed shots.

Generally, the decision of whether to fast break does not seem difficult — just check out the passing ability of the right guard. The point guards who lead the NBA's fast-breaking teams are obvious choices to do the same in Strat. A guard with high turnovers and few dazzlers is clearly not going to be the man. However, many other factors should play into this decision, especially the passing of the left guard and small forward, and the shooting of all five players.

Similarly, the coach who elects to use a normal offense because his team does not fast break very well still lacks a great deal of information about how his team will perform. Obviously, the importance of rated shooters will increase in a normal offense, but the importance of passing does not necessarily decrease. In fact, the passing of the center and left forward will increase considerably in importance. Also, home and road differences come into play in the normal offense.

To make better decisions, a coach should be aware of exactly which results are contained in the 60-card action deck that influences every play of every game. This article contains a complete breakdown of both the normal and fast-break offenses. Each of the 60 possible outcomes is listed, along with an analysis of the implications of these readings.

To be sure, the lineup, positioning and strategy decisions made before play begins will have a very large impact on the results. But in order to get the most out of your team,

you also need to know the percentages.

However, a disclaimer about the fast-break offense: Use of the action deck is not a perfectly random process. Because a fast-break offense will be used only after a defensive rebound, the card readings under normal offense will affect the chance of a fast-break offense being used at all. To begin with, these readings affect the percentage of the shot taken. A switch reading will lead to a higher percentage shot than a reading of Outside/Inside shot. Next, the rebound readings will then affect the likelihood of a defensive rebound. Thus, all 60 readings are not distributed equally. However, the variance is relatively small and should not distort the analyses below.

FAST-BREAK OFFENSE

First, look at the fast break's principal player: The right guard. His influence on the outcome of fast-break possessions is astronomical — and vastly disproportionate to the influence that the other players have. The fast-break offense contains 20 passes by the right guard and 9 fast-break shots for the right guard — the right guard will initiate play in just under half of all fast-break offense possessions.

This is a staggering figure, especially if the guard has only turnovers and dazzlers in his fast-break passing column, because that means that the right guard alone will determine the final outcome in 29 of the 60 fast-break plays. The actual percentage may be higher, because the right guard also receives four passes from the right forward and four from the left guard, which may result in fast-break shots by the right guard.

Thus, the right guard's passing is the most important factor in deciding whether or not to fast break, and the right guard's shooting is also very important. You cannot run the fast break without a point guard who is very good in these categories.

Overall, the fast-break offense is evenly divided into 30 passes and 30 fast-break shots. The right guard's 20 passes go primarily to the right forward and the left guard (7 each) and secondarily to the center and the left forward (3 each). The right forward and left guard are the only other players who can make fast-break passes. Each has 5 passes, 4 of which are to the right guard and the fifth of which is to each other (LG to RF, RF to LG).

Thus, 24 of the 30 passes involve a pass from one of these three positions (RG, LG, RF) to the other, with the only exceptions being the 3 passes from RG to C and the 3 passes from RG to LF.

The 30 fast-break shots also are weighted by position. In addition to the right guard's 9 shots, the left guard has 8 and the right forward has 7. The center and left forward have 3 each. Like the passing plays, 24 of the 30 fast-break shots are distributed to the "small 3." Overall, 48 of the 60 possessions involve only these three players. Furthermore, if the RG does not have any fast-break shots in his passing column, this number becomes 54 out of 60 with the only remaining outcomes being the 3 fast-break shots for the center and the left forward.

The left guard and right forward are involved in 20 (RF) and 21 (LG) plays, respectively, with each making 5 passes, receiving 8 passes, and taking 7 (RF) or 8 (LG) fast-break shots. In my opinion, one of these players must be very good, or both must be above average, in order to successfully run the break. If one player is weak, but the other is strong, you can run the fast break without too much liability.

Generally, the shooting abilities of these players are more important than their passing abilities. However, the importance of shooting is reduced if the right guard has few fast-break shots in his passing column. If it is a dazzler or turnover, it does not matter who receives the pass.

Although the center and left forward have very small roles in the fast break, don't overlook them. A fast break can only be run if the offense misses a shot and the defense rebounds it. Thus, both defense and rebounding are important — and the center and left forward have the most rebound chances. Without good rebounding there, you may not be fast-breaking very often.

Nevertheless, a fast break will significantly reduce the role of the center and left forward in your offense. This is an often overlooked consequence of running the break — it may effectively take you best scorer out of the offense.

NORMAL OFFENSE

While the fast break emphasizes different positions unevenly, the normal offense contains a distribution that is, well, just plain normal. In this mode, players are treated

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equally in every respect.

Each player has 7 chances of gaining control, which accounts for 35 of the 60 cards in the "control" section. Once a player gains control, the card is turned, revealing one of 60 new results, which are different for the home and visiting teams.

The home-court advantage: The home team offense has 10 switch readings, while the visitors have 5. These five readings are replaced with "Replay" readings on the visiting side. Also, while the home team has 15 Outside/Inside shots, the visitors have only 13. An Outside/Inside shot is a position shot for that player which must be outside if the player is positioned outside and inside otherwise. The two missing results on the visitors' side are both automatic turnovers. There are also 2 open Outside/Inside shots for each team.

Thus, of the 60 cards, the player in control will attempt a shot 27 times if he is on the home team and 20 times on the visiting team.

The most common reading from the action deck is "opponent defense number." There is one card for each of the numbers 21-45, a total of 25 cards — more than 40 percent of the time, the outcome depends on the opponent's defense and will either be a steal, foul, or a pass to any 1+ shooter. Gamers who appreciate SOM's incredible attention to detail marvel at the key role each player's individual defense plays.

This has important implications for both coaches. On defense, the effect is obvious. On offense, the importance of having 1+ rated shooters will increase against a team that has fewer steals and fouls.

The remaining results are Replays. The home team has 8, four of which are automatic, two of which can be avoided if there is a 2+ shooter, and two of which can be avoided if there is a 3-rated shooter. The visiting team has the same 8 replays and, as indicated above, an additional 5 replays for a total of 13.

The other 25 "control" readings are passes, but these are also distributed equally. Each of the five positions has one pass to each of the other four positions, accounting for 20 of the passes, while the remaining five passes are to the player of the offensive coach's choice (3 from RG, 1 from LG, 1 from RF).

Since player passing is equal for all positions in the normal offense, the center's passing is just as important as the right guard's. Gamers who discount a center with high turnovers, thinking he does not pass as much

as the other players, are simply incorrect. Also, the percentage of passes made by the right guard, who is allegedly running the offense, is only 20 percent, because each player has the same number of passes.

Because the normal offense treats each player just about equally, player positioning is of increased importance. Since the normal offense results in more "position shots," positioning of every player, but especially the rated shooters, is of paramount importance.

I believe the first rule of running the normal offense is to place the rated shooters in the most advantageous positions. If a mismatch is available with a rated shooter, such as a big guard playing inside against a small guard, it should be used for maximum advantage. Even if no such option exists, all possible avenues should be exploited to allow the rated shooters to be effective. This includes placing appropriate players around the shooter to counter a double-team.

The same guidelines apply on defense. Every attempt should be made to deter the rated shooters from taking their strongest shots. All of the options provided by the game, including double-teaming, sag and close defenses, and individual matchup options provide coaches with an opportunity to reduce the effectiveness of the rated shooters. Do so even if sacrificing defense against the non-rated shooters, because the majority of the shots will be directed toward the rated shooters.

Actually, there is one area in the normal offense where positions are treated differently. As indicated above in the fast break section, there are more rebound readings for the left forward and the center than for the other positions, with right guard having the fewest. In this respect, centers and left forwards are more important. However, this is true whether the offense is fast break or normal.

CONCLUSION

Common sense tells any coach that if you have a point guard with a lot of dazzlers and players who can shoot the fast break shot well, you should fast break. Otherwise, you should use the normal offense. While these simple guidelines may work in many situations, there are many more factors to consider when deciding which offense is more appropriate.

The right guard's role is dramatically increased in the fast-break offense. Fast-break passing is the most important element, but the right guard must also be able to shoot well. The left guard and small forward also play important roles, and it is essential that at least one of them be able to perform effec-

tively on the break. Although the center and left forward have negligible offensive roles, their defensive rebounding ratings may be essential in getting the break started.

The normal offense treats all players equally, just about. Passing opportunities are equal for all positions, thus placing an increased importance on shooting and positioning. Rated shooters will get a disproportionate number of shots, so coaches should position the rated shooters to their advantage.

Lastly, coaches with teams that fast break should remember not to overlook the factors discussed in the normal offense. The fast break is not available on every play, and an inability to score from the normal offense will simply create fast-break opportunities for the other team. It will also make it more difficult to win.