Playing a Zone Defense in Women’s Lacrosse

A zone defense gives up outside lane shots and takes away the middle of the 8 meter arc – the “sweet spot” of attackers. To be effective at the zone, you need to identify “vocal” leaders and “thinkers” and put them in key spots (the crease, the top-center of the arc, or the rover position). You must have defenders who are strong playing in 1v1 situations.

Zone defense requires defenders to make decisions. The ball has to be the #1 priority. Defenders marking the ball carrier cannot leave their ball responsibility to pick up an open cutter. They must stay on a double team when it occurs. If an attacker challenges, is doubled by the adjacent zone defender and starts to back out, the defenders must stay on the double team and apply lots of pressure. This is where the zone pays off in creating opportunities for maximum pressure and possible turnovers.

Reasons for using a zone defense:

- **Forces the attacking team to play together to beat you** – This could be especially effective at the high school level where often times teams rely on one or two players to generate the bulk of their offense. If they all have to work together, it takes away their ability to rely on the strength of a couple of key players.
- **Positions multiple defensive players in a confined area** – Your opportunity to double-team is increased. Also, you have an increased opportunity to win ground balls dropped in the 8m.
- **Limits shots and masks defender deficiencies** – By playing a zone, you attempt to limit the quality of shot by an opponent while hiding your weaknesses and not exposing your team to 1v1 scenarios.
- **Allows you to FAST BREAK!** Players are free to break out of the zone without being matched up with an opponent right away. If you have a fast team, you can encourage a quick break out and chance to push the ball down the opposite end of the field.

Getting into the zone:

- **Option 1**: Concede the midfield and drop in right away – a good option if you have slow midfielders and a weak goalie.
- **Option 2**: Pressure to the 30 yd line, and then drop in to a zone formation once the opponent has settled the ball. To do this effectively, you must have attackers who will redefend. The zone starts with the low attackers. They buy time for defenders to get in position.
Different types of zones

A few examples

1-4-2 (sagging defense):
1 = defender pressuring ball; 4 = defenders shellng the top of the 8M; 2 = low crease defenders

- Shell the 8M with 7 Defenders
- Allows for maximum ball pressure which helps to disguise open looks in the 8M.
- 1 player is pressuring ball,
- 2 adjacents are stepping to ball, looking to double on challenge while juggling cutters as well
- 4 other players sagging toward ball to take cutters or help with a challenge

1-3-1-2 (Zone with rover):
1 = player pressuring ball; 3 = defenders shelling the top of the 8M; 1 = Rover; 2 = low crease defenders

- More conservative – completely focused on defending the 8M
- 6 players (4 on top and 2 on the crease) shell the 8M and 1 player (the rover) works just around the 8M, picking up cutters to allow shell players to get back to their spots faster.
- Rover position is very demanding – requires a smart, athletic player who can handle chaos.
- This zone does not require the extent of shifting and bumping of the other zone.

A backer zone (2-2 box with 1 rover):

It's basically a box set up with 4 corner players and one floating rover player who follows the ball. This is a high pressure zone. For example, when the ball is top-right, the corner player in the top-right position can go out and pressure the ball carrier, and the rover fills in her spot, acts as a two slide, and keeps the box-and-one-rover zone intact.

- The two zones on either post have to be the best 1v1 defenders on the team to destroy the crease roll.
- Every zone defender has to force their man to the outside so the backer can contain them and/or double the ball to create turnovers.
- Be prepared for the skip passes, and anticipate them.
- Make sure the backer is athletic and can run for a while, they WILL get tired.
- For cutters, let one zone defender escort the cutter to the intended zone of the cutter.
Always be focused on the entrance of your zone to retrieve cutters.

Depending on how in shape your players are and how nervous the ball carriers are on the opposing team, here are two alternatives to the backer zone:

- Have the rover and the two players from the 7 squad defense who are not involved in the box zone double/triple team the ball carrier. Note that players can get tired quickly and may need to substitute with the players marking the four corners.

- Have the rover go after the ball carrier. The two players who are not involved in the box zone should mark the adjacent opponents who are closest to either side of the ball carrier. The player from the high box corner who is ball-side should move out to double-team the ball carrier so that the ball carrier is always double-teamed. The other high-corner zone player moves to the top of the 8M arc so that she and the two low defenders now form a triangle around the 8M. These players look to stop the cutters.

You need an extremely well balanced defense with a lot of team chemistry to pull off any type of backer zone. Many high schools have no idea how to attack a backer zone defense, and it can catch them off guard and be extremely effective. Especially for teams who rely on 1v1 takes to cage.

Generally your fastest girl will be the backer, however the better defensive skills the better. Teams in high school obviously have a harder time with passing and catching, so if you can throw pressure onto an offense, it generally creates a lot of turnovers. If you find you’re getting beat backside, just switch into a man v man and accept that they have the skills to beat a zone and maybe try a different kind of pressure offense/backer.

You can do a man-to-man with a backer. You always have the defender farthest from the ball covering two. You need to be able to play really good individual 1v1 defense in any scheme for it to work.

One of the most effective versions of a high-pressure backer zone, is where the player on ball is right in the face of the ball carrier, with a backer just outside the 8m, and high pressure on the two players adjacent to the ball carrier. The other 3 defenders are playing a zone around the 8m, rotating and reacting to cuts, so that you have full, hard, pressure on ball, and have everybody else covered.
Rules for Playing an Effective Zone

- **Sticks up & take away the space** – This is an extremely important visual cue to the offense. It asserts the attitude of the defense and can be intimidating. It literally can make someone seem covered when really a defender might be a step behind.

- **See Ball, See Zone** – Swivel head mentality. This is a very critical skill. You must always be looking around and evaluating danger.
  
  **Note:** If players struggle with this skill, you will see constant back door cuts – defenders must constantly check ball, check cutters.

- **Cover the Crease** – low defenders are key to making the Zone work! They not only take care of crease challenges but they are relied up to be *mini-rovers*: that is to take all of the cutters from the top so that top defenders can get back to their zones. They are also CRITICAL to the collapse when the ball does get inside the 8M. Low Defense has to be very careful that they don’t ball watch – they need to be aware of players behind the goal and not get back doored by these cutters.

- **CUT THE CUTTER** – This is the single most important skill and the most critical factor in asserting the power of the defender and dictating the play! Deny cutters access to the 8M – change her cut!! "If you see her, take her" – Don’t assume other people are covering open cutters!!

- **Shift Ball Side as Zone** – important to overload to the ball side so that there appear to be fewer options for attackers. If attackers do choose to skip pass, you have plenty of time to adjust when the ball is in the air.

- **Bump** – this is a movement of the zone that requires shifting to your teammates’ zone areas. This can happen if you’re pressuring the ball and you attempt to hand off an attacker and there is no other defender available for you to hand off to. For example, your adjacent has taken a cutter and vacated her zone. You must stay with ball and your teammate will recover to your spot. You MUST communicate!

- **COLLAPSE** – Hugely important – essentially why you play a zone. This skill ensures that all shots will be contested to a certain degree. Players must collapse on opponents who have penetrated the “sweet spot” – the 8M – either by driving with the ball or receiving a feed. All seven defenders (or at least the four closest) must collapse and contest the shot, further diminishing the quality of the opportunity.
Practicing the Zone

Many of these concepts are the same as player-to-player defense.

1. Start with **Passing off cutters** – Elbow-to-opposite-side-of-crease
   - Need 2 defenders and 2 attackers, and a goalie. One attacker, standing at the top of the 12M has the ball and will feed if the cutter is open for a pass in the 8M. Cutter goes ½ speed from the opposite corner to the crease. Defenders are working on perfecting the details of the hand-off and not allowing for an open pass. If a pass gets in, play it out with a shot.
   - Emphasize **body position** (defender plays ball side – not goal side defense – They must get in front of the cutter and force her to change her cut rather than escorting her through the 8M), **stick position** (stick to stick – defenders must pass off by touching sticks), **talking** (got her, take her, etc. – make sure to use LOUD talk and be sure you are calling out the names of teammates) and **returning to your zone quickly** – without any hesitation.

2. **Pinching In** – work on doubling the challenge.
   - Need 2 defenders and one attacker and a goalie
   - Defenders are working on defending the drive. One defender greets the ball and forces her to the other defender – you must mark off the middle of the 8M with cones and limit the Attack to only challenging from the side of the 8M where the 2 top defenders are standing. This will force attack to challenge defenders. The defenders must work on applying a good double team and on pressuring the shooter.
   - Defenders adjacent to the ball must take a step towards the ball and away from the 8M. This puts them in the right place to help defend the drive.
   - Adjacent players must not drift from the ball as they take cutters.

3. **Crease-to-Elbow hand off**. This is one of the weakest points in the zone – be sure it is a quick and efficient hand off.
   - Start off with 2 defenders, 2 attackers and a goalie. Attack is working on a crease roll from behind. Both attackers start behind the goal and one attempts a crease roll while the other makes a “follow me” cut. This will force your crease defender to get back once the hand off to the elbow defender has occurred. If she doesn’t get back in time, the following attacker will be able to sneak under the defense as an open player.
   - Don’t want crease defender to get pulled up to the elbow – this takes total priority! Elbow players must prioritize this help and the defender next to them must recognize the situation and assist with cutters.
   - You can add another pair of attack and defense players. Have the third defender next to the elbow player and place the third attacker just off the elbow. When the crease roll happens and the elbow defender has to help, have the attacker on the wing cut through. It is the adjacent defender’s job to pick her up.
   - Finally, when you work in all seven defenders, you MUST put limitations on the attack. First they can ONLY perimeter pass. Then, they are only permitted to cut from one elbow to the opposite crease. This will help limit the confusion for the defense and also build their confidence.
Beating the Zone Defense

Womens’ Lacrosse

Today zones are more aggressive, less passive with almost a man-to-man look combined with ball pressure. This results in less opportunity for ball handlers to diagnose the field and shoot. The defenders’ goal is to knock down passes. If done correctly, the defenders will move as one.

To beat the zone, you need to attack the gaps in the zone. Draw two defensive players in to play the ball, and then move the ball quickly around the perimeter, eventually forcing the defense to rotate. Don’t sit back and don’t get bunched up. Move into the gaps that a zone creates. Overload an area. Avoid unnecessary ball carrying. It gives the defense a chance to reset.

A zone defense is very good at shutting down individual dodgers. It is poor at putting pressure on possession if you quickly move the ball around outside the zone perimeter. Make the extra pass and find the seams in the zone. You can no longer rely on a single player or two on offense. The success of your offense is determined by the knowledge of how a zone works and the skill of all your players.

It's important that your best shooters get their shots. It's not a matter of getting a shot. It becomes a matter of getting the best shot. It’s important that midfielders understand the defensive rotation. Don't be afraid to dodge the zone when you spot a gap, and attack the rotation of defensive players with ball movement.

You need to create a 1v1 style offense, attacking weak points inside the zone when they occur. You also need to quickly determine when a play is not going to work, and then withdraw and repeat. Patience is the biggest challenge for players, but it is key.

A good cutting & feeding team can beat a zone defense if they have:

- Girls who can pass with precision
- Cutters with good timing who can create space, and catch without breaking stride

Recommendations for attacking the zone:

- Never, Never dodge into a firmly-planted zone defense.
- Make the defenders play outside their zones and then take advantage of it
- Use quick ball movement.
- Work the ball from behind (if the defense slides and plays you, look for shooters behind an oncoming defenseman).
- Overload one side of the zone, and then attack from the other side.
- Do not have cutters simultaneously going from both sides. Otherwise the defenders passing cutters will just exchange.
- DO NOT force the play - if it isn't going to work, reset and repeat.
- Patience is very important against a zone, the ball moves quickly but don't force half chances.
• Look to create open shots for cutters in front of the crease or to isolate players in 1v1 situations.
• Move the ball quickly (to avoid the pressure), use skip passes to create 1v1's (because the defender rotation can't keep up). Picture three players standing in a row. The player at one end has the ball. He passes to the player at the other end and skips the player in the middle; hence the term "skip pass."
• Overload cutters from one zone and eventually the zone will be empty leaving a girl wide open for a feed.
• Use backdoor cuts. The definition of a zone defense is that all defenders are watching the ball. And "ball watching" defenses leave themselves vulnerable to quick cuts from a player coming out of the view of the defenders.
• Just make the zone players WORK!

Three ways to break the zone defense:

• **Double cuts.** There is a difference between "a lot of cutting through" and "double/multiple cuts". One just means everyone is cutting through at some point in time, the other is having specifically time cuts after each other. Have 1 person cut, and then immediately have another person cut a half second later. Timed correctly, it will drag the zone out of place and someone should be free to either drive to the goal or to get a feed and take a shot.
• **Players positioned inside the 8 meter arc.** Have one or two attackers stand inside the 8. The purpose of having 1 or 2 people stay in the 8 is if they’re just hanging out there, they might be covered, but they’re also dragging the zone out of place and forcing girls to cover them and not participate in the zone defense. Basically, the purpose is to make the zone break down.
• **Quick movement.** Quick movement of players who are off ball, and quick passes of the ball while the zone recovers.

Methods to try when looking to break a zone:

**2-cut system.**

4. Ball starts at the top left of the 8m (if you're facing the goal.)
5. The person to the ball's right, (should be dead center on top of the 8, facing the goal) cuts through down low.
6. Then the girl that was next to that cutter, cuts through looking for a feed and goes to goal.

**Note:** Timing is key, otherwise the zone will recover. The double cutters (with less than a second between them) coming from the same area breaks down a zone. If a defender follows your cut while you are in her zone, and then another girl starts cutting threw her zone again right as you are leaving, she won’t have enough time to recover. So, either the 2nd cutter is open or another defender slides and leaves a different girl open.
**Straight-thru cuts.**

The player to the right and to the left of the ball carrier run straight through the 8m while the ball carrier stands still for a second or two. This *should* clear out some space for the ball carrier to go to goal.

**Note:** If the opposing team collapses their zone during stacks or uneven setups, then this won't work and you will get hammered by double and triple teams. If defenders aren't coming out to play the ball, then the ball-carrier can also fake shots toward the goal and draw 'obstruction of free space' calls in her favor.

**Overloading one side of the zone then attacking the other.**

1. Control the ball behind the goal using a wheel play. Move the ball around as fast as you can and get the defense moving. Once you find a gap - and there will be one eventually - take advantage of it.
2. Send multiple players cutting to the ball handler. Timing is essential to avoid the double/triple teaming.
3. If there is a cutter open, feed the ball to them. However, if they are covered, redirect the ball thru X, and then attack the weak side from behind. Send a cutter off of a pick from up top.

**Note:** It is important you don't force the play. Timing is essential to avoid double/triple teaming. The girl who makes the redirection pass thru X must follow the driving attack player as she becomes the outlet pass if they double or defend the isolation well. The pass thru X is a pass from back right to back left... the ball passes thru X (not the player running thru X). The idea being you commit players and the ball to one side of the goal, attracting defenders out of position, breaking down the zone to then quickly move the ball and attack the space created.

The passer of the ball moves from back right to back left, as the dodger drives from back left to front left. If they get stopped, they can roll away from pressure knowing the outlet pass will be at back left. The most likely outcome is the dodger will draw an extra defender and should look to feed open attack player inside. If one is not open, roll out and pass to outlet. Reset the offense and start again.
Notes about Zone Defense

Pulling off a zone defense in women’s lacrosse is difficult because of the 3-second count and obstruction to free space rules. It also requires extremely athletic players with top-notch communication skills. Because this may be difficult to find, teams often incorporate a partial zone (for example, leaving two girls down low).

For stacks, you can do one of two things. If the ball is not near the stack, such as ball at x and a stack off to the side, double the ball and have everyone else go man-to-man by the stack. Usually, the girl with the ball will freeze up, throw the ball away, or make some other kind of nervous mistake. If defenders don’t recognize the stack quickly enough, switch to a regular man-to-man defense with pressure on the ball. Usually it floods the area with enough people that it's hard to make a pass or cut without running into a defender.

Use constant pressure to either force a pass, dropped ball, or drive to goal in most cases.

Never hand off the ball carrier. The defender must stay with the ball carrier all the way through their drive till they are out of the 8 and everyone shifts accordingly.

Cutters are handed off roughly at mid point. The initial defender calls out a hand off and notifies another girl on defense where the cutter is headed towards to come meet them and take the girl all the way through to the other side. If the cutter decides to stop in the middle of the 8, so does the defender playing her. Everyone else just adjusts accordingly and evens out the 8m.

If one player sits in the middle of the 8 on the crease, the defender that originally followed them into the 8 stays with them and everyone else shifts around the 8 and adjusts the zones accordingly. Yeah, it's 1 less defender for the zone, but it's also 1 less attacker on the outside.

Zone defense is doable in women's lacrosse, but relying on one type of defense is always a bad idea. Late in a game when you are down three or four goals you can't play zone. You can't play zone if your goalie isn't good. Many coaches fear that playing zone exclusively will hurt their man-to-man schemes and covering skills. Zones subtly can create lazy defenders.

Attackers can take a zone defense out of its comfort level by overloading, stacking, motion, and setting picks. The defense needs to play smart and change how they play based on the circumstances. To beat a zone your attack players have to be able to read the field. They need to see that their defender has left the zone and react to it. When that happens, the player with the ball needs to see and also react to it. You have to really pay attention and communicate or you will never break the zone.