Defensive Strategies:
Utilizing your talent and wearing down the opponent

Adapted from Volleyball: Steps to Success by Bonnie Kenny and Cindy Gregory

Good attackers are important to a team, but good blockers and defenders are needed, too. Good team defense can help keep your team in many matches and can win some close ones for you. By using your libero and defensive specialists, you can significantly increase the effectiveness of your team’s defensive play. Nothing brings a crowd to their feet faster than a spectacular dig made in a rally.

Realistically, you cannot always expect magnificent digs from your defense, but you can expect good, consistent digs to the target so that you can execute your offense. We call this a “dig to kill,” and when it happens it is truly a beautiful thing.

The two goals of defense are to score points and to control the momentum of the game. The ability of the blockers and the backcourt defenders and consideration of the opponent’s offensive strategies and personnel determine the defensive systems’ designs. The best way to play defense is to put players in areas of the court that opponents are more likely to attack.

When implementing a defense, keep it as simple as possible. The four different defenses presented in this text will provide a team with four effective ways to defend against an opponent. During play, you can change the position of...
one person to take away an opponent’s tendencies. You can do this without changing the entire defense. You can also mix and match different parts of the defenses based on your personnel and opponent. You may choose to play one type of defense against the outside attackers and a different defense against the right-side attackers.

These four defenses are not difficult to master; sufficient training in practice prepares the players to understand where they go, when they go there, and why they go there. Make sure that everyone understands her own areas of responsibility in each of the different defenses as well as those of her teammates. This will help all players stay in system while playing defense as a team and to learn to trust that everyone will do their part to make the defense work.

With six defenders on a team, each player is responsible for 145 square feet of the court. Everyone must work in tandem to cover that ground. Because of this, everyone needs to be able to play defense from different positions on the court and in different body postures.

**Player-back or Perimeter Defense (Figure 1)**

Player-back or perimeter defense is a basic setup that many teams use. It features defenders digging near the perimeter of the court but always facing the attacker. Defenders in this defense always want to stay deep enough to defend balls in front of them. Movement is to the front, left or right in the player-back defense.

A major drawback of the player-back defense is that it leaves the middle of the court vulnerable. Remember – in this system, players are playing along the sidelines and baseline, covering the perimeter of the court. They are relying on the block to take away the middle area of the court, or at least make it very difficult for the attacker to hit it there. The blocker must at least tip the ball up, allowing other players the chance to play it, otherwise, the hit will be nearly impossible to defend.

The middle-back defender must be disciplined enough to stay back and play the last 10 feet of the court along the entire baseline.

The left back and right back or wing defenders should have their backs to the sideline when digging a ball cross-court and work to position themselves directly off the middle blocker’s inside shoulder. This way, they can see the hitter and be prepared to defend the ball. If defenders cannot see the hitter, they are standing behind the block. If they stand behind the block, they are in an area that the block is denying the hitter. Little chance exists for a player to hit the ball there. The higher the set, the deeper wings move in to adjust. Remember, the higher the set, the more time there is available to respond to the ball, but the attacker can hit the ball deeper as well.

Against a middle attack, teams should put up a good double block and position the backcourt defenders around the block. Middle hitters hit low and fast tempo sets. Thus, defenders have very little time to move or adjust. Wind defenders do not move much at all. Little or no time at all may exist to scoot their feet back towards the sideline. Remember, against a middle attack, teams want the block to deflect the ball and diggers to defend it.
**Player-up Defense (Figure 2)**
Player-up defense covers the middle of the court and only has three defenders covering the perimeter of the playing area. In this system, a player is positioned on the attack line and she mirrors the ball. This person defends behind the block, covers tips and defends balls that are sent to the middle of the court. The defender who is up in this defense could be either a weak defender whom you are trying to hide or the setter. If the defender is the setter, this defense usually keeps her close to the target and away from the sideline, where she might have to dig a lot of balls.

Preferably, you want this weaker player to defend here if your opponent tips a lot, because you do not want your setter to play the first ball. If your setter defends the first ball, she cannot set the second ball for your attacker.

**Rotation Defense (Figure 3)**
In rotation defense, defenders have to move more to position themselves to play defense. This system covers the corners of the floor more so than the player-back defense and also covers tips directly over the block. Everyone in this defense rotates in the direction that the ball is set, and they move in system together. When a team moves in system in defense, they all adjust their positions at the same time. This enable the defense to space correctly on the court (away from each other) to best defend.

In the rotation defense, it is easy to remember which way you move if you just remember that the backcourt defender who is closest to the ball is the player who rotates up behind the block. For example, a high ball is set to the outside hitter on the other side of the net. The right-back defender comes up the sideline and gets behind the block. The middle-back defender moves all the way to the right sideline (right foot on the right sideline). The left-back defender rotates and plays defense with their back to the left-back corner. The left-front blocker who is not blocking moves off the net 10 to 12 feet in order to defend.

**Middle-middle Defense (Figure 4)**
Middle-middle defense is based on the theory that 40 percent of the balls that are attacked are hit to the middle of the floor. Defensive theory says to put your best defenders where the opponents are likely to hit the ball. If you don’t believe this, watch film...an amazing number of attacks are sent to the middle.
Base position for wing defenders is 3 feet behind the attack line or about 13 feet off the net and 2 feet inside of their sideline. The middle-back defender is in the middle of the court. This is where you’re going to want your best defender, because they will have the best chance to dig a high number of balls.

This player will dig many balls overhead, so make sure you work on this daily in practice. This is usually where the libero plays defense. Some coaches like to have the best back-row attacker play middle-back so that they can attack as many balls as possible even while in the back row. Here is our philosophy: You dig the ball before you attack it, and if the majority of balls are being hit to the middle of the court, we want our best defender there.

Just like player-back defense, this leaves the corners vulnerable. Left- and right-back defenders must stay close to their base positions if the opposing attacker can hit sharp angles. If they can’t, the defenders need to move back to the corner on their half of the court because this is where that hitter can and will hit instead. Wing defenders have to remember never to get beat to their left (on the elft side of the court) and vice versa for the right side, particularly when the crosscourt attacker is hitting the ball.

**Summary**

Anyone who is passionate enough to do whatever it takes to keep the ball off the floor can master and learn defense. It takes a tremendous amount of work – relentless pursuit on defense can wear down an opponent in any match.

In an ideal world, teams dig every ball to a target. We all know that this just isn’t possible. Be patient when implementing defenses. As with offense, the best approach is to keep it simple, do what works, and always be willing to experiment with new approaches.
Middle Back Release
Will Condon
Head Women’s Coach
University of South Carolina, Aiken

Number of Players: 8

Number of Balls: Steady Supply

Directions:
1. Coach (C) enters a free ball to one of the defenders (D).
2. Hitters (OS, RS) on the receiving side transition off the net.
3. The defender passes the ball to the setter (S).
4. The setter sets either right side or outside attacker.
5. When the set is made, the defender releases to a defensive position for the attack that was set.
6. The blocker attempts to block the attacker.
7. The attacker hits a controlled ball to the location where the defender is supposed to reach.
8. The defender passes the ball to the setter.
9. Repeat until desired goal is reached.

Goals:
• Total number of contacts.
• Total number of digs by a defender.
• Total net crosses.

Variations:
• Use more than one defender (no more than three).
• Have setters block with hitters
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