

The Good Ol' 'Hyperbolic Paraboloid' Defense

In Other Words, Rupp's 1-3-1 Zone

The trap defense that Pat Riley's Los Angeles Lakers used so effectively at strategic moments during their 24-game marathon playoff route to a second consecutive NBA championship last month bears a striking resemblance to the 1-3-1 zone trap that helped put All-American forward Riley and his "Rupp's Runts" teammates into the 1966 NCAA



Russell Rice

Cats' Pause Columnist



championship final against Texas Western.

Although zone defenses are prohibited in the NBA, the rules do allow double-teaming the man with the ball, which clears the way for a trapping defense.

Of course, Wildcat coach Adolph Rupp, a noted hater of zone defenses, refused to call his trap a zone, referring to it instead as a "transitional and shifting man-to-man backed by a hyperbolic paraboloid between the ball and the basket."

RUPP SPRUNG THAT TERMINOLOGY on an unsuspecting press corps after surprising Ray Mears and Tennessee 66-57 with the defense in Knoxville during January of 1964. As the media sought further enlightenment, he explained that a paraboloid is "sort of a cone" and a hyperboloid is "one with one of the points cut off," while stratified means "in layers" and transitional means "changing."

Although Rupp said he and Lancaster "invented" the defense during a trip to Japan, he admitted that Lancaster got the idea from Chuck Noe, then coach at Virginia Tech, when those two roomed together during an East-West high school all-star game in Pikeville.

Lancaster later wrote that he and Noe were killing time in their hotel room when the Gobbler coach said, "Harry, I want to show you a zone defense that's the greatest thing I've ever seen."

"You're wasting your time," Lancaster replied. "There's no way in hell Adolph will ever use it."

"But this zone is different," Noe said. "It has rules."

"In those days most zones were just areas of the floor," Lancaster recalled later. "You designated a zone for each player and instructed them not to let anybody score from their zone. But the 1-3-1 that Chuck designed for me that day was different. It had a rule for every player. It dictated exactly where each player was to go in every situation."

The Wildcat freshman team that year, dubbed the "Katzenjammer Kids" by Rupp, was led by the talented trio of Larry Conley, Mickey Gibson and Tom Kron. The Kittens practiced after the varsity each day and Rupp never hung around to watch the sessions. With the zone-hater home enjoying his pre-dinner bourbon, Lancaster started "fooling around" with the 1-3-1 in practice, following diagrams and rules written for him by Noe. He called Noe several times for clarifications.

THE KEY WAS HAVING A BIG GUARD AT THE POINT, and a clever forward on the right side, where he could trap after the other players had forced the opponents to go to the left. Kron, 6-foot-5, and Conley, 6-3, filled those positions, respectively.

The Kittens played their games as preliminaries to the varsity in those days. Rupp always went to the dressing room after watching the first half, which gave Lancaster an opportunity to experiment with the new defense during the second half. He later recalled that the Kittens were in the dressing room one night as the varsity prepared to leave and Rupp turned to him and said, "Harry, you were running a ----- zone out there tonight. You're just wasting our kids' time running that."

"I told him this zone was different," Lancaster said. "I told him there were rules for everything. I sent him all the diagrams the next day, but it was not mentioned again."

Tennessee was coached by Ray Mears, whose 1-3-1 slow-down offense had always given Rupp trouble. When the Volunteers came to Lexington on that January day in 1964, they were 10-2 overall and 3-0 in the conference. The Wildcats were 12-2 overall, but the two losses had come in four conference games.

Recognizing an opportunity, Lancaster suggested to Rupp, "If we go with that zone, it might force Tennessee to play at a faster tempo than they want to. Mears is smart as hell when he knows what you're going to do, but he can't adjust in a game. We'll take him by surprise."

LANCASTER WAS SURPRISED WHEN RUPP AGREED to use the defense. After the game, Mears kept his team in the dressing room for an extended period of time. When he finally emerged, he noted, "It was a good defense. That's all I'm going to say."

The Wildcats went back to the man-to-man the following game, but they resorted to the trap again at Knoxville, defeating the Vols 42-38 for the conference championship. Kron played a terrific game at the point.

Although the Wildcats had two exciting sophomores in Riley and Louie Dampier the following year, they fell on hard times and finished 15-10, worst record under Rupp up to that time. The addition of Thad Jaracz, a 6-5 sophomore, the following year completed the unit that was to be known as the "Runts."

With the 1-3-1 as the basic defense, Rupp and Lancaster stationed Kron on the point, Conley and Dampier on the wings with Jaracz in between, and Riley on the baseline. The team won 23 straight games before falling to Tennessee 69-62 in Knoxville. Then the 'Cats closed the season as No. 1 after defeating Tulane, 103-74.

Dampier scored 34 points and Riley 29 in an 86-79 win over Dayton and Riley repeated with 29 in an 84-77 win over Michigan in the Mideast Regional at Iowa City. Conley came down with the flu and did not practice prior to the Final Four at College Park, Md. He was still ill, but played in an 83-79 UK semifinal win over second-ranked Duke.

After some members of the staff stayed up with the ailing Conley, Wildcat hopes received another blow when Riley came up with an infected foot. He and the trainer had neglected to tell the coaching staff. Kentucky lost to Texas Western 83-79 in what was the toughest loss of Rupp's career.

PERSONAL NOTES: As a sports editor traveling with the Wildcats, I remember well the 1963-64 season, especially the fast start that had UK winning its first 10 games. After defeating Duke 81-79 on Terry Mobley's shot in the closing seconds of the Sugar Bowl tournament, the 'Cats had only a couple days at home before traveling South again, losing to Georgia Tech 76-67 and Vanderbilt 85-83. They lost only to Alabama and St. Louis in the remaining 13 games before losing to Ohio University and Loyola in the Mideast Regional at Minneapolis.

With the Tech game at Atlanta out of reach in the closing minutes, I suddenly noticed that UK had gone into a strange defense. Nothing was mentioned of the matter until the late Larry Boeck, then with the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, and I were walking up the long ramp to the elevated press box in the Vandy gym a couple of nights later.

"You know Larry," I said. "I could have sworn that was a zone defense that Rupp threw against Tech."

"No way," he replied. "Rupp would never use a zone defense."

While doing some research work in Kansas on Rupp and his old coach Phog Allen a dozen or so years ago, I came across a tidbit where Allen, also an opponent of the zone defense, was describing some type of new defense that really wasn't a zone. Allen's terminology then was remarkably close to the one that his prize pupil Rupp would use years later in describing the 1-3-1 trap.

Rupp was always collecting such tidbits, along with poems and clever sayings that he would save for an opportune time.



The halfcourt trap that Riley used to win his second consecutive NBA championship is strikingly similar to Rupp's "zone."

Pat and Louie were sophomores when the Wildcats lost to Florida, their sixth setback in 15 games, in January of 1965. We flew in a small plane from Gainesville to Athens, Ga., and were waiting for transportation into town when Pat asked me if it was true that Rupp had stated during the postgame press conference that this was the worst team he had ever coached.

"That's exactly what he said," I replied.

When we got to the motel, a team meeting was called immediately. The Wildcats then beat Georgia the following night, which was not a great feat in those days, and won four other SEC games before losing three in a row to Vanderbilt and Auburn on the road and Alabama at home. Then they beat UT and Alabama to finish 15-10. People around Lexington were starting to say Rupp was slipping. That was the year before the "Runts" restored him to the throne for the time being.

Pat Riley stops by the Coliseum every summer to say hello to old friends and others in the athletic department. I always seem to be on vacation at the time. I hope I'm around this year because I want to ask him how he felt being a member of what Rupp termed his worst team up to that time and then being a member of a team that was the toast of the city, state and nation the following year. (I won't mention the 13-13 year of 1966-67)

I also remember looking for "Shive" (the late Bernie Shively) in College Park after the Duke game so we could get going on our traditional card game. He was in Conley's room, helping put up a croop tent.

I also saw Riley's foot in the locker room after the Texas Western game and it was really not a pleasant sight. It took a lot of courage to play with that painful ailment.