

Passing and Catching the Basketball

The Five Passing Lanes

Each game situation presents the possibility for one perfect pass. Imagine yourself faced by a defender crouched over in good defensive position. What you should now see is not just this player, but actually, five possible passing lanes. These five lanes are:

1. Over the top of the defender's head.
2. Near the left side of his head.
3. Near the right side of his head.
4. Near his right leg.
5. Near his left leg.

If you are well guarded by your man you won't be able to pass the ball immediately where you want to. In cases like this, fake with the ball. Fake with your body; or, fake with your body and the ball. Once the defender goes for the fake, pass through one of the five lanes.

Catching the Ball

A pass is only good if it can be caught. Therefore, you should always be ready to catch the ball. You should anticipate both when and where the pass will be thrown. In order to catch the ball you should:

1. Get as open as possible and present a good target to the passer.

To receive the ball:

- Keep your hands out from the chest.
 - Keep fingers pointed up and spread comfortably, with the thumbs almost touching each other. This position enables you to immediately get a good hold on the ball.
 - Between the passer and the receiver there is an unspoken signal to pass the ball: the raised and open hands of the receiver. This tells the passer, "I'm open! Give me the ball!"
2. Not every pass will be perfect. Be ready to move from side to side for a poorly thrown or deflected pass.
 3. Keep your eyes on the ball from the time it leaves the passer's hands until you actually touch the ball yourself. Taking your eyes off the ball for only a split-second can cause a fumbled pass.
 4. Step toward the ball as it comes to you with your arms out to decrease the length of the pass. Also, this prevents the defense from stepping in front and stealing the ball.

5. After the ball hits your fingers, bend your elbows slightly and bring the ball in toward your chest. This cushions the impact of the pass and gives you better control of the ball.
6. Now, that you have the ball at chest level, you are in a position to pass or shoot quickly.

Passing Sets Up Winning Shots

Passing is the quickest and most effective way to get the ball from player to player and move it around the court. The more passes that are made by the offense, the more you will challenge the defense. It keeps them scrambling, frustrated, and tired. The perfect end result of a series of well-executed passes will be to an open man close to the basket. He can take the ball and easily score.

When you break down the game of basketball to the most elemental form, it's not the shooting that wins games for you. It's the passes that went into setting up those winning shots.

Magic Johnson says, "I love to pass. It gives me a thrill to have the ball end up in the hands of the right player who's just ready to put it in the bucket for two points."

He goes on to say, "You can't overpower the ball. Your teammate won't be able to hold onto it. I try to make my passes soft enough so my teammate can catch and do something with it right away."

Magic offers more hints, "What I use for a target depends on the particular situation. With Kareem, because he is so tall, he'll hold up his hand and give me an easy target. With other players, I have to work harder, especially when I'm closely guarded. If my teammate is closely guarded, my target is to his outside open hand. When he's not closely guarded I aim the ball at the middle of his chest, right at his uniform numbers."

The Two-Handed Chest Pass

The chest pass is the most common pass you will throw in a game when there isn't a defensive player between you and your teammate. To execute this pass, start with the ball held in two hands chest-high and close to your body. Your elbows should be tucked in and fingers spread around the ball with your thumbs up. Don't spread your fingers out too far because this positioning will prevent you from making a quick pass. As you hold the ball, your wrists should be pointed upward. Holding them downward will force you, first, to turn them up before you pass. This is an unnecessary extra movement that only delays the pass.

When you are about to make the pass, step in the direction of your pass. Moving like this gives you body balance and gives your pass more power and speed. Don't overextend your step, because this tends to take away some balance.

As your arms stretch out to their full length, rotate your elbows and wrists outward so that your hands end up in a thumbs-downward, palms-out position. Release the ball with a snap of your wrist. Spin the ball with your, index fingers, middle fingers, and thumbs as it leaves your hands. This spin on the ball causes it to travel in a straighter line. This type of pass is easier to catch than a "flat spinless" pass.

The Two-Handed Bounce Pass

The basic mechanics of the bounce pass are the same as those of the chest pass; however, the game situation for each of the passes are different. A bounce pass is a good one to use on a back-door play. It is also the pass to use when passing to a teammate, guarded from behind in the low post, or in other situations when a defender is between you and the receiver.

Starting with the same position as the two-handed chest pass, take a strong step in the direction of your receiver. Quickly extend your arms and palms outward. Backspin is put on the ball as you go from thumbs up to a thumbs down release position. This backspin makes the ball easier to catch. The ball must hit the floor at least three-quarters of the distance to your receiver. It should come up to him at his thighs and waist.

The Two-Handed Overhead Pass

The overhead pass is commonly used for moving the ball around the perimeter, as a skip pass, a pass into the post area, and as an outlet pass. When you make this pass, always aim the ball a little over the head of the receiver.

To make an overhead pass, hold the ball over your head and slightly back of the center of your head. Don't hold the ball BEHIND your head. This wastes movement and time. Your fingers should be spread firmly around the ball, thumbs a couple of inches apart at the bottom of the ball. This pass gets its power from the flick of your wrists and fingers. As you step toward the receiver, snap the wrists and rotate both your arms and palms outward. Your hands should end with the fingers pointing upward.

The Lateral Pass

The starting position is the same as the two-handed chest pass. With your defender standing in front of you, step across his body with the foot opposite the ball. This protects the ball. Bring the ball to your side and extend your arms. Quickly cock your outside wrist, drop your helper hand, and snap the ball to your receiver.

A variation of this pass is the lateral bounce pass made with one or both hands. If you use this pass, the ball must be bounced to a spot, at least, three-quarters of the distance to the receiver.

The Push Pass

The push pass is a quick pass made with one hand. The pass originates near your ear and relies on your elbow being bent for its power. It can either be a straight or a lob pass. This depends upon the defensive alignment.

The Baseball Pass

This is a long-distance pass, usually thrown more than half-court. Generally, one baseball pass to a player headed down-court ahead of anyone else, is all that's needed for a quick two points.

To make the baseball pass, keep both hands on the ball as long as possible. This gives you better control and will enable you to stop the pass at the last moment, if needed.

Plant your back foot and bring the ball back above the shoulder and near the ear on your throwing side. The arm must be bent at a 45-degree angle. The upper arm should be parallel to the floor. This position will enable you to throw a quick, straight, and hard pass. Step toward the direction of your intended pass with the foot opposite your throwing arm. Make an overhead throw, snapping the wrist, and follow through with the arm fully extended. Remember to put a backward rotation on the ball to make it go straight.

The Behind-The-Back Pass

This pass used to be considered a "show-off" pass; however, it now has become a normal offensive weapon. Still, it MUST NOT be abused.

To make the pass, hold the ball with two hands. As you bring the ball back around your hip, your helping hand drops off. Your passing hand is on the side of the ball and must thrust the ball behind the back. The movement ends with the passing hand near the opposite hip, with the fingers pointing in the direction of the pass.

The Hand-Off Pass

This is a pass that doesn't require an extension of the arm. It is used to give the ball to a teammate who is either cutting or circling behind you.

Have one arm up and the ball laying on the palm of your other hand. Simply toss or flip it to the receiver. Another variation of this is to turn your body toward the receiver, or else, make a complete turn, face the receiver and give him the ball.

The Hook Pass

When you are closely guarded, hold the ball at shoulder level, elbows flared outward to protect the ball. Start to lift the ball up with two hands, with the wrist of the outside hand flexed. Drop your helping hand to face level. Extend your passing arm over your head with the ball. When you have stretched this arm out completely, flick the ball by snapping your wrist forward.

The Off-The-Dribble Pass

This is becoming a pass that is popping up at all levels of basketball. To make this pass work, on your last dribble, move your dribbling hand to the top quarter of the ball. Combine a lateral movement of the hand and arm, and push the ball forward with a snap of the wrist toward the receiver. This pass is quick and deceptive. It will usually catch the defensive man by surprise.

Passing Drills

Passing, like shooting, requires constant practice. If you will regularly work on the following drills, your passing mechanics will improve. However, it's only through team practice sessions and games, with your coach watching, that you will really learn WHEN to pass and HOW to get the pass over, under, or through the defender. Such situations will develop and sharpen your passing skills the most, turning your passing mechanics into valuable on-court skills.

Wall Passing

This will help you develop your two-handed chest pass as well as the bounce pass. Performing the drill regularly will improve your reflexes and form. Also, it will help you to develop ball rotation and arm strength. Do the drill like this:

1. Stand six feet from a wall and pass the ball chest-high to a spot you have marked on the wall. Concentrate on your form. Make 20 passes like this.
2. Step back two feet and take 20 more chest passes. This completes the set.
3. Do another set, but, this time use bounce passes.
4. Next, see how many chest or bounce passes you can make in a minute. Try to increase the number with each practice session.

Before you reach the end of this drill, your arms will begin to tire and your fingertips might even become sore. Keep concentrating and maintaining form throughout the drill.

Dead Ball Rule

When you play with your teammates or friends, play with the rule that dribbling is not allowed. If you do dribble, you lose possession of the ball. By playing with this "dead ball" rule, all players will be forced to concentrate on their passing game and look for the open man instead of dribbling the ball.

Bull In The Ring

Form a circle with players standing at least four feet from each other. Place one defensive man in the middle. The object of this drill is to pass the ball to each other without the defensive man touching, deflecting, or stealing the ball.

In this case, the passer who makes the mistake becomes the defender and the defender takes his place on offense. The other rule of this game is: you are not allowed to pass to players standing on either side.

I.U. Passing Drill

This drill requires several players and two balls. Players form a semi-circle, with one player (the in-the-barrel player) standing one step in from an imaginary line drawn between the two end players forming the semi-circle. Drill goes like this:

1. The "in-the-barrel" player makes a correct form two-handed chest pass to one of the players in the semi-circle. At the same time he must call-out that player's name.
2. The instant the ball leaves the man-in-the-barrel's hands, the player holding the second ball in the semi-circle, executes a correct form two handed chest pass to the man-in-the barrel. He, also, must call-out the man-in-the barrel's name.
3. Passing continues at a rapid pace for one minute. Then players rotate clockwise, with a new man-in-the barrel. The drill continues until every player has had his turn in the barrel. There are four rules:
 - o The passer must call-out the name of the receiver.
 - o You must concentrate on the proper passing mechanics.
 - o The "in-the-barrel" player can not make consecutive passes to side by side men in the semi-circle.
 - o The "in-the-barrel" player must stay one step in from an imaginary line extending from the end semi-circle players.
4. Repeat this drill, using bounce passes.

Two On One

Two offensive players with one ball line up across from each other at the half court or free-throw circle. One defensive man stands in the middle of the circle, trying to touch, deflect, or steal the ball. Using fakes, the two passers must pass the ball to each other without dribbling or taking steps. Once the ball is touched by the defender, the passer goes in the middle and the defender becomes a passer.