

Taoist Sacred Hoops - Phil Jackson

The triangle offense is best described, as five-man Tai Chi. The basic idea is to orchestrate the flow of movement in order to lure the defense off balance and create a myriad of openings on the floor. The system gets its name from one of the most common patterns of movement: the sideline triangle. Example: As Scottie Pippen moves the ball up court, he and two other players form a triangle on the right side of the floor about fifteen feet apart from each other—Steve Kerr in the corner, Luc Longley in the post and Scottie along the sideline. Meanwhile, Michael Jordan hovers around the top of the key and Toni Kukoc positions himself opposite Pippen on the other side of the floor. Next Pippen passes the ball into Longley, and everybody goes into a series of complex coordinated moves, depending on how the defense responds. The point is not to go head-to-head with the defense, but to toy with the defenders and trick them into overextending themselves. That means thinking and moving in unison as a group and being acutely aware, at any given moment, of what's happening on the floor. Executed properly, the system is virtually unstoppable because there are no set plays and the defense can't predict what's going to happen next. If the defense tries to prevent one move, the players will adjust instinctively and start another series of cuts and passes that often lead to a better shot.

At the heart of the system is what Tex calls the seven principles of a sound offense:

1. The offense must penetrate the defense. In order to run the system, the first step is to break through the perimeter of the defense, usually around the three-point line, with a drive, a pass, or a shot. The number-one option is to pass the ball into the post and go for a three-point power play.
2. The offense must involve a full-court game. Transition offense starts on defense. The players must be able to play end-to-end and perform skills at fast-break pace.
3. The offense must provide proper spacing. This is critical. As they move around the court, the players should maintain a distance of fifteen to eighteen feet from one another. That gives everybody room to operate and prevents the defense from being able to cover two players with one man.
4. The offense must ensure player and ball movement with a purpose. All things being equal, each player will spend around eighty percent of his time without the ball. In the triangle offense, the players have prescribed routes to follow in those situations, so that they're all moving in harmony toward a common goal. When Toni Kukoc joined the Bulls, he tended to gravitate toward the ball when it wasn't in his hands. Now he has learned to fan away from the ball and move to the open spots—making him a much more difficult player to guard.
5. The offense must provide strong rebounding position and good defensive balance on all shots. With the triangle offense, everyone knows where to go when a shot goes up to put themselves in a position to pick off the rebound or protect against the fast break. Location is everything, especially when playing the boards.
6. The offense must give the player with the ball an opportunity to pass the ball to any of his teammates. The players move in such a way so that the ball handler can see them and hit them with a pass. That sets up the counterpoint effect. As the defense increases the pressure on one point on the floor, an opening is inevitably created somewhere else that the defenders can't see. If the players are lined up properly, the ball handler should be able to find someone in that spot.
7. The offense must utilize the players' individual skills. The system requires everybody to become an offensive threat. That means they have to find what they do best within the context of the team. As John Paxson puts it, "You can find a way to fit into the offense, no matter what your strengths are. I wasn't a creative player. I wasn't going to take the ball and beat the other guys to the basket. But I was a good shooter, and the system played to my strength. It helped me understand what I did well and find the areas on the court where I could thrive."

Learning that system is a demanding, often, tedious process that takes years to master. The key is a repetitive series of drills that train the players, on an experiential level as well as an intellectual one, to move, as Tex puts it, "like five fingers on a hand." In that respect, the drills resemble Zen practice. After months of focusing intently on performing the drills in practice, the players begin to see—Aha! This is how all the pieces fit together. They develop an intuitive feel for how their movements and those of everyone else on the floor are interconnected. To Lakota warriors, the eagle is the most sacred of birds because of its vision and its role as a messenger to the Great Spirit. The famed Lakota holy man, Black Elk, painted a spotted eagle on his horse before going into battle to strengthen his eagle medicine. As a young boy, afflicted with a terminal illness, he had a vision detailed in his book, *Black Elk Speaks*, of leaving his body and flying, like an eagle, to the "high and lonely center of the earth," where he saw "the shapes of all things in the spirit" and understood that "the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle." Empowered by his vision, Black Elk recovered his health and grew into a warrior with exceptional mystical gifts. At the heart of my vision was the selfless ideal of teamwork that I'd been experimenting with since my early days in the CBA. My goal was to give everyone on the team a vital role—even though I knew I couldn't give every man equal playing time, nor could I change the NBA's disproportionate system of financial rewards. But I could get the bench players to be more actively involved. My idea was to use ten players regularly and give the others enough playing time so that they could blend in effortlessly with everybody else when they were on the floor. I've often been criticized for leaving backups on the floor too long, but I think the cohesion it creates is more than worth the gamble. In Game 6 of the 1992 finals against the Portland Trail Blazers, we were down by 17 points in the third quarter and sinking fast. So I put in the second unit. The rest of the coaching staff, not to mention members of the press, thought I'd finally gone over the edge, but within minutes the subs wiped out the deficit and put us back in the game. Tex Winter's system would be my blueprint. But that alone wasn't going to be enough. We needed to reinforce the lessons the players were learning in practice, to get them to embrace the concept of selflessness wholeheartedly.

The Way of the Warrior

*The system taught the mechanics, but to create the kind of cohesive team I envisioned, I needed to touch the players on a much deeper level. I wanted to give them a model of selfless action that would capture their imaginations. Lakota warriors had a deep reverence for the mysteries of life. That's where their power, and sense of freedom, came from. It was no coincidence that Crazy Horse, the greatest Sioux warrior, was first and foremost a holy man. To the Lakota, everything was sacred, even the enemy, because of their belief in the interconnectedness of all life. As one seer put it: "We are earth people on a spiritual journey to the stars. Our quest, our earth walk, is to look within, to know who we are, to see that we are connected to all things, that there is no separation, only in the mind." The Lakota didn't perceive of the self as a separate entity, isolated from the rest of the universe. The stones they carved into arrowheads, the buffalo they hunted, the Crow warriors they battled, were all seen as reflections of themselves. Black Elk wrote in *The Sacred Pipe*, "Peace... comes within the souls of men when they realize their relationship, their oneness with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the Universe dwells the Great Spirit, and that this center is really everywhere. It is within each of us." The Lakota's' concept of teamwork was deeply rooted in their view of the universe. A warrior didn't try to stand out from his fellow band members; he strove to act bravely and honorable, to help the group in whatever way he could to accomplish its mission. If glory befell him, he was obligated to give away his most prized possessions to relatives, friends, the poor, and the aged. As a result, the leaders of the tribe were often its poorest members. St. Augustine said, "Anger is a weed; hate is the tree." Anger only breeds more anger and eventually fuels violence—on the streets or in professional sports. The system reinforces this perspective. The strength of the triangle offense is that it's based on the Taoist principle of yielding to an opponent's force in order to render him powerless. The idea is not to wilt or act dishonorably in the face of overwhelming force, but to be savvy enough to use the enemy's own power against him. If you look hard enough, you'll find his weaknesses. Bottom line: there's no need to overpower when you can out-smart. For the strategy to work, all five players have to be moving in sync so that they can take advantage of the openings that occur when the defense overextends itself. If one player gets caught in a tussle with his man, resisting the pressure rather than moving away from it, he can jam up the whole system. That lesson has to be constantly reinforced.*