



Strategy:

FULL COURT PRESS

by Joseph W. Varela

“If the enemy is taking his ease, harass him; if quietly encamped, force him to move . . . march swiftly to places where you are not expected.”

-Sun Tzu¹

“ . . . in the course of his defense the defender can fight a tactically offensive battle by seeking out and attacking the enemy as soon as he invades his theater of operations.”

-Carl von Clausewitz²

Vivek Ranadive had a problem. He had agreed to coach his daughter's National Junior Basketball team, essentially the Little League of basketball. But at first glance, it appeared that he had little to work with.

Ranadive was an immigrant from Mumbai. He was a graduate of MIT who owned a software company. He had no experience with basketball. His team, made up mostly of twelve-year-old suburban girls, had two serious players, but the rest had never played the game. None of them had any particular physical talents. He was competing against well-coached teams of girls who played pickup games every afternoon. The opposition was clearly superior. It seemed to be a recipe for humiliation and defeat.³

Many times, an “outsider,” working without preconceived notions or ingrained habits, can discover unorthodox solutions to a problem the existence of which insiders have failed to notice. Ranadive took a hard look at basketball itself. He was perplexed at how after a team scored, the players would immediately retreat to their end of the court and await the opponent, who was allowed to advance the ball unopposed until the last 20 feet or so.⁴ In fact, the team in possession was permitted to bring the ball inbounds unmolested, and was further permitted to arrange its players under the goal and bring the ball near. Only in the last few seconds, when the offense executed its prearranged scoring maneuver, did the defenders respond. And this situation obtained at the highest levels of collegiate and professional play. Each basket is ordinarily worth two points. NBA teams score in triple digits regularly.⁵ It was all offense, no defense, by tacit agreement. Looking at it quantitatively, on a basketball court, for most of the time, in most of the space, the game was not contested.⁶

Ranadive thought that this style of play rewarded the stronger teams, namely those who had the talent and experience to better execute prepared plays under the goal. More accurately, he thought that such a style tended to widen the gap between the stronger and weaker teams. The problem was how to narrow, and if possible, overcome that gap. Even if his players had the physical talents to execute the technical skills they would need to match the competition, Ranadive had no time to teach those skills. What he needed was a stratagem.

Ranadive's solution was what is known as the "full-court press." This stratagem, reduced to its essence, is to contest each and every move the offensive team makes, from the moment it brings the ball into play. It is but rarely used in traditional basketball, and then only briefly. What if, Ranadive wondered, his team could use the full-court press every minute and on every inch of the court?

And so he spent what little practice time was available teaching his girls how to press, how to steal the ball, how to block passes, how to make only short shots. He spent most of the practice sessions making the girls run, thereby building the endurance conditioning necessary for such sustained action. He taught his team to contest every foot of the court, to stick to the other team like glue, to be everywhere at once, to concede nothing. It was a style of play that allowed effort and energy to substitute for skill.

They crushed the opposition. Regardless of the superior experience and talents of the opponents, Ranadive's team instantly dominated the games, jumped out to early leads and held them. They upset the practiced plays of their opponents, spoiled their timing, forced turnovers. They rattled the opposing players, made them angry, made them panic, ran them out of breath.⁷ In one game when only four of their players showed up, they lost by only three points. They moved through the regional championships and into the nationals, where they were finally eliminated; but they had played at a level far beyond that which their meager resources should have predicted.

There are lessons for the defense lawyer.

When a criminal case commences, how is the defense lawyer to react? Too many defenses resemble the traditional style of basketball play. They concede the prosecution's opening moves, fall back, and await the prosecutor's next move. The case is reset over a period of weeks and months, and little work is accomplished. Meanwhile the prosecutor is getting ready for trial.

What would a "full-court press" look like? Like Ranadive's girls, the defense lawyer must put forth great effort immediately. Witnesses must be located and their statements taken. Where applicable, visit the scene and get pictures,

before the scene changes. Crucial pretrial motions must be filed and, where applicable, hearings held. Discovery should be sought immediately; most Harris County state courts have standardized discovery orders which the judge will enter even before motions are filed; while these are by no means complete discovery, they are a start. The criminal records of all witnesses must be found. Legal research on critical issues must be accomplished.

A steady stream of this kind of work is a full-court press. If nothing else, the defense lawyer should be outworking the prosecutor from the outset, and must be seen doing so. As with Ranadive's basketball team, effort on the part of the defense can compensate for the government's superior resources. A prosecutor aware of such a vigorous defense might think twice before tangling with it.

¹THE ART OF WAR, chap. VI (James Clavell, trans. 1983).

²ON WAR, Book VI, chap. 9 (trans. Michael Howard & Peter Paret 1976).

³The story is told in Malcolm Gladwell, *How David Beats Goliath*, THE NEW YORKER, May 11, 2009. This author wishes to thank Mr. David Adler for bringing it to his attention.

⁴I've wondered about this myself. What if football teams, after turning the ball over to the opposition, fell back to their own 20-yard line and awaited events?

⁵Think about baseball, a game in which the defense dominates. Imagine if a typical Major League Baseball score was 53-48.

⁶In a very different sport, imagine a Tour de France in which the cyclists agree not to compete until the last 10 miles of each stage. Of course it does not work this way; attacks can and do happen at any time.

⁷As this essay went to press, the University of Houston Cougars were applying this stratagem to football! See Steve Campbell, *Coogs enjoy cramping opponents' style: UH's fast-paced attack often leaves defenses winded*, HOUSTON CHRONICLE, October 21, 2009, at <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/sports/college/houston/6679741.html> (last visited Oct. 28, 2009).

