

## UNDERSTANDING THE GRINNELL “RUN AND GUN” SYSTEM

### INTRODUCTION

In the Tom Hanks movie *That Thing You Do*, he tells the story of a 60's Rock band that skyrockets from total obscurity to fame with one hit song. But the success of the song was not assured until a new drummer joined the band. During the group's first rehearsal together, the drummer instinctively felt the new song was too slow and began to pick up the tempo, transforming it from a slow ballad to an exciting Rock and Roll number. Despite protests from the band's lead singer/songwriter, the new tempo stuck, and “the rest was history”.

Had the band stayed with the original slower tempo, nothing good would have come of the song. The game of basketball is in a similar state right now. A potentially exciting game has been forced into a slower tempo by decades of overcoaching and a hyper-conservative, controlling approach. The following is a rationale for adopting a new exciting alternative to traditional basketball that goes beyond the ball-control style, beyond even traditional fast breaking style.

Although the name for this style comes from the past, it is actually basketball as it will hopefully be played in the future: The Run and Gun System.

### RATIONALE

Why play Run and Gun Basketball? We can answer this question by considering what situations have led coaches to implement the Run and Gun, and the advantages of this style of play.

1. ***It is fun to play.*** Coaches who have used the Run and Gun almost universally report that their players are having more fun than they've ever had playing basketball. The tempo naturally lends itself to excitement and enthusiasm, and fans pick up on the players' energy.
2. ***Players develop more rapidly.*** There is no question that an individual who plays with a high level of intensity will progress more rapidly and use more of her natural ability than one who does not. Players increase their scoring range, play defense more aggressively, and rebound harder. They will also become much better conditioned than someone used to playing at a slower pace.
3. ***It equalizes competition.*** Unlike a more traditional run and press style, the Run and Gun can give a team the opportunity to compete with a superior opponent. This is true because the system emphasizes three aspects of play which are not dependant on athleticism. These aspects are a) three point shooting, b) offensive rebounding (which is more a consequence of hustle and effort than skill), and c) conditioning. Even a talented athlete will tire in an up tempo game, and the Run and Gun seeks to force an opponent to play much faster than it is used to. This negates its athletic advantage once fatigue sets in, and as Vince Lombardi asserted, “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.”

Coaches who implement the Run and Gun often do so not to win more games, but rather because they are disappointed with the level of effort and enthusiasm displayed by their team. In order to break out of this competitive rut, these coaches are willing to try anything, a move often made out of desperation. They may feel fan support is minimal or negative, and they are often personally “burned out” on coaching due to poor individual attitudes or lack of success. They are willing to commit to an approach in which winning is not the first priority, where the process—striving for excellence—is more important than the product: winning.

## CRITICISMS

The fast breaking and pressing style of play has sometimes earned the reputation of being an unsound, undisciplined approach whose use is limited to exceptionally athletic teams. Most coaches agree that a fast tempo favors the team with the best athletes because such a tempo gives the dominant team more opportunities to capitalize on its athletic superiority.

So why would a team with limited ability even attempt to Run and Gun? Wouldn't such an approach result in embarrassing blowouts? Not necessarily. As mentioned before, the basic premise of the Run and Gun is that deficiencies in personnel can be overcome by relying on factors that do not depend on raw athleticism, i.e. three point shooting skills, offensive rebounding, and conditioning. A coach seeking to maximize these factors would need to incorporate the following components into his team's style of play.

1. An ultra-aggressive press to force more turnovers and create a faster tempo
2. Offensive transition and quick hitters to create three-point shots and rebounds
3. Using more depth to sustain the fast tempo while fatiguing opponents

A second common criticism is that such a style prevents more talented players from "getting into the flow" because time on the court is limited by fatigue and more frequent substitutions. However, just the opposite is true in a Run and Gun system, because although playing intervals are shorter (often just one minute long), rest intervals are also much shorter. In effect, players never get *out* of the flow, because they are back on the court before cooling off.

## PROBLEMS WITH BALL-CONTROL BASKETBALL

The Run and Gun system is based on a simple premise: To score as many points as possible.

Notice that this goal is not concerned with how many points the opposition scores (although, hopefully, that will be less than us). Defense is significant, but only as a means of achieving the offensive goals. While this statement may seem like heresy to many coaches, consider the fact that the coach whose stated goal is to limit their opponent to the fewest possible points is seldom questioned. However, measuring a team's defensive performance purely based on points allowed is not necessarily valid. A team that consistently holds its opponents in the forties may be a good defensive team, but is also probably a team that has a very slow pace of play, in effect "playing defense while on offense".

*One of the unfortunate side-effects of such a conservative offensive style is that it can seriously limit players' initiative.* The emphasis in a ball-control style is often the "elimination of mistakes", but this focus on the negative that can prevent players from flourishing. It is no coincidence that one of the foremost proponents of this defensive minded, ball-control philosophy, Bob Knight has said that "success in basketball is a matter of eliminating mistakes". Yet Knight's emphasis on control and perfection has in recent years resulted in low team morale and poor performances in the NCAA tournament.

On the other hand, John Wooden, an advocate of up-tempo basketball, believes that "victory goes to the team making the most mistakes". Wooden resolves this seemingly paradoxical statement by explaining that a team that is willing to show initiative and play aggressively and without fear is more likely to succeed despite its mistakes. It is no coincidence that Bill Walton, a three-time NCAA national player of the year for Wooden at UCLA, is quoted as saying, "It all started with our practices at UCLA which were nonstop action and absolutely electric, super-charged, on edge, crisp, and incredibly demanding,

(but with) positive reinforcement...It was wonderfully exhilarating and absolutely intense. I can't describe how exciting it was to be a part of that—the joy he created in preparing us for competition.”

This emphasis on simply eliminating mistakes in traditional basketball can be counterproductive in much the same way as telling someone, “Don't think about the color yellow!” Focusing on the negative is more common when coaching a traditional style than when playing an aggressive, up-tempo game where mistakes are accepted as an inherent risk of this style of play. Yet one of the most surprising statistics of the Run and Gun style is that Grinnell College ( the school that originated this system) typically averages over 120 points while turning the ball over less than 15 times per game: far below what might be expected. This occurs because players are encouraged to shoot early in each possession--limiting the opportunities for a turnover--and because they have developed great confidence in their ability to successfully execute the System at full speed.

### **A PHILOSOPHICAL CHOICE**

Many rules in the game, particularly those related to the shot clock and the three point line, are designed to increase scoring. Yet every year scoring averages *decrease* as coaches exert more and more control over their players, placing greater emphasis on aggressive defense and ball-control offense.

Most would admit that players like to score, that they like to play fast, and that the game naturally lends itself to a quick tempo. Why then do many coaches train teams to play more slowly? Obviously, they believe they will have a better chance to win as a result of slowing the game down and “playing under control”. Even though most players love high scoring games, there are always those fans, sportswriters, and athletic directors who would criticize a 95-93 win as a poor defensive effort, while praising a 45-43 loss as a defensive battle.

The point is that *tempo is a philosophical choice*. As explained above, the best tempo at which to play is not necessarily based on personnel. Once a coach realizes it is possible to be successful with any style and any type of personnel, the decision regarding system of play boils down to personal preference. As John Wooden said, “I have continually stressed that it is not what you do, but how well you do it”.

### **DEFINING SUCCESS**

The choice of tempo may have more to do with how a coach defines success. If you as a coach are inclined to define success primarily as providing a meaningful experience for players and fans, then the Run and Gun style may be best suited to those goals. If involving more players, getting them to play very hard, and generating tremendous enthusiasm are the ends you seek, then Run and Gun is a means to achieve them. If you define success in terms of process rather than product, the Run and Gun may deserve consideration. If you define success as giving your best, then clearly any style of play can be successful, but a style that pushes the players to their limits—as the Run and Gun does—may be the best choice.

On the other hand, defining success exclusively in terms of wins and losses can lead to a negative team environment. If only “product” matters, then a team which has played to its potential yet loses has

failed according to this definition. On the other hand, a team that wins despite playing poorly is a “success”.

## HOW AND WHY TO MAXIMIZE SCORING

Basketball is meant to be played fast. Most players and coaches believe that the most exhilarating and fulfilling way to play the game is in a style that enhances flow and creativity, which inevitably results in a high-scoring contest.

If it is true that players overwhelmingly prefer to play an up-tempo style—and the facts seem indisputable—then coaches are truly doing a disservice to those players, and to the spirit of the game when they play at a tempo that handcuffs individual talent. And since high scoring games go hand in hand with playing up-tempo basketball, then the most obvious question a coach ought to be asking is, “*In what specific ways can a team increase its scoring average?*”

To determine how to help a team score more points, it is useful for the coach to be aware of the six statistical categories linked to increased point production. Traditional teams tend to focus on the first two categories listed below, which are relatively conservative methods of improving offensive production. :

1. ***Shooting a better percentage***, thereby scoring more points per attempt
2. ***Reducing offensive turnovers***, which gives the team more opportunities

Run and Gun Basketball on the other hand stresses the four approaches listed below because these methods in combination can result in the most significant increase in shot attempts, and therefore in point production.

1. ***By shooting earlier during each possession***. Simply by playing at a faster tempo and looking for shots within the first 12 seconds of each possession, the team will naturally shoot more often during the course of a game.
2. ***By forcing more turnovers***. By playing an aggressive full-court pressure defense, a team will not only increase tempo but create more shots for itself by forcing turnovers. Turnovers also place the opponent in a poor defensive position to prevent a quick shot opportunity in transition. Even when the defense is not able to force a turnover, a quick shot by the opponent usually occurs. Along those same lines, a quick tempo is so vital that we consider it better to give up a basket within the first 12 seconds of a possession than for the opponent to be allowed to hold the ball for 30 seconds and not score. Tempo is paramount.
3. ***By securing more offensive rebounds***. When a team shoots in transition, it has a much better opportunity of rebounding a missed shot than it would against a set defense. Also, because the Run and Gun style emphasizes three point attempts, the offensive team will have a better chance of getting long rebounds over the head of the defense.
4. ***By attempting more three point shots***. The rapid pace of the Run and Gun style makes it more difficult for opponents to cover three point shooters in transitions. And although three pointers are more difficult to hit consistently, when a team’s better shooters are freed to shoot the three at any time, their confidence and effectiveness will soar.

## THE “FORMULA FOR SUCCESS”

Each of these four methods of improving offensive production is incorporated into a “Formula for Success”. This formula summarizes—in concrete statistical terms—the goals which must be consistently reached for an uptempo team to be successful. The formula as stated below is tailored for a college women’s team. Mens teams, or high school teams playing 32 minutes rather than a 40 minute game would adjust the formula to reflect those differences.

**FORMULA = 90 SHOTS + 45 THREES + 33 TURNOVERS + 40% OFFENSIVE REBOUNDS = WIN**

90 FGA = 45 Three-point FGA and 45 Two-point FGA

It’s important to recognize that each of these four key goals are interrelated. A faster tempo will lead to more Shots and more Three’s, but this tempo can only be achieved through an aggressive full-court press, which will create many more turnovers. An up-tempo style also leads to a much higher ORB percentage because it creates quick shots which are often taken before the defense acquires good rebound possession. Taking more Threes also improves ORB% since such shots rebound farther, nullifying the defense’s inside position advantage.

The Run and Gun approach allows a team to accomplish all of these goals simultaneously. The coach needs to be aware, however, that the opponent will almost always shoot a high field goal percentage because of more lay-up opportunities vs. the press. This disadvantage can be offset by the additional turnovers and offensive rebounds created, resulting in many more shots than the opponent. A team could thereby outscore an opponent despite shooting a much lower percentage from the field!

NOTE: In recent years Grinnell has added a fifth formula goal of creating a +25 shot differential. This stat is in effect a summary of all the other stats in the system because if it is achieved, a team can be certain that it must have been successful in forcing turnovers and gaining offensive rebounds. (Admittedly, a team that reaches it’s ORB% and TO goals will not achieve the +25 FGA goal if the opponent is allowed an excessive number of second shots themselves, or if a team has too many turnovers of it’s own.) Remember, the essence of the System is getting more shots than the opponent to counterbalance the fact that the opponent will get better shots. The +25 shot differential goal neatly summarizes this philosophy.

## BREAK-EVEN POINTS IN THE FORMULA

The “Breakeven” example below shows how a Run and Gun team can outscore its’ traditional opponent by meeting each of its four goals from the Formula for Success, even when the opponent shoots a very high percentage. The shooting percentages and other stats listed are close to what the team could expect to achieve based on results of other college women’s teams using the Run and Gun system:

<u>RUN AND GUN TEAM</u>	
90 total shots attempted	
45 two-point FGA @ 40%	= 36pts
45 three-point FGA @ 30%	= 40 pts
10 shooting fouls @ 70%	= 14pts
<u>18 turnovers</u>	= <u>0pts</u>
118 TOTAL POSSESSIONS	= 90 pts

<u>TRADITIONAL OPPONENT</u>	
75 total shots attempted:	
65 two-point FGA @ 50%	= 65 pts
10 three-point FGA @ 33%	= 10 pts
10 shooting fouls @ 70%	= 14 pts
<u>33 turnovers</u>	= <u>0pts</u>
118 TOTAL POSSESSIONS	= 89 pts

Note that the total possessions for each team are exactly the same. The 15 additional shots taken by the Run and Gun team (90 vs. 75) were the results of the 15 additional turnovers committed by the Traditional opponent. By aggressively pursuing offensive rebounds and limiting opponents to one shot, a Run and Gun team can gain even more additional shots!

## COMPARISON CHARTS

The chart below compares the Formula goals to our team's statistics from the 2003-04 season. It also shows the statistics actually attained and compares these stats to the Grinnell College (the men's college team that created the system and has played it since 1991)

Avg/Game	ONU (2003-04)	Goals (2004-05)	Actual Avg (04-05)	Grinnell MBB (03-04)
FGA	67	90	85*	114
3FGA	19	45	45*	66
OPP. TO's	16	33	32	25
ORB%	33%	40%	41%	45%
SCORING	67.8ppg	90.0 ppg	95.9 ppg (*NAIA Div I record)	126.2 ppg

A few secondary goals which we will be tracking throughout the season include: Offensive Turnovers, Shot Differential, Best Scoring Run, Opponent's ORB%, and Home Attendance!

## CREATING CHAOS

One of the points of emphasis in the system is to create "Chaos" on the floor. We want the game to be played at such a tempo that the opponent will be out of control, maximizing our depth and conditioning advantage and creating fatigue and a sense of panic in our opponent.

Chaos inevitably results from playing at a very fast tempo, even when the opponent tries to slow the game down for awhile. *Often, a team that attempts to slow tempo will create even more problems for themselves because they are not in an attacking frame of mind.* They are trying NOT to make mistakes and will thus become overly cautious, causing the very mistakes and turnovers they are trying to avoid.

## FOUR COMPONENTS OF THE SYSTEM

By focusing on our four formula goals a team can develop the tempo necessary to create chaos: 90 shots + 33 turnovers + 45 Threes + 40% ORB. It can't be emphasized strongly enough that the *Formula is a blueprint.* Every aspect of the system is implemented with the goal in mind of achieving these statistical goals. The following four components are the means to this end.

1. The 1-2-2 Press
  2. The Fast Break
  3. Offensive Rebounding Rules
  4. Playing Units
1. **The 1-2-2 Zone Press.** Obviously, a team must play pressure defense in order to prevent opponents from holding the ball, otherwise achieving 100 shots would be impossible. The 1-2-2 Press has the advantage of being easy and quick to deploy, and the players are positioned in the press according to their offensive alignment. The Left Wing on offense is also the left wing of the press. The Front of the press is usually the player closest to the offensive basketball, the low post player. The Interceptor is the point guard, and the Safety is the high post or trailer position. Changing from offense to defense and back again is therefore accomplished instantly.

But in addition to speeding tempo, the pressing team must be as aggressive as possible in order to generate turnovers. Therefore, players are taught to press even on a missed shot by having the nearest two defenders attack the ball with the remaining three forming an umbrella to cover passing lanes. Players involved in the “Missed Shot” Press are usually, but not always, the Front and the Wing. The Safety in this press is either the player who took the three point attempt, or the deepest defender after a shot taken inside the arc. Players are also trained to continue trapping even in the front court to prevent teams from holding the ball once moving into the offensive end.

2. ***The Fast Break.*** This component allows us to meet our goal of 90 shots. Our intention is to shoot within the first 12 seconds of every possession. We will run the break on every missed shot or score by getting the ball to the point guard, sending both wings wide to spot up on the arc on the offensive end, and running the first post down the floor to the mid-post area opposite the point guard. The other post will trail the play and spot up on the arc opposite the point guard. On dead balls we always run a quick hitting play in order to generate a three point shot or layup inside. Following dead ball situations, we will run a quick hitter to generate an early shot or to allow a certain player to get an open look.
3. ***Offensive Rebounding.*** It is *critical* that we generate additional shots via our offensive rebounding rules. On any three-point attempt, the shooter will rotate back to the top of the arc, and the other four players will crash the board attempting to achieve “outside rebounding position”. Since three point shots rebound farther out, this “outside position” is preferable, and will allow us to pin defenders under the boards and grab the long rebound. On any shot inside the arc, the deepest offensive player rotates back to the safety position. In order to meet our goal of 45 three point attempts, we will pass any offensive rebound back out to the shooter for a second attempt, unless the rebounder has a clear layup opportunity inside.
4. ***Playing Units.*** We will develop three units of 5-6 players (numbers permitting) or two units of 7-8 players each, and substitute five players after every :45 seconds of play. This substitution is necessary in order to maintain place of play (90 shots) and to create turnovers. Longer shifts inevitably result in a slower tempo and fewer turnovers forced, due to the fact that our players must pace themselves. Playing shifts for most of the first half are predetermined, and we will not vary from them even for foul trouble. Since players know exactly when and how long they will play, they are not fearful of being pulled from the game for a mistake or for not playing well. This generates confidence by minimizing fear of failure. Units are evaluated using a +/- chart described below.

## **EVALUATION AND UNIT SELECTION**

One of the most unique elements of the Run and Gun system is the way in which players are evaluated. Since we substitute in groups of five, it is a simple matter to rate each group’s shift in terms of the change in score while they were on the court. For example if the score was 45-45 when a unit took the floor and they created a lead of 50-47 during their minute of play, every player in that group receives a “+/-” score of +3. On the other hand, a unit that enters the game ahead by 66-60 but leaves the game with the score tied at 66-66 receives a +/- score of -6.

These +/- ratings can also be charted during scrimmages in practice to aid in squad selection, and to determine playing time. By filming practice scrimmages and charting +/- stats for different units—and creating a simple spreadsheet for these purposes—will allow the coach to quickly evaluate various combinations. In the early season, a round-robin format is used to assure that everyone plays with every possible combination of teammates and opponents. Players who are assigned to the “Featured Team” on a given day will execute the Run and Gun system, while those on the “Scout Team” play a traditional offense and defense. Only players on the Featured teams will have their +/- totals averaged to rank players according to their ratings, and this information is used to provide an objective tool for measuring each player’s contribution under the fairest possible conditions.

The beauty of this approach is that every player on a successful shift receives a good score, not just the individual who scored the points. A player’s presence on any given team may consistently result in that unit playing better than expected (as evidenced by its +/- score). Why this is happening is not as important as the fact that such a player’s presence leads to team’s success. Perhaps the player is a good scorer, but she may also be contributing by forcing turnovers, playing tough defense, grabbing rebounds, or passing to the open player. Every player on a group with good “chemistry” is rewarded in this way, and so players soon realize that their individual success is tied directly to the success of the team.

A second approach for selecting teams and playing time is to simply assign a grade to each individual player based on their performances in early season practices and games. We use the following formula for grading purposes, based on videotape of practices/games:

$(\text{Points} + \text{Rebounds} + \text{Steals} + \text{Blocks} + \text{Assists} - \text{Missed shots} - \text{Fouls} - \text{Turnovers}) \div \text{Minutes Played.}$

Players with a higher grade (per minutes played) are obviously making greater contributions and few mistakes, and should receive more playing time. But everyone on our team will play some meaningful amount of time. Though their role may be simply to help us use our depth in wearing an opponent down, that role is critical to our success!

## **THE SYSTEM**

A true System is one in which the offense and defense complement each other. The defense fuels the offense and vice-versa as the system feeds off energy it generates.

Although there is no one “correct” way to run the system. Remember, however, that every element of the system must contribute to helping a team achieve the four Formula Goals. When deciding whether to incorporate an offensive play or defensive alignment, the coach must ask, one central question, “Will this help us generate more shots, more threes, more offensive rebounds, force more turnovers, and increase the tempo?”

If the answer to this question is not “Yes!” then the coach should have serious reservations about including that element, because achieving the Formula Goals creates wins and fun, while slowing down to a more tradition tempo will create confusion among players who will believe in the System, just so long as you do. The coach must beware of the temptation to slow the tempo using a more conservative pressing scheme because this will impact every other part of the system.

## RESOURCES

Refer to the following resources to learn more about specific components of the system, and their execution:

<u>Title, Speaker, Year (Cost, Format)</u>	<u>Available from:</u>
<i>Basketball in the Fast Lane</i> , Paul Westhead, 1989 (\$39 video)	Championship Books and Videos (May be out of print)
<i>Running to Extremes</i> , David Arsenault, 1997 (\$39 video)	Championship Books and Videos
<i>Running Game: A Formula for Success</i> , Arsenault, 1996 (\$10 book)	Championship Books and Videos
<i>Running to Win</i> , David Arsenault, 2005 (\$ 39DVD)	Championship Books and Videos
<i>2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Run and Gun Clinic</i> , 2005 (\$30 set of 4 DVD's) (featuring David Arsenault and other top Run & Gun Coaches)	Doug Porter, Olivet Nazarene Univ. One University Avenue Bourbonnais, IL 60914