Chapter 8
Six on Five Offense, Five on Six Defense

As is highlighted in the rules from the previous chapter, there are varieties of penalties which result in an excluded player typically from the defensive team. That player must go over to the corner of the pool, near the sideline behind his(her) own cage for a period of time.

It is during this “exclusion” time that both the offense and the defense work to execute tactics for scoring or preventing a goal. As Nitzkowski says: “A productive Six-on-Five Offense has never been more important to the successful team than it is today.” (p 281) Depending on the level of play, there can be upwards of 15-20 total exclusions per game. All other things considered even, a team’s ability to score during this opportunity or prevent the other team from scoring will likely decide the outcome of the match.

Numerically, the best opportunity for a team to score is right after the exclusion foul is called. This fast outlet pass and perhaps 2nd pass for an assist is called a “quick.”

It is thus very important that both the offensive and defensive teams hear the referee’s whistle and identify where the excluded player is in the pool. In addition, rather than mechanically swimming to spots, the offense should make release moves, “v-outs”, to try for this quick if there aren’t many defenders around the goal.

The “quick” right back to beat the 5 on 6 zone — at the very instant of the ejection whistles, the 2m. offense dry passes out to #2 and right back for the shot.

Teams typically attack the six on five by having one of two configurations: the “4-2” or the “3-3”. These formations combine different movements to achieve the highest percentage shot possible. There is much teamwork involved with the execution of the six on five offense, and players should be familiar with each other and how and where their teammates want their passes.

A. 4-2 Offensive Configuration:
Technique points – Offensive players need to put the ball up above the head and move quickly to spots while at the same time looking to shoot and keeping the goalie on alert. The most fundamental principle of extra-player offense is to move the goalie and the defense out of the position through quick, accurate, dry passes and realistic fakes. The adage: “one fake and a pass” holds true when trying to move the goalie
and field players out of position for a quick cross or post pass. Other strategies include multiple fakes, player rotations, and inward/outward shifts before passing the assist.

4-2 Six-on-Five Offense position names and numbers

1. Basic passes to the posts:
   These include, but are not limited to #6 to #3; #6 to #2; #4 to #3; #5 to #2; and #1 to either #2 and/or #3. The six position, given that most players are right-handed, is typically an assist position. With a left-handed player, the 6 spot is also a shooting spot, as is the 1 spot. This is so because each of these players (1 and 6) have only one defender, in addition to the goalie, to beat for a score. The closest and highest percentage shots come from players #2 and #3.
   a. Six-to-three: This assist is set up with quick passes between the #5 (top) and #6 (lefty) positions, and goalie fakes, to move the defenders away from the posts and then the assist into #3.

Six-to-three prep and pass – in the sequence below, white cap#10 is playing on the “3” post. She extends her arm & “steps out” to receive the assist from the “6” spot (not seen).

“Step out prep”, six-to-three pass, White cap #10
Receive and shoot, six-to-three passes below, white cap#10, dark cap#3 on the three posts

b. Six-to-two “lob” or direct line pass: similarly, the #6 player makes set-up passes with player #4 and/or #1 before making a pass to the open player @ post #2. In the photo below, white cap #8 has successfully drawn the dark cap defenders to his side to be able to pass a lob to the #2 post (or to #1 spot) for a shot.
c. Five-to-two or Four-to-three “diagonal” pass to post: when the center defender playing between the posts allows a passing lane between the top and the #2 and/or #3 positions, the top players can make a line pass above the post players head for a forehand or backhand reception and shot.

Four-to-three post pass (diagonal) – blue cap #7 passing to three-post

2. Shots from #1 and #6: Teams usually put their best shooters at these two positions so that the defense must “honor” them and the offense gains a high percentage shot. Whenever possible, it is beneficial for the #1 or #6 player to: receive a cross pass before shooting; move towards the cage to improve the shooting angle; and/or fake the goalie to have him/her commit.
a. It is also important for these players to be able to shoot to the opposite side of the goal (cross cage) as the goalie typically dives to the near side on a cross pass.

Shot from the #6 position, left-hander (dark #7) with good angle, few field player arms

Shot from one position (#4 dark cap), beating goalie & defender (#4 white), likely off from cross pass
Shot from #1 position (dark cap), beating the goalie off cross pass

Notice the goalie’s position above – he had been on the opposite side of the cage and therefore had difficulty moving across to the near side to block the shot.

B. Three-three offensive configuration: This approach involves spreading the defenders so as to maximize the opportunity for a high percentage outside shot (4-6m. away). There are three offensive players on the 2m. line and three in the 5-7m. area, with the three outside offensive players attempting to exploit their 3 on 2.

3-3 Six on Five Offense position names and numbers

- Much like a point guard in basketball, the #5 player penetrates, “walking” with the ball above his/her head towards the cage @ an angle and tries to get one of the outside defenders to commit. When this defender does commit, #5 “dishes” off to either #4 or #6 teammate, depending on who committed, for the shot.
- This configuration is more effective with left-handed players at the #6 and #3 spots, so that they can quickly catch and shoot the ball.
• The three-three generally takes less familiarity and time to implement because the ball is usually handled by only 2-3 offensive players and the passes are relatively basic.

Five on Six Defense:

Technical points – at its heart, the five player defense is a zone. In the photo below, one can see all five dark cap players compacted into a space that effectively only allows “outside” shots. The defensive players must quickly get to their zone positions immediately upon hearing the multiple whistles indicating an exclusion AND cover the center to prevent the “quick.”

Five-player zone (dark caps)

A. Player responsibilities, five on six:

3-2 Five on Six Defense position names and letters

1) Post players “a” and “c” – these two players have shot blocking responsibilities to obstruct the near side of the cage for offense #1 & #6 – see white cap player “c” in upcoming photos. These players must NOT allow shots to the near side of the cage as the goalie is depending on them to prevent this.

• In addition, players “a” and “c” have responsibilities to go back to the 2 and 3 post positions, respectively and cut off passes to these players. These players need to decide, in concert with their goalie, whether to put the outside arm up or match arms (see below).
• It is important that when the field defender blocks the ball, (s)he does so with a slight motion, not waiving at the ball; and trying to knock it down, not tip it. The goaltender will have much more chance on this than with a deflection.

Responsibilities for “a” and “c” defenders front view –
“funneling the ball” (see notes p.11)

Back line defender “c” (white cap) covering near post of the goal

Back line “c” defender (dark cap) cutting off near side of cage
Player “c” defender (white cap) matching arms with left-hander @ 6 position

Player “a” defender (white cap) matching arms with right-hander (dark cap#6) @ 1 position

2) Center back defensive position - “b” spot:
This player is a mirror of the goalie; (s)he is responsible for passes to both of the posts, shots from both the 4 and 5 “top” offensive positions, and the diagonal passes from 4 to 3 and 5 to 2.

- The player assuming this position should have good lateral mobility, preferably long arms, and work in concert with the goalie so as not to screen him(her).
- As with all defenders, being able to block and not deflect the ball is of the utmost importance, by using the forearm as much as is possible and not waving the arm.
Center back “b” defender with arm up closing off cross-cage shot and pass to 3 post

Center back “b” defender (dark cap) putting arm up to block cross-cage shot from offensive player on top (likely 4 spot)

3) Top defenders “d” and “e”
These players have responsibilities as shot blockers for the 4 and 5 offensive players and must move back to the 2 and 3 posts when the top players don’t have the ball. In addition, these players should not be rotated out of position when the offense rotates in one direction or the other.
More notes regarding 5 on 6:

- All shots should be “funneled” to the middle of the cage so the goalie has the best chance of blocking them. A goalie should be responsible for the inner 2.4 sq.m. or 24 sq. ft. of the surface area of the cage, not the 1ft. (3dm.) inside & adjacent to both posts. (see diagram p.8)
- Defenders (especially “a”, “b”, & “c”) must “seal off”, i.e. prevent all rebounds from goalie blocks so that the offensive team does not have a second chance (garbage).
- Hands must be up continuously so that players cannot shoot immediately after a pass is made.
- Players should be “on their hips” to cover maximum amount of distance in the zone in the shortest amount of time.
- When the excluded player returns, the other five should rotate towards the nearest player (a=2,b=3,c=6,d=4,e=5 OR c=3, b=2, a=1, d=4, e=5 depending on the entry area); players must be careful not to fully leave their zone until the re-entering player gets to his/her player, and resume full strength (six on six) defense.
- There are variations to the 3-2 zone, and most of these involve splitting and gapping the 4, 5, and 6 players, especially if they are all right-handed.
- There are variations which require the defense to be aggressive and foul the perimeter players (1,4,5 and/or 6) in order to stop good shooters.
- The five-on-six is a good time for the “d” and “e” players to “bait” passes – particularly the 6 to 5, 1 to 4, 5 to 1 and 4 to 6 passes. Defenders can do this baiting by sliding their legs into the passing lane and then popping up to intercept immediately after the pass is made.

References:


Tanner, John, “Five-on-Six and Six-on-five,” Irvine, Ca National Swimming / Water Polo Coaches Clinic; (May,1993): 89-90.