

11

THE LMU ATTACK

“You have to be a little bit crazy to do this.”

—Sonny Allen

Before the Grinnell System, there was simply “The System” as popularized by Paul Westhead at Loyola Marymount University. Both of us have used the LMU break at various points in our career, Gary adopting the original Westhead system in full during the early 1990’s at Redlands, which is just a few miles from LMU in southern California.

ORIGINS OF THE LMU SYSTEM

In the mid-1980’s the game of college basketball was in the doldrums as many coaches emphasized a ball-control style, using slowdown tactics regularly and stalling late in the game. Scores under 50 points were not at all unusual. In the decade 1972-1982, scoring averages in Division I men’s basketball fell ten points per game from 77.7 to 67.6, leading to two rule changes intended to reverse the trend. The first was the shot clock, set originally at 45 seconds in 1985 and reduced to 35 seconds eight years later. In 1986 came an equally significant change with the adoption of the three-point line.

Although many of the individual components of Westhead’s system were already in use by other coaches, he was one of the first to take full advantage of the new rules by successfully integrating the three-point shot into an up-tempo transition game along with a full-court pressing scheme. With two outstanding players in Bo Kimble and Hank Gathers, LMU shattered college basketball scoring records and was involved in five of the highest scoring games in NCAA Division I history, while averaging 122.4 points per game in 1989-90. One can only speculate how differently college basketball history might have unfolded had not Gathers died tragically of a heart condition during an LMU conference tournament game in 1990. Although the Lions still were able to advance deep into the NCAA tournament before falling to eventual national champion UNLV in the Regional finals, an NCAA title by LMU might have proven to be as big an

influence on the course of the game as Bob Knight's success with half-court ball-control basketball was following Indiana's NCAA titles in 1976, 1981, and 1987.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Westhead's original version of the System was quite similar to the approach we are discussing in this book in many respects. Both rely on the fast break, three-point shooting, and an aggressive press to fatigue opponents and force them into "meltdown." However, the differences are just as striking as the similarities:

- 1) **Depth**—Westhead's style was based on a conventional 7-8 player rotation rather than playing 15-18 players and substituting in groups of five. LMU's incredible physical conditioning may be one of their team's greatest achievements during that era. For players to be able to play true System basketball without sacrificing intensity while averaging 32 minutes per game—as Bo Kimbel did during his senior season at LMU—showed a level of conditioning far beyond the capabilities of most college and high school athletes.
- 2) **Half-court Defense**—The LMU defense also differed from the type used by Grinnell, Redlands, and Olivet in that Westhead's teams did not continue to trap once the ball crossed half-court, but fell back into a 2-3 zone or a soft man-to-man to conserve energy. Grinnell's System, on the other hand, does continue trapping in the half-court in order to force turnovers and maintain tempo versus spread/delay offenses. Keep in mind that this relentless trapping philosophy is only possible because teams playing the Grinnell System use a much deeper bench. Since Westhead had fewer players in his rotation, he admitted that the Lions deployed their half-court defense as a momentary opportunity to "catch their breath." Their use of a soft man-to-man defense or 2-3 zone—rather than continuing to trap—was a necessary compromise.
- 3) **Post Involvement**—The LMU offense also emphasizes a much greater role for the low-post player. Westhead liked putting his best player at the 4 position, where he could get the ball in transition in the middle of the floor with a live dribble. If not open for this "1-4 on top" pass, he then posted up in a conventional manner. The Grinnell style does not require a true post player in its offensive scheme.

- 4) **Screening Action**—The LMU screening action is also relatively simple when contrasted with the continuous “staggered-double” or even triple screens used at the end of Grinnell offensive transitions. Since Grinnell’s approach relies heavily on the three point shot (trying to create at least *half* of its attempts from beyond the arc), a more sophisticated screening action is necessary in order to achieve this goal. LMU, while still leading the nation in three-point attempts, used more high percentage low-post options to create an inside threat.
- 5) **Athleticism**—One criticism of the LMU approach is that it may require more athleticism than some teams possess. The Grinnell system was designed in a Division III setting with average athletes in mind, and its sophisticated screening options at the end of the break allow a team to create three-point shots for preferred shooters, while using other less versatile players in rebounding or screening roles. The LMU break, on the other hand, relies on speed and athletic ability at every position.
- 6) **Scoring Balance**—The LMU break creates scoring options for every player. The Grinnell approach was designed for a team with less overall skill, one that might have only a few “preferred” shooters who need a scheme that will help them get open for more shots than the team's role players. LMU can be more of an “equal opportunity offense,” although Grinnell’s attack can be adjusted to provide more balanced scoring in situations where a team has more scorers.

THE LMU BREAK

The Loyola Break might be more accurately called the Sonny Allen numbered fast break. Allen created the offense—which Westhead later made famous—in the 1960’s at Old Dominion University at a time when the three-lane fast break was the standard. Allen wanted a more structured break that would involve all five players and give each one a clear role. His innovations proved successful and resulted in an NCAA Division II national championship at ODU in 1975. One of Westhead’s contributions was the way in which he utilized the 2-guard (right wing) at the end of the break to take advantage of the newly instituted three point line. In the LMU scheme, the 2-guard was primarily a threat from behind the arc, and routinely led the nation in three-point attempts and makes. Westhead

