

The Triangle: Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, Phil Jackson, and the enduring offensive scheme

Phil Jackson mastered a new kind of offense on his way to 11 Titles, here is how he ran the Triangle Offense and how he used it to rein in the most polarizing players in sports.

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The triangle: a shape consisting of three straight lines of equal length coming together to form a three sided polygon. It represents the ideas of balance, equality, and order. It was these ideas that Phil Jackson had in mind at his Montana home in the summer of 1990. His star player, Michael Jordan, had just been shut down in his second trip to the Eastern Conference Finals Isiah Thomas and the Detroit Pistons. Despite scoring 32 points per game, Jordan and the Chicago Bulls narrowly lost the series 4-3.¹ Phil Jackson entered the offseason with a lot of questions to answer. Jordan had already spent six years in the league without a Finals appearance. Meanwhile, the Pistons went on to win their second championship in a row, and employing the infamous “Jordan Rules”² to halt Chicago’s progress season after season, the Bulls were lost. Head Coach Phil Jackson could see that relying on Michael Jordan to propel them to a

¹ It was this series that Scottie Pippen suffered from “migraines.” Jordan suddenly found his number two guy struck by stage fright.

² A strategy to make Jordan uncomfortable and punish him for driving to the hoop. The Piston’s center, Bill Laimbeer, had the job of grounding Air Jordan’s flight whenever Michael went up for a dunk.

championship would not work. Because of this, Jackson, with the help of his assistant coach, Tex Winter, innovated an offense, dubbed the Triangle offense, that would allow Jordan to prosper, while also allowing his young teammates Scottie Pippen and Horace Grant³ room to grow. What happened next is history.

The System

Necessity is the father of invention. In the summer of 1990, after five years of disappointing playoff appearances, a change was necessary for the Chicago Bulls. In 1985 they drafted Michael Jordan, one of the best prospects since Magic Johnson and Larry Bird⁴ entered the league. However, coaches found it difficult to win games with Jordan, and teammates found it hard to play with such a brash figure⁵. On the other hand, opposing teams loved Jordan and his one-dimensional offensive attack. It was the Detroit Pistons that invented the “Jordan Rules.” These “rules” were simple: the defense should only focus on stopping Jordan, force him to take tough shots, and punish him when he drove into the paint. It was because of these methods that Phil Jackson adopted the Triangle.

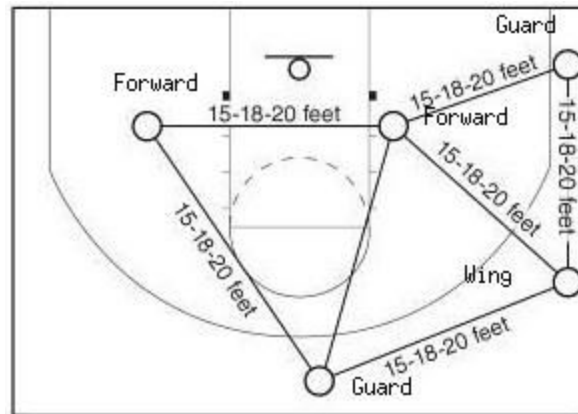
The beauty of the Triangle offense is that it is an equal opportunity offense. Teams could no longer focus on a single player with the “Jordan Rules,” because in the Triangle, every player is a threat to score. The system does this by not relying on plays, but instead relying on

³ Unfortunately, Horace Grant would break up with the Bulls in 1995 and join their Eastern Conference rival, the Orlando Magic.

⁴ Jordan had his own rivalry with Larry Bird and the Boston Celtics, too. The Celtics swept the Bulls in the 1986 and 1987 playoffs.

⁵ “Brash figure” is an understatement. Jordan once punched a teammate, now Golden State’s head coach Steve Kerr, because of a hard foul during a practice.

decisions. Each player has a certain decision to make while running the Triangle, and these decisions come in a systematic way:



1. To initiate the offense, the three main positions, the guard, wing, and forward, form the opening triangle. The guard passes to the wing, and he then cuts to the corner. Meanwhile, the forward takes position in the strong side post⁶, by the basket. This forms the triangle that gives the offense its name.
2. The first decision is to pass into the post, where the forward can turn and score easily. If this is not available, the wing can then pass into the corner, or pass to the weak side guard⁷ at the top of the key.
3. Once passed into the post, the wing can cut inside for the pass, or the guard can backdoor cut⁸ for a lane to the hoop. If passed to the guard at the top of the key, they can dribble hand-off to the forward at the elbow or the wing and cut to the basket.
4. When in the elbow, the forward can pass to the corner, pass to the cutting wing, or shoot it himself.

⁶ In normal people speak, near the basket on the same side as the ball.

⁷ The guard on the side opposite of the ball.

⁸ Sneak behind the defenders on the way to the hoop.

There are a number of different plays that can occur just off of these few decisions. It is in this way that the Triangle offense is so potent. The offense reacts to what the defense is giving rather than trying to guess it. Also, the offense is unpredictable, as it is entirely predicated on the decisions of the players as they run it.

Another key feature of the Triangle is that through the unselfishness of the offense and the decision making process, each of the five players on the court is always involved in the offense. A player that touches the ball and feels important to the offense is more likely to work hard on defense and give more effort for their team.

Although the Triangle offense was invented by Sam Barry during his time at the University of Southern California, Tex Winter⁹ innovated and invigorated the offense to its modern phase, and Phil Jackson utilized it to become the most successful coach in NBA history.

Many detractors and Jordan-haters will point to Jordan and Pippen as the catalyst behind Jackson's success as a coach. They'll say that hall of fame players will find success in any system. However, the Triangle is more than an offensive scheme, it is a culture that will breed success from the star players to the bench warmers. This is where the ability of the coach is truly put to the test. Coach Jackson would show his players videos of packs of wolves hunting. He also had the team practice daily meditation, in order to achieve better "zen." Jackson believed that there was more to life than basketball, and being in touch with your inner self would lead to basketball greatness.

⁹ Winter spent over half his life working on the Triangle offense, only to have Jackson's name forever tied to it. It's like Thomas Jefferson writing up the Declaration of Independence only to have John Hancock take up half the paper with his signature.

This culture shift of not relying on star players and instead nurturing a team to form one solid unit has been replicated many times. Mix those elements with a fast-paced, pass-happy offense and success will come. The Golden State Warriors have experienced the same culture shift under coach Steve Kerr (while also running Triangle-offensive sets), and Villanova's Jay Wright has won two championships by encouraging a fast-paced, equal opportunity brand of basketball.

A Tale of Two Kobes

Nothing lasts forever, not even for the greatest athletes in history. Jordan left Chicago with six titles under his belt and headed for a job with the Washington Wizards¹⁰. Meanwhile, Phil Jackson headed to Los Angeles to deal with another pair of bombastic superstars: Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant. Truthfully, Jackson had no idea the highs and lows that lied ahead of him in Hollywood.

In the summer of 2003, the Los Angeles Lakers had every reason to celebrate. They had won three titles in four years, and had a promising future despite losing to the San Antonio Spurs in the second round of the 2003 playoffs. The Lakers had MVP Shaquille O'Neal and his boisterous partner in the backcourt: the young Kobe Bryant. Not only that, but on the bench sat legendary coach Phil Jackson. All signs pointed to a Lakers Dynasty for years to come. The reality of the situation was a lot different, however. Shaq and Kobe publicly feuded¹¹, Bryant

¹⁰ A short-lived job as President of Basketball Operations for the Wizards. A job that would end with him signing himself as a player and playing another three years.

¹¹ The feud grew so bad that by the 2003-2004 season, Shaq and Kobe wouldn't even mention the other by name, and Kobe refused to eat with the team after games. That's right, Shaq and Kobe's falling out was just like a high school breakup.

was involved in a sexual assault case, and in 2004 Coach Jackson would release a tell-all book calling Bryant “uncoachable.” All of these factors led to Jackson quitting in 2004, following the team’s loss to the Detroit Pistons in the Finals.

Only one year later, Phil Jackson would return¹², and bring with him the ideas of the Triangle offense, in one last attempt to rein in his star player like he did Michael Jordan a decade ago.

The Kobe and Shaq breakup was a difficult one. Shaquille O’Neal shipped off to the East Coast to join Dwayne Wade and the Miami Heat for a title run¹³. Meanwhile, Kobe found himself alone in California. What followed is perhaps some of the most impressive individual performances in basketball history. Like the 2005 season, when he scored more than 50 points in four games in a row. Or the famous January 22nd evening in 2006 when Kobe dropped an 81-point game against the Toronto Raptors, marking the highest scoring total by a single player since Wilt Chamberlain’s legendary (and almost archaic) 100-point game. However, these efforts were in vain, considering the Lakers missed the playoffs in the 2005-2006 season. With Phil Jackson back, he had to do what he did to Jordan a decade prior: form a team player out of an unapologetic ball hog. Fortunately, Kobe Bryant was a changed man since being dubbed “uncoachable.”¹⁴ He came into the 2006 season with a new number, 24, and a new outlook on basketball. With the help of Coach Jackson and the Triangle, Kobe led his team to another two titles before the end of the decade.

¹² To the surprise of no one. Since his playing days back in the ‘70s with the New York Knicks, Jackson has always loved a challenge.

¹³ Which the Heat would win thanks to perhaps the most lopsided officiating in history. Dwayne Wade shot 97 free throws in six games: more than double any other player in the series.

¹⁴ And after begging to be traded and denied by Lakers owner Jerry Buss.

The debate of which Kobe was better, ‘Number 8’ or ‘Number 24’, is perhaps a more contested debate than Kobe and Jordan. However, the best answer, and a total cop-out, is that ‘8’ and ‘24’ are different players. ‘8’ embodied the spirit of his idol, Michael Jordan, frequently taking over games and pissing off teammates in the process. ‘24’ represents the beauty of the Triangle: a generational talent willing to sacrifice personal glory for the team’s success. ‘24’ Kobe took the ideas of the Triangle to heart so well that he even began mentoring young Laker’s players in his twilight years, a feat that Jordan could not replicate on the Wizards.¹⁵

The Second Triumvirate

Coming into the 2006-2007 season, Phil Jackson couldn’t have asked for a better roster to run the Triangle offense¹⁶. Although the Triangle can be ran with any type of roster, there are a few specific personnel that make the job easier. For one, a scoring shooting guard. Fortunately for Jackson, he received arguably the second best shooting guard in NBA history: Kobe Bryant, a player who tried his hardest to emulate his idol Michael Jordan.

Next up is a big man that can operate in the post. The Bulls had this during both of their three-peats: Horace Grant during the first, and Toni Kukoc in the later half of the 90’s.

Similarly, the Lakers had 26 year old Pau Gasol: a forward from Spain.

Another important piece to the Triangle puzzle is a pass first point guard to easily distribute the ball. Derek Fisher filled this role for the Lakers: a point guard willing to pass up shots and also make them when he needed to.

¹⁵ A moment of silence for Kwame Brown’s career.

¹⁶ Besides the ‘96 Bulls, of course.

Fill in the remaining roster spots with role players, and the team is ready to run the Triangle offense.

Perhaps more interesting than what Phil Jackson was able to do with the Triangle Offense is how teams have adapted his ideas for the modern era. Comparing the time of Jordan to now is nigh-impossible. Sharpshooter Larry Bird never made more than 100 threes in a season, nor attempted over 250. Compare these numbers to Steph Curry¹⁷, who has the record for most threes made in a season with 402. Three-point shooting now dominates both the pro league and college. However, the winning systems remain the same. While teams such as the Houston Rockets utilize the pick-and-roll with a large degree of success, championship teams such as the Warriors, San Antonio Spurs, and the LeBron led Miami Heat all utilized off-ball screens, back door cutting, and spot-up jumpers to keep the offense from growing stagnant. It is with these elements that the Triangle lives on.

Get the Goat

Michael Jordan was a six time NBA champion, six time Finals MVP, and four time league MVP under Phil Jackson. Kobe Bryant was a five time NBA champion, two time Finals MVP, and the league MVP¹⁸ under Phil Jackson. Neither won a championship without Coach Jackson and the Triangle Offense.

Although not every team has a Hall of Fame coach to run a complex system such as the Triangle, but that doesn't mean that every team can't benefit from the ideas the Triangle

¹⁷ Which isn't fair, because Curry's shooting ability defies all normal logic.

¹⁸ Greatest of all time when it comes to being robbed for the MVP award. Phoenix Suns' point guard Steve Nash won it over Kobe twice during Kobe's prime years. A heist on par with *The Great Train Robbery*.

preaches. Since the 1980s, when Magic Johnson and Larry Bird dominated the league, the best basketball teams are those that know how to pass and keep every player involved. This lessons extends to many other sports, as you will find the same truth in soccer, football, and hockey. The other lesson is that with the right coach and the right system, you can take an all-star player and turn him into the greatest of all time.

Phil Jackson has retired from coaching, but his influence still lives on, forever memorialized with a simple shape.



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¹⁹ Picture from the 1993 Eastern Conference Finals against the New York Knicks. Knicks center Patrick Ewing is just one of the few Hall of Famers that went without a championship due to Jordan's dominance. Clyde Drexler and the Portland Trail Blazers, Gary Payton and Shawn Kemp of the Seattle SuperSonics, and Karl Malone and John Stockton of the Utah Jazz were a few players inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame that failed to get past Michael Jordan.