THE LATERAL DRIBBLE: PROTECTION, ACCELERATION, THE FIRST STEP, TURNING THE CORNER, RUNNING, SHOOTING, DRIVING AND THE LOGO

By Robert Tilitz

The lateral dribble is the most important dribble in basketball. The multi-purpose lateral dribble might not be fancy, but it is body-wedge protected and streamlined. First and foremost, the lateral dribble protects the basketball. The lateral dribble also facilitates acceleration, the first step, turning the corner, dribbling on the run, transitioning to strongside pull-up jump shots, taking off for strongside driving layups and more.

The lateral dribble is most effective when used in combination with the strongside game's full complement of shooting, driving and passing options, all of which, by definition, can only be obtained when the player dribbles to his or her dominant side with the dominant hand. To be sure, the strongside game is built around the strongside pull-up jump shot, but the lateral dribble is vital to its success. The role of the lateral dribble is to protect and to motorize the strongside game.

The lateral dribble is a dynamic sequence that varies somewhat with its different uses. The lateral dribble's foundation is its multi-purpose torqued ready stance, which gives the lateral dribble its defining look. The lateral dribble's torqued ready stance locates the ballhandler's dribble hand, which for the purposes of this analysis will always be the dominant hand, back just past the dominant-side hip and angled out. The reachback of the dribble hand automatically twists the ballhandler's upper body or torso slightly backward. At the same time, the ballhandler's head and feet should point forward.

The lateral dribble has the look of a precarious sideways dribble, which raises questions about its reliability. But the lateral dribble is no more difficult to control than the conventional forward-facing dribble. The explanation for this remarkable equivalence stems from the fact that the dribble hand gets its bearings from the torso. So when the lateral dribble's reachback automatically twists the torso slightly backward, the lateral dribble automatically keeps its bearings. That's why the lateral dribble always has the feel, the comfort and the control of the conventional forward-facing dribble.

The lateral dribble's torqued ready stance protects the basketball because the reachback of the dribble hand that locates the lateral dribble back past the dominant-side hip also wedges nearly the full breadth of the ballhandler's body between the basketball and the defender. That's body-wedge protection. The lateral dribble's torqued ready stance protects the basketball whether the ballhandler is standing still or in motion. In motion, the lateral dribble's torqued ready stance stretches out as the body stretches out.

Given the premium put on protection, the lateral dribble would be invaluable if all it could do was shield the basketball from the defender with its body-wedge torqued ready stance. But the lateral dribble's torqued ready stance is just as good at rotation driven acceleration as it is at protection. Rotation driven acceleration is a whole-body action that is built into the torqued ready stance. Rotation driven acceleration gets its initial impetus from the forward direction of the lateral dribble.

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The first-step should originate from the lateral dribble's torqued ready stance, whether from a standing start or in motion up to slow and medium speeds. The first-step phase of the lateral dribble is a difference-maker because of the extra added acceleration it generates. In order to accelerate out of the lateral dribble's torqued ready stance, the ballhandler should direct the lateral dribble forward, which will rotate the torso forward for added momentum. At the same time, the inside leg should stride forward, which is the first step. Although the first-step phase of the lateral dribble is a short and simple sequence, there's still room for plenty of variation. For one, starting the first step from a standing-start works whether the player is initially dribbling or not dribbling. For another, delaying the first step indefinitely while pounding the lateral dribble behind the body-wedge of the torqued ready stance is a sound tactic. For yet another, repeatedly starting and stopping the forward phase of the lateral dribble and the first-step by first directing the lateral dribble forward and then pulling it back behind the body-wedge with a reachback dribble is a recommended stop-and-start tactic that can continue indefinitely until the sought-after positioning advantage is gained.

Turning the corner should originate from the lateral dribble's torqued ready stance. The turning-the-corner phase of the lateral dribble is another difference-maker because of the extra added acceleration it generates and the opening it creates. Turning the corner, which is often preceded by a reachback dribble to set up the lateral dribble's torqued ready stance, usually starts on the run at slow and medium speeds. In order to initiate the turning-the-corner phase of the lateral dribble, the ballhandler should direct the lateral dribble forward, which will rotate the torso forward for added momentum, and at the same time stride forward with the inside leg at an inward angle to secure the corner.

Dribbling on the run encourages modification of the lateral dribble. To accommodate the dynamics of running, the outward turn of the dribble hand and the outward turn of the torso are often abbreviated. Instead of reaching back just past the dominant-side hip to set up the lateral dribble's torqued ready stance, the dribble hand should locate just ahead of the outward-turned dominant-side hip. And the outward turn of the torso should be reduced by about 30 degrees. The lateral dribble can be synchronized to coordinate with the pumping arm action and leg action of running by way of repeated alternate back-and-forth dribbles. The back-and-forth lateral dribble brings fluidity and economy of motion to dribbling on the run, not to mention protection of the basketball and acceleration. The back-and-forth dribble is more natural than dribbling exclusively out front while on the run. When dribbling on the run against intense and constant defensive pressure, it is advisable to maintain a mobile and constant version of the lateral dribble's torqued ready stance. Speed will be sacrificed, but protection is always the top priority.

The transition from dribbling on the run to strongside pull-up jump shots should originate from the lateral dribble's on-the-run torqued ready stance with its outward turn of the dribble hand and the torso. First, the lateral dribble should be grabbed from the side or the rear. Then the basketball should be swept forward to the off-hand to form a firm and flexible double-whole-hand grip. At the same time, the inside leg should apply the brakes and start to pivot. The forward sweep of the basketball and the resulting forward turn of the torso produce momentum that propels the start of the strongside pull-up

jumpshooter's turn toward the basket on the ground during the drop into the gather for the jump of the strongside pull-up jump shot. From there, after the strongside pull-up jump shot's shooting grip is set up, it's all about the jump of the jump shot until the airborne shooting position is reached. That's because the arm action that raises the basketball to the shooting position also helps to power the jump of the jump shot.

The transition from dribbling on the run to strongside driving layups should originate from the lateral dribble's on-the-run torqued ready stance with its outward turn of the dribble hand and the torso. First, the lateral dribble should be grabbed from the side or the rear. Then the basketball should be swept forward to the off-hand to form a firm and flexible double-whole-hand grip. At the same time, the inside leg should extend its stride to plant for a one-legged jump. The forward sweep of the basketball and the resulting forward turn of the torso produce momentum that can accelerate and power strongside driving layups. For strongside driving layups, the forward sweep of the basketball can also serve as either a ramming or an avoidance tactic against the obstructive defensive reach-ins that multiply close to the basket. From there, it's all about the jump of the driving layup. That's because the arm action that raises the basketball to the shooting position also helps to power the jump of the driving layup.

At present, there is a contradictory relationship between the lateral dribble and the NBA. On one level, the NBA has elevated the lateral dribble to iconic stature by making it the league's logo in the form of Jerry West's dribbling silhouette. On another level, the NBA's coaches have yet to engage in serious analysis of the lateral dribble, not even giving it a name other than the belated "logo dribble." The obvious conclusion is that the NBA's reverence for the lateral dribble has been intuitive, not informed. The caliber of play in the NBA has suffered as a result. Sure, the lateral dribble shows up regularly in the hands of some players. But that's only because those players have learned the lateral dribble on their own. The coaches need to get with it and prepare themselves to teach the lateral dribble. That should be easy to do with the blueprint provided above.



THE LATERAL DRIBBLE: from left, Kevin Johnson, Kevin Durant and Luca Doncic. Head forward, feet forward, dribble hand turned outward and torso turned outward. The outward turn of the dribble hand turns the torso outward. Because the dribble hand gets its bearings from the torso, the lateral dribble has the feel, the comfort and the control of a forward-facing dribble. Most importantly, the lateral dribble provides body-wedge protection of the basketball and whole-body rotation driven acceleration.