

Hey basketball coaches: Listen up

Long-time youth basketball official who has seen it all offers up some tips to help coaches have a greater impact on their players – and a more successful and enjoyable experience.

Despite my lack of coaching experience I have officiated enough games to provide youth basketball coaches a list of ways to become a better coach. For the record, I have never told a youth basketball coach how to do their job during a game – incredible restraint considering the fact that 85 percent of coaches have told me how to do my job. This is my one shot to offer a few suggestions:

► **Teach your players to run the baseline after a made basket**

This is an advantage a coach can communicate to their players. How many times have you seen the inbound player – chained to one spot – struggling mightily to inbound the ball against a press? Too many bad things can happen: A five-second violation; the pass is intercepted and converted into an easy lay-up; or an entry pass is successfully completed, but the player is immediately trapped in a bad position, which leads to a turnover and subsequent lay-up. Running the baseline is as rudimentary as it gets, but eight times out of ten, younger players don't do it when they are pressured. That's the coach's fault. Make this a priority and your game will improve immediately.

► **Don't let your players fall in love with the three-point shot**

It's your job to teach players how to play the game. Letting them stand behind the three-point arc all day is poor, lazy coaching. Players are much more likely to make that shot if they are in rhythm, most likely on a pass from the inside out. Teams with better athletes can challenge three-point shooters. If they take that option away, how will your team generate offense?

► **Teach back-door cuts and freelancing at a younger age or implement more plays**

One of my favorite coach-player exchanges happened near the

end of a sixth-grade boys' game in which the coach of a team losing by 20 points shouted out the play he wanted the point guard to run. I'll never forget that point guard's response, which everyone in the gym heard: "Dad, that play doesn't work!" Taken aback, the coach replied, "That's because you aren't running it right," before calling a timeout.

In this case, the point guard didn't try to disrespect his coach and father; he was simply telling the truth. When teams execute only a few plays the same way, opposing players have the play memorized by the third time. That's why that play didn't work in the fourth quarter, the third quarter, the second quarter and halfway through the first quarter. If you don't teach your players how to go back door if

the opponent jumps the cut, design multiple (at least two more) options per play depending on how the defense reacts, or allow your players some ability to freelance to change up the defense, your team is in for a long afternoon.

A simple tip is to use multiple words for the same play. That will keep the defense guessing for a few more possessions.

► **Don't let your team panic with 2½ minutes left and start jacking up ill-advised threes**

This happens way too often. Your team played a good solid game for 25 minutes, but you trail by seven points with a couple of minutes left. Instead of working the ball for a good shot, one of your players throws up a three-pointer and misses badly. The other team scores again, and now your team is down nine points. The same process repeats itself and now your team trails by 11 and then 13.

There is plenty of time to rally if a team is patient on offense and aggressively defends to force turnovers. As a coach, it's your job to avoid the panic button and lead your team in crunch time.



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Remember this important math formula: A bad three is never better than a good two.

► **Volunteer to officiate some in-house games**


Coaches who moonlight as referees have a much better understanding of the game. You don't need to officiate 10 months out of the year, but you will be amazed at how much insight you will gain after whistleblowing only a few games. You can take the knowledge you gained as an official and pass it on to your team. Understanding a referee's perspective firsthand will make you a better coach.

Never forget that the experience and lessons learned are more important than records, playing time and the number of trophies collecting dust in your seventh-grader's bedroom

Too often, coaches lose sight of the big picture. Winning is important – we all understand that – but it should never

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ninth graders, you have failed miserably, despite a gaudy win-loss record, newspaper clippings and trophies you and your players collected along the way.

Always ask the question: Is this a positive experience for my players? If the answer is yes, I tip my cap to you. If the answer is no, reevaluate your priorities because negative experiences will cause ramifications for years to come. 

be the highest priority. As coaches, you have the special opportunity and privilege to teach kids how to play the great game of basketball, how to win with humility, how to accept defeat gracefully, how to function as a team, the important ideals of sportsmanship and work ethic, how to balance fun with success, and how to incorporate hundreds of life-teaching moments along the way.

If you drive your players so hard that they resent the game of basketball by the time they are

Derek Wolden is the author of BasketCases and a long-time youth basketball official. You can order his book through the NAYS online bookstore at <http://shop.nays.org/>; or visit www.basketcasesbook.com for additional information.

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