

## **Team Preparation and Mental Game**

### **Things to think about...**

#### **On Team Concepts:**

There is no "I" in "team".

If you feel you are the best, or one of the best players on the team, then you must feel extra responsibility for making the team and each other team member better.

A championship team is more than a collection of five good individual players. It requires at least eight or nine teammates, who work hard together, who respect, help and encourage each other, who have a common goal, mindset and spirit, and yet who all realize their individual roles and importance to the team.

It's not who starts the game; it's who can finish it.

#### **On Defense:**

Good offense wins games; great defense and hustle wins championships.

Good defense comes from 50% good technique, and 50% inspiration and perspiration.

The best way to get back into the game when you're down 10 points or more, is to play great defense and rebound. Keep the other team from scoring so you can catch up.

#### **On Personal Character and Attitude:**

Reputation is what you are perceived to be; character is what you are.

The true athlete must have character, not be a character.

In life you make choices, and your choices make you.

You don't have to win a trophy to be a winner.

In basketball, there is no such thing as a perfect game. Don't get upset if you make a mistake or miss a shot, keep playing hard and things will work out. Remember, a man can fail many times, but he isn't a failure until he gives up. Always think, "Next play".

#### **On Goals:**

The journey is more important than the finish line. It's the fun, work, and experiences (good and bad) along the way that ultimately will be the most valuable to your personal growth. If you have prepared, worked your hardest, played fair, and given it your best effort along the way, then no matter what happens, you can be proud and satisfied at the end.

If you fail to prepare, you prepare to fail.

To be great is hard, but it's the "hard" (the difficulty) that makes it great...otherwise anyone could do it.

**On Speed and Quickness:**

You must be quick, but never hurry.

**Other Important "Little Things":**

Usually it is unwise to blindly "save" a ball going out-of-bounds under your opponents' basket. Let it go out and reset your defense.

If you are caught trapped in a corner...bounce the ball off the opponent's foot so it goes out-of-bounds. Or call "time-out" if it is a crucial time in the game and a crucial possession. But don't waste all of your coach's time-outs unnecessarily.

When you have a 6 (or more) point lead with only a minute to go in the game, protect the ball and burn the clock. You don't need to score any more points (unless it's an easy lay-up). Remember, "the clock is your enemy" now. Slow down, run the clock, careful passing, and be prepared to have to make free throws.

There are "good fouls" (like stopping an obvious score during an important part of the game. Make her go shoot the free throw). There are really, stupid "bad fouls" (like fouling someone with only 2 seconds left in the period with the bonus in effect).

Eliminate stupid fouls so you can use your five fouls for important stuff, like boxing-out, rebounding, posting-up, stopping a crucial shot, etc.

A little tip on staying out of foul trouble: your number of fouls should be less than or equal to the quarter number that you are in. #Fouls <= Quarter#

So, don't get your 2nd foul in the 1st quarter, or your 3rd foul in the 2nd quarter, or your 4th foul in the 3rd quarter, because you will most likely get your 5th foul before the game is over.

If a teammate steals the ball and is driving down the court for a fast-break lay-up, hustle down after her. Chances are, you will either get a pass from her, or get the rebound and an easy put-back basket. Always assume your teammate is going to miss the lay-up, so you get down there and get the rebound. It's an easy way to pick up some extra points!

To become champions, you must play four good quarters each game. It sounds obvious, but only the good teams do it! Focus on short blocks of time...break each quarter into four minute segments and focus on winning each segment...so you don't let up the entire game.

There are critical times in a game where key plays make the difference...to become champions, you must learn to recognize these times ("crunch time")...and pick up your intensity on the boards and on defense, and avoid costly turn-overs.

## **How to make the team... Tryouts!**

I'm the coach and you are a player trying to make my team. So how do you impress me with your skills, and what is it that I am looking for in try-outs?

The things I look for are solid fundamentals... don't be flashy. I like kids who play tough defense, hustle after loose balls, play aggressively (but not dirty). I love kids who box out and rebound. I like kids who are good passers, and avoid turnovers. I like team players. Don't try to impress me by dribbling between your legs.

Be the first one arriving for practice and the last one to leave. Show me work ethic... be willing to hustle hard during drills, etc. Show respect for the coaches and the other players. Ask the coaches to help you with your weaknesses. We all like to practice the things we are already good at. You get better by working on your weaknesses.

Are you a tall inside player? If so, impress me with rebounding, defense, and some post up moves. Example: a drop-step baseline move (see Inside Post-Up Moves)

If you are a guard, show me you can handle the ball and keep under control. If you can shoot the "3", fire some up during shoot-arounds. I like a perimeter player who can shoot the outside shot, but can also drive to the hoop, can see the whole floor and pass, and can handle the ball well. Show me your outside moves (see Outside Moves).

Work on your skills at home, or at the nearby playground in the summer (off-season). Work on the correct things, not just the things you are already good at (see Practicing in the Off-Season). Be physically "in-shape" (conditioning) when you arrive at try-outs.

During tryouts, don't be intimidated by better players, or players who made the team last year. There will always be a few players at try-outs who are better players and you know will make the team. But you can be an important part of the team to as a "role player" . Remember, hard work, hustle and a good attitude will impress the coach, even if your shooting is off that week.

## **Attitude, the "Right Stuff"**

An important aspect is developing a proper attitude about the game. To become winners, we must recognize how important our teammates are. "United we stand, divided we fall!" We must stick together. We must work together on offense with good passing, looking for an open teammate. But don't be afraid to shoot! If you are open, take the shot. Part of being a good teammate is scoring and taking good shots! If you miss a shot, forget it...you'll probably make the next one.

Remember: there is no such thing as a perfect game! Michael Jordan has never played a perfect game...he has always missed some shots. So don't get down on yourself if you mess up, just keep playing hard and things will work out. None of us is perfect...even the coaches! The refs aren't perfect either... so expect a bad call or two and don't let it get to you. Basketball is not a perfect game.

Being a good teammate is playing hard on defense. Go hard for loose balls and rebounds. Learn how to "box-out". Learn to set good picks (screens) on offense, so you can free up a teammate for an easy shot. Being a good teammate means coming to the game rested and playing as hard as you can. It means encouraging your teammates on and off the court. Together you can win! For you to become champions, you must develop a team "chemistry", or spirit...a respect and trust in each other, that you must begin to form now and develop over the years as you get into high-school. Many very talented teams never reach their full potential because they lack this chemistry, or team spirit. Many less talented teams have accomplished unthinkable goals by their hard work, desire, and team spirit.

Proper attitude means respect for your teammates and your opponents. Your opponents are trying their best just like you. Never try to "show up" or "trash-talk" your opponents, and don't over-celebrate a basket with too many "high-fives". When you over-celebrate, you make it seem like the basket was a big deal, and something you didn't really expect to make. Instead, be cool, like it's no big deal, you do it all the time.

Never play "dirty"...it's just not worth it! You only lower yourself by doing it. Play hard, with enthusiasm, and play to win, but play with class. Make your parents and teachers proud. Don't argue with the referees...they're human and don't always make the right call, but hey, that's life...it's not always fair. You just have to make the best of the situation and go on. People will remember you for how you act on the court. When we win, never gloat or rub it in your opponent's face.

When you're on the court, play as hard as you can to win, but when the game is over, it's over! Forget it, it's only basketball! If you do lose a game, remember that you can often learn more in losing. You don't have to win a trophy to be a winner!

## The Role Player

We can't all be super-stars, or even starters. We don't all have great shooting skills or ball-handling skills. But we can still be important "spokes in the wheel". We can still be very important to the success of our team. We are important "role players".

Coaches love good role players, because they know better than anyone that there will be times in a game, or during the season, that they will have to get good play, some good minutes from their bench personnel. Usually, you cannot be a championship team with just five good players. You need important players who can come off the bench and play quality minutes.

### What makes a great role player?

A role player could be a starter who has a special skill... such as being a great defensive player, or a great rebounder, or a point guard who can handle the ball and pass.

A role player is often the player who comes off the bench. She understands and accepts her role on the team. While on the bench, she keeps her head in the game, and observes what's going on, where the weaknesses are in the defense, which opposing players are "killing us", what's happening on the boards, etc. She is "ready to go" when the coach calls.

A good role player will come off the bench and really hustle on defense, go for loose balls, get the important rebounds. She can be aggressive, since she usually is less concerned about fouling out. She will not hurt her team with turnovers, or weak defense. By doing these things, she will give her team a lift. Many times I have seen the momentum of a game change because of the renewed "spirit" and energy that a role player brings into the game.

She is able to play quality minutes when a starter needs a rest, or is in foul trouble.

My former AAU coaching associate used to advise the role players to "make a difference"... not just go into the game and run aimlessly up and down the floor, but play hard, hustle and "make a difference"... good advice.

The role player understands that "it's not who starts the game, but who can finish it!"

The role player hustles in practice and works hard. She is not a complainer (about playing time). Rather, she has a positive attitude, encourages her teammates, and understands her importance to the team, and the importance of her contributions. She realizes that "her time will come". This really takes a special person, because most of us want to be starters... it takes great maturity to be a good role player.

## **The Exceptional Player**

These are some of the things that make a player a standout above the rest. The exceptional player:

1. Always plays great defense, even when her offense is "off".
2. Always hustles, boxes-out and rebounds.
3. Sees the whole floor and is an excellent passer, able to find the open teammate.
4. Is a good ball-handler, avoids costly turnovers.
5. Can shoot from outside.

6. Can drive, "take it to the hoop".

You can't rely on just an outside shot, or just your ability to drive. You've got to be able to do both. If you can't score from outside, the defense will "sag" and not allow you to drive. If you can't drive, they will guard you close outside, and not allow your outside shot. You got to be able to do both so that the defense cannot key on either aspect of your game.

7. Looks for her shot all the time. Doesn't stop shooting just because she missed one or two shots early in the game. If a great player starts off "cold", she will usually get it going by hustling, playing good defense, getting a steal or two...then she loosens up and the shots start falling.

8. Can make clutch free throws.

9. Stays out of foul-trouble.

10. Has "mental toughness"... is able to sense the critical times in a game and elevate her game and her teammates a notch (especially with defense, hustle and rebounding). Is able to make the "big plays" in crunch time. Is able to do the "little things" needed to win...like making the pass to an open teammate, setting a perfect screen, making a steal, etc. Keeps focused...does not let a bad call upset her. Is able to forget mistakes and keep playing hard. Understands the game situation, the clock.

11. Inspires and leads her teammates by her example, her hard work ethic and hustle in practice and during games. She works harder than anyone else. You can't ask your teammates to practice and play harder if you're not there yourself. Exceptional players are not born...they become exceptional by hard work and dedication.

12. Understands the concept of "team" and "family". It takes more than skill to have a championship team. You must have team "chemistry", respect for each other, a common goal, and help and encourage each other. The exceptional player is "coachable".

## **Transition Offense**

"Transition" refers to the process of changing from defense to offense (transition offense), or offense to defense (transition defense). Your transition offense can be a slow, walk-it-up-floor transition, an aggressive fast break transition, or something in between. Each coach has to decide which is best for his team and his personnel. Do you really want an up-tempo fast game, especially if you have a strong half-court game with good postmen, or if your guards are not particularly quick, have trouble keeping the ball under control, or are inexperienced?

On the other hand, if your team is quick, with good, experienced ball handlers, an aggressive up-tempo style has advantages.

1. The fast break can produce easy scores.
2. Pushing the ball up the floor quickly puts pressure on the opponent, and they will be constantly worrying about getting back on defense. This thinking may cause them to be less aggressive going for their offensive rebounds, and may keep their point guard from penetrating (thinking he has to stay back to prevent the fast break).
3. An aggressive team attitude on offense will often carry over to your defense and rebounding.
4. An up-tempo game will favor the team that is well conditioned. A poorly conditioned team will "run out of gas" by the fourth quarter.
5. The fast break will often break the opponent's press defense.
6. A team that plays up-tempo will usually use more of its bench players, with frequent substitutions. This often creates good team harmony with many players getting playing time. An up-tempo game will favor the team with a "deep bench", with many good substitute players.
7. The players and fans enjoy a well-played up-tempo game.

## **Transition Offensive Concepts**

The most important rule to inculcate in your players' minds is to always keep under control. You don't want your fast-breaking style to result in turnovers and missed opportunities to score. They have to learn to recognize when to push the break, and when to slow down and stay under control. They must learn not to force bad passes. Some teams like to push the break every opportunity they can (after a steal, defensive rebound, an opponent's score, etc). Some teams only push it up after a steal or a score, or only certain times of the game.

Although this is very basic, young players learning the game must be taught how to transition from defense to offense. Kids must be taught that when an inside, tall player gets a defensive rebound, he/she should immediately look to pass to a guard, a good ball-handler, to get the ball up the court, even if you are playing a slow-down game. Teach your ball-handlers that on every defensive rebound, they must move into a position quickly where the rebounder can pass to them. Coaches often assume kids know this, but like every other fundamental in the game, it must be taught. Rebounders should be taught to take care of the ball after a defensive rebound and make a clean, simple pass to a guard. So often, I see kids work hard for the rebound, only to lose it with a careless outlet pass. Impress your kids that the opponent is often "lurking around" to steal those outlet passes.

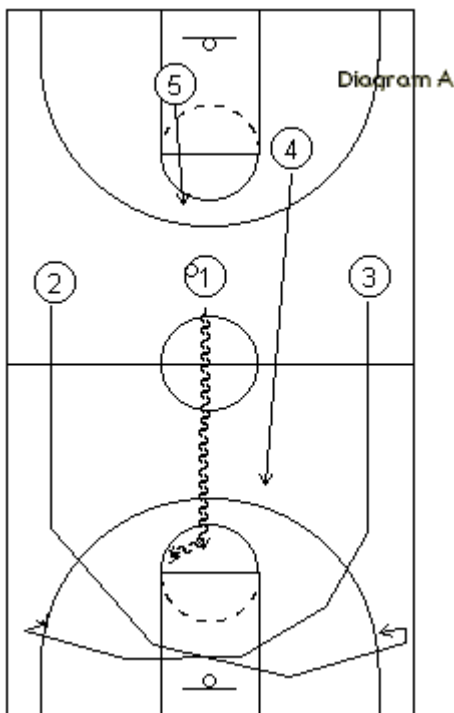
Also, some coaches like to assign the same person (usually a post player with good passing skills) to be the inbounds passer each time a basket is made, or the ball is out-of-bounds. The

post players should be taught to get down the floor and allow spacing and room for the guards to bring the ball up.

### **Running the primary fast break**

There are different ways of running the transition offense, but most methods use the idea of filling three lanes coming up the floor, a "trailer", and a "prevent" person (diagram A). The guards, or small forward should run the three lanes. One lane is straight up the middle of the floor, and the other lanes are along each sideline. Some coaches feel that it doesn't matter which player is in which lane, but just fill each lane position as quickly as possible and "go!". Other coaches teach that the outlet pass always goes to the point guard (the team's best ball handler) in the center, and the outside lanes, trailer and prevent position are assigned to individual players, so each one knows his role. If the break doesn't develop, then just bring it up slowly and avoid the turnover that can happen by getting the ball into the wrong person's hands.

Preferably, the ball will be in the center lane, although the break can be run from the wing and can be run with only two lanes filled (as after a quick mid-court steal). The center person should dribble the ball all the way to the free throw lane, and should not make any unnecessary passes prior to that point. The two outside lanes should cut at 45 degrees to the hoop for a pass from the point, and the layup. If the point guard pops the free throw jumper, the wings should crash the boards for the rebound. If neither happens, the wings should cross under the basket and fill the opposite corner or wing, and the point guard should move to the right side of the free throw circle. Next the "trailer" should cut through the left side of the lane, expecting the pass. The "prevent" player should come up the floor slowly, making sure no opponents are behind him. He prevents the opponent from taking it to the hoop should they steal or intercept the ball. If nothing develops from the break, the team then flows into it's usual half-court offensive set.



### **Starting the break**

Coaches differ on how to start the break off a defensive rebound. Some prefer the outlet pass to go to a guard out on the wing (free throw line extended). This guard can either pass to the other guard who is filling the center lane, or dribble quickly and fill the center lane himself.

Other coaches teach getting the outlet pass directly to the point guard in the center of the floor. If you can get this pass through, this is certainly the fastest and easiest way to get the break going, and avoids a dangerous pass to the wing, and a centering pass. It also gets the ball into the hands of your best ball-handler. The point guard should come to the pass, pivot and start the speed dribble up the floor, while the other guard and small forward fill the outside lanes.

A successful fast break depends on:

1. Getting the defensive rebound.
2. A good, quick outlet pass.



3. Filling the lanes.
4. Maintaining control. "Be quick, but never hurry."
5. Recognition. Don't force the break or pass if it is not there.

There are several drills that will help your transition offense.

See Transition Offense Drills, 4 on 4 Transition, Pitch 'n Fire, Rebound-Outlet-Break Drill

When the primary fast break is not possible, consider using the secondary break (see "Secondary Break")