

Coaching Young Players

I have gotten lots of questions from coaches and parents about coaching youth basketball, and advice for coaching youngsters, let's say 1st through 6th grades... elementary school children. You are probably a parent coach, a teacher-coach, a former player, or just someone who likes kids and wants to help coach and work with a bunch of kids. You may be organizing a recreational league or a church league, or are developing a program at your elementary school.

Some of the kids may have played some, and some have never played before. Some are there because they already love the game, and some are there because of their friends. Some were urged by their parents to give it a try.

Their parents will likely have varying perspectives. A few will think you should win every game at whatever cost, and will be yelling advice from the sidelines. Some will be thankful and happy that their child is on your team. Some will be a little fearful that you may yell at their child, or that their child may not be a good player and will embarrass him/herself.

So what advice do I give you?

First, make it fun for the kids. Do not yell negative things at them as this embarrasses them in front of their friends, and is actually counter-productive creating more stress and more mistakes. It makes you look like a bully, and you may completely turn the player away from ever wanting to play again. You can yell, but it should always be positive comments. If a player messes up, don't embarrass him/her in front of his/her friends. For example, if someone is having trouble with a certain skill or drill, rather than pointing the finger at him, blow the whistle and say, "Some of you are having trouble doing... blah, blah, blah... let me show you how to do this." So maintain a positive attitude, even if you are losing by 30 points.

Teach good sportsmanship by your example... no yelling at the refs, no demeaning the other team, other players, etc. Teach them to play hard, but do not allow "dirty" play or trash talking. Teach them to respect their opponents and the officials. Wins and losses are not important at this age. Teach them that you don't have to win a trophy to be a winner.

Also, let the kids know that it is OK to make mistakes, that you expect them to make mistakes. Basketball is not a perfect game. All players make mistakes, even Michael Jordan. Coaches make mistakes, and we all know that the refs make mistakes! You just have to keep playing hard and learn from those errors. "A good garden may have a few weeds."

If you have an actual team (not a large clinic-type group), teach them about teamwork and their responsibilities to the team... coming to practice, encouraging each other, helping each other, etc.

At the first practice, provide a handout for the players and their parents. This handout could contain some of the following items:

1. Your phone number, or how they can contact and communicate with you.
2. Your game and practice schedules.

3. Your goals for the team.
4. A roster of all the players (if you know it).
5. Let them know about any costs.
6. Your policy regarding playing time.

I have actually seen parents in the stands timing each player's playing time with a stopwatch! I believe that you should let all the kids play at this age... winning is not the prime consideration at this age. Having said that, I also think that it is unfair to the kids that come to all the practices for a player who frequently misses practices to get as much playing time in games. Explain your policy on excused and unexcused absences.

7. You could mention how parents could help (some like to be involved), such as keeping stats, working the scoreboard, driving to games, providing treats, helping with uniforms, post-game pizza parties, and maybe even assisting in practice.
8. You could briefly discuss the common problem these days of unacceptable parent behavior at games... yelling advice to their own child, yelling at the refs and other team's players, and "coaching" from the stands.

When dealing with parents, be honest and open and show them that you really care about helping their child... get them on your side. Make yourself available to talk with them after a game. Be diplomatic about any "coaching" advice they have to offer. Rather than getting into an argument with them, just politely thank them for their interest... you obviously don't need to follow their advice, but you also don't have to be snotty about it either! Do not simply choose to ignore parents. You may be able to get away with this if you are coaching at the college level, but it is still churlish, inconsiderate behavior. When coaching youth basketball, even at the high school level, parents can help make or break you... believe it!

If you have a son/daughter on the team... be fair. Do not give your own child more playing time than the others. Treat your child like any other player on the team... do not over-criticize and expect more from him/her. And don't provide him/her any special treatment either. When you are at the court, he/she is like any other player on the team. Away from the court, he/she is your special child and needs your love and support, not criticism... save any criticism or advice for when you are actually in the gym... kids don't even want to hear about it in the car on the way home. My daughter sure didn't!

OK... now down to playing basketball! Let's put together a team.

First, you probably have limited practice time at this age. So don't try to accomplish too much, and keep things simple. Practices for younger children should probably be no longer than 60 to 90 minutes because of their short attention span. So what are you going to teach them? What are your priorities? Others may disagree with me, but here are some of my thoughts.

Teach the fundamentals. At every practice, do ten minutes of ball-handling and dribbling drills. Do simple passing drills. Teach footwork (pivoting, triple threat position, doing lay-ups, how to

shuffle and slide on defense, etc). Correct shooting form will be difficult to teach at very young ages, since it will just be an effort to get the ball up to the hoop! But start working on correct form when the kids are strong enough... maybe 6th-7th grade. Teach man to man defense and how to box out and rebound.

Team Offense. With a limited number of practices, find out who can dribble and handle the ball... they are your point guards and wings. Put them in a simple "3-out, 2-in" set (a point guard, left and right wings, and two post players), or bring one of the posts up to the free throw line... hence a 1-3-1 set. Teach them the numbering quickly... 1 is the point, 2 is the right wing and 4 the right post, and 3 the left wing and 5 the left post (the even numbers are on the right side and the odd numbers on the left). The only reason to put them into a set is to try to maintain some spacing on the floor... so all five don't end up in the right corner! But tell them that they must not stand still in their position, but cut and move. Don't teach any plays except maybe a simple out-of-bounds play. They will not execute plays at this age anyway. Let them just "play".

I have a "first shot mentality" with kids this age... in other words, the player with the first open shot within his/her shooting range, should take the shot. This has several advantages. If they do too much passing at this age, they will eventually throw the ball away or commit a turnover, and you don't get a shot. So shoot early, and crash the offensive boards for second and third chances. It's a little like ice hockey at this age... the team with the most "shots on goal" usually wins. "First shot mentality" also takes the pressure off the kids (some kids are afraid to shoot, afraid to miss). If you teach the kids that you expect them to shoot when they are open, and that you don't expect them to make all their shots (even Michael Jordan only makes half of 'em) they will play more relaxed and better. Let them know that you don't expect them to make every shot... but that you do expect them to shoot when they are open, and everybody rebounds (maybe one guard back). Teach them that part of being a good "team" player is taking good shots.

So nothing fancy on offense... just a simple set, spacing, cutting, an early shot and crash the boards for more shots. If they are quick, fast break for easy lay-ups too.

Team Defense. I believe all young kids should first learn to play man-to-man defense before learning zones. With the really young kids, just teach on-ball defense. With 6th graders, start teaching "on-ball", "deny" and "help side" concepts (read "Basic Defense"). Now having said this, you could probably win most of your games by using a 2-1-2 (or 2-3) zone defense because at this age most baskets will be made inside the paint. If you pack the paint with your defense, you will shut them down... there is little outside scoring at this age. Our town's recreational league does not permit zone defenses at the younger ages. Double-teaming is not allowed, except in the paint. The kids will become better defensive players if they learn to move their feet and learn to play good man defense. Even playing man-to-man you can clog the paint. Just tell the kids that the paint is the "blood and guts" area that they must defend... that's where most scores will occur. So whenever there is an offensive player in the paint, a warning bell should ring in their heads that this player is a threat to score if he/she gets the ball... so deny this pass. When an offensive player dribble penetrates, other defenders should collapse on him/her and "help". Also, when a player dribbles around the right corner (they always do), don't let him/her penetrate along the baseline... stop it there and trap.

Full-court press. First, full court pressing probably should not be permitted with younger kids. But if you are permitted to full court press, use former Oregon State legend Ralph Miller's "pressure defense". I have used this with middle school kids and it works great, and is very easy to understand and teach. You will get steals and turnovers in the backcourt that you can quickly convert into easy lay-ups. It is simply a full-court man-to-man defense, so it flows easily into your half-court man-to-man defense. Simply, you pressure the ball handler, and the other players try to deny a pass to their man. Oftentimes the young inexperienced guards will throw the ball away, or make some other turnover, but just applying a little gentle pressure. Don't let them dribble the ball uncontested up the floor... apply a little harassment. Don't teach a lot of trapping and gambling... just everyone plays good man-to-man pressure. Now, this is important... if they see the ball advancing quickly up the court (a good dribbler, or a good pass), then everybody sprints back as fast as they can to the paint (the old "blood and guts" area) and tries to stop them from getting the lay-up. Then, after stopping the lay-up, everyone can fan out and pick up his/her man. So when you are beat on the press, you must sprint back. Tell them that if they don't sprint back, you will assume that they are tired and will sit them down for a rest! By playing full-court defense, they will tire easier and actually want rest, and this is good for getting all your players in the game.

Substituting. Try to figure out who your best players are. When you substitute, always have two good players out there... someone who can dribble and get the ball down the floor, and someone who can rebound and play tough defense "in the paint". I often have my assistant make most of the substitutions. You are too busy trying to "coach" the game to keep track of everyone's playing time... your assistant can be a big help here. Discuss with your assistant before the game who your starters will be, and your general substitution pattern (who plays what positions, etc), and then let him do it... you can always over-ride him in a given game situation. With young players, let everyone on the team have a chance to start at least one game during the season. I tell the kids, "its not who starts... it's who can finish the game". My players don't seem to care who starts because they know that they are all going to get to play. Believe it or not, I have even had some say, "Coach, let Jessica start this game, because I started the last one"... kids can be so neat!

Running a youth clinic

You and some other coaches/parents are organizing a general instructional clinic(s) for elementary aged children... no actual set teams. What drills/skills are you going to teach? How can we make it fun?

Again, with youngsters, do about 90 minutes. You can have both girls and boys doing this clinic. In the clinic setting, you should teach individual player skills... save team concepts, offensive sets, plays, zones, etc for their team coaches. You need to teach them correct fundamentals and still make it fun for them.

Spend about 10-15 minutes on stationary ball handling and dribbling drills. Get them all in one big circle, spread out, with the instructor in the center of the circle. Each player has a ball. The instructor goes through the ball-handling drills and dribbling drills and the players follow his example, doing the same drill the instructor is doing. Since I am getting older and am not as

skilled as I was years ago, I have one of our excellent high school players do the ball-handling and dribbling demonstrations... they are heroes to the kids! Have a couple coaches walk around the circle helping kids who are having difficulty.

Then, spend five minutes on sideline dribbling drills.

A quick trip to the drinking fountain... then 5 minutes of full-court dribbling drills.

Play a couple quick games of dribble tag.

Do 5-10 minutes of two-man passing drills... the chest pass, bounce pass and overhead pass. Demonstrate correct technique... step into the pass, hands on both sides of the ball, snap the pass finishing with the thumbs pointing down.

Work on lay-ups, demonstrating correct footwork. Split them into two groups (equal talent) with a group on each basket. Each group makes two lines (shooters and rebounders) along the sidelines. Start with right-handed lay-ups. When you say "go" each group starts doing lay-ups, with the shooters going to the end of the rebounding line and the rebounders going to the end of the shooting line. Every time a lay-up is made, that group yells the count (the number they have made). First team to 10 wins... the losers have to do five push-ups and the winners get to count for them. You can have similar competitions shooting short shots in the paint area.

Here's a variation the kids love... they are all on the same team. Have a shooting line starting in the center of the free throw line area, and a rebounding line near the basket. The rebounder will pass it to the first person in the shooting line, who steps in to about the hash marks (depends on the age) and shoots. The kids yell out their number of baskets each time one is made. You give them a time limit and a goal of how many shots they must make in that time period (adjust this based on their skill level and so every player gets to shoot at least twice). If you have a big group, you may want to run this on each end of the floor. Make it challenging for them. If they fail to make the goal in the allotted time, they all have to do five push-ups. Now here's the part they love... if they succeed in "beating the clock", then the coaches all have to do five push-ups! They love counting for you when you are doing your push-ups.

Use your imagination... you can create other little games for them.

Spend the last 15-20 minutes scrimmaging... man-to-man defense, no full-court pressing. Divide the talent equally and don't have the same kids on the same team each week... mix them up. When you have both girls and boys, I have found that it is best to split them up and have the girls scrimmage on one end (use the side baskets) and the boys on the other. When playing together, some boys will never pass to the girls and the girls get upset and frustrated. So if you have enough players, let the girls have their own game.

At the end of practice, get them all in the huddle and tell them how well they are doing, and advise them to do dribbling and ball-handling every day at home for ten minutes. Then everybody puts their hands together and yells your school mascot name-- like "Raiders!!!"

Planning Practices

I have been asked by coaches to show a sample practice plan, so there's one included below. Now this is just an example. I will vary the drills and skills, and the team skills from practice to practice. Certain skills should be practiced every practice, such as the ball-handling and dribbling drills, and shooting drills. Depending on your schedule, the amount of practice time you have and what your specific team needs are, you vary your drills. A rough rule of thumb for high school teams is to spend about half the time on individual fundamentals and half the time on team skills. If you are working with younger kids, you might slant this more toward fundamental skills.

You must plan each practice. John Wooden has said he and his assistants often would spend more time planning a practice than the actual practice itself lasted. Keep a loose-leaf notebook of each of your practices that you can refer back to. After each drill or after practice, you can scribble additional notes on your practice plan from that day. Things that you have learned, or things that you feel need special emphasis. Don't just come to the gym each day without a plan and think you can just "wing it". You have to plan for success and plan your practices just like a teacher creates a lesson plan for his/her English or math class. Your practice should be like a classroom and you are the teacher.

Several additional notes:

Stretching is important at the start of practice in order to avoid injuries. I always disliked using my precious "gym time" on stretching exercises. So I have asked my players to come 10-15 minutes early and do their stretching on the sidelines, so we are ready to go once practice starts. This might not be practical, and you may need to do 10 minutes of stretching at the beginning. While the team is stretching, you can discuss your plans for the day, or explain what things need to be worked on, use the time to praise good things that have happened, reflect on your "quote of the day" (see below), etc.

Move quickly from one drill to another and don't spend half of your practice time on one drill. The kids will get bored and won't learn much after the first 5-10 minutes into the drill. If they mess up, they will get another chance to run that drill tomorrow.

Budget your time for each drill. If you are introducing a new drill, play, offense, defense, etc, you will have to allow more time the first time. If you are reviewing something, like a set of plays or your out-of-bounds plays (that they should already know), move quickly through these... you are re-enforcing their memory (a brief repetitive exercise that can be done each day). It is probably best when introducing a new drill to put it at the start of practice when player interest and concentration are highest.

Follow an up tempo exhausting drill with 5 minutes of something less aerobic. Make them work hard, but don't be unreasonable.

Do your free-throw shooting after an aerobic, running drill when the players are tired, in order to simulate the leg and body fatigue that occurs in the real game setting.

Have every player do dribbling and ball-handling drills. I have been asked, "Why have my post players waste their time doing guard-type dribbling drills?" Doing these drills will make your post players better athletes in general, will help their overall coordination, and will improve their "hands". Also, how do you know a certain player will be a post player all his/her life (especially younger players).

If you have a good assistant, you can plan some time for individual skills with perimeter players on one end of the floor, and your post players on the other end.

Do not show favoritism to certain players in practice. Make them all work equally hard. Try to instill in your star players that they must lead by example, and be willing to work harder than anyone else on the team to be a great player. Don't ignore your "role players" (a better term than "subs", or "bench players")... make them feel they are contributing and encourage them.

Early in the season, I would run a lot of conditioning drills. I believe your players and team will improve much more by doing conditioning drills than a lot of push-ups and running without the ball. If you are going to make your players run, make them do it with a ball... like full-court speed dribbling, using the right hand one direction and the left hand coming back. Rather than running a "gut buster", or a "suicide" (which is a terrible name), do a fast-paced aerobic drill like speed dribbling. The kids will get just as tired, will hate it just as much, but their dribbling and conditioning will both improve.

Getting into tournament play, or a crucial game, you might spend most of your time on team skills preparing for the big game, working on any special situations necessary to play the upcoming opponent. For example, you might want to refine your press break, or your full-court press, or how you will defend a certain star player, or how you will attack their zone defense, etc

"Open" or "closed" practices... whether to allow parents, spectators in the gym during practice is up to you and your philosophy. But make sure you have rules established from the start of the season. If you allow parents in the gym, make sure they understand that it is a classroom and they must keep quiet and not "coach" the kids from the stands. In the event that this becomes a problem, you reserve the right to close your practices at any time.

Pre-game Preparation

I am referring to the immediate pre-game time... not the week of practice before the game. This is an important time for the players and coaches to get comfortable with the situation at hand, and focus on the job to be done. Every coach has his/her own way to get his team ready. Here is what we do with our team.

Allow enough time to arrive at the gym. Rushing around at the last minute creates a disorganized, frantic mood entering the game. You want players and coaches to be relaxed, calm and "in control" starting the game. Allow at least 30 - 45 minutes before the game (players dressed). Players need time to stretch, perform warm-up drills, practice free shooting and free throws. You need time for a quick team meeting before the game. You may want time to meet the opposing coach, refs.

Here are **some things to do before the game**. Have this organized in advance so there is no last minute confusion. You could designate some of this to your assistant, or manager.

1. If it is an AAU competition, have all your player's ID cards and birth certificates ready ahead of time in an envelope.
2. Have your official score-book roster entered in advance. We keep photocopies of our roster in a folder to hand to the scorer's table. Or you can have an assistant or statistician fill out the roster.
3. If you use a clipboard in time-outs, have it ready, with pen and cloth to wipe it. Don't waste half of your first time-out looking for the clipboard or pen!
4. Make sure your medical kit is available.
5. Recruit statisticians, or assign who's keeping which stats, and have the stats forms ready.
6. Know in advance or any special rules... such as running clock, number of time-outs, etc.
7. If you are in a strange gym, walk your players around the floor, even before they are dressed. Show them where the out-of-bounds lines are, the 10 second line, etc. Sometimes these lines are not obvious if the gym is used for volleyball and other sports, where multiple lines are painted on the floor. Show them where the bench and scorer's table will be for checking in the game. In one of our events this year, the scorer's table was at the far end of the gym... not between the two squads. Show them the location of the scoreboard/clock.
8. Review with your assistant coach the starting lineup, substitution patterns, and any special strategies for this game.

Players on the floor

As soon as the players get out on the floor, we have them start stretching and doing warm-ups. We like the 3-line lay-up drill as a warm-up because it not only gets the players moving and shooting lay-ups, but also because this is an excellent passing drill. We stress that the kids keep good spacing, zip their passes, and convert the lay-ups. We do this from the right and left sides. Then we have players free-shoot, taking shots they are most likely to get in the game. Finally, team free throws, everyone around the lane.

Team meeting, huddle

1. This meeting is used to focus the players on the job at hand, and review what our game plan is, and what things make us successful. I don't think you gain anything by trying to point out the importance of this game... you are likely to make them more nervous. They already know the significance of the game. Instead of trying to get them "fired-up", you need to calmly reassure them that everything will be OK, and that we are here to have fun... and that we will focus on doing the good things that have made us successful in the past.

2. My assistant calls out the starting line-up and positions. We don't make a big deal out of who is starting. My kids all take turns starting games, as I think this creates better team chemistry (although I certainly will have three of my best out there). Often, the first few minutes of the game is a "feeling out" time anyway, when teams are not yet in the groove. I like to bring in a couple of good players off the bench 3 or 4 minutes into the game. My players know that "it's not who starts, but who can finish the game". I have my assistant do most of the substituting (following our pre-designed substitution pattern), so I can concentrate on the game. I will vary the substitution pattern depending on the game situation, foul situation, and crucial times in the game.

3. Go over the team defense, and defensive assignments, how we are going to play certain players, and help each other, etc. Are we going full court press, or not. We want three attitudes on defense: contest every shot, protect (deny) the paint area, and "one-shot only" mentality. The opponent only gets one contested shot, and they're OUT! ... they get no offensive rebounds, no second and third shots.

4. Go over your team offense, what set you are using, and briefly review what other sets or plays you might go to during the game. I remind my players to keep correct spacing, move without the ball, set screens, and make passes crisp... no soft, easily-intercepted, passes. I also stress the importance of offensive rebounding (except the point guard) and talk about attacking the offensive boards, to get those easy second and third shots. We discuss whether we are going to push the fast break, or slow down into a half court tempo. We remind the players to keep under control, avoid the turnovers.

5. I tell the kids that if we do these things that have made us successful in the past, we will be OK. To help counteract tenseness and pressure, I often say something like "Let's go out and have some fun."

6. Then hands together in the huddle, we yell "Play Hard!" and are ready to go (I hope).

Coaching ... game strategy

First of all, realize that most games are won and lost by your players executing the fundamentals and plays that you have taught them in practice. But courtside coaching can greatly influence the outcome of a game, especially a close game. If you get blown out by 30 points, let's face it... the other team was probably a lot better than you.

Game plan

First, prepare for the game through scouting, or reviewing game films of your upcoming opponent. Find out who their best offensive players are, what their style of play is, what they like to do, and what their weaknesses are. Then you can develop a game plan that hopefully will favor your strengths and attack their weaknesses, and deny their strengths. Discuss in your practices and in your pre-game meeting your strategy for playing this team. Discuss the defensive assignments so each player knows his role exactly, and who he will be responsible for guarding.

If you have never played this team before and have no prior information (often the case with AAU teams), try to learn early who their best players are and what style of game, what tempo, they like. Once you know this, you can make quick adjustments in a time-out, or at the end of the first quarter.

Game Tempo

Try to set the game tempo to the style that best suits your team. If you are a running, pressing team, and your opponent is a slow-down team, push the ball up the floor on offense, press on defense, and create havoc! If you are better in a half-court slower paced game (less team quickness and only average ball handlers), then bring the ball up the court more deliberately, and get back on defense to prevent the fast break. If your opponent is a great fast-breaking team, prepare your team to stop the break by having one, or maybe even two, guards back, and have your big guys jam the rebounder with hands up so he can't get off the quick outlet pass.

Type of defense

What does your team do best? -- Man-to-man, or zone? Are they quick, good defenders (go man-to-man), or do you have a couple slow defenders (maybe go zone)? Most teams may try both at various times of the game. Only you can decide what is best for your team. Here are a few things that I look at. If the opponent has good outside shooters, use man-to-man to keep pressure on their shooters.

If their strength is inside post play, you can play man-to-man and double team the post with your weak side guard. In this situation, whenever the ball goes into the low post, have your low post defender deny him the drop step to the baseline, and have your weak side guard slide down quickly to prevent the move to the lane. Or you can go into a 2-1-2, or 2-3 zone to "pack the paint" with your defense. This leaves the outside more vulnerable. During the course of a game, if I realize that the opponent is getting most of their baskets inside, I may switch to a 2-1-2 zone to jam the paint and see if they can shoot from outside. If they can't hit the outside shot consistently, this may be the best way to stop them.

If they are playing with a point guard and two wing players ("3-out, 2-in"), we may try a 1-2-2 trapping zone.

Some coaches play only man-to-man and refuse to use zones. Others use only zones. As a coach, I believe I should use every possible tool or trick that I can to win a game. I personally favor man-to-man, but will not hesitate to go zone if I feel it will give us an advantage, or a better chance of winning. One exception, teach kids in the lower levels to play good man-to-man, before getting into zones. So in practice, we will work on man-to-man defense, but also have the 2-1-2 and 1-2-2 in our arsenal, and periodically review our zone coverage patterns.

So when do you switch from man-to-man to zone, or vice versa? There are different ways of doing this. Some coaches will change defenses frequently, in order to confuse the enemy... as long as his own team doesn't get confused too! I personally like riding success until the opponent shows me that they can beat it. If we are doing a great job with our current defense, I will stay with it until it begins to fail.

You might also change from man-to-man to a zone if one or two of your better players are in foul trouble, and you are trying to protect them from additional foul exposure.

When to press, or stop pressing

Again, the decision to press depends on whether your team has quickness, stamina, and bench support, and whether the faster pace favors your team. Some teams will press the entire game because it favors their quickness, and they have a deep bench. Some will press at the start of the game to get off to a quick start. Some will press the last few minutes before the end of a period, realizing they can rest at the break. Some teams will press after each made basket. Some teams only press when they are behind late in the game, but it's usually too late by then.

My personal plan often is to start the game pressing. Once the opponent starts breaking down the press, or gets a couple lay-ups, I'll drop it. I'll put it back on later as a "surprise" tactic, or if I sense a critical time in the game where a couple quick steals and lay-ups could make a big difference. If I have a 10 point lead with a just couple minutes left in the game, I would drop the press, slow the game down, get back on defense and make the opponent work hard in the half-court for their shots, working the clock down.

Using time-outs

Coaches should use their time-outs wisely. In close games, if possible, I try to save two or three time-outs for the last few minutes of the game, when you may need to stop the clock, set up a play, discuss your team's strategy, etc. Sometimes it doesn't work this way. You get behind early, and must use your time-outs to hopefully break the opponent's momentum, and reset your own strategy. If you are trying to slow the game down, you might also use some time-outs early. If you are getting beat early, there is no point in saving your time-outs for the end of the game, when you are down 20! Sometimes I will look over at the opposing coach and notice that he is going to call time-out, and this may save one for me. Sometimes I see a coach call a time-out 30 seconds before the end of a quarter and wonder to myself, "Why?" Why waste a time-out then, when you can use the time at the end of the period as your time-out? Remember, that at the end of each quarter, you have a free time-out.

Keep it simple in your time-out huddle. The kids will often only remember one thing you tell them in a time-out... usually the last thing. So use your time-out to make one important team point... don't waste a time-out to instruct just one player... you can substitute for him and explain things to him on the bench quickly, and then send him back in. An example of an important "team" pointer might be stressing getting back quickly on defense and keeping one or two guards back if the opponent is fast breaking. Another example might be to change your defense, or your offensive plan, and another might be to simply prod the kids into increasing their defensive and rebounding intensity and overall hustle. But keep it simple.

Substitutions

If you are coaching youth basketball, where everyone is supposed to get to play, or if you have a team with a deep bench and can do a lot of substituting, then I would advise relying on your assistant coach to help with the substituting. If you only play six or seven players, you can handle it. In the former situation, I have found that it's really hard to keep track of everyone's playing time, and still try to coach the game, set the strategy, etc. Before the game, I will discuss with my assistant who the starters will be for that game. We will then also talk about which substitutions to bring in for certain players and at what intervals... that is, our "substitution pattern". Once the game starts, I have my assistant make most of the substitutions based on that pattern. He can see when certain players are getting tired and need a break. If we have a "hot" player on offense, we will ride that horse for awhile and not substitute until things "cool off". I will over-ride the assistant at any time, if I see a certain situation where I feel we need to have a certain player or two on the floor at that time.

I also like to be aware of our players' fouls. I have a formula that I try to teach my players in regard to staying out of foul trouble: "your number of fouls should be less than the number of the quarter you are playing in." So you never get your 2nd foul in the first quarter, or your 3rd foul in the second quarter, or your 4th foul in the 3rd quarter. If any of these situations occurs with any of my key players, I may sit him down for awhile. If we are down 10, I may need to keep him in there, and have to take my chances with the fouls, and maybe try to protect him, using a zone on defense. On the other hand, I have seen coaches essentially foul-out their own players with four fouls, sitting them down for a quarter or more because of four fouls... essentially the coach has fouled his own player out with only four fouls, and taken him physically and mentally out of the game. You might be better off letting him play carefully, than not at all!

Another point on substitutions... if you have eight or nine fairly good players, it will probably be to your advantage over the course of the season to play all these kids, with lots of substituting. If you are willing to perhaps accept a couple losses early in the season, you may be a much stronger team late in the season if you develop that eight or nine-man rotation into a good team, with lots of bench support. This also creates more team harmony and team spirit.

Yelling at the players

Sometimes I see coaches screaming at kids. I don't think this helps the player, and is usually born out of frustration on the coach's part. It doesn't mean the coach is a mean person, and often the coach feels bad about it after the game. Personally, I think coaches should be vocal in encouraging their players, and yelling plays, strategy, etc. I think it is counter-productive to yell negative stuff at kids in front of their parents, friends and the fans. I think it is OK to get on them

in practice, in the privacy of your gym. But games are for the players and should be fun for them, and they shouldn't have to dread the coach yelling at them.

End of quarter strategy

If you have the lead, and there is only 20 seconds left in the quarter, you may want to hold the ball for the last shot, so that you may increase your lead, and at worse, maintain your present lead without allowing the opponent a last second chance. In high school or under, I would want the shot to go up with about 5 or 6 seconds left. This allows time for an offensive rebound and a second shot, but not much time for the opponent to get the ball down the floor off the rebound. Also, it takes some of the pressure off the shooter with 6 seconds left, as he knows there is a chance for a rebound and put back. If he waits until the buzzer, there is more pressure on him to make the shot.

Late game strategy

If you are ahead...

With just a 6 to 12 point lead with only a couple minutes left in the game, I try to "shorten" the game by holding for a good shot, preferably a lay-up, and keep the clock running. As the late Al McGuire used to say, "you don't need any more points... the clock is now your enemy!" This may be a good time for a time-out and explain to the kids, "nothing but lay-ups". Even better, make the call from the bench so that the clock doesn't stop for a time-out. Chances are, the opposing coach will use one of his time-outs anyway to instruct his players to foul and press... so you can probably save your time-out.

In "running the clock", I would always take the lay-up because it is a higher percentage thing than just trying to hold the ball, and you can put the nail in the coffin with one last score. You must still work your offense, but looking only for the lay-up. If you try to just "stall" without looking for the lay-up, the chances are greater that you may turn the ball over, or that you will get fouled, and a lay-up is easier than two pressure packed free throws. If you have a two possession lead (4 points) with less than 30 seconds, hold the ball.

On defense, get back and play good half court defense. Avoid stupid fouls that stop the clock and allow the opponent to score when the clock is actually stopped (free throws). Contest (but don't foul) the three-pointer, and prevent the fast break and easy lay-up.

If you are behind...

Have your players push the ball up the court on offense, and full court press on defense. Use your time-outs to stop the clock and remind your players that the key to winning is tough defense and rebounding... you must prevent the opponent from scoring to allow your offense a chance to catch up. Think in terms of the number of possessions you are down. If you score, you might call a time-out immediately before they can in-bounds the ball. This not only stops the clock, but also allows you to get your full-court press set, where you can try to deny and steal the ball.

If you are inside a minute and are down two or three possessions, try to get the quick steal, but if you don't get it, then immediately foul to stop the clock. Too often, teams will let 20 seconds run off the clock before someone finally fouls, wasting too much precious time. Remember that a lot

of things can happen in just 20 seconds. After being down by two, our high school varsity scored 4 points in just 7 seconds to win it's regional final game this year!

If you are down 4 points, you don't have to go to the three-pointer, since it's two possessions anyway. Take it to the hoop and get to the free-throw line and stop the clock. Then after scoring, or making the two free throws, put maximum, deny pressure on the in-bounds pass, going for the steal, or quick foul. Even if you are down 3 with only 20 seconds to go, it might be a higher percentage move to go for the quick two-pointer and then pressure the inbounds pass than putting the whole game on the shoulders of your three-pointer shooter, who probably has tired legs. If you take the "3" and miss, and the opponent gets the rebound, you are usually history, because you will have to foul, and they only have to convert one free throw to "ice" the game.

If the game is tied and you have the ball...

Hold for the last shot and try to get that shot with 4 or 5 seconds left, so you have time for an offensive rebound and a second shot. But warn your players to be careful not to get the "over-the-back" foul on the rebound. Again, it takes some of the pressure off the shooter if he doesn't wait until the buzzer. Try to get the ball inside for the high percentage shot... you may either get the shot, or get fouled and win it on the free-throw line. If you have an outstanding outside shooter, you can go "inside-out", passing the ball into the low-post, sucking the defense inside, and then kicking the pass out to your perimeter hotshot for the game-winner. If you need to, call a time-out to instruct your players on this strategy... but realize that when you call time-out, you risk having your in-bounds pass stolen. Even better... work on this game situation in practice and be able to call it from the bench without using a time-out (unless you need to stop the clock).

If the game is tied and you are on defense...

Make sure your players all know their defensive assignments. Be sure to get "help side" defense on their star players. Contest the shot with hands up, but do not foul, unless it looks like an easy lay-up... then you must make them win it on the free-throw line, which is not always easy late in the game with the pressure on and fatigue a factor. Some coaches will have their defense try to "take the charge" on dribble-penetration. My experience is that unless it is a really obvious charge, you won't get the call from the ref when the game is on the line.

If you get the quick steal in transition, attack the basket immediately without calling a time-out to set up a play. Chances are, in transition, you will get a good shot, or get fouled. If you get the defensive rebound with 5-6 seconds left, get a quick time out to stop the clock and set up your last play.

Another "gutsy" strategy is: assuming they have a poor free-throw shooter; you may immediately foul him, if it is a "one and one" situation. If he misses the first free throw, you can gain possession and now you have the advantage. I would not attempt this if the opponent is in the double bonus, or if there is less than 10 seconds left... you may not have time to score after the free throws, should he make them.

There is a lot of basketball strategy that can be used in the final two minutes! I'm sure I have omitted some things and other coaches could add even more pointers. Watch TV and see the

great college coaches work the clock late in the game. You can learn a lot from the TV commentators as well.