

Coaching Tip – Helping Athletes Transition to the Next Level Within the Sport of Basketball

Basketball is a game played with two teams of five players each. The game does not have to be complicated. A team is either attacking its opponent's basket with the goal of scoring, or it is defending its basket with the goals of keeping the opponent from scoring and gaining possession of the ball. However, not every athlete is ready or has the necessary skills to play the game as they begin the sport. Such skills include dribbling, passing, shooting, rebounding, defense, and working with teammates. The objective of this tip is to assist the coach in starting where the athlete is and progressing at the athlete's rate of learning. The challenge for the coach is to provide both skills and game-like strategies in a series of progressions at every level of ability.

Individual Skills to 3-on-3 Half-Court Competition

An athlete may have very low functioning ability such as having difficulty grasping and catching the ball, tracking a moving ball, and even getting the ball to the basket. However, the coach should design practice so that each athlete works on each skill separately and builds upon it to perform the skill in competition.

The Individual Skills Contest involves three events: ten-meter dribble, target pass, and spot shot. The coach organizes each practice in such a way that varying degrees of pressure are added to performing the skill. The skill then gets the necessary repetition and reinforcement under more game-like conditions.

- The first degree of pressure is performing the skill itself.
- The second degree of pressure is performing the skill a set number of times.
- The third degree of pressure is performing as many of the skill as possible in a set amount of time, like 30 seconds.
- The fourth degree of pressure is performing the skill and reacting to a passive opponent.
- The fifth degree of pressure is performing the skill with a teammate against two and then three opponents, which is now playing basketball, the game.

Even though athletes may be doing Individual Skills, a coach still needs to provide opportunities for game-like play. A practice for Individual Skills athletes would include the following: warm-up and stretching activities, stations (one each of the ISC events), then a low-organized game such as two-on-two keep-away followed by cool down and rewarding all athletes' efforts. The game of keep-away serves as a link to the game of basketball and a means of using skills while playing with teammates and against opponents.

Keep-away can be played on the half court (with the court markings being the boundaries) and in different ways with graduated increases in pressure.

- At the first level, a team scores one point after it makes 5 successful passes among teammates. (Athletes are recognizing teammates and opponents and moving to get the ball.)
- At the next level, a team scores one point after it makes 5 successful passes and moves the ball from the half court to under the basket. One team is working on offense and moving the ball toward the desired goal; the other team is working on defense or trying to steal the ball. Once the defensive team steals the ball, it passes the ball to the coach who is at a designated spot above the free throw line. (Athletes are learning the game, but in a structured way with specific goals and actions required. This is actually the formation of the 3-on-3 half-court game. Over repetition and time, the coach is enabling athlete's to work toward team play.)
- The next level is actually playing 3-on-3 half-court when the coach sees the athletes performing the key concepts of recognizing teammates and opponents, moving the ball toward a desired goal, and moving themselves in relation to the ball. Movement is the key.

The biggest challenges of 3-on-3 basketball is changing from offense to defense and taking the ball back across the free throw line. The keep-away game is played in graduated progressions to approximate what the athletes will do in 3-on-3. When the athletes are able to make these adjustments, they are ready to play 3-on-3.

3-on-3 Half-Court to 5-on-5 Full-Court Team Play

Some athletes will not be able to advance to full-court team play because of their physical capacity to run up and down the court. Other athletes will be able to progress from individual skills competition directly to full-court team play. There are a variety of reasons why this can occur. It is actually much easier to begin recognizing offense at one end of the court and defense at the other end of the court, rather than take the ball back behind the free throw line before attacking the basket. Players need to recognize when their team has the ball (moving into offense at their shooting end) and when it does not (running into defense at their protecting end). However in this case, they are running to different ends of the court (a much easier task), as opposed to making adjustments at the same end of the court.

One of the key elements for successful offense and defense is **structure**. The lower the ability of the athlete and team, the more structure is needed. Structure provides stability, familiarity, and consistency. Create an offense and place athletes in positions that enable them to use their skills. For example on offense, the lowest ability athlete should set up in the corner to the left side of the basket (as one faces the basket). For defense, the athlete runs down the same side of the court and finds his/her spot where the free throw lane intersects with the lane line. Staying on one side of the court gives the athlete a frame of reference (the side line) and assurance of knowing where he/she should be from one perspective. In addition, there is less physical contact away from the basket and more help from teammates. *(Refer to the Special Olympics Basketball Sports Skills Program Guide on pages III-32 and 33 for more detailed information on creating a simple offense and providing the progressions for athletes to learn it.)*

Structure on offense and defense can be taught so that an athlete only learns and performs one or two skills at each end of the court. Athletes need to learn one position on offense and one position on defense. The higher ability athlete can take on more responsibility, but only after one position is learned and repeated in practice and in competition. It is critical to provide scrimmage time in every practice so that offense, defense, and team play are repeated and reinforced. Even in the beginning of the season (when learning is still in process), it is critical to play. Lower ability athletes may need physical prompting and even physical assistance. A coach can “shadow” the athlete as he/she runs up and down the court and assist him/her to be in the right place and move according to the ball. But it is also critical to schedule frequent competitions for athletes to test and hone their skills in true game play with officials, different opponents, the scoreboard and clock, spectators, etc.

The key to an athlete transitioning to the next level is continually assessing where the athlete is and providing the necessary skills and progressions of the next level. By providing low-organized game-like activities of the next level, the coach not only is preparing the athlete, but also is enabling the athlete to have fun and take part in team play. The athlete’s abilities dictate the level, and some athletes may never gain the concepts necessary to play the game. However, the coach provides the necessary opportunities to support and challenge the athlete’s efforts to progress to as high a level as the athlete can achieve.