

The Coaching Toolbox

Winning Way Series

37 Ideas to Improve Your Team TODAY!

Our best ideas to improve teams immediately



Brian Williams

37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

Thank you for joining the Coaching Toolbox community! This e-book is a thank you for joining that group by subscribing to our daily e-mail. The ideas are taken from the three ebooks in our “130 Great Ideas” ebook series and our two HoopClinics Screencasts. There is a link for more information at the end of each section.

The 39 ideas are divided into the following sections:

8 Ideas to Improve Mental Toughness

8 Little Ideas that Make a Huge Difference

8 Ideas to improve your practices

8 Ideas to improve your defense

5 Ideas to help your overall Program Development

These are ideas that you can implement into your program immediately to begin making a difference in the performance of your team.

Mental Toughness (for players)

I have always felt that I have emphasized mental toughness with the teams I have coached and have worked to improve the mental toughness of each individual player. I have also been a student of mental toughness and have attempted to apply the things I have learned to my coaching career as well as in all aspects of my life. I have taught and emphasized to our players that it is the main aspect of what our program was built upon. We have referred to the building blocks of our program in this manner:

- 1) Toughness
- 2) Individual Skills and Simple Schemes
- 3) The Winamac Way (the intangibles that want our program to stand for)

With toughness being number one because I feel that everything else feeds from that. I just don't feel that you can emphasize everything in your program and be able to do everything

“Mental toughness is the ability to control thoughts and actions and maintain a focus on what is important in a calm and poised way to be able to improve individual skills and 5 player schemes, then to be able to execute them during the pressure of competition.”

--Brian Williams

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

well. I believe that you have to pick the few areas that you are going to emphasize and work to get really good in those areas. This e-book will focus on my beliefs and efforts to improve my mental toughness as well as that of our players.

“The mental is to the physical as four is to one.”

--Coach Bob Knight

To me, Mental Toughness is a simple concept: Keeping the mind focused on thoughts and emotions that improve performance and away from those that hinder performance. But, mental toughness is a very difficult one to master, apply, and maintain. There are two distinct times when mental toughness comes into play in building a basketball program. One is in training (can be individual skills workouts, out of season conditioning workouts, or team practices) and the other is in the heat of a game. It is my belief that being mentally tough in one of those areas does not necessarily guarantee mental toughness in the other.

- 1. To begin improving mental toughness--develop and expect physical toughness.**
We have a rule that "contact is not an excuse to lose the ball." You might get called for an offensive foul, traveling, tied up for a held ball, being over and back, or 5 seconds, but we do not want any fumble that leads to a layup or to us chasing a player from behind.

Vince Lombardi said that “fatigue makes cowards of us all.” Whether you achieve your conditioning with a ball (which I prefer), without a ball, during your practice, or by running lines at the end of practice, your players need to be in tough physical shape to achieve the desired level of mental toughness.
- 2. Do not allow displays of poor body language.** A person's outer actions are almost always a reflection of their inner thoughts. To control one's body language, he must control his inner thoughts. Controlling those inner thoughts is at the heart of mental toughness. Controlling body language also helps keep negative emotions that a player is feeling from spreading to the remainder of the team.
- 3. Never accept excuses.** When I hear a player give an excuse, that tells me that whatever they are making an excuse about is either not that important to them, or that they are unsure of their own ability to perform well. If a person is focused on the desired outcome and is not focused on reasons why the goal cannot be accomplished or what obstacles are in the way, it is amazing how resourceful they can be. This idea is an extension of the fact that all good leaders set high standards for their groups. Accepting excuses is not in line with high standards.

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

4. **Stay in the present moment.** The most important play in basketball is the one that is happening right now. Human beings tend to not be in the present. We're either worrying about the past or worrying about the future. Those projections into the future are almost always negative. For example a player standing at the free throw line is thinking "what will happen if I miss the shot?" All these projections into the future are 90% negative in 90% untrue, but it really affects performance. Emphasize two players to keep their minds in the present because that's where the action is and it is the only place where they can make a difference.
- "Rule your mind or it will rule you."
--Horace**
5. **Develop and stick to performance rituals before and during the game.** Rituals keep players minds from wandering. Things like having the players sit on the bench in the same spot during timeouts and quarter breaks, the same warm up, come to the bench at the same time, same locker room routine.
 6. **Teach players to focus their thinking on their performance, not outcomes.** A player's total focus should be on executing and not on the result of an individual play or possession whether it is practice or a game. In games, worrying about who the opponent is, the opponent's record, skills, or size is counterproductive in every way.
 7. **Over-prepare to develop confidence.** Practice the physical skills until they are automatic and your players can perform them without thinking under stressful competition. The more time a coach spends in practice rehearsing over and over the situations that players will face in a game and creating as much competition as possible in practice, the more the players will have the mentality that they have been through it before when those situations arise in games. Some examples are, protecting a lead at the end of a game, taking the last shot of a quarter, running a last second play needing a score to keep from losing, being behind by 10 points with two minutes to go in a game, etc... Aside from previous success in games, nothing will give your players more confidence than the detailed preparation that you do in practice.
 8. **Players need to practice concentrating.** If you are going to expect them to constantly do the things that you think are important, you will need to teach them to pay attention to detail in the practice setting. Give the players drills that require extra concentration and attention to detail. One way of doing this is to begin practice by saying, "Today at practice anytime the whistle blows we want every player to immediately get into perfect shooting stance." This helps to emphasize a basic

37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

fundamental, but also helps us to practice concentrating and paying attention to detail. Of course you could have the players do anything you want when the whistle blows. By selecting something that you believe is important, you are once again emphasizing how important that concept is. We are constantly setting the tone that little things make a difference.

Ideas 1-8 in this e-book are taken from the e-book,

“130 Great Ideas to Make Your Basketball Team More Mentally Tough”

For more information about the Mental Toughness e-book, click the following link, or paste it into your browser:

www.coachingtoolbox.net/ebooks/mental-toughness/mental-toughness-ebook.html

Little Ideas that Make a Huge Difference

The cliché we all hear at clinics is that “if you get one thing from the presentation it is worth it.” My hope is that you get many ideas that you find useful from this list! The important part is not the ideas themselves. It is the follow through that counts. It’s not what you know and teach, it’s what you emphasize and accept over and over, day in and day out that will make the difference for your team.

9. **Emphasize execution, not baskets.** It is important to have a standard for offensive and defensive execution and effort, not just baskets on offense or stops on defense. Our reason being that if you are scrimmaging against your second unit or JV, you can score or stop them without the execution that you will need on game night against another team's first unit. The standard in practice must be, and your players need to be sold on why that is important, what it takes to win on game night, not what it takes to defeat your second team.

“All great things are only a number of small things that have carefully been collected together.”

--Unknown

10. **Make out of season competitive workouts.** Each year, we develop specific and measurable performance goals that the players know for our individual skill and sports performance development drills. These are measurable goals for our drills and

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

use them in and out of season. The five performance levels we have are 1) Sectional Champion 2) Varsity Regular (top 7 players) 3) Varsity 4) JV 5) Freshman.

As an example, we have a drill in our workout program where a player starts on the wing at the free throw line extended and drive toward the basket, then stops at about 12 feet from the basket, executes a hop back (or step back) shot. For the top level, sectional champion, we expect the player to make 8 out of 10 shots. The next highest level (varsity regular) must hit 7 out of 10. Varsity player 6 out of 10, Junior Varsity 5 out of 10, and Freshman 4 out of 10.

The player determines which level he is going to work out at and we keep a season won/loss record. So if we have time for 10 individual development drills, we keep track of how many times he met or exceeded his level goal. If he met or exceeded six times and didn't make the goal 4 times, then that is his "season record." In between each drill, we shoot a one and one. If he makes both, he wins, otherwise it is a loss. So, 10 drills and 10 sets of one and one is a 20 game season.

"A competitive environment offers two possibilities. You can lose, or if you want to win, you can change."

--Unknown

At the end of this 20 game workout "season," we start the state tournament and each game is one and done. In Indiana, there are three games in the first round of the state tournament (sectional), two games in the second round (regional), one game if you advance to the third week (semi-state), and then a one game state final. Our players are familiar with how the state tournament is set up and they always enjoy seeing how far they can advance. Regardless of what level they worked out at during their 10 drill and 10 one and one season, they must enter the state tournament at the sectional champion level.

We use similar quantifiable goals in our running, weight lifting, and agilities that we do in our sports performance and conditioning workouts in the offseason.

11. **It's never enough...** Most players are willing to give a second effort and that is what your opponents will give too. What separates the great players and teams is the ability to consistently give the third and fourth efforts or as many efforts as it takes to make the play. Strive to make it a mindset in your program that second efforts are expected and reward and praise the third and fourth efforts as those are what lead to never giving up.
12. **One armed bandits are no good.** One teaching point to help players stay out of foul trouble is for players to only grab for the ball on defense when they can get it with two hands. Our experience has been that it is a more successful way to take the ball

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

or tie it up because of the increased leverage of two hands. The main advantage of always going for the ball with two hands is that it avoids the one handed reach ins for the ball when guarding a dribbler. That type of reaching more often than not results in a foul. Since you can't reach with two hands while on the move, you don't take the risk of fouling. If the ball is being held by an offensive player, officials are much less likely to call a foul when a defender goes for the ball with two hands.

13. **A better way to play 1-on-1.** 1 on 1 can be a valuable part of an individual workout. To use 1-on-1 as a tool to improve, play "Continuous 1-on-1." In continuous 1-on-1 there is no "checking up top." Once a player scores, the other player who is now on offense, takes the ball out of the net and spins it out anywhere behind the three point arc, goes out and meets the pass, squares to the basket and plays from there. Even if the shot is missed, if the defender gets the rebound, he or

"The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing."

--Stephen Covey

she spins the ball out behind the arc and plays from there. It is a good toughness and conditioning drill to finish a workout with and it forces players to go from offense to defense and defense to offense in a more game-like way.

14. **As you watch the video of your games and practices chart block out percentage** for each player, deflections, going to offensive rebound position, or anything else that is vital to winning with your system of play, but that often goes unnoticed and not rewarded. Come up with a system to give players who meet your standards a visible symbol on their locker or on a bulletin board in the locker room. For example, anyone with 90% blockouts will receive a sticker on the board on their locker. It can be anything or several things that you feel are important and since you are emphasizing it and more importantly, measuring it, that area will improve.
15. **What do you expect?** Michael Jordan always expected to get hit when he took the ball hard to the rim because he did not want to be angry when shooting his free throws. After all, the best revenge is making the free throws.
16. **Don't be a clock watcher** When you are working for the last shot of a quarter, teach your players and practice repeatedly, to not look at the clock once they start making the play or taking the shot. The time to look at the clock is with 12 to 15 seconds to go (or if there is a whistle stopping play) and then to have a feel for the clock as it counts down. What good is looking at the clock other than to slow them down and distract their focus away from what you want them to execute? If they have been through daily repetitions in practice they will have developed that clock in their head.

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

This is especially critical when rebounding a last second shot, there is no time to look, they need to rebound and score. I would rather have them put the ball in the basket, even if it is after the horn, rather than rush the shot and miss it before the horn sounds. I have never seen a basket that does not go in count (except goal tending), but I have seen officials count a basket that was probably late—especially if your level does not use replay.

For more information about the 130 Little Ideas that Make a Huge Difference e-book, click the following link, or paste it into your browser:

www.coachingtoolbox.net/ebooks/little-ideas/little-ideas-ebook.html

Practice

I believe that:

“WHAT HAPPENS IN PRACTICE IS THE LIFEBLOOD OF THE SUCCESS OF YOUR BASKETBALL PROGRAM.”

In order to benefit from this section of this e-book, a coach must believe completely in that statement. Your program is defined by the careful planning and skilled implementation of effective practice plans. Coaches who motivate and inspire their players to practice in a manner that indicates that they believe that statement to be true will have the best practices...and having great

practices leads to having the most success in games. A coach must continually advocate that consistently great practices are what it takes for a team to reach its potential. Whether it's during summer workouts, the first day of practice for the upcoming season, or the night before the state finals, the message must be the same:

**“It's not the hours you put in,
it's what you put in the hours.”**

--Unknown

“The quality of practice greatly influences the outcome of games, and of great significance is that practice is something that your team can control.”

No matter what your vision for your team is, the way to achieve it starts and ends with having great practices. Here are 8 of our 130 Great Ideas to improve your practices

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

17. **Spend 30 minutes every day in practice** in an organized, goal driven, and measureable system to improve the individual skills of your players. The best way to make the team better is to improve the abilities of the individual team members.
18. **Validate your drills.** Coach Bob Hurley uses this idea and picked it up from Coach Vance Walberg. Tell your team at the beginning of some of the competitive drills that you run that at the end they will need to “validate” it. For example, if you split your team into two groups and do a competitive shooting drill, the team that wins the drill must then make a free throw (coach chooses the player to shoot so that all players have a chance to shoot the free throw eventually) to validate their win. If the player makes the free throw, the team that lost the drill must run. If the player misses the free throw, then the team that won the drill must run. It is a good way to shoot some pressure free throws and to teach that for most of the games you win, you have to close them by making free throws.
19. **Clearly define shot selection.** In order to help players understand shot selection and create the habit of attempting quality shots, we have each player evaluate every shot in a practice scrimmage. The players simply hold up 1, 2, 3 or 4 fingers after each shot taken. A 4 is a power shot inside, 3 an uncontested jump shot, 2 is an ok or so-so shot and 1 is a terrible shot. We want our players to understand that we win more often when we take 4’s and 3’s. By making the players evaluate each shot they will be more conscious of shot selection and understand how important it is to you.
20. **Try it, you’ll like it.** I have always believed in experimenting with something new in basketball practice a couple of times a week for no more than 10 minutes of practice time. Early in the season we usually try something new every day. I am not suggesting that you experiment with revamping your philosophies and core values of your program, but am suggesting to think about experimenting with your personnel early in the season to be able to get the right players in the right situations, and as a way to add some variety to keep the players interest and attention late in the season.

“A fool is a man who has never tried an experiment in his life.”

--Erasmus Darwin

Even during the years where we have had "everyone back" I still felt that they were not the same players that they were last year. At least I hoped that they weren't because I wanted to improve on last year's record not repeat it. So, I spent some time learning where they had grown and where they still needed to get better.

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

When I pick up new drills during the off-season or improvements to our offensive and defense systems, I like to put them in early season practices to see if they do fit with our personnel. I certainly believe in constantly working to improve as a coach, but regardless of how well something works for another program, it might not work for you, so I think it is good to put something in and work on it a few times before deciding if it is for us. It is possible that I did not get the whole story of how something works if I saw it at a clinic or on a DVD.

For example, a few years ago, I saw a very successful coach who always produced great shooters say at a clinic that they did their shooting drills at the end of practice so that they could shoot when they were tired. That made a lot of sense to me. We tried it in our early practices and our players did not like it. They liked our shooting progression early in the practice and felt that it helped them to "groove" their shots for the rest of the practice. So, we tweaked it and did our shooting fundamentals early and did some game pace drills late to try and get the best of both worlds. That team ended up being the highest field goal percentage team that I have coached, so I am glad that I experimented with it, told them what and why I was giving it a test run, and then listened to their input.

"Improvement begins with I."

--Arnold Glasgow

Early in the season, I think it is important to do some experimenting with what spots you put players in against presses and traps, who inbounds the ball, who inbounds the ball for a game winning shot, who takes the shots at the end of quarters, what shots each player can

make in a scrimmage, and any other crucial personnel decisions that we need to make. Usually, I don't change my mind as to who needs to fill each role and what they can do, but there are times when I have made some decisions that I feel have made us better by putting players in different positions. Many times it is not the new role that you put someone in, but it becomes how that trickles down to filling their previous spot and what role changes would take place for the rest of our players that is the deciding factor in to change or not to change.

We have always been a motion program with a handful of set plays that we feel fit our players for that year. Early in the year we experiment with our plays to see what works for this group and what doesn't so that we can pare down the number that we will use. As the season wears on, we also tweak what we run as we see how we are being defended and if our personnel changes due to injuries or adjustments in our lineup.

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

Since basketball is a long season, I like to look for new drills that drill the same concepts as the season moves into January and February. Not major, complex changes, but something that can be explained quickly and doesn't eat up a lot of practice time. I think it helps maintain the attention of the players as they have something new to think about rather than going through the same things in the same way time after time.

I do not believe in taking major portions of the practice to experiment. Ten minutes max every day the first couple weeks of practice and then ten minutes once or twice a week after that. I don't want change for change sake, but I also want to always be looking for new ideas and new ways to do things better that will improve our program.

21. **Create special rules in practice.** One highly effective way to produce the needed challenges for your first team is by making special rules in practice that cause the "first team" to be challenged by you as their coach and the scoreboard if the second group is not physically able to provide that challenge that is needed to improve.

Make sure that the special rules challenge the first team with them. Some years your starters will need more challenges to push them than others. So each year, revisit what you are doing with your special rules and make adjustments and adaptations that fit your current team. The rules should make the scrimmages competitive so that with their aid, the second team can score more points and win the scrimmage. This serves to make your practice much more competitive which is crucial to the improvement of your team.

“A competitor finds a way to win. Competitors take bad breaks and use them to drive themselves just that much harder. Quitters take bad breaks and use them as reasons to give up. It's all a matter of pride.”

--Nancy Lopez

Make the rules fit your schemes and goals for each game. For example making a rule that every time the second team makes a pass in a scrimmage counts as a point for them is great if you are working on playing a smothering man to man defense that denies all passes, but makes no sense if you are a team that plays a zone or a packing man to man where you don't pressure the non penetrating passes. A better rule for a defense designed to keep the ball out of the middle is that each time the second team gets the ball in the paint, it is a point for them.

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Your players must understand the purpose of the rules. It must make sense to the players as to how your rules will develop practice habits that will carry over to games. Players don't have to agree with everything, but if they see a method to your madness, there is a much higher likelihood that your system will produce better results.

The rules should be simple and easy to track. They should not interfere with the flow of the scrimmage because the players and the coaches have to slow down to figure out what just happened and how that affects the score.

Run the clock and the scoreboard like a game when you scrimmage in practice. Make every special rules violation to either result in a turnover, adding points to the score of the second team, or both. I have found that it is too difficult for the manager who is operating the scoreboard and clock to take points away from a team. If you just yell, "Two points for the red team because the white team did not chin the defensive rebound," the players know why the points were lost and the manager can just add them to the score of the second team. The point differential is the same regardless of whether you add to the second team's score or subtract from the first team, so it makes sense to make it easier on your scorekeeper. It is also good to have another manager keep a possession chart and record what violation resulted in the points so that you can analyze what rules you are violating the most frequently and then work to improve those areas. If you don't have access to a scoreboard, you can still designate a coach or manager to keep a possession chart on a clipboard and call out the score.

With one team of our teams, our coaching staff struggled to keep our players from dribbling across the timeline (or even worse, dribbling to the sideline and then crossing the ten second line into the coffin corner) and picking up their dribble with no way to get out of trouble. They had no live dribble and no way to pass to our designated outlet behind the ball that we have in every offensive situation without an over and back. Adding a simple rule in practice that it was an automatic turnover to cross the line and pick up the dribble or cross on the sideline eliminated that bad habit in games. With the addition of the new rule, we made great strides in that area.

"Every end is a new beginning."

--Unknown

22. End practice with a team huddle and make every effort to end on a positive note. There will be times that confronting an issue or a lack of effort must take place, but the less of those endings, the better.

Give some thought about the progress for that practice, and where you are going to have to improve. Keep in mind that the last things that you say will be some of the

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

easiest things for the players to remember. As you break the huddle, have the players slap five with each other and say something positive to each person before leaving the floor.

Have the players shake every coach's hand before leaving practice, or find some way to communicate before leaving. That way, you can get a feel for each one's frame of mind as they leave practice. It is also a good time to have a few moments of conversation without the demands of moving on to the next activity.

23. **End each practice with a two minute live clock segment.** We want our players to be prepared for any situation. By doing this every practice, we believe our players play with more poise and confidence. This also helps coaches determine the best late game strategies for that particular team. We rehearse all possible scenarios in this drill. Put the players in every possible game ending situation. Maybe you are up and holding the ball and the other team is fouling quickly and you have to shoot several 1 and 1 free throws. You might be down by several and have to foul. Sometimes we play the final minutes pretending a key player has fouled out. Be creative and do this consistently. With respect to game planning, you can rehearse situations for that opponent—such as who to foul and who not to foul if you are behind at the end of the game, what shooter to leave at the end of the game to help, what shooter to not leave at the end of the game, who are the likely players for them to take pressure shots, and what type of press or half court trap to look for at the end if you are ahead.

24. **Anything a coach allows in practice will surface in games:** Lack of hustle, poor shot selection, poor body language, excuses, complaining about calls, etc... Practice is the time to shape the behavior you want to see in the games. You must be consistent in this regard. Decide what is intolerable and never ever waiver. Here it is important to define what is intolerable. Be careful not to be petty. If you are, the players will not respect you. Be clear that some things simply cannot happen if we expect to be successful. If you consistently demonstrate that you will not tolerate actions that hurt the team's chances of being successful, you will earn their respect and modify their behavior.

**“You get what you expect,
inspect, and accept.”**

--Coach Don Meyer

[37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today](#)

Ideas 17-24 in this e-book are taken from the e-book,

[“130 Great Ideas to Get a Lot More Accomplished in Practice”](#)

For more information about that e-book, click the following link:

www.coachingtoolbox.net/ebooks/practice/basketball-practice-ebook.html

Defense

My objective in putting this segment of this e-book is to give you some ideas to possibly implement in your defensive system. I am never in favor of taking anyone's whole system and then implementing it as yours. No matter what coach you learn from, that coach does not know your personnel, face your schedule, and is not you. Your experience, personality, beliefs about how the game should be played, and many other factors will determine how you fit this information into your defensive system.

One of the toughest decisions a coach makes defensively is to what extent you are going to make changes in your rules in order to defend exceptional players or teams that you face. ‘We want our defense to become habit from what we have practiced, so we do not make many adjustments based on scouting.

Here are some ideas that you might consider adapting to fit your defensive system.

25. **51 seconds of perfect defense.** In order to get players to concentrate on the defensive principles that you believe in and to develop the proper habits, try the following drill. We ask the players to play three perfect defensive possessions. The length of the possession is determined by our playing style. If for example, the opposition's average possession is 17 seconds against our defense, we ask the players to play perfect defense for three times that length or 51 seconds. We demand that they execute three perfect 51 second defensive possessions. During each possession every coach is watching for a defensive mistake. Be picky. Stress the principles that you believe

“To be successful, you don't have to do extraordinary things. Just do the ordinary things extraordinarily well.”

-Jim Rohn

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

are important whether that be jumping to the ball on a pass, keeping the ball out of the lane, trapping the post, helping the helper or anything else that you believe in. If a coach sees a mistake, that possession must start over again at 51 seconds. If the

“Defense starts with a determination and pride to excel. It comes with knowledge and communication, and you’ve got to have heart.”

--John Bach

defense causes a turnover you can reward the defense by running 5 seconds off of the clock, restart the possession and run the clock from that point. If the offense takes a bad or contested shot and the defense gets the rebound, we just stop the clock and then resume the

possession and run the clock from that point. If the offense scores, takes an uncontested shot, or gets a rebound, then the clock is reset at 51 seconds. We continue until we have played three perfect 51 second possessions. In this way we are stressing, without any doubt, what we believe is important defensively to our success. We have found this to be very helpful. Players will focus on what you think is important. They will communicate better in order to avoid confusion. This drill will also show you who your leaders are. The leaders will step up and make players accountable for their mistakes. While players may understand that defense is important, they aren’t particularly fond of playing defense for long periods of time. The players will be motivated to complete this drill in as little time as possible.

26. Develop an organized system for conversion to defense and practice it daily.

The goal of our conversion defense is to force our opponent to play against our set half court defense by allowing 0 points in conversion. I don’t like to say “stop the ball” because I feel that as your defense is moving down the floor, you must give some ground in order that the ball does not go around you if you are attempting to make a stand and stop it. We want the on ball defender to slow the ball to enable the other defenders who are sprinting to be able to get back and get in position to set our half court defense.

We practice converting to defense off our made and missed field goals, made and missed free throws, and off live turnovers.

The assignments and responsibilities for our conversion defense are outlined on the next page.

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

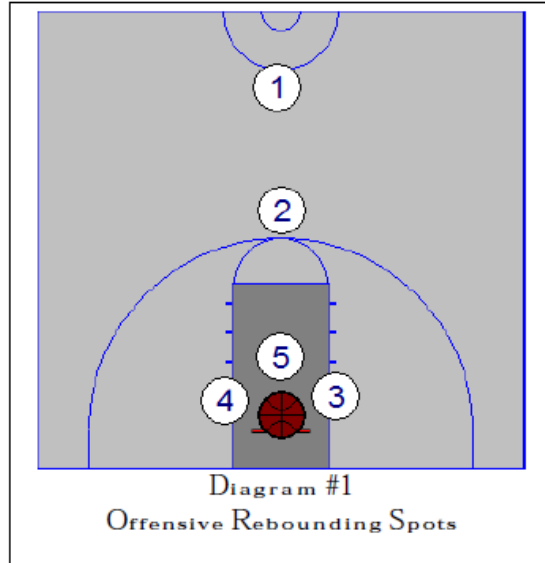
(Refer to Diagram #1 for our offensive rebounding spots as they are the start of our conversion defense.)

Conversion responsibilities

Player #1 (Fullback) retreats to the basket and is responsible to stop lay ups.

Player #2 (Halfback) slows the dribbler at half court.

Players #3, #4, and #5 Block, Block, Front of rim rebound spots, then sprint back whether the opponent rebounds or if the ball goes through the basket.



27. **Make a list of the things you must defend and stop to beat the teams that you must beat to win your conference, district, etc...** In my opinion, the way you must play to beat those teams is the way that you should design your schemes that you use for the entire season and are things that you should practice throughout the entire season, not just a few nights before or the week of the games that make the biggest difference in your season.

Specifically,

- What cuts in their offenses must you take away?
- What screens in their offenses must you defend?
- What set plays must you stop?

Generally,

- How will you defend the post?
- How will you defend dribble penetration?

"To be the best, you must beat the best."

--Unknown

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

- What tempo must you defend?
- What are your rules for defending each movement?
- What game adjustments you will make if your primary rule is not working?

28. **Put in writing what it looks like when your team is playing hard on defense.** It clarifies it for both you and for the players. Here is a place to start:

- Block out every time our opponent shoots
- Play defense in a stance
- Provide early help and then recover quickly
- Help the helper
- Close out with hands above shoulders
- Chin rebounds and face our basket
- Take a charge in the lane or on the baseline
- Steal passes that are thrown too far
- Contest every shot
- Deflect passes without reaching and fouling

“The only thing I’ve learned is that your teams must play very, very hard.”

--Gene Bess

- Always be in position, so you do not get into foul trouble
- Move your feet on defense rather than one-hand reaching and grabbing
- Sprint to your new spot on the airtime of the pass—arrive when the ball does
- Use active hands to distract dribblers, shooters, and passers without reaching
- Reach to tie up or take the basketball from an opponent with two hands
- When you are a trapper, sprint out of the trap when the ball is passed out of it
- Adjust your defensive position each time the ball or your man moves

29. **Use drills that put the defense at a disadvantage** each night while still emphasizing and practicing your defensive rules.

Here is an example of that type of drill: Put the defense at a disadvantage by decreasing the number of defenders from five to four. Since we play a team man to man defense, when we run our four on five defensive drill (four defensive players guarding five offensive players) in practice, we have found what works best for us is to designate a specific player who is not guarded rather than just having four guard five with no purpose.

So, we will play four on five and designate the open player as a particular type of player. For instance, if we designate the open player as a driver, then that designated driver (no pun intended) catches and drives every time while the four defenders

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

execute their help responsibilities. When we run this drill, we are working on our help against a driver. We have four versions of the drill:

- Open Driver
- Open Low Post
- Open Point Guard
- Open Shooter

This **is** an excellent drill to work on “help the helper” because if a defensive player steps in to help on the unguarded player, our rule is that if you pick up the player with the ball, you stay with her. Since that happens a lot in 4 on 5, we are constantly getting to practice our rotations to help the helper.

30. **Never help up the lane from the basket.** Even though ours is a helping style defense, we do not want to help from the basket up the lane and allow a dump down to the block for a layup. A five foot pull up is a high percentage shot, but not as high percentage as a layup. Of course, if our defenders guarding the low post are faced with this situation frequently, then we are allowing too much penetration and need to find out where the breakdown is occurring out front and get that fixed.
31. **Contest every shot.** We have an assistant coach keep a stat sheet during a game for shots our opponents take that we do not challenge and not our defender’s uniform number for who should have challenged the shot. We cover this stat at halftime while we still have time to do something about it that will make a difference in the game. We visually watch for this in practice. That is another reason I am big on playing hard and not fouling—free throws are uncontested shots.
32. **Develop a system that can be used to both teach and evaluate your defense.**

Our defensive system is broken into six phases:

- 1) Conversion
- 2) Establish and maintain defensive spacing
- 3) Pressure the ball without fouling and without allowing penetration
- 4) Keep the ball out of the lane—if it gets in the lane, we trap it.
- 5) Contest every shot
- 6) Block out, pursue the ball, and chin the rebound or dive on loose balls.

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

--Socrates

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[37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today](#)

We have statistical goals for each of these areas that we evaluate each practice and game. I also use these phases when planning our practice drills.

Ideas 25-32 in this e-book are taken from the HoopClinics Pack Line Defense Screencast:

For more information about that screencast, click the following link:

<http://www.coachingtoolbox.net/shop/index.php/hoopclinics-pack-line-defense.html>

Program Development

The best basketball programs have a defined “way” that is both a system of playing basketball and a means of teaching intrinsic life lessons—both on and off the court. Successful programs have trademarks that are linked to their way of playing basketball and to the characteristics that their players display while representing those teams. We feel that for coaches to develop their programs fully and completely, there must be a culture that is developed and nurtured over time that

“Demands commitment, denies selfishness, accepts reality yet seeks improvement every day while putting the team above self.”

--The Butler Way

is evident from the outside and that your participants take pride in honoring, upholding, and perpetuating. The way of your program is your blueprint and your mode of operation. It must go deeper than on-court play, and “the ways” of the great programs do. We would go so far as to say, if a basketball team is only about playing the game, then it is really not a program. It must be an extension of the educational

system.

33. **For a program to truly be successful and to reach its potential (by whatever your definition of success is in your current position); the following areas need to be clearly defined, aligned, and complementary to each other:**

- 1) Basketball skills.

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

- 2) Offensive and defensive schemes.
- 3) Toughness (Physical and Mental).
- 4) Your program's culture and identity.

Having an established program culture and identity will make a big difference in how well your players learn your schemes, the performance of the skills needed to execute those schemes, and the mental and physical toughness to execute under adversity and pressure. Whatever is taught by being emphasized, measured, and then evaluated will improve when you are working with competitive individuals with a desire to get better.

All four areas must fit together and overlap in order to be consistent and complimentary. Your culture must be based on your vision for the program and fit with each of the other three areas if it is to have the maximum impact on your program.

34. Measure players against a standard, not a personal judgment by the coach.

If a program way is established over time and has been communicated over and over, it diminishes the chances that it will be taken personally as coaches correct and redirect the efforts, execution, and attitudes of players. It definitely takes time to build the trust necessary between a coach and the players to get to this point.

It does not happen overnight. Even though there is no way to completely remove the sting a player feels when being coached and corrected, if a standard has been established, chances are that player will take it less personally when she knows what the standards are and that it is what your program stands for.

We feel that anything that can help in reducing the friction that develops as a coach pushes players to do better helps to improve unity and cohesiveness. Some players are motivated by personal challenges. But, for others who are not as thick skinned, emphasizing the program's standards can help keep the relationship from deteriorating.

As an example, rather than berating a player for a lack of enthusiasm, effort, poor performance, or whatever needs to be corrected, a simple phrase directed to

**“To avoid criticism, do nothing,
say nothing, be nothing.”**

--Elbert Hubbard

37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

individuals or the entire squad, such as, "Is this the Cougar Way? Is this what we stand for in our program, or do we expect better?"

35. Emphasize measure, and evaluate your trademarks every single day.

Just like we teach fundamentals, our offenses, and our defenses every day, you must teach the attitude and mindset that make up our program's way each day in practice. We have specific written practice activities with the objective of teaching your way. It has been our experience that we need to have written and defined practice objectives for the points of our program identity that we are emphasizing that day, just like we do to improve our half court trap offense or out of bounds plays. The culture does not happen on its own without a great deal of attention and emphasis from all involved.

"Be a yardstick of quality. Some people aren't used to an environment where excellence is expected."

--Stephen Jobs

It might be a short talk before practice, a video that exemplifies your Program Way; it might be a daily segment of practice such as "ten minutes of toughness," where you do a drill that is designed to improve physical and mental toughness. This does not take the place of the drill by drill, possession by possession teaching and reinforcing of the mindset you are working to instill, it adds to it.

Sometimes the measuring stick might be a tangible statistic, sometimes it could be a mythical standard. Regardless, the standards must be set high—certainly higher than your team and the individuals have ever met before if you are going to improve. Setting a goal of being the hardest practicing team in the state is something that is not measurable, but if your team can earn the feeling that they are, then you have achieved something special. To achieve your goal, you could keep tangible statistics by defining what is playing hard to you and then assigning a manager to keep track of how many times those things occur and then giving the feedback to the players. On page 34, Appendix G has a list of what we define as playing hard and our players know what is on the list. We can pick two or three items and have managers stat them in practice to get a more objective appraisal of how hard we are playing. Regardless of what your trademarks are, make a written list of what it looks like for the players to read and digest.

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

Videotaping practices and mixing clips from games is a good resource to have to show your players what the exact execution or action looks like. We like to tape the defensive phases of practice for the first week. The execution is not the best, but the intensity and communication is always high as practice is new and exciting. After a few weeks as the level naturally starts to drop, we will tape again and then let the players watch and listen to the difference in intensity and communication the next day. It is much easier for them to see for themselves than to hear me talk about it.

36. Decide how each player can utilize his or her particular talents for the benefit of your team and communicate it to everyone on the team.

Here is a short list of questions to continually consider for each player:

- How do we motivate each player?
- What does each player do well?
- What are the areas of concern for each player?
- What will be his individual development workout?
- What does he need to add to bring to our program?
- What is the best use of the Individual Development time for this individual?
- Are we staying away from drills that waste time and are unproductive? What does he need to be able to do in a game to help the team?
- How are we going to track his or her progress?
- What scoring moves does he have?
- How can we make them better?
- What scoring moves does he need to develop?
- How can we help him develop these?
- What are his areas of growth he needs to make?

“A leader who is a good team builder promotes the feeling that everyone is unique and adds value.”

--Unknown

37. Your program’s values and priorities help to soften tough decisions.

There is never any way to completely remove the edge from tough decisions, but there are times when they must be made in every program. Having a written blueprint that was created from your beliefs and experiences as to what is best for first the program, and second for the individual, will guide you when you have to make the tough calls and will softening their sting once you make them. As an example, valuing the educational and citizenship aspects above winning, makes it is

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37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

easier to make the tough decision to suspend or even dismiss team members who have violated team or school rules.

Here is a sample of a set of priorities that we have used to help make consistent decisions as a coaching staff. If a player is put in the unfortunate position of having to choose between practice and something else, and there is no way to accommodate and reschedule practice without inconveniencing everyone, we follow the priorities. That way everyone on the team knows that we are basing our decision on guidelines, not favoritism and that helps with team morale. Most players are going to want to work around conflicts and you can teach them to plan in advance, but sometimes conflicts arise without warning or cannot be avoided regardless of how much preplanning you try to do.

A priorities list goes a long way in teaching participants values:

- 1) Spirituality
- 2) Personal health
- 3) Family
- 4) Citizenship
- 5) Academics
- 6) Basketball in season
- 7) Part times jobs and social

“Decide what you want, decide what you are willing to exchange for it, establish your priorities, and go to work.”

--H. L. Hunt

We are not saying that this is the only priority list, but it is one that we have used that has made some tough and important decisions (or some even not so tough) easier. We feel it is very helpful for every coach to have a list of priorities to share with players, parents, and administrators as to where you place basketball.

Here are a few examples of how our priority list is utilized. We would rather have a player miss practice rather than class if there is no other way to fit in a doctor or dental visit because academics are the priority. We emphasize, no other way to work the appointment in. If a player has a required academic field trip that goes past the school day, they are excused to be late or even miss practice. Holiday times with games and the need for practice often present problems, but our priorities allowed us to feel good about being flexible for families with multiple holiday celebrations and or time for visiting divorced parents during time away from school.

37 Ideas to Improve Your Basketball Team Today

Ideas 33-37 are taken from the HoopClinics Program Development Screencast:

For more information about that screencast, click the following link:

<http://www.coachingtoolbox.net/shop/index.php/hoopclinics-program-development.html>

Conclusion

I sincerely hope that this document contains some ideas that you can implement immediately with your team and that eventually, you will find a use for most, if not all of the ideas contained within.

As a member of the Coaching Toolbox Community, you will continue to receive coaching ideas via e-mail that relate to all areas of coaching basketball.

Feel free to contact me at info@coachingtoolbox.net if there is ever a need.

In addition to the Coaching Toolbox, I am partners in two other online basketball coaching information sites:

I partner with Ed Schilling, April (McDivitt) Foster, and Josh Stinson for Coaches Academy. For more information, visit:

www.coachesacademy.net

Josh and I have put together a site that features screencast coaching clinics. You can register for a free clinic on the 2-2-1 press at:

www.hoopclinics.com

Again, thanks for your interest in this information!

Brian Williams

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