

Junior Basketball – a guide for coaches and parents

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Coaching types

Let's start with some groundwork. We've all had our own experiences with coaches – whether you are one (like myself) or you've had to put your trust in one (also like myself) – and while there's sure to be some overlap, I'd say the following represents an accurate cross-section of what one is liable to encounter:

- the *ex-player* – often frustrated at his own failings, tends to favour kids that remind him of himself, is very demanding, playing ability doesn't always translate to coaching ability
- the *parent* – generally takes on the coaching role as no one else is good enough to coach his son/daughter, always knows what's best for his child
- the *grumpy never quite succeeded at anything* – very stereotypical, generally older, discontent with his lot in life, takes out his frustrations on the kids
- the *always right lecturer* – despite possibly never being any good himself, this guy is adamant that he is the most knowledgeable person on the planet when it comes to the sport, there is simply no arguing with him, much less discussing anything
- the *lover of the game* – admirable, but blind to the realities of the competitive side of the sport, sacrifices development and success for aesthetics
- the *doesn't want to be there* – propelled into the role unwillingly, or alternatively thought it sounded fun at the time, but quickly lost interest... remains in his seat the entire game
- the *playbooker* – rather than let kids learn by doing/experimenting, this guy insists on doing things a particular way, every time... assumes kids are incapable of creating or seeing options themselves
- the *teacher* – is interested in being a facilitator to kids learning and while targeting success, is concerned with kids developing a love for competing, bonding as a team and learning life skills/lessons while maturing as individuals... (rarely seen in the wild and conceivably extinct)

Assistants and assistance

One need only look to the AFL to see the growing importance of having quality support staff. In junior basketball this usually only amounts to one individual, but the right person can be invaluable. Basketball is such a high-tempo game that a coach ideally needs to focus his efforts purely on what's happening on the court. *Is the offense working? How is the opposition hurting us? Are we going to get a call go our way? Do I have the match-ups right? Is anyone looking tired? How many fouls do we have to give? How can I express my exasperation so I won't get a tech foul? Would it be beneficial to use a timeout?* So much to consider, and usually so little time to make decisions.

A good assistant should be able to seamlessly step in and coach the team. An excellent knowledge of the game, combined with exceptional people skills and the ability to assist with the finer points of development at training should be on any checklist. On game-day, pointing out potentially overlooked details, tracking subs and offering suggestions to the head coach are all expected, while taking time to speak to the players on the bench about their roles and offer performance tips is equally important.

Likewise, the head coach must be comfortable relying on, and being receptive to, his assistant. Any good businessman understands the truth in the maxim 'to be successful, surround yourself with people smarter than yourself'.

Selecting teams

For domestic/local competitions... simple. Well almost. You ask to play with your friends and generally all is good, but for the club it's much like trying to put together school classes and as such, on occasion you'll luck out and get a trouble-maker or that anti-social, smelly kid in your team.

At representative level, there are all sorts of fun and games to be had – and really, this shouldn't be the case. In a perfect world, kids try out, show what they can do, and are graded as such. In reality, not so much. It must be said though, some clubs aren't far off the mark here. The majority though seem to have questionable inner-workings, with all manner of subjectivity taking place. *How well do the coaches know the kid or his family? Is the kid new to the club? Does the child come recommended? How long has he been at the club – ie. has he done his time? Can he help us win games right now?* These are some of the most commonly asked questions that will go into determining your child's likelihood of making it onto a team.

Oh, and of course, physical attributes. Ok, height. Elevation, loftiness, how tall you are. Your verticality (and your vertical for that matter). Did I mention height? Turns out it's kind of important. And if by chance you're not blessed in this department, you'd better have at least one of three things going for you: speed/athleticism, ball-handling skills, or some aggro (and preferably the man-child frame to go with it). In short, it's not so much about attitude, as altitude.

Keep in mind too, while it may not seem logical, talent is subjective, at least at tryouts. It's rare for kids to perform at their best in such pressure situations, so coaches are forced to a large degree to go on reputations. Your child might say he was running rings around another kid, but that kid might have already proven himself over the course of previous seasons. All of which means it's not unusual for kids to end up in a team that many wouldn't altogether agree with. It's important to realise that this may not always be a bad thing. Unless your child is nearing the end of their junior career (ie. U18s), there is simply no rush. Despite the desire to play at the highest level, playing down a grade – especially if it means extended court-time – can often be a blessing. Parents need to keep this in mind when managing expectations.

Winning vs Losing

Make no mistake, at the representative level, it's all about winning.

Why? Because everyone wants to win of course. Wrong. The coach wants to win. Let me rephrase that. The coach *wants* to win. The players and the parents would *rather* win. Big difference.

Am I suggesting that it's all about the coaches' egos. Not entirely, but a well-known men's State League coach once put it to me exactly like that. It's an enormous challenge being in charge of a team and many coaches take their pseudo-NBA-head-coach role extremely seriously. Coaches at this level value their reputations and are always seeking an opportunity to improve their standing among their peers – not to mention secure a (better) coaching gig next season – and why wouldn't they. From the outside looking in, the only way to achieve this is through results. Thus the manic focus on, and mantra of 'winning is everything'. Get used to it.

Winning is a great feeling, but there's a feeling that's better and more lasting. Knowing that each individual in the team is playing to his potential – and that you had a hand in that. From a kid's perspective, playing the best basketball you're capable of, enjoying the on-court drama, embracing the moment and savouring the opportunity to compete, is the ultimate – win or lose. And interestingly, a funny thing happens when you relax and enjoy sport and play up to your potential. You win more.

For the coach, the reality is it's nearly impossible to focus on anything other than winning, especially in close games. By instead trying to focus on specific ways players can improve or the team can execute, coaches can remain more composed which in turn reflects on players. Both of which are more likely to contribute to the achievement of the end goal... player development... er, winning.

Playing favourites

This is something that – given the previous point about winning – shouldn't occur, but curiously it does. Coaches become charmed by certain players both on a personal level and the way in which they play the game. This in turn results in the coach wanting to see that player do well, and naturally this can result in a number of perks. Notably court time, but more importantly, a perhaps not-so critical eye. You might know this as the '2 sets of rules' idiom, which is ironic because coaches are forever bemoaning referees' use of the same standard.

Such is the bond that our coach has developed with Little Johnny, that he allows this affiliation to cloud his judgement that ultimately (though often inadvertently) leads to him not applying the same rules and standards as he would the rest of the team. The coach may also find it hard to admit to his player's shortcomings if he has shown such unwavering faith.

This is predictably the case in a parent-child situation, but can be even more unsettling for a team when this is not the case. As such favouritism rarely goes unnoticed, the rest of the team will ultimately rebel either through personal jibes or in their actions on the court. Regardless, this is not a good look and not surprisingly is ineffectual in getting results.

Court time (representative level)

Ah, this ol' chestnut... the bane of players and parents everywhere. Basketball is unique in this sense. It's unlike most other team sports in that 'making the team' is merely the beginning. Players then need to work their way into the coach's heart, or better yet, the starting five. Failing to do so can result in much heartache.

Despite a good selection process, every team will have a range of abilities on its roster. The coach knows this. The kids know this. But kids are not stupid. They know almost exactly where they rank in the pecking order (if they're being honest) and if this doesn't match the coach's view, then they're in for a long season. Remember, our coach will likely have all manner of biases in play at this point, so conflict is almost guaranteed here. Parents may however need a quiet reminder that coaches are coaching to win. Anyone can step in and allocate court-time to please the masses, but a coach is much more than that.

Having said that, problems may arise very early on. The starting five will obviously start each game, and nine times out of ten, finish the game on the court as well. This leaves the bench to fill minutes while the 'stars' take a short rest (think Patty Mills until recently). This presents a dilemma for the incoming bench player. He's already entering the fray cold with everyone warmed up and settled, plus he knows in this stint he's getting 1-5 minutes at best, so naturally his mindset is unwittingly altered. *I need to go in harder. I need to do something special. I can't make a mistake.* Quite the opposite of what a player should be thinking as they take the court. Inevitably, this thinking leads to quick fouls, trying to do too much when they get the ball, or, depending on the personality of the individual, doing absolutely nothing when they get the ball, in order to avoid screwing up. Sadly, mistakes are made, performance is affected and court time diminished further still. A vicious cycle indeed.

Quite clearly, kids need court time to improve. Learning and doing at training is no substitute for the real thing, and since most kids aren't getting paid a million dollars a year to warm the bench (or wave a towel around), not getting opportunities is a miserable feeling.

Once things get closer to the pointy end of the season, the court time issue will only become more glaring. This is generally mirrored in the domestic game too with coaches having one eye on the silverware. The only way to get around this, if there is one, is to be proactive. Kids – though it's often a parent which is not ideal, but is ok if done without malice – must go out of their way to speak to the coach (or assistant) and ask; what can I do better, why Johnny starts and I don't, tell the coach what you bring to the team, sell yourself, or simply ask for more court time to prove yourself. Any

coach should be delighted to hear such enthusiasm and be more than willing to discuss this, and if he isn't able to answer such questions, then either he probably won't be in the job for much longer or you should look elsewhere to continue your basketball career.

Which is a fitting segway into the next topic...

Benching players for making mistakes

Every coach has done this. For some it's borne out of frustration and is only on occasion, but for many others it represents the underlining principle of their coaching methodology.

Put simply, it is a disease and is *always* counter-productive. Unless you're planning on writing off that player as a bad debt and/or sending him on a downward spiral into basketball oblivion, then coach, you *need* to stop doing this – for the kid's sake, and your team's. If left unchecked, it will fester and become an all-encompassing disorder that will bring your team to its knees, leaving your players scared to shoot, attack off the dribble or even run the most basic offense. You have been warned.

Berating kids

Have you ever looked after someone else's kid, or dog for that matter? Ever scolded them while in your care. Doubtful. It's not really your place is it..?

Now while this might sound a touch simplistic, even unrelated, tearing strips off a player to get your point across – valid as it may be – is not always going to get the desired result, however well-meaning. Firstly, you need to pick your targets very carefully. Everyone reacts differently and while for some the rocket might be just the tonic, for others it could be confidence crushing. Make no mistake though, raising your voice, getting exasperated and showing your frustration are all well within the coach's arsenal and can be used to great effect when combined with some inspiring words. Players however, are likely to need reassurance that your meltdown is due to your frustration that they are not getting the best out of themselves, rather than that they are no good – which will be their default perception.

Confidence

So just spend each training session and time-out telling everyone how good they are? Almost.

Nine times out of ten, a confident player is a better player. The exceptions are those kids who are not team players or whose belief in themselves far outweighs their ability, and it is a coach's job to pick up on this.

A note for coaches: you do not know a player until you have given him *your* confidence. And that confidence needs to be real, not just 'ok you can play point guard for the first 5 minutes of the third quarter', or, 'you're in the starting five until you make a mistake and then you're off'. Put yourself in their shoes. Really think about what sort of opportunity you'd need to prove *yourself*.

Confidence is also about teaching players to play to their strengths. A coach can often see what a player can't – even about themselves – so if Johnny can't hit the side of a barn from beyond 8 feet, then encourage him to attack the basket or look to dish rather than pinging 3 pointers all game. Alternatively, don't play him on the perimeter. In turn, he will become a more valuable player, his confidence will grow and the team will benefit.

Improving confidence among the group is also about feedback. You can't go wrong telling players everything they're doing *right* in a game. Sadly, not many coaches do.

A coach also needs to look for ways to get his players 'up' for games, or help get someone out of a form slump. Too often players are left to work their own way out of a hole, and without assistance, more often than not they will just keep digging. Instead, take the player aside at training and spend

some one-on-one time to discuss and work on a solution. Think about giving that player a specific assignment for the next game. Ask him to tag another player, get a particular number of rebounds, don't make more than one turnover per half – something tangible. Small achievements such as these will undoubtedly boost confidence. You just need to think outside the box sometimes.

Enjoyment

This is a no-brainer, but something that far too many coaches have little time for. If a kid isn't enjoying turning up every week (that includes training) then the coach isn't doing his job.

Coaches can't be reminded often enough. It's not about them. It's never about them. It may be a thankless role, but at the end of the day, it's all about the players.

Zone v Man-to-man Defence

It has long been recognized within basketball circles that learning man-to-man defence is paramount where long-term player development is the goal. While zones may assist players in understanding their position and spacing on the court, man-to-man principles teach all manner of individual defensive skills. On-ball, one pass away and help defence and the footwork, agility and court-awareness that comes with it are invaluable.

That is not to deny the effectiveness of a zone defence in the right situation, meaning it is well worth having up your sleeve. Inevitably poor outside shooting at the junior level, combined with a zone and some defensive size can quash a team's offensive efficiency.

While zone defences are becoming more and more common at the college and professional level, there is no excuse for a coach that encourages it as the default.

Fundamentals vs Set plays

Generally speaking, this can be summed up simply. These are kids. This is not the NBA. If you are spending more than a fraction of your training sessions trying to get kids to learn set plays, then you have no place in the sport. If you can teach kids to play solid man-to-man defence and understand all the principles of a good offense (spacing, movement, cutting, screening, etc), then you've succeeded.

At the representative level where teams train for up to 3-4 times longer than domestic, obviously coaches can look to achieve more. This may involve having a few sets they can start from, ensuring that defensively they can run a press, man-to-man and some form of zone, and that they are capable of attacking each of these defences themselves with a flexible offense. Having out-of-bounds and end-of-game plays won't go astray either.

It must be kept in mind though, that expecting kids at the U10/12 and even U14 level to be able to understand, remember and implement set plays under pressure, in a game situation, is too many degrees of foolishness.

Coaches who disagree might ask themselves how many times they've been pulling their hair out when just one player forgets his role in the play and it ultimately breaks down, or worse, the ball is turned over.

Kids need to learn to play without having to think. The thinking part comes later, once they've mastered the fundamentals.

Star players

If only we all had a truly star player – either on our team or better yet, in our family. It would certainly make life easier, but it is also a challenge. In order to not do a disservice to the individual in question, the situation needs to be handled tactfully.

Generally at the youth level, your star will be a proficient scorer. Born point guards who can distribute at will are rarer still. So clearly it should be the coach's goal to encourage the star to become a more well-rounded player. This usually means by looking to get his teammates more involved, dishing out assists and working on areas of his game that might be sub-par in comparison – often this will be defence and rebounding. Challenge the star to improve in the areas you've identified, which should also help keep his feet on the ground.

Culture

Create a culture within your team where one player's success is everyone's success. Let me put it in practical terms. If you have to tell your players to be vocal and supportive when they're on the bench, you haven't established the right culture.

Referees

The most important thing to understand about referees is that they are amateurs, much like the players and coaches who deride them. Whereas teams train for up to 4 hours per week, referees aren't afforded that luxury. Their only learning happens on the job, under the spotlight of intense scrutiny. Fair to say, not ideal. Referee supervisors are charged with overseeing and ensuring the performance and consistency of each stadium's officiating, often having to monitor 3 or more courts at any one time. Subsequently, real-time feedback at games is not what it could (or should) be.

Any coach will tell you that all he craves is consistency, for the same calls to be made at both ends. This won't always be the case and players are quick to pick up on any perceived discrepancies. Unfortunately, this can lead to an us-versus-them mentality and adversely affect performance. Referees expect coaches to react to calls throughout a match (though it must be noted that some officials deal with this better than others), but don't as easily tolerate a player mouthing off in their direction.

Coaches are best off keeping their players in check and trying to pick up on any refereeing trends early in each game, and look to use that to the team's advantage.

Being receptive to parents

Unless you've coached Little Johnny for two or more seasons, his parents know more about him than you do. Talk to them, find out what makes him tick, any issues you can expect, what they think he needs help with, what he's good at, what position he plays in his domestic team, and so on. They're privy to dinner table and after-match car-ride-home discussions – you're not. Ask away, and don't feel silly for doing so – you don't know everything remember. You'll make the family feel more involved and comfortable leaving you in charge of their pride and joy's burgeoning career. You'll also likely learn more from one conversation than a whole season of second-guessing yourself.

Inviting two-way communication with players

Coaches need to be very aware of something here. Kids, as a rule, will not approach you to talk about the game or their performance, and they certainly won't be brazen enough to question your authority. Any dialogue must come from you.

So, open up the communication lines at the start of the season. In fact, make a habit of pulling each player aside individually and just get their thoughts on anything you can get them to talk about. Make it known that you're interested in what they have to say. Otherwise, players will harbour any ill-feeling and whether you notice it or not, this will brew all season long if you're not careful.

Unhappy players = unhappy team = poor-performing team = fewer wins = unhappy coach. It's your choice.

Inclusion

Much like in the classroom, you will have different characters and temperaments thrown together in any sporting team. As in society, a hierarchy will soon develop. This isn't a problem in itself, as teams need leaders, however it is the coach's job to ensure this operates in a controlled environment. Yes, your alpha-male types will always exist and other kids may even look up to them, but bullying or belittling of any sort should not be condoned.

Kids will spend good portions of the season fighting for places and court time, but it should always be good-natured competition. Ensuring no animosity exists between players is something the coach is responsible for, so it must be made clear that no one player is more important in the coach's eyes and certainly no one is beyond reproach.

Coaching your own child

This is an interesting one, as parents will choose to do this for a variety of reasons, not always benevolent. It can only be hoped that they're doing so to be more involved. It helps of course if they possess the knowledge and traits required to further the development of their child and others in the team, and if this is the case, then they can only be applauded.

Many however, do so to promote their child's advancement in all the wrong ways, and this must be frowned upon. Stepping in in a controlling manner or looking to achieve vicariously are also unacceptable.

For those with noble intentions, there are still some simple rules to follow. Obviously, you cannot be seen to be favouring your own child. In fact, it pays to be harsher on your child than any other player, which will actually be beneficial in the long run anyway. Similarly, your child should be treated and spoken to no differently. This simple advice will help keep dubious parents at bay.

Life lessons

An important part of being a coach has nothing to do with the sport, and instead involves helping young men and women grow as individuals. Instilling discipline, both behavioural and towards learning their craft, and acquiring values that can serve them throughout their lives. Whether you realize it or not, kids will take something from every session, good or bad. It is imperative then, to lead by example. Anyone with kids will need no further explanation.

This doesn't only involve the particular actions or words of the coach either. It can be very much about what the coach stands for as well, and how he enforces those beliefs. Some examples might be a player who frequently misses training sessions, yet still gets more minutes than other equally talented players in the team, or, a kid who is clearly not a team player who doesn't get pulled up for his actions. These all contribute to the kind of player who leaves your team at season's end, not to mention their opinion of you as a coach and more significantly, of you as a person.

Playing without fear

Perhaps surprisingly, this is the most sure-fire way to get a team playing better. Fear of failure, especially at the junior level, is arguably the biggest obstruction to learning and improvement, and most coaches actually teach in such a way as to instil this fear.

Does it help to point out all the times players are less than perfect? Does it help to lose patience with players every time they make a mistake? Does it help to put unattainable expectations onto young players?

How often do coaches tell players to go out there and have fun and then leap off the bench at the slightest mistake?

Should they instead be encouraging players to relax and do what comes naturally, to just focus on what they're doing, don't worry about what anyone else thinks, don't dwell on turnovers, concentrate on second efforts instead, not to play the game looking over their shoulder?

Inadvertently creating players who play out of fear is not the worst of it either. It can also lead to players who are so afraid to fail, that they are also afraid to try.

Have you ever met a truly content perfectionist? Unlikely. They will be the first to tell you that perfection as a goal will lead to endless frustration and inevitably, likely resentment of the sport and almost certainly the coach.

Sport is really just an exercise in failure anyway. No one is perfect. Turnovers and missed shots are a given. It's learning to deal with these failures and move on, accepting it as part of the game, that reveals how good a player will ultimately be.... with a little help from an intelligent coach.

Volunteers

It must be said of course, that for all their failings, coaches are nearly always volunteers. Surely this affords them a level of freedom and we should all cut them some slack..? You'd like to think so, but alas, it doesn't quite work like that. Sporting parents are demanding creatures and will place high standards on your performance, whether you like it or not. As far as they're concerned, for the next 6-12 months, you're solely responsible for guiding their child towards greatness. And they won't make it easy for you either. Sure you'll get the odd parent who'll pull you aside to raise a query or two or get some feedback, but don't expect the rest to tell you about all the things you could be doing better. You're on your own.

In conclusion

Parents, there are many quality coaches out there. Naturally do your due diligence, but whether you and your child are fortunate enough to stumble upon one is another matter entirely.

Coaches, hopefully it has become apparent that coaching involves responsibilities very similar to that of both a parent and teacher. To 'teach', can actually be defined as making someone *less* inclined to do something – as in "*I'll teach you*". Don't become one of those coaches.

Instead, champion the alternate definition... Teaching: 'the art of assisting discovery'.

You'll be glad you did. The rewards are enormous.

In another lifetime, Matt Dawson was a former elite junior tennis player until he was cut down in his prime by a debilitating inability to win matches.

He has over 10 years' experience as a tennis coach, has spent the past 5 years coaching junior basketball and currently has two children playing domestic and representative basketball in Melbourne, Australia.

He likes to think he follows the principles outlined in this article, but said children – whom he also coaches – gladly point out that this is not always the case. They will not be getting any court time next week.