

COACHING SHOOTING WITH TEAMS AND GROUPS

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A. INTRODUCTION

Here are some simple suggestions a coach can use with teams or groups of kids to develop shooting when there isn't much time for individual attention. I'll use the term "kids" to refer to the team or group, but this is applicable to groups of all ages and sizes.

From my experience working with 10-20 kids or more, I've learned how to structure exercises that encourage and inspire self discovery and self learning! All of us have learned things on our own. If we're interested in something and not interfered with, what is called "Natural Learning" takes place everywhere, all the time. The Key is knowing where to look, where to focus attention.

The first step is to have the kids come to KNOW HOW THEY SHOOT NOW. That's an important step in any learning, because if you don't know where you start from, you can learn something new but then slowly old habits can creep back in without being noticed. If you know both where you were and where you are and can feel and see the differences, then the learning is deeper. This time (perhaps 20-30 minutes) could be the entire first session if time is limited.

B. LEARNING WHERE YOU ARE - SIMPLE DISTINCTIONS

Here are the areas you can ask the kids (or yourself) to look at:

- POWER
- HEIGHT (OR ARCH)
- SPIN
- STANCE
- SET POINT
- RELEASE
- FOLLOW THROUGH

--- DEMONSTRATIONS FIRST ---

First, have the group sit down between the free throw line and the top of the key. To introduce these areas of discovery, have 2 kids shoot in front of the whole group and have a conversation about what the kids see in the shooters' shots. Have one player shoot from the left and one from the right, about 15-16 feet away. If one of the demonstrators is chosen as

one of the "better" shooters and one as a "less skilled" shooter, the contrasts would be helpful, but this isn't a big deal. The following are "general" awarenesses. As we proceed, we'll get more specific. Have each of the demonstrators shoot a couple shots for each question that follows.

(1) WHERE DOES POWER COME FROM?

Ask the group to notice where the majority of power for shooting comes from for each shooter. Is it more from the Upper Body, or is it from a combination (integration) of Lower and Upper Bodies (it might be 50%-50% , or maybe more upper body (75-25) or more lower body (25-75)? [NOTE: Most kids shoot more from Upper Body, some entirely, so watch to see if the observers can see that. Better shooters will be the "Integrated" type shooters.]

(2) HOW HIGH ARE THE SHOTS?

Next, ask them how high each demonstrator's shots get above the rim and call out what they see. Ask them to look at the bottom of the ball relative to the rim. (The top of the backboard is a good reference point, 3 feet above the rim, and the top of the white rectangle on most baskets is about 1 1/2 feet.) Is the ball, at its highest point, 6 inches above the rim? ...1 foot? ...1 1/2 feet? ...2 feet? ...3 feet or more? Ask the demonstrators to shoot normally and not try to change their arch.

(3) OBSERVE SPIN:

Watch Spin and notice if it's backspin, sidespin, forward spin or dead in the air? It might be a combination. If it's backspin, how fast is it? ...slow? ...medium? ...fast?

(4) STANCE

With one shot (two at most), ask the group to tell you if the players' stances are "square" or "open." Square means the feet are parallel (or staggered with the lead foot pointing at the basket) and center of the chest is perpendicular to the line to the basket. Open means the body is rotated counterclockwise (for right-handers) a little or a lot. In the open stance, the front foot turns a little to the side and back foot turns more, like a boxer would stand to land jabs.

(5) SET POINT

Observe where the demonstrators' Set Points are. (The Set Point is the momentary stopping point in a jump shot where the ball gets "Set" before the Release takes place. It's necessary with all the movement of a jump shot to provide a stable starting point. Is the Set Point below the eyes (the player looks over the ball at the target) or above the eyes (player looks under the ball)? Note where it is exactly.

If it's above the eyes, note where the bottom of the ball is. Is it even with the eyes, middle of forehead, top of the head or even higher? Is the back of the ball at the area of the front of the head, or is the ball brought overhead, to the middle of the head, or to the back of the head or more? Or is it out front of the head a few inches? Look at alignment, too. Is the center of the ball in line with the shooting eye (approximately, within an inch or so), or is it in line with the ear or the shoulder? (It might even be off center toward the opposite ear.)

(6) RELEASE AND SHOOTING ARM

Next observe how the ball is released and what happens with the shooting arm.

Is the Release ...

-- a Pushing Action?

-- a Throwing Action?

-- a Wrist Flipping action?

What happens to the shooting arm during the Release?

Does it...

- straighten or is it short-armed?
- stay straightened in the Follow Through or break down?

If we could imagine the person as a clock, and the shooting arm is the hour hand, what time on a clock does the arm point to in the Release?

-- (Let 9 o'clock be parallel to the ground and 12 o'clock straight up.)

-- Is the "time"

... 10 o'clock? 11 o'clock?, 10:30?, 11:30?, etc.

(7) FOLLOW THROUGH: SHOOTING WRIST AND HAND

Is the Follow Through held for a second or two?

Are the wrist and hand... -- tense? -- or relaxed?

Does the hand bounce during the Release?

Does it stay pointed in the direction of the basket?

... -- or does it turn one way or another?

These general distinctions will help the kids start to understand shooting better, both as observers of others and as observers of themselves.

C. DISCOVER HOW YOU SHOOT NOW

Now it's time to break up in pairs and go to a basket and observe these same aspects in their shooting. Before they break, explain that they are to do just a few shots for each area of discovery, and ask them to please make it about what they are noticing, not whether or not they make the shot. (STRESS THIS VERY STRONGLY -- THE KEY THING HERE IS AWARENESS, NOT PERFORMANCE!)

Set up the first three awarenesses (Power, height & spin) and have them go off and examine how they shoot. With one partner shooting and one rebounding (if pairs), tell them to take only 2-3 shots for each area, do all three areas, and then switch with their partner. As soon as both partners have shot, return to the gathering spot. Ask them to observe their partner's shots, also. (If you have a mature bunch of kids, you might even tell them they are to report on their partner AND themselves and be able to point out differences.)

<<< Break for shooting in pairs - for about 5 minutes max! >>>

Then gather and discuss quickly what they discovered. To save time, ask for a raise of hands for each area of focus (if you have time, you might ask individuals to describe what they saw in their shooting):

POWER

-- How many saw they used mostly Upper Body power to shoot from?

-- How many saw their shots were more Integrated (75-25 upper/lower, or maybe 50-50)?

HEIGHT

-- How many had a "Low" arch, 6 inches to 1 1/2 feet above the rim, in the area of the lower half of the backboard?

-- How many had a "Medium" arch, 1 1/2 to 3 feet above the rim, the upper half of the backboard?

-- How many had a "High" arch, higher than the backboard, 3+, 4 or 5 feet above the rim or more?

SPIN

- How many had Backspin?
- How many had Sidespin?
- How many had Forward Spin?
- How many had a combination of Backspin and Sidespin?
- If Backspin, how many had a Slow rate of Backspin?
- If Backspin, how many had a Medium rate of Backspin?
- If Backspin, how many had a Fast rate of Backspin?

Then set up the last four areas: Stance, Set Point, Release and Follow Through.

<<< Break for shooting in pairs - 5 minutes max! >>>

STANCE (This can probably only take one shot, as it's so obvious from looking at the position of the feet and the shoulders.)

- Square or Open?
- If Open, how much? (roughly 15 degrees, 20, 30, 45 degrees? More than 45 degrees would be too much)

SET POINT

- Above eyes or below?
- If above, is bottom of ball even with eyes, middle of forehead, or at the top of the head or higher?
- Is back of ball even with front of head, overhead a bit, overhead a lot? -- Is it held out front of the head?
- Is the center of the ball aligned with the shooting eye, or is it right or left? How much?

RELEASE & ARM

- How many saw they saw they THREW the ball toward the basket?
- How many FLIPPED the ball with their wrists?
- How many used an upward PUSHING action to send the ball toward the basket?

FOLLOW THROUGH AND WRIST/HAND

- How many held their Follow Through?
- How many saw they pull back?
- How many saw they saw their hands were tense?
- How many saw they saw their hands were relaxed?
- Did anyone see that their hand actually bounced, it was so relaxed?
- How many saw they saw their hand stayed pointed in the direction of the basket?
- How many saw they saw their hand moved to one side or the other or pulled back?

If done in a spirit of discovery and curiosity, the team/group will come to a powerful understanding of how to look at shooting and how they themselves shoot. Tell them there are no "rights" or "wrongs" in this; just different ways to do things.

D. NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR SHOOTING

(About 30 minutes. This could be a later session, if time is short.)

Now you're going to suggest some different ways of shooting, some "new possibilities" that can lead them to discovering different, more effective, ways to shoot a basketball. I'll group distinctions together that are related.

As you start each following segment, ask one of your players to demonstrate briefly while you talk. As the player starts to shoot, ask him or her to do the "suggestions" below, highlighting what you want the group to do when they break into pairs. Don't take a lot of time doing this, but this can be helpful to set up the exercise clearly.

(1) STANCE

Suggestions: Invite them first to notice how they stand in relation to the basket. -- If they tend to Square Up, ask them to experiment with opening their bodies by rotating a little and a lot (to the left for right-handers, to the right for left-handers), seeing which feels better, Square or Open. The strong foot will be forward, the opposite foot back a little or a lot. -- In which position do they feel more "under and behind" the ball? -- Does the Release action feel any less tense with one or the other?

Have them go off in pairs for 5 minutes, then return and discuss what they noticed in themselves and in their partners.

(2) POWER & HEIGHT

Suggestions: Invite them first to experience shooting more FROM their leg drive or leg lift. Ask them how they might be able to do that. Can anyone figure that out? [Note: The answer is to shoot earlier in the jumping (or free throw/set shot) motion.]

- Ask them to notice what happens to the flight of the ball, and Height when they shoot earlier.
- Does it feel any more "effortless" when they use more leg power?
- What percent of the lower body force are they noticing? (100% just means they're using every bit of available leg force, shooting very quickly. If Zero %, it means they're shooting at the top of the jump.)
- Invite them to experiment with a higher and higher percentage, that is, just keep shooting earlier and earlier and see what happens. They'll probably have to get ready earlier than they're used to. See what happens. Be creative! This does not necessarily mean to jump more strongly!

Have them go off in pairs for 5 minutes, then return and discuss what they noticed in themselves and in their partners.

(3) SET POINT AND "SETTING" THE BALL

Suggestions: For those who take the ball over their heads, ask them to experiment with having the ball more toward the front of their heads.

- If the ball is to the side of their head (a la John Stockton), ask them to experiment having it more over their shooting eye. A more "open" stance may be required for this. See if they feel more "Under and Behind" the ball in that position. Under and Behind makes accuracy easier. -- Watch what happens to the shot when the Set Point is in different positions.
- Is it more of a Throw or Flip one way and more of a Push the other way?
- A powerful way to shoot is having the ball more in front and Pushing the ball upward, high above but in direct line with the target. Suggest they experiment with shooting that way. Remind them to keep using a lot of leg drive to power the shot. Shoot earlier and earlier.
- Suggest they aim higher, now that more leg power is being called forth.

Notice how you "set" the ball. Where from and how do you bring the ball to the Set Point? When is the ball first aligned with the eye and basket, if you even align it so. If not, try aligning the ball with the shooting eye, rather than with the ear or shoulder or something else (nose?).

INERTIA AND SETTING THE BALL

Notice that if the ball is moving and in line with the eye and basket before the Release starts and

you keep it moving, Accuracy is a lot easier to achieve. This is called Inertia. Do you "catch" it? This is a major factor in creating accuracy and consistency!

Have them go off in pairs for 5 minutes, then return and discuss what they noticed in themselves and in their partners.

(4) RELEASE & ARM

Suggestions: Suggest they just straighten the arm, quickly, aimed high above the rim. Let Power come from the legs. Accuracy comes from the arm pushing directly in line with the target with no interference from wrist and hand.

- Notice if they keep the arm straight as they finish the shot. If not, experiment doing so.
- What "time" do their arms point to during the Release?
- Notice what happens with this way of shooting. Is the shot more consistent and repeatable this way?

If, by eliminating any throwing or flipping motion, their Release feels weaker, that's okay because the Lower Body will provide most of the power.

Have them go off in pairs for 5 minutes, then return and discuss what they noticed in themselves and in their partners.

(5) FOLLOW THROUGH (ARM, WRIST AND HAND) & SPIN

Suggestions: How do they Follow Through? Is the Follow Through held for a second or two? -- What happens if they relax wrist and hand and rely on the legs and the arm straightening to provide the power?

- Can the wrist and hand add "nothing" to the shot, just control the ball and then Let Go?
- Does it feel more consistent and repeatable when wrist/hand are relaxed?
- What do they notice about Accuracy?
- Is it increased or decreased when the wrist and hand relax and do less?
- Invite them to notice the Spin with this (different) way of shooting.
- How does it compare with their original Spin?

Have them go off in pairs for 5 minutes, then return and discuss what they noticed in themselves and in their partners.

E. WRAP UP

The above routines are a suggested way for a coach to introduce powerful self coaching ideas and experiences without having to spend a lot of time with each player. Tell the kids the "Distinctions" will do the teaching if they spend time and attention "experiencing" them. Invite them to experiment and exaggerate. Tell them to expect to miss baskets, but to learn from every shot. Missing is expected, but pay attention!

A note about this "perfect" stuff. One of my mentors said "You'll learn much more by perfect awareness of an imperfect shot than you will with imperfect awareness of a perfect shot." I don't like the idea that you can only learn from "perfect" execution. We would learn very slowly if that were true, because we're not perfect that often. I feel we learn from "everything," even the worst mistakes, if we're paying attention. Isn't that a much happier prospect? See if it's true.

The discussions, in large groups and in pairs and in later practice sessions, will aid immensely, so encourage them to talk about what they see and feel and ask questions when they don't

understand. Invite them to continually talk about and explore shooting. When some of them have breakthroughs, ask them to demonstrate for the group and have a discussion about what happened.

In doing these exercises, you'll see all kinds of learning happening. Some kids will make extraordinary strides. Others will be confused. But I think a large majority will begin a process of exploration and discovery that will alter the way they look at shooting forever. They'll understand shooting better, and realize they, too, can shoot well. And they'll begin to see how they can coach themselves in this skill.

Great Shooting is not rocket science. It's really very simple Bio-Mechanics. If you "do" this, the ball "does" that ... every time. Once kids "get" these principles, they'll see them (or the absence of them) everywhere. Keep the conversation about shooting going!

F. A WORD ABOUT THE MENTAL ASPECTS OF SHOOTING

The group exercises given above are all about the physical actions you can do to minimize variables and learn to power and control the flight of a basketball. There are other exercises that can be used to strengthen the mental aspects of shooting: Concentration, Intention, Connection to the target, Trust, Letting Go, Confidence, Visualization, Imagination, etc. However, to me shooting is so easy you don't need a lot of visualization and self talk to get you confident.

When you can put the ball high and soft into the basket from anywhere in your range just about all the time, you won't need a sports psychologist. Your Confidence will naturally grow from the success you have. Concentration and Intention are gained from being present to what you do. You'll find that it helps to really "Connect" to the basket as you go to shoot, and Trusting yourself and Letting Go of fears, doubts, etc. just increase naturally.

I guess I feel that the mental stuff is the last 10% of great shooting, and most of what you need will develop naturally when you know how to shoot. Master the simple physical aspects of shooting and the mental will usually fall into place. If you want me to write more on this, let me know. And if you see that the physical just naturally improves the mental, as I say, let me know how that manifested for your players.

Please Email me (Tom@swish22.com) with any questions and keep me informed as to how these suggestions work for you. My experience shows me that people learn when they increase awareness ... awareness of where they are, and awareness of where they want to go (the goal). The tricky part is to be aware of the gap between those two states and then NOT try to fix it. If they can just keep on observing without trying to change it, their incredible body / brain system solves the puzzle ... naturally. It's called Learning.

AWARENESS IS TRULY DEVELOPMENTAL!

Any encouragement you can give them to do these exercises with full attention will help, whether in groups or alone.

I'm most eager to hear of your thoughts and experiences.

Sincerely, Tom Nordland
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