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Putting the ball through the hoop is obviously the object of the game of basketball. Because of this, good shooters are coveted by coaches and feared by opponents. To no one's surprise, shooting is given the highest priority of all basketball skills.

While most coaches work regularly with their players on shooting fundamentals, there are some elements of shot making that are frequently overlooked. Below are some examples of often neglected aspects of basketball shooting. We need to encourage players to become mindful of those varied facets and watch proudly as your team's shooting percentages and scoring averages soar.

CATCHING THE BASKETBALL

Catching the basketball is without question the most underrated (and under-practiced) aspect of good shooting. Prior to every scoring opportunity, with the exception of the rare follow-up tip, securing the ball cleanly is required. It doesn't matter if you're receiving a teammate's pass, picking up your own dribble, or grabbing an offensive rebound, you must first gain possession of the basketball, or scoring will not be an option.

While coaches should always drill their players diligently on the fundamentals of pass catching such as receiving the basketball with arms slightly bent and at a reasonable distance from the body, and establishing and maintaining control of a pass with finger-tips rather than palms, far and away the most common problem players have relating to pass catching is readiness. Too many players, especially young players, have what can best be described as lazy hands. Here's the typical situation: A player comes off a down screen, brushing past the screener shoulder-to-shoulder with

eyes focused intently on the passer—just how the coach taught it in pre-season practice. His footwork is basketball-clinic perfect. His feet are at shoulder width with knees slightly flexed.

Only the final piece of the puzzle is missing---the hands. His hands are, much to the coach's and the passer's chagrin, dangling lazily at his sides.

Coaches must insist that their athletes be ready to catch the basketball at all times on the offensive end of the floor. This goes for all players, not just the top scorers who have the majority of the plays run for them. Pass catching readiness should be drilled into your team with as much vigor as transition defense or boxing out. I have had success getting this point across to the players I work with by constantly stressing the importance of the split second in basketball. This split second in this case is the time saved by catching the ball efficiently prior to shooting, which could well be the difference between two points and a disrupted or blocked shot. Players love to score, so this should get their attention. If for some reason it doesn't, try to emphasize how a quicker shot release off the catch will be invaluable at the next level where defenders are sure to be bigger, faster, and more athletic.

PRACTICING SHOOTING FUNDAMENTALS NEVER STOPS

Attaining sound shooting form is no excuse for neglecting shooting fundamentals practice. In fact, all players, regardless of level or shooting ability, should spend some time during each practice on shooting basics. I suggest that players take a page out of NBA superstar and much improved perimeter shooter Grant Hill's practice plan. This multi-year all-star still begins every shooting workout with short distance, one hand shooting. He feels this regular work on the basics keeps his form pure and sets a positive tone for the entire shooting session.

Remember, the price you pay for ignoring shooting fundamentals in your workout is bad shooting habits, and bad shooting habits, as I heard someone say once, "are like comfortable chairs—easy to fall into, hard to get out of." They wreak havoc on even the purest shooter's strokes. So have your players stay clear of these shooting demons by practicing shooting fundamentals regularly.

HEAD MOVEMENT

If you were to listen in on a group of high-level basketball minds discussing shooting fundamentals, you would likely hear the names of numerous body parts mentioned along with the usual shooting catch-phrases. Some of the most popular might include: shoulders squared to the hoop; knees flexed; feet shoulder width apart; shooting elbow pointed directly at the target; wrist bent as if you're holding a loaded tray; fingers spread comfortably; and palm off the ball.

One body part that is rarely considered, however, is the head. And I don't mean what's going on inside it, but rather what it's doing during the execution. Too much head movement can drastically hinder shooting accuracy, causing the shooter to lose balance and focus. This shooting defect is a common problem for athletes at all levels of play from junior high school on up through the professional ranks.

When shooting, it is imperative for the shooter to keep the head stationary. Even the slightest head tilt can be enough to send an otherwise perfectly aimed shot awry. Coaches should consistently be on the lookout for players who move their heads when shooting, because it is very difficult for the shooter to detect this subtle flaw in form on his or her own. Once discovered, this flaw can be corrected.

MAKE THE LAST DRIBBLE PRIOR TO SHOOTING A HARD ONE

If players hope to evolve into thriving scorers in today's fast paced game, complete with aggressive, pressing defenses and speedy, athletic defenders, possessing a quick shot release off the dribble is imperative. Players can enhance their ability to shoot quickly off the dribble by making their last bounce prior to shooting a hard one. This not only gets the ball into the shooter's hands quicker but actually leads the player directly into the shooting motion.

During shooting drills, the coaches should keep reminding the players to pound that last dribble before launching a shot. Within a short time, the hard dribble should become second nature. The dividends will then follow as less and less of your team's shots are disturbed and more and more end up where they belong—in the bottom of the net.

BE EFFICIENT: USE THE BACKBOARD WHENEVER POSSIBLE

Only the most astute basketball historians are aware that the backboard was not originally part of the standard basketball facility. Back in the early days of the game, overly enthusiastic fans sitting in the balcony where the rim was affixed would, at every opportunity, interfere with the flight of the ball on its way toward the bucket. The backboard was then added to block the spectators from intervening with the flight of the ball.

While not initially created as a shooter's aid, the backboard can nevertheless be a tremendous asset. No less an authority than UCLA coaching legend John Wooden believed strongly in the bank shot. In leading the Bruins to an unprecedented 10 NCAA championships, coach Wooden always preached the use of the backboard to his players. Unfortunately, his advice has not been heeded much in recent years; players who shoot the bank shot consistently are few in number. In the professional ranks only Tim Duncan stands out (is it a coincidence that he is considered by many to be the premier all-around player in the NBA"?)

There are two basic elements you must keep in mind when shooting a shot off the backboard. First, be aware of angles and distance. Generally, bank shots are most effective when taken at approximately 45-degree angles from the front rim and from no more than 15 feet away. Second, players must master the delicate art of placing the basketball on the board so it falls softly through the hoop after the carom. As a rule of thumb, a bank shot taken from a 45-degree angle should be aimed at the near, upper corner of the square that is painted on most backboards (if there is no square, you'll have to estimate). From other angles, slight adjustments must obviously be made.

The key to successful bank shooting is, of course, practice. I have worked with many players who, with the exception of lay-ups, never used the backboard at all. But after a summer of hard work and of following the suggestions above, they became proficient bank shooters.

SHOOTING MECHANICS FIRST; GAME-SPEED SHOOTING DRILLS SECOND

Many coaches make the mistake of not separating work on shooting fundamentals from game-speed shooting drills. While it is helpful to evaluate and even make subtle suggestions during fast-paced shooting drills, focused practice on shot mechanics should always take place in a controlled setting at a relaxed speed. This type work is most effectively incorporated early in a practice when players' concentration levels are highest.

When teaching proper shooting fundamentals, coaches should think of themselves as golf instructors, methodically breaking down every aspect of a player's shot from footwork to ball release. Because this painstaking process requires a great deal of concentration, repetition, and patience.

So, remember, practice shooting form first; practice game-speed shooting drills second.

THE AFTER SHOT

Of all shooting related fundamentals, the release receives far and away the most attention. Finger position, elbow angle, and wrist snap. Every deadeye shooter I've come across from Reggie Miller to Allan Houston has spent countless hours perfecting the release.

One important aspect of the shot release is often neglected, however. Coined the "after shot" by shooting coach extraordinaire Chip Engellend (Engellend worked with Grant Hill, Shane Battier, and Steve Kerr among others), it entails maintaining the wrist follow through for an extended period of time, or at least as long as it takes for the ball to go through the basket.

This technique serves two important purposes for the shooter. First, it encourages backspin, which as most coaches and players know contributes to soft touch on a shot. A soft shot leaves a shooter more room for directional error, as it allows the ball to stay on the rim longer. The longer

the ball remains on the rim, the better the chance it has of eventually dropping through.

Second, the after shot ensures that shooters stay with their shots throughout the entire shooting process. Many shooters tend to move on to other responsibilities too soon. In essence, they jump the gun and short change the task at hand. For instance, how many times have you witnessed a well-meaning player backpedaling toward the defensive end or moving in to follow his shot instead of completing his shot attempt properly? While hustling back on defense and hitting the offensive boards are normally positive activities on the basketball court, ones that coaches applaud, doing so while shooting is a recipe for an errant shot.

The after shot is a technique that will help all players reach their full potential as shooters. It is a simple habit that can be practiced whenever shooting is involved. Have your players use the after shot on each and every shot attempt whether it be from the field or free-throw line and watch as balls go through the bucket like never before.

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Thanks for the opportunity.

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