

HOW TO MAKE YOUR YOUTH BASKETBALL PRACTICE FUN

All youth coaches fight this battle. You want your players to practice hard, develop skills, and become better basketball players. But you also want them to have fun. Unfortunately, skill development can be monotonous and NOT very enjoyable! So what do you do?

Follow these seven simple, yet highly effective steps and we guarantee that your players will love you for it...

7 Critical Elements to Make Your Practice FUN

- **#1 – Make your practices fast paced.** Kids enjoy fast paced drills and practices. They don't like waiting around and they lose focus when things are moving slowly. So you must keep them moving at all times. Your players should not be standing in lines waiting. They should move from drill to drill efficiently, and they should participate in drills that are highly active and fast paced.
- **#2 – Set your players up for success.** Position your players to experience success, otherwise, they'll become discouraged and lose their enthusiasm. The simple fact is that ALL young players need to enjoy success at some level, and it's your job to set them up for achievement, be it large or small.
- **#3 – Establish discipline.** In order for your players to have fun, there must be order and discipline. This will allow you to run a smooth and organized practice, giving everyone the opportunity to learn and enjoy themselves in a safe and productive environment.
- **#4 – Get your players' attention.** Young players have very short attention spans, so it can be difficult to grab their attention and hold it. However, it's important to be able to do so in order to run a productive practice.
- **#5 – Structure your practice properly.** It's tricky for new coaches to know how to organize a practice—when to give breaks, when to use certain drills and for how long. But a good structure can break up the monotony, save time, and keep things flowing smoothly.
- **#6 – Stay positive and upbeat.** Your mood can be contagious. If you're down, your players will pick up on it, which makes for a miserable practice. Everything starts with you, so keep a positive and upbeat attitude and the team will follow suit.
- **#7 – Make your drills fun.** In order to develop basketball skills, you MUST run drills. There's just no way around 'em. Drills should account for at least 75% of your practice time. So if your drills are boring, 75% of your practice will be boring. To help you, we have provided you with a bunch of exciting drills and games to incorporate into your practices. But don't stop there. We'll also give you some tips on how to make your own existing drills more enjoyable.

Element #1 - How to Keep Your Practice Fast Paced and Fun

Kids love to stay active and keep moving, so it's imperative that you structure a practice that is fast paced and fun. Here's how...

- **Plan Ahead of Time:** The #1 key here is preparation. You must have a well thought out practice plan. If you don't already use a written practice plan, start now. This will allow you to keep things moving quickly and keep your players on track.
- **Transition to New Drills Quickly** This goes back to preparation. You need to have a plan and know exactly what drill is next. The last thing you want to do is have to think in between drills and try to figure out what to do. Get everyone running to the next spot and keep things moving.
- **Choose Drills That Are Fast Paced:** Kids enjoy drills that require them to run around and be active. Things like dribbling through cones and using chairs are great ways to keep them moving.

- Use Multifaceted Drills: It's more fun to use drills that incorporate a variety of skills. For example, a drill where kids dribble through cones, pass, and shoot a lay up is more entertaining than a simple lay up drill. Not to mention a better use of practice time.
- Consider Using Stations: Four-minute stations work great for a large group of young players. Simply set up a station at each basket or in different areas of the gym with a coach or parent at each one. You might have cones set up for dribbling in one area and chairs set up in another area for Musical Slides. Split the team into small groups and explain how each station works before letting them have at it. When 4 minutes expires, the whistle goes off and the kids rotate clockwise to the next station. If you have 6 stations, then it takes 24 minutes to complete the entire sequence. You can experiment with the time, but with large summer camps, we have found that 4 minutes is just enough time to demonstrate the drill and let the kids practice for a few minutes. Kids really love it because things are constantly changing and moving quickly.
- Use Assistant Coaches or Parents to Serve as Passers and Rebounders. Some drills move faster if you have some capable helpers to keep things moving, so put your assistant coaches and parents to work for you to keep practice flowing as smoothly as possible.
- Keep Everyone Busy. No Waiting in Lines. You'll need to choose drills that complement the number of players, balls, and baskets that you have, but there will be times when you have an activity that doesn't allow for participation of the entire group. If you have some drills where you just can't keep everyone occupied, give your players "busy work" drills that can be done on the side with little supervision.

Here are 10 ideas for "busy work" drills and/or activities to keep your players active and learning at all times.

- ✓ Jump rope
- ✓ Two Ball Dribbling
- ✓ Mikan Drill
- ✓ Free Throw Challenge
- ✓ Partner Passing
- ✓ Lay up drills
- ✓ Rebounding drills
- ✓ Spider Dribbling
- ✓ Figure 8 Dribbling
- ✓ One on One

You can almost always come up with the right combination of drills to keep everyone busy.

Element #2 - How to Make Your Players Feel Successful: It's critically important to make sure that all of your players experience success. Without some level of achievement, it's nearly impossible for them to enjoy themselves. Success helps to keep players motivated and enthusiastic about playing basketball. Success can come in a variety of forms. Most people think of winning as success. But that's not what we're talking about here. We believe that you should forget about winning and focus instead on learning, celebrating each player's individual improvements along with the triumphs of the team as a whole. Here are just a few ways that you can celebrate those small, but meaningful accomplishments:

- Run a mix of drills that vary in difficulty so EVERY player has the opportunity to succeed. Sometimes, just completing a drill can create a feeling of victory and satisfaction for your players.
- Verbally reward and praise improvement. Give your players lots of compliments when they're doing well and let them know how much they have improved. Congratulate them on the progress they've made. It's easy to forget how much they have grown as players, and it's your job to remind them.
- Reward hard work because this usually results in improvement too.

- **Measure performance and reward development.** Your options are unlimited here. This can be as simple as tracking the number of form shots a player makes during practice, then showing how much they improved a few weeks later. It's a "small" success that makes players feel good and motivates them to keep working. A few other things that you can measure include:
 - ✓ Number of rebounds per game
 - ✓ Number of shot attempts per game
 - ✓ Number of assists per game
 - ✓ Length of offensive possessions
 - ✓ Whether you out rebounded the other team. (You don't always have to focus on wins or losses, especially with youngsters.)
 - ✓ Track the number of footwork mistakes (travels) in certain drills. Then show them on paper how much they improved over time.

You see, not everything is about winning.

- **Don't be overly critical.** If you see that a player isn't executing a drill properly, be sure to mention what they're doing right as well. Players will respond better to criticism if it's "sandwiched" between a couple of favorable comments.

Element #3 - How to Establish Discipline and Keep Players Under Control: One of the best ways to get your players to enjoy themselves and get the most from this experience is by establishing the right kind of discipline. That's right! Discipline, structure, accountability, and follow-through. Kids actually have more fun if they have a good set of rules in place. They respond well to structure because it makes them feel more secure. They know what to expect and how to perform. True, some will test you. Expect it! But remember to be consistent and always mean what you say. If you tell your team that talking during a team meeting means a lap around the gym, then enforce it— always, and for EVERYONE.

Have you ever watched the TV show Super Nanny? It's funny because her teachings are really effective and reinforce many of the things that we incorporate into basketball practices. We recommend watching her TV show to help with your practices. But in the meantime...

1. Set rules.
2. Communicate those rules both verbally and in writing.
3. Have a written schedule.
4. Have a written practice plan.
5. Follow through with your rules.

It's actually quite simple. Kids are smart. They know what they can get away with. So you must establish some very basic rules and expectations. You owe it to your players, their parents and especially to yourself. Do you really want to coach 20 kids without any discipline or structure in place? When rules are broken or expectations are not met, then there have to be consequences, every time. Not some of the time. Every time! The behavior of your players will very quickly change if you are consistent.

Element #4 - How to Grab and Hold Your Players' Attention: If you can't get your players' attention on a consistent basis, you'll struggle to run a smooth and enjoyable practice. Even worse, you'll end up frustrated and yelling at your players, which is not fun for anyone! To get some ideas for getting your players' attention, we solicited advice from a school psychologist. They use special techniques to keep the attention of kids that have trouble focusing. Many of these techniques can be applied to coaching.

Here are a few techniques to get your players' attention and keep them focused:

- 1) **Do less talking and more showing.** Young kids have a very short auditory attention span, so you should limit talk to a max of 2 minutes. Then start showing. All too often, coaches talk, and talk, and talk. But it doesn't do

ANY good because no one is listening! It's easy to forget that young kids aren't much different than you as an adult.

For example, how many times have you ignored the written assembly instructions on a piece of furniture or a toy and just focused on the illustrations to get the job done? The truth is that we tend to learn more from the "showing" than the "telling".

- 2) Use all the senses. Again, do more than just give verbal instructions. You can get their attention by tapping into visual senses and actually showing them how to do something on the court. You can use cue cards, chalk boards, and so on.

Another sure way to get a player's attention is to put your hand on their shoulder. You obviously can't be everywhere and use this technique in all situations, but keep this in mind when you need to quickly GRAB a floundering player's attention. If an assistant coach is nearby, they can do the same.

- 3) Use point sheets. Start a reward system where players can earn points by paying attention. Keep track of their points on sheets. Then, as players earn points they can earn rewards like play money that can be used to buy Gatorade, drinks, or other items that you have on hand.
- 4) Choose topics that are of interest to your players. This might seem like a trivial tip, but few coaches seem to remember it. Kids are more interested in things that they can relate to. So, if anything, keep this in mind when structuring your practice: Mix some interesting stuff in between the boring stuff.

For example, when working on form shooting you can say, "Did you know that Dwayne Wade does form shooting every day?" Learn about your kids' favorite players and talk about them. This little trick will keep them both interested and enthused.

- 5) Provide frequent breaks. It helps to provide frequent breaks between drills and activities. If players know that breaks are coming and you don't push them too hard, they'll pay more attention during practice.
- 6) Explain and show the reason why. A great way to get your players on board is to explain the reason *why* you do certain things. Most coaches neglect this super effective tactic and instead they just jam the tactics down their players' throats.

Explaining the "reason why" is a proven psychological trigger that causes people to take a desired action. Humans, by nature, want to know the reason why they are doing things. If your players don't understand the reason you want them to keep their knees bent, always be ready to help, see man and ball, apply ball pressure, and so on, then they will NOT give 100%!

- 7) Constantly change things. Don't dwell on the same drill for too long or your players will completely lose focus. Continually change things and move onto new drills every 2-5 minutes.
- 8) Use a timer. A common technique used by school psychologists is to use a timer. You can do the same thing during your practices. Set a timer that beeps every two minutes so you know when you've been talking for too long and when to move onto the next drill. A stopwatch is also effective and less distracting to players.
- 9) Ask questions to keep things interactive. When you're talking, be sure to ask the group and individuals questions. This type of interaction is much more interesting than just listening to someone talk, and it keeps players attentive, as they'll want to be prepared in case they're called on.
- 10) Use their first names frequently. Nothing grabs a player's attention more than calling out their name. In fact, anything that is about "you" or has your name in it will draw your attention. If you don't know all of your players names, heaven forbid, learn them!!
- 11) All eyes on you. During the brief moments that you're talking, make it a non-negotiable rule that ALL eyes are on you. This makes it a lot harder for players to lose their focus.

Element #5 - How to Structure Your Practice: The organization of your practice can have a profound effect on the entire experience for you and your team. A good structure will help you keep your players attentive, having fun, and everything running smoothly.

A well-organized practice gives everyone the opportunity to have fun. Our first and most important suggestion is to prepare well ahead of time and develop a written practice plan. Take the time to strategically plan out and script your entire practice. You should know exactly which drill to run next by looking at your practice plan, which will help you dramatically improve the efficiency of your practice.

Beyond that, *here are 10 suggestions to help you better structure your practices:*

- 1) Introduce new drills and concepts at the beginning of practice when players are most attentive.
- 2) Limit each drill to a MAX of 3-5 minutes. Young players just don't have the attention span and brain development to benefit from drills longer than this.
- 3) If you have a tough or boring drill coming up, be sure to follow up with a fun one, and let players know what's coming. Many times, just knowing that something fun is around the corner will help them get through a difficult drill.
- 4) Start to develop a consistent pattern and be sure that you don't go too long without something fun. If you work on intense stuff for too long, your players will get rambunctious and they'll never recover.
- 5) Choose drills that are fast paced and incorporate conditioning. Avoid running players at the end because they will become anxious about the end of practice. Your normal drills should be so fast paced that you don't need conditioning at the end.
- 6) Logically organize drills so there is little down time. If a particular drill requires lots of time to set up, then run that drill directly after a break so you can set up while players are getting drinks.
- 7) Use your players to help you set up drills, so they're constantly involved. For example, you can teach them how to get cones and set them up for certain drills. Have them run to set up the cones between drills so there is no down time. You can even make a game out of it. The player that gets their cones set up first gets two claps.
- 8) Use your imagination to keep players busy at ALL times. If a certain drill requires only 5 players, have the rest of your players work on ball handing or jump rope on the side to keep them busy. No standing and waiting.
- 9) End each practice on a positive note. Team oriented drills give them a feeling of togetherness as they leave the floor.
- 10) Break up the monotony. It helps to break things up throughout practice to avoid boredom. Players generally lose focus after working on the same thing for too long, so the more variety the better. For example, you could do 5 minutes of defensive drills and then change things up to a competitive shooting drill that they enjoy.

Element #6 - How to Keep Your Attitude Positive and Upbeat: This comes down to your attitude and how you interact with your players. Do you continually yell at players to keep them in line? Do you criticize players more than you compliment them?

Here are a few techniques to keep things positive and upbeat:

- Use the sandwich technique. When correcting players, be sure to start and end with a compliment. For example, if Billy doesn't do a good job of blocking out say, "Hey Billy, way to hustle down the court. Next time the shot goes up, be sure to pivot and block out your man. But good job with the hustle. Keep it up." You see how this is more positive than simply correcting the kid? If you correct and critique kids too much, they'll get discouraged and that's the last thing you want.
- Don't put too much pressure on yourself by worrying about winning. Too many coaches fall into the trap of feeling like they need to win all of their games. This added pressure can cause stress and a negative attitude. Remember that your goal is to make a difference in your players' lives, not to win the national championship.

- Offer occasional non-verbal rewards. For a fun way to keep things interesting and provide a little motivation, try giving out rewards after practices. We used to give a Gatorade to players every time they took a charge and drew the foul during a practice. This helped with "top of mind awareness", so they were often thinking about charges. But the players also had a lot of fun with it. One of the first things they'd say after games, with a big SMILE on their face, would be, "Did you see that charge coach? You owe me a Gatorade!" Players can be motivated to achieve goals by occasionally offering tangible rewards or by utilizing a tactic of the great Morgan Wooten. Wooten offered "Permissions" to his players. Permissions are rewards granted to players for outstanding efforts or reaching set goals. The permissions are earned throughout the practice and then totaled up at the end. Each permission resulted in one less lap, suicide, or other conditioning drill.
- Show players that you care. Demonstrate that you care about players by showing a sincere interest in what they do both on and off the court. This will show them that you really care about them and will help you build a better relationship.

It all comes down to three simple rules to keep in mind: *Smile. Enjoy yourself. Set a good example.*

Element #7- How to Make Your Drills Fun: We have supplied you with 50 fun drills that you can use to make your practices fun, yet educational. But don't stop there! You can make almost any ordinary drill fun. Just use your imagination. You can do things like:

- ✓ Turn the drill into a game. Nothing says, "FUN" like a game. You can turn a simple lay-up drill into a game by keeping track of missed shots. If you miss you're out. The last player standing wins.
- ✓ Gimmicks. Tricks like offering points will make any drill enjoyable. Allow players to earn redeemable points for paying attention, properly executing a drill, helping out a teammate, or whatever you choose. Points can get players rewards that range from a Gatorade to a few less sprints.
- ✓ Take a few tips from your childhood. Remember your favorite childhood games like "Mother, May I", "Red Rover" and "Tag"? They're still being enjoyed by kids today and you can incorporate basic basketball skills into almost all of them to create fun new activities for your team.
- ✓ Add props. Using simple props like cones, chairs, mats, and other common items found in the gymnasium can take ordinary drills to a whole new level. Have players dribble through cones to improve their ball handling skills or
- ✓ Occasionally Add Competitive Twists to Your Drills. We use the word "occasionally" because you shouldn't use competition too much. In fact, some young kids do not respond to competition and are DEMOTIVATED by it. But as long as you're careful, adding competition to your drills can be a great way to spice things up, make things fun, and keep players working hard.

As an example, you could establish teams for a shooting drill and reward the team or individual player that makes the most shots. With a little imagination, you can come up with ways to make almost all your drills competitive. Just remember that comparisons between teammates can make some players feel badly about themselves and can spur rivalries between teammates. In short, it can squash a player's motivation. If you need to compare teammates, do so only to model a desired behavior or skill.

For example, "Watch how Joe follows through with his free throw shot, try that next time you're at the line and see how it feels."

- ✓ Developing Skills and Having Fun: As coaches, we all know that we can't play games the entire time. Otherwise, the players wouldn't develop their basketball skills properly. There are moments that you'll have to teach and spend a few minutes having the kids run a drill that may not be so "fun." A great way to do this is to teach a skill and follow it with a game that works on developing that particular skill.

For example, spend a couple of minutes explaining how to shoot a lay up. Have the kids work on it for 3 or 4 minutes. Then, have them see who can make the most lay ups in 2 minutes. Show them how to do a chest

pass. Have your players partner up and do chest passes for a couple of minutes. After that, see who can get the most chest passes in 30 seconds.

Try using this formula: Lecture (2 minutes) + Skill Building (2 to 4 minutes) + Game (1 min to 3 min) = 5 to 9 minutes, which is about the perfect amount of time to spend on a particular skill.

Link to full PDF, which includes 50 game & drill ideas:

<file:///C:/Users/dserick/Documents/Scott/Sports/Basketball/60%20Fun%20Basketball%20Drills%20&%20Games.pdf>