

Training and Coaching Tips for Youth Basketball Practice

By Brian McCormick

Once the team is selected, a youth basketball coach faces two major decisions: developing a philosophy and prioritizing skills.

In many youth leagues, teams practice once or twice a week for a total of no more than three hours; a coach cannot expect to teach his team everything, so he must prioritize skills and create a basic system of play around the prioritized skills.

Novice players have so much to learn: the rules, the skills, the strategy, the tactics, etc. Young players (9-11 years old) need to experience the game and prepare to play in games, as the game is the point. However, in order to play better, players need instruction, drills and repetitions. Coaching a youth basketball practice is more difficult than a college or professional practice because there is so much to teach and such a small foundation. While anything one teaches is helpful to the players, the amount of required instruction to prepare players for a game is somewhat overwhelming.

Coaching philosophies break into two very general categories: winning or fun. Both have negative connotations. When the score is kept, the goal is to win. However, for most youth players, winning is not the most important part of sports; winning is preferable to losing, but there are more important things, like fun, learning new skills and playing with friends. When coaches are “fun,” players do not develop new skills and there is not a significant challenge. Coaches need to balance these philosophies to create an appropriate philosophy for his team.

A youth coach’s focus should be development and learning; youth sport is preparation for further athletic participation, whether recreational or competitive. This preparation is physical and mental, general and sport-specific. Unfortunately, the emphasis is often solely on basketball-specific development and game preparation, which ignores many lessons that are equally or possibly more important to players’ development.

The following is a basic philosophy and generic practice plan for coaching youth basketball.

Practice Plan

15 minutes: Athletic Skills/Movement Preparation

Basketball is a game of movement; however, coaches ignore movement skills and focus on more important things. Nothing is more important than teaching players to move correctly; players lacking general athletic skills struggle to perfect basketball-specific skills. This is an area coaches must emphasize, not ignore.

Drills include:

- Marching
- Skipping
- Body weight squats
- Jogging/Back pedaling
- Lunges
- Butt kicks
- High Knees
- Frankenstein Walks (hand straight ahead; kick leg up to the hands)
- Pelican Walks (bend over and touch one leg while the other leg rises off the ground)
- Carioca
- Crossover Steps
- Lateral Bounds
- Lateral Squats

The Athletic Skills Warm-up serves three functions: 1) Prepares athlete for practice; a dynamic warm-up is more functional and sport-specific than a static stretch; 2) Teaches athletes proper movement habits, which enhances performance; many athletes progress with poor running form or the inability to squat properly and suffer injuries or decreased performance because of poor movement habits; 3) Prepares athletes for more sport-specific training as they age; an athlete who learns to do a body squat properly at a young age has an advantage in strength and technique as he ages and strength training is emphasized even more.

Parents and coaches may be skeptical about spending nearly a third of the practice time doing calisthenics, but the ultimate performance enhancement and injury reduction over the course of an athlete's career is worth an extra loss suffered during the season.

15 minutes: **Ball Handling/Shooting Practice**

Ball handling and shooting are the essential sport-specific skills. For young players, ball handling is easier to master than shooting, so more time is spent training ball handling; shooting instruction and repetitions increase when the player is physically strong enough to shoot with correct form from 10-15 feet from the basket.

During this training time, the majority of the time is spent in two activities: 1) Lay-ups and 2) Games using dribbling. Players must be able to use both hands around the basket and finish from different angles. Each practice should incorporate game-like lay-up training in some form. Initially, coaches teach different lay-ups and work in a controlled setting from relatively close to the basket. As the season progresses, full court, speed lay-ups, lay-ups after a dribble move and the full variety of shots around the basket take precedence; different finishes include: reverse lay-ups, crossover lay-ups, power lay-ups, up-and-unders, floaters, finger rolls, runners, running hooks, inside-hand lay-ups and more.

At a young age, different games are a great way to teach skills because drills do not always transfer. Tag is a great game for young athletes because it trains agility, linear speed, lateral speed, etc. Play tag with a basketball, and it's a great way to teach ball handling without the tediousness of putting teams in lines and dribbling straight up and down the floor. Players learn to dribble with their head up to avoid defenders (it). As players progress, challenge the team to dribble only with their weak hand or add different moves to the game.

30 minutes: **Scrimmage**

Some coaches view scrimmages as abdicating one's coaching duties and rolling the ball out for players to do as they want; others view scrimmages as the most essential teaching tool, as it simulates a game, which is the entire point in the first place. By using small-sided games and modifying the rules, the coach trains skills and habits players need to develop. For instance, playing a game without dribbling teaches players to get open and to pass while under pressure. Playing 1v1 in the full court trains ball handling, man2man defense and full speed lay-ups. To work on setting screens, play 3v3 or 4v4 in the half court and only count baskets scored directly off an off-ball screen situation.

By modifying rules to train different skills, coaches keep players active, prepare players for games, teach players to compete, and train skills and habits which can be expanded as players grow. Also, when coaches stop the action to teach something, players understand the lesson because it is directly from the game action and not an abstract concept during a drill which at that moment has little application in their minds to the game itself.

This is not a practice plan for teams concerned with winning the championship; this basic plan is geared towards development, learning and fun. Young players play sports for fun and exercise more than winning and many quit sports when they get too competitive or boring or when the coach doesn't teach them anything. Within this plan, players prepare for future athletic success, learn basic basketball skills, compete, have fun and prepare for game action through meaningful structured play.