



Choosing a Team

This is the time of year in this country that many provincial and national teams are being selected. Since I have been asked by a number of people about this topic I thought I would share some thoughts about team selection.

It is always the hardest part of a coach's job. Anytime you cut players you have now said that someone is better than someone else. You are beginning to rank people. In today's society it is not acceptable to pick a team and just post a list or tell people to expect a phone call some times next week. People deserve to know why they did or did not make the team as soon as possible and face to face. The more a coach keeps things hush hush the more room there is for rumours to fill in the blanks. It is not easy, but a coach must practice truth over harmony. You are going to upset people. It is best to do it in a way that focuses on telling the truth, but also allowing people to keep their dignity and room to grow from the experience. This is part of growing as a coach and more importantly as a compassionate person. What follows are some points to ponder:

Selection Criteria

What is your selection criterion? You need to make a public statement up front about what qualities you are looking for from the players:

- **Eligibility** is usually the first concern. With age group teams it usually involves age. With national teams it is a passport. Leagues may have rules for eligibility about transfers, number of games played at certain levels of competition. Eligibility is ultimately the coach's responsibility. Ignorance of this can get you into trouble.
- **Ability** - Some statement needs to be made as to what abilities you are looking for in the players. These abilities can be from the physical, mental or social/ emotional level. Here is the line I used with my high school teams:

Fitness, skill level, maturity and competitiveness to play at an elite high school level.

This is basically a motherhood statement. If you are too specific you can get caught in your own trap. I remember a coach picking a team based on fitness tests and skills test. The results were not a team that anyone connected with basketball would have chosen. You need some wiggle room.

- **Commitment** – Players must be able to make the training and competitive schedule. If there are conflicts this should be made public before the team is picked. Very often parents/ players will keep this hidden from the coach until the team is picked. Then the parents/players will try to negotiate the solution after the fact. All cards need to be laid

- on the table at the beginning. This should also involve any fund raising responsibilities.
- **Attitude** – This needs to be defined. Saying someone has a bad attitude is a recipe for disaster. I defined attitude as being:
 - An energy giver or taker on the team.
 - Trustworthy.
 - Able to travel as part of a team and represent yourself, the school and community in a positive light.
 - Coachable - willing to learn and able to communicate problems.

Someone should be assigned the task of holding you accountable to your selection criteria. Where coaches get into trouble is where they say one thing, but do another.

Promises Promises

Be careful not to promise people ahead of time that they are on the team. Too often coaches, in order to get the 'special' 'player to try out, promises a position. If this gets out others then feel the whole try out process is unfair and a waste of time. You hear comments such as; "There is no sense trying out for that team, the coach already has it picked." The same can happen when a coach picks a team ahead of time in his/her mind, but starts to share this information with others. It is so easy for this information to get misconstrued. If there is one thing that people like to do is gossip. The exception is if you have made a **public statement** about players. For example, a coach may say that those players who were on the team last year are automatically on the team this year. The coach may still want the players to attend the try out for comparison purposes.

Be aware of the lure

Fishing lures work because they are bright and shiny. They are not the real thing. Many coaches have become infatuated with a player who has one spectacular try out. Is the try out the only thing that matters or is it one piece of the puzzle. Be sure to communicate to people if the try out is what counts or is it just the final part in a series of events. Usually you are not comparing apples to apples at a try out.

- The coach teaches a set offence that he/she wants the players to run in the try out. On the positive side it may show which players can learn. On the negative those players who already know the offence are at a distinct advantage. They will play more relaxed and naturally look better.
- The same situation as above only the coach teaches a set that no one has seen before. The coach thinks that this will make it easy to compare. One player runs around doing his/her own thing. He/she scores at will and steals the ball because the others are playing like robots trying to please the coach. This is a classic lure.
- A player does not show well. When the coaches meet at the end they complain that he/she did not have a good try out. The reason was he/she never touched the ball. The player got paired with the ball hogging point guard for the entire scrimmage.

If only...

At the end of a try out you should never begin your talk with a player you are cutting by saying; “if only you ... “. You should have told the player exactly what you needed to see. If a player wasn't defending well tell him/her; “I need to see you contain your check on defence.” If a player was only driving to the basket, tell the player: “I need to see if you can make an assist.” I have never been a big fan of coaches who separate themselves from the players and watch from afar. You need to find out how players can adapt to coaching. It also becomes much easier to tell a player after why he/she did or did not make the team.

What do you need?

You are building a team. It is not always the collection of the best ball handlers and shooters. There are many roles that needed to be filled on a team. Do you have a defensive stopper? Is there one player who you can rely on to get the ball to the right player at the right time? Do you have that player who can bust the zone from the outside? Who is going to get you those tough offensive boards? Your job as a coach is to know what roles and responsibilities are required. Will players accept the roles you want them to have? Too often a player who is used to being a scorer on a team will not accept a lesser role on another team.

Development

Some players are always taken with future development in mind. This is true even at the NBA level. Some players should be chosen from a purely developmental point of view. For too many years the tall uncoordinated late maturer has not been given a chance to make age group teams.

More games are lost off the floor than on the floor

A team involves a collection of human beings. This means that they must have some sort of interaction with each other. Behaviour off the floor has a huge impact on your team. Do you pick your team by biology or chemistry? From my experience I would never pick an elite team, which I was going to travel with over night, if I did not see them in an overnight residence situation. I did not want any surprises on my first night away with the team.

Scrimmage

- If you are going to scrimmage please let the players warm up. If someone is a shooter and you just start to play it is very difficult to shoot.
- Pay attention to details: Who gives energy who takes energy? Who listens? Who puts the balls away? Who is coachable? Who takes the challenge of guarding the best player? Who conveniently subs to avoid looking bad? Who knows how to make the player he is in competition for look bad in try out; thereby raising his or her stock.
- Focus first on those who cannot play and those who are automatic picks. Now spend the majority of your time on the players in the middle.
- Use a games approach.
 - Zone
 - Ultimate- no dribbling
 - Rugby – the ball can only be passed backward until the ball gets inside

the three point line.

- Hockey – the ball can not be dribbled across half.
- 1 second ball – must dribble pass or shoot within one second of catching the ball.
- Post touch – no shot can be taken until the ball goes inside the key first.
- Use a screen
- Full court pick up

This is great way to see how players can adapt their skills to a variety of situations that may occur.

How do you cut someone?

I always told players there were two ways to handle being cut:

1. Blame someone and not grow from the situation.
2. Learn from the situation and grow to become a better player.

I always remember Jack Donohue saying players on average got cut five times before making a national team.

If a player is going to have the opportunity to grow he/she requires the coach to be open and honest in his/her feedback:

- It should be immediate and face to face. **HAVE SOMEONE WITH YOU AS A WITNESS.** You should never be alone with an athlete in a closed room delivering a negative message. You never know what story someone will concoct.
- Be specific. Pick out examples of what the athlete did well or needs to improve. This is why it is always a good idea to keep stats at a scrimmage. It is easier to say you need to learn to take care of the ball when you have the stat to back it up.
- Spend time with those you cut first. Those that have made the team don't need you right now.
- Think it through. Allow people a chance to keep their dignity. Walking out of a room after being cut to face a group of waiting people is not easy. Sometimes using a place where people can exit without having to face the group is better.
- If a family member is involved think about removing yourself from the decision.