

Chapter 1

Teaching Basketball to Children

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Congratulations on your decision to volunteer to coach a youth basketball team. Your season-long journey — beginning when you meet the kids and parents, continuing at the first practice, and ending with the final game and awards ceremony — will be packed with special moments. The job you do will bring a smile to your face, and you and your players — regardless of their age, skill levels, or experience — will remember this season for the rest of your lives.

And if you're picking up this book because you haven't decided if you want the job yet, we hope the information can convince you that your job as a coach will be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life — as long as you do it for the right reasons. Heading into the season, your goals should be zeroed in on fun, skill development, and safety, as well as making it all happen in a stress-free environment.

Please be aware that if you volunteer to coach youth basketball, you're taking on a very important role. How you approach the season and how you interact with the kids will affect how they feel about themselves, the sport of basketball, and you. Your coaching style can either help them develop an unquenchable passion for the game or sweep away all their interest in playing organized sports.

To start and finish your job, you need some quality information on all the different aspects of the game. Consider this chapter your jumping-off point to this book and to the world of coaching youth basketball. Using this chapter and the rest of this book as a guide, you can find everything you need to navigate your players to a safe, fun-filled, rewarding, and memorable season.

Before You Grab the Clipboard: Preparing for Your Season

People get involved with coaching youth basketball for all sorts of reasons. Perhaps you volunteered this season because spending extra time with your child while introducing him to the game sounded like a fun experience. Maybe the league has a shortage of coaches, and you chose to step forward and help out the kids. Or perhaps you simply love working with kids, and the thought of coaching a youth basketball team sounded pretty appealing.

Whatever your reason, you must recognize that you're accepting an enormous responsibility that you can't take lightly. Hopefully, you've stepped forward for all the right reasons, rather than for many of the wrong reasons some get involved in the game, such as hoping to win a shiny first-place trophy to show off to friends and neighbors, or to guide their children to future athletic scholarships. Before any youngster begins dribbling or shooting a ball, you have plenty of behind-the-scenes work to do to ensure that the season gets off to a smooth start and stays smooth throughout. This section gives you a preview. Check out Chapter 2 for the complete lowdown.

Gaining mom and dad's support

The vast majority of the moms and dads you'll meet while coaching youth basketball will be wonderful, supportive, and caring people — as long as you do your part to make and keep them this way. When working with your players, you'll stress the importance of teamwork. When it comes to working with parents, it's really no different. When coaches and parents commit to working together — the adult form of teamwork — they create a special formula that produces tremendous benefits for the youngsters. When coaches and parents clash over everything from playing time to strategy, it can spoil the experience for everyone involved.



You can make an immediate connection with the parents and sidestep many potential problems by gathering them for a special meeting before you begin the season. You can lay the ground rules on what you expect in terms of behavior during games, and you can outline their roles and responsibilities. (Check out Chapter 4 for tips on how to run this preseason meeting.)

No matter what, never forget that parents play important roles in youth basketball programs. Keep the following points in mind to help make your dealings with the parents go smoothly:



- ✓ **Explain your expectations.** Many parents have never had a child involved in organized basketball before, so they'll appreciate a little guidance. Before the season starts, outline your expectations for them and their kids so you leave no question about what kind of conduct and attitude you expect. Go over your planned coaching methods and detail what you want everyone to take away from this experience.

Telling parents firsthand that you're committed to skill development and fun over winning, and that you'll distribute playing time equally — regardless of skill level — squashes any chance of petty squabbles surfacing. Chapter 2 helps you develop your all-important coaching philosophy and become knowledgeable with all your league's policies and rules regarding playing time and other considerations.

- ✓ **Include parents whenever possible.** Parents invest a lot of time and money into their child's basketball experience. The season will be much more enjoyable for them and their youngster if you can find ways to include them on your season-long journey. Parents can do so much more than bring snacks and drinks to games. You can involve them in your practices and recruit the right ones to assist on game day (see Chapter 4). Plus, it's a great gesture on your part. (Chapter 6 covers planning your practices.)

- ✓ **Communicate with them.** Besides conducting a preseason parents meeting, you need to keep the communication lines open all season long. Regularly talk to the parents about their kids' progress; share your thoughts on areas of the game where the kids are really improving; offer suggestions for ways they can help their youngsters develop; and check in to make sure their kids are still having fun. (Chapter 8 details how you can talk with parents during the season.)



We'd be remiss if we didn't warn you that some parents will take their kids' participation more seriously than necessary. They think they're doing what's best for their children, but they can end up being sources of season-long aggravation. No matter what, there's always a chance that problems will materialize. If a problem pops up, you should remain calm and in control of your emotions, and never allow situations to escalate. Chapter 19 gives the rundown on some of the more common problems that you may need to address and presents the best approaches for solving them before they disrupt your season.

Getting a handle on the rules and terms

Just like any good auto mechanic understands how all the different parts of a vehicle work, a good basketball coach knows all the rules of the game and how they're applied. A good coach also knows how to teach the rules — along

with the various terms and strategies associated with the game — to players. That isn't as complicated as it may seem, but it does take some time and effort on your part to learn all the rules that comprise this great game.

In Chapter 3, we dig into basketball's rulebook to help you cover key basketball terms. We also explain the many violations that refs often whistle. The information there serves as a basis for the skills, techniques, and strategies you need to pass along to your players (which we cover throughout Parts II, III, and IV of this book).



Make sure you know any special rules that your league has in place. Quite often, leagues utilize different rules depending on the age and experience level of the players. Everything from the size of the court to what types of rules are enforced change from community to community. Knowing these rules — and being able to share them with your players — makes a tremendous difference in your coaching and how you can motivate your players to have the most fun possible.

Hitting the Court

The most fun you'll have during the season will occur on the court — both during practices and on game days — when you're working closely with the kids in all different areas of the game. During your practice sessions with the kids, you'll instruct them both one-on-one and in group settings, and you'll teach, motivate, and applaud them every step of the way. When game days roll around, you'll have a front row seat as you watch them transfer those skills to a more competitive setting against other teams. During these moments, you can forge special bonds with your players and help them improve in the game.



Always keep in mind that coaching youth basketball is much more than helping a youngster deliver passes, make shots, and protect the ball. Coaching during practice and games also is about putting a smile on a youngster's face when she's on the court and seeing the excitement in her eyes as she has fun learning how to perform a variety of skills. While you're teaching and coaching, always keep the focus on fun. It could mean the difference between a child playing one season or forever. This section touches on what to do during court time, including practices and games.

Mapping out your practices

When you plan your practices, you'll create sessions that kids look forward to because they set the tone for all sorts of learning and skill development. If your practices aren't carefully planned — perhaps you put them together while

sitting in your car, five minutes before the players arrive — you minimize the sessions' productivity and smother a lot of the fun that could've taken place. Planning is important. But how you design your practices and choose drills also has a direct impact on the kids' enjoyment. (To help you prepare for and run a great practice, check out the info in Chapter 6.)



Keep the following thoughts in mind to help squeeze the most fun and productivity out of every practice you run:

- ✓ **Be more than a coach.** Your position as coach gives you a special opportunity to make a difference in a lot of other areas of the kids' lives. Sure, you'll teach kids the basics of the game, but your impact can extend far beyond how to set a screen or take a jump shot.

For example, while your kids are warming up for practice (see Chapter 18), take the time to talk to them about the importance of doing well in school. You also can speak about the importance of staying away from tobacco and drugs and leading a healthy lifestyle. The words you deliver may stick with a child for the rest of his life.

- ✓ **Set a relaxed atmosphere.** Let the kids know during the first practice of the season (see Chapter 6) that mistakes are part of the game, and that all you ask is that they listen to your instructions and give their best effort — with a smile on their face, of course. Make your practices stress-free sessions where youngsters can make mistakes without the fear of criticism or embarrassment. In this environment, your kids will play much more relaxed, which clears the way for them to have more fun, learn skills quicker, and perform better.

Focusing on fundamentals first

Although you may be enthusiastic about teaching kids all facets of the game, temper your enthusiasm so that you don't overwhelm them by throwing too much at them. When taking the court with a beginning-level team, you must focus on the most basic of skills, such as dribbling the basketball. After youngsters have a decent understanding of that skill, you can progress to other areas, such as shooting and passing. Gradually, after spending several practice sessions with them, you'll find that some kids will become more proficient at executing certain skills, and others will probably have some difficulty that, as the coach, you have to find ways to help them overcome.

Ultimately, your long-range goal is to help kids become all-around players who can perform a variety of skills at both the offensive and defensive ends of the court. But remember, that won't occur during a one-hour practice with you. It's going to take a lot of time — and plenty of patience on your part — to help kids get there. So relax, build on the fundamentals of the game, and enjoy your season-long journey helping the kids enjoy learning and embracing the game.



When choosing practice drills for your sessions, your best bet is to opt for drills that keep the kids moving and are challenging enough to hold their interest. Standing-around time drastically reduces the amount of learning that can take place. The array of drills we present for both offense and defense in Chapters 11, 14, and 17 will challenge and excite beginning, intermediate, and advanced players.

Surviving game day

One of the challenges of coaching basketball is constantly adapting to ever-changing conditions. This challenge is especially prevalent on game day, when you have to make all sorts of decisions with little time to sort through your options, all while distractions are grabbing for your attention. For instance, you have playing time to monitor, plays to call, strategies to adjust, and pre-game, halftime, and post-game talks to deliver. (That's why it's so helpful to have assistants! Chapter 4 goes through the process of choosing the right assistants.) Yes, game day brings with it a lengthy list of responsibilities, but don't go reaching for the antacid tablets just yet. Chapter 7 gives you all you need to help game day go smoothly. (Also, Chapters 12, 13, 15, and 16 go through many strategies on both sides of the ball and present many plays that you can call during a game.)

We also have you covered with more detailed information if you're coaching a more basketball-savvy, older squad. Part IV of this book covers strategies for offense and defense, and Chapter 20 covers coaching a travel team.



Besides giving kids the chance to use all their skills against a real opponent, game day provides you with some great teachable moments, too. Reinforce what you brought up during practice that week, such as the importance of teamwork, displaying good sportsmanship, abiding by the rules, doing your best at all times, and having fun regardless of what the scoreboard reads.

Juggling Your Parenting and Coaching Responsibilities

Parenting presents an endless list of challenges and responsibilities; tacking on the role of coaching your child can be doubly difficult. As soon as you step on the court with your child, all sorts of issues can appear out of nowhere. Don't worry, we help prepare you as best we can in this section. If you can handle the issues, you'll create an experience that will be enormously rewarding and memorable for both you and your child.

Making the decision and navigating the season from the sidelines

Before you decide to grab the whistle and clipboard and assume the role of basketball coach, sit down with your child and gauge how he feels about you running the team. If you don't ask, you'll never know. Many youngsters are thrilled to have their dads or moms as coaches, and if you see that sparkle in his eyes when you bring up the subject, that makes all the time and effort you'll have to put into the season well worth it. On the other hand, some children — for whatever reason — don't feel comfortable with the idea and would prefer that their parents don't coach their teams. Take your child's wishes into account before making the decision. After considering all the issues, your family must decide if you should indeed coach your child this season.

If you and your child agree that it's okay for you to coach the team, keep the following “don'ts” in mind as you navigate through the season:

- ✔ **Don't overlook your parenting duties.** Whether the team wins or loses, you have to put down your playbook and remember that you're a parent first. Ask your child whether he had fun, and pile on the praise for doing his best and displaying good sportsmanship.
- ✔ **Don't close the lines of communication.** You want your child to know that he can come to you to talk about a concern at any time during the season. Open communication helps ensure that you'll be able to monitor how the season is going.
- ✔ **Don't carry over practice sessions to home.** If your child has some difficulty performing a specific skill during practice, avoid the urge to insist on working on the skill as soon as you get home. You can ask in casual conversation if he'd like to spend some time working on a certain skill, *if* you sense that he's really interested. If he is, great, but if not, let it go. Pushing your child can drain his interest in the sport.
- ✔ **Don't compare your child to siblings.** Let your child develop at her own rate. Children should never feel burdened by expectations to match the skills or abilities of older or younger siblings. Such comparisons can crush self-esteem and chase away the desire to play basketball.
- ✔ **Don't mislead your child.** You shouldn't heap on the praise when actual honesty about his skill level or work ethic needs to be addressed. Act as you would if he wasn't focusing on his school work or needed some extra help in a particular subject.
- ✔ **Don't shortchange the praise.** Be sure to praise your child's willingness, understanding, and cooperation in this special venture. Coaching your child can be one of the most rewarding experiences you'll ever have, but it isn't always easy.

Sidestepping problems with your child

To derive maximum benefits from coaching your child, you have to find the proper balance between providing preferential treatment and overcompensating. It's a tricky proposition — sort of like balancing on a high wire, minus the safety net — but we have you covered with some pointers in the following list. Ideally, your behavior should fit somewhere between these two extremes, which each carry negative consequences:

- ✓ **Providing preferential treatment:** It isn't uncommon for coaches to show preferential treatment to their own children, whether they realize it or not. For instance, they may provide their children with extra playing time, more attention, and special team duties (such as captain). Be aware that showing favoritism pushes your child into an uncomfortable position with his teammates, weakening your team camaraderie and his chances to have fun with his peers.
- ✓ **Overcompensating to steer clear of preferential treatment:** Don't go too far in trying to ensure that no one thinks you're giving preferential treatment to your child. For instance, don't reduce your child's playing time, give him less attention or instruction during practices, or constantly criticize him and have expectations that are too high. Taking these measures creates a negative atmosphere for your child, because it detracts from his enjoyment of the game for reasons that he doesn't understand.



As a parent, you want your child to excel in any activity he undertakes. Just don't view your coaching position as an opportunity to control your child's destiny and steer him toward stardom. You don't want to compromise his experience by pushing him harder than the other kids, demanding more from him, and criticizing him when he doesn't fulfill your unfair expectations. If you lose sight of what youth basketball is all about — fun, skill development, and relationship building — you'll negatively impact your child's emotional well-being and his interest in learning and playing in the future.