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WIN MORE GAMES BY CONSISTENTLY KNOCKING DOWN FREE THROWS

By Christopher Stankovich, Ph.D. - www.drstankovich.com

In the game of basketball, successfully making free throws on a consistent basis can be the make-or-break factor when it comes to wins and losses. What is funny about free throws is that while they are “free,” they often don’t seem to be very easy to make! In this article I would like to go over some basic concepts and techniques designed to help you teach your players how to consistently make at least 75% of their free throws annually.

Basketball, like all sports, relies on three inter-related factors for success to occur: Physical training, technical instruction, and mental preparation. Simply put, athletes who train in all three areas often reach their full potential, while athletes who train in only one or two of these areas usually play below their full potential.

When it comes to free throws, ironically, physical training usually doesn’t play a very big role (in other words, you don’t have to be in great shape to consistently make your shots). What players do need to know, however, are the mechanics of free throw shooting (technical instruction) and mental training skills that help with focus, composure, and confidence. In fact, I am so confident in the mental aspect of free throw shooting that I would argue that mentally confident and focused players can even lag behind with the mechanics of free throw shooting and still improve their free throw percentage!

Sadly, while mental training plays a huge role in free throw accuracy, very few coaches teach these skills, and even fewer players have the slightest clue about how to incorporate things like breathing, arousal regulation, imagery, and self-talk to improve FT accuracy. Think about this for a moment – if your players consistently toed the line with great confidence, had a consistent and regulated routine, and developed the ability to quickly bounce back after missing the first FT, how much better would their FT percentage be by the end of the year?

So, what do basketball players need to know in order to dramatically improve their FT percentage? The following points will help you immediately begin to see a difference:

- First, teach your kids that no matter how terrible they have shot FT’s in the past to forget about it. Unfortunately, for some of your poor shooters, the biggest problem they face is having a self-fulfilling prophecy in place where they believe that they simply cannot consistently make FT’s! The truth is, as long as they feel this way they won’t make any improvements, so it is vital you get your kids to start at ground zero.
- Next, remind your kids how important free throws are and make sure to allow time everyday for them to work on their free throws. When you show that FT’s are important, they will respond by feeling the same way.
- After your kids buy in to this philosophy, and after you

have taught them the mechanics of shooting, the next thing to do is to discuss basic mental training skills that will immediately help them make more shots.

- Every kid needs to have a consistent, pre-shot routine! What the kid does as part of this routine is up to him/her – the key is that the player find a routine that he or she feels very comfortable doing and is consistent every time.
- Regardless of how many dribbles he or she takes, when it comes time to center on the target there are a couple things the player can do to ensure success. First, taking a very deep belly breath (into the stomach, not the lungs) will immediately do two things: 1) it will moderate arousal level and allow the player to calm his/her nerves, and 2) it will put the focus on the player and not allow the mind to wander and think about other things (i.e. the noisy crowd). Think of this type of breathing as a very precise way to regulate your thermostat (but instead of at your house, we are talking about your body’s arousal system). Deep breathing is a major piece to better FT shooting so be sure kids do not skip over this step!
- After a very deep belly breath, the player should next use imagery to simply see the ball leaving his/her hands and developing into a perfect trajectory that ends by swishing through the net. There is no “right or wrong” way to do imagery, so simply encourage your kids to take a few seconds to simply envision making the shot. In addition to visual imagery, kids can also learn kinesthetic imagery, whereby they actually “feel” the rhythm and release of shooting the free throw.
- Finally, self-talk is simply what we say to ourselves. Sadly, many nervous players at the free throw line instruct themselves to “not” miss or “not” screw up. This is a very bad thing! Whenever you tell yourself to “not” do something, the exact opposite occurs! If you don’t believe me right now DON’T think of a pink elephant! See what I mean?!
- Instead, the player’s self-talk should always be positive and productive. Rather than saying “don’t miss this shot,” the player can instead say any word that is positive in nature (i.e. “money” or “points” or “swish”). A positive word will continue to keep the arousal level good (meaning fewer negative nerves), allowing mind and body to remain in synchrony.
- As the self talk ends, the next step is to simply (and calmly) drain the shot.
- If the shot is missed, the routine does NOT change – instead, receive the ball and repeat the steps.
- This method will work, but it must be practiced until it is comfortable and mastered (meaning it needs to be worked on in practice every day). While practicing make sure your kids go through their new FT shooting

Dr. Chris Stankovich is recognized as a national expert in the field of Sport Psychology. For more information on peak performance products (including Sports Success 360), seminars, and professional consultation please visit www.drstankovich.com.

Win More Games by Consistently Knocking Down Free Throws - continued

routine somewhat quickly each day so they are not standing at the line and spending too much time trying to be perfect. Simply, grab a ball, move through the routine, shoot, then quickly repeat the steps.

- Once it feels good in practice, “muscle memory” will have been developed and the result will be FT’s in games that are easy to make as they are in practice.

Let’s face it, when kids miss free throws it’s usually not because they are out of shape, and it’s usually not because they don’t know the mechanics of shooting, either. The truth is the majority of their misses has to do with being overly-nervous and fearful, resulting in an increase in anxiety in the body, leading to tense and tight muscles, which lead to a tense and awkward shot – instead of a consistent and fluid shot. When a kid misses a few shots in a row, what usually happens is a lot more negative self-talk, faster (rushed) shots at the FT line, and ultimately more misses (leading to a complete breakdown in confidence).

There is nothing magical about the tips I have presented

today, but they will work (in fact, even young kids can learn these techniques). The key is for coaches to buy into the importance of FT shooting, and to teach kids how to incorporate basic mental training skills that can help. From there, consistent relaxed practice will lead to automatic muscle memory shots in games – and ultimately more wins for your team!

The Sports Performance Assessment for Basketball (by Dr. Chris Stankovich) is the world’s first app for iphones and the ipod-touch that allows players to quickly and discretely test their “mental toughness” – as well as learn specific strategies around how to improve their confidence, focus, preparation, and resiliency. If your players struggle with in-game focus, anxiety, and handling adversity (as so many student athletes do), then check out the Sports Performance Assessment for Basketball so your kids can quickly learn how to take their game to the next level! For more information please visit www.drstankovich.com, or go to the apps store and download your copy today!

**DISTRICT 10 - Tony Bisutti
Dublin Scioto High School**



Welcome to District 10 for the 2010-11 academic year. Hopefully everyone not only had a productive summer with their players, but also found some time to relax and re-charge the batteries. A special welcome goes out to the new head coaches in District 10 (list below). I’d like to encourage all coaches to get involved in District 10 as there are many ways you can participate in our organization.

Those interested should contact Boys Presidents Kevin Thuman (Westerville North) and Girls President Jim Strode (Bexley).

The following coaches are **Officers and Board Members** in District 10 for the 2010-11 academic year. Boys President - Kevin Thuman (Westerville North), Girls President - Jim Strode (Bexley), OHSBCA Representative - Tony Bisutti (Dublin Scioto), Boys Past President - Sam Davis (New Albany) and Tony Staib (Gahana Lincoln), Recorder - Steve Hall (Grandview), All-Star Game - Satch Sullinger (Northland), Tom Souder (Worthington Kilbourne) and Mike Lanza (Hartley), Media Relations - Vince Lombardo (Watterson), Hall of Fame Committee - Paul Pennell (Retired) and Joe Lang (Ready), and Attendance & Dues - Bob White (East) and Ray Corbett (Grandview). Board Members are Laurie Barr (Thomas Worthington), Scott Davis (Beechcroft), Kathy Lindsey (Hilliard Bradley), Matt Martin (Dublin Jerome), Bob Miller (Thomas Worthington), Todd Phillips (Franklin Heights), and Chris Savage (Upper Arlington).

Goals for District 10 for 2010-11 are: (1) Increase OHSBCA membership by including **ASSISTANT COACHES** in our membership, (2) Emphasis on coaches meeting deadlines for membership, (3) Continued use of District 10 website

for membership, information, downloads, etc., (4) Broader representation on the District 10 Board, (5) Continued implementation of “League Liaisons” to help spread word and get information out, (6) **Mandatory Attendance @ October 12th Clinic Meeting at Bexley High School - 6:00 PM.** Each school must have a representative from each Boys/Girls program or Players/Coaches are not eligible for post season awards.

Attention Girls Basketball Coaches: If you have any OHSBCA questoins we have a Girls Advisory Board Member for District 10 & 11. Contact Dave Butcher (Pickerington North) at 614-830-2756 or dave_butcher@fc.pickerington.k12.oh.us.

Update: Rules Interpretation Meetings may now be conducted online between October 5th and November 8th. Go to www.ohsaa.org and navigate to the basketball web page.

Please check out our website at www.ohiodistrict10.org to keep updated with District 10 information. I would like to thank all the head coaches and assistant coaches from District 10 who joined the OHSBCA last year. Finally, I would like to thank our Past Presidents, Tony Staib and Sam Davis for all their work and efforts over the past two years. These gentlemen put in a tremendous amount of time and efforts and deserve our special thanks for the great job they did. Also thanks goes our to our current Girls President, Jim Strode for all he has brought to the table. Finally, I would like to offer a gib welcome to incoming Boys President, Kevin Thuman.

- New Boys Coaches**
Ryan Gross, Marysville
- New Girls Coaches**
Gary Burke, Canal Winchester
Al Jarrett, Columbus Mifflin
Stephanie Jones, Columbus School for Girls
Matt Fisher, Dublin Scioto
Hugo Quint, Westland
Carla Shaw, Hamilton Township
Joy Taylor, Hilliard Davidson
Ben Ackley, London
Brian Cromwell, St. Francis DeSales
Silas Williams, Westerville South