

Ten Late Season Fundamentals To Emphasize in Practice!

To make sure that your players continue to improve as individuals, be sure to continue to work on fundamentals. You can introduce new fundamentals drills to freshen things up during a time of the season when things can get stale in practice. I am not suggesting you introduce a new offense or defense, but just a new way to practice a single skill.

Teams tend to reach a "saturation" point during the season where as a group the team does not improve much more. One way to overcome this sticking point in improvement is to shift the focus slightly during practice to individual improvement.

Emphasize the fact that for the TEAM to continue to improve, each individual player must continue to improve. As the individual players improve, the TEAM will once again move forward and improve again, getting past the sticking point in improvement. The list below is not a list of drills to use, but rather a list of skills that must be practiced. Use the drills that you have used all season to teach these fundamentals, just emphasize the perfect execution of the skills.

Remember the fact that players do what we as coaches *emphasize*, not what we necessarily teach.

Skills to emphasize:

1) Lay-ups and free throws: these are the two skills that games are won with. It is not enough to just practice these skills, there has to be a consequence for failure to perform at a high enough level. Attaching a consequence to the performance communicates these are essential skills. Explain to your players repeatedly how these two skills impact the outcome of a game.

2) Pass the ball away from the defender: Another concept that must be taught and practiced and re-taught and re-emphasized. Close contests are the norm in most district races and one or two turnovers can make the difference in the outcome of a game. It is not enough to work on passing skills, the idea of where to pass must be reinforced as well.

3) Footwork: John Wooden worked on footwork in every practice of the season, including the last practice before his national championship games. Basketball is played with the feet as well as the hands and most of the skills of the game involve the correct execution of footwork in order for the skill to be executed correctly.

4) Closeouts with HIGH HANDS: Dick Bennett felt that having high hands on a closeout was the most important thing a defender could do when transitioning from help defense to on the ball defense. Emphasize the correct execution of closing out.

5) Hand discipline on defense: Why lose a game because one player lacked hand discipline and reached for the ball and either was beaten by the offensive player or had a needless foul called.

6) Rebounding technique: There are different ways to block out and the point here is not to argue which is the best technique. The point is to work on how you want your players to block out for the rebound, both on offense and defense.

7) Ball handling: I do want to emphasize one skill in particular in this example, the pull-back crossover dribble. This move, when combined with the pull-back and go is a deadly go to and counter-move combination that can be used to defeat traps, ball pressure and to blow past defenders. When late season fatigue begins to take its toll, the ability to know you can defeat pressure with your ball handling skill is a great boost to a player's confidence and energy level.

8) Setting screens correctly: Many times late in a game, it is not the offense that breaks down or succeeds in getting a key shot on a key possession, it is the effectiveness of how the fundamentals of the offense are executed that determines the success or failure of the offense. In addition to passing, screening is the big key in how offenses are executed. Make sure players set screens on the defender and not space and that the screens are stationary and legal. Break down the skill of screening and work on it in progressions leading up to the execution of the screen in a five-on-five setting.

9) Cutting and moving: The best passes away from the defense and the best screens are of little value if the player who is intended to get open does not cut properly. Review the techniques and the timing of cutting in your fundamental drills and emphasize it in five-on-five work. Remember, standing still is a form of moving.

10) Shooting: This one seems like a no-brainer but coaches and players alike will go through the motions with shooting work late in the season. Find ways to make shooting work competitive to keep it fresh. Emphasize footwork in shooting drills and most of all, have players continue to use their shooting progression daily to warm-up their shot. Most late season shooting slumps are caused first by a physical problem in shooting technique before the slump becomes a mental obstacle. Avoid this problem by keeping your player's shooting technique sharp.

Remember – you the coach are responsible to create a practice environment that emphasizes the correct execution of fundamentals late in the season when everything is on the line!



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