

Some Coaching Bullets to Consider

Del Harris and friends, 2012 (revised from 2009)

Before you start:

- Be sure you have a mission statement that is current with your current thinking and then stay committed to that statement. Be sure your staff and players understand
- Make sure your philosophy of coaching, of defense, of offense and of dealing with players and other constituents is clear-cut and understood by yourself and staff.
- Leave a paper trail. Keep copies of important communications with all relevant parties. Notes, dates and times of any significant meeting with players, media, etc can be of value.
- Be sure you have a plan for the first day, week and rough copy for first month of your practices.
- Be sure any staff is up to date on current trends in conditioning, nutrition, etc. These change.
- Be sure to read current books and old standards on leadership, management skills, time management, significant biographies of important people and successful coaches in any sport. You must continue to grow mentally and spiritually.
- **Revise your drill book (you have on don't you?)** to add any new concepts you have picked up and to discard needless ones.
- The best drills are the ones you make up that teach specifically the exercise you are trying to teach/correct.
- Your drill book should be divided into categories such as: warmup, shooting, fundamentals of offense/defense, fast break buildups for offense and transition defense, half court offense, post offense/defense, trap drills, defense shell drills, situation drills for 1-1, 2-2 and 3-3, game ending situations drills, etc.
- Be sure to be clear on all basic defense issues such as you initial and backup coverages relative to pick and roll defense, low post defense, and methods of rotation to cover breakdowns.
- Make sure your coaches and players understand the concepts of switching on defense such as **which teammates will be able to switch with each other on their own as needed or desired unless the game plan or a timeout changes it**—have switching partners which normally means that equal size players will switch with one another as needed.
- Know that the concept of switching to keep your bigger players inside and your smaller ones outside is often very productive, i.e. **“Bigs in, Littles out”**. Thus you would not switch a big man out off of a downpick or pindown for a small player except in a critical emergency situation.

Your team will reflect what you emphasize. Take your pick, but only about 4 or 5 will be the limit as to what they will attach themselves to, so choose wisely.

1. Defense
2. Rebounding

3. Unselfish play---team unity---team attitude
4. Running game
5. Half court game
6. Pressing team---running team
7. Physical team
8. 3-pt team
9. Zone team
10. Ball and player movement team, etc.

Game Time:

- Be sure you have a helpful game card with you at all times such as quarterbacks have on their sleeve or arm.
- A good game card will not only have all your play calls, but will have categories that will get you a post up as needed and that tell you what plays you have that will get each position (1 through 5) a shot when you want one of those players to have the ball.
- On the back of the card or on a special situations card you can have in your pocket or an assistant will keep be sure to have plays already diagrammed that are for special late game situations such as: when you need a 3 pointer, or a quick 2, or you have differing amounts of time on the clock to get a shot.
- Be smart on what you chart and have accountable chart keepers. A possession chart can tell you the pace and momentum of the game because it will tell you how many possessions you have had at every time interval and once you know your best pace, you can tell if you are dictating or if the opponent is.
- Momentum is revealed by a possession chart in that it shows how many times you and your opponent have scored or failed to score in the most recent possessions.
- **Other charted items** may be the fast break game on both sides of the ball, the low post game (scores allowed/how traps have worked, etc), the pick and roll game (percentage of scores/stops), deflections, penetrations allowed, uncontested shots allowed, and whatever else you deem to be of real value.

As you go along:

- “Prove you are valuable and success will happen for you. Forget about the entitlements.”
- Be careful of the player who insists he is all about winning, but doesn’t work like a winner. He is usually happy when things are going his way, whether the team is or not.
- The team that will accept **we over me** (we/me) as a group has a chance to achieve all they are capable of.
- There is no “I” in team but there is “ME” but it tears up TEAM to get it. META spells disaster for the team; it says that the “**ME Trumps All**” the rest of the team.
- Doc Rivers: Try to keep the “chemistry guy” on your team. Doc moves the lockers around occasionally to keep the right people together or separated as needs be.

- Del Harris: Speak to players often, but more on the conversational level than any other. Get to know them and then prove that you care about them.
- Del Harris: The Caring-Trust-Loyalty Dynamic is of utmost importance to a successful organization. First show you do **care** consistently. Caring leads to **trust**. Trust breeds **loyalty** and loyalty leads to **unity**.
- **Jerry Sloan** coaches with the idea that he wants to be a friend of his player/s 20 years down the road. Now you know he is not a softie, but he cares and his players know it. They trust him and are loyal to him and they just find a way to win every year. That is true coaching.
- Del Harris: There are five levels of communication with players—use each one less than the one before it as you go down the levels.
 - 1. **Conversational level**—you have the give and take whereby you get to know the player and he learns you as well. You demonstrate you care. Use this the most.
 - 2. **Encouragement level**—voice is animated and enthusiastic. Use it as much as you can, but it has to be a result of real achievement, not just blowing smoke. But the worst person to be with is the one you simply cannot please. Be real.
 - 3. **Instructional level**—voice is slightly animated as you attempt to pass on teaching points that may help your player get better, or that may help him understand the team concept. Use often, but mostly in practice or in certain 1-1 situations.
 - 4. **Correctional level**—voice increases somewhat in urgency, but this is not to be confused with screaming. Naturally, this is used on important issues in practices and games to help eliminate errors. Use it as needed, but if it overwhelms the encouragement level, the team will tune you out sooner than later.
 - 5. **“Go Nuts” level**—yes, there is a place for letting them know that they have crossed the line in terms of lack of effort or execution or attitude, etc. They must know you really care about certain issues. But, of course you must maintain control here, as it should be a purposeful act. Overdo this level and you will lose your team by Christmas unless you are winning every game.
- You need a **“closer”** in every business, someone who can seal the deal often. Know who yours are. This is not an equal opportunity situation. Be able to run your stuff to get the ball to the “closer” in need situations.
- Do not underestimate the value of a player who can inbound the ball in pressure situations. Lack of this ability will beat you in the close games. The chances are you will have no more than two of these, if you actually have anyone. Develop one.
- Every team wants to win the championship. Talk about it on the first day, and then forget the talk until you are playing for it. Your goals must become closer at

hand and the main one is to get better every day/game. That is the path to championships, not talk. And I don't want to hear that my teams did not win an NBA title. My college teams won 19 championships, we won 3 national titles in Puerto Rico against NBA or D-1 level coaches and won 2 international gold medals. My Lakers team that was the youngest team in the playoffs my final two years (when Kobe was 18 and 19 years old) won 56 and 61 games with Shaq missing 53 of those games due to injury. They ran off 3 in a row two years later.

- **Most of your players will be role players.** Most will think they are key players. As coach you must laud the roles you assign; make them be understood and appreciated. **Without the dedicated role players you cannot succeed.**
- **Have simple goals for your role players.** Just 1 or 2 stats per quarter can add up to being the difference—a steal, a rebound, a free throw, a deflection, an assist, etc. Just a little goes a long way. Honor your role players as well as the stars.
- **Check it out**—NBA teams seldom have more than 2-3 players who are more than role players—ones who produce consistently across the stat sheet and make others better. The **85+ percent** are role players.
- Coaches who talk too much in practice can kill the team's ability/need to communicate among themselves. Coaches who chatter too much give the appearance of working hard but actually stifle the players in developing their own skills of communication. This is true especially of assistants. Hooting and hollering on every pass and cut is not necessarily a sign you are working.
- Simplify your teaching and communication. This will reduce confusion. An athlete that is not decisive and confident in what he is to do will be hesitant and a hesitant athlete will fail.
- NBA asst. coach Brendan Suhr (Daly disciple): you must coach each player differently. It's about **their** strengths and needs, not yours. Read books: Strength Finders and Strength Finder 2.0.
- Identify your leaders and lieutenants. You must connect early with them and get them to understand and promulgate your mission and goals for the team.
- The best teams are the ones where the coach and the team leaders are united (**requires some ego reduction on part of coach**) and these players work the hardest and articulate the team message to others.
- It is hard for a general to win without support from within the ranks. Encourage and develop leaders and relationships with them
- Suhr: Fill up your players "emotional Bank Accounts". Make 4 deposits to one withdrawal.
- Encourage your players to take responsibility. The best ones have often been allowed too much freedom from this at lower levels (i. e., AAU ball) "My Bad" is not sufficient.
- You can help, but players must know that they are in charge of their own attitudes, work ethic, enthusiasm, and mental/physical approaches.
- Many times I have been asked how a coach gets an NBA player to listen. **The answer is that you must be willing and able to help them get better.** If you can do that, they will listen because they do want to improve. Once you quit helping them, you can lose them. Keep improving and learning yourself, therefore.

- When Hank Haney quits **helping** Tiger Woods to win, Tiger will get another coach. (Ha—I wrote this about 2009—Hank is gone)
- Learn to read body language to be able better to deal with a player that day.
- Watch your own body language in practice and especially during games. Do not slump over at the bench or go goofy when things go wrong or a player makes a mistake. Have enthusiastic or positive approach when appropriate, but stay subdued in the down times. You can go crazy on the team, but that is different than the defeatist, slumped over approach or the throwing your hands up in the air to the crowd as if to say—I am ok, but what is wrong with that player? **Stay in control of your body language no matter what you are feeling inside. (solid advice—hard to do)**
- **Why do coaches react so strongly to a player’s mistakes in many cases?** Trust this. It is because the coach wants to **divorce himself** from that mistake and thus that player at that time. It is his way of **telling the fans** that it is **not his fault**. The same coach will give a body language reaction fist pump that says, “That is what I coached him to do” when the player scores.
- One of your main goals with each player is to coach him to become the best **teammate** he can be. When we interviewed a player pre-draft, we always asked him about his relationship to his coaches and to his teammates. When we talked to his coach we wanted to know what kind of teammate he was.
- When I coached college, I coined a term called “**Teammanship**” and in that concept we tried to inculcate things that would honor team membership and encourage team building. (On one occasion for each of my two top scorers I had to put them to the brink of elimination in order to get them to know I was serious. Thankfully, both stayed but one came in the day before he was to enroll at another college to tell me he wanted to come back and be a good team member. He led the team in scoring and we went 25-3, 6th in nation).
- When my first of two college teams that were inducted into their own Hall of Fame *en masse*, all 13 players came from as far as Europe to be there. **The one who came from England was the one I mentioned in the previous point.** I had started with that team nearly 35 years previousl to their induction, but they were still a team.
- Other books of value—The Outliers, The Talent Code (maybe the best relative to teaching/coaching technique I have ever read), Training Camp by Jon Gordon, Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun (great quick read), Red and Me by Bill Russell, Talent is not Enough by John Maxwell (any of his leadership books such as the Servant Leader, etc.), the magazine entitled SUCCESS, and many more.
- My own book, ***On Point—4 steps to better life teams*** is obviously one I believe in for great teambuilding that leads to lasting relationships—worth more than trophies. See www.OnPointLifeTeam.com for review.
- Allow enough shooting time. Still the most singly important factor in the game. Bad plays look good when ball goes in and vice versa.
- Encourage your shooters to get in their 300 or so reps every day. Nowitzki and Nash and then Jason Terry got in 500 every day---every day—and they are the best for obvious reasons.

- These players came into the NBA as poor shooters—Jordan, Dr. J., and Clyde Drexler and they became Hall of Famers and good shooters. Most players become much better shooters in the NBA due to reps. Check any player’s career stats.
- If a player comes into the league as a rebounder or a steals guy, he will rebound and steal in the league. The only stat that players consistently get better at is shooting and it is because they get more reps as a pro.
- **Defense is the difference in championship games normally. But while defense may win a championship for you, you will never get a chance to find out, if you cannot score.**
- The thing that makes for a bad team in the NBA (remember that every one of these players was the best on his HS and college team in most cases) is the inability to score.
- Avoid trying to keep your team at half court too much thinking that you can stop them and do more teaching. The game is played full court.
- Too much time at half court will stifle a teams fast break game as the initial reaction to go to the other end is the difference in a successful break most often.
- **A team that spends too much time at half court teaching will not be as good a transition defensive team as it needs to be in most cases.**
- So, do more scrimmage-like situations but control the scrimmages and fulfill what you want as a teacher and what the team needs for transition offense and defense.
- Best scrimmage teaching drills are starting with a specific situation at half court and then letting there be that possession and two more. This three-possession game is called O-D-O for Offense-Defense-Offense. On the second and third possession the teams can do whatever comes up, as that is the way the game is played.
- Limiting the scrimmage to three possessions allows you to teach the pluses and minuses of the three possessions better because everyone can remember that short of a series.
- Drill also some 5-possession games and do the same way. You start with a controlled half court and then the players play out four more possessions, ending up on the end they started. The game is generally played in spurts of no more than 5 possessions before a whistle is blown and this allows game feel and coach control.
- Be inventive with these controlled sessions. Have each possession be only with 10 seconds; or have them run a particular set when they don’t have a fast break; or have them go vs. man/man some and zone on other sets; and start the initial possession from out of bounds needing a 3 or needing a quick 2 or running the clock etc.
- You can score these by giving a point for a score and a point for a stop. With 3 possessions (or 5) there will always be a winner since there are an uneven number of points available. The winner of each one can start the next set if you want. Or you can keep track of the number of sets each team wins to determine a winner. Award the winners.
- You never waste time when you do the defensive shell drills.

- Remember that you must **emphasize defense**, but offense is more involved because it involves ball skills and exact timing. Thus, **offense takes more time**.
- I always doubt coaches who say they spend far more time on defense than offense. Why would you do that when offense requires much more teaching and time? And why ignore offense when teaching defense---the guys on both sides of the ball are on your team when you are teaching defense, unless you spend the whole time running slides against air. **Air is not the enemy**—good to remember in all defenses, especially when in a zoning situation on the weak side or when the team is in a regular zone defense.
- Hopefully, anyone should realize that you could teach both offense and defense at the same time. So teach both at the same time. If you cannot, have an assistant focus on what you are not focused on and let him talk.
- Even in the most dedicated of offensive drills, if a player does well or poorly on defense, you cannot overlook that. **More time on offense, more emphasis on defense.**
- **Your team will reflect what you emphasize. (worth repeating)**
- **You are an offensive or defensive coach relative to what upsets you.** If you say you are a defense coach but never sub for poor defense by your better players, you are not a defense coach. (If he is really good, you don't have to leave him out for long—you made a point).
- If you are an execution coach but don't get upset at the lack of execution, then you really are not what you say you are.

Summary Note

- Over the years your teams will be identified by about 3-5 things that they do well—not 10-15 things. Those are the things you teach well and that are important to you.
- With the great coaches you always know what their teams will do well. So decide how you want to be typified and stick with that as long as you are successful. Make subtle changes as you go, but stick with your winning core.

Best wishes for success and great relationships,

Del Harris, GM Texas Legends, NBADL
dharris@texlegends.com
www.OnPointLifeTeams.com