

Practice Strategies to Get Your Team to Play Hard

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Many years ago I had the opportunity to ask Gary Williams, the Head Coach at University of Maryland, what was the most important quality he looked for in the players he was recruiting. I was thinking he was going to say something like size, quickness, shooting ability, or understanding of game, but instead he looked at me like I must be from another planet, and said “they have to be a competitor”. As a coach you want to believe that every contest you go into you know your players will give it everything they have to perform well. The team may not shoot well, or they may turn the ball over but at least you know they will compete on every possession.

While many people believe you cannot make non-competitors into competitors, I disagree to a certain point. I think if you use proven strategies in practice you can improve the competitive fire in all your athletes. Are you going to make an infrequent competitor into a consistent, hard-nosed tough competitor? – I doubt it; but you can improve each of these athletes. Just like any skill you work to improve you can help each athlete compete harder and more consistently by using some of the strategies described below. It is your responsibility as a coach to help your athletes become the best competitors they can become. Therefore you must create a practice environment where competition is expected and embraced.

A critical aspect of competing is being in the present – not thinking ahead and letting the past go. Coaches must teach, preach, and demand that players focus on the present responsibilities each player has so they will compete better.

The following is a list of strategies that can be used to teach your team to play hard and to compete every possession.

1. The coach is the only one to call fouls. The coach can then set the standard of play. While it is important to teach players to play without fouling it is equally important to teach players to play through fouls, to play physically, and to play aggressively. It is also important players not concern themselves with the officials.
2. There is no out of bounds! If the ball bounces out of the normal boundaries of the court the play is still alive. The players will then hustle after the loose ball to maintain possession. This will keep kids hustling after the ball. There are two arguments I have heard against this concept: 1) kids will get hurt – in 20+ years I have not seen it happen; 2) they will not be aware of where the out of bounds lines are – again, I have not seen this be a factor.

3. Make every scrimmage or drill a competition; all competitions have either a score or a time standard. Examples, you must make so many lay-ups in a 3 player weave in 2 minutes or first team to five baskets. The consequences for losing are severe if the losing team did not compete very hard - set of lines, suicide, 60 seconds. If the losing team did compete hard make it a less severe penalty or no penalty.
4. Play every drill, scrimmage, and breakdown until the defense gets the ball, i.e. if the offense scores and then recovers the ball from the basket they can score again.
5. Use overload situations, 3 vs 4, 4 vs 5, 5 vs 6. This places extra pressure on the out-manned team to concentrate and play harder to compensate for out-numbered situation and it also places pressure on the team with the numerical advantage because the expectation is to win. Give the team with the numerical advantage a slight score disadvantage to start each drill.
6. Use a rebounding bubble. Because no baskets are scored - score with stops, rating of shots and offensive rebounds. This will increase the hustle to secure the ball.
7. Give extra points for offensive rebounds. When you scrimmage or play any drill if a team gets an offensive rebound they get 2 extra points. Offensive rebounding is about desire and hard work – this should be rewarded!
8. Reward the team with extra points whenever there are hustle plays such as diving on the floor or drawing a charge.
9. Have one of your players wear a designated jersey during practice. If this player secures an offensive rebound his team gets bonus points. The defending team must then focus on keeping this player off the boards and the designated player will focus on and feel pressure to get to the boards.
10. Use the “next basket wins” games during practice, even if one team is up by several points, this will bring the competitive nature in your athletes out. The team ahead will know they have been thrown an injustice and will try to show you they are not going to be denied and the team behind will recognize their opportunity for victory and compete hard.
11. Time and score scenarios during practice bring a high level of interest and focus. Here is an example “Blue is up 65-62 with a 1:30 to go and both teams are in bonus. Red ball under the basket.” The players usually will be quite focused to execute properly to win.