

Excerpt from *Survival Guide for Coaching Youth Basketball*

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Prepping for the First Game

If your team is scheduled to play its first game after only one or two practices, don't try to make everyone learn everything faster. This is called panicking. Teaching a crash course in basketball will only overwhelm the kids and jack up your blood pressure to catastrophic levels. You want to be on the sidelines with a clipboard, Coach, not in the hospital attached to an IV.

Remember, the only way you can get the results you want for your players is through time and repetition, neither of which you have right now. Dial down your expectations and begin laying the groundwork for your season with one fundamental at a time. Once you're done with introductions, include the following elements in the first couple of practices (the drills will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters).

*“Remember, the only way you can get the results you want for your players is through **time and repetition...**”*

*“...begin laying the groundwork for your season with **one fundamental at a time.**”*

1

Warm-ups and stretching.

Warm-ups are designed to increase core body temperature, increase blood flow to the muscles, increase range of motion, help mental preparation, and stretch muscles to prevent soreness. When children play, they rarely jump right into an activity, but naturally start slowly and build up to whatever game or fun thing they are doing. Similarly, a basketball warm-up is designed to gradually increase in tempo and intensity in preparation for the practice or game. Ideally, the warm-up should take 10 to 15 minutes and move directly into the day's basketball drills and activities, but adjust to an abbreviated version if you have less time.

Figure 2.1 provides a basic but very functional warm-up routine. This will get everyone moving right away and prevent an outbreak of chitter-chatter among the restless players. The warm-up is built on dynamic stretching, which gently takes athletes to the limits of their range of motion. Dynamic stretching improves flexibility and helps prepare the players for an aerobic workout. Ideally, after the players have performed joint rotations, they should engage in at least five minutes of aerobic activity, such as jogging, jumping rope, or any other activity that will cause a similar increase in cardiovascular output (to get their blood pumping). If you have only 60 minutes for practice, you may need to reduce the number and duration of exercises so the warm-up does not cut significantly into the time for drills.

REVIEW THE BASICS

- ✓ **Warm-ups and stretching**
- ✓ **Dribbling drills**
- ✓ **Passing drills**
- ✓ **Free-throw shooting**
- ✓ **Defensive slides**
- ✓ **Zone defensive set**
- ✓ **Offensive scheme**

2

Dribbling drills. Ballhandling is difficult to master, but you may find one or two diamonds in the rough by observing how your young charges bounce a basketball. Can they dribble a ball the length of the floor without bouncing it off their toes? Can they control the ball with either hand?

3

Passing drills. Right away, you'll be able to assess the athleticism of the individual players by the way they throw and catch a ball. Some may be snapping chest passes and catching with soft hands. Others may have difficulty throwing the ball accurately even 10 feet or may back off and turn their head as they try to catch a pass.



Figure 2.1 Sample Warm-Up Routine

Make sure the players breathe normally during these exercises and that they stretch their muscles only enough to feel mild tension, not pain. Each exercise should be done for approximately 20 yards at a walking pace, unless otherwise noted.

Toe and heel walk	Walk high on the toes, then only on the heels, and then alternate between toes and heels.
Knee hugs	Walk, pulling the knee up to the chest, take a step, and then hug the other knee.
Shin hugs or quad stretch	Gently pull the heel up to the butt (don't overstretch). Stretch the quadriceps and maintain balance. Athletes can place one hand on a wall to help maintain balance.
Lunges with a twist	Step forward with the right leg and almost touch the left knee to the floor. In the semi-kneeling position turn the upper body left, then right. Stand up and step with the other leg and repeat the twist to both sides.
Side lunges	Step to the side with a long lunge, keeping the upper body straight. Bring the legs together and repeat the lunge.
Straight-leg toe touches	While walking forward with the legs straight, bend forward to touch the toes. This hamstring stretch should be done slowly and gently, especially if the athletes are less flexible.
Leg kicks	Walk forward, kicking one leg and then the other. Kick gently at first and then higher as muscles loosen.
Side shuffle	Shuffle sideways, staying low and not crossing the legs. Increase speed and intensity as the exercise is mastered.
Carioca	Shuffle sideways by crossing one leg in front of the other and then crossing the same leg behind. Continue this pattern to stretch and increase flexibility in the hips. Repeat, going in the opposite direction with the other leg making the crossing steps.
High skips	Skip as high as possible, throwing the right hand in the air at the same time the right knee goes up, simulating a layup action. Repeat on the left side.
High knees	Run with a high knee lift and strong arm action.
Backward run	Alternately bring each heel to the butt and then step back as far as possible to run backward.
Straight-leg run	Run while keeping the legs straight, pulling them forward and then down. When done correctly, this exercise, which mimics a football player's celebratory run in the end zone, strengthens the muscles used in sprinting.

“A basketball warm-up is designed to gradually increase in tempo and intensity in preparation for the practice or game.”



Watching the players move will give a coach a good idea of each player's footwork, quickness, and balance.

4 Free-throw shooting. Here's another way to get a quick read of the team's relative skill level. Some kids may not even be able to reach the rim from the free-throw line. Encourage them to step closer. Others may be heaving the ball over the backboard because they have no clue how to shoot a basketball. One or two may be able to actually make a shot. File it all away for future reference, Coach. Right away, you'll have a sense of what each player needs to do to improve.

5 Defensive slides. Watching the players move from side to side and then drop-step backward down the floor while defending a ballhandler will give a coach a good idea of each player's footwork, quickness, and balance. (See later chapter for a detailed explanation of this skill.)

6 Zone defensive set. By setting up a zone defense, you will teach an essential building block of team defense: players shouldn't all run around and chase the ball. Along with defensive fundamentals, you start to lay the groundwork for basic defensive concepts. Players need to learn body position in relationship to their opponent and the basket they are defending.

In a zone defense, an individual player's coverage area is greatly reduced compared to man-to-man defense. This is why it's best to start with a zone defense (while still keeping in mind that you will want your team to play mostly man-to-man defense by the time the season ends). But don't expect to nail all that down right away. In the first practice, you'll be doing well if you get the kids to understand the floor positioning of the 2-3 zone. Just keep building on the concepts bit by bit with each practice.

7 Offensive scheme. The pass-cut-replace offense (explained in a later chapter) is the easiest team offense to learn. It is especially useful because it involves all five players on the floor.

It will take the players a few practices to fully understand it, but initially your mantra should be *pass and cut*. In other words, the players shouldn't stand around after getting rid of the ball. If you can get the players to cut toward the basket after making a pass, you'll be imparting a basic principle of any offense.

Figure 2.2 provides a sample practice plan incorporating all the necessary elements for an early-season practice. Each practice will be different, but the sample shows how a practice could be structured. It covers the basics and can help you quickly gauge your team's abilities in the areas of ballhandling, shooting, and defensive agility. **Give the players at least one water break during a practice**—more if the workout is longer than 60 minutes, is particularly stressful, or if conditions (such as heat or humidity) in the gym warrant it. This also gives you an opportunity to catch your breath, drink some water, and pop an aspirin or two as needed. Occasionally,

the noise level in a small gym can be a little tough to take, even for the most seasoned coach.

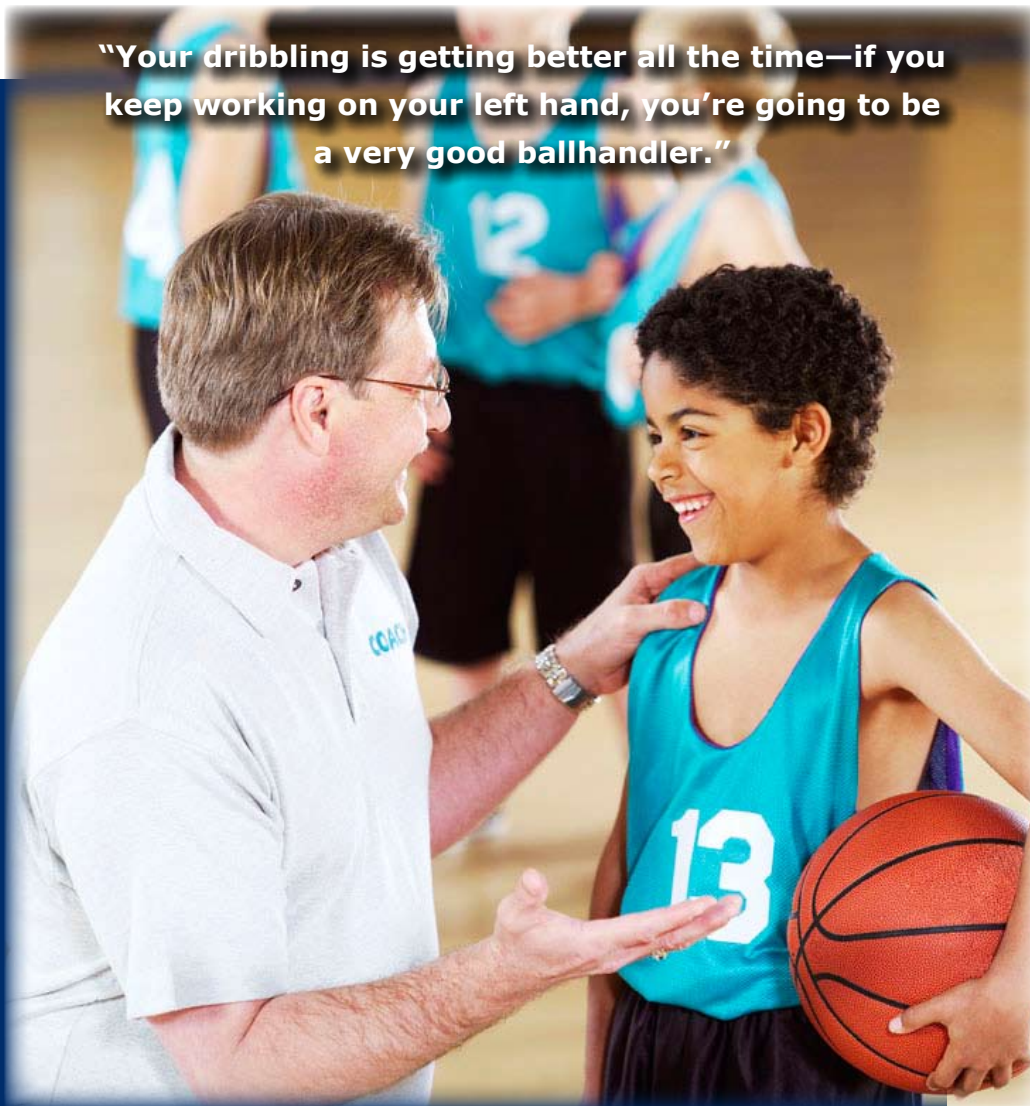
You might also find that water breaks are a good time to set up any necessary equipment for the second half of practice or to make any adjustments in the practice schedule based on what's happened so far.

Breaks can also be a good time to talk to a player or two individually to offer either encouragement (Your free throws are looking really good today. Have you been working on them at home?) or advice (Your dribbling is getting better all the time—if you keep working on your left hand, you're going to be a very good ballhandler).



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“Your dribbling is getting better all the time—if you keep working on your left hand, you’re going to be a very good ballhandler.”



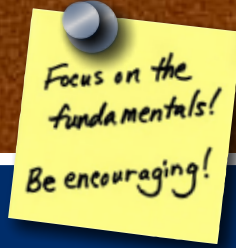
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Figure 2.2 Sample Early-Season Practice Plan

Early in the season the coach should evaluate the players' individual abilities to get a handle on the relative strengths and weaknesses of the team. Practice time should be primarily devoted to individual skills to aid in this evaluation, while introducing a handful of basic team concepts.

Duration	Skill or activity	Exercises or drills by team experience level
5:00 to 5:02	Warm-up	Players jog around the court twice.
5:02 to 5:05	Stretching	Players stretch arms, shoulders, neck, back, and legs.
5:05 to 5:10	Dribbling	Starting from five lines of two at each baseline, with one ball per line, players do the following: Right-hand dribble down and back twice Left-hand dribble down and back twice Crossover, two dribbles right, two dribbles left, down and back twice
5:10 to 5:15	Passing	Pair up players with a ball. Have them stand 10 to 12 feet apart and practice chest passes, bounce passes, and overhead passes.
5:15 to 5:25	Free-throw shooting	Divide the players up equally at each available basket and have them rotate around the free-throw lanes, shooting two free throws at a time for a maximum of 10 each. The non-shooting players should rebound and return the ball quickly to the shooter. Have the non-shooting players clap once for a miss, twice for a make to keep them involved.
Water break		
5:30 to 5:40	Defensive drill	Z Slides (page 89): Establish proper defensive stance, then work on defensive footwork. Defenders slide side to side and work to stay in front of the dribbler the length of the court.
5:40 to 5:50	Offensive scheme	Pass-cut-replace
5:50 to 6:00	Defensive set	2-3 zone

The sample practice plan “can help you quickly gauge your team’s abilities in the areas of ballhandling, shooting, and defensive agility.”



About the Author

The authors are **Keith Miniscalco** and **Greg Kot**. Miniscalco, with 19 years of youth basketball coaching experience and 8 years of coaching high school, knows how to develop youth players to excel at all levels. He has coached both boys and girls in several acclaimed Chicago Park District and youth school leagues. He also cofounded the highly respected Over the Edge youth basketball program in Chicago, which has as its goal preparing youth-level players for high school competition. The program has seen great success and has proven to be extremely effective for young athletes who wish to continue with competitive basketball.

While Greg Kot is a full-time music critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, he fills much of his spare time coaching with Miniscalco in the Over the Edge program. An accomplished writer, Kot has been the *Tribune's* pop critic since 1990, and he is a regular contributor to numerous national publications such as *Rolling Stone*. He also cohosts a nationally syndicated radio show, *Sound Opinions*, on public radio.

To order a copy of the book *Survival Guide for Coaching Youth Basketball*, click [here](#) or call toll-free at 800-747-4457.

Survival Guide for Coaching Youth Basketball is a perfect supplement to the ASEP *Coaching Youth Basketball* online course and book. While the *Survival Guide* focuses on the essentials needed to step on the court for the first time, *Coaching Youth Basketball* takes a more comprehensive approach to coaching. It provides coaches with information on establishing a coaching philosophy; communicating with athletes, officials, and parents; administering sport first aid; implementing small-sided games; planning for practices and the season; and more.



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