

Mike et al:

Thank you, and thank Ken Friedman, for the excellent page on in-season Skill Deterioration. I don't often respond to these, 'cause as you know, I get too deeply into them, and I am a dangerous man when I sit down at a keyboard, but I really appreciate receiving the stuff you send out.

I've tossed out some random thoughts below that I hope might be of some value to the ongoing discussion that Ken's page should engender – both specific to that topic and regarding the background considerations that might come into play.

Mike -- and everybody who's ever been around me when I get interested in something -- knows that I am far too wordy, and can get complex as hell about that thing at the drop of a hat, generally leading at least one other somebody in the room, and maybe everybody in the room, to think, "Shit, who let him in here?" So I apologize before beginning -- you don't have to read what follows. If any of you do stick with it and read through to the end, I'd be really interested in hearing what you think.

COMMENTS:

As I know you know, Mike, physiologists have told us for some time that almost every basketball team de-conditions during a basketball season, unless some very specific measures are consciously undertaken to attempt to diminish this affect. Similarly, without sufficient attention to specific details of skills and concepts, basketball players' overall 'game' will deteriorate.

With my high school team, we specifically rely upon the kids to do their own scheduled additional fitness and strength work -- most of them are still doing primarily body-weight resistance, partly due to the number of Grade 9's & 10's we have this season. We speak very directly to the kids as a team about this early in each year, and we make the captains responsible for ensuring that a plan gets put in place and gets carried out. One means we have found to deal with this is to schedule different members of the team to go into the training room that is just off our gym floor to do their extra conditioning, strength, core and flexibility work on alternating days, immediately following practice. Our captains were the ones who came up with this approach. *And yes, I know that we are incredibly fortunate to be in a school that has a training room that is just off the gym floor.

We do also still devote some in-season practices totally to skill development within the context of conditioning, and vice versa, and we announce these practices as such, prior to their getting underway, so the kids know exactly what we're attempting to accomplish that day. Later in the season, we do find that we have to devote most of our time in some practices to teaching and reinforcing specific team patterns, and we try to do these sessions on days that are clearly "recovery days", if at all possible. These are also instances where the kids will supplement with additional physical conditioning work outside the practice.

Also, because we are a rural school that desires to compete with the very best teams in our geographic region, much of our schedule is necessarily tournament-based and "on the road".

Therefore, on any practice day that immediately follows upon a tournament, or follows the day after a very hard-fought single-game in the few instances where we have these, we divide our team into those who need recovery and those who need additional fitness work. *Our single games generally happen on a Wednesday. The tournaments generally are Fridays and Saturdays, either with two games on the Friday and one on the Saturday, or vice versa.

I used to make the determination myself of which kids belonged in which group, but now I simply ask the kids for a show of hands of which of them needs to be in which group that day. Although my own estimates tend to be fairly accurate, the kids are actually better judges of this than I could be.

Interestingly enough -- because I know somebody out there who is reading this will be saying that this approach won't work because some kids will always want out of whichever the toughest of the two activity choices will be -- the exceptions are always kids who I felt needed to have recovery that day, but who insist that they actually need more work. In this instance, you as the coach must occasionally overrule one of these kids, if s/he is someone who demands too much of themselves, and doesn't have an appropriate appreciation for their own need to recover.

As I tell our kids, "(Learning how to get proper) Rest is a Skill."

A couple of other things that occurred to me while reading Ken's note:

First, if it is true that "the popular perception is a player improves during the season", I'm not sure how that perception became popular. Its popularity is probably closely related to what is frequently referred to as "common sense", something that in my experience is a fairly uncommon, and in fact exceptionally rare, phenomenon among humans in collectivity.

Our mantra to kids has always been that "basketball players make themselves, during the off-season" and that basketball players must make additional extra efforts outside of their team practices during the season, if they have any hope of maintaining or sustaining the individual skill improvements they've worked so hard to make during the off-season. At the university level, where professional coaches are on hand throughout the day, and students' academic schedules are limited to a few hours of class per week, good programs take care of this need through having frequent individual sessions scheduled for each team member throughout each week during the season.

At the high school level, particularly in a rural school where the kids arrive by buses -- but I suspect it is somewhat true for any school -- we have found this fairly difficult to achieve in terms of access to the facility, the kids' own academic, transportation and life schedules, and of course my own schedule as a purely volunteer coach who is not otherwise affiliated with the high school, and so is not on-site during the days. For these and a variety of other reasons, extra individual skill sessions in-season and outside our scheduled team practice times, are almost impossible to achieve.

Thus, as I'm sure you always did when you were an active team coach, **a high percentage of our team's practice time during the season is devoted to individual player development – movement, skills & concepts.**

I have always believed that this is an absolute necessity for every team at every level, if that team has any hope of actually improving as a team during the season. Whenever I've strayed from this – and I have, at times -- my teams' development has suffered.

Think about it: What makes the best teams the best teams?

Why can virtually everybody pick most of the strongest teams in any province for the upcoming season, prior to the season's even beginning? Might it have something to do with that team having more talent than its competitors?

Might it possibly be connected to those teams having better players? “Players make Plays.”

I.e. Might it be the case that the best teams have athletes who are superior to those of other teams, with skills that are superior to those of the players on competing teams, and have an understanding of and willingness to play the game in the way it is supposed to be played as a collective enterprise that is superior to that of other teams?

*On this note, I have always thought that “athleticism” in an optimal basketball sense is something that is slightly different from what “popular perception” (there's that phrase again) might have it be. That's another discussion.

But, for this topic, I don't think too many people would argue with the notion that the best teams tend to have players who are more fundamentally sound than their opponents, and that the very best teams tend to have more of these players, thus ‘depth of talent’.

If these players are also athletically and physically superior, and are willing to play together unselfishly as a team, recognizing who among them can do what, and what each of their limitations are, and if they're willing to play the game in a way that respects the Game, their opponents, themselves and their teammates, and if they are a collective unit that recognizes, respects and plays the game as a team in a way that optimizes whatever the differences are among these, then you as their coach have hit the jackpot. For what it's worth, at least in the region of the country where I live, such collections of athletic talent seem to occur more frequently in urban centres than in rural centres.

To consider the alternative, if the players on a team aren't good enough, the forms that team's coach attempts to implement really don't make any difference when they come up against superior athletes and players who are disciplined and concentrating on what they're doing. If a team's players can't pass and catch and move in balance, then it doesn't matter what patterns a coach draws out for them to move in. The other team will simply destroy them, along with their patterns.

Unfortunately, in most instances, even if the players are reasonably sound in performing skills in non-competitive drills, or in match-ups against athletes of similar calibre to them, but simply are not of sufficient calibre as athletes to be able to perform these skills well against superior athletes, they're still going to be in deep trouble when they play a team made up of quicker people who can exploit their lack of athleticism. Basketball is not a sport in which there is a net between you and your opponent. The opponent can get at you directly, and can get into your space, and the most competitive opponents tend to do that.

So, if coaches are not devoting major portions of each practice to the development of their individual athletes in terms of movement, skills and concepts, and are instead devoting major amounts of practice time to team patterns, those teams are probably going to be taken out of those patterns when they come up against superior teams.

If some portion of athlete-development efforts is not devoted to the pre-basketball aspects of player development -- strength, flexibility, quickness, movement in balance, general and specific speed, power and endurance, etc. etc. -- then that athlete will never become quite the basketball player s/he might otherwise have become.

But, of course, almost everything in life is easier said than done. And always, there is the question of resources, one of the most ever-present yet elusive of which is time, and another of which is access to facilities.

Without meaning to be critical of anyone, I think it is safe to say that we live in a nation that has never truly cared overly much (or at least, not enough to act upon it) about putting in place an infrastructure that would enable excellence in sport, even within what probably qualifies as our primary religious movement nationally, i.e. 'hockey'.

Canada Basketball has gone to tremendous effort over the past several years to search out 'best practices' from around the world, from which to begin to develop our own uniquely Canadian approach to becoming better at basketball. As in any such widespread quest, each of us will agree with much of what has been gathered, and will have some specific disagreements with some of what has been gathered.

Without question, one of the most important concepts that much of the rest of the world has applied in their approach to development within virtually every sport, is the notion -- which, when I was a kid, was fundamental to the understanding of every professional Physical Educator I ever met (back in the days when Canadian schools actually employed 'professional Physical Educators' as what were called Phys Ed teachers) -- that kids should play as many different sports as possible, and should absolutely avoid overspecialization within any one sport, at least until they had reached an age of around 15-16 years old, and that they should continue to "play at" other sports, even when they did reach a stage where they would specialize more within their chosen sport.

I still believe in the efficacy of this approach to athletic development. I also think that kids need to spend a lot more time playing pickup games -- in whatever combinations of sports they want -- than the modern era kid seems to do. But this, too, is for another discussion.

You may be asking, but how does this jive with your notion that "basketball players make themselves during the off-season"? Good question.

First, it jives absolutely, in the sense that one of the ways that a basketball player makes her/himself in the off-season is by playing a sport other than basketball. Along with playing something else competitively or recreationally during the off-season, for both rest and conditioning purposes, to use different muscle groups within one's body, to learn balance and movement while giving one's "basketball muscles" a break from overuse, to learn how to "track" a ball in ways that will carry over very positively to basketball, but that may not

appear as opportunities within each basketball encounter in quite the same ways, individuals who wish to become great will also devote a certain amount of their own time to individual skill development within their chosen sport of basketball.

That formula was followed by pretty much all of the great players of previous eras.

Different people have different views, but my own view is that when people speak of the deterioration of basketball on the continent of North America (and really, let's face it, folks who speak this way are speaking about the United States, not Canada -- if we're honest, we will admit that we as a nation haven't yet arrived at a point of sufficient international loftiness in basketball from which we *could* deteriorate) they are really speaking about the deterioration of the infrastructure that once dominated basketball development in the United States, which I would argue was largely responsible for the rise of the game in that country.

That infrastructure, I would contend, consisted of professional coaches who taught both respect for and the fundamentals of The Game within a scholastically-based (infra) structure.

Grade school coaches taught skills to players who then graduated to play for their middle schools or junior high schools (whether JV or varsity), who then graduated to play for their high school's Freshman team, junior varsity and varsity teams.

The very best of these players then went on for further training and development under the guidance of professional coaches who taught them fundamentals and the finer points of the game for four years of college basketball. The very, very best of these players then went on to have an opportunity to play professionally in the United States, and others who were almost as good as them went on to play professionally elsewhere in the world.

*Now, in what I'm about to say, keep in mind that I am aware that there were, are, and always will be exceptions to the generalizations I'm about to make. Really, I do understand that, and I strongly suspect that everyone on this particular list is one of those exceptions.

However, I have seen enough reality that meshes very directly with what I'm about to describe that I think it's worth raising for discussion.

*Also, I know a lot of you will find that all this wordiness is just too "heavy" to bother wading through. That's okay, too. Again, I just think it's worth saying it, to find out if anyone else out there sees the problem in anywhere close to the same terms as I do.

I think that at least some people out there might agree that the beginning of the crumbling of this sound educational structure for the development of basketball within the United States coincided with the advent of what might be called "Branded Marketing Company" basketball, or "Initialized" basketball, and other forms of "Exploitation of Talented Individual Kids for primarily adult purposes, many of them economic, but sometimes just egotistical" basketball, in the summers. *To avoid libelling anybody, I won't use any organizations' or companies' names or initials here, but I think most folks will have some idea of what I'm talking about.

Not only did the advent of these primarily commercial interests begin to subvert the best of the educationally-based American basketball developmental infrastructure, they also greatly increased the number of games that the best individual players played during the off-season, while adding entire layers of less than desirable attitudinal, commercial and anti-fundamental approaches to each of these player's basketball activities during the off-season. Essentially, they brought the "Creed of Greed" to new heights (depths?), and appealed to the worst aspects of a modern, instant gratification, entertainment and media-based cultural consciousness. And, in the process, they led the kids involved to undervalue and diminish their appreciation for their school-based basketball experience in the winters.

Meanwhile, in Canada, I would contend that we have never really had an effective basketball development infrastructure to corrupt.

Instead, we have had primarily a "mom-and-pop" and "the occasional crazy dedicated individual" approach to player development. Perhaps it is different in other parts of the country, but in the Maritimes at least, most development of young players in this part of the country has come through minor basketball systems, with volunteer coaches being either fathers (some of whom have played the game; many of whom had played hockey) or young players who themselves are still learning the game, and more recently, some mothers (who again, may or may not have played the game themselves). Interestingly, I am told that in Newfoundland, it was the Christian Brothers (many of them Americans) and other collections of Americans who were stationed in military bases in the province (and perhaps before Newfoundland was a province; I'm not sure of the timing) who were a fairly major part of the sport's development there – American priests and military guys who brought a love for the game to the Island.

As for the schools in the Maritimes, there have always been a handful of extremely good high school basketball coaches within each province ("the occasional crazy dedicated individual"), individuals who devoted their lives to the Game and the kids they coached, in exactly the same way as the very best coaches in any sport do, anywhere in the world. The kids who were fortunate enough to play for these coaches benefited in so many ways that it is impossible to describe them here. Not surprisingly, the most athletically gifted of kids from within these programs often went on to play for university programs. And, equally unsurprisingly, these gifted, devoted coaches always found some way to create and maintain a developmental 'feeder' system for young kids who would come into their HS programs.

Very few Maritime kids have ever represented Canada internationally, but I suspect this has more to do with demographics than devotion, in the same way that more kids from the largest population centres within each province tend to represent that province in national competitions. As that great basketball coach Charles Darwin would say, larger and more diverse population samples make for the possibility of more effective selection.

I personally grew up in a small border town that was fairly well known for being a baseball and basketball hotbed. We were taught basketball skills at a fairly high level from an early age, in our Physical Education classes in school, and then could easily go across the border for pickup games (and vice versa) with our American counterparts from an early age as well.

During Christmas vacations, our school principal would give the keys to the gym to a responsible University player who was home for the Break, and they and we would more or less live in the gym for the duration of the holidays. So on a personal note, my memories of basketball development through the medium of the school, supplemented by lots of opportunity for pickup games and individual workouts on outdoor courts, usually built on the school grounds on both sides of the border, are incredibly positive ones.

On the other hand, when I began coaching a Midget-aged Boys team in the minor basketball system of Halifax some number of years ago, junior high basketball was more or less a joke, as far as development went. The kids who played for me were embarrassed to have me come and watch their junior high school games, because of the low calibre of play.

The corporately or governmentally-funded Club-based approach that has served so much of the rest of the world so well as a vehicle for sport development has never taken hold in Canada, and it may be too late for it to do so in other than the corrupted form that we are beginning to see in some cities, as an offshoot of the US stuff that I described above.

I've gone on at some length on this topic of developmental infrastructure because I sincerely believe that if Canada Basketball is to begin to make the sort of progress that I know it wants to nationally, the question of infrastructure is crucial to this effort. And I would suggest that very clearly thought-out choices are going to have to be made, and made very carefully.

Mike will remember having heard me quote the old political joke about Canada having had the privilege of choosing from among the best of French, British and American cultures, and having made all the wrong choices in each of the various cultural, social, culinary and political possibilities. Like all jokes, it isn't totally fair, but it's worth thinking about.

I think Canada Basketball has a chance to make better choices this time around.

And, I do truly believe that the best choice for Canada will be one that may very well not yet exist in quite precisely the form that will be necessary to serve Canada's needs, within Canada's historical, geographical, economic, cultural and material resource base.

And, I believe that part of this best solution does in fact exist in some of our own past practices, as well as in some of the past and current best practices in the United States, as well as in all the additional learning and experimentation that the rest of the world has brought to their approach to basketball, and to sport development in general.

The important thing will be to recognize which is which, and to avoid absolutist thinking.

And, I think an absolutely crucial aspect of this question of infrastructure is that of access to physical facilities designed for basketball – i.e. gymnasiums -- indoor and outdoor courts, and access for kids to expert coaching.

I recognize that there'll never be enough of these to satisfy us basketball freaks, and I also recognize that we can't let this lack of facilities stymie our efforts. And I know that virtually

every small Canadian community that's going to raise funds to build a community athletic facility thinks first of an arena, then a pool, and then maybe a running track, and usually not a gymnasium ever. But I think we have absolutely got to have more basketball spaces, and far, far greater access for kids to these spaces, if the game is to develop in the way that I know you, Mike, and I suspect everybody who is on this list, wants to see.

Now, switching gears and returning to Ken's specific topic, partly as one means to avoid absolutist thinking, and perhaps partly also because I am innately difficult to deal with, by nature, I want to add a slightly complicating thought to those included within the excellent page from Ken on Skill Deterioration due to too many competitions.

I've noted above that the marketing-based and "Initialized" summer basketball stuff has led to far too many games being played in the summer, with far too little attention being paid to basketball detail -- it isn't just that they play too many games, with virtually no practices, thus taking up time that could otherwise be devoted to developing individual skills, conditioning, playing at other sports, etc.; it's also that the basketball environment in which this goes on is really corrupted.

For what it's worth -- I might be totally wrong, but this is an aspect of what I have seen -- our current approach to national championship tournaments and Canada Games may induce preparation schedules for provincial teams that suffer from the same lack of adequate devotion to individual player development, although at least the environment isn't commercially corrupted.

Now for the complicating observation:

When I first began to coach at the high school level 3 seasons ago, I came in with the bias that "high school kids play far too many games, and don't have nearly enough practices".

I still do think that high school players and teams don't get enough practices, and I also think that high school kids don't learn *how to* practice with a sufficient degree of intensity and in a manner that will provide them with optimal development within the practice sessions that they do get. My guess is that one of the biggest challenges for most high school stars who are fortunate enough to go on to play at the university level -- along with dealing with the disappointment of not playing nearly as many minutes as they thought they were going to when they were recruited -- is learning how to practice 4-5 times a week with intensity.

But, I must admit, I have changed my views somewhat in terms of the role of "playing games" in a high school basketball player's development.

What I have observed is that high school players do partly learn how to play the game, by playing actual games. These must be supplemented by sufficient practice time to 'complete' them, and enable reflection upon what has been learned in games, but the games are a necessary part of the process.

In other words, although there are too many teams that don't get enough practices, the individual players on these teams, and the teams as a collective entity, don't seem to be able to fully develop simply by practicing. So some sufficient number of games during the season

against the highest possible calibre of opponent is absolutely necessary to their development as players. And, believe it or not, the desirable number of games is probably higher than one might think -- possibly as high as 35-40 games in a season stretching from late October to the end of February, or about four-plus months.

I'd like to hear from other high school coaches what their observations are on that specific question of player development through a combination of practices and games. *Below, I have noted some additional problems with the quality of competition available in high school games.

Now, I suspect this requirement to develop through playing actual games of basketball might vary somewhat for the NEDA kids, since each of them has been selected because they are an elite athlete, and because each of them has probably had a fairly high backlog of games prior to arrival in the NEDA program, and, equally importantly, because they're working out every day with and against equally elite calibre athletes and basketball players, under the guidance and direction of some of the best qualified professionals in the country, who are able to devote their own resources full-time to becoming better at what they do. In other words, the NEDA kids' individual basketball development can occur within the context of competing against other individual people who will exploit any weaknesses the individual does not correct, in an environment in which these weaknesses will be noted daily by fully engaged, professional experts, and corrective measures will be undertaken daily.

And, of course, NEDA is a crystallized form of a carefully thought out, multifaceted developmental approach for elite athletes, within the sport of basketball. I don't wish to insult anybody out there, but I suspect that description would not be applied to too many of our high school or minor basketball programs in this country.

One very real difficulty that I have noticed with too much school-based basketball is that too many of their games are not competitive. Often, not even close to being competitive.

One of the things I noticed very early on with high school kids was that for the most talented teams, if they're not winning by 15-20 points, they begin to panic. They simply don't get enough closely competed games, games that are won and lost by single digits, and especially not enough of what I call "possession games" to develop to the extent that they otherwise could as competitive basketball players and teams, as high level decision-makers. *I also think there are some severe cultural deficiencies ("competitive naïveté" is one description that might be applied to this phenomenon) that too many of our Canadian kids bring to international competition when they manage to secure a position on one of our national teams, but that is yet another, much larger topic, for a completely other discussion.

Sticking to the schools for a minute, there seem to be a whole bunch of cultural elements involved in our society that mitigate against rearranging our competitive scholastic enterprises in a way that would put the best teams against their peers more frequently, so school-based basketball in Canada may never become much more of a developmental field than it currently is in this regard.

But it is nevertheless a reality of rural life that 'the high school' tends to be the only athletic facility in the community where basketball can be played. Granted, much of our population nationally is migrating into the largest urban centres, so this may take care of itself over time, but in the meantime, if rural kids are to have any hope of developing as basketball players, that development almost has to occur within the medium of the school.

And, I must say, one of our own advantages as a basketball team from a rural school is that our league is now something of a minimalist exercise, so we go out of our way to schedule nothing but the best competition in the Atlantic region to play against in tournaments.

So our kids get as much high-level competition as is possible, within the exigencies of our own particular geographic, cultural and economic realities. On the other hand, let's face it; we're not going to have a lot of kids from our little program achieving elite status, anyway.

What basketball developmental infrastructure is necessary in Canada -- especially in the largest urban centres where most of the athletic talent is inevitably going to come from -- to enable optimal individual player development, and overall development of the Game of basketball to a higher level in this country?

So, to summarize:

I think that school-based and minor teams in this country do absolutely need far more time devoted to basketball practice and to individual and group physical and mental training outside their basketball practices, and I do also think that they need to play more games during their basketball season than I would originally have thought, prior to becoming involved at the high school level.

And, I think that more of their time within each basketball practice must be devoted to individual player development (Admittedly, this is a speculative comment on my part, because I've not been able to observe too many other basketball teams practicing during the actual competitive season, although in conversations with other coaches, I do get the impression that most of the practice time for too many programs is spent performing what I would call 'team pattern' or 'systems' activity, rather than activities that will develop both skills and concepts in the players).

But for any of this to happen, a lot has to change, not the least of which is access by our coaches to the kind of knowledge -- **and even more importantly, the free time away from what they actually do to make a living, to be able to pursue and integrate this knowledge** -- that will enable them to pass on this developmental expertise to their athletes.

Given the limitations upon access to facilities, I suspect that the additional forms of athletic development and training that are absolutely necessary to under gird optimal individual development as basketball players during their competitive season must be allocated to times that are outside their scheduled basketball practice sessions.

Given the totally voluntary nature of almost all our basketball coaches in this country outside the universities, I am not sure how we can expect enough coaches to become sufficiently

knowledgeable to make the necessary development happen, even if access to facilities could be made possible.

There are some other things that come to mind on this topic, but I figure this is long enough for now. To anybody who has actually stuck with it and read through this whole thing, thank you.

I'd really like to hear what you think -- keep the curse words to a minimum, please

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