

Preseason Tactics to Developing Team Unity

Previously published in
American Basketball Quarterly

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Successful teams often speak of special relationships fostered through on-court competitiveness and off-court friendships. The 2006 Florida Gators won the national championship behind the enthusiasm and energy of four sophomores who spoke openly of their close friendships and shared campus apartment. Such stories speak to the importance of team cohesion, suggesting that much of a team's strength can be found in the unity of its players and the commitment they share.

One of the main challenges of the preseason is to find that “magic” balance between practicing skills and strategy, and appropriately developing team unity. However, team unity can be elusive and difficult to work on when preparation time is limited, scrimmages and games are approaching, and skill development and team concepts need strengthening. Although some experts suggest that a focus on team building can be more appropriate than drills or chalk talks, coaches are right to be concerned with overemphasizing any one tactic when preparing their team.

So how can you take the “magic” and guess work out of preseason planning while ensuring that your team is building unity while also developing skills and tactical understanding? To follow is a list of creative ideas that will help you maximize your preseason, ensuring that your team is not only prepared to play, but is also confidently playing with and for each other:

Preseason Meeting

In the administrative meeting you inevitably call before the first day of practice, schedule time for a team discussion about goals. Talk to the players about where you think they are before the season starts, and what you want to get out of the preseason. Don't jump to talk of championships or specific match-ups. Talk to them about the playbook, the system, and preparing for the first few scrimmages. If it's an older group, talk to them about establishing their legacy with hard work, dedication to execution, and discipline. Invite discussion from them about what they would like to achieve, and jot down five preseason goals that you can assess in the upcoming weeks. Such a talk will help them narrow their focus, keep them centered as preseason challenges arise, and will also set a tone of unity, establishing a sense of shared passion and vision that only they will experience.

Team Strengthening Fitness: The Whole is Greater than its Parts

Conditioning inherently serves two purposes: to physically test and prepare individual players for competition; and, to unify a group by demanding the completion of a common challenge. Stress the power and potential of group cohesion by developing and including

team fitness drills. Spice up your team's conditioning drills while also strengthening unity and confidence by employing some of the following ideas:

- Cumulative Fitness - Determine how many reps the average individual player can complete at any given exercise, and then multiply that number by the number of individuals on the team. Without explanation ask a team of twelve to complete any of the following examples:
 - 750 Push-Ups
 - 1500 Sit-Ups
 - 150 Full Court Sprints
 - 15 Miles
 - 750 Lay Ups
 - A Predetermined Cumulative Max for Bench, Squats, and Wall Sits

After the team begins the workout, explain the value of team and the importance of relying on each other to complete group tasks. If each player does his or her part, the whole of the group is much more significant than each individual's contribution. Similarly, by learning to rely on teammates, individual players may learn a valuable lesson about how friends and trusted others can ease the weight of heavy burdens.

- Team Sit-Ups – Having the team form a circle, lie in sit-up position, lock arms, and complete a preset number of sit-ups as a unified group emphasizes the importance of working together and inherently builds camaraderie. Requiring 30+ team sit-ups after a preseason practice is a demanding request that fosters communication, coordinated efforts, and cooperation.
- Team Push-Ups – Line the team shoulder to shoulder in up position, having them each contribute a push-up one at a time. As the first person comes up from the first push-up, the second person goes down, and so on until they have completed a pre-determined number. A team may only be able to complete 240 (i.e., 20 each), that number may grow with time and conditioning.
- 1 Mile Leapfrog – Instill competition and cooperation by breaking the team into 2-4 groups, and having them race 1 mile around the track leapfrogging each other along the way. The players should see this as a fun challenge for the first lap, but then they'll have to focus on pushing through the burn in their legs as they hurdle their teammates toward the finish line.

History

Tying your players into the generations of players before them, the great names associated with your program, or the rich history of basketball in general is a economical way of developing unity, purpose, and pride without losing practice time. Give your players something to play for that extends beyond them and the team by strengthening alumni ties and emphasizing program history.

Emphasize program history and enhance alumni ties by providing alums with schedules and up-dates regarding the season, facilitating and encouraging professional networking between

alums and current players (e.g. High School students can learn a great deal about college ball from successful alums, and College students can greatly benefit from alums who work in their field of interest), and inviting alums to speak with the team about their experiences and triumphs. Beyond inviting your alumni to be a continual part of the program, hang photos of past teams, players and coaches in the locker room, speak to the players about the achievements and lessons learned that you've witnessed, emphasize the importance of historic players who didn't set records but meaningfully contributed to the team, and remind players of the legacy of which they're a part.

If you're a young program or a coach trying to change the culture of a deflated team, remind the players of the legacy they're establishing and the wonderful history of the sport they play. Speak to the team about historic figures who have used basketball to assert themselves and overcome great odds, while also reminding them that they too can overcome great odds and accomplish great things through the game. Finally, give your players creative assignments that emphasize the history they're a part of. The incredibly successful coaching staff of the Princeton lacrosse team occasionally asks team members to identify the past players who have worn their jersey number, and present a detailed biography of one of those players.

Although these are just a few ideas, they will hopefully help you to develop team unity without sacrificing much needed practice time. All of these concepts are fairly easy to employ, and with a bit of planning you can clearly build on these ideas to develop a series of workouts or strategies unique to your program. By being creative and planning in the off season, you can develop preseason workouts that not only prepare your athletes for strategic and physical challenges, but also help to facilitate a bond between players that no opposing team will be able to break.