

Insights from Attending House League Practices and Games

Kudos to House League Coaches

Having attended quite a few house league practices and games since October, I have quite an appreciation for the manner in which our coaches have accepted their coaching responsibilities. What impressed me most is their positive attitude! Coaching a house league team with only one hour of practice per week is really difficult. What should a coach focus on – individual skills or team skills? Most practices have been a mix of both.

How quickly should the players improve given a one hour practice: the answer, not much. I've worked with quite a few youngsters on shooting and immediately the players had shown considerable improvement. The next week I was rather frustrated as the players returned to their old habits. Making sure I didn't reveal my disappointment, I just reviewed what we covered the previous week. What coaches have to realize is that whenever a specific skill is changed, it takes time to rewire the circuits in the brain. I realize that and don't fault the house league players when they cannot solidify their newfound skills without repetitive practice.

I'm impressed with the focus of the practices and games. It is evident that the players are having fun, win or lose. At games, I watch the coaches as much as I watch the play on the court. It is great to see coaches urging their players on and then quietly providing advice to players on the bench. I've always been a proponent of the coach giving his player positive feedback during a game. What bothers me most is when I see a coach frowning during a game or reacting in a negative manner! Oh, I've done that as a coach, and it really did not pay dividends. Basically, I was reacting to my unrealistic expectations. Gradually, I learned to keep a positive outlook during practices and games. It's nice to see that so many of our house league coaches recognize that the games are about the kids having fun and not solely about doing things right and winning.

Planning for Practices

Planning for a practice is not simply a matter of jotting down a few drills. For example, I watched games with one skill in mind. How well did our youngsters do lay-ups? Sadly, I gave them a failing grade. What struck me was that too many players were starting their lay-up too soon, and they released the ball four or five feet from the basket. The result – they shot about 30% on their lay-ups. Also, too many of the players were using underhand lay-ups. That would be fine if they were scoring. Actually, in the games I watched they shot about 20% and were pleased when they sunk a basket. I firmly believe that players should be sinking 60% to 70% of their lay-ups. I don't even see that happening in the warm-up drill where the percentage should be around 90%.

If that's the case, what would I do as a coach? First, I would work on the players' launch spot. I would make sure that their last step is closer to the basket so that they are within a yard of the basket when they release the ball. Secondly, I would focus on their right leg for a right handed lay-up. Is it effectively providing vertical thrust? Is the player's head looking up to the basket? Is the ball moving up above shoulder height with both hands on the ball? All of these aspects help the player to control his body in the air and obtain maximum vertical thrust. I feel that closer attention to these details would result in a higher percentage during games.

Also, I would make sure that the players practice from different angles. It is amazing how often players take the same approach during a practice – at a 45 degree angle – but during a game they are doing lay-ups from all kinds of angles. It is important that they practice situations that they will face in a game.

Part of practicing lay-ups should involve some defensive pressure. Quite often as a coach, I would play a little defense and make the player drive aggressively by me for a lay-up. Players have to learn to focus totally on their shot and not worry about the defender.