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Groupthink

George Orwell, in his famous book 1984, coined the phrase groupthink. Over time it has come to reflect the bad decisions that are made by groups. Groups develop one directional thinking and critical thinking is often suspended, rendered ineffective or non-existent (This definition comes from the book Group Dynamics in Sport by Albert Carron and Heather A Hausenblas). Many organizations can be accused of groupthink. Most often it occurs when no one challenges the thinking or direction the group is heading.

It is my contention that basketball in North America went through a major case of groupthink over the past decades. In 1980 Canada was considered one of the top basketball nations in the World. If our men and women had of attended the Moscow Olympics there was a good chance that both teams would have medaled. This was the peak of North American basketball. By 1988, in Seoul, the Americans realized they could no longer win with a university all-star team. The pros arrived in 1992 in Barcelona with the first Dream team. We were full into groupthink by this point. The solution was not to fix the problems of development, but to take those already developed and provide them with more opportunities to succeed. In the short term this type of thinking works; for the Americans won the gold in 1996 and 2000 (Lithuania was one missed box out on a foul shot away from defeating the USA in Sydney). By 2004 in Athens the top countries in the world had caught up again by emphasizing development over glorifying those who already have the talent.. Even though the Americans won in 2008 in Beijing those in basketball recognize that problems do exist. Coach K had to spend three years developing a national team, with the top players in the world, in order to win that medal. When you fail to fix the problem at its source and invest in development of the base, the fall will come when the top players finally move on. In a country like the USA that can survive on population the problem will not be as prevalent. In Canada it hits home harder and quicker.

There can be many reasons for groupthink to occur:

- Stagnant or lack of turnover in leadership roles within the group.
- Lack of education or a pathway for new ideas to enter into the group.
- No sharing of information.
- Disagreement is seen as being disloyal.
- Society, usually through the media, portrays or glorifies old ways of doing things.
- Fear of change.
- Vocal minority often bullies the silent majority.
- Not able to read the signs and project the consequences of continued actions into the future.
- Short term pleasure vs. long term pain.

Let us look at a few of these reasons that apply to basketball.

Green Eggs and Ham

“I do not like green eggs and ham”. This is how many people react to change or ideas that are different from what they usually do. In the Dr. Seuss book Green Eggs and Ham, Sam I Am spend the majority of his time trying to convince the critic that he will like green eggs and ham. As we all know once the critic tries the breakfast he loves it. Think of the amount of time

and energy wasted in our organizations on resistance to change. Not all change is progress, but we must be willing to try new ideas. I find that it is at the administrative level where changes take the longest to occur. Coaches will change quickly if they think there is another win out there. Players will change if they see it will help their game. It is harder for administrators to see how change brings immediate improvement. Often change at the administrative level is not made by one person, it is a group of people that is bound by a constitution or by-laws. In order to change the system, lobbying must be done and the proper steps must be followed. Many people burn out or become frustrated when faced with this bureaucratic wall.

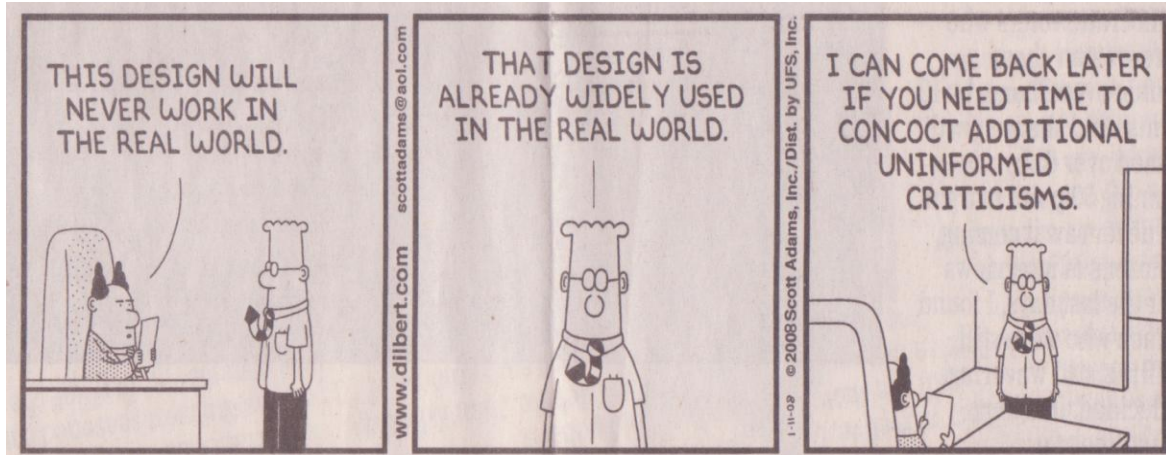
Success breeds myths

I first heard this term used by Rick Torbett. It is so true at all levels of the game. If we win it can become very easy to give credit to the wrong things. Very often we win in spite of this supposed action. Anyone who has attended coaching clinics or bought basketball instructional material has seen the plethora of material titled *“The offence I used to win the championship.”* My high school coaches often talked about how no one really full court pressed until the 1964 UCLA Bruins went undefeated. The Michigan State 3-2 zone became popular after the Magic Johnson team defeated Larry Bird’s Indiana State team in the 1979 NCAA Championship game. After Jim Valvano won at North Carolina there were many coaches who added the box and one and triangle and two to their arsenal. How many teams ran the triangle offence after Michael Jordan and the Bulls won all of those NBA championships? I know I did. The Memphis dribble drive offence is the latest in this groupthink approach we often take. There is nothing wrong with this type of approach. In fact I applaud the coaches who are will to try something new, but coaches must learn to decipher what is truly behind the reasons for a team’s success. Can these actions or concepts be applied to that coach’s level of play? My old mentor coach often reminded me that what works at one level will not necessarily work at another. Running the dribble drive with players who cannot dribble or shoot the outside shot may not be a good idea. I would argue in most cases it has more to do with the talent and skills of the players then the system that was used. In my past coaching it was amazing how much better my teams were when we had good talent and skills.

Uniformed criticism

Growing up in Nova Scotia in the 1970’s we had two channels on TV, CBC and CTV. We used to watch golf on Sunday afternoon hoping that the NBA basketball game ran overtime on the American channel feed. This way we might get to see a couple of minutes of basketball. Most of what we learned of the NBA we got from reading Sports Illustrated, as the local papers did not carry NBA on regular bases, or by listening to Johnny Most, of the Celtics, on the radio. Actually it was easier to listen to Marv Albert and the Knicks, as the New York signal was often clearer. It was very difficult to form opinions because we had so little information to go on. When talking about players we would repeat what we heard or read. Today we have an overabundance of media covering sport. I can watch every NBA game that is played. Most teams have their own channel. Sport talk radio is on 24/7. Each of these forms of media is looking for information to fill up their air time. We have come full circle. Because there is so much basketball information available people do not have to think. We assume that if it was said on a talk show or on TV it must be true. Very often the opinion of one person (often it a conversation that was stretched to fill in air time) becomes the headline at twenty minutes past the hour. The uniformed can become stars. If you have style and can sell what

you say you might even get invited back. Statistical or even anecdotal evidence is not required. Those people who are informed and have something of value to say are often lost in the sheer mass of information.



Camps

Basketball camps used to be the best place for learning how to coach. In each area of the country there was a camp that all of the best coaches went to work. This was where you learned the game. You would watch 10 different coaches teach a skill or a concept. At night you could sit around and discuss why they taught the way they did. No one was intimidated by this give and take banter. It was how you learned. You were expected to share your ideas. These types of camps are rare now of days for many reasons.

Note: not everything was great about these camps. They were expensive and usually exclusive to high school aged players. The cost of overnight residence camps became very high. As the cost for university went up the players were used as coaches instead of bringing in local high school coaches. Also, we had many children who wanted to attend camps, but could not afford the cost. These camps tended to be tailored to the elite older players. A group that does not attend camps any more.

Today many organizations run their own camps in conjunction with their club or school team. It is the big fund raiser for the team. It is also a way to pay local people for their work over the year. The problem is that new ideas often do not get inside the confides of the gym. It is the same people coaching the same kids with the same ideas. If you are not one of the family you are seen as “the enemy”. Any new ideas that you bring are dangerous to the players. Players start into the club /team at a very young age. Their whole development is done within that one organization. The lost opportunity to share ideas is what has hurt the development of the game. Recently I have attended many camps where coaches are still trying to share ideas. I applaud teams and organizations that are not afraid to bring outside people into the fold. By allowing others to work with your players and coaches you learn and grow.

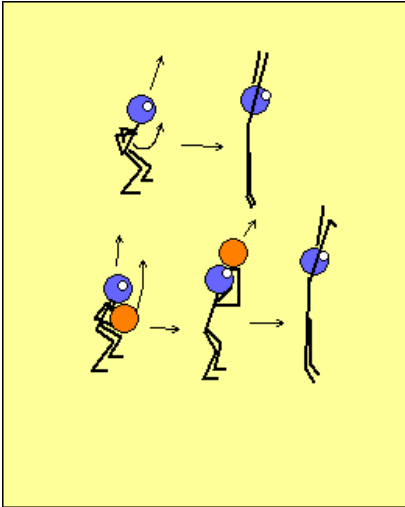
Steal from the best and share with the rest

I was having a conversation with Greg Francis our boys NEDA and Junior National team coach. He commented that I was the only coach he knew who used other sports to describe basketball. I think this comes from my multi-sport background. Some of the best lessons I have learned in coaching have come from watching or conversations with other coaches from different sports. I have made it my quest to search for universal truths that hold true to all sport or human movement. By looking outside our sport it helps avoid groupthink. We avoid getting distracted by myths of success. From track and field I have learned much about the biomechanics of human movement. I have also learned how to properly train the energy systems. Football has taught me leverage. This applies to boxing out and post play. How to attack the seams of zones is something I have also applied to my zone offensive concepts in basketball. Football has also taught me how to delegate and organize a team. From fencing and Aikido I learned footwork and how to stay balanced. A soccer coach was the first who introduced me to dynamic warm up and the idea of pre-habilitation (exercises to prevent injuries).

One area in basketball where groupthink has affected the game is shooting. Many shooting gurus have promoted techniques and theories that go against what the body naturally wants to do. They can give examples of shooters who have proven successful using their theories. It is difficult to argue because we do not know how good the player could have been if he/she had learned a different technique. These shooters have developed their own unique style that is often difficult to duplicate by the masses. Also, the shooting style is effective at that stage of development. It does not transfer well to another level. My feeling is that we want to teach a technique that players can use at the highest level of play, but principles and concepts will apply to all ages. Like walking the child can grow with the shot as he/she moves from stage to stage. With many shooting techniques they do not work as you move up or down the competitive ladder. Younger players can not generate the power needed to use the technique or else in the search for power the child sacrifices form. Older players often cannot get this shot off against defence as they get older.

When I teach the jump shot I ask players to pretend that they are on jumping on a mini trampoline. This gets the players too:

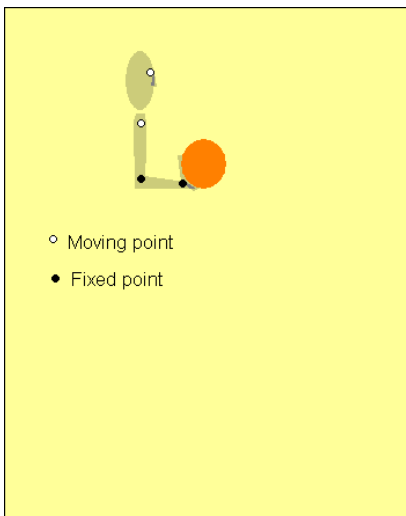
- Start with the feet parallel and shoulder width.
- Swing both their arms for height when jumping.
- Finish the jump with both arms above the head for balance.
- Land on balance.



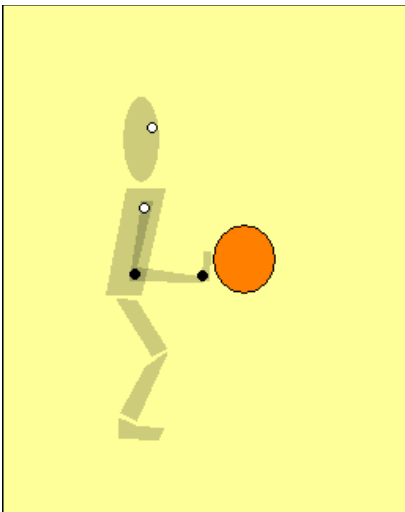
Jump shot

With the adoption of the short shot clock the jump shot has become a more important shot that players need to develop. Very often a player may need to elevate over a defender to get off a shot. In the past this may have been considered contested. We have a nation of set shooters. Very few players actually jump to shoot. This is ok if you have time and are not closely guarded, but we do need to develop players who can get their shot off when closely guarded.

Many players will shoot off the dribble more effectively than on the catch. They can get more arm swing and can shift their horizontal movement into vertical.



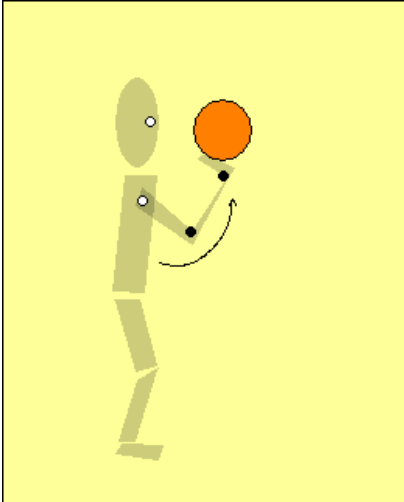
One of the key biomechanical principles of human movement is that in order to produce efficient movement, one end of the muscle remains fixed. If there is no fixed point the body part can move in more than one direction. This extra motion is inefficient. It is difficult to reproduce straight line motion consistently if a player has movement in all of the joints of the arm at one time. Also, the proper sequencing of the limbs means an efficient transfer of the power generated from the big muscles of the legs.



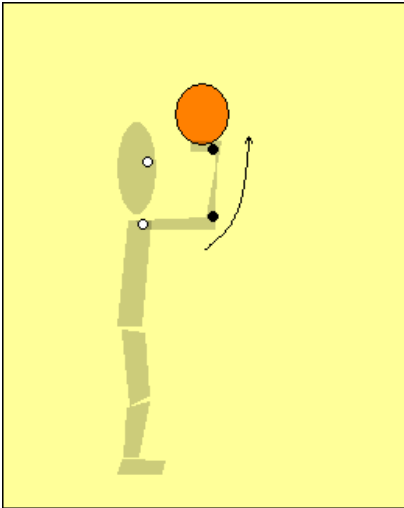
We want players to start with a **C or L** in the shooting arm.

The C is formed by the 90° angles of the shoulder, elbow and wrist.

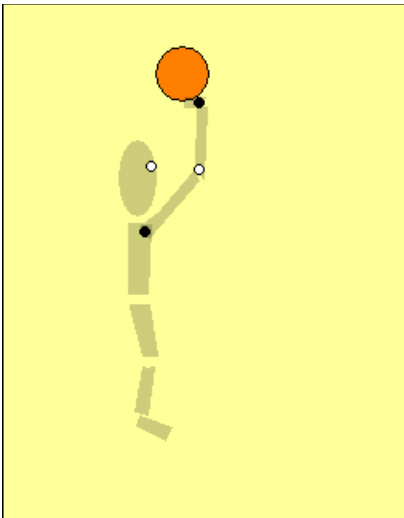
Note that the forearm is parallel to the floor. This allows the player to swing the arms and generate lift.



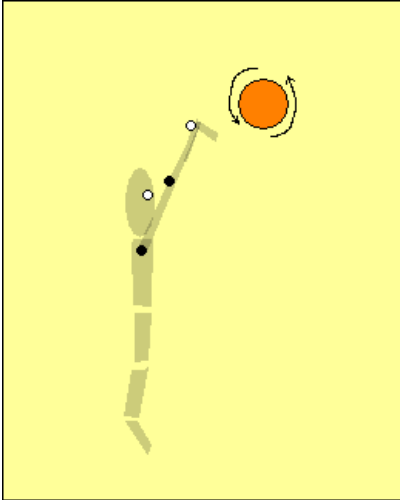
As the legs begin to straighten the C position is maintained. The shoulder joint is the only joint where movement should occur.



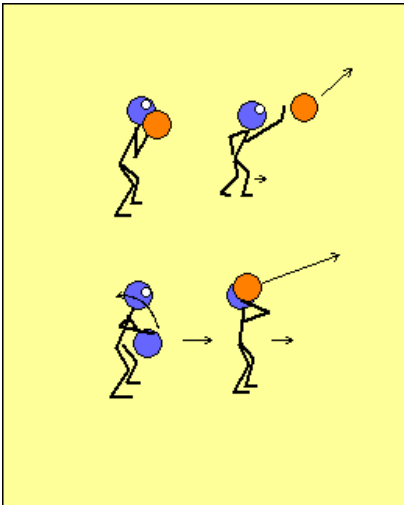
The C is maintained (by keeping the elbow and wrist fixed) until the player is looking under the ball.



Now the elbow starts to straighten once the shoulder has reached the proper height.

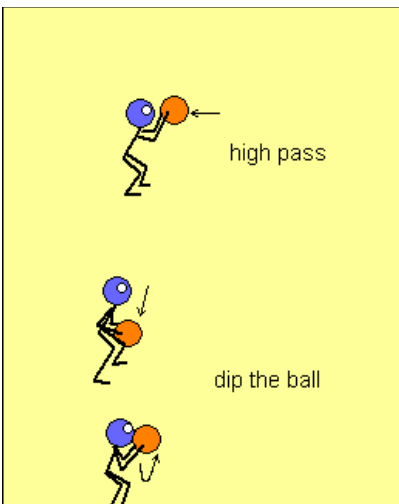


The final movement is by the wrist. The elbow and shoulder remain still. This action occurs as the player leaves the floor (younger players). With older players it is at the top of the jump. This proper sequence of movement allows the power generated from the legs to travel up through the body and out the shooting fingers. When there is movement in other planes of the body at the same time energy is lost. For a young player this is deadly to producing the proper power and finesse to shoot properly.



Too many players start the ball with a V in the shooting arm. This means the ball is near the face. Since the arms cannot swing from this position to help in generating vertical lift the player develops power by pushing. It usually ends up in a shot put action. The player often will drop the non-shooting hand. Often the shoulder, elbow and wrist are all moving at the same time.

Players who start with a flat wrist or on top of the ball develop a backward flip of the ball when they set the wrist at the top. These players generate power by arching the back and then slinging the ball forward. They are playing darts. Because the wrist is not set or fixed we have the shoulder joint, elbow and wrist all bending at the same time. The ball cannot be propelled forward until this negative motion is stopped.



When players catch a high pass the general tendency is to dip the ball. Why? The need to generate lift. It is also a rhythm thing. It is hard for young players to generate the power needed to shoot properly without stepping into the shot and catching the ball at the good starting position. As players get stronger and sequence their movement effectively many will be able to handle a high pass and shoot without dipping.