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## **Sisyphus Effect**

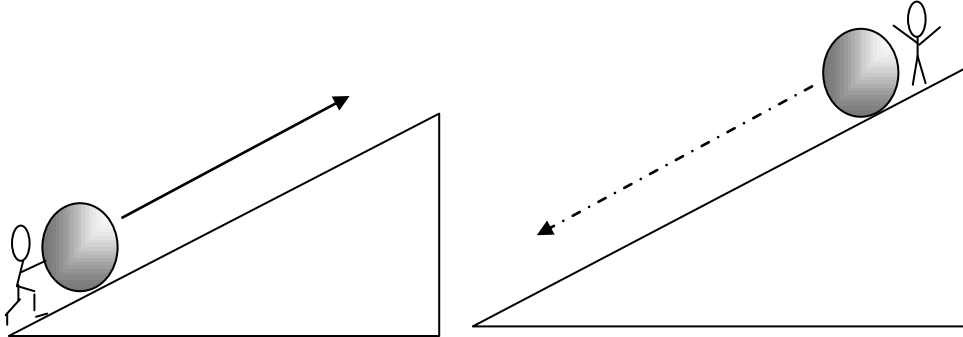
I just spent the last week working with coaches at our U15 National Championships. I spent three days watching and listening to coaches in competition. The final two days I debriefed the coaches on their experience. I learn so much from this process.

Many of our developmental coaches do an excellent job of teaching skills and concepts in the competition. Some coaches believe that the game is not the time to teach, they see it as the test. Practice is where the teaching occurs. If you have not shown the ability to use a certain skill or concept in practice, you will not be allowed to use it in the game because it will jeopardize the chance for the team to win. I agree with these coaches if we are looking at winning in the short term. In the last play of the game, the one that decides the outcome, we want to give our players the best chance to win. We probably will not have the weakest ball handler advance the ball up the floor. The problem is when this approach is used over the entire season or worse for a player's entire developmental career. In all my years of coaching both football and basketball, the plan I had at the start of the season for players was not the one we finished with. Some players developed more than others did and injuries or players leaving the team always had an impact on the final team dynamics. A coach must always be thinking ahead. You must need a plan B.

To me competition is the time to demonstrate that you have learned the concepts that you practiced. What many coaches do is restrict the test the child gets to write. In practice, the player is allowed to dribble and shoot. In the game the coach only allows the player to pass and rebound. Coaches are afraid that they will jeopardize the victory if the players make mistakes. This is true if you are thinking about winning in the short term, but if long-term victory is your goal you must allow mistakes and teaching to occur within the game.

When athletes' plays games and no learning takes place, they start each game with the same skill set and concepts as the previous game. This remind one of Sisyphus, from Greek Mythology, who was punished for his transgressions by being forced to push a huge bolder up a hill only to see it roll back to the bottom at the end of the day. The next day starts with the same task. When players are not allowed a second chance in games the stone rolls back to the bottom of the hill.

## Improvement Slope



The coach must ensure the stone does not roll back by using benchmarks within the game to ensure that the players have learned and can apply the skill or concept. How does the athlete guarantee to the coach that the benchmark has been achieved?

- Use of questions to show comprehension
- Demonstrate the skill or concept with a competitive situation

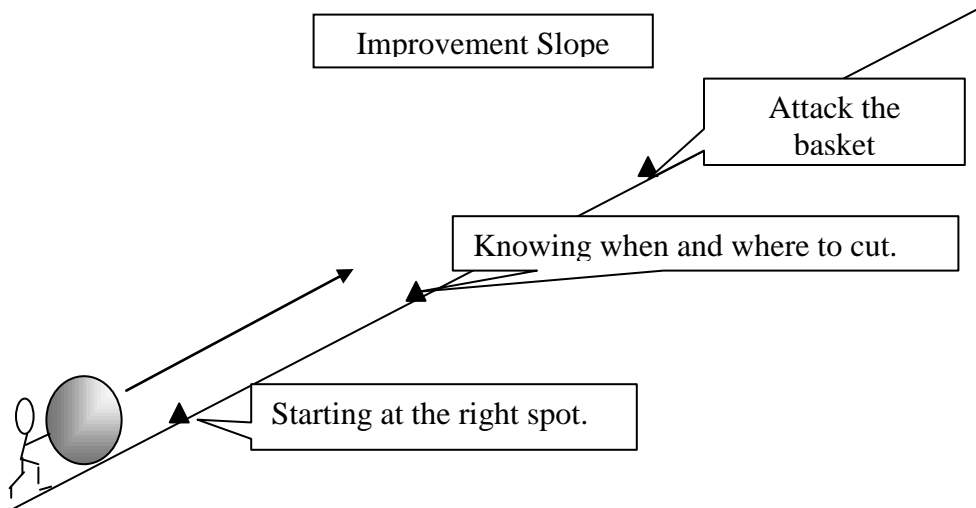
By asking questions and listening to the answer the coach can judge comprehension.

Developmental athletes will often answer with; “I don’t know”. This is because they have not learned the language necessary to describe their thoughts, feelings or actions.

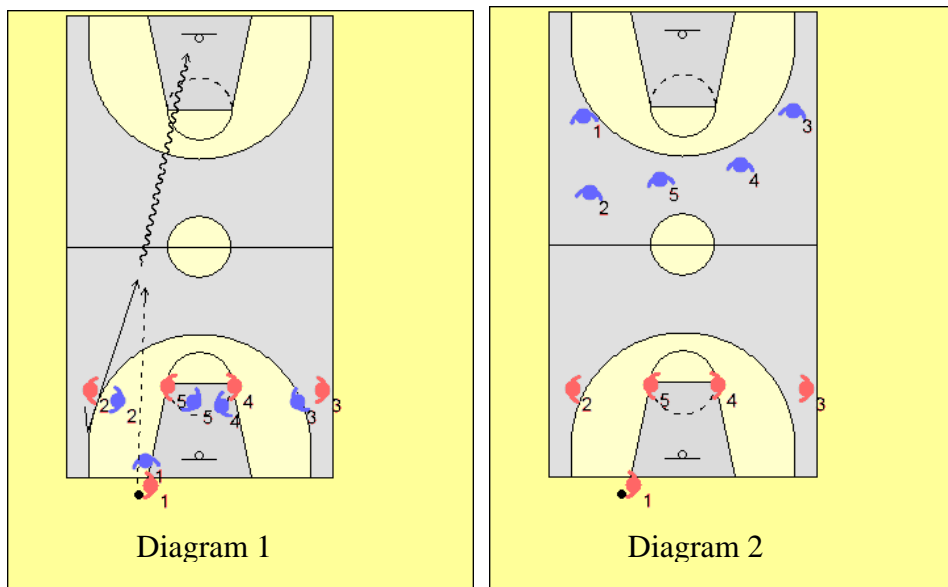
Demonstration is the ultimate test. Players need the opportunity to show coaches their competency in the game. I would also argue that they need more than one chance. They need to learn from their mistakes.

In the example below the coach is teaching a particular player how to attack pressure.

The first benchmark the player must achieve is starting in the correct spot. If the coach **stops coaching** by giving no instructions and allows the athlete on every possession to go to a different spot, the stone is rolling backwards. If the coach using the bench to coach by subbing on the first mistake and never giving the athlete another chance the stone also rolls back down the hill. If the athlete is not even allowed in the game the stone never gets a chance to move up the hill at all. Once the athlete consistently knows where to go, the coach can load the athlete with the next benchmark; knowing when and where to cut. Once this skill is mastered the coach loads the next piece which is to attack the basket.



Many coaches at the first sign of a mistake make a strategic or personnel change to solve the problem. A coach wants to have his/her team play full court player-to-player defence. In the first game of the year after scoring the players all pick up their check and play in a  $\frac{3}{4}$  deny position. One of the offence players fakes a cut to the ball and goes long. The inbounder throws long over the head of the defender. The ball is caught and the player scores an uncontested lay up (Diagram 1).



The coach immediately calls time out. The coach takes a strategic solution and calls the press off and instructs the player to pick up at half court. In this situation the athletes were not allowed to push their stone of full court pressure improvement up the hill. No benchmarks were allowed to be put in place. Next game the stone will start at the bottom of the hill. This coach is trying to win in the short term. If the coach has a long term view of victory he or she will instruct the player as to the adjustment that needs to be made. The key is that the child is given the opportunity to

demonstrate the new learning. If the demonstration of competency is only allowed to take place in practice the child is not being given a true test.

Coaches also allow the stone to roll back down the hill when they stop coaching. This usually occurs when a blow out occurs. The coach who is leading by a large margin and allows the players to get into garbage time activities risks the benchmarks being eroded for the next game. The coach who stops coaching when this /her team is losing risks the stone rolling back because the players lose confidence in the coach and each other. The danger here is that the stone may roll back to a spot even further than where it began.

This same Sisyphus Effect can also occur in organizations when they do not have people in current positions pass on their knowledge to future replacements. I see this happen all the time in coaching. Organizations invest a lot of time, money and effort in training a coach. When the coach leaves all of that information is taken with him/her. Legacy material needs to be developed that can be given to the new coach.