

Mike McKay - Manager of Coach Education and Development



Reading This Week

I am writing from Kamloops BC, where we are preparing for the U15 National Championships. One of the great things about a full day of travel is the ability to get into a good book. I picked up a copy of **Traffic; Why We Drive The Way We Do** by Tom Vanderbilt. It has been an amazing read so far and has some analogies that apply to our current basketball situation.

In North America we see the ability to drive a car as one of the greatest signs of freedom. To have your licence means you can hit the open road at anytime you choose. You are completely independent, just you and your car. Those of us from the 1960's remember the movie Easy Rider. It spoke to this kind of freedom. In fact when you really look at it, driving is one of the most restrictive and interdependent things that we do in our society. First, you must be registered and licensed to drive. Someone else decides if you are competent. You have to pay a fee for the privilege. If you abuse the privilege and go outside the accepted guidelines you can be penalized or have your privilege taken away. You must put your trust in the other drivers on the road that they will follow the same guidelines that you are following. Your very life depends on this trust.

This universal system of traffic was not a instantaneous occurrence. When cars first came on the scene there was no such thing as traffic signs, signals and general rules of the road. Every time two cars met a decision had to be made as to which side to pass each other. Over time each municipality experimented with their own solutions to traffic problems. Some worked, some didn't. As communication improved the better ideas were spread across the country and the world. A common set of traffic laws were developed. There are still exceptions. I am still not sure when I can turn right on a red in Quebec. I almost got killed in Australia because I kept forgetting that the cars came at me from the right side first, when I was crossing a street.

How does this relate to basketball? We need to have the same universal integration of our playing rules and concepts. Players and coaches need to abide by these agreed upon common rules. When a coach goes outside of the accepted boundaries for a particular age group he/she should be warned and if the behaviour persists he/she will be penalized. When coaches start restrict players skill development by placing players in set positions at a young age, the coaches should be educated. If they still do not change should they still be able to coach? When coaches start playing full court trapping defences with mini basketball players that coach should be informed that it is not acceptable. When a coach starts running multiple set plays at the mini level that coach should be warned. These are examples of concepts that do not follow the rules of the road. If an idea comes along that helps the system it should be implemented throughout the entire system. Coaches need to understand that they are working to produce players who can drive (play) anywhere in the world, not just drive (play) in their own municipality. It is only by having this interdependence that the whole system can thrive. When coaches see themselves as

independent drives and do not follow the rules of the road; their bad habits and the accidents they cause have a ripple effect throughout the entire system.

The other book I have been reading on this trip is called **Simplexity: Why Simple Things Become Complex (And How Complex Things Can Be Made Simple)**, by Jeffery Klugger. In this book the author comments about a book called **Basketball On Paper** by Dean Oliver (I have read the book and recommend it to coaches who want to take a serious look at statistics of the game). Klugger makes the statement that many coaches base a lot of their decisions on hunches. Oliver in his book argues that a coach should trust the numbers not his/her hunch. It got me to thinking about coaching intuition.

When I used to teach leadership physical education I taught a section on decision making. One piece was on when do you trust your intuition or hunch when making a decision. As a football coach who was responsible for calling the offence I used to tell the students that I found my hunches worked best when I had prepared or had past experience with the situation. What did it mean to prepare.

I was lucky that my former university football coach, John Huard (Played in the NFL with the Denver Broncos and the CFL with Montreal. He also had a brief stint as coach of the Toronto Argonauts) took me under his wing and showed me how to prepare. I was the manager with Acadia University from 1979-82. During this time we won two Vanier Cups. When breaking down tape we would look at the first step of each offensive lineman and the position of his head on the block. The player received a grade on each play. This was before computer software did a lot of this work for you. It was all done by hand. This allowed Coach to be very specific when we went to practice as to what needed to be worked on. When scouting and opponent we looked for individual tendencies of players based on position on the field, down and distance, etc. When coach developed a game plan he taught me to run plays that tested these tendencies to see if they still held true. He told me you had to give the opponent credit that he was also scouting and practicing. But as I once heard Brian Heaney say; "People change, but seldom." The next thing we did was practice. Following his example, I would have my players come in during the mornings, before class, to introduce and walk through the subtleties of the play. That way when we got on the field in the afternoon we did not have to waste precious time. We would film practice to see how the plays were developing. We would watch film of our opponents to show the players the simple tendencies to watch for. We drilled the players on the details of the plays and the counters we would run. These were always based on the abilities of our players to execute the play, not on the abilities of some superstar player who we may have seen run a play on TV. I found inexperienced coaches would often come with me with a play that they saw some team on TV use. It usually involved some extraordinary athlete making an extraordinary play. When game time arrived we would run plays early in the game to confirm that the tendencies still existed. Coaches and players all knew what to look for. After each possession we would debrief and prepare for the next series. Coaching high school football for over twenty years I found my hunches were usually pretty good because of this preparation.

I carried the same preparation over to basketball. I was video taping all of my high school games and opponents as far back as 1982 when I purchased the first Panasonic Omni Vision, It was the first portable VHS system available commercially. (Older coaches may remember this as Reggie Vision because it was promoted by Reggie Jackson.). For years I did the same film breakdown that I learned in football. It assisted me in learning how to teach the game because I saw the simple fundamental errors my players were making. It forced me to learn how to teach the fundamentals because if I did not the same errors kept showing up time after time.

I also was lucky in university to mentor with basketball coach Ian McMillan., Ian had spent a year with the Houston Rockets of the NBA back in 1977. When I coached with Ian at Acadia in 1980-82. He brought with him much of what he learned from the pros. One feature was the stats we took on the bench. For each possession I would write down how we gained possession, what action we took and the result. This became very helpful in our coaching hunches. Ian could ask me a simple question; "Mike what is working?". He did not want me to give him a hunch he wanted it based on the numbers. I would say something to the effect;" Ian on our last ten possession we ran #2 three times for no scores, # 5 five times for three scores and two fouls that lead to foul shots. The other three times we ran transition and got two turnovers and one miss. You may think that this was me being afraid to give him the simple answer, "#5". But he wanted the information to help him understand with cold hard facts about what was going on. In his mind he may have had a hunch that we were running and having success in transition, but this showed him it was not true.

I carried over this attention to detail with my own teams. It has always amazed me the number of coaches who do not keep stats on the bench. Especially stats that can impact performance. Here are some stats that over time I have charted. Many are ones I have done while attending international tournaments or have picked up from other coaches. They have helped me grow in my understanding of the game:

Time and score

This stat allowed us to judge playing time and contribution of certain line ups. It is simply charting the line up on the floor at any particular moment. Every sub you mark the score and the time of the sub.

Defensive rebound and opponent shot chart

Where was the opponent shooting from and who was getting the rebounds?

Possession chart

The back up point guard charted each possession to see what was run and its effectiveness.

During games I would have assistant coaches track the following at various times:

- Number ball reversals in our offensive possession
- Screening effectiveness
- Posting (posting on a body or posting on a spot)

- How the opponent was defending screens
- The opponents defensive rotations

Anyone who has ever been with me at a game knows I will all of a sudden start keeping tabs on some crazy things:

- How long does it take before the offence gets the ball into a position where they can score
- Where the ball crosses half
- How long before the defence gets five pairs of eyes facing the ball
- The number of times in a possession when players do not attack the rim with their eyes and body.

Why do I chart things? I want to know for sure what is happening. Having accurate information makes me more comfortable in my hunches.