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Taking the Initiative

I was very fortunate to attend the 2009 FIBA U19 World Championship, in Auckland New Zealand. Over the next couple of weeks I will share some of my observations and leanings from the event. The people of Auckland did an excellent job in hosting the event. Lubomir Kotleba, the technical director for FIBA, said at the first technical meeting; “Many people want to play, but few want to host.” To look after the accommodations, meals and transportation of 16 teams is not an easy task.

I was very impressed with how the teams took the initiative win games. They were the ones that took it to the opposition. They determine the tempo of the game. The players acted with confidence and this allowed them to dictate play. No one won a game hoping that the opposition would make a mistake so that they could win.

How do you gain the initiative?

Pre-game preparation

In order to play with confidence players need a good warm up that looks after the physical, mental and social/emotional aspects of the game.

Physical – the body needs to be warm.

- Dynamic flexibility
- Nervous system – fully excited and ready to go. At some point in the warm up you need to do something with speed. This fully excites the nervous system. Too often players walk through the warm up saving themselves for the game. It then takes them the first part of the game to be ready to play. The USA did just this in their semi-final game. They players looked like they were warming up for an NBA game. It seemed like they were trying to let on that it wasn't a big deal. Their opponent, Croatia, on the other was both physically and mental warmed up. It didn't hurt to have a strong contingent of fans cheering and singing for them as they warmed up. Croatia quickly went up six nothing and the USA had to call time out. It still took them another few minutes to be ready to play.
- Basketball skills – simulate the skills you are going to use. Dunking a basketball for the complete warm up does not prepare you to shoot, dribble pass or play defence.

Mental – Establish pre-game routines that funnel down to the tip off. This helps ensure the proper focus and arousal level. I would say that the biggest weakness of players at this age is focus. They get easily distracted, losing focus at key times.

Emotional / social - Team bonding was important. Most of the teams had some sort of cheer or chant that they did before coming on the court. Also, during the national anthem the majority of the teams locked arms to feel bonded. Many sung their anthem as the music played.

Strategies and tactics

A number of the parents from team Canada made the trip to New Zealand. Some were bold enough to rent a car. One evening at super they were commenting on the experience of driving on the left-hand

side of the road. The comment was “I had to think about what I was doing. I also made a number of mistakes. Especially when I was turning on the wind shield wipers instead of the signal light.” The same is true for coaches who change the strategies and tactics of the team just before the big game. The players need to play instinctive. If your systems of play are new and do not fit the skills and concepts of the players they will be thinking and therefore bound to make some mistakes.

The pattern needs to fit the players

- Does the coach choose players to fit his/her style of play or do you build a style of play that fits your players? As in most things it is usually a combination of the two. One of the NBA scouts answered, when asked what was the main thing he looked for in a player; “Does he have a natural position.” This points out that in the NBA they look for players who can fit their style of play. This makes sense since they can choose from a pool of all the best players in the entire world. When drawing from a smaller pool of athletes you often do not have this luxury.

Taking the game to the opposition

- Imposing your style on the opponent –stay with what works; know your point of attack.
- Having a defined pattern of play so the players can focus on playing the game.
- Speed of play – The teams that could execute at a higher speed changed the game. Sometimes you could see this when teams came out of a time out. Knowing when to speed up or slow down the game shows initiative.
- Attitude of the players
 - Offensive vs. defence – an attack mentality vs. playing not to lose
 - Not afraid to make mistakes. If the Bill Packer or any analyst for an NCAA game had been present they would have been floored by the number of passes made by jumping in the air and the number of rebounds that were tipped and not secured with two hands. I can hear them saying; “You should not leave your feet to pass the ball.” The type of cross court passes the players were making in penetration could never be made by staying on the ground. For every ten times they through this pass they would have one mistake. They did not fear the mistake because the reward for making the pass was usually a good open shot.
- Getting your opponent to hesitate – vary your offence and defence. Mix in some pressure. A press often takes the focus from score and puts it on not turning the ball over. Coach Steve Konchalski made the comment that if you are changing defences or offences you should chart their effectiveness on the bench. This way you have immediate feedback. If the opponent scores or stops your team three consecutive times you should consider a change.
- On the court – taking care of the ball. The other team cannot score if they do not have the ball.
- Increased physical play - disrupt or bump cutters, increased ball pressure.
- Make tactical adjustments to how the opponent is playing i.e. slip screens if the defences hedges too soon, switch a screen defensively.

Concentration

Coach Dave Deviro made the comment to the players. “You have done all of the right things to make it to the top eight, are you now going to have the discipline to do the little things required to take you to the top.” In talking with the coach from Australia he made a similar comment. What separates the players and teams at this age is the ability to concentrate. The missed box out on the foul line because the player is thinking about the foul call. The missed rotation in you defence because the player is still

thinking about the turnover at the offensive end. The poor close out on the shooter who nails a three because the player forgot the new sub came into the game.

Transfer of Responsibility

In order to perform well on the court you need to perform well off the court. It is not the team that has the most elaborate rules in place that does well in this regard, it is the team where the players take ownership for their actions off the court. Age group athletes are used to having things done for them. Mum and Dad cook the food, tell them when to get up, make all of their appointments etc. As these athletes move into adulthood one of the main things that happens is the transfer of responsibility to the child to become an independent self-reliant adult. The same is true in coaching. There needs to be a shift in coach dominated environment into an athlete responsible environment. This allows for a partnership to occur. At the junior level is where this really occurs. Athletes want to be independent, but many have not gained the maturity to be responsible.

- **Nutrition** - when presented with an all you can eat buffet do you take a meal consisting entirely meats and deserts or do they take responsibility to get some fruits and vegetables.
- **Sleep** – do they get the required amount of rest?
- **Use of down time** – do they partake in actives that enhance recovery and team building or hinder it.