

Tournament time

As we all know in the basketball world March is the time when champions are crowned. My congratulations to:

- UBC Thunderbirds, CIS Women's Champions,
- Brock Badgers, CIS men's Champions,
- Sainte Foy Dynamiques, CCAA Women's Champions,
- Douglas College Royals, the men's CCAA Champions.

I am sure the players' coaches, families and friends will remember these championships the rest of their lives. I also want to say a special well done to Coach Les berry and the Acadia Axemen. Losing by 48 points to the Carleton Ravens in the 2007 tournament was a very humbling experience. To come back and defeat the five time defending champions in double overtime in their own home town was a tremendous accomplishment. To do it by out rebounding the Ravens was incredible. If you were lucky enough to be attendance it is a game you will soon not forget. What a great atmosphere for basketball in this country! The tournament committee did a wonderful job for their first try at the event. I do think the NBA three point line confused many of the players when they rose up to shoot, but that can be easily fixed.

The idea of an offensive hierarchy began to pecculate when I watched the U19 men's and Women's World Championships this summer. The teams that won seemed to have the natural ability to exploit the weakness of the defence. They also seemed to have the ball in the right players hands at the right times. Finally, the players for the majority of the time made the right decisions. As I watched the Men's and Women's CIS and the Women's CCAA championships they same pattern held true. The teams that won seemed to have the ability to accomplish all six levels.

Offensive hierarchy

1. **On air** – the easiest basket is the 1 on 0 lay up – this usually occurs in transition where you out run the defence or of a turnover or steal. Teams that extend their defence are often looking for this type of basket.
2. **Advantage situations** – 2 on 1, 3 on 2 etc. These again are usually a result of transition or by creating cracks and seams though penetration.
3. **“Run your stuff”** – this is where a team comes down the floor and runs the plays or concepts worked on in practice. This is the offensive **strategy** of the team. You often hear coaches talking that they run the triangle, flex, a continuity, sets, or motion.
4. Teams scout the opponent and emphasize different things within their offence. They establish a **point of attack** within their offence.
 - Weakness in the defence
 - The defence fronts the post so if we clear the backside help defender we can lob.
 - No safeties on defence so we can transition for a score.
 - No one rotates to help the helper so if we drive baseline and force help we can make the pass for the score.
 - Weakness of a specific player
 - The player guarding the wing is slow so if we can isolate we can attack.

- The bottom player in the zone is not a good rebounder, we want to always have a tall rebounder in his/her area.
 - Play to the strength of our offence
 - We curl hard to the basket and have great passers inside.
 - We spread the floor well and can shoot the ball.
 - Play to the strength of a specific offensive player.
 - Our guard can read off the pick.
 - Our wing player can make great decisions on the drive.
- 5. **Tactical adjustments** or wrinkles – here the players make reads as to how they are being defended. These are not called plays by the coach. They often have been brought to their attention by the coach, but the players make the action happen.
 - When the defence hedges to early on the pick they slip it.
 - If the defence overplays a passing lane they go back door.
- 6. **Players make plays** – at the highest level a player makes a play that may not have practiced or drawn up in the time out. We can all remember Michael Jordan hitting game winning shots. The great teams know how to get the ball to the right player, in the right spots, at the right times. They other players learn to play off this player's play.

As I stated above the great teams seemed to have a balance and mixture of the above. Teams that tried to dominate with only one element became predictable and eventually easy to defend. If you think you will push the ball every time and create an advantage take a look at the Phoenix Suns. They realized to win the big prize they had to have other options in their offensive arsenal. If you try to isolate that one great player for the entire game the defence can find ways to shut him/her down. Except when it was that magical night when Kobe Bryant scored over 80 points on the Raptors.

I challenge coaches to think about the way you teach your players offence. I suggest that most of us spend the bulk of our time on teaching our stuff. In 99% of the situations at the championships where teams tried to run a play in a crucial situation it was thwarted by the defence that had the play scouted. Everyone knew the player was to come off multiple screens and shoot the ball at a designated spot. When teams ran plays to put players in position to make a play or the players had been drilled in the wrinkles and options off the play the success rate went up. Brock Badgers continued to put the ball their senior guard hands. He found the hot player or took it to the basketball when that was the best available option. The same was true with the post. When the ball got to the post, the player made the decision on what move to make based on the defence he saw. It is interesting to note that the three teams that won the championships I attended all had strong guard play. They made the best decisions.

Here were some of the situations that caused teams problems on offence:

1. The ball in the wrong players hands late in the clock. The player did not know how to initiate a scoring opportunity. Too often they would freeze the ball or use unproductive dribbles.

2. No point of attack. The team would come down and just move the ball around with no sense of urgency. They were running stuff with no idea on how they planned to score.
3. Poor spacing late in a clock. Even if the ball ends up in the right player's hands at the right time, if you do not space the floor properly it limits the options available. Too often the players without the ball crowd the player with the ball or stand around allowing the defence to help and recover.
4. Running a non-shooter to set a screen for a shooter, whether it is a ball screen or a stagger screen away from the ball, it is not always a good option late in the clock. They will switch off and deny the shooter leaving the non-shooter as the one holding the ball.
5. Running a ball screen offence where the player dribbling the ball cannot or will not shoot a dribble jump shot. Eventually the defence will figure it out.
6. Running a high low game or a post feed game with the passer being someone who cannot shoot. The defence sags and takes away the passing angle.
7. Stagger screens where the last screen is switchable and there is no space for a slip.
8. Needing a three point shot and only having one three point shooter on the floor.
9. Having the ability to go the length of the floor and get a two or three point shot without calling time out. This is a strategy that coaches need to practice in the FIBA game. It was amazing how often teams seemed unprepared for this situation. The opponent would be shooting two foul shots. The coach elected not to take the time out, anticipating taking the time out after the make on the second shot. This would allow the ball to be advanced to half court. More often than not the offensive player missed the second shot. Invariably the defensive team rebounding was hesitant in initiating transition. The coach usually was caught standing on the sideline with whiteboard in hand now yelling for the team to push it to score.
10. Does your side line inbound play from half court have the ability to get you;
 - A score at the rim with less than a second.
 - A three point shot for multiple people.
 - A high percentage two point shot where your best player gets the ball in his/her best spot in order to make a play.
 - A inbound vs. extreme pressure to your best foul shooter(s) if you are up.

The overriding message is you need a **Plan B**. When you put all your eggs in one basket, Plan A, good teams can shut you down. They players need to understand the various options and when they apply. It is about the players making play.

March madness

The usually hype around March Madness in the NCAA has produced some interesting talk in my travels. The Globe and Mail in its Monday March 17th addition had a list of all the Canadians taking part in this years tournament (Note, it only included the male Canadian players and not the females). There were eleven players on this list. It was interesting to note the amount of playing time and contribution that these players made to their teams success. I know that some are only freshmen and we can only hope their stature grows, but it is a shame that some of our best and brightest players do not get to

take the leadership role that is so important for their growth as a player. They are usually delegated to roll players. I contrast that with the players who were involved in the Canadian University championships. In crunch times they were the ones who got to decide the outcome of the game. You cannot convince me that the experience of winning a national championship was diminished for the players from UBC and Brock because it was done in Canada. They will have memories that will last a lifetime. The game tapes will also show that they were on the floor when the game mattered. It is not that I am against the NCAA, I am against the hype and lack of accurate information provided to players when they make their choice to attend a university. It is difficult for the athlete and parents not to get caught up in the hoopla surrounding the event. I found it interesting to note in my travels to the Canadian men's and women's championships how we have forgotten to ask the players their opinion about CIS schools becoming NCAA institutions. I had more than one player tell me that they would transfer if the move happened. If they had wanted the restrictions of NCAA basketball they would have chosen it in the first place. They wanted the Canadian experience where they felt there were fewer restrictions on development and how they could spend their time. I hope the powers that be ask the questions of the people the move impacts the most, the players.