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Peaks and Valleys

I want to say thanks to the host committee of the Women's CIS Championship for putting on one of the best championships I have ever attended. The community of Regina went out of its way to make the teams and guests feel welcomed. The crowd was electric. I have never seen so many young girls in attendance at a women's CIS game. The idea of having local youth teams adopt one of the university teams was brilliant. I was pleased to see the CIS teams embrace this idea. Also, the committee involved over 160 girls and 40 coaches in clinic over the weekend. These girls all attended the games.

I also want to congratulate the Simon Fraser Clan on winning the 2009 CIS Women's National Championship. They proved that they deserved to be the National Champions with their solid play all weekend. What impressed me about SFU was:

- The skills of all of the players,
- Their understanding of roles,
- Their ability to handle the peaks and valleys.

Spencer Johnson has a new book out called **Peaks and Valleys: Making Good And Bad Times Work For You – At Work And In Life**. I have always been a fan of his books. He collaborated with Ken Blanchard in writing the **One Minute Manager**. He also wrote **Who Moved My Cheese** which is about dealing with change. All of these books are simple reads about simple principles that we can apply to all areas of our lives. I found it interesting to apply the principles of the Peaks and Valleys to the CIS Championship and coaching.

As coaches we know that a game is made up of peaks and valleys. When we are at the peak our team is performing well. Spencer Johnson says the peak is where we celebrate life. All of the things we have practices is paying off. As a coach there is no greater thrill than to see you team putting it all together. The valley is the opposite. Nothing we seem to do is working at the moment. The other team is on a run.

The bad decisions made in good times are often the start of the slide in to the valley. The good decisions made in bad times are what start the climb out of the valley.

Spencer Johnson

There are two important points for coaches:

- What can I do to get out of the valley?
- What can I do to keep my team on the peak and not start the slide down the slope?

Preventing the slide into the valley

- **Keep doing what we have been doing** - We often talk about the difference between a veteran team and a young team. This is one place that we often see the difference. Sometimes when a player is inexperienced or subbed into the game they forget what has been working. They feel it is their turn to shoot or we should run this play because we haven't tried it yet.

They go away from what works. Simon Fraser was the best team at the CIS championship of doing what works. It was very rare for players to take shots that were not their shots. Their subs coming off the bench knew what shots they should take. The number of timely big shots hit by so called role players was uncanny. The only time I can remember Mattheke Hutzler taking an outside shot was late in the shot clock, when all bets were off. She won the MVP award because she knew her role. Run the floor, rebound, defend and set screens. No one did it better. She also rarely came off the floor. You would see many SFU players passing up wide open shots early in the clock. Why? It was not their shot. They had the discipline to know that a shot is not an individuals shot, it is a shot for the team. In order to win we need to take the shots that we have shown we can make throughout the entire season. The championship tournament is not the place to experiment with shot selection. There is a reason why some players are open in the big games!

- **Maintain our focus** – When we get the lead we often lose concentration. We stop paying attention to the key points. We no longer call screens or shot, we no longer make note of when the three-point shooter subs into the game, we stop communicating with each other. We also start concentrating on the wrong things. We start thinking about the outcome and not the process. We start watching the scoreboard. The players on the bench start to talk about the party we are going to have after the game. More often than not the players or coach get caught up in the “other game”. They over react to the officials and forget to concentrate on what they can control. The players and coaches have to avoid getting too emotional over mistakes.
- **Avoid Complacency** – Players lower their intensity level. The players forget what got them to the peak. They start to relax. They no longer cut as hard to get open, they don't work to get around the box out. Sometimes players get too intense. Often when starting the game the team comes out to excited and tries to hard. They force passes, take fouls. The players will often be fatigued two minutes into the game.

Start the climb out of the valley

The path out of the valley appears when we change how we see things. As a coach you need to take off the blinders and not let your emotions or your perfectionism blind you to reality. You may need to calm yourself and really watch what the other team is doing. One time I had a player not curling off the screen to the basket in a regional championship game. All season long it was a key to our success. During a timeout I was mad at the player and challenged her to cut harder. She quickly pointed out that the reason she could not curl was because the other team's biggest and strongest player was stepping out and rocking her on the cut. I had not seen this, because I was so focus on being a perfectionist. I did not give the other team credit that they would take this away. Luckily I was willing to see things differently and not get caught up in the “do what I say attitude” that we sometimes take as a coach. Often we need to listen to understand and not listen to defend our opinions. We made a simple adjustment that we had practiced, and took advantage of the defender extending the screen.

This is why I always wanted stats being taken on the bench. It gave me an accurate picture of what was really happening. In times of stress I did not want to let my perception of reality to taint my decision. I always had my “ready card” handy to remind me of what was prepared in the unstressed time before the game or the night before. This was my plan for how to deal with the valley. It listed the entire offensive

and defensive adjustments we would make based on what the other team did. It listed possible line ups for certain situations; if we saw zone, foul trouble, pressure, or best foul shooters for late in the game.

For most coaches we try to solve the valley through time outs and subs. In the FIBA game you cannot always use timeouts, there are not enough available. What happens when these don't work? Very often it is because we are not addressing what is really needed to start the climb out of the valley.

- **Paint a clear picture of what is actually happening.** The coach must be able to describe to the players what is actually happening. We cannot talk in generalities at this time. “We are not working hard enough, were too soft, and were not moving” do not paint a picture. “They have taken 10 shots and have 6 offensive boards. All of their points have come from these offensive boards. We also have our two post players with two fouls each.” Truth over harmony.

- **Describe the future** – Use sensible goals not fearful goals. Build a clear visible path out of the valley.
 - Fearful goal - If you don't start boxing out we are going to lose this game. You will have more to worry about than simply losing if we don't box out. You will have to deal with me.”
 - Sensible goals (describe the future using all five senses: taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing). - “When the ball leaves the shooters hand we need to **hear** you call ‘shot’. When that happens everyone has to **look** and find their check. You then step and **feel** the contact of their solar plexus on your friendly forearm. You will be so close you can **smell** what they had for lunch. When you do that you will **taste** their fear to go after the rebound.” (Note: I was stretching on this last one; I hope you get the idea. It doesn't always have to include all five senses. The more you make it come alive the more the players can believe in it happening.)

- **Focus** – Narrows your focus to what is important. Cut out the fluff. “Forget the crowd, forget the score, and forget the referees. All you have to do is what we said we were going to do. Take care of the ball, take our shots and rebound the ball at both ends.”

The valley is where we learn. If you don't learn from the valley you become bitter. If you learn you become better.

Spencer Johnson