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Implementing Small-Sided Games into Youth Basketball Practice

By Brett Carter and Jiling Liu 

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In youth sports, specifically basketball, coaches tend to believe drills are the most effective way to develop skills and make their players more capable. In fact, relying on drills may not work, because it does not mimic real game situations that players will face (Clemente, 2016). What's worse, repetitive drills can be boring and therefore hinder players' motivation (Collins & Barcelona, 2018). An alternative way to do typical drills is to implement small-sided games. Small-sided games are modified versions of the actual game with a reduced number of players and typically with a reduced playing area (Rodrigues et al., 2022). This approach has many benefits, such as providing opportunities to make game-like decisions, specifying constraints to focus on certain skills or situations, and increasing involvement of players in the game. In this column, we will elaborate the benefits and suggest a practice plan for youth basketball coaches to implement better small-sided games into practice.

Opportunities for Game-Like Decision Making

Game-based approaches have become more and more popular over typical drill-based approaches. With a game-based approach, players are put in situations that they might see in a real game rather than a predetermined situation where no on the spot decisions to make. Using this approach allows players

to engage in critical thinking and reactions to changing stimuli instead of knowing exactly what they are doing before they even do it (Rodrigues et al., 2022). Getting these repetitions in a game-like situation better prepares them for in-game play. Small-sided games increase variability and unpredictability of situations in which coaches want their players to practice. For example, playing three-on-three with only one dribble per catch can help basketball players learn to move into open spaces and work on their movement without the ball. By allowing players to learn key concepts, gain more experience in certain situations, and make their own decisions rather than having decisions made for them, small-sided games contribute to individual and team development.

Specifying Constraints for Practice

A constraint refers to how a coach expect their players to play a game. It is a crucial aspect of small-sided games and usually involves changing one or more rules. By manipulating constraints, coaches can get the exact desired game-like situations. A constraint can be as simple as the number of players involved, such as playing three on three instead of four on four. This is a key element of small-sided games, as it will always have the constraint of playing with less players. A time limit within which a play must be done is another example of constraints. It can also be a reduced playing area where specific skills and plays needed to be reinforced, such as players must get the ball in the

Table 1. Small-Sided Basketball Game (Three Versus Three) Sample Plan

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| <p>Review terminology for different cuts and screens</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Front cut: Cut in front of the defender. • Back cut: Cut behind the defender. • Curl cut: Curl around a screen toward the basket. • V-cut: Fake a cut to the basket and cut back up. • Flare cut: Flare to the opposite wing after receiving a flare screen. • Down screen: Player goes toward the basket and sets screen for a teammate. • Back screen: Player comes up from basket and sets screen on the back of the defender. • Flare screen: Player sets screen on side of defender to allow for a flare cut. • Cross screen: Player moves from one side of the court to the other to set a screen on side of defender. <p>Progression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players start by playing three-on-three half-court using passes only, no dribbles and no on-ball screens. Teams play until the offense scores, or the defense gets a turnover or rebound. Once this happens, the defense goes to offense, the offense goes off; and a new group of three come on. Players are to utilize front, back and v-cuts cuts, as well as down, back and cross screens to get them open for a shot. • Once the play has gone a few rounds, give player options to use curl and flare cuts as well as flare screens to add variations. • Once the play has gone a few rounds, give players one dribble per catch while still utilizing screens and cuts. • Once the play has gone a few rounds, allow players to dribble as much as needed. • Last, allow each round to end at the first team making three baskets and switch offense every time a basket is made or off a turnover or rebound. <p>Considerations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize using cuts and screens to get open space/shots. • Allow players to make decisions by themselves; avoid dictating what screen or cut to use. • Players are expected to use ball fakes, jab steps, dribble moves, and shot variety based on situations. |
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paint before making a shot (Praca et al., 2021). When a specific practice is considered, for instance, a three-on-three can be an ideal setup for practicing off-ball screens: After passing the ball to player B, player A runs to screen for player C in the other side.

Player Involvement

Another benefit of small-sided games is that it puts relatively more players in the action and takes away from players on the court standing around. This is vital for youth players, as they need as much exposure in game-like scenarios as possible so they can develop knowledge and skills of problem solving in game situations on their own instead of being told the solution (O'Neil & Olson, 2021). The small-sided game helps players of all skill levels have more touches with the ball per play, which in turn makes the game more enjoyable for all players. When the game is more enjoyable, it motivates the players to become more skillful and competent in play as well as keep playing basketball in the long run. Being self-motivated is crucial for youth basketball players' development.

Implementation

When implementing small-sided games into practice, there are various opportunities for all types of skill acquisition and decision making. Coaches can teach practically any concept using small-sided games. Typical examples would be ball screens, off-ball screens, cuts, and dribble hand-offs. During these plays, players can practice fundamental skills (e.g., passing, dribbling, shooting and positioning and defense) and specific skills (e.g., jab step, ball fakes, and footwork) as well. Table 1 is an outline of what a small-sided game with progression would look like in practice. The progression allows players to practice learned skills in a situation that forces them to make their own decisions. This sample plan focuses on reviewing different cuts and screens previously practiced. Three objectives are: (1) during the small-sided game, players will use different cuts and screens; (2) after the small-sided game, players will describe all five cuts and four screens; and (3) after the small-sided game, players will explain which screen and cut they think is most effective in game situations.

Conclusion


Using small-sided games gives players opportunities to not only gain knowledge and skills but play the game in an enjoyable way. Adding games as described in this text to youth basketball programs may significantly develop young players' skills

to be used in real competition. Adding a variety between small-sided games and drills can enhance a player's engagement and motivation. We recommend coaches to be creative with small-sided games that fit the situation or scenario they are trying to mimic. This can help players learn different skills and concepts translated directly into a full game.

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Submissions Welcome!

Readers are encouraged to send "Coach's Corner" submissions to *Strategies* Editor at tlawson@shapeamerica.org.

The purpose of the Coach's Corner column is to feature short articles about one specific coaching lesson that readers can immediately implement with their team. Articles should contain a brief introduction, followed by quick-hitting information such as bullet points or lists. Submissions should not exceed 1,000–1,500 words (or roughly four typed, doublespaced pages).