**Coaching Your First Game**

Each year there are many people who will be coaching a basketball game for the first time.  It can be a very overwhelming situation; many things can occupy your consciousness – referees, parents, minor officials, opposing coach, opposition’s players, and, most importantly, your players.  As fast as the game may seem for many young players it can be equally as fast for the first-time coach.

Throughout the course of the game you will address the players many times.  Learn to be very clear, enthusiastic, and display a sense of confidence when talking to the team or individual players.  While there will be times when it is necessary to be stern with yours players, generally speaking, be positive. Your objective when speaking to your players is speak in a tone that expresses that you believe in them – nothing is worse for players to have a sense that the coach is waiting for them to make a mistake.

Here are some ideas which may help you through the first few games.

**1. Pre-Game**  
Coaches can begin the “game experience” with a pre-game warm up and then a brief talk to establish with the players the points you want them to concentrate on during the game.

As players move through their basketball career the pre-game meeting will become a standard practice.  Establish a routine of when you are going to meet, at TCYBA you should meet no earlier than 5 minutes before the start of the game as in many gyms or hallways there simply is no room to stand and wait for long periods. However, it is important that you establish with the parents, and players, that you will meet prior to the game and that all players must be in attendance.  Parents and players must understand that a 7:00 pm game means show up at 6:55 pm ready to play, uniform on and laces tightened.

At the youth level discuss with the players one offensive principle and one defensive principle you would like them to focus on during the game. At the youth level keep the points simple; offensively it might be for the passer to make a basket cut after each pass he/she makes or every time a player catches the ball he/she must face the basket and get into a triple threat stance.  Defensively it could be for all defenders to jump towards the ball on every pass that is made or to stay in a proper defensive stance throughout the entire possession.   These principles should be things you have practiced – don’t emphasize things you have not done in practice.  Remember games are the opportunities to test what you have done in practice.

In the pre-game talk name the five players who will start the game. This will take away any uncertainty the players have and allow them focus on the game.

Keep the pre-game talk brief and to the point.  It is critical you have the attention of the entire team; do not begin the talk until you have it.  The pre-game talk should be positive and enthusiastic.  At the conclusion of the talk have all the players extend their hands into the middle of a team huddle and have a team cheer, usually saying the team’s name,  nickname or motto.

**2. Shift Changes** Shift changes are not to be used for discussion, have your players substitutions ready in advance! Players should know where they are going and who they are taking off. Have them call the player off and Hi-5. At the start of each shift especially at junior levels, officials will ask player to identify their checks or line up across from them. Bench and coaches should try to Hi-5 players coming off. The assistant/ bench coach should take time to encourage players and remind them of things they learned in practice. All players must get equal playing time.

**3. Worry about what you can control**  
You cannot control official’s calls, the opponents play, and whether your team’s shots go in.  These are examples of things that will occur during the course of a game that you have no control over.  Don’t worry about them; it is wasted energy, takes your focus away from your team and, most importantly, your players will begin to focus on them.  Playing or coaching basketball is hard enough without worrying about factors you have no control over.  As well you are setting a poor example for your athletes.

**4. Time-outs**   
If you have time-outs use them with a purpose in mind, as they come out of playing time.   Time-outs are opportunities to help your athlete’s regain their focus on the parts of the game they are not doing well or keep focused on what they are doing well.  During these breaks you should praise them about what they are doing well and/or send back onto the floor with specific strategy.  Again it is vital to be brief and  clear.  Do not mistake a large amount of information with quality; follow the old adage - “less is usually more.”  Jerry Tarkanian, the former coach at UNLV said “too much information makes the feet slow”.

**5. Half-time**Get the players on the bench as you only have 4 minutes to get hydrated, go to the restroom, and relax.  Take time to review what happened in the first half and decide on any changes you want to make for the second half.  Then sit with the team and give positive feedback both individually and as a team.  Finally, communicate the aspects of the game for the players to focus on and make any adjustments you have deemed necessary.  Be brief, enthusiastic and confident when addressing the team.

**6. Post Game Meeting**  
After the teams have shaken hands with each other and officials. Clear the bench area immediately and walk around the court, NOT across, so as to allow next team to warm up without interference. Give your players time to gather their clothes, bags, etc and then meet in a designated area away from the gym.  While the players are gathering their gear, review in your mind what went well and what needs to be improved upon.  Address the team and again be positive; recognize one or two things the team did well and areas that need to be addressed in the next practice.

The post-game meeting is a time when confidence can be built by recognizing individuals who displayed excellent effort on the floor.  For success in basketball, players must play hard, and the post-game meeting gives the coach an opportunity to recognize those players who gave tremendous effort.  Remember, basketball is only a game – don’t beat the players up.  Leave them wanting to come back for more.

Good luck and enjoy the experience!