

How Important is Each Possession in Youth Basketball?

After a close loss, many youth basketball coaches will sit up all night trying to figure out what they could have done differently, what mistakes were made (turnovers), how many easy shots / free throws that were missed, foul trouble, poor execution of plays, non aggressive defense, poor rebounding, etc. All things that can drive a coach to insanity! Which one of these specific things could have made a difference in the outcome of the game? The answer is pretty easy – ANY of the above! A coach can review everything listed and try to determine where the exact problem is, but time and time again it will always come back to “any of the above.” This leads me to one very important point – **How important is each and every possession during the course of a game?** As a coach, have you ever sat down with your players and discussed this? I mean really discuss this in detail to the point that each possession is viewed as extremely critical by all the players? Imagine your whole team understanding that each possession can actually affect the outcome of a close game, and then be willing to work hard and do whatever it will take to win.

If you think about it, the outcome of a close game could have already been decided in the first quarter!

Just because a player misses the last shot or misses free throws at the end of the game doesn't mean they lost the game for the team. What about the player who missed their shots or free throws in the first half? What about the fouls, the turnovers, the poor rebounding in the first half of the game?

Losing is a total “Team” concern, you win or lose as a team, plain and simple.

Factors that have an affect on the outcome of a game...

- **Offensive Rebounds** – Get two more offensive rebounds per game and score once or twice off the rebounds you get up to 2 – 6 points (3 pointers have to be calculated in the mix also), but most of all you didn't give possession of the ball to the other team – which could have been up to 2 – 6 points for them.

Point Swing = 2 - 12 points (max)

- **Defensive Rebounds** – Get three more defensive rebounds per game and these possessions go to your team. If you score once or twice off these possessions you get 2 – 6 points, but most of all you didn't allow the other team to score on these possessions – which could have been up to 2 – 6 points for them.

Point Swing = 2 - 12 points (max)

- **Missed Free Throws / Fouls** – If your players shoot 60% from the free throw line instead of 50% this could produce anywhere from 2 – 8 points per game (depending on how many times your team goes to the free throw line).

Fouls – If your players reduce the number of fouls they commit each game this will lower the number of times your opponent goes to the free throw line. This will eliminate scoring opportunities for your opponent – which could be up to 2 – 8 points for them.

Point Swing = 2 - 16 points (max)

- **Missed easy Lay-Ups** – This is one of the most frustrating things to me as a coach. I do understand that every shot is not going to go in, but missed easy “uncontested” lay-ups are in-excusable in my eyes. What I mean by that is you can’t realistically expect your team to make every easy lay-up, but you really don’t want your team missing a high percentage of easy lay-ups. If you make just 2 – 4 of those easy lay-ups, this means 4 – 8 more points for your team. So if your team misses any easy lay-ups and don’t regain possession, the other team now gets a chance to score – which could be up to 2 – 8 points for them.

Point Swing = 2 - 16 points (max)

- **Poor Defense / Lack of Aggressiveness** – Your defense is there to stop the other team from scoring points. If some of your players decide to take it easy on defense (which allows the other team to score), it does nothing but contribute to a possible loss. Let’s just say for example that 3 different players during the course of the game decide to stop playing defense for one play each and allows the other team an easy basket – this would give the other team 2 – 6 points. On the other hand, if these players played hard and made stops – your team would regain possession and have the opportunity to score anywhere from 2 – 6 points.

Point Swing = 2 - 12 points (max)

- **Turnovers** – Turnovers have to be the all around biggest factor in the point swing estimations. In fact, we have dedicated a whole menu page to turnovers and how they affect the game. The bottom line is this – when your team turns the ball over and the other team gains possession – your team has given the other team opportunities to score on these possessions.

For this example we will use 20 turnovers...

20 Turnovers = a point swing of anywhere from 12-23 points. Do I need to say any more about how turnovers affect the outcome of the game? If you want to read more about turnovers...

[CLICK HERE to go to our TURNOVER MENU PAGE...](#)

- **Poor shot decision** – This is one that is hardly ever gets included when talking about the outcome of the game. If you have 2 players that take 2 – 3 shots per game when you really don't want them to, this takes the ball out of your best shooters hands – this again can lead to the other team gaining possessions – which could lead up to 2 – 6 points for them.

Point Swing = 2 - 12 points (max)

- **Poor Execution (and defending) of Inbounds Plays** – Inbounds plays are designed to get your team an easy shot opportunity under your basket. If your team does not execute the plays correctly (and the play is easily defended), you won't get a chance at an easy basket, and your team could lose possession to the other team. On the defensive side, if your team doesn't "defend" against the inbound play and allows the other team some easy baskets; this also can contribute to a loss in a close game.

Point Swing = 2 - 12 points (max)

Take any one or two of the factors listed above (in any combination or time occurring in the game) and you can easily find a dozen reasons why your team didn't win the game.

Poor Coaching Decisions

When we talk about possessions and the outcome of a game we have to include poor coaching decisions. There are a many ways where a poor decision by the coach can lead to points scored for the other team. The more experience a coach has, the fewer poor decisions there should be. As with the players, coaches have to experience poor decisions and learn from them just as players need to gain experience playing in the game.

A few examples are...

- a. Substitutions – Leaving players in too long, or not long enough.
- b. Play Calling – Not countering what the other team is doing on defense, or not taking advantage of a certain plays or quick hitters when the opportunity arises.
- c. Time Outs – Allowing the other team to continue on a run, and calling a time out too late (after the damage is done).
- d. Not fouling at the end of the game to stop the clock – know when it's time to start fouling, and not waiting until it's too late.
- e. Not knowing when to start "delaying" the game, waiting too long and allow the other team the opportunity to get back into the game.
- f. Not having your best free throw shooters in the game when the other team is fouling to stop the clock.
- g. Arguing with the Referee instead of paying attention to what's going on with the game.
- h. Arguing with the Referee and getting a technical foul.

Hopefully, you get the picture. Winning and Losing is a total team effort (or lack of effort), losing can never be attributed to just one player or the coach.

Team Awareness – A must...

It's the coach's responsibility to discuss the importance of each possession with their team. I am not saying to just discuss it at the beginning of the season and forget about it. I am saying that this needs to be a daily message with your team. The team needs to understand just how important possessions are, and how they can do their part to help the team succeed. If your players buy into this concept, you will be successful. Each player must take responsibility for their part in taking care of the basketball. When players make mistakes, they need to acknowledge them, and work even harder to fix them. Coaches must keep the concept alive by mentioning it daily, and help fix problem areas as needed. A coach must identify what the problems are, and devise a plan to fix them. This means identifying each player's weaknesses, finding drills or skill work to help the player, and monitoring progress using statistics. Keep in mind that everyone will still make mistakes, you will never eliminate all the mistakes made by your team, but as long as you work together you can reduce the number of mistakes to the point where you are winning more games...

Conclusion

There is an old saying that "Coaches lose the close ones" but as you have read above - this is not a "fair" or very "accurate" statement. There are just too many variables through the course of a game that can affect the outcome. I personally feel that any games that are lost by 25-30 points (or more) has a lot to do with the players not playing up to their potential (giving up early, not hustling on defense, etc). When your team is down by 30, all a coach can do at that point is encourage the players to finish strong and to keep working hard (try to take something positive from the game and build on it).