

Hands Up If You Want To Play !

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The subject of this article is the use of the hands in various parts of basketball play. Obviously, the other aspects of the game (footwork, stance, court position etc.) are equally, if not more, important. The use of hands is just the focus for this article.

The key point I'd like to make is that your players' hands should always be in an "up and ready" position for whatever they are about to do. The fraction of a second taken to raise the arms and hands can be the difference between a great catch and shoot and a fumble!

When coaching youngsters it is always a battle to make this happen, but I believe all you can do is constantly reinforce and praise those players that are always "ready".

Removing distractions is another way to improve readiness. Make sure uniforms fit and hair is tied back. It is very frustrating to watch your players fumble the ball because they were adjusting an ill-fitting singlet!

Holding The Ball

Whilst this might seem like a very basic topic, it is surprising the number of young players who are never taught this.

- Use only the finger pads (not finger tips) to hold the ball.
- Spread the fingers (not too far).
- Hold on tightly – those other guys want the ball too.

On-Ball Defense

- Pressure on the ball is paramount to good defense. Obviously the hands are the integral component to good ball pressure.

- Ball side hand should trace the ball, pressuring the passing lane and a possible shot. Be economical with your hand movement, erratic flailing of arms doesn't help much.
- Off side hand should be held lower, palm up ready to pressure the dribble and guard against the possible cross-over move.
- Don't reach in. If you want to pressure the ball make short, sharp jabs at the ball. Reaching in will pull the defender off-balance and she will be easily beaten. It will also lead to a likely foul.
- Dig up at the ball, don't slap down. Digging up is more likely to relieve the offense of the ball and will lead to much less fouls. Many referees will call a foul for a downwards slap even if it is all ball !
- When trying to knock the ball away from the dribbler, flick outwards (away from the dribbler). Flicking towards her is less likely to result in a steal.
- When defending a player who is in a shooting position you must have a hand held high to pressure the shot. The aim here is not always to block the shot, but to make the shot more difficult for the shooter. Make her change her shot. Getting your hand up high to pressure the shot and/or block the shooter's view of the basket is essential. Never let a shooter have an easy shot !
- When attempting to block a shot always jump straight up with the arm fully extended upwards. Flick at the ball with your fingers. Don't bring the arm down and swat at the ball – you'll nearly always pick up the foul!

Off-Ball Defense

- Keeping the hands held high – just near the shoulders – makes them much more ready to intercept a pass than if they are by your side.
- When denying the pass make sure one hand and arm is in the passing lane.
- On the rare occasions you must lose sight of your player (e.g. fronting) – use your arms and hands to "feel out" their location. You must always know where they are.

Receiving The Ball

- If you want the ball you must make a target with your hands. I really like, and use the catch-cry used by Mario Blasone "show me ten fingers" if you want the ball.
- When catching the ball high extend your arms away from your body so that you can "absorb the shock" as the ball hits your hands.
- Spread your fingers and cup them slightly to catch the ball.
- When catching the ball high, thumbs point at each other and fingers point up.
- When catching the ball low, thumbs point out and fingers point down.
- When leading, cutting or posting-up always present a target hand away from your defender.
- Once you've caught the ball, always bring it up into the "shooting pocket". Get into the triple threat position. Make your defender play you!

Rebounding

- The position of the hands when “blocking out” in readiness for a rebound should be up above the shoulders, with the thumbs pointing at the ears. This not only makes them “up and ready” to grab the rebound, but also makes sure your upper arms form a nice wide barrier for the opposition behind!

Passing

- Most young players don’t use their wrists enough when passing. Stress the importance of flicking the wrists. With most passes the fingers should follow through to point at the target.
- Fake a pass to make a pass. Use a short movement of the ball to fake in one direction before passing in the other. Make sure you leave both hands on the ball until you actually pass the ball (e.g. baseball pass). You can’t fake with one hand off the ball.

Shooting

- Probably the biggest point to make with young players about the use of hands when shooting is that only one hand propels the ball to the basket.
- Start holding the ball like a waiter holding a tray of drinks. Upper arm parallel to floor, lower arm perpendicular to floor, wrist cocked so hand is also parallel to floor. The arm and hand should look like three sides of a rectangle.
- The three middle fingers of the shooting hand do most of the “pushing” of the shot. The middle finger should be centered on the ball.
- Emphasize the follow-through “flicking of the wrist” to get the backspin on the ball. This is what gives you a “soft” shot.

- Tell your players to hold the follow-through position for a couple of seconds. This will make sure they are thinking about the follow-through and make it easier for you to spot mistakes.
- The off hand just helps support the ball before the shot. It is not involved once the shooting action begins. Position the off hand on the lower front corner of the ball.
- Players that get the ball into a “ready-to-shoot” position quickly (as soon as they catch the ball) will get their shots off more quickly and with less pressure from the defense. The “ready-to-shoot” or triple-threat position requires the ball to be up at about shoulder height with the shooting hand “cocked” as described above.

Dribbling

- As with holding the ball, always use the finger pads, comfortably spread.
- Use energy from the wrist to push the ball down to the floor with the fingers. Follow through with the fingers (point at the floor).
- When “speed dribbling” push the back of the ball (closest to you), so you are pushing the ball out in front.
- When “crossing over” or changing direction move the hand towards the side of the ball to get a good angle to push the ball sideways and keep the ball low.

Signals

- Use a variety of hand signals for nominating offenses and defenses.
- Hold up your fist when setting a screen.

Team Building Things

- Have your players touch hands as they are substituted on and off. While they do this they should exchange necessary information (who they are guarding etc.)
- Always acknowledge the “assist” when you score by pointing at the passer.
- Encourage the free throw shooter by “giving them five”.
- Before every period of play and after every practice get the team in a hands-in huddle. End the huddle with the team “shout” (e.g. “Go Hornets”).

In summary I’d like to stress my key point. Make sure your players always have their hands ready for the task at hand. Holding your hands high – above the waist, even at shoulder height – for most of the game will give you that fraction of a second advantage that could be the difference between a win or a loss.

So, “Hands Up If You Want To Play!”