

TRUE 2 HOOPS

Free Throw Shooting Drills

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The most important traits a good free throw shooter should possess are concentration and ultimate confidence in his own ability. The system our teams employed proved to be successful in developing those traits in all players, not just the good shooters.

Let's start by talking about the set up we taught to create an efficient shooting stroke. The components are as follows:

1. Feet shoulder-width apart for great balance with the shooting side slightly forward. We want to the shooter to toe in on the nail mark in the center of the free throw line.
2. Now we line up the following body parts in a straight line.
 - A. Right hip point
 - B. Right elbow
 - C. Right shoulder
 - D. Right sight eye

As we talk the players through the shot, we constantly remind them to stay lined up toward the hoop.

This brings us to major point of how we developed good free throw shooters. We had players shoot free throws with one hand in the fall and in the spring.

We had players assume their stance with the shooting side forward, then we place the ball in the shooting hand above the head, the arm in an L shaped position and the ball resting gently on the fingers, much like a waiter holding a large tray of food.

We then had players bend their knees, keeping the ball in place with the elbow in and the arm in an L shaped position. We then have them elevate toward the release point of the shot. As the knees come up, the arm starts to rise in one motion. They take the ball up, then out toward the hoop. As the ball is released from the fingers, the wrist is snapped to give the ball soft back spin. We then remind the player to hold the pose on the follow through until the ball hits the basket. The arm should be reaching out toward the rim as if to grab it, and they should finish on their tiptoes.

We saw that this technique helped players become rock steady with the ball in one hand. By not allowing the off hand to be a part of the shot, the players become mentally in sync with the components of the shot, thus creating ultimate concentration on each and every free throw attempt.

Good free throw shooters know the components of the shot so well they become able to coach themselves for adjustments. For instance, they will know instinctively when a free throw is missed, that perhaps there was not sufficient lift from the legs. They then make the adjustment on their next attempt.

Our teams would shoot free throws two different ways, one in game-like and stressful situations and the other for repetitions.

The most important game situation drill is our 16-3-2-1 drill. During the off-season, we would do this drill at the end of our athletic period. In season, this drill is done in the middle of practice every day without fail.

Players are stationed at the baskets around in the gym with two balls per basket at each hoop. The goal is to make 16 free-throws before time is called. The coach will vary the time of the drill from six to nine minutes. We never tell the players how long the time will be to create extra pressure on them.

Even though the rules have changed regarding shooting two free throws once a team reaches the penalty (no more one and one situations), you should still use the one and one free throw rules during this drill. The drill emphasizes making the first shot of a one and one. This will come in handy in close games when you have to have both free throws to win or stay in the game.

Each player steps to the line for a one and one situation. He must go through his own pre-shot routine for every shot. This helps to create the same rhythm for each shot.

If the player misses the front end of the one and one, he must put the ball down and run three full court sprints (down and back is one). When he finishes running, he starts over shooting the front end. If he makes the first shot and misses the second shot, he runs two full court sprints. After running, you start with the front end again. If he makes them both, that counts as two free throws made in the attempt to make 16 free throws during the drill. Even though a player makes both free throws, he still has to run one down and back. All made shots count toward the 16 total goal.

The penalty for not making the 16 free throws is pushups. We would multiply the number short of the 16 free throws by 10 (or whatever number the coach chooses) and that is how many pushups are owed. For example, if a player makes 11, then he is short by 5. Multiply 5 times 10 to get 50 pushups. Pushups are done before getting the water break in the middle of practice. You obviously can vary the number of pushups per free-throws not made, but 10 is the limit.

Now imagine shooting the ball one handed, and missing the front end over and over. All you are doing is running. Now the player really concentrates on his stroke. If a player makes his free throws, he runs far less than those who do not, plus he avoids the pushups at the end. This creates pressure on each shot, and also promotes competition between the players. It is a form of prestige to avoid the pushups, and the players like to kid each other about the amount of pushups they had to do each day.

I might add at this point, that we rarely run at the end of practice for conditioning. Conditioning running is built into our drills.

The next drill in shooting under pressure is always done either at the end of our athletic period or at the end of practice during the season. All the players line up on the baseline and the coach tosses the ball to one player who will attempt one free throw. We tell the team that the number of free throws to make is five. If the player misses his free throw, every player must run 5 full court sprints. The number then goes to six. However, if he makes it, the next player is selected and the number is three. If he makes his shot, then the number is 2, then one, etc. If the team makes four straight free throws, the drill is over and we are finished. If we miss, then the number goes up and it is much harder to get to zero. Missing free throws in this drill creates a lot of peer pressure because you are making the whole team run. It is very hard to walk to the line with all of your teammates looking at you, not wanting to run sprints.

What we are trying to instill in our each player is that making free throws is a given. We expect to make them because we have faced pressure each day during practice, and have learned to block out all thoughts except the one of making the shot. That thought is “this ball is going in the hoop.” They know it will be successful before the attempt is taken.

When we shoot free throws for repetition, we always do it as the end of practice. Our players make 100 free throws each and every day before they leave the floor. This is when the players can take their time and work on the different flaws to their strokes.

On game days during the athletic period, we shoot free throws for 30 minutes and walk through our game plan for 20 minutes. On Saturdays after film work, we make 200 free throws before going home. Notice we always **make** a certain number, not **shoot** a certain number. Every week our players each make between 600 and 800 free throws. When we scrimmage full court during practice, we shoot one and ones for every fouls shot situation. This helps to reinforce our 16-3-2-1 drill and also our players get conditioned to make the front end.

So what’s the bottom line? Over a 37-year head coaching career, all teams combined averaged shooting 70% from the free-throw line.

We all know many games are won and lost at the free-throw line, probably more than we’d like to admit. But, I can tell you from first-hand experience, you will never regret prioritizing team free-throw shooting. The drills described in this article worked well for us and I know it will work for you as well.