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Mike Krzyzewski: “I can walk into any gym, watch any coach working with his team, and learn something new.”

As a 35 year-old coach in the ABA (and a former player) I have some philosophies that I have developed over time. While I’m ALWAYS open to learning other/new philosophies, these ones mean something to me…..

It’s all about THE NEXT PASS

Too many players think the first pass out of any offensive action (pick-n-roll, post-up, down screen, drive-n-kick) is a green light for them to shoot it. They catch the ball with a little bit of space and think it’s THEIR entitlement to score. However, in the pro game, it’s all about that NEXT pass. Team defenses rotate quickly - 9 times out of 10 it’s the next swing pass that results in the *real* ‘scoring’ opportunity (i.e.- a WIDE open shot).

First look is UPCOURT

The days of the point guard standing at the wing and yelling ‘OUTLET’ as his bigman grabs a defensive rebound are over - the game has changed. With the high volume of outside shots being attempted, defenders are now leaking out after shots and not staying to help out on the boards. As a result, the first look in the pro game should always be UPcourt, to a leaking guard or possibly even a ‘cherry picker’. Even if this causes the ‘big’ to take a few dribbles in the backcourt after his rebound. The lead guard is now a safety valve on the sideline rather than a quarterback in the backfield. This applies to guards too. Looking downcourt FIRST forces the defense to adjust. This keeps the opponent on its toes – becoming a bigger factor as the game wears on. ‘GET IT UP!’ is heard from the sideline on nearly every NBA possession these days. It’s ALL about getting easy opportunities.

FEET are underrated

We measure everything on prospects today, from their verticals to their cuticles. But if a player can’t get to a certain spot on time (in proper position), these traits don't matter (especially with big men). Positioning is crucial on the basketball court, even more so than jumping high or running fast.

An example of this issue is Croatian center Ante Tomic, drafted by the Utah Jazz in 2010. Ante has not made the jump from the Euroleague to the NBA, and likely never will. That’s because he possesses ‘bad feet’. His exceptional IQ, size, and hands are negated by the fact that he gets to most plays a step late. Even when his anticipation is good, his body positioning is poor. This causes numerous blocking fouls on defense rather than charges or blocked shots. It also causes him to turn easy offensive scoring opportunities into difficult field goal attempts that often miss.

On your toes

Literally. Many players (especially ‘bigs’) use their heels too much when they play – stomping around like a bull (a recent example of this is center Jordan Henriquez on the Knicks Summer League squad). Staying up on your toes in basketball, even when idle, is a huge advantage. It’s a simple thing that is somehow not being taught to all youngsters learning the game of basketball. Too many are quick to work with a ball and not on their positioning.

Nets rookie Bojan Bogdanovic is a great example of this. He seemingly is always doing a ‘stutter step’ off the ball during games. He’s always on the balls of his feet, giving him an advantage in anticipating the next play – on either end of the floor.

SWITCHING on ball screens is OK

Teams often pick-n-roll because they have nothing else going on offense, it’s lazy execution. They think that ‘well something good will happen’. They are usually bluffing when it comes to ‘mismatches’. By Switching All Picks (except vs super stars or extreme PnRs like 1-5), you eliminate the effectiveness of screens and call the offensive team’s bluff – make them burn you on the mismatch before you start giving up open shots off of mediocre pick-n-roll play. Most the time, the ‘big’ doesn’t even set a screen worthy of losing the man at the top. Too often open shots, lay-ups, and free throws are earned off of this limbo state. If it’s a weak screen, go through it – if it’s a sold screen, switch it. Don’t allow the offense to score off of hesitance or miscommunication. There are two main reasons for this strategy:

1. Players today lack the ability to take advantage of mismatches that previous eras had. ‘Bigs’ often rush, causing an offensive foul or turnover. ’Smalls’ usually settle for a long jumper rather than breaking down the defense (which is usually ready to help).
2. Even in the rare situation where a player takes advantage of a mismatch from switching, this often takes their team out of rhythm offensively. They break their offensive set and often change their preferred tempo/style of play, which hurts in the long run despite creating short-term scoring opportunities.

Oldest play in basketball

You hear it all the time on TV, ‘the pick-n-roll is the oldest play in basketball’. No, it’s not. The **Give-n-Go** is the oldest play in basketball. Not enough teams use this simple reactionary play. When offenses breakdown, which is frequently the case in today’s 82-game NBA marathon, you often see guards with the ball begging for a high screen. That guard should simply throw the ball to the closest teammate and make a hard cut to the basket. It’s a much harder play to defend due to its spontaneity and its attacking toward the basket area. On-ball defenders naturally ease up when their man passes the ball - use this against them. This should be drilled into players in practice just like gameplans are. It should become a habit. It’s also the best way to beat pressure defense. They’ll think twice next time they want to jam the ball-handler.

Opposites Attract Wins

Contrast Breeds Success, whether it’s a group of players on the court or a coach’s substitutions. Changing speeds is the best way to gain an advantage on the basketball court. Changing gears in regards to your rotation applies much in the same way.

Rick Adelman, known for his reluctance to use rookies, missed out on a great opportunity last season. Backing up the beefy Nikola Pekovic consistently with the long/lanky Gorgui Dieng would have been an ideal situation. Possibly even using strictly a three-man rotation inside Pekovic/Love/Dieng (all with different skillsets & body types) would also have been difficult to match up with for opposing coaches.

Conversely, I did not like the Denver Nuggets’ decision to sign PG Nate Robinson last offseason. His similarity to Ty Lawson simply created duplication on the roster. The previous year’s combination of the speedy the Lawson with the stocky Andre Miller was an ideal combination (though Miller’s attitude was also a factor in his lack of playing time).

People often confuse “quickness” with “speed”. Speaking of contrast, the use of a combo-guard off the bench is huge. A 3-man rotation in the backcourt, where the reserve can spell either guard spot, is a serious weapon. Jarrett Jack is a great example of how one guard can impact the game off the bench at both positions. Young guards Jordan Crawford and Tony Wroten also have the potential for long careers if used in this role. Being a combo guard off the bench also limits defensive liabilities (see Jason Terry’s role in Dallas).

1st play of every game

I believe the first offensive possession of every game should be a post-up to soften up the interior defense and establish some inside strength. It is also likely to draw an early foul, if for no other reason. Ideally, I’d like to have a big screen a big (block to block), with the wing feeding the post. If it equals a score or a foul drawn, perhaps even run it a few more times - if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.

Take 2-for-1 w/ grain of salt

The strategy of taking a quick shot with 30-40 seconds left in a quarter, in order to give yourself the final offensive possession, is one of the most mis-used plays in all of basketball. If you come down and just jack up a bad shot, what have you really achieved? You’re better off running a play and getting a high percentage shot. The idea to this strategy is that ending the quarter with the final offensive possession (assuming a score) can be a big momentum boost heading into halftime or the quarter break. True, but getting a big DEFENSIVE stop to end the quarter can be just as much of a momentum boost. The 2-for-1 should be coached to only apply if you have a GOOD shot.

Don’t fall in love w/ the corners

An offensive player should not hold the ball in the corner for more than 2 or 3 seconds. It should either be shot, driven, or passed inside quickly. It’s called ‘the corner’ for a reason - you have less avenues/options with two walls around you. This ball position plays into the DEFENSE’s hands. Keep the rock moving.

Starting Lineups

I believe having a set starting lineup is crucial to both a team’s identity as well as to establishing consistency in regards to players’ roles. Today’s game, however, is moving towards a ‘position-less’ game where non-star players are now interchangeable depending on matchups. Erik Spoelstra’s Heat changed lineups on the fly, platooning players (Battier, Haslem, Lewis) into that forward spot alongside Bosh & James. Even Gregg Popovich has been flexible in terms of his starting four-spot next to Tim Duncan (Diaw, Splitter, Bonner) depending on the matchups. Finding a happy medium between these two perspectives is ideal.