

HOW TO 'CHANGE' YOUR FREE THROW SHOOTING MECHANICS

For me, the 2008 Presidential elections which did not end nearly soon enough, you too may have switched off of the thousands of political ads and political 'hoopla,' (pun intended) all of which promise something better than we had before. Basically "Change". This happened to be the one 'keyword' that fueled Obama's campaign and promise to "Change" America.

At least 50% of the country took the bait and believe some change is necessary because things were not going well in the political and economic arenas. Great. This is a good analogy for this article on free throw shooting. If you or perhaps a team you are coaching or following is not shooting well then doesn't it make sense that something needs to change. There is a constant need for change because we are unhappy of the status quo.

Change is inevitable. Change is scary. Change is progress. "Only perfection, once realized does not require change, but the journey to reach perfection, requires change." In reference to free throw shooting, with the right knowledge perfection is attainable, but mentally challenging to maintain.

Changing physical or mechanical behavior or already grooved mechanical skills, can stir up emotions like resentment, fear, anxiety, depression, insecurity anger, etc. There are many of us that flat out feel safe in our comfort zone, and don't want to trek beyond it's borders.

By perfection I am referring to shooting free throws in lots of 100. This gives you an exact percentage and a measurement by which to judge yourself. For me, it takes about 7-8 minutes to make 100 consecutive without any fanfare. A simple task only made possible by utilizing the perfect knowledge I have accumulated over the years, and information I am compelled to share with the rest of the world that hovers around the average percentage of mid sixties to low seventies.

If you can't make 95% of your free throws then changes are necessary. It is not wise to make the same mistakes over and over again. Missing a free throw is simply a matter of flawed physical and scientific principles. Recognizing the problems is where the challenge lies. When you are sick or afflicted in some way you generally visit a specialist or medical practitioner. What's the deal doc? Fix me.

Of course the shooter must first recognize what level of change is necessary. If one is complacent with 70% from the free throw line then any change is irrelevant. But to the purist and perfectionist (you know who you are), who is never satisfied with mediocrity (70% or below) there exists a constant urge that seeks self-improvement. And this urge actually transcends all facets of life.

The problem here is that common knowledge says the more you practice the better you become. This statement is not necessarily true. If this is the case then all basketball players should be perfect by now. Heck that's all they do, is practice their

shooting. When it involves accuracy, and a flying object, then a whole lot of skills need to be learned, applied and mastered. Anyone can throw a ball at a hoop and make a few baskets. But how many players can make almost everything they shoot. Here lies the million dollar question.

We all just naturally develop our own “comfort zone”. If we don’t learn or even understand the effectiveness or ‘degree of efficiency’ of our comfort zone then we won’t understand what flaws to correct. The comfort zone naturally resists physical or mental changes until the mental attitude changes and recognizes the mechanical flaws and decides to act upon them, or at least slowly bring about some level of ‘change’.

This is why many players make excuses to try and resist. Losers make excuses, winners make promises and commitments. Everyone knows this saying. They hang on to their feeling of control (however flawed). They fear losing that comfortable feeling, even though they know their action is wrong. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. I just believe that people won’t change if it is not important to them. Its just great to know that free throw shooting is important to all players.

One fact that is critical to comprehend here is that you can think positive and believe in yourself, but when it comes to shooting a basketball your belief in self has little bearing on the shot. The ball needs perfect management and full conscious effort to be told where to go. Randomness is mediocrity. Its not our friend. Remember that about 80% of shots are crooked or wayward. Keeping the ball going on the ‘straight and narrow’ is a conscious mental effort manifested in the physical form. I almost feel like I am talking about young undisciplined kids. Interesting analogy. Anyhow, if you don’t have the information you don’t know what to focus upon so you keep practicing and hoping you will get better which leads to F.E.A.R or false evidence appearing real. The information has got to cross the conscious barrier into the subconscious mind where attitudes are changed either for better or worse, depending what information is fed into the meter.

Great shooters generally develop an attitude of “no conscience”. In other words, no extraneous thoughts enter their mind that may detract from the most important job at hand and that is applying all your mental resources guaranteeing the necessary body control for perfect shooting mechanics. Mind over matter. Process over product. Alpha before Zeta. When I ask any player, “what do you think about at the last moment before the ball is released?” inevitably the answer is related to either making the basket or not missing. This is totally wrong.

Sure, change requires visualization of the benefits to you. But I think this term ‘visualization’ is misunderstood when it comes to free throw shooting. Just sitting or laying down with my eyes closed and ‘visualizing’ the ball going through the hoop is a simple exercise. But the problem is there is a real gap between visualizing the made basket and the reality of you actually performing the right mechanics that fulfills the vision. Who is doing the actual shooting that you are visualizing? If the ball is going in all the time then their mechanics are better than yours. This change is necessary.

The 'visualization' process should be focused on the actual perfect shooting mechanism of the ball leaving the widespread fingers in slow-motion. To prove this to myself I flew to California to have my own shot filmed and analyzed with a slow motion camera. We filmed the shot at 1,000 frames per second, and in layman's terms this means that my free throw took 9 seconds from the finger release to the ball entering the basket. My main objective for this was to observe how much actual joint and lateral finger movement I had in my own follow through. As tight as I thought my own shot was I was surprised how much movement there was in my hand even though I still shoot 99% from the line any time I wish. So just imagine how much movement is in your fine appendage joints (hands and fingers) if you are an average shooter.

Talk about change. When I was contracted to work with Shaq with the Los Angeles Lakers in 2000-2001, he was shooting at 38.3% from the line. By the time I finished with him in June 2001 he was shooting 69.4%. Mind you he has been in the league over a dozen years and this is how bad he was. You don't think he had access to some of the best minds in the world. Namely Phil Jackson, Magic Johnson, Bill Sharman, Jerry West and many others. This was a puzzle to me and a real challenge to see if I could CHANGE Shaq's free throw shooting mechanics and subsequently his percentage. It was and we did.

I basically had to re-invent, re-construct, breakdown and throw away everything he ever did before (a serious change). If ever anyone needed change it was definitely Shaq. Just like any other athlete who has been doing something incorrect for a long time, he resisted and fought me at times on different issues trying to make excuses for his flawed shooting actions. I kept telling him that this has nothing to do with emotions, but simple correct physical actions initiated from the mental holding tank.

He fought me on the knee bend or lack thereof, he fought me on the wide finger principle, the shot timing, the height, the dominant release finger, the holding pattern on the follow through, and especially on the single finger tip pushups. But with my constant reminder to him that he needed me more than I needed him. He had a whole city begging and praying for his improvement. There is great power in prayer and faith. But with perseverance and constant monitoring his every shot in practice and games he underwent a total 'overhaul' (real change) or even a "Renaissance", which led to him doubling his paltry free-throw shooting percentage of 38.3% to 69.4% in one season.

This became evident to him once he saw my almost flawless mechanics in operation. He quickly became bored watching my ball go in all the time and also come back to me most of the time of its own accord through correct principles. Finally the process became the focus and not the finished product or the desire for instant gratification or the reward of seeing the ball go in. Making the basket is the immediate reward and we have to learn to separate the intense desire for success or in this case making every shot, because when we miss we get failure feedback which we all hate, by the way. No one ever attempting a shot from anywhere ever wants to miss.

THE DIFFICULTY OF CHANGE

Again, change is inevitable and very often happens without us even being conscious of it. That is not the 'change' we are talking about. We want the change we can consciously control and mould to our specifications. We want the change that the ball wants. The right arc, the right rotation, the right speed etc.

Barring any anatomical anomaly or physical handicap, your ability to change will rely directly on your capacity to concentrate on the actual 'change' process.

By the process in shooting free throws, I mean everything involved in the shot from the toes to the fingers and everything in between. But, obviously you don't focus or even give the time of day to think about having your feet shoulder width apart. Bending the knees is a natural, intuitive action and requires no thought at all. So, even if these factors make up the 'process' you don't think about them. These are natural habitual, unconscious actions.

I can tell immediately if your shot mechanics break down by the way your finished shot looks. The message I get is that if your mind is focused on watching or hoping the ball goes in the basket then your shot process will falter at the weak spots or fall back into your old, natural, habitual comfort zone. Even though nature itself is perfect, natural actions like a golf swing or a free throw are not, otherwise most players would be superb shooters.

It takes momentary focused mental application and a conscious over ruling of old incorrect physical effort to stop the bad habit from occurring and recurring. The mind rules here. This is mental toughness in action. Stay on the job. This may be a simple action of never letting your fingers point to the floor. I am completely against the "hand in the cookie jar" method, or the goose-neck follow through. These closures or follow through actions are too difficult to monitor and duplicate every time.

The worst thing you can do as a 'new learner' or a 'changer' is to try to rectify your shooting habits while shooting baskets during a game. The basket becomes taboo. The root of all frustration because we want the reward of a made basket. We want instant gratification. We are like a baby wanting candy. Crawl before you can walk. Practice your new 'follow through' drills while laying down, against a wall, backboard, ceiling etc. Do these in the hundreds of thousands to create your new re-formed perfect shooting habit then its easier to apply during games where it matters most.

Remember, there is very little room at the top, and that is why very few reach the top of their field. Too often it takes too much effort and sacrifice to get there.