

Basketball: Myths about free throw shooting

There is a plethora of information on the game of basketball, skill development, practice planning, history, game statistics, personal profiles, goods and services relating to the game etc, etc. Of course the age of the internet has had a great effect on the accessibility of all this information.

A nagging problem though from my vantage point of being a shooting coach, master, guru, specialist, surgeon, therapist, world record holder etc, is that a lot of the information, although with good intent is mundane, repetitive and bordering irrelevant.

Even though the topic of this article relates to free throw shooting I mean to include three point shooting and field goal shooting whether it be jump shots or set shots or even hook shots. (A hook shot is pretty much the same as a jump shot except your body is at 90 degrees to the chest of the defender, even if it's a one or two legged jump shot).

The real reason for this article is that the information about free throw shooting or the shooting mechanics in general, that is or has been taught over the past generations obviously must not be very good because the revealing statistics prove this fact.

As of the start of the 21st century you could lump the shooting statistics into the following pool. For example, the average high school team in the USA shoots around 65% from the free throw line, Colleges average around 68% and the professional players average a whopping 72% from the line. You can give or take one or two percentage points in either direction. But the point here is that only about 5-7 percent separates the highly paid professional players from the average all-american kid.

My theory here is that the professional coaches were once college, High school and junior high coaches. It seems that what they learned in their early days as coaches kinda' stays with them throughout their career and without too much personal development. If I am not a great shooter myself it is hard to teach another individual how to be a great shooter. Granted there are those who become great shooters through hard work and possible good genes, but great shooters seem to be a rare breed. A green belt in karate can't teach black belt principles. If this is not the case then how come our national average is mediocre or could be awarded a "C" grade and even a "D" in most cases.

It is not my intent by any means to belittle or undermine the millions of dedicated coaches out there, but it is impossible for a coach to everything to everybody. He/she can't be a doctor, psychologist, father, teacher, spiritual leader, and a master of all things basketball.

Many coaches are strong at teaching different departments like offense, or defense or creative strategies etc. But it is very tough to be great at all aspects of the game and the shooting department seems to elude most of us because it is very hard to perfect the accuracy engineering part of the shot process. If you are a coach reading this just ask yourself, "Can I outshoot all my players on my team"? Do I have any respect from my players as a shooter or are my shooting credentials rather paltry? Most kids don't know any more than the coaches and will do anything you try to teach. Most coaches hope that the kids that play for them somehow magically should be great shooters. Shooters are not born. They are made. All players have the potential to be great shooters but somewhere along the line they have not received all the information they need.

So what are the myths about great shooting?

Myth #1. The feet are very important in shooting.

Not true. They are just there. Of course we all bend our knees' naturally without even being told. But novices to the game do feel awkward about which foot is forward or backward. Best stance is shoulder width apart and right handers have their right foot forward about 6 inches. But if you have the right strength you can have feet side by side. Eventually though, the further you go from the basket the more you will move your right foot forward to help in momentum transfer. But the feet have nothing to do with the 'accuracy' part which is the most important thing in free throw shooting

Myth #2. Keep your eyes on the front, back or any part of the rim during the whole shot process.

Many players do this probably because they were taught this early. Initially you obviously look at the rim to gauge the distance etc. Then the moment the ball is released from the fingertips your eyes should transfer to the flight of the ball where you can now see if the ball is going to enter the basket, go short, long or crooked. This provides great feedback. Funny that Michael Jordan, Reggie Miller, Dirk Nowitzki, Steve Nash, Peja Stojakovic and even myself, all watch the rim. Try it, you will like the control you will be empowered with.

Myth #3. Eye dominance is a factor in great shooting.

I can only speak from experience and that is that if I can shoot better than 70% with my eyes closed and 99% with my eyes open then what good is eye dominance. If I am going to use one eye then I would keep my right eye open for a right hander so I can see down the inside of the shooting arm as it lines up with the rim on the follow through. I will admit that this fixation on eye dominance was never a part of my basketball career. Sorry.

Myth #4. On your follow through after the shot imagine placing your hand in a cookie jar.

Now that sounds like a real scientific measurement that can be duplicated for great free throw shooting. How big is the cookie jar? How big is the opening?

How deep is the jar? Are there cookies in the jar? Do I try to get a cookie while my hand is in the jar? This is ridiculous. The bad thing about this concept is that it forces you to close your fingers to reach into the jar, and closing the fingers is really a shooting flaw that should be avoided. Remember that the way the hand is on the ball at the start of the shot is the way it should look after the ball has been released. A wide hand is a strong hand and the fingers are accountable for what each one does to the ball. More on this in another article.

Myth #5. Make sure your body is square to the basket when you shoot.

This is not necessarily true in all cases. The most important part of the body that needs to be square to the basket is the shooting shoulder, elbow and wrist. You can actually shoot free throws just as good while square to the basket or sideways. By this I mean stand on the free throw line with feet shoulder width apart. Now you are perfectly square to the basket with both feet one inch from the line. Now move your left foot back behind the right foot while still shoulder width apart and face the left wall. Turn your head to the right and now shoot at the original basket. Now see how big a deal it is to be square. As long as the upper part of your body faces the basket you improve your chances of scoring due to body balance. When in close to the basket though there are no rules for being square. Just turn your hand to make up for the body being out of square.

Myth #6. Its really important to shoot with the seams.

Does this mean that your fingers run parallel to the seams or across the grain. Its kind of an ambiguous statement. It should not be a factor and is no bearing on good or bad shooting percentages. I shoot just a swell with the grain, against the grain or no grain at all. But on my free throws since I have time, I actually do place my index finger in the center of the ball and perpendicular to the seams. Its just a personal preference and not a mechanical must.

Myth #7. You must develop a rhythm on your shooting.

Rhythm, shmythm. It has little or no relevance to the shot. During a free throw we see all kinds of so called rhythms, like blowing kisses, praying, doing the sign of the cross, taking a strange array of dribbles etc. Once the ball gets set or locked into the 'shot pocket' all this pre-shot routine is dead and has no bearing on the shot itself. Unless you are a small child using a wind up routine for momentum to get the shot to reach the basket then it is of no value. Again its just a personal preference to what looks cool perhaps. Who knows why players do the strange things they do. Try shooting free throws straight from the shot pocket with no fanfare. No difference. Just wasting more time. Less is more. The shot itself could care less about your pre-shot routine.

Myth #8. Johnny seems to be in a shooting slump lately.

You hear this every so often. What does a slump mean? Shooting 20%, 30% 50% from the free throw line, 3-point line, from the field. The way I see it is that the whole world is in a permanent shooting slump and the only reason for this is

poor shooting mechanics due to lack of scientific information. Shooting under 75% from the free throw line is really just a hair above average and nothing to brag about. You see my point. It seems that when Johnny has a high scoring game that he is now out of the slump. Great shooters rarely have slumps because they have rather developed shooting mechanics.

Myth #9. You must have the elbow under the ball.

When must the elbow be under the ball? There are thousands of players who are very thin and wiry, which allows them much more flexibility than those more muscle bound or heavier set individuals.

Most people just can't get their elbow under the center of the ball (the ideal location) prior to the shot. Its OK to have the ball in the shot pocket with your elbow not directly under the center of the ball. BUT, as the ball is being shot and your forearm is in the 'upmode', make sure your elbow moves under the center of the ball prior to the hand releasing it. This may be a few inches. Since my own 'shot pocket' is right between my eyes and a couple inches above the forehead you can see how it is physically impossible to have the elbow directly under the center of the ball. BUT, my elbow gets there as the shot is going up, so all the center of gravity, leverage and release are all working in balanced synchronicity, thus placing even and correct pressure on important fingers. I realize this may be hard to visualize, but I am having all this illustrated in my new basketball shooting Ebook "How to make shooting mystery into shooting mastery" soon to be released.

Myth #10. You have to believe in yourself and have confidence when you shoot.

This comment is at least positive but it does not do much for the shooting mechanics. Belief in self does not make the shot go straight. What comes first, the chicken or the egg? Does a player have great confidence because they are consistently great shooters, or do they lack confidence because they are inconsistent shooters? Confidence is earned through consistent success. Consistent failures create low confidence levels. Prove my point by doing this drill. Stand right under the basket and shoot 50 shots point blank range. Chances are you will make 49-50 (even with poor mechanics). Confidence is high, huh? Then move out to the 3 point line and shoot 50. Did your confidence level drop? This all relates to your ability to correct personal shooting flaws. The more pure your mechanics the higher the confidence. They go hand in hand. Was there a difference in the confidence level after the drill?

Myth #11. You have to practice a lot to be a great shooter. This is also not necessarily true. The problem with practicing a lot is with the 'lot'. And the question is what is the content and purpose of the practice? If we spend a lot of time shooting free throws and we continue repeating the same bad habits then we are just reinforcing the bad habits. Let me ask this question? If you practice free throw shooting and you make 99% out of 100 and you can do it all the time then how much practice do you need? You are already as close to perfection

as possible. When was the last time you practiced breathing. You can't remember because you do it so well.

Fact #12. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Just about every basketball player has the capacity to be a very good shooter. Most are just mediocre because they have mediocre information. Our (coaches') instructions for the most part are nebulous, hazy or indistinct. It is imperative that the ball get the right information every time, for ever. I know this is getting deep, but the deeper you get the more beautiful it is. It really is empowering.
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- *NBA draft 1975
- *Olympic scoring champ 1976. 3 Olympic scoring records. Most points ever scored in one game- 50
- *2nd leading scorer in '72 Olympics
- *College All- American.
- *Led all Colleges, Pros and High Schools In free throw % in 1972- 92.4%.
- *Selected All- World in '78. *LA Lakers Shooting coach 2000-1. NBA champs.
- *Our revolutionary scientific shooting principles have perfected the shooting process.

All these myths are being emphasized by coaches today in one way or another. We are entrenched in a gopher hole and bullets are flying in every which way and we cant get out until we change the mental dynamics and apply scientific principles to our physical capacity.

Perfect practice makes perfect.