

of three to push together and get up on their feet. You can have the whole team doing this at the same time, perhaps seven pairs, five groups of three, four groups of four, or whatever works out for your team. Coaches can take part, too. It's best to let the team members figure it out. But maybe two or three team members aren't successful. In other words, their failure is draining positive energy from the rest of the team. This contrasts sharply with the positive energy generated when the whole team is able to get up by working together.

6. The human knot. The team stands in a circle. Each member of the team has to cross both arms in front of herself and grab another teammate's hand, but not the hand of a teammate next to her. So this forms a human knot of the whole group, and the task is to try to get out of it. It usually takes an hour or more, and you learn who are the leaders of the team and who aren't, who cares and who doesn't, and who are good communicators.

In terms of team building on the court, it starts with the terminology we use. Nothing is about you or me as individuals; it's about us as a team. It's not me making a free throw; it's about making a free throw for our team. When someone utters the word *I*, I go nuts. We constantly emphasize that what each of them does affects everyone else on the team. If a team member misses a lay-up, each member of the team is doing 10 push-ups. Everything we do is about *we*.

People succeed in basketball not just because they are talented, work hard, and compete tough, but also because they contribute positively to the makeup of their team. Believing in one another, trusting one another, and backing up one another are what make a team a true family, and there is nothing better than that.

Team Retreats

Sometimes it's helpful to get the team away from the basketball setting in order to focus on relationship building. Team retreats provide such opportunities, and one exercise that works well at these gatherings is conducted in the following manner.

First, players are paired together according to who knows each other least well. They interview each other at length. They then report their findings back to the team. The questions can be as follows: What is your full name? What does it mean? Who gave it to you? What is your family like? What do your parents do? Who has influenced you most? What was the best part of your life? What was the toughest part of your life?

The coach should emphasize that no one needs to share anything they are uncomfortable with. Even so, it is amazing how much people can open up and how much can be learned about each other. People quickly find there is much they do not know about each other.

Once, this exercise paired two very different players on a team. One was from an extremely poor family background. This teenager was already a father, not only to his own son, but also to his younger siblings (their father was not present). The other player was from a very wealthy family and seemingly had it all. These two players had little in common, and there was really no relationship or caring between them. After the player from the wealthy family learned of the hardships of his teammate, his respect and caring grew immediately—he learned about the incredible strong will of this player and the tough circumstances he was born into. However, the “well-off” player then, unexpectedly, shared the challenges in his life. He explained how his family immigrated from Europe and worked hard to build a successful restaurant business by working around the clock. He described how people prejudged him for having a nice car or nice clothes. He told how his parents made him work long hours at the family business and how he was torn about whether to work there in the future or risk hurting his parents. His less fortunate teammate came to respect him and his family for what they had earned—and saw him as much more like himself than he imagined. Not surprisingly, these two individuals played better together and had better chemistry after this experience at the retreat.

Team Travel and Social Opportunities

In Division I basketball, team travel is often a big part of the experience, and clubs at other college levels and even high school and AAU teams tend to travel a lot these days. Spending so much time together on the road can strengthen—or strain—relationships.

To help make travel as smooth as possible, plan ahead and raise money through various fund-raising activities before the season. Also, when possible, include a visit to interesting, educational places (e.g., Kennedy Space Center, the Smithsonian, the Alamo) while the team is traveling. Former players often reflect on those trips as important bonding experiences.

Team meals also put teammates together in social situations. In most cultures, breaking bread with people is an act of friendship. Some coaches begin every school year with a “welcome back” picnic, and at the end of the year, they have a cookout for all those who contributed to the program. Some college teams have a daily team breakfast. Many coaches also invite their team over to their home for dinner. And some coaches have lunch individually with each player before the season starts. Other fun bonding activities might include bowling, Wiffle ball, canoeing, hiking, or going to concerts and movies together.

Community Service

Though motives might be questioned (Do they really care or are they doing it for positive attention?) and the positive impact might be doubted (Does a one-time effort really make a difference?), providing a charitable

service within a community is a wonderful thing. Community service also draws those who volunteer closer together. Moreover, this service may help teach athletes who are very blessed and gifted physically how to appreciate others who are less capable in some way.

Finding the time to devote to community service can be a challenge with school, homework, practice, and other commitments in a young athlete's life. When time is an issue, one option for providing service is for the team to choose a youth group to mentor. In the preseason and postseason, players can periodically travel to see the youth group. During the season, the youth group can travel to the team. They can come to certain practices and games, and the two groups can shoot baskets and share pizza afterward. In this way, regular contact is possible and is made convenient for players during the season. The players have a chance to be positive role models, and they are once again doing something important as a team to become closer.

Team Pride

Providing the best possible uniforms, gear, locker rooms, and travel is not easy with most budgets. However, these things make players feel like part of something special. So doing some extra fund-raising can make a difference for a program. The coach of a national powerhouse program once said that the most important part of his program is "stuff." He said having the best stuff was important to his players. It made them feel as if they were cared for and were part of a special and elite program. John Calipari took the University of Massachusetts from being one of the losingest programs in America to the 1996 Final Four. His initial premise was that to beat elite programs, they had to look like and feel like an elite program. Thus, he and the school worked to improve the facilities, equipment, and travel. These efforts helped foster pride in the program.

Personal Caring

BIRTHDAYS ARE A GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW PERSONAL CARING. A CUPCAKE WITH A CANDLE AND THE TEAM SINGING "HAPPY BIRTHDAY" SOUNDS SIMPLE, BUT IT IS APPRECIATED.

Another good exercise is to go around the team and have each player say something positive about each teammate. Also, once or twice a year, a coach can teach players to "carry" each other. The team is divided into pairs of players. The first pair lie on their backs head to head. The next pair then lie next to them in the same head-to-head position. This continues until the whole team is lying in pairs head to head. Each person then puts his hands up as if performing a bench press. The first team member stands up, lies across the hands, and is passed to the end of the line. After being passed to the end, he lies down again and waits for his partner to

be passed down the line. The partner then lies down again (head to head with his partner), and the group continues to pass teammates down. The exercise is finished when the last player is passed down. The goal is to have fun as a group and encourage trusting in teammates along the way.

Another exercise that may be used at the start of each practice is a team run. In this warm-up run, everyone jogs around the court in a single-file line, and the last person sprints past teammates to the front of the line. The new person at the end of the line then runs to the front of the line, and so on, until everyone has run to the front of the line. To add to the team-building aspect of this activity, the person who is running to the front should give a friendly fist or hand to each teammate he passes, and the teammate must call out his name loudly as the runner passes by. Players will encourage each other, joke with nicknames, and still get loosened up through this simple warm-up activity.

RESPECT FOR TEAMMATES

Ideally, a coach wants a team that does the following: On offense, the team shares the ball unselfishly by identifying open teammates and delivering the ball immediately. As a result, the team gets good, high-percentage shots. On the defensive end, the opponent never seems to get a good shot because even when someone is beat, help is there—with players quickly reacting to ball movement, helping, rotating, and recovering. The players encourage each other, like each other, sacrifice for each other, and trust each other. Realistically, a coach can only demand cohesive play and encourage close relationships. This is an absolute key in helping a team reach whatever potential it has.

Everyone—coaches and players—must treat each other with respect. Disrespect cannot be tolerated. Blaming teammates for problems or not listening to others, especially well-meaning leaders, is unacceptable.

A coach can foster respect by praising team members for doing all of the above and creating pride in being part of a committed team comprised of good people. For example, sharing good news at the start or end of practice, such as good grades on tests or assignments, new personal bests in drills or the weight room, or reports of kind acts all help create the perception that teammates are worthy of respect.

Before a team can become tight knit, team members must value being part of that team. They must have some admiration for teammates and want their approval. They must want to fit in and buy into the team culture. When this occurs—and it isn't always easy—enjoyment and productivity increase. More important, lifelong friendships and memories develop.