

WHAT IS A BASKETBALL PLAYER?

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(1) A basketball player can be defined as a "person who participates in a game played by two teams of five players each, the object being to propel a large, spheroid ball through a circular steel rim, usually elevated to a height of ten feet." The generality and vagueness of this definition leaves much to be desired, for there is more to achieving the distinction of "basketball player" than mastering the basic concepts of "spheroid" and "steel rim." A dedicated basketball player's year can be divided into three distinct phases: pre-season preparations, mid-season routines, and off-season maintenance of skills. Each of these periods is crucial in and of itself; yet only determination through all the phases will make the whole more than a sum of its parts. Bluntly stated, his perpetual adherence to the concept of improvement--or a lack of this devotion--will probably determine the basketball players' fate: the pinnacle of success or the deep chasm of failure.

(2) The most essential factor is probably proper pre-season conditioning. What makes this stage so crucial, above and beyond the incessant pressure and uncertainty of whether he will survive the next "cut," is the adeptness which a player must display in order to acquire the respect of coaches and fellow athletes alike. Here, players are most closely examined and evaluated; consequently, it is also where preferred positions are won and lost, roles within the team are jockeyed for, and precedents are set--whether positive or negative--which invariably carry on throughout the season. This "exhibition of adeptness" requires the player to employ a delicate balance of strategies, which range from dealing with egotistical arrogance to earning "brownie points" to using the subtle psychology of idle locker-room banter. The individual must exhibit self-confidence without appearing cocky, aggressiveness without seeming foul-prone, and a high degree of coachability without coming across as passive and spineless. If he possesses the stamina and mental tenacity to endure this experience and separate himself with the men from the boys, he can then proudly claim success in making that decisive first step in his endeavor.

(3) Perhaps the endurance required for pre-season survival is second only to that required to maintain performance quality for the three months which is the duration of the season. The emphasis in practice gradually shifts. Repetitive, fundamental drills, intended to develop stamina, agility, and a "feel for the ball," are discarded in favor of complex offensive and defensive strategies. The coaches show a somewhat puzzling transformation from merciless bastards, interested only in "second effort" and late-in-the-game endurance, to cold, calculating strategists interested more in "court awareness" and mental conditioning. This reduction in strenuous exercise also provides an opportunity for necessary healing and rest to

take place between games.

(4) Game play, for the well-prepared player, is the highlight of the week, the place where all his hard work can pay off. There is a satisfaction, a pride born of sweat, to be gained in a perfect execution of plays and in the aggressive domination of a less-prepared opponent. This aggressiveness comes as a result of being mentally ready, "up," for a game. Many times, a physically inferior, less well-coached, and/or less talented team will win as a result of mental preparation and concentration. The serious player must be intelligent, for a basketballer is no "dumb jock."

(5) The gruelling season lasts from early December to late February, except in the case of a particularly successful team. After the last game and on throughout the summer, a player is expected to practice of his own volition, being responsible both to himself and his team. During the summer he polishes skills through pick-up games, playing against the neighborhood's elite: the only way to improve is by playing with individuals better than himself. The off-season, for the dedicated individual, involves hours a day on the hot black-top, just to keep his "shooting touch." The still more serious player will spend his summer lifting weights and running, so strong is his commitment. Somewhat frustrating at times, basketball is unquestionably a year-round proposition, with no room for loafers.

(6) Thus, I think you can see that there is more to a basketball player than just "a person who participates in a game played" Although the work is at times sheer drudgery, the rewards can far exceed the dues paid along the way. Failure to fully prepare for games is inexcusable, and can leave even the most talented player at a disadvantage.