

Pressing Points: First Game Checklist by Ed Schilling

It won't be long before basketball will be in full force at all levels – pro, college, high school, jr. high, etc. Many fans think that all coaching entails is showing up on game days, yelling at the refs and calling a few time outs. As coaches, we know that is the farthest thing from the truth.

Before your first game you might want to consider the following ideas, just to make sure you're covered. Obviously, your team will not execute in tournament form. Depending on how much practice time you have before your first game, you may not get to cover several of the items.

1. **Player Evaluation.** There are a lot of important things to cover before the first game. Knowing who your best players really are and which five play best together cannot be over emphasized. Many times the best five players do not make the best team.

If you have video equipment available (borrow if you have to), tape several practices and any scrimmages. The time you take to watch the practices and scrimmages will be well worth it in the long run. Also, I suggest that you have stats taken during the scrimmages or while watching the tape. As Coach Cal says, "Stats indict, while video tape convicts!" Having your best possible team and combinations on the floor contributes to your preparedness and success.

2. **A Solid Defense.** Even if you don't have any offensive structure, you can still win games early in the season if you can defend. A half-court defense that utilizes your team's strengths and plays away from your weaknesses is vital to your success in the early, middle, and late season. I suggest spending somewhere between 40-60% of your early practice time on defensive fundamentals that apply to your primary defense and on actually playing that defense. Normally, a half court man to man defense or a basic 2-3 zone defense that matches your squad. Additionally, make sure you are prepared to defend the basic man offenses (like Flex and UCLA) that your opponents will play. If you are a zone team – be ready to defend the three out, two inside zone offense that tries to penetrate the gaps of zone.
3. **Man to Man Offense.** Regardless of your chosen offense, you need to have some degree of structure. Players usually "go crazy" on offense during the first few games. They play at a speed that they are not capable of playing. Having a continuity offense or some basic set plays give the players a bit of structure and help them play within their ability. The "Flex" (Screen the screener action), "simplified Motion" (Screen down, screen away), and "UCLA" (Pass to the wing, and run off the screen at the foul line) are some of the common and proven man to man offense. When looking at an offense for your team, keep your personnel in mind. Also, a good offense creates good spacing, has weak side rebounding position built in, allows for inside and perimeter scoring, and gets the ball in your best player's hands early and often.

4. **Offense Against Pressing Defense.** Presses are normally most effective early in the season, because the press catches teams by surprise and it takes advantage of nervousness. Don't let your team be caught off guard. Work on your press offense and fundamentals that help beat pressure defense. A solid press offense begins by getting the ball out of bounds quickly; it gives the person with the ball passing options up the sideline, in the middle, on the diagonal, and behind the line of the ball. If you have this type of alignment and the players meet the passes and are strong with the ball, especially in traps, then you should be prepared to attack the press and score off of it.

Also, don't forget to go against the half court trapping defense. A lot of good teams lose early in the season because they are not prepared to play against full and half court presses.

5. **A "Go To" Play.** At the end of the game, when the score is close, and the need for a basket is high, you need to have a play that gets the ball to your best scorer in a scoring position. Your team must feel confident that at the end of the game they can run "winner" or "special" and get a good shot. When your team comes into the timeout, you will be able to calmly and confidently say, "If they play zone we run "Hero" and if they play man, we beat them with "winner." You will have practiced it and they will know what to do. The time out becomes a quick review session and a chance to pump your team full of confidence.
6. **Pressure Defense.** Even if you don't plan on being a pressing team (full court or half), you need to have a pressure defense in your arsenal just in case you get behind and have to scramble. You don't want the fans to say, "We were behind by 12 points with two minutes to play and he had his team sitting in a zone." If you play man defense primarily, then extend it to the full court and add a run and trap and a run and jump. If you are a zone team, then extend it to a half-court trap. Unless you are a fabulous team, you are going to need to press and pressure at some point in the season. Before the first game you may want to at least go over what you would do if by some strange turn of events you get behind.
7. **Zone Offense.** Your zone offenses may be very simple, but if you haven't worked on attacking a 2-3 zone, a 3-2 zone, and 1-3-1 zone then chances are you won't attack the opponent's zone when game time comes. Your players need to at least understand where a particular zone is weak (i.e., a 3-2 zone is weak in the corners and in the middle during the shifts) and also they need to know where the gaps are (i.e., a 2-3 zone has gaps on the top and in the wing areas).
8. **Free Throw Rebounding.** If you do not practice rebounding free throws then I will predict that you will lose or forfeit a chance to seal a game this coming season. Just about every close game comes down to making free throws and rebounding missed free throws. Remember, 20% of the points scored in a normal basketball game are scored at

the free throw line; 20% of your team's shots are taken from the free throw line. You can gain advantage by your team knowing how to rebound missed free throws.

At UMass, if there is a violation at the line, the entire team runs a timed sprint. Also, if a player does not make physical contact with his block out responsibility or doesn't go after the rebound with two hands, the entire team runs.

9. **Out of Bounds Plays.** A baseline out of bounds play that works against both man and zone is a great thing to have. Getting the ball in bounds is not a given. Hey, it is four against five in the defense's favor. Be ready. Take a look at the play of the month for a proven, successful OB play. Also, have one sideline OB play that you can use versus man and zone. Even if it is as simple as a box set where the two players closest to the ball go screen for the two players behind them, at least you will be organized and will get the ball in play.
10. **Fundamentals.** You may have the greatest offenses and plays in the world, but if you can't make a 10 foot jump shot, or dribble the ball versus pressure, then chances are that you are going to lose. At nearly every UMass practice we dedicate at least 50% of the time to fundamentals like passing and dribbling the ball, defensive footwork, rebounding, etc. Fundamentals ALWAYS make your team better. Even though time is limited and you need to cover the above nine things, don't forget to work on fundamentals daily.

The above list of 10 items are some basic things that should be touched on before the first game. The old saying applies, "Chance favors the prepared mind." You can't do everything; however, the basics decide wins and losses. Perhaps your checklist has other ideas in the top 10 priorities – that's great. I just wanted to give you some food for thought as this hectic month leads into the first game of the season. More importantly, we wish you luck in preparing your individuals for their life outside the athletic environment.