# The
# Confidence
# Puzzle

## A Parents Guide to Charting a Course From The Rec League to High School Basketball

# BJ Mumford

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**Introduction**

Imagine you're building a 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle and, after hours of work, nearing the final placement of the last few pieces, you get the sinking feeling that there is a piece missing!

Your player's confidence is like a puzzle that you don't have the box for - you can only see the big picture after all the pieces are in place - and at the start, you don't even know if you have all the pieces.

Your player builds their confidence from the knowledge and certainty they have in their ability to execute each of the minor details successfully. The problem is that no one is taking the time to show them how to execute those details, how those pieces fit into the big picture, or what other pieces may be missing.

They may be collecting a pile of puzzle pieces but not assembling a puzzle!
Now imagine the relief you would feel when you find that last puzzle piece that was missing orient it toward its rightful position, and gently press it down into place. Ah!

Your player will feel a similar sense of relief when they are finally able to complete their puzzle when all of the skills they know are assembled in a cohesive framework that finally makes sense.

Confidence emerges when they have certainty in their ability to execute both the decisions and the skills they need to succeed in any situation!

# Chapter 1
## Concrete Confidence

Confidence is often used interchangeably with phrases like "self-esteem" and "believe in yourself," addressing the need to have a positive view of yourself to achieve success.

I call this the "fluffy" kind of confidence, which is vague, in-actionable, and meant to provide good feelings hoping that things will change for the better by thinking positive thoughts.

When I say players lack confidence, I mean the Concrete Confidence - that emergent property that only appears when a player achieves certainty in a skill or ability built piece by piece over time - like a puzzle.
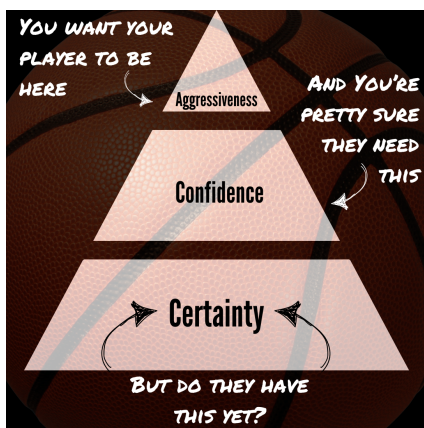
Author and business coach Dan Sullivan describes the cycle of developing confidence in his book *The 4 C's Formula* as progressing from Commitment, to Courage, to Capability, then to Confidence.

I find this very accurate in observing basketball players over the past 15 years. Players that are committed to improving and dare to risk failure to test out new skills in competition, prove their capabilities to themselves, and confidence is the natural result.

Now, to most accurately understand what produces confidence, I think we must also look at its opposites: uncertainty, indecisiveness, nervousness, and the fear of making mistakes.

The top 4 antidotes to these effects are:

- Coaching Consistency
- Decision practice
- Skill certainty
- Reframing mistakes



YOU WANT YOUR PLAYER TO BE HERE

Aggressiveness

AND YOU'RE PRETTY SURE THEY NEED THIS

Confidence

Certainty

BUT DO THEY HAVE THIS YET?

**Coaching Consistency**

Coaches are notorious for making changes on a whim, often without considering how it will affect their players. Changing offenses mid-season, changing starting roles and lineups every game, changing plays every possession, or substituting five players every 2 minutes makes your player feel as if they have no firm ground to stand on. As a result, your player will often act nervous, indecisive, or just freeze up on the court due to information overload and attempting to remember everything they have been told to do - which often includes directly contradictory instructions!

Even worse is when coaches' misguided attempts to create artificial chaos or adversity for your player, thinking that more random things for the player to learn, react to, and remember will somehow make them better at responding to real game situations.

Here's a tip: *It doesn't*.

Consistency in coaching comes from having a system. Coach Ron Ekker, former College head coach, NBA assistant, and author of *Basketball's 3rd Element: Improvisation,* discusses the importance of a cohesive system that provides rational consistency across all areas of a program, team, and offense and defense. A principled or rule-based offense and defensive system have been proven to be most effective in producing the most outstanding performances by players and teams.

My favorite example is the Phil Jackson era Chicago Bulls and the Triangle offense. The Triangle offense was a simple system that provided consistency to coordinate players while also providing a framework of offense within which players could improvise and create their own best opportunities.

Teams with simple, consistent rules for offense and defense and coaches who work hard to eliminate any distractions or contradictions are consistently more successful by allowing them to become more mentally efficient as individual players and as a team.

**Decision practice**

Players spend a large amount of their early basketball career practicing technical skills - "The Fundamentals" usually in an isolated, stationary environment with little or no movement, no defense, and 0 decisions.

In games, coaches expect them to apply those technical skills in various situations that each have multiple possible options, cues, and decisions to make in real-time, at game speed.

However, if they are not succeeding in applying the skills to competitive situations, they are usually advised to return to "The Fundamentals" - more stationary, isolated practice (and also very dull!)

What is missing is what I call "Bridging the Gap" from practice to games which requires applied skills in focused game situations, allowing your player to get the necessary repetitions of reading cues, selecting skills, and making decisions in a controlled environment.

This focus on decisions allows the progression:
- From isolated skills to combination skills
- From slow, conscious decisions to instant, unconscious, automated decisions
- From no cues or arbitrary coach cues to realistic cues that will be consistent in games

More about decision training in Chapter 2

**Skill Certainty**

I see the progression toward confidence in skill coming from 4 steps:
1. Awareness of what your body parts are doing
2. Understanding what your body parts should be doing
3. Receiving precision real-time feedback when a single piece of skill is done correctly
4. Having certainty that the whole skill is executed correctly based on the physical experience of executing each piece of that skill

Demonstrations are great, and about 20% of players are primarily visual learners that can match their movement to what they see performed. However, the other 80% of players are kinesthetic learners, meaning that they learn by physically doing the skill themselves - and most have no idea what their body is doing!

What is missing from most players that attempt to learn only from watching Youtube or clinic demonstrations is a precise feedback mechanism that allows them to realize what it FEELS like to perform the skill correctly. Once they feel it and receive verbal confirmation from a coach at the exact second they execute it, they understand it and can self-correct.

Doing this on hundreds of skills by breaking down thousands of pieces allows your player to have an arsenal of skills they are 100% certain about executing because they have FELT IT!

Because of their heightened awareness, players commonly develop the ability to tell me their corrections when they make a mistake. Compared to the ideal kinesthetic model they have created, when they feel what went wrong, they know how to fix it themselves.

I know players are on their way when they begin self-diagnosing and self-correcting their mistakes - when they can mess up, identify the problem, find the correct solution, and apply it on their next attempt all on their own!

**Reframing Mistakes**

Mistakes are bad, most players would agree. Whether it be a missed shot, fumbled pass, or dribbling off their foot. Mistakes are wrong, and coaches reinforce this idea with the "instant sub if you mess up" approach.

Avoiding mistakes cripples your player from attempting anything they see as even slightly risky (like attacking to score) and usually leaves them as indecisive, passive participants in the game.

Reframing mistakes as:

A) Being completely explainable with a clear cause based on either technique or decision, and

B) Being within your player's control to change

It can make a miraculous difference!

I like to think of basketball as a perpetual lab experiment, allowing players to take on the role of a scientist where ***all results are information in their experiments.***

When they miss a shot, we create a theory for what caused it and try again (more on this in Chapter 4!).

When they mess up the timing, footwork, dribble, whatever, we try again - drilling down into as small components as necessary to find the cause and a theory for a solution to try next.

There is no wrong way to play basketball outside of rule violations, and those rules are the most consistent thing about basketball and not worthy of worry or fear.

Instead, we change from the defensive mindset of "Don't travel" or "Don't make a mistake" to an offensive attitude asking, "What is a more effective, more efficient, more accurate, and more consistent method to get the result we want?"

We change the player's perspective from **avoiding attempts at new things** for fear of messing up to one of **confidently creating new and improved skills** in the pursuit of increased performance.

## Chapter 2
## The Importance of Context

**Situational Context**

Basketball is like writing. Once you know the ABCs and the rules for forming words, it is time to start building sentences!

Unfortunately for your youth player, most basketball practices involve only two parts:
1) Dutifully writing words like CAT over and over again (stationary skills)
2) Copying entire paragraphs written by the teacher (scripted pattern plays)

And if they are not performing on tests, they get homework to do more of the same.

What your player wants and NEEDS to succeed is to:

1. Constantly learn new words,
2. Figure out how those words can fit together into sentences and
3. Create entirely new paragraphs (improvisation!)

If your player is only doing stationary dribbling drills and running scripted plays designed by the coach, I can't say that they will NEVER learn to play basketball, only that this approach **will slow them to the point that they may quit before they succeed.**

To improve any player's motivation - they need to know the situational context in which a specific skill will be used by attempting it in that game situation and experiencing the need for it (likely by failing if this is a new/ weak skill for them). This experience creates a problem in need of a solution.

I guarantee they will be practicing that skill on their own tomorrow!

## Aspirational Context

Imagine you are driving through the cornfields of the midwest on a road trip. Unfortunately, you have no map, GPS, or way to see how far you have come or how close you are to your destination.

How would you feel about continuing to drive straight ahead?

Your player feels this same sense of being lost, without a reference point for how far they have come or how distant their future aspirations are.

They have played rec basketball, probably played in travel/ AAU tournaments, and won many trophies. They know they have gotten better, but they are unsure: HOW MUCH BETTER?

They want to play high school basketball, but **they have no objective measurement for where they are on their journey**.

They have no idea how far away their destination is or how much time and effort it will take to get there. If it takes a max effort for an unknown length of time, with an unknown outcome, continuing seems futile.

So, like the driver lost in the cornfield, they simply stop driving. They quit the sport.

Now imagine, out of the miles of 8ft tall corn stalks, you suddenly came across a clearing with a rest stop and a big ol' sign that said:

## "YOU ARE HERE >>>"

With a big arrow pointing to a map of the state you are in, the road you are on, and a distance scale to estimate the driving time to your final destination.
Sweet relief!

Now would you continue driving? Maybe even a bit faster to beat your new estimated arrival time? (You know who you are.)

Your player needs someone to tell them YOU ARE HERE>>>

They need an objective way to evaluate their current skill set, define their aspirations for basketball, and create a roadmap to get from A to B and a priority list of next steps to get there.

Most players and parents attempt to overcome this problem by either:

A) Doing more of the same - Playing more games, attending more practices, skills & drills sessions, camps, and clinics in the hope that their player will reach their dreams by the sheer volume of activity

Or

B) Trying out for Elite travel/ AAU teams until they make it on one because if they are called elite and surrounded by elite players, they are elite, right?

To improve their motivation to practice, every player needs an objective evaluation by someone other than a team coach or parent who both have their biases. Someone who knows basketball and can properly place a player on their map based on their skillset and aspirations by asking questions:
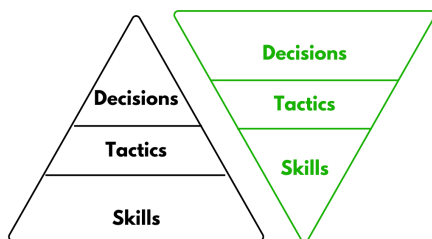
1. Where do you want to go? - Identify aspirations for the highest level of play (HS, College, NBA)
2. Where are you? - Evaluate player skill set based on film and on-court eval to identify the current ability
3. How do you get there? - Map out the road from your current ability to the next achievable step on the player's journey

**Building skills downstream from decisions**

Making quick, high-quality decisions is the most significant advantage a basketball player can have. Decision-making is a more substantial performance accelerator than any physical improvement that strength, speed, or agility training can produce. Based on that alone, it deserves our attention.

I also consider it the most significant point of leverage for increasing a player's level of competitive performance. Where physical increases in performance can take years, your player can instantly accomplish mental gains with some help in simplifying their options, re-framing their perspective, and narrowing the focus of their attention.



Decision-Making:
The 3-part Chain Reaction

You attack

Defense reacts

You decide

Skills "Downstream from decisions" means that we have given your player the chance to experience the game situational context where they will execute the skill. By seeing the court area they will be in, the angle of the basket they will be attacking, and the defender or teammate "cue" they will use to make the decision, they achieve **understanding by doing.**

Once your player understands the options available to them and the cues they will use to decide between them, executing the necessary skills becomes incredibly motivating for players to practice.

Training decisions, like any skill, is only a matter of breaking down and perfecting the components involved in a decision. Once re-assembled, you can build incredible combinations - of decisions, reactions, and execution of skills in what I call a "decision-tree cascade."
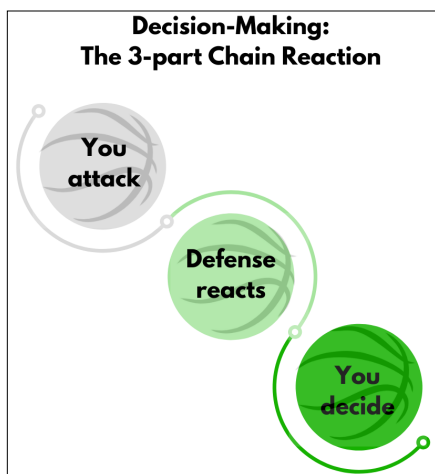
When decisions become executed at the level of unconscious instinct and allow the player to make 3+decisions/ execution of skills in a row leading to a scoring play - we have achieved the ideal - of "automaticity" or "fluency" in basketball.

To make decision training work, coaches have to **let go of the focus on execution of skill and celebrate ANY visible action that results from a correct decision** - regardless of the outcome.

For example, when your player is working on the decision to shoot a layup or change direction based on a defender's position:

Focus your praise on the correct decision to change/ not change direction - even if your player dribbles off their foot, loses the ball, gets blocked, or misses the shot after that point.

Learning how to make a wide-open layup at the rim is easy after you have correctly decided how to destroy a defender's chance of stopping you, and it's a lot more fun to practice.

# Chapter 3
## Limitation = Focus

## Parkinson's Law

Parkinson's Law states that "Work expands to fill the time available for its completion." This law applies to any resource, including time, space, money, and even the options players have on a basketball court.

 If you get a raise or bonus at work - how hard is it to find ways to use it?

Given 30 days to complete a project, most people will complete it on day # 30!

In basketball, having ten players, no shot clock, and 4,500 square feet of space is too much distraction to effectively focus on learning or changing anything about how you play.

## Limited Options

I have done a lot of study on decision-making and have concluded the best, fastest decisions happen from having only two options. The simplicity of only two options means that in a closeout situation, at the point of catching a pass, we can simplify to:

Option #1= shoot or

Option #2 = drive

A binary decision.

Decision-Making:
"2 Moves & a Cue"

Attack

Decision cue

Move          Countermove
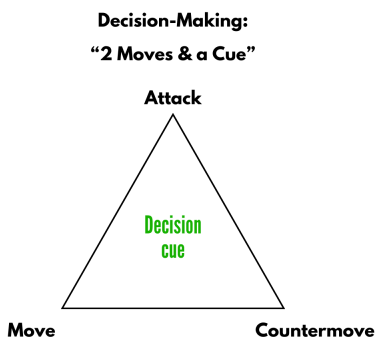
This approach accomplishes several things:

1. Your player can shoot with confidence knowing that shoot is option #1, increasing their % made
2. It helps us to define a single cue to use (defender within 6 feet with a hand up) to trigger Option #2
3. Defenders have to defend for a shot, usually over-playing and creating opportunities to drive
4. If they drive, it means removing one defender from the play, creating a 5v4 offense advantage and leading to the next binary decision - finish or pass based on how the help defense reacts.

Result: Your player either takes an open shot without hesitation at the catch or creates an advantage by driving that results in a layup or assist.

**Limited Space**

Playing 1v1, 2v2, and 3v3 in a limited space creates an opportunity for focused creativity as your player must troubleshoot what works within a specific area. For example, you can create boundaries by using cones or obstacles that your player must score inside of. Or by using a 1/4 court space with the rim line as the boundary for a 2v2 or 3v3 game.

Futsal is a great example I learned about from reading *The Talent Code* by Daniel Coyle. The smaller space, smaller, heavier ball, and faster pace of play of Brazilian Futsal have produced some of the world's greatest soccer players.

An excellent example is using a simple width restriction for a basketball full-court press 1v1 game (width of the paint/ half-court circle as out-of-bounds lines). This width restriction allows both defender and ball handler to execute more focused skills in a "laboratory experiment" setting. They will have to engage with the problem of containing the ball and getting past a defender inside a limited space and find their own solutions.

## Limited Time

Time limitation may be the most straightforward, most useful, and least utilized limitation that coaches, parents, and players have at their disposal. Players that play with a shot clock in high school are significantly better at identifying, selecting, and executing skills at a fast pace. They also perform better in college games due to repetitive practice using the filter of urgency that comes with a shot clock in high school.

Unlimited time allows for distraction by irrelevant cues, the practice of elaborate nonsense, and the use of scripted "misdirection" plays by coaches. When there is a shot clock, players must get better at finding the most critical information to pay attention to, the most effective skill to execute, and making the best decision possible without hesitation.

To provide the opportunity for this type of practice, coaches have to change their philosophy of practice from programming robotic automatons to empowering individual players to find, decide, and execute opportunities within the game's flow.

As a parent, providing a verbal shot clock for your player when executing a skill or playing 1v1 with a friend can significantly impact performance over time. I have found that players improve their efficiency of decisions and their awareness of the time they need to execute specific skills, allowing them to take better quality shots under pressure.

At first, your player will think that time is going faster than it is in reality and rush to shoot with 3-4 seconds remaining. Some players will purposely wait to take a shot until the "buzzer" to experience the excitement of "just-in-time" shots.

While you can encourage them to score as fast as possible, regardless of the time remaining, it is best to let them experiment with a consistent shot clock duration for a time and then make a note for the next practice to have a shorter shot clock.

You have probably experienced your player going half-speed, whether in team practice or on their own. Most parents and

coaches have yelled "Hustle!" to players in this situation. Do yourself (and your player) a favor and save your voice while giving them an exciting motivator for speed - **<u>use a shot clock next time!</u>**

# Chapter 4
## Negative Space

Try this: Draw an egg using only dots (made by tapping your pen tip on paper), and using negative space - fill in the background, the egg's shadow, etc., while leaving the actual "egg" as blank space on your paper. Difficult, huh? How many dots did it take you to finish?
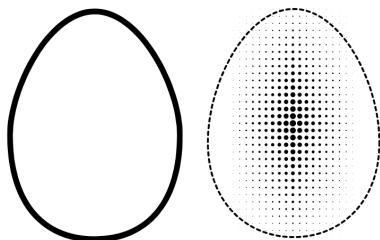


Unfortunately, your youth basketball player goes through this when learning a new skill. Most coaching is vague and utilizes the "negative space" approach to define the desired skill.

The instructions will go something like this:

"Shoot a layup."

"Don't jump off that foot."

"Use your other hand."

"That was a travel."

"Come on now, Finish!"

"We're going to do sprints for every missed layup today!"

Are you frustrated yet? I would be too.

Now add in criticism and threats of punishment for not going fast enough, trying hard enough, or missing the layup. You have a pretty accurate picture of the psychological state that most youth basketball players experience during an average practice - and that is only a simple individual skill that most players can already do - at least with their dominant hand.

Now imagine the same approach to a 5-man offense or defense, where the vague instructions, confusion, and frustration are amplified times five players, any of which could make a mistake that could trigger punishment for the whole team. Yikes!

**The Importance of Specific Instructions**

The foundation of good coaching is consistently stating in positive terms precisely what you want the player TO do versus saying all the things you want the player NOT to do (the negative space).

The TAGteach (Teaching with Acoustical Guidance) method has perfected this science by boiling down final instructions to a single specific and observable action, stated in a positive frame of 5 words or less, that the instructor can evaluate on a binary Yes/ No difference.

The 3 stages of the Focus Funnel used in TAGteach allow the coach to:

1.   Provide context (We are going to work on left-handed layups),
2.   Provide general instructions (Run and shoot your layup with the ball on your left shoulder like a pizza pan),
3.   Provide specific instructions stated as:   our TAGpoint is "Pizza pan."

TAGteach is a powerful communication shortcut! The equivalent of drawing a precise egg shape in 1 smooth oval-shaped swoosh of the pen, compared to thousands of dots around the "negative space" egg.

So specific instructions are the preparation stage for learning a new skill (or perfecting an old one), but it gets better!

**The Value of Precision Feedback**

Remember that most athletes fall into the category of kinesthetic learners - meaning that they learn best by doing. All athletes learn best with a multimedia experience - Seeing, doing, and hearing all in a short time, or ideally simultaneously.

We have covered auditory learning in our instructions phase. However, the real power of the TAGteach communication method shows up during the action - when we have narrowed the focus of both coach and player so precisely that when they do it correctly, all we have to say is "Yes".

We will often use a coach demonstration (visual learning) of a specific focus point and have your player take the coach's role - saying "Yes" if the coach did it correctly - to make sure they understand the visual model of what to do.

When your player is executing the skill, we have both kinesthetic and auditory learning happening by having them both doing and listening simultaneously.

An incredible 4-step sequence happens in less than 1 second while doing this:

1. The player performs the correct action as instructed
2. Coach observes the correct action
3. Coach says "yes" at the instant the player achieves the focus point
4. The player registers the snapshot in time of what it FELT like to do it correctly while hearing an auditory confirmation and matching that with their visual model from the demonstration.

I have yet to find a player, age group, or experience level that can't master any skill using this method.

**"Try again" vs. "We will run sprints if you make a mistake."**

Lab experiments give you unlimited tries, and all results are information you can use to formulate your next theory and calibrate your next attempt.

Using the specific instructions and precision real-time feedback mechanism of TAGteach described above, we arrive at the following conclusion:

**Focusing your player's attention on what went wrong is a waste of time!**

Mistakes or errors that do not achieve the targeted focus point simply trigger a "try again" response. Multiple failures to execute the focus point should cue the coach to refine or change the focus point description, use a smaller chunk of the skill, or demonstrate the skill again with your player saying "yes" to the same focus point.

We want to give your player unlimited attempts but limited failures. So after three failures with the chosen focus point, it is time for a change. Same skill, different focus point, re-demonstrate, try again.

Compare this with our vague layup coaching instructions above that ended with threats of running sprints. There were no specific instructions, no precision feedback, and "mistakes = punishment."

How long will your 11-year-old put up with, much less enjoy, practicing any sport in that environment?

Will they have confidence in attempting a layup in games?

Can they attack the basket with any amount of aggressiveness?

Your player is absolutely crippled by this coaching approach - making them nervous, anxious, indecisive, and slow to react while second-guessing the decisions they do make, self-criticizing their errors, and living in fear of being subbed out of the game - limiting the time they get to play the sport they love!

# Chapter 5
# Principles vs. Patterns

Your player is often stuck running a pattern offense that applies to particular game circumstances and usually has its own specific rules (that may even be contradictory to another offense run by the same team). Specific and contradictory rules lead to a lot of doubt, uncertainty, and slow play - in short - conscious thought!

Principles of offense, in contrast, are universal and apply to all situations and circumstances, allowing your player to feel grounded by knowing with certainty that specific actions they can take will always be correct. When pattern offense breaks down, improvisation is where scoring happens - as much as 70% of all points scored in a game! (See references - *Basketball's Third Element: Improvisation* by Ron Ekker)

When your player focuses on pattern memorization, they miss opportunities to score or make seemingly obvious passes because they have spent hours learning to anticipate the next part of the pattern.

The crazy part of running pattern offense is that **it can take hours or weeks of practice for the offense to memorize how to run it properly. Then, it only takes 2-3 possessions or about 90 seconds for the defensive opponent to figure it out,** predict where the next pass is going, and steal it - defeating all of that work by the offense. Having steps 1-5 pre-scripted usually results in a turnover before step 5, and meanwhile, no one was looking to score on steps 1-4!

A principled offense allows your player to "chunk" the game into 1, 2, or 3 player actions and react to their teammates in harmony based on consistent principles or rules.

A team may use the same five steps of a scripted pattern. The difference is that **each player will be looking to score**, and any defensive error will become an opportunity for them to exploit. The effect of this is profound!

Even the most straightforward rule implemented consistently can produce improved spacing, faster pace of play, more significant advantages, and more wide-open shots. Poor excuses for offense principles include cliche's like "Always pass to the open man," which gets your player to only look for someone to pass to and never look to score.

One of my favorite riddle-like questions for players is based on this "rule":

Coach: "If our team rule is "always pass to the open man," and you catch a pass, what did your teammate just tell you?"

Player: Confused silence

Coach: "YOU are the open man!"

"The Circle Principle" (also known as the "drive and kick" principle) is an example of a universal:

If the player with the ball attacks the rim with a right-hand dribble (drive), all teammates should move to their right in a circle outside the 3-point line to be available for a pass (kick).

Against poor defenses, this results in a layup for the driver, as all the defense is pulled outside the paint to guard their man. Against good defenses, help defense stops the drive but exposes up-to-4 open shooters that can catch a kick-out pass for a shot or advantage drive as their defender recovers.

**(Volunteer parent coaching tip: If you implemented no other offense than this 1 rule, you would likely outscore all pattern plays you can run at the youth level)**

What we want to create with a principled offense is a synchronized framework that allows players to do their best work without getting in each other's way.

Many "5-out" offenses attempt to do this by running pass and cut or "Motion" offense with cuts coming fast and repeatedly but end up with a mess. Most result in many ineffective cuts by players just

trying to run the pattern (and forgetting to try and score), often piling up in each other's way. With so many cutters bringing their defender into the paint, there is nowhere for your player to drive - so most teams continue passing until the defense steals a pass!

The result is usually a "frustration shot" or a team that passes until the defense predicts the next pass and steals it. Turnovers and missed shots are a frustrating way to end most possessions! This leads coaches that attempt this more "Freestyle" offense to return to running specific scripted pattern plays.

**Evaluating Coaches**

If you want to find a great way to boost your player's confidence, find a coach that uses principle-based offense.

A quick shortcut is to ask them how many plays are in their playbook. More than five means they are likely complicating things for their players.

Positive keywords to listen for when talking to potential coaches are:
Positionless, principled, rule-based, player empowered, improvisation, decision-making, thinking on their feet, creativity, and trust.

# Chapter 6
## Private Failure, Public Success

The pre-teen years are vulnerable. Your player wants to feel competent, capable, and confident in their abilities. Unfortunately, peers are not known for their positive support. Fear of peer ridicule, public failure, and humiliation is very serious.

The result is that your player may fear making a mistake in practice and will be hesitant to attempt anything new that they are not at least 90% certain they can perform well. This greatly inhibits their ability to experiment through trial and error and establish a baseline comfort level with a skill in a team practice setting.

Suppose we add coaching negativity and punishment to this mix. In that case, your player may become disabled from attempting ANYTHING new - and even fail at those skills they were once competent and confident in performing!

Outside of team practice, your player may not know what to practice, have access to a court or hoop, or be motivated to practice independently, which means they are also not getting the chance to attempt things in a private setting.

**<u>Without that chance for a few dozen repetitions without criticism, your player will seldom meet their need for feeling confident enough to attempt that skill in front of their peers.</u>**

1on1 coaching has proved to be particularly valuable for many players, but only if the coaching philosophy is centered around helping your player meet their need for privacy, time to slow down, and constructive feedback. If 1on1 sessions only involve the coach telling your player what they are doing wrong, they will still experience anxiety and avoidance of attempting new things.

Your player needs a safe space, free of ridicule and criticism, and ideally filled with specific instructions, positive feedback, and a tolerance of mistakes even higher than their own!

A coach that can create an environment of high expectations, specific instructions, precise positive feedback, and unlimited

attempts allows your player to finally relax and begin assembling all of the small chunks of skills they need. Once their needs are met, they can build the concrete confidence necessary to attempt that skill in front of peers and eventually in live competition.

When your player has this opportunity - fumbling, failing, and making mistakes privately - their success appears magical to the outside observer. "Overnight Success" is common in sports, where players work behind the scenes in a private setting to perfect their skills and build confidence. Then, when they are suddenly in the spotlight of competition, they feel ready for anything. Remember the importance of private failure and public success!

# Chapter 7
## The Value of Free Play

When was the last time your 12-year-old met up with friends at the park and played pick-up games?

 If your player considers themself a serious basketball competitor, they have likely had very few experiences like this. Instead, most players oscillate between "shooting around" on their own and playing formal 5v5 games with coaches, referees, and scoreboards.

Informal competition or free play is what we would call pick-up games of any number of players (1v1 etc.) that are player-directed - meaning no adult is there to enforce the rules, keep the score or tell them what to do.

This environment drives players to negotiate rules for how they will call fouls, who gets the ball after a made basket, and who will keep score. Players are also more likely to collaborate on team selection, making even teams to ensure it's a close game and even creating a "handicap" rule for the best player or giving the youngest/ smallest/ least experienced player an extra advantage.

Allowing themselves the freedom to create their own rules creates the opportunity to customize the game to fit the personnel and the situation. In addition, it makes the game more fun to include all levels of players, rather than exclude them as they would if the tournament championship was on the line!

A player-directed environment is the ultimate laboratory for experimentation and improvement. This combines the responsibility, the freedom, and competitiveness to make success rewarding, without the pressure to win that makes mistakes too risky.

What results from repetition in this environment is that players begin to figure out through trial and error what works and what doesn't in games and what areas they are struggling in or lacking the tools they need to succeed.

Without the pressure of the game clock, tournament titles, or coach-directed plays, players are free to use their imagination. Assuming they want to win, they will naturally discover the most effective way to create advantages and high-quality scoring opportunities for their team - incentivizing team play.

Unlike a formal game with the presence of a coach as the only opinion that matters - their peer's evaluation of the shots your player takes will prevent them from taking *too many* wild goofball shots (They're 11 years old - they are still going to take a *few).*

The channeling of focus into limited options drives creativity and improvisation to troubleshoot solutions against a live defense. The key here is the player's feeling of having unlimited attempts and almost no consequences for mistakes (losing face by losing a game or losing the respect of peers with poor decisions, effort, or shot attempts is just enough!).

Your player will quickly begin to assimilate what they're learning and find a balance between attempting new things and using their strengths to make sure their team wins. They have experienced the trifecta of competition, creating and trying new skills and winning at least half the time they play.

Now THAT sounds like a recipe for confidence!

See you on the court,
- Coach BJ

# Is your player struggling with confidence?

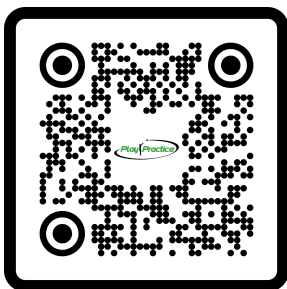Let's figure out how to get them back on track!

Text me at 603-932-5893

Email me at bj@playpracticebasketball.com or

Visit playpracticebasketball.com/about

Comments, questions, and suggested improvements are welcome!

Scan the QR code to find out how your player scores on the Confidence Index!



The Confidence Index

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# About the Author

**Inspiration:**

I was homeschooled from K-12th grade, didn't start playing basketball until age 12, and I was 5'3" tall in 7th grade – shorter than my 14 -year-old sister (which really bothered me). When I started playing basketball, it was with a group of 12-18-year-old homeschool players, some as tall as 6'6". I was short, unskilled, and panicky under pressure, which resulted in the hot-potato approach – getting rid of the ball as soon as possible to someone more capable!

I grew 11 inches between 13 and 15 and was now a 6'4" center in our league. Starting late and growing so quickly, I was unskilled and constantly re-calibrating to my ever-increasing height.

As you can imagine, homeschool coaches were all volunteer parents doing their best to coach a competitive team. I improved throughout my high school years but remained a mostly unskilled "garbage man" – my primary contribution was cleaning up missed shots and putting them back in the basket.

Those who can't do, teach - So I became a head coach right away!

**From player to coach:**

Five months after graduating high school, I was a head coach for a 7/8th grade team of players only five years younger than myself. I was bitten by the coaching bug that very first season!

Seeing all of my peers run off to college, usually with no idea what they wanted to study, or why, I decided that the normal college route was not for me. My self-directed learning experience through homeschooling served me well.

I sought online coaching courses, certifications, and hands-on learning through player development work with former college coaches. Six years later, after coaching every day and earning co-coach of the year as a 24-year-old high school varsity coach, I

decided to pursue an online degree for a Bachelor of Sport Science, majoring in…

You guessed it, coaching!

After several years of coaching internationally and then at the high school level in Indiana and Maine, I always returned to 1on1 coaching with 6, 7 & 8th-grade players. I realized that THAT was what I loved to do most and was most rewarding.

While working on my degree and looking at the standard career track of college assistant coaches, I began evaluating the lifestyle necessary to make it at the college level. When calculating the number of players and the leverage of impact I could have there compared to working with my favorite age group, I concluded that I wanted to serve those kids that reminded me of my 12-year-old-self. So, combined with starting a family in NH, I fully embraced player development and started Play Practice Basketball as my full-time focus in 2018.