

Play Ball or Not at All
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For being a winter sport, basketball seems to have an unusual predicament that plagues coaches during the winter months when the sport is played. Where fall and spring baseball games and practices are held outdoors and are affected by weather because of this fact, basketball has a rising, unique issue, shared only by other winter season sports.

That issue is: playing games or practicing on days where their school has cancelled classes due to inclement weather.

Now, many times, this decision is not even in the head coach's hands to make. The district Athletic Director, Building Principal, or Superintendent might be the ones making the decision or an established School Board policy dictates the decision, much to the shagrin of any basketball coach worth his salt wanting to get in the gym and play.

Even though the games are played inside, what's going on outside is affecting what's going on inside and plays a huge part. In my time coaching, I have been that coach, who drove through a blizzard-covered road with my 4-wheel-drive truck, stuffing as many players of mine in the cab, on a school snow day, and hauling them to the gym for practice. For many coaches who have been coaching for a while, this was common practice back in the day. Problem is back in the day was not too long ago, but the world has changed. The days of rounding up your players for practices and games on snow days is, for all intensive purposes, over. Schools implore their coaches to forget this "old school" practice to avoid issues of liability. Coaches providing snow transportation is not the only thing dropping by the wayside though: practices and games on snow days are a hotly debated topic.

Many schools have already incorporated "No School, No Practice" policies for days that school is called off due to inclement weather. Even when the roads are clear by the afternoon, some schools still stick to their policy. Schools that do this cannot be faulted for erring on the side of safety, even when the sun comes out, the snow melts, and the temp jumps to 46 degrees by noon. In this day and age of even the craziest lawsuits winning in court, no school or administrator wants to even get out on a ledge they really do not need to. Thus, this sort of policy is generally upheld.

And while every coach is concerned over the safety of their players, by not having practice or a game on the snow day, you lose that day of preparation or possible scheduled game. Worse than scrambling to cram a day's worth of practice into the next practice is when the snow day comes the day before a game! I can bet many coaches reading this have experienced the same scenario at some point, whether the decision of not practicing was theirs or someone above their pay grade. Even worse than that...being out multiple snow days and the first day back is also game day!

"We haven't had a chance to practice because of the snow and we can't practice! There's no way we will be prepared or ready to play!"

I've muttered the same line. You probably have too.

And if you have not...your talent was probably better than mine or the opponent you were going to play. That conversation was not always successful in moving the game either, but that's the fun of basketball in Missouri.

Not all schools have a no practices and/or games on snow days policy. In some cases, the decision is left up to the head coach who has a conversation with the athletic director (in cases where it's a game in question, the other school is consulted). And that coach might still get out in the snow with their trucks and "lock in the hubs", and drive around their 4-wheel drive, basketball-uberating truck getting players to go practice. More power to those of you that can still do this. Your team will be more prepared than the team that couldn't practice. But be cautious of doing this: you're one patch of ice away from disaster, and no one wants that on their conscience.

Coaches, do your part to remember it's not always about getting the kids in the gym, and be mindful of all factors when you're presented with this type of decision.

It will not always be the worst decision to practice or play on snow days.

It will not always be the worst decision not to practice or play on snow days.

No one wants to be in the gym more than you; just be sure everyone makes it when you can get in there.

Chris Miller

January: The Month Where "Good Teams Go to Die"

In addition to being a high school basketball coach, I'm also a principal. At our most recent staff meeting, I warned our teachers about January. In my opinion, it's the worst month on the school calendar. It's when we have most of our bad weather, it's when everybody starts getting sick, and all of that leads to us losing "our routine."

I think the same thing is true for a basketball team. If you stop and think about it for a minute, I'm sure you'll agree with me. Your team started practice back in late October. They were excited, "THIS IS OUR YEAR!" After a couple weeks of practice, they got tired of seeing each other and wanted to play a real game. No problem, because that Thanksgiving Tournament popped up. Then regular season games. Then Christmas break rolled around...

And now it's "How long until the district tournament start?"

That question means different things to different teams. Maybe your team is really good and has a chance to win it's district, maybe even make it to the Final Four. Your team is excited about the end of the season, but how do you get through "the middle" of your season? Or maybe your team isn't doing so hot, and you have kids ready for softball practice already. Your team is just ready for it to be over, but how do you get through "the middle" of your season?

And that brings us back to my original point. January is the worst month on the school calendar. I think this is the month that separates teams. Some teams that were 8-2 to start the season are going to finish up 16-10 because they handled January poorly, and vice versa, some teams that started out 4-6 are going to be red hot coming down the stretch because they handled January well.

Here is my advice. First of all, it depends on your team. Are you healthy? Do you have continuity in your lineup? Do you have an older team or younger team? What does your upcoming schedule look like? These things all matter.

But in a nutshell, and I got this advice from Jim Bidewell, the legendary coach down at Portageville, don't burn them out in January. They're sick, the weather is awful, the season has been going on forever, and finish line is weeks away. So I always picked this time of year to shorten practice just a little. I didn't run them near as much. I tried to "give them their legs back," and then start to have "real practice" again around the last week of January.

I think it's also a good time to take inventory of your team. What "stuff" are you running on offense and defense that needs to be thrown out? What are you doing that does NOT work? Get rid of that stuff now, simplify your gameplan, and focus the time you have on being really good at what is working.

Last point, and I think this is crucial, every team has something different to play for. We've all played 10-15 games by now, and your team knows how good you are (or how good you're not). I think it's really important, and I kind of touched on this already, but you have to give them something to play for. If you're one of the teams with "state" aspirations, it's pretty easy. But if you're not, how do you keep practice meaningful day after day?

I would create little mini goals for your team. Come up with a reward for the kids the next day at practice. Keep them invested in what is going on. Because if you've coached long enough, you know this is true - it's miserable coaching a team that hates coming to practice, feels like they don't have anything to play for, etc etc etc.

So to sum this up, I'd keep practice short, maybe run them a little less, cut the playbook down to only the stuff that's working, and create some type of reward system everyday in practice. Make it fun. If your team is already good, they'll keep getting better. If your team is headed for a first round district loss, at least practice will be fun for the next 5-6 weeks.

Thanks for reading, and feel free to reach out to me anytime at coach.david.heeb@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

Coach David Heeb

How Do You Handle The Heartache Of A Season-Ending Loss?

This season I was a varsity assistant coach at Blue Valley Northwest in Overland Park, Kansas. Due to having a great group of kids and a very good coaching staff, we were fortunate enough to make it to the 6A Kansas boys' state championship game. We faced a Wichita Heights team who were ranked in the top 25 nationally in almost every poll and even as high as #9 in some polls. The boys battled all game and came back from an 11 point deficit to tie the game up with a few minutes left. We even had a few chances to take the lead late in the 4th quarter, but the ball just didn't bounce our way and we ended up losing by 7 points.

Even after finishing 2nd in the state, the kids were really down after the game. And like us, many coaching staffs have to face many tearful faces in the locker room at the end of a season.

So what do you do? What do you say? Here are some ideas:

- Teach life lessons. Up until the very end of the year, it's very important to continuously teach life lessons. You can emphasize all the core values (honesty, teamwork, hard work, etc.) that talked about throughout the year and possibly give them quotes to back them up. It'd be nice to have some quotes ready for a loss and for a win.
- Here are some great quotes for perseverance:
 - "The true measure of a man is not how he behaves in moments of comfort and convenience but how he stands at times of controversy and challenges." - MLK
 - "Why do we fall? -- So we can learn to pick ourselves up." - Batman Begins
 - "The only real failure in life is one not learned from." - Anthony J. D'Angelo
 - "When you are down on your back, if you can look up, you can get up." - Les Brown
 - "In order to succeed, you must first be willing to fail." - Anonymous
 - "Failure is the opportunity to begin again more intelligently." - Henry Ford
 - "When the world says, "Give up," Hope whispers, "Try it one more time." - Unknown
 - "Fall seven times, stand up eight." - Japanese Proverb
 - "Perseverance is the hard work you do after you get tired of doing the hard work you already did." - Newt Gingrich
 - "It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer." - Albert Einstein
 - "Success seems to be largely a matter of hanging on after others have let go." - William Feather
- Tell them you are proud of them. Most teams pour their heart into the final few weeks of the season. The great ones pour their heart into their entire career. Either way, you should tell them that you are proud of them.
- Focus on the good qualities of the players. Most likely, each kid that is still in your program has some good qualities as a person. You should tell each player about their good qualities whether it is in front of the team or individually.

- Tell them that you love them. Our head coach was always great at reinforcing that we love each other on and off of the court. Showing support and love for people helps them get through tough moments.
- Focus on good things that happened during the season. We were fortunate, because we ended the season 23-2 which was a school record and we got 2nd in the state. Even if you don't have a great season, there are certainly highlights that happened during the season that you can talk about.
- Be there for them. Tell the kids that you're there for them and that if they ever need anything, they need to let you know.
- Put things in perspective. Even though the loss is tough, you need to let the kids know that worse things happen in life. We're very fortunate to be able to play a game that we love. And we need to realize that in relation to things like the Japanese earthquake, this is very minor.

By: Joe Haefner

Courtesy of Breakthrough Basketball