

Improving Your Youth Basketball Team: Five Simple Skills by Brian McCormick

As a basketball consultant and personal trainer, I work with numerous youth, [high school](#) and college basketball teams and players every year. At every practice, players are deficient in at least one of these five simple skills, ultimately decreasing the team's offensive efficiency. While none will automatically make someone a great basketball player or turn a team into a championship contender, every player must possess these skills so his/her team's offense runs smoothly. These are simple skills which can easily be introduced and reinforced through everyday drills that require little practice time. However, these skills must be emphasized.

1. Left-handed Lay-ups. At an "elite" camp last summer, a [high school](#) freshman informed me she did not have to practice using her right hand (she was left-handed) because her coach never put her on the right side of the floor. Every good player possesses the ability to use either right or left hand. I am not an old-school coach (like my father) who believes a player should always use the outside hand on the dribble or a lay-up. However, players must possess the ability to use either hand and must use the correct hand based on the situation. Watching Manu Ginobili and Steve Nash during the play-offs should only serve to reinforce the importance of ambidexterity around the basket.

2. The Box. Youth basketball's biggest detraction is the number of jump balls; while some see jump balls as great defense and hustle, many result from weak offensive play, and the constant barrage of whistles slows the game's tempo. To avoid needless jump balls, players must be aggressive, while protecting the ball from the defense. Therefore, players must keep the ball out of the BOX. The BOX is the area in the middle of the body between the chest and the top of the knees. When ripping the ball from one side of the body to the other, under defensive pressure, a player rips the ball through over top, across the player's hair line, or low, under the player's knees. The offensive player remains aggressive, while protecting the ball and limiting turnovers.

3. Push Pass. Chest passes are great, and every coach looks smart practicing them, but they have limited game effectiveness, as the passer must be relatively unguarded. Unfortunately, many teams play defense, limiting the chest pass' usefulness. The push pass is a more functional pass, as the offensive player can pass under defensive pressure. The push pass is a quick, two-handed pass with a one-handed follow-thru, much like a horizontal shot, utilized off the dribble or from the triple threat position. Coupled with a small ball fake, the push pass is probably the most important pass in one's arsenal. Quickness is the key, and a push pass increases the player's quickness when distributing the ball.

4. Pullback Crossover. This move is especially effective when defeating a trapping defense, diffusing pressure or creating space against a quick, aggressive defender. The basic move is a quick change of direction, from forward to backward, using the offensive player's body to protect the ball. Properly executed, the offensive player stops her momentum by stepping her inside foot into the defender. Dribbling by the back foot protects the ball by enabling the ball handler to keep her body's width between the defender and the ball, as the offensive player retreats. The quicker the change of direction, the greater the separation. Once sufficient space is created, the ball handler opens her shoulders to the court and makes a hard crossover dribble, accelerating in the other direction.

5. Basket Cut. Ball movement and player movement; every successful team combines these two basic offensive elements. Poor offensive players stand and watch and clap for their teammates. A simple basket cut gets the cutter open for a lay-up or collapses the defense to create an opening for a teammate. A player in motion is tougher to defend, as anytime the offensive player moves, the defender must move; if the defenders concentrate on their own man, the help defense reacts slowly to penetration. Players tend to run to the ball; instead, they should run to the basket. The ball will find them; they do not have to run to it every time. Greedy players run to the ball; selfish players stand; good players move and make basket cuts.