Sport Psychology Library: Basketball

By Kevin L. Burke and Dale Brown. Copyright 2003 by Fitness Information Technology, Inc., P.O. Box 4425, University Avenue, Morgantown, WV 26504-4425

Reviewed by Joe Whitney, Director of Mental Training, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996

Oftentimes I’m asked, “Can you recommend a good sport psychology book for _____ (fill in the sport)?” If the sport is tennis or golf, one need only direct the inquisitor to the nearest Barnes and Noble where at least a half dozen texts of various quality await. With a few notable exceptions, Ravizza and Hanson’s Heads-Up Baseball (1995) being one that comes immediately to mind, other sports are not nearly as well served by the sport psychology “how to” writing community. However, with their authorship of Basketball, the latest addition to the Sport Psychology Library series, long time collegiate coach Dale Brown and sport psychology practitioner Kevin Burke have fashioned a short, highly readable and fundamentally sound text that goes a long way toward filling this void for the sport of basketball.

Make no mistake, Basketball is a basic text aimed directly at the developing player. As such, leanness is perhaps its most endearing quality. At just over 100 pages, it is pleasantly inviting to the player-reader whose library card is already occupied by the likes of Tolstoy, Twain, and Tolkien. Reader friendly organization and highly digestible vocabulary make page turning easy enough for the book to be completed and well comprehended in one or two sittings. Key points are introduced, highlighted, and summarized in each chapter, while pictures, quotes, and diagrams provide additional support of the authors’ main ideas.

The book’s content focuses on three basic mental skills: imagery, concentration, and self-talk. These skills are explained in the first two chapters and then applied to basketball specific situations in the remainder of the book. Application chapters include the following: shooting, defense, all around basketball skills, sporting behavior, dealing with distractions (referees, fans, opponents, and injuries), motivation, confidence, and life skills. While the authors might not receive any Pulitzers for creative writing, their steadfast adherence to a formula of thoroughly explaining a concept, offering examples, suggesting strategies, and providing practice exercises more than gets the job done.

Perhaps most noteworthy is the authors’ employment of this formula to the concept of imagery. Stray points not initially accounted for, such as imagery perspective and control, are cleverly gathered in a section entitled “Frequently Asked Questions About Imagery.” Applications of this important mental skill are frequent, creative, and practical. In fact, imagery is so well incorporated into every facet of the game that an alternative title for the book might read 101 Ways to Achieve Basketball Success Through Imagery. A small sample of strategies and
exercises offered in this area include basketball skill development, game simulation, confidence enhancement, defensive preparation, and self-talk rehearsal for a variety of situations and distractions.

Only slightly less impressive is the presentation of concentration and self-talk skills. While the information is again sound and well supported by examples and exercises, I found myself cast in the role of cantankerous reviewer and not overly fond of the authors’ relabeling of some basic sport psychology terminology. I was particularly troubled by the abandonment of the traditional attentional focus vocabulary. Specifically, “broad-narrow, internal-external” becomes “many-few, inside-outside.” For me, and this is admittedly a judgment call, “many-few” does not seem to explain the concept of attentional width as clearly and precisely as the original phrasing, particularly in the visual realm which is so important to basketball performance. Less damaging is the authors’ substitution of the term “gem talk” for “positive self-talk.” Here, the authors replace a fairly self-explanatory term with one that needs to be continuously reexplained throughout the book.

The authors spend a fair amount of time motivating the player-reader as to the importance of learning and applying the mental skills presented in each chapter. Typically, they use a player quote or a hypothetical situation for this purpose. While such an approach is fine, it tends to give a more sterile and textbook like feel. Frankly, what is missing are the personal stories that could really bring these concepts to life. In particular, I was disappointed that more anecdotes from Brown’s own coaching career were not included (e.g., stories about how his players achieved success through adherence to the mental game strategies outlined in the book). The authors do include well-worn stories of how professional players like Michael Jordan and Bill Russell used imagery in their careers, but they fail to carry the same motivational weight of more personal vignettes, such as those that characterize the writing of Bob Rotella in his popular golf books.

As stated earlier, Basketball is primarily a mental game owners manual for the individual player. The true test of its worthiness will be evidenced by the number of athletes who improve their mental games after incorporating the ideas presented. The strategies and exercises are simple enough to understand yet substantive enough to be effective. Players who face specific obstacles such as low confidence or anger management will have little difficulty in finding workable strategies to fortify their mental game armor. With this said, the authors might have offered more information for the player who suffers from competitive anxiety. I think the self-talk strategies in the pressure section of chapter nine are helpful to this player, but the authors might also have reintroduced the breathing relaxation strategy (briefly mentioned as a concentration exercise in chapter two) in order to help athletes cope with the more somatic symptoms of this particular challenge. Likewise, the advanced player, with previous exposure to mental skills training, while finding the information useful, would probably be better served by a future book that provides more in-depth coverage of the psychology of basketball.

I agree with the authors’ opening remarks that the coach, with a touch of creativity, will be able to convert the information presented in the book into solid coaching strategies. The clear and understandable explanations of the three basic mental skills provide an excellent foundation for coaches interested in teaching those skills to their players. Coaches will also find the sections of the book dealing with referees and maintaining emotional composure helpful for their own mental games. A suggestion for future editions would be to include separate text boxes