Don Kelbick Interview Transcript

Get Insider Tips and Tactics Used By NBA Player Development Coach, Don Kelbick

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Jeff Haefner: Hi, Don. Thanks for taking the time to talk with us today. We're really excited to pick your brain and learn about some of the things you've picked up over the last 25 years of coaching basketball in your four years as an NBA player development coach, working with players like Tim Hardaway, Raja Bell, Bruce Bowen, Rasul Butler, and other NBA players.

Don Kelbick: I appreciate your calling. Anytime I have a chance to talk basketball and hopefully share whatever I know with anybody, I really enjoy those opportunities.

Jeff Haefner: Yes, and we definitely appreciate that, and yesterday we had some interesting conversations. You and I talked for a while, and you brought up some really interesting points about the mental aspects of the game that I know would definitely help both players and coaches, and you also opened up my eyes to some coaching aspects that I think a lot of coaches would really benefit from. Particularly, you mentioned how teaching is such an important aspect of coaching basketball, and you mentioned that you disagree with many of the tactics that coaches use today.

So if you don't mind, let's start talking about how to teach the game of basketball; then maybe we can work into some of the mental aspects of basketball that we also discussed yesterday. So why don't you tell me about the teaching aspect of basketball. How should coaches be teaching their players?

Don Kelbick: Well, I'm not sure that disagree is the right word. I've discovered different methods as I went along. I found some non-traditional things that I really wished I knew earlier in my career, and I don't profess to know everything about teaching. I only know what has been really successful for me, especially over the past few years as I've gotten into better and better players and I've been able to make connections and make significant improvements in players on an individual basis, dealing strictly with development.

I know that I've seen a lot of changes in the way that people teach basketball, the technology that's involved and the additional pressure that's put on coaches and the decisions, whoever makes these decisions, that playing has become more important than teaching the game.

As a matter of fact, last summer, there was a summit that involved all the top basketball people in this country. It was actually international, but Mike Krzyzewski was involved, David Stern was involved, George Raveling from Nike was involved, Jerry

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Colangelo from USA Basketball, and several other people, and they did an extensive examination of the way that we treat basketball in this country. They had determined – not that they would be the be-all and end-all of basketball – that kids in our country spend too much time playing and not enough time learning how to play, and the results of that have been poor play in international competition. When you look at players around the world, they just seem to be much more skilled in the fundamentals. While they may not be as athletic and they may not jump as high and they may not run as fast, their level of fundamentals seems to have surpassed ours, and I think a lot of that has to do with style of play. There's a trickle-down effect from the NBA that most NBA play now is isolation in matchups. That's not the way the game was invented and that's not the way it's played around the rest of the world.

So I'm trying to isolate some of those things in my teaching, and I've learned a lot of things. I've probably learned more things from the players than they have learned from me. One of the things that I have learned in my teaching background – because I do have two teaching degrees – is that stress affects the way people learn. I've observed especially high school coaches, and I've seen them in their – as we know, a lot of high school coaches are teachers as well – and I've observed them in their classroom, and they're just outstanding teachers, where there's two-way conversation, there's nurturing, there's help through problems. Then when they get on the basketball court in their coaching, now all of a sudden they become authoritarian and they become dictators.

Now, having kids – not just kids, but anybody – learning something new is stressful enough. Fear of the unknown and lack of confidence really retard growth, and when you have coaches that are on the floor that are only interested in controlling what's happening between the lines and not really interested in growth, what you do is you wind up stunting growth. It's like that old analogy that if you're on the beach and you pick up a handful of sand, the tighter you hold onto the sand, the tighter your grip is, the more the sand slips through your fingers. I think that's a great analogy when it comes to coaching.

Jeff Haefner: Right, and you're also driving some of the players away, because it's not as fun when somebody's telling you what to do all the time.

Don Kelbick: Absolutely.

Jeff Haefner: In a dictatorship, in a sense.

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Don Kelbick: Absolutely, because coaches – who are coaches' role models? Coaches' role models are guys that they watch on TV, and TV tends to gravitate towards the more colorful characters because it creates more interest in their viewership. So you see somebody on the sidelines that's standing up and yelling and screaming all the time; coaches believe that that's the way it is supposed to act; but when you think about it – first of all, the referees don't listen anyway, and the guy is coaching in an arena that holds 20,000 people and he's yelling at a player that's all the way across the court and on the other end of the floor. The chances of that guy even hearing him are slim, but that doesn't stop the coach from standing up and yelling and screaming on the sidelines.

I go to youth games, and I go to junior high school games, and I go to games where kids have a limited practice time and they're just learning the game, and to see the way recreational and youth coaches treat their kids, I think is very damaging to basketball and to learning. So I've learned to adjust my teaching to try and make some positive effects mentally, and as a result once the skills catch up, not only is there a steeper learning curve, but kids are more comfortable. They're more comfortable performing the skills and they're more comfortable when they fail to perform the skills; they don't lose their confidence as much.

I'm a big believer in the great Far-Eastern thinker, Yogi Berra. Yogi once said that "Ninety percent of the game is fifty percent mental," and I think he underestimates. Bobby Knight once said, "Mental is to physical as four is to one, " and I think he underestimates. I think that the number one thing is trying to teach kids how to play. I use the words "kids" kind of pejoratively, but it's the same thing I do with my pro guys, is you have to make them comfortable with what you're trying to teach them, because trying to perform new skills is stress-inducing anyway.

So anytime you can reduce the stress and find a way for them to reach success while enjoying themselves, they're going to progress much quicker.

Jeff Haefner: So what are some of the –

Don Kelbick: Just as an illustration of that, is that when I first started my coaching career, I became a head coach on a college level when I was 30 years of age, which is relatively young. It was probably too young.

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Jeff Haefner: Yeah, that's definitely pretty quick.

Don Kelbick: But I went out my first several years of coaching, and I was a general. I was Patton, and we were very prepared and very fastidious in what we did. Somebody had taught me, "Don't show your kids your practice plan, because they're going to find the places where they're going to goof off." Now, seeing that that was one of my role models, I thought that that's what coaches were supposed to do. As I went along, I found out that – at least for me, and I can only speak from my experience; coaches have to do what they're comfortable with. At least for me, I found that over time that was not the healthiest thing for me to do. First reason is is that I demanded so much of my players that if they had any thought of taking time off during a practice, I didn't want them in my gym. So if I thought I had that inside my players, then I picked the wrong people.

The second thing I found – and what I wound up doing, I wound up posting my practice plan both in the locker room and in the gym; in addition, my assistants having copies of the practice plan. If a player wanted to know what we were going to do, they're supposed to tell them, and we would start if we practice with, "All right, guys, here is what we're going to work on today. I found that that really, really lowered the stress level in practice, because while there were things that kids don't like to do, there were things that kids do like to do, and they're much, much more willing to get to a difficult drill that causes a lot of stress and a lot of problems with kids if they know coming right behind it, there's going to be something they're going to be successful at.

Jeff Haefner: So not only did you let them know what was going to happen and keep them involved and feel like part of what's going on, you also mixed up your practice plans so it was maybe a really difficult drill and then followed up by something that was a little more enjoyable and not so difficult?

Don Kelbick: We hoped to make all the drills and everything we do in practice – we hoped to make them all enjoyable, but –

Jeff Haefner: What are some of the things that you've done to make those drills more enjoyable for players, and some of the methods you've used that's worked well to try to reduce stress?

Don Kelbick: Well, the first thing we did is we removed negative reinforcement. I don't think that a kid makes more lay-ups because there's a threat behind the lay-up that if he misses, that he's going to have to run

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suicide. I just don't think that that's a productive situation. If a kid can't make a lay-up or continues to miss lay-ups, we would have him practice more lay-ups. We stopped penalizing losing teams and started rewarding winning teams when we played for competition in practice. Now, functionally over time, that may generate out to be the same thing, but there's a big difference between allowing a team to take an early water break because they have more points in a drill than the other time and putting the losing team on the baseline and having them run a suicide.

Jeff Haefner: Right.

Don Kelbick: You want people to cherish success more – and I'm different in this regard; I want people to cherish success more than they fear failure. I think that when you start to fear failure, that is when you start dealing with pressure. Pressure is all self-induced, and if you have no fear of negative ramifications, I think you perform better. There's a part now, coaches will say, "Well, if you have no negative ramifications for actions, then how do you control them and how do you get kids to do the right things?"

Jeff Haefner: Exactly.

Don Kelbick: Well, you want – first of all, a lot of that has to do with interpersonal relationships and a lot of that has to do with the way that you teach them a value system and the people that you have in your gym; that everything has its own intrinsic value, and players have to want to be successful and that you reward them for success, and the ultimate reward is getting on the court for the game.

So I used to spend an enormous amount of time – definitely too much time – punishing people. If you're not going to do it this way, then you're going to run. Well, when we do that for punishment – first of all, how hard can this kid really run? What does he get out of the running? It's not really good conditioning, builds up animosity between you and your players. If it's done during practice, the other players are not working while you're punishing a particular player, and if you're one of those people who believe, as I do, in team rewards and team penalties, if you're punishing your entire team because of the actions of one or two people, not only does it build animosity towards you, but they build animosity towards one another.

I used to be a big believer that if you had eleven good kids in the gym, that you can live with one or two bad ones; and we made

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everybody responsible for one another. When the kids that were not responsible were acting responsibly, then the whole team would be punished, because we believed that the eleven kids, the eleven good ones, should exert pressure on the other two.

You know, it didn't work that way. It didn't work that way. What happened is that consistently, the two who were irresponsible would drag one or two or three other responsible kids down the tubes with them. So now, you're not talking about eleven and two; now you're talking about eight and seven.

Jeff Haefner: Yeah. So what do you do about that?

Don Kelbick: And the other thing that you're doing is you're removing the reward for the kids that do what they're supposed to do. For example, if a kid missed class – early in my head coaching career in college, we had a rule that if you missed class, everybody runs for the guy who missed the class. Well, the Dean's list students who went to class ten minutes early, sat with the teacher for 20 minutes after class, would come to me and say, "Where's my reward? If I'm going to have to run anyway, why should I go to class?"

Now, you hope that you have high enough charactered kids to realize that you go to class because number one, it's the right thing to do; number two, that's why you're in school, and number three is because that's where you're going to learn. That's all well and good, but the kids who are responsible students will continue to go to class, but the ones who are on the fence will stop going because they're going to wind up running anyway.

So after one practice where we did almost nothing but run, I realized that we didn't make anybody better. We didn't address the problem. The team itself suffered, the responsible ones and the irresponsible ones. We didn't do anything to make the team better, we didn't do anything to make individuals better, and it was a wasted day. It was a day we were never going to get back.

So I'd become of the mind that when we get into practice, we are going to do whatever it is we need to do to get better, and if you are not going to be responsible for what you don, you're either not going to be on the team or you're not going to play. And that was the penalty, because I didn't believe in – I no longer believe in punishing the good with the bad.

Jeff Haefner: So –

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Don Kelbick: Sometimes when you're only punishing the irresponsible players, the responsible players get punished anyway because it makes the team weaker.

Jeff Haefner: So in essence you focus on rewarding positive rewards overall, and then the only real negative punishment is, well, if you don't try to get better and you don't work on these things, you're not going to play, or you're just not going to be on the team.

Don Kelbick: Yeah.

Jeff Haefner: So there's really only two negatives.

Don Kelbick: Those are really things that are – sitting a kid down and having him not play is not really a hard decision, but it's a really difficult decision to sit face-to-face with a kid and say, "You're not fitting in with everybody else, so I can't have you on this team."

Jeff Haefner: Yes, because ultimately you want to help these kids and make them better, keep building better players all around, so definitely a tough thing to deal with.

Don Kelbick: When I deal on an individual basis or when I deal with kids, the first thing that I try and teach them is you can't fear failure, especially when you're learning new skills. One of the examples that I use is I'll go to a junior high school kid and I'll ask him, "Have you ever head of quantum physics?" I don't know why I picked quantum physics, but it's always quantum physics. "Have you ever heard of quantum physics?"

So invariably a kid looks and me and he says, "No." I said, "So if I asked you a question about quantum physics and you didn't know the answer, would that upset you?" So he says, "No." I said, "Why not?" He said, "I have no idea of what quantum physics is, so I don't expect to know the answer." So I carry that over to basketball and say, "We're going to do a drill where you're going to dribble two balls, and you're going to put one behind your back and one through your legs. If you can't do that, is that going to upset you?" He'll say, "Yes." "Why?" "Well, it's going t upset me because I want to be a good basketball player and I want to be perfect in everything that I want to do, and if I can't do that it's going to bother me." I said, "Have you ever done this before?" He says, "No." I just look at him and I say, "Quantum physics."

So that if it's a new skill, if it is something that you have never done before, if it's something that you need to learn, you can't be

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upset because you're not able to do it the first time or the second time. Each time you lose the ball, all it is is an opportunity to pick it up and try again, because if a kid fears failure, he's not going to pick up the ball again. He's not going to try again. So you have to remove that fear of failure when you're trying to teach new kids, new skills, at any level.

The second thing is you have to explain to them – and you have to do it in different ways, depending on age groups – is that when you learn a new skill – and lets' say you have a kid who has poor shooting form and you're trying to correct his shooting form – effectively what you're doing is you're not correcting his shooting form; you're teaching him how to shoot anew. So you're teaching him a new skill all over again.

Jeff Haefner: Which is very difficult.

Don Kelbick: Right, and we also have to understand that it takes – once somebody has a habit established, it takes three times as long to re-establish that habit in a different manner. So for every one shot, player takes in his old form, he's got to take four in his new form. So it takes a long time, and there's a lot of frustration, but in varying ways, depending on the maturity and the age of the kid and what they're able to comprehend, you have to teach them that you have to be able to accept short-term losses for long-term gains.

Jeff Haefner: Exactly. That's a very important lesson, if you can get the kids to buy into that, that's a huge part of the game in teaching. We all have so many kids that you get as a coach that don't shoot right, they don't have proper footwork, and they just have so many bad habits they developed as young kids playing basketball when they're five years old and growing up that there's so many things like that to fix.

Don Kelbick: One of the mistakes that we make as coaches is that when we see a kid like that, we just say, "Here, do it this way." Now, we don't take the time to teach him not what he's supposed to do, but what we are doing. We don't take the time to teach the kids that the reason why we're making this change is because in the long-term you're going to be better than where you are now. All we do is we say, "Move your elbow in." So what happens when a kid tries it your way, if he goes two for ten – this is another analogy that I use with kids – a kid that goes two for ten on the foul line, and you go and you try and correct him, and he goes one for ten. The next time he shoots ten foul shots, what is he going to do?

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Jeff Haefner: He's going to think it doesn't work.

Don Kelbick: Yeah, he's going to go back to his old way because the greatest motivator is success. So he's saying, whether it be consciously or unconsciously, "I'm making two for ten my way. I only made one for ten your way. Why should I do it your way?" Well, we have to teach players why that is, and you may be only making one for ten today my way and you're making two for ten your way, and that's fine. Two weeks from now, my way, you're going to be making three out of ten; your way is still going to be two for ten. Four weeks from now, my way is going to be five for ten; your way is still going to be two for ten. Six weeks from now, my way is going to be eight for ten; your way is still going to be two for ten. So you have to get kids to buy into things that they have not experienced yet, and that's pretty much the definition of faith.

Jeff Haefner: I think that's a really good point.

Don Kelbick: Yeah, but we put out proof.

Jeff Haefner: Yeah, and everybody wants instant gratification, so that is a very, very important thing to explain why you're doing it and what they're going to get in the long term. That's definitely a good –

Don Kelbick: Yeah, I've seen kids – I've coached so many players and I've seen them develop from 10, 11, 12 years old into pro ranks, so I have an idea of how a kid progresses and how they develop within their skills. Well, you're trying to teach a 13-year-old; his only frame of reference is he's 13 years old. He has no idea what he's going to look like when he's 15, when he's 17, when he's 18. So you have to develop a relationship with that player to take it on faith that I've seen enough players that have progressed from 13 to 18 that I can predict that if we get this straightened out, by the time you're 14, this is what's going to happen.

Jeff Haefner: Using other players as examples is great proof to get them to believe they can actually do it, so yeah, if you got those examples, those are good things to mention as well.

Don Kelbick: The other aspect is, I believe in teaching people a lot of things away from the basketball court.

Jeff Haefner: Right, you mentioned that yesterday with – like the shooting was the good example that you gave. That was pretty interesting as well.

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Don Kelbick: That the object of shooting is to do what? Is to put the ball in the basketball.

Jeff Haefner: Exactly.

Don Kelbick: You're trying to work on shooting form at the basket. No matter what you tell the kid after four or five shots, if the ball's not going in the basket, he's not going to believe that he's doing the right thing. So if he throws the ball up in the air, hits it with his head and it goes deep into the basket, he's going to believe that that was good.

Jeff Haefner: So what do you do about that? Solve that problem.

Don Kelbick: Well, one of the things that I do is I work on form, not only away from the basket, but if I get a kid to work on form in his living room, I'll do that; that we start with kids sitting on chairs and just trying to get the ball straight up in the air. There's a drill that I do early where we work on shooting form where he's supposed to shoot the ball as high as he physically can and have the ball come directly back into his hand without having to move his hand, and catch it one-handed, because if it has proper spin, it's easy to catch.. That you could do at home; that you could do in the living room; you could do in a garage; in the backyard. You don't need a basket.

Jeff Haefner: Right.

Don Kelbick: Eventually you progress to standing up, and in standing up while you're shooting, and standing up and jumping and doing the same thing, and then shooting against the wall, because when you do it at a basket, as long as the ball goes in the basket, you're sure to believe that he's done well. We both know; we've both seen players where a kid throws the shot in from an ungodly place without even looking at the basket, and you turn to your assistant and you say, "That's the best shot that kid could have hit. Now he thinks he can shoot and we know he can't, and the more so the more he shoots, the better off we are." Now, we've all been through that.

Jeff Haefner: Oh, yeah.

Don Kelbick: Another real big thing that I try and encourage especially younger players to practice, is footwork. I really believe that the basis of your game is in your feet. When I work my shooting, arm technique and that sort of thing that everybody else works on, I

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work maybe ten percent of my time. The other, I would say – I don't want to sound too much like Yogi Berra – the other 50 percent is footwork and then 40 percent is mental – but I believe that the biggest part of your game in any aspect is footwork.

Jeff Haefner: Right.

Don Kelbick: So we do certain footwork drills, and I encourage kids to go home and grab a chair, because most of my workouts involve chairs, and do the same workouts that we just did on the court, just do it without a ball, and use the chair as reference points.

Jeff Haefner: They can work on footwork right in their own house.

Don Kelbick: They can work on their footwork while they're walking to school, by just walking. So when you walk to school, instead of walking straight, try reverse pivoting up the block. Of course, you have to do it when nobody else is looking, because people are going to think that you're nuts, but try instead pivoting; try drop-stepping. When your mom calls you for dinner, make step-through moves on the way into the kitchen.

Jeff Haefner: So it's definitely important for players and coaches for that matter, to understand footwork of the game, because that's going to help you not only in shooting from the perimeter, but scoring in the post to getting rebounds, to getting past your defender, off the stationary move. I mean, footwork is almost every single aspect of the game.

Don Kelbick: And it's the same footwork – there's only a certain amount of things you can do on a basketball court. It's the angle and the theater and the context that you put that in that determines what you're doing. An inside pivot to get a shot in the post is exactly the same pivot as a drop-step pivot to box a man out. It's exactly the same. A V-cut, to get open on the wing, is exactly the same move as a crossover dribble. An inside pivot on the post is exactly the same as an L-cut to get the ball on the wing.

Jeff Haefner: So it makes sense to work on that stuff and get good at pivoting and those footwork moves, definitely. It'll help you in all aspects.

Don Kelbick: Right, and what it does is, it helps your players with their confidence level, because they don't have to re-learn new things; because again, we already discussed how trying to learn new things creates stress. Well, you've been through inside pivots in the post, and kids are comfortable with inside pivots in the post

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because they're shooting the ball. Now you want to go to rebound it. You don't have to re-teach the footwork. You can just say to them, the same inside pivot that we just did in the post, you do it here and then you put your body to the guy; and then you go back into the post and you say, "Here's how we seal on a crosscourt pass," and it's the same footwork, and it all started with that kid shooting the ball with an inside pivot.

Jeff Haefner: Right, so I find it interesting that – I think a lot of players and coaches probably think they or their players already know how to do these pivoting because it's so simple, but I'm curious, do you - - when you're working with NBA player and higher-level players, do you still work on these pivots and these rudimentary back-pivots and things like that, or how important is it?

Don Kelbick: It's very important. The level of player that I work with, a lot of the players that I work with have a similar profile, that Raja Bell came up, three, four years after playing in the CBA. This fellow played in France for three years. These are the guys who had to rely on really, really effective fundamentals, because physically they're not as gifted as say, Carmelo Anthony. They reiterate to me constantly. I remember Raja saying to me, he said, "I never thought about my feet until I went to camp with the Atlanta Hawks," and they worked a lot on not only getting footwork for getting shots but footwork coming around screens and that sort of thing. He had said that to me.

There were guys that I had worked with –Rasul Butler, who has very good footwork, but we've been able to improve his footwork coming off the screens. One of the common things about good players in the NBA, the ones that are not supremely talented – the upper five percent of talent level – is that they have excellent footwork.

Hakeem Olajuwon down in the post, tremendous athlete, great quickness. You talk to anybody that's playing him, the first thing that they say about him is "great footwork in the post." Know who else has great – I mean, look at Tim Duncan, great footwork in the post.

Jeff Haefner: So what are some of the things these guys are doing with their feet to get shots and score in the post and things like that?

Don Kelbick: Again, there are only a certain number of things you can do. This may not answer your question directly, but I'll say the same thing to them that I say to kids, that when I go out and I have a shooting

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workout with Raja Bell, and our shooting workouts, just before he went to camp, we were up to 650 makes in an hour and a half.

Jeff Haefner: That's a lot.

Don Kelbick: And we're talking about "made" shots.

Jeff Haefner: That's a lot of shots. So how'd you get him to take so many shots? Was somebody constantly rebounding and getting the ball right back to him?

Don Kelbick: Pretty much me.

Jeff Haefner: Yeah, you, so you got a workout, too.

Don Kelbick: In the foot drills, but also the nature of the drills that we do. I've developed a workout routine that enables us to do that without really going nuts, which is a whole different interview.

Jeff Haefner: Right.

Don Kelbick: I say to them the same thing I say to kids, "What you think is a shooting drill, I think is a footwork drill." So when I work with Raja, I very rarely make any comments at all about his shooting technique, but if he misses three or four shots in a row, immediately the first place I look at is at his feet, and then I'll try and dissect his rhythm a little bit; but he usually self corrects.

Jeff Haefner: Right.

Don Kelbick: Guys like Rasul has great footwork, but I think at time it might even be more prevalent to the post, because basketball's a game of length and angles, and you wonder why post guys, when they make moves to the basket, wind up going away from the basket, and it usually has to do with their footwork; but we don't look at that. As coaches, what we do is we say, "You've got to toughen up and you've got to go after the contact and you got to lean in." Really, that's not it.

Jeff Haefner: Yeah, so that's a mistake. You need to –

Don Kelbick: It's poor footwork that forces them to take a step away from the basket if they drive towards the basket, and that creates –

Jeff Haefner: Fix their feet instead of yelling at them, and telling them to make contact and stuff like that is basically what you're saying; right?

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Don Kelbick: Yeah, one of the things that we teach in the post is let say, drop steps. When you drop step, the foot that you drop step with, no matter where you are, is direct line to the front of the rim. We drill that and we drill that and we drill that, because in a game, as coaches we're all familiar with the phrase, "game slippage."

Jeff Haefner: Right.

Don Kelbick: Under pressure, is a player going to drop step directly at the basket? If he gets ten attempts, we're lucky if he does it once, but now when he doesn't step towards the basket, he's more in a direct line. He may get a better seal, he may get better rhythm, he may get fouled, he may have better opportunities to open up passing lanes – as opposed to watching them in practice, as he drop steps leaning away form the basket, because instead of stepping towards the rim, he stepped towards the foul line.

If you can picture that – let's say we're doing a drop step from the middle on the left-hand side of the court so his right foot is his pivot foot – instead of stepping with his left foot towards the front of the rim, what he's doing, he's stepping with his left foot towards the foul line, which as he lifts his pivot foot to take his shot, it's going to drive him away from the basket. But instead of inspecting his footwork, what we do is we tell him to go after the contact and don't be afraid of the contact. Well, not that he's afraid of contact – well, there are kids that are afraid of contact, but in most cases, that's not the issue. In most cases, he's stepping away from the basket, so he has no choice but to go away from the basket.

Jeff Haefner: Right, you just need to understand the proper footwork techniques and then drill the kids, and then if you're a player, run your own drills and do that stuff in your living room and on the court and things like that. That's good stuff.

Don Kelbick: Yeah, and I don't want to get off topic but the point of the whole matter is that we need to teach our players not just what to do, but why we do it and to sell them it's going to make them better player. Every time I hear a coach say to his player, "We're going do it this way because I'm the coach and you're the player, and that' your job," I'd like to put a gun in my mouth.

It's just so much easier to explain the whole process to a kid, and then he going to go after with such vigor that you're not going to be able to stop him.

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Jeff Haefner: Part of the problem is sometimes the coaches just are simply; they're ignorant and they don't know why they're even doing what they're doing. Like you said, they've seen Bobby Knight yelling on the sidelines, and they see coaches in NBA doing different things, so they try to mimic what they're doing instead of understanding the basics of the game.

Don Kelbick: We're not saying that Bobby Knight is wrong, because obviously he's been very successful. People have to be who they are, but if you're developing who you are based upon what you see in other people as opposed to what you feel is the best way for you to learn, you should always put yourself in a player's position, mentally. Always put yourself – I mean, if this is how I was being taught, would this be effective for me? Would staying in a drill for 20 minutes because it's not being done to my satisfaction, if I were a player, would that be productive for me?

Jeff Haefner: That'll change your thought process, I'm sure, in a lot of things you do, if you ask that question.

Don Kelbick: Absolutely, but I really think that the biggest thing is that you have to realize that as you teach kids, that they are under stress and really what you need to do is you need to try and find ways to relieve that stress, to allow players to learn and to grow and to excel as opposed to thinking that a player's going to do it because of you. Your job as a coach is to put him in a position where he can learn the best, and then he makes decisions as to whether or not he's going to learn that. Nobody does anything because of you. All you can do is put the seeds in the pot, water it every day and put it in a position where it can get sun every day, and then the plant's going to grow at its own speed.

Jeff Haefner: Right.

Don Kelbick: It's pretty much the same thing with players.

Jeff Haefner: You told me something interesting yesterday, and I believe you're referring to Coach Mick Van Gundy and what he experienced with his youth team?

Don Kelbick: Stan Van Gundy.

Jeff Haefner: Stan Van Gundy, okay. Would you mind repeating what you told me yesterday, and what you experienced with his kid.

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Don Kelbick: What Stan had done two years that he did not coach, is he has an eleven-year-old son now; I believe he's 12. He coached his son's basketball team, and he told me he was just shocked. I asked him how his team was doing; he says, "We're doing great, but we're not winning any games." He said he was shocked at all the parents that were coaching the other kids' teams, and they're an eleven-year old league, and eleven-year olds, most of them, have severe physical limitations. They haven't grown any strength yet; their perceptions are still developing; their space and time –

Jeff Haefner: Their ball-handling skills?

Don Kelbick: Yeah. They were all still developing, and he said that all the coaches in this youth league, what they would do, is they would press and they would track kids not because the situation called for it – so they weren't teaching their kids situational basketball, but they would do it because they knew that an eleven-year old, if put in a trap in the corner, was not strong enough to throw the ball to a place where they could break the trap and be effective offensively. How is that benefiting these kids' skills so when they're 14 years old, when they are strong enough to do it, they're not going to have the knowledge or the skills to be able to take advantage when somebody traps them in the corner?

Jeff Haefner: So I assume Van Gundy was doing more just teaching the game of basketball perhaps and half court and different things like that?

Don Kelbick: Right, he played man-to-man defense; he ran an offense where kids had to pass, they had to cut and they had to screen. He didn't do any isolation side-screens; he didn't do any clear-outs for his best players, because his objective was, if he had ten kids on his team, he wanted all ten kids to learn how to play the game.

Jeff Haefner: Right. Yeah, it's something I see on a personal level, too, with so many coaches around here. They full-court press and shooting threes and run and gunning these kids; they're not doing them any justice. They need to learn how to play in the half court and how to set screens and how to do these things, and then when they get up to high school, they may have had a lot of success and won a lot of games, but the trapping things that they've been doing and the bad habits they develop don't work by the time the kids get older and they're stronger and get into high school. It really hurts them in the long run, big time.

Don Kelbick: And then they don't know how to adjust. I think as coaches, we can't get caught up in an instant gratification situation. If you're

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coaching kids, you have to learn how to take pride and how to take satisfaction, not from successes that you have today, but the success that the kids that you worked with, 12, 13, 14 years of age, the success that they have when they're 18. Now, you have to sit back and you have to wait for that, but it's much more satisfying when you're sitting at a game, a kid that's 18 years old sticks four shots in a row, and you know that because you had him when he was 13 and you taught him shot selection, don't just pull up and take shots; we're not running a 13-year-old right to take threes when most of the kids can't even reach the basket. You taught him proper technique. You taught him that the number one thing in shot selection is to take shots you can make.

That kid goes out in a championship game when he's 18 years old and makes four shots that make a difference in a game, you have to take satisfaction in the fact that you taught him that. That's part of the process that you started when he was 12 or 13 years of age. He may not get that satisfaction when he's 13 years of age. He may come back at you and say, "Well, everybody else is shooting; why can't I, and you may lose a couple of youth league games because but when it really matters, when it's really gong to make a difference in a kid's life, you're part of that learning process. I think as coaches we need to learn to take long-term views.

Jeff Haefner: I wholeheartedly agree, and think it's great to hear it coming from someone like yourself that's seen everything from the NBA to college and been doing it for a long time, so it's definitely good to hear that reassurance.

Don Kelbick: Well, I haven't been doing it for a long time, but I'm sure I have seen everything. Again, I want to reiterate, this is just what I believe.

Jeff Haefner: Right, and I happen to agree with you, especially these youth concepts and things like that, wholeheartedly.

Don Kelbick: But if coaches that have been a little bit more exposed to that don't believe that, that's fine too, because I'm sure you can teach me some things. There's no one way to do things. These are just things that I have learned to believe over the years that I've been doing this, and I really wholeheartedly believe it because I've seen positive results.

Jeff Haefner: That's definitely what it's all about and what we're trying to do here, is share information from other coaches and continually learn, learn, learn so we can all get better coaches and become

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better players and things like that. So definitely appreciate all the comments and things, and if you don't mind here, we've got a few minutes where we could get into some of the more mental aspects. We've actually talked a lot about mental stuff, but maybe there's a couple of things we haven't quite gotten into that it may make sense to talk about, because I know you're big into the mental stuff, and think that that's very important for basketball.

Do you have some last mental tips that you have for players to improve their game?

Don Kelbick: I just think, number one, we have to find ways to remove fear of failure. I believe the two most – I can't even say what I believe are the two most important things – the two most important words in the U.S. language are, because they're frowned upon by society, but if I can give you an example, and it's something that really, really shapes the way that I look at the game as well, is that when I played in college, I had the best job in the world. All I was supposed to do is come off the screens and shoot jump shots.

Jeff Haefner: You were the scorer.

Don Kelbick: If I tried to pass the ball to somebody, I would sit down. If I was open coming off the screen; I didn't get the ball back, I would sit down. We were playing in a big rivalry game, and I was 0 for 10 in the first half, and I get the ball out on a wing and I pass the shot and pass it to somebody else. The next time down the floor, I'm open on the wing, I get the ball and I pass up a shot and throw it to somebody on the wing. Sure enough, the buzzer sounds and I'm on the bench. I stayed on the floor through 0 for 10; I passed up two shots, and I sat down.

I was the star of the halftime show. Coach just ripped into me, and the message was, "What is your job?" "My job is to come off screens on a wing and shoot the ball." "So why do you have that job?" "Because I'm good at it." "How'd you get good at it?" "I worked hours and hours and hours and I outworked other people to get that job." So he says, "Why did you stop shooting?" I said, "I'm 0 for 10. I'm hurting the team." And he looks at me and he says, "You might be 0 for 10, but you're doing your job." He says, "If you stop shooting now, you're not doing your job; then you start hurting the team." Then he said something that stayed with me forever. He looked at me and he says, "Are you good enough to do this?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "You tell me how many are going to go in if you don't shoot any?" I understood that he had

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enough confidence in me that I didn't forget how to shoot. They just didn't go in.

He gave me enough confidence to know that even if I was missing shots, I was going to stay in the game because that's my job and because we both believed that I was the best at it. I went out and I shot 10 for 12 in the second half. Had he not done that, I would have went out on the floor – if had gone out on the floor – but when I was out on the floor, I would be doubting what I could do and what I couldn't do.

Jeff Haefner: So you'd have been hesitating and thinking about your shot?

Don Kelbick: You cannot fear failure.

Jeff Haefner: So you can't worry about missing your shot when you're in the game. If you miss it, oh, well.

Don Kelbick: Nope – yep.

Jeff Haefner: If it goes in, it goes in. You know that some will go in and some won't, and you might miss ten in a row, but the next one could go in.

Don Kelbick: I use different words than, "Oh, well."

Jeff Haefner: *[Laughs]*.

Don Kelbick: Athletics is actually an exercise in failure. If you're a baseball player, you play for 15 years, and over your 15 years you make out. You're out 70 percent of the time, what do they call you?

Jeff Haefner: Pretty good hitter.

Don Kelbick: They call you a Hall of Famer.

Jeff Haefner: *[Laughs]*.

Don Kelbick: You're a basketball player – using college standards now – it's a little bit different in the pros, but even in the pros. You shoot three-point shots and you miss 65 percent of the time, what do they call you?

Jeff Haefner: Great three-point shooter.

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Don Kelbick: Yeah, they call you a great shooter. You're missing 65 percent of the time. If your overall shooting percentage is 45 percent – so you miss 55 percent of the time, what do they call you? They call you a great shooter. If you're going to put more emphasis on failures than you do on successes –

Jeff Haefner: You're in trouble.

Don Kelbick: Yeah, you're not going to survive. Sports is an exercise in failure. Anybody can handle success. It's the great ones that take the failures and realize that at some point success is going to follow that, and they use their failures as a springboard. You can either run away from it or you can embrace it. Nobody wants to miss shots. Nobody wants to turn the ball over. Nobody wants to be on the foul line, missing a foul shot at the end of the game, but unless you want to be in that situation, it's not going to happen. You have to be willing to accept the failures – which will be momentary – for long-term success. If you wind up being a 45 percent shooter, and people thing you're a great shooter, you're still failing 55 percent of the time.

Jeff Haefner: Yet, most people don't think about it like that, though.

Don Kelbick: But if you're going to dwell more on those failures than you are on your success, you're never going to accomplish anything.

Jeff Haefner: That's a good point. I learned awhile ago, and it worked well for me and may or may not work for others, just to not think about your shot, get yourself a lift, and the little thing I used to do is whenever I took a shot I'd just say, "Nice shot; I can do better," and just say it to myself under my breath, and I didn't care if it went in or not. That got me in the habit of getting into that mode or that zone or whatever you want to call it. So, "Hey, nice shot; you can do better," I wasn't so concerned if it went in. That little thing kind of helped me, and maybe it'll work for others, but everybody has to find their own thing that works for them.

Don Kelbick: As a player, I invented analysis paralysis, and it's awful, analysis paralysis. Another analogy that I use, too, is that – and I've actually done this with pro guys, because there are some guys that I work with who really are great shooters, and they step to the foul line and they can't make foul shots. I asked them. I said, "Why can't you make a foul shot if it should embarrass you?" He says, "Well, every time I step to the foul line and I miss, I start to make adjustments." I said, "You've been in the NBA for 14 years. How many foul shots do you think you've taken through your life?" He

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said, "Hundreds of thousands." I said, "If you miss one, what makes you think that you forgot how to shoot?" He said, "Every time you miss, you try and make an adjustment. You're trying to learn multiple shots. It's hard enough to master one shot."

So you don't change. The analogy that I use is that if you're walking down the street and you trip and you fall, what do you do? Well, you get up and you start walking again. When you walk, do you stand there and you say, okay, I'm going to put my left foot forward, right foot forward, left foot forward. No, I just walk. You don't even think about it; it's unconscious. You've taken hundreds of thousands of foul shots in your life, so you miss one or you miss two, and you're going to sit there and you're going to go through your shot and exam it, say, "Is my elbow in the ball on my fingertips? Am I following through correctly?" Hundreds of thousands of foul shots, just shoot it.

Jeff Haefner: Yeah, just do it without thinking and it's like walking.

Don Kelbick: Yeah, you take your mind out of it, your body's going to know what to do.

Jeff Haefner: Yeah, you've done it enough times and you've practiced enough that shooting's like walking. That's partly why practice is so important.

Don Kelbick: For some of us, for some of us, we shoot better than we walk. But the process is the same. You could go for miles and miles and miles and not once think about the process of walking. It should be the same when you shoot. It should be the same when you dribble.

Jeff Haefner: Absolutely. It's definitely interesting, and something I haven't really thought about too much myself, at least to that level, so that's a good analogy, the walking and shooting. Are there any other, just a couple – quick, before we wrap things up, couple of quick mental tips that you think would be good?

Don Kelbick: I'll give you one more story, because I'm a big believer – for those of us who know that your body cannot tell the difference between reality and fantasy. We've all had dreams where we're being chased and keep falling down, and you wake up out of your dream and you're sweating and your heart is racing because while you were going through that dream, your body thought it was real. It's a conscious decision for you to determine what's real and what's

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not real. Those of us that can't do that determine insanity. That's a condition of insanity.

There was a guy that I was exposed to in college. His name was Dick Setka. He was held in solitary confinement in North Korea for 18 years from the Korean War. When they finally released him, they asked him how he kept his sanity. What he said just astounded me. He said, "They would wake me up in the morning; I would eat breakfast, and then I would close my eyes and I would play my favorite golf course. I would play 18 holes in my mind. That would take five hours. Time came for another meal; after that meal, I would play another 18 holes. So that's ten hours out of the day, and then I would sleep. I did that every day for 18 years"

He finally got released and went home, and the first time he went out to his favorite golf course, he shot a 74, after 18 years of solitary confinement. For those of us who play golf and for those of us who have to live in winter, like people in Iowa, you go out and you say – and those of us who are golfers, we go out and the first couple of rallies that we play are always the best, and then we start to regress. The reason for that is during the entire winter, we're thinking about doing the right things in golf. When I was up in New Hampshire during the 12 months of winter, I was always thinking about playing golf during the two weeks of summer that we had. I would get out the first day and I would hit the ball very well. Then I would start to spiral downward once I didn't hit the ball well, and I started to get some negative feedback. Mental aspects, when you say – I'm very, very big on mental imagery. Mental imagery does not give you negative feedback; it's always successful.

Jeff Haefner: Mental imagery is basically kind of visualizing success essentially, visually hitting the ball and making it, or shooting the ball and making it?

Don Kelbick: Yep. Now, you won't become a good foul shooter by not practicing, but you will be a better foul shooter if before you go to sleep, you close your eyes and you picture yourself taking 20 perfect foul shots, and feeling all the things that it takes to shoot foul shots. Now, that doesn't take the place of practicing, but if you add that into your practice regimen, you get better. Another great illustration – I do this with kids – is you have them close their eyes in a dark room, and you tell them a story, putting them in their favorite uniform playing for their favorite team, hitting the shot to win the championship at the buzzer. Two things will happen. First of all, nobody will miss. No one ever misses. Second thing is, ask

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him, "Did you feel it? Did your hair stand up on end; the hair on the back of your neck stand up? Did you get a chill? Feel your heart. Is your heart racing right now?" Because your body does not know the difference between reality and fantasy. That's all controlled by your mind. So if you can train your mind to get out of your body's way things work better.

Jeff Haefner: Getting in the zone in the correct state is definitely a powerful thing to do, or whatever you want to call it.

Don Kelbick: When you're in the zone, you have no fear of failure; your perceptual field gets larger because you have no stress; everything slows down fully; you have tons of time to do whatever it is you want to do.

Jeff Haefner: Your mind is clear.

Don Kelbick: Yeah, but when you miss five shots in a row, if you're going to stand there and you're going to examine every piece of every shot you take, analysis paralysis; you have no chance. It's like laying in bed, telling yourself to go to sleep and you wind up being more awake. Same process.

Jeff Haefner: All right, well, that's definitely great stuff to think about and take home and apply, and definitely appreciate your time and all your information here, and hopefully we can talk more in the future and keep the great information coming.

Don Kelbick: My pleasure. Anything I can do to help you, just let me know.

Jeff Haefner: Okay, it's much appreciated, and we'll talk to you later, Don.

Don Kelbick: Bye-bye.

Jeff Haefner: All right, bye-bye.

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