

24. John Wooden's Eight Keys to Run a Great Practice

Former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden was a master at organizing practices for maximum production. Here are his 8 tips to create a great practice environment. Implement these and watch athletic motivation and engagement soar.

1. *Fundamentals before creativity:* Coach Wooden believes the teaching of fundamentals, until they are all executed quickly, properly, and without conscious thought, is prerequisite to playing the game. Drills must be created so that all of the fundamentals are taught to the criterion that players execute them automatically.

In Wooden's words: "Drilling created a foundation on which individual initiative and imagination can flourish."

2. *Use variety.* Although the general skeleton of practice lessons were the same, there were lots of surprises that kept things interesting and fun. Coach Wooden "would devise new [drills] to prevent monotony, although there would be some drills we must do every single day."

3. *Teaching new material.* When creating the daily lesson plan, Coach Wooden was careful to install new material in the first half of practice, not the second. There were two reasons for this: Our minds were fresh and not yet worn down by two hours of high-intensity activities, and he could devise activities during the second half of practice for the application of new material.

4. *Quick transitions.* During Wooden's practice sessions, one witnessed lightning-quick transitions from activity to activity. Players sprinted to the next area and took pride in being the first to begin. Transitions were as intense as the activities. No time was wasted. With a little ingenuity, creativity, and organization, classrooms can be morphed from inefficient operations to efficient systems.

5. *Increasing complexity.* Drills evolved from simple to extremely complex and demanding. Every movement, every action was carefully thought out and planned.

6. *Conditioning.* Coach Wooden's philosophy is for players and students to improve a little every day and make perfection the goal. His method for improving conditioning included one painful demand -- each player, when reaching the point of exhaustion, was to push himself beyond. When this is done every day, top conditioning will be attained over time.

7. *End on a positive note.* Coach Wooden always had something interesting, challenging, or fun planned for the last five minutes.

8. *End on time and avoid altering a plan during the lesson.* Once the practice started, Coach Wooden never changed it, even though he may have noticed an existing drill that needed more time or thought of a new one he should have included. The proper place for new ideas and improvements was on the back of the 3 x 5 index card, which he made notations on.

He strongly believed in ending practices on time; otherwise players might hold back, anticipating the need for energy reserves if the practice was extended. Because athletes knew the practice would stop promptly at 5:29 p.m. without exception, he felt he could maintain the intensity level throughout the session and we would be willing to extend ourselves.