



**“THERE’S  
ONLY ONE  
WAY TO WIN;  
LESSONS  
FROM A  
LEGEND”**

**DICK  
DEVENZIO,  
COPYRIGHT © 2006**

## Chapter Two

Shared by [Keys To The Gym](#)



## 2.THE BASICS

*He really didn't do too much teaching. It was basically, fire you up, you do it. If you don't, you're out of there . . . On defense—and we prided ourselves on defense—he didn't teach you to extend your foot and split the man and take away the baseline. He just sort of said, "You just hunch on over and get up on his ass and you'll do all right."*

— Coach Walt Ostrowski Former Coach DV player

***USUALLY, BEFORE HE HAD EVEN TOSSED A BALL TO ONE TEAM TO BEGIN PLAY, HE'D BE ANGRY. THAT LOOK OF TOTAL DISGUST AND ANGUISH WOULD COME OVER HIS FACE . . .***

### The Basics

**To** start practice or to start off a new season, some coaches

go over a group of fundamental drills: dribbling, shooting, and passing. Groups of players get in lines and focus on one fundamental after another.

Coach DV would watch another coach do such things, and he would nod approvingly. "We should do more of that," he would say. But he never did much of it.

If his team members were nearby, he would grab them, even in the off-season, and he would be angry. "You see, boys, that's what you have to do. If you want to be a player, that's what you have to do. You have to put in the time; you have to make sure you can shoot and dribble and pass. You have to put in the time."

Nevertheless, he didn't spend time on shooting, dribbling, or passing. He thought players should do that on their own.

“You gotta put in time on your own, boys. You gotta be able to do what good players can do. There’s no secret. If you want to be good, you have to practice. If you don’t want to practice or put in time on your own, you should be doing something else. You have to decide what you want to do. If you want to play this game, then you have to play it. You have to eat, sleep, and dream it. That’s if you want to be good. If you just want to participate, that’s fine. But then you have to realize you’re not a basketball player.”

The need to practice diligently in the off-season was a rule that Coach DV wouldn’t bother to articulate very often. It went without saying. Everyone knows that. If you want to be good at something, you watch players who are good. You see what they do and make sure you can do it, too. You find out how much time they spend and spend more than that amount of time.

That was merely stating the obvious, so Coach DV would never think to state it at all—unless he was angry at a player who was playing poorly.

“You see, son, that’s why you have to practice,” he would say. “If you had put in the time, you would have taken that ball and dropped it in the basket, and I wouldn’t be yelling at you now and your parents wouldn’t have to call the school. Everybody would be clapping for you. I would be clapping for you, your parents would be clapping for you. They would think I was a great coach, and everyone would be happy. But now, no one is happy because you didn’t practice. You have to practice.”

Once the season began, Coach DV didn’t feel there was time to spend on individual fundamentals. “Kids have to do that on their own. If they want to be good, they’ll do it.”

Coach DV’s team fundamentals—the things he spent all of his time on—were ridiculously simple. To install his plan for the year, Coach DV didn’t pass out any notebooks or distribute any

handouts. If he saw some other coach doing that, he would say admiringly, "We ought to do that. I'd like to do that. That's a good idea. Players need to be reading things like that."

But Coach DV very seldom passed anything out. To install his plan for the year, Coach DV would get ten kids together and tell five of them to take their shirts off.

There usually wouldn't be many more than ten around. Why? "Because too many cooks spoil the soup," he liked to say. "You can't have too many kids on a basketball team—you'll just have problems." So he would discourage kids from coming out for the team. He wanted just the ones who had practiced.

Usually, before he had even tossed a ball to one team to begin play, he'd be angry. That look of total disgust and anguish would come over his face and everyone would get still.

Once, one kid had tossed his shirt off to the side and it hadn't gone completely off the court.

"Look, son," he said. "We can't play with a shirt on the court. You gotta act like a human being. What's wrong with you? Don't you see that out-of-bounds line? Don't you think that someone may soon be running or dribbling where that shirt is? You must be the dumbest man alive. Or maybe you can't see. I'm sorry. Have you had your eyes checked recently?"

You may think he was speaking sarcastically, but guess what? He was deadly serious. He couldn't believe that a person who could see clearly would throw a shirt on the court and just leave it there. No human being would do that!

"Son, do you watch pro games?" he continued. "You do? Good. How many pro games do you see that start with some shirts lying on the court? None? Well then what the hell—wait, excuse me, son, I don't want to yell bad words." [His voice would get soft now.] "Why would we want shirts on our court if the pros don't

use them on theirs? C'mon now, son. Don't act like some dumb gazook. Act like a human being. That's all I ask. Just act like a human being. You don't throw a shirt on a court."

With five shirted players and five "skin" players, Coach DV would tell one team to "go that way" and he would toss a ball to one of the players.

Probably not more than a second or two later, Coach DV would be totally pissed off!

Either the kid who got the ball, one of the defenders, or someone else would be standing and watching.

"Son, you *never* stand on a basketball court," he would say. "Do you understand that? You never stand on a basketball court."

A youngster or someone inexperienced in the ways of Coach DV might proffer that the kid wasn't ready. He had expected a jump ball or one team to take the ball out of bounds in order to start the game.

"Son, look. You have to be ready. You have to always be ready. You see, son, this is a basketball court. When you step out here, you're ready. You're ready for anything. You're ready for the unexpected. You're ready for the expected. You're just ready for anything. And when something happens, you react. Never stand. Expect something to happen. You gotta . . ."

Coach DV would think he was getting through and then he'd look at the kid.

"No wonder you're not ready, you're standing there like a pregnant lady or an old fat man. You can't stand like that on a basketball court, son. Please, what are you trying to do? Look, you gotta stand like a basketball player. You bend your knees and you're ready to move to the left and to the right, you're ready to go

backward and forward. You can't stand like a pregnant lady and play this game. C'mon, son, play like a human being. You gotta look like a basketball player."

Coach DV would put the ball back in play by handing it to a player. Never mattered which player, or which team had it last. The ball went to whomever he happened to give it to.

Sometimes, early in the season, an inexperienced player would stop and indicate, "It's our ball." Meaning that his team had possession of the ball back when Coach DV stopped the action to make a point.

Coach DV would erupt again, each time with equal or greater force than the last.

"Son, it's nobody's ball. This is basketball. It's a game. If you want the ball, you're always free to get it. You steal the ball, you rebound it, you play defense so close they have trouble breathing. It's not anyone's ball when I have it. What's wrong with you? Hasn't anyone ever taught you anything? C'mon, play."

The first time the ball actually advanced to one end of the court, a player would usually take it to the basket and score. Almost anyone who ever watched basketball would have the tendency to compliment some graceful or powerful dribbles into the basket and the shot that neatly bounced off the board into the basket: "Nice play! Nice shot!"

But not Coach DV.

"Gawt-darn-it!" he'd yell, walking out onto the court and making it clear with the look on his face that he wanted the ball and he wanted total silence and stillness.

"You can't just give away baskets. I know Carson played last year and he's supposed to be good, but you can't just let him score. He'll think he's All-American playing against you. You just *let* him

go in there. You can't do that. You can't just *let* a guy score. You gotta get in front of him; you can't let him in there. You know where he wants to go, so just get there. You gotta play this game, you can't just stand around and watch and give away baskets. That's not sports. That's not basketball. That's Christmas. That's gift-giving. You do that on your birthday. Is it Carson's birthday?

"Excuse me, I'm sorry, Carson, is it your birthday?"

He would ask the question without a hint of sarcasm. Clearly, his mind would be off on the tangent. If by chance it were Carson's birthday, he would change his tone, and make it clear that he understood; it was okay. He would apologize for having gotten upset. But then he would make it abundantly clear: now that Carson has his gift, *you better not give him another*.

Of course, it typically wouldn't be Carson's birthday, and then Coach DV would be furious.

"What? It's not Carson's birthday? Well then what the hell are you doing? This is basketball. You can't just let a guy dribble the ball in like that and score an easy basket. You *never* give an easy basket. Never. This is my *life* you guys are playing with. If you don't want to play this game right, don't play it. Quit. You *never* give an easy basket."

Coach DV didn't think of these commands as being part of a philosophy of basketball. They were just common sense, a daily and constant part of every practice. He felt these ideas should go without saying. Every athlete or human being ought to know these things long before he ever went out for a basketball team.

But, was Coach DV just unlucky? No one ever came out for one of his teams with sufficient common sense to satisfy him. Coach DV's notion of common sense was a bit more stringent than anyone was used to. Few players practiced enough, few were ready for everything, and few were in the habit of never giving away

opportunities to opponents. In other words, for forty years, even Coach DV's stars had to put in a great deal of time, not just practicing in the off-season, but in learning his meaning of common sense, how to be always ready, and how to make an opponent struggle for every dribble, pass, and shot.

What? Give 'em an easy basket? No way. And don't let them throw an easy pass. Don't let them dribble where they want to go. Don't let them run where they want to run. Make it difficult for them to breathe! *That* was basketball, Coach DV style.

That was the only way to win.

This book available at the [PGC Basketball Bookstore](#).