

FREE THROW SHOOTING

By Dr. Hal Wissel

Successful free-throw shooting requires confidence, a routine, relaxation, rhythm, and concentration. Relaxation, rhythm, and a routine contribute to concentration and confidence.

Confidence. Think positively. You always shoot from the same place on the line. No one is guarding you. The basket is big; over three and a half balls can fit in the rim. Using affirmation statements can promote confident thoughts about yourself and your ability to shoot. For example, you can say to yourself, "I am a shooter," or you can remind yourself of past successes. Visualizing a successful shot before shooting can also increase confidence. In addition, acting like a shooter before and after shooting will lead to confidence. Part of acting like a shooter is to exaggerate your follow-through by keeping your shooting arm up until the ball reaches the basket. With confidence-and sound mechanics-you cannot miss.

Routine. Develop a sound routine for the free throw. A routine helps you relax, focus, and shoot with rhythm. Most important, using a routine will enhance your confidence. Your routine may include using visualization to practice your free throw mentally. You may want to physically simulate your free-throw stroke as a part of your routine-many great free-throw shooters do this, such as NBA players Steve Nash and Ray Allen. Your routine may include dribbling a set number of times, checking pre-shot mechanics, and taking a deep breath to relax. There is no single routine that works for everyone. You want to select a routine that works for you. Once you adopt a sound routine, you should stay with it. Don't copy fads or repeatedly change your routine. Most players use the one-hand shot for a free throw (figure 4.2), taking the time to control each of the basic mechanics: sight, balance, hand position, elbow-in alignment, shooting rhythm, and follow-through. Here is a sample routine that you can adjust to fit you. Stand a few feet behind the free-throw line until the official hands you the ball. You will stay more relaxed there. If you hear negative remarks from the crowd or you recognize your own negative thoughts, interrupt them with the word stop. Take a deep breath and let go of the negative thoughts as you exhale. Replace them with a positive statement of affirmation such as "I'm a shooter," "Nothing but net," or "Count it!" Once you receive the ball, position your feet, making certain to line up the ball (not your head) with the middle of the basket. Use the small indentation (nail) mark in the floor at the exact middle of the free-throw line that marks the free-throw circle. Set your shooting foot slightly outside this mark, lining up the ball with the middle of the basket. Set up in a balanced stance. Some players bounce the ball a certain number of times to help them relax. When you bounce the ball, keep your shooting hand on top. This helps ensure that you will have your shooting hand facing the basket when you set the ball high in position to shoot. Use a relaxed hand position, and line up your index finger with the valve on the ball. Next, check your elbow-in alignment.

Relaxation. Learn to relax when shooting free throws. You have more time to think when shooting free throws than when shooting other shots. Trying too hard may cause undue physical or emotional tension. Use deep breathing to relax your mind and body. For a free throw, you should particularly relax your shoulders; take a deep breath and let your shoulders drop and loosen. Do the same for your arms, hands, and fingers. Learn to relax other parts of your body. Controlling your breathing and relaxing your muscles are especially useful in a free-throw routine. Make sure that taking a deep breath to relax is part of your routine.

Rhythm. Start your shot high and use the down-and-up motion of your legs for rhythm rather than lowering the ball for rhythm. The down-and-up motion of your legs provides momentum for your shot and is particularly helpful when shooting late in the game when your legs are tired. By starting the ball high and using your legs for rhythm, you will lessen the chance for error that can come with lowering the ball. Exaggerate your follow-through, keeping your eyes on the target and your shooting arm up until the ball reaches the basket. Shooting a free throw is different than shooting from the field because you have time to think. Thinking can cause a slower rhythm, along with the tendency for your free throw to be short. Shoot the free throw with a smooth, free-flowing rhythm. Using personalized key words can help you establish a smooth, sequential rhythm. Say your words in the rhythm of your shot. For example, if your trigger words are legs and through and your anchor word is yes, put them together-legs-through-yes!-in rhythm with your shot, from the start of your shot until the ball is released. Using personalized key words this way establishes your rhythm, enhances your mechanics, and builds confidence.

Concentration. The last and most important step before initiating the free-throw motion is to eliminate all distractions and focus on the target just over the front of the rim. Keep from being distracted by the crowd or your own negative thoughts. When you hear a negative statement or recognize your own negative thoughts, eliminate the negatives with the word stop, and use positive affirmations. Confidence and concentration go together. Concentrate on shooting a successful shot, and let go of any previous shots that missed or any thoughts of what you might do wrong. Stay in the present. Visualize shooting a successful free throw while you emphasize your anchor word: Yes! Net! In! Through! Most of all enjoy the moment. Keep your focus on the target as you shoot. See it, shoot it, count it!