

There's Speed and Then There's Basketball Speed©

By

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In sports, the fastest, quickest athletes are usually the most successful. All athletes need speed – particularly in sports like basketball. But exactly what kind of speed and quickness is best for basketball? Many coaches place, in my opinion, too much emphasis on “straight-ahead” speed by, for example, placing their entire speed-training focus and efforts on getting their athletes to run a faster 40 yard dash, or fast from baseline to baseline. But in a sport like basketball, is this necessarily the kind of speed that's going to make for a more effective player? There's no doubt that if a player is fast, it can make the difference between her getting a breakaway lay-up, or making a defensive stop by getting into position to take a charge. But the truth of the matter is that seldom, if ever, does a player run baseline to baseline in a straight-line, and even if they did, a fast 40-yard dash might not equate to an effectively fast basketball player! Here's what I mean.

The regulation length of a basketball court is 94 feet long in the NCAA, and 74 and 84 feet long in Junior High and High School respectively. Each of these courts is shorter than your 40-yard dash. So, having an athlete with a fast top-end speed measured at 40 yards wouldn't necessarily be as effective as having an athlete that is perhaps a bit slower in the 40, but whose *quickness* and *explosiveness* makes them faster down the court in this shorter distance – particularly when measured from the wide-variety of starting positions that basketball players must face – for example, backpedaling, or from a side-shuffle. Most sprinting in basketball starts from these moving or “rolling” positions, not a stationary one. So, training an athlete for speed entirely from a standstill position (such as your typical 40 yard sprint “timed” runs) isn't necessarily as effective as training for acceleration and quickness from a variety of “game-like” starting positions, and for shorter more “game-like” distances.

An effective speed training program for basketball athletes would include having them perform their speed training from different starting positions such as turning and sprinting from a backpedal, accelerating from a side-shuffle, or running after getting up from the floor (simulating being knocked down and having to get-up and get down court). I believe that this translates into a more “real world” training for basketball players than simply lining up at one baseline and having sprinting to the other. This doesn't mean that there is no room in a basketball player's training for that kind of sprinting – because it may have a place in a player's conditioning program – to build, for example, *speed endurance*. Speed endurance training is more about being able to sustain a certain level of speed throughout the entire game and this is important, because, as the sports adage goes, “it's not how you start, but how you finish!” But, don't confuse this type of training with working on a players' game speed!

So, what types of things would a basic basketball speed program include? Here are three tips that coaches or athletes may want to consider when planning a program to improve basketball speed.

Build Strength

Before any speed work is done, the athlete must have adequate strength. Without it, you might as well be trying to get a car to go 100 miles an hour with a go-cart's engine. In order to go faster, you have to have the proper engine to drive fast! Studies have shown that weight training to build strength can improve running speed. Don't take it for granted that simply because an athlete can play her sport, that she has adequate strength to improve her speed. Being able to play the sport itself is not a good gauge of whether the athlete has sufficient strength! Having good strength is vitally important to being fast. We're not talking about building big muscles here! We're talking about building strong muscles that can help us produce speed.

A basic strength building program for speed includes strengthening the legs (calves, hamstrings, and quads) with exercises such as calf raises, squats, leg curls and extensions; strengthening the upper body with exercises such as bench press, seated row, shoulder raises, bicep curls, and triceps extensions. Core muscles (abdominals and back) can be strengthened using regular crunches from the floor, stability ball crunches, oblique rotations, and back extensions. By using these basic exercises and more, the basketball athlete can begin to develop the strength necessary to build speed.

Work on Acceleration and Quickness

Acceleration is the ability to increase velocity. The key here is how quickly can the athlete increase their speed? This is perhaps more important in basketball than raw speed, because unlike a sport like track where all the athletes take-off at the same time – with the starting gun, basketball players must be quick to recognize when they must *start* a sprint – e.g. a rebound leading to a fast break, and then be able to accelerate quickly. Improved reaction time or quickness, and the ability to accelerate are two prime components to becoming effectively faster on the court. In basketball, having the ability to accelerate from a stationary position or from a moving position is equally important. Acceleration drills such as teaching the athlete the proper 45 degree body position to begin acceleration, or demonstrating the proper use of arm action in the sprint can be used in this type of training. Each of these seemingly simple, but often overlooked important aspects to becoming faster will help increase the athlete's acceleration.

Don't Forget Deceleration!

Training for speed without including deceleration training is like learning to drive a car very fast without brakes. Athletes need effective speed, and effective speed means being fast, but under control. When a basketball player dribbles fast down court for a break-away lay-up, she'd better be able to effectively slow-down as she approaches the basket! Otherwise, she's out of control, and will probably miss the lay-up, and perhaps get injured. Braking or decelerating is extremely important to speed training. - perhaps the most important skill in basketball speed training. This may seem counterintuitive to some, but in order to have effective speed on the basketball court, the athlete must be able to run

fast, decelerate or slow down, and reaccelerate into a sprint, cut, or jump. Slowing down properly actually aids in the athlete's ability to reaccelerate! A fast, out of control player is not very effective in a game. So make sure that deceleration techniques are practiced in your speed workouts. An extensive discussion about proper deceleration technique is complex and beyond the scope of this article. However, many experts suggest that two key components to good deceleration is in keeping nice flexed or bent knees, and in lowering the athlete's hip during deceleration – whether from a sprint, or from a landing.

LaRue is the owner of LEC Fitness, LLC, a Sports Conditioning Company dedicated to improving the sport-specific conditioning for female athletes of all ages. Sample exercises that can be used to improve a basketball athlete's strength for speed, go to www.lecfitness.com and click on Women's Basketball Demo. LaRue works with athletes and teams in-person or through his online training and programming. He is currently writing a booklet on Women's and Girl's Strengthening for Basketball, and a Basketball Speed manual. Advance copies of either of these resources, can be obtained by contacting him at: lecfitness@yahoo.com.