Nonverbal Rewards, Problem Behaviors

In addition to verbal forms of motivation, I use a system of behavioral rewards called "permissions." The system is based on the amount of effort and the quality of performance demonstrated during practice. Outstanding efforts and accomplishments earn players permissions, which allow them to get out of a certain amount of running at the end of practice. Failure to put forth total effort or to remain alert throughout the practice, however, may result in extra running.

At the end of practice, we add up the permissions to determine how many double suicides each player must run. (A suicide involves running the length of the floor in short sprints from foul line to baseline, half-court to baseline, the other foul line to baseline, and finally baseline to baseline. A double suicide involves completing this sequence twice.)

Another way permissions are granted is through our three foul-shooting sets during the practice:

1. Players shoot 10 free throws at the start of practice.
2. Halfway through, players shoot 5 two-shot fouls.
3. And at the end of practice, players shoot 5 one-and-ones.

If a player makes 9 or 10 free throws in any of the sets, he will pick up a permission. If he shoots below 7, he will pick up a double suicide.

We assign permissions and double suicides to other elements of our practices as well, such as the halfcourt offense (which will be discussed in chapters 10 and 11). We make a game out of it; the winning side picks up a permission, the losing side gets a double suicide.

You can assign permissions or suicides to any activity during practice. This will encourage your players to concentrate and practice as hard as possible, which is essential to player development. Coaches who have watched our workouts are amazed at the effort put forth by the players. I think this reward system is one of the major reasons why the players work so hard.

Thought for the Day
There is no elevator to success—you have to take the stairs.

I also encourage hustle by allowing players to reduce their running at the end of practice in ways independent of permissions and double suicides. Most of our conditioning work is done during the practice itself, so the amount players run at the end of practice varies with how much conditioning I feel the players actually got during practice. If, for example, we're running 20 sprints in two minutes, I may decide that the leader after 10 will get to drop out, then the leader after 12, and so on.

At the end of practice, some players have more permissions than double suicides and do not have to do the extra running at all. Those who have the extra running try to borrow permissions from the players who have a surplus by offering to stand in line for the teammate's lunch, carry his books, or shovel snow off his car. But any player who does finish in a deficit will have to run at least one double suicide.

It always works out that we issue more permissions than double suicides, however. So most players who end up running only run one double suicide, which they must complete in one minute. But I do not view this extra running at the end of practice as a punishment; rather, I tell the players that it is an opportunity for them to get in a little better condition.

The system of permissions is actually designed for training the mental, more than the physical,

condition of players. Players' awareness of permissions and double suicides increases their concentration and effort during practice. They perform with maximum intensity because they know it can result in permissions. Additionally, the bartering between players who have extra permissions and those who need them increases the camaraderie among the players and invariably leads to some of the more amusing moments of practice.

Problem Behaviors

The permission-suicide system works well on the court in practice. But how do you administer rewards and punishment relative to compliance with or violation of team rules?

Because I believe that the team is not my team, but rather the players' team, I let the players make the rules. However, I do encourage the team to set as few rules as possible. And I've learned not to fall into the trap of designating exactly what punishments will be applied if the rules are broken. If you announce what the punishment is before an infraction occurs, you'll paint yourself into a corner. Any situation that arises should be dealt with in the context of its own circumstances.

Flexibility: A Must

When I was a young coach, I asked the players to set the night curfew for a road trip. When the curfew was established, I foolishly announced that anyone missing the curfew would be off the team.

Wouldn't you know it, my six-foot-eight star center, Sid Catlett, and a young sophomore named Billy Hite missed the curfew by 15 minutes. At the team breakfast the next morning, I announced that both of them were off the team because I had said that would be the penalty.

But after talking to the two players individually, I found out that they had had a legitimate reason for being late. Now my problem was to solve the bad situation that I had created by announcing a penalty without extenuating circumstances in advance.

The next school day, I called a meeting of the team and had both Sid Catlett and Billy Hite attend. I told the rest of the players that if Catlett was kicked off the team, all the college coaches who were recruiting him would think he was a bad person, and we all knew that wasn't true. I could not, I said, put myself in the position of playing God and possibly ruining a young man's future. I told them that Sid would be reinstated, and that, because Sid was being reinstated, Billy Hite had to be brought back as well.

Sid went on to a great career at Notre Dame. Billy had a great football career at the University of North Carolina and is now the associate head football coach at Virginia Tech.

You can ruin or at least damage future athletic and academic careers when you paint yourself into a corner by announcing penalties in advance. Penalties can only be fairly arrived at after all the facts have been weighed.

For less serious infractions that come up along the way, you have to use your good judgment. If a player is slightly late for practice, I merely say, "You've missed some of your conditioning. But don't worry. At the end of practice, we'll let you catch up." That usually drives the point home.

One punishment I do not believe in is reducing a player's minutes in a game. If the penalty is worthy of suspension, then the player should miss the whole game. Conversely, if a player dresses for the game, he should be allowed to play as much as he is needed. (This applies to injuries, too, as I'll discuss in the next chapter.)

If you try to punish a player by limiting his minutes, you are getting into murky waters. First of all, the ever-changing conditions in games never really allow you to predict how many minutes a particular player will be playing. A second problem is that you may send the wrong message to the player about his role on the team.

Curfew on Discipline

During the 1989 season, we played against a team on which some of the players had broken curfew. Before the game, their coach announced that those players would not start, and none of them played in the first half while we built a lead. But the coach allowed the curfew violators to play in the second half, and because they did, their team was able to pull out a victory. To me, the only thing this team's coach proved to his players was "We can't win without you." The original intent of the punishment was lost, and the players suffered no negative consequences from their actions.

When a player has an unexcused absence, a good one-on-one talk generally assures that it will not happen again. Of course, what is said in these talks will vary depending on the circumstances, but one of the main points you want to emphasize to the player is that his behavior reflects what kind of person he is. Ask him, "Is this the person you want to show to the rest of the world?" Tell him that people, including college representatives, will be forming opinions of him based on the image he presents on the court.

In addition, I remind players that they also represent their families and their school. In these situations, try to appeal to their sense of loyalty, pride, and commitment.

People often ask me if kids are as easy to coach and as good today as they were 50 years ago. I think kids today are as good as ever. They need the same things kids needed 50 years ago: discipline, love, and attention. They need adults in their lives who care for them, treat them as human beings, take the time to work with them, and give them constructive criticism. Coaches should provide all of these—not only because we feel we should, but also because we want to better our young athletes.