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Basketball's On-the-Court Situations, Strategies Often Extend to Workplace

By Ali P. Gordon

UCF Forum columnist

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To me, basketball has always been THE sport of team sports because of its vibrancy, its thrills, its intense moments, its nonstop action and its sheer power. Only a few get to live out their hoop dreams, however, and play at the highest professional level.

According to NCAA research compiled in 2015, there is roughly a 3 percent chance that a high school basketball player will compete in college, and approximately a 1 percent chance that an NCAA hoops player will go on to suit up for the WNBA or NBA. For the remainder of us, there's always pickup basketball.

Check the neighborhood park, church gym, recreation center or military sports center near you. There's a dedicated group of folks that regularly comes together to play some ball, whether it be weekday lunchtime, Saturday mornings or whenever. Playground players come from everywhere, spontaneously pick teams and play. The teams are not always the same from one game to the next, but of course one primary objective is always the same: win.

While other aims of every pickup hoops player is to maximize fun and to get some good exercise, winning the game carries the reward of getting to immediately play again. Losing teams typically vacate the court and are obliged to essentially wait their turn to compete again. If you get the right mix of players, however, your team can run the court all day. Some other key nuances differentiate pickup from organized basketball. Without having coaches and referees, leadership and a rigid set of rules are sometimes lacking.

Many of the attributes inherent to team-oriented sports mimic the situations that our workplace teams or we as individuals encounter. Play enough pickup sports or watch enough NBA or WNBA and some things will pop out to you that have relevance off the court, such as:

Winning groups don't necessarily have the most talented individuals

It's a beauty in motion when fundamental team-oriented basketball is played. Individual members working together create low-energy, high-probability scoring opportunities for one another on offense and support each other on defense. They efficiently cooperate with each other to obscure individual weaknesses at both ends of the court. Players on

winning teams often forego some individuality (such as taking excessive shots), and perhaps even some level of enjoyment, in order to maximize the chances of winning.

Highly talented individuals on the same team sometimes compete against each to be the most talented member of the team. These players go for high-energy, low-probability plays. They look to shoot first and share last. Their attitudes of individuality create inefficiencies that effective opposing teams take advantage of.

In the workplace, high-achieving groups, departments or offices have individuals who support each other. There is a willingness to collaborate to achieve the overall goal. When one person is out sick or on vacation, for example, a co-worker picks up the slack and things keep moving smoothly. There's no work stoppage. Team-oriented environments are fun to be in because adversity is dealt with very efficiently.

Intensity picks up when resources are low

At some parks there are numerous courts with just enough players to start a game. Consequently, there are many opportunities to compete. At others, there might be just one court with an overabundance of players. For this latter case, there is a scarcity of playing opportunities, so losing a game is extremely undesirable because it potentially carries the outcome of having to wait a very long time to play again. The outcome of a loss diametrically opposes the purpose of going to court in the first place.

With limited playing opportunities, competition between teams can be intense. Individuals play harder on both offense and defense. No uncontested shots combined with a lack of officiating sometimes means that tactics such as pushing, elbowing, holding, clawing, jersey-grabbing and the like can sometimes be employed to allow a weaker player/team to nullify talent gaps of opposing players/teams. Arguments happen and tempers flare, too.

This may sound like a very important report or presentation that you've toiled to put together, right? Every "i" is dotted, every "t" crossed. Midnight oil was burned. If your preparation was for an interview for a job opportunity having only one slot and many applicants, you might have tried to cleverly anticipate (or even gain access to) the interview questions that might come up. You've out-hustled the others in order to gain an edge so your case is viewed the most favorably.

Appearances are fleeting

Sizing up an opponent before a game can sometimes be misleading. Just because a player may be shorter and slighter in size, and wears an unkempt outfit with mismatched socks, doesn't mean that he or she won't outjump, outhustle and outperform you during the game.

Don't be fooled by perceived stereotypes. Those pregame observations often begin to disappear on the court.

And just like on the court, you can only judge co-workers' skills and competence once they've played on your work team. Those people who shine and are willing to collaborate to pursue your overall goal are the teammates you want.

Winning cures a lot of complaints.

Winning at basketball – and in the workplace – involves a blend of individual sacrifice, cerebral effort, adaptation to dynamic conditions, and a sometimes a degree of luck.

Who's got next?

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