

# FREE THROW SHOOTING

By Dr. Hal Wissel

Successful free throw shooting requires confidence, sound mechanics, a routine, relaxation, rhythm and concentration. Routine, relaxation, and rhythm 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. Three and a half balls can fit in the rim. With confidence - and sound mechanics - you cannot miss.

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 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!*"

## Routine

Develop a sound routine for the free throw to check pre-shot mechanics. A routine also helps you relax, focus, and shoot with rhythm. Most important, using a routine will enhance your confidence. The routine can include dribbling a set number of times, checking mechanics, using visualization to practice your free throw mentally just before shooting it, and taking a deep breath to relax. Adopt a sound routine and stay with it; it is a mistake to copy fads or repeatedly change your routine.

Here is a sample routine that you can adjust to fit you. 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 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.

Most players use the one-hand shot for a free throw taking the time to control each of the basic mechanics: balance, hand position, elbow-in alignment, sight (focus), rhythm, and follow-through.

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 you to have your shooting hand facing the basket when you set the 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 with free throws than with 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.

## Concentration

Before shooting, visualize a successful shot. Visualization just before you shoot can produce a more free-flowing, smooth, continuous rhythm and increase confidence. Just before shooting, concentrate on your target just over the front of the rim. Keep your focus on the target as you shoot.

## 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.

Shoot the free throw with a smooth, free-flowing rhythm. Use personalized key words to help establish a smooth, sequential rhythm for free throw shooting. 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.

## **Act Like a Shooter**

Exaggerate your follow-through, keeping your eyes on the target and your shooting arm up until the ball reaches the basket. Holding your follow-through is not only good mechanically, but more importantly you look and act like a shooter.

### **Common Error**

You feel tense before and during your free throw.

### **Correction**

Use deep breathing to relax your mind and body. Breathe in deeply and exhale fully. Relax your shoulders, letting them drop and loosen. Do the same for your arms, hands, and fingers. Learn to relax other parts of your body as necessary.

## **Free Throw Drills**

### **1. Daily Free Throw Practice**

Shoot a set number of free throws each day. Practice sets of 10 free throws after other drills. Because a player rarely shoots more than two free throws in a row during a game, when doing this drill, never take more than two successive free throws without moving off the line.

Practice under pressure. Use imagination, and compete against yourself. For example, imagine that time is out and that making the free throw will win the game. Record the number of free throws made out of every 100 attempts. Constantly challenge your own record. Do the same with consecutive free throws.

Be confident. Use positive affirmation statements before you go to the line, and visualize a successful shot just before shooting. Having a routine helps build confidence for free throws. Use deep breathing and muscle relaxation techniques.

Focus. The final step before shooting is to eliminate all distractions and focus on the basket. Say your personalized key words in rhythm from the start of your free throw to the release of the ball. If you miss, visualize a successful free throw with good form, again saying your key words.

Shoot 100 free throws. Score yourself based on the total number of free throws made. Record your score. Also record the highest number of consecutive free throws. Challenge your record every time you perform the drill.

### **2. Eyes Open and Eyes Closed Free Throw Shooting**

Combining free throw practice with eyes closed and free throw practice with eyes open has been shown by research to improve shooting more than free throw practice with eyes open alone. Shooting with eyes closed removes vision as your dominant sense, heightening your other senses, particularly the kinesthetic sense (feel of body movement) and touch. Visualize a successful shot and focus on the basket immediately before closing your eyes. Shoot a free throw with your eyes closed.

Start the drill by shooting 5 free throws with your eyes open. Have a partner rebound each shot and keep track of how many shots you make out of 5 and how many consecutive shots you make. After shooting 5 free throws with your eyes open, shoot 5 free throws with your eyes closed. Have a partner rebound the ball and give you feedback on each shot, including the reaction of the ball on the rim. Use this feedback and your kinesthetic and tactile senses to adjust your shot as necessary. Complete the drill by shooting 5 free throws with your eyes open. Have a partner rebound each shot and keep track of how many shots you make out of 5 and how many consecutive shots you make.

Score yourself based on the total number of free throws made. Record your score. Also record the highest number of consecutive free throws. Challenge your record every time you perform the drill.

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