REBOUNDING FROM AN EMOTIONAL LOSS

You're at home competing against a cross-town rival. A post-season birth has been secured but this win is crucial both to the team and the fans as the rival is someone you will probably face deep in the playoffs. From the first whistle your team is performing at a sub-par level compared to the way they have played the majority of the season Your players are making uncharacteristic mistakes, they appear to be too hyped up, and seem to be trying to force the game, rather than letting it come to them. The players and fans are getting frustrated and the emotions are becoming more intense as the game nears the end. A late run puts your team in a position to be victorious but costly errors and turnovers late in the game exemplify the emotional and frustrating loss.

As the team exits the floor and the fans file out you realize this is not the ideal way to enter the playoffs with a team who is capable of making a run at the championship. This type of emotional loss can tear into a team's confidence and cohesion, and could lead to some lingering disappointment and unrelenting frustration. The following strategies may be used to deal with the emotional loss and regain the confidence and swagger necessary for competitive success.

DEALING WITH THE LOSS

Immediately after the game the players will probably be quite upset, disappointed, and frustrated with both the way they played and with the emotional loss. Allow them some time after the game to deal with it in their own way. Letting them be with their own thoughts and having player initiated conversation may shed some light on their reactions. Following that you may ask them to identify what they believe led to the loss and then provide some of your own insight. The goal here is to not only start identifying tangible factors that attributed to the loss but also to begin the process of moving on. Immediately following an emotional loss it's important to reflect on both the good and the bad of the game without spending too much time breaking the game down because the high emotions could cloud reasonable judgment.

Some possible questions that you could ask are: How many of you were looking past this game to the playoffs? Prior to the game where was your focus? How many of you were thinking it would be great to beat our rivals at home and gain some momentum into the postseason? How do you think that thought process might have affected today's game? How many of you were focused on the process of what we needed to do on the court to win the game? The goal of these questions is to aid your players in recognizing the dangers of focusing on outcomes rather than the process of playing the game the way we practice. Commonly, focusing on outcomes can lead to poor focus or it can create tension which could have been the cause of some players trying to force the win, rather than playing in control and letting the game come to them. Additionally, these questions will allow the players to see how they performed under certain circumstances, and perhaps recognize what not to focus on in similar high-pressure situations. In essence an emotional game such as this one can be a blessing in disguise when the players and coaches are able to step back and examine what led to the loss.

LEARN FROM THE EXPERIENCE

Nobody wants to lose a critical game in any fashion, especially when emotions are running high. However, experience can be the most powerful educator and for future growth it is crucial that you capitalize on this golden opportunity to help your players learn from this experience. Utilizing some of the mental, physical, and tactical factors that you and your team have identified in the first step, you can now outline a practice plan for the following week to work on these things in preparation for the first playoff game.

This process accomplishes two things. First it helps your players move beyond the feeling of being defeated and allows them to see what specifically led to the loss. Secondly, accomplishing some of the practice goals that you have outlined for them will help rebuild their confidence in their abilities and strengths, which was cut down in the previous game.

CATCH AND RELEASE

Now that you and your team have examined, identified, and pulled out the lessons learned from the game it is important to recognize that the loss in the past and let go of it. You can easily tell if your team is still holding onto the loss especially if they are still talking about it or they are not showing full commitment during practice. One danger of continuing to hold onto a loss is a faulty perspective. For example, if they get into a similar situation in a playoff game and they haven't fully let go of the loss, they might start the dangerous thinking of "here we go again" rather than "I've been here before but now I know what to do." One way to let it go is to bring the team together and have each individual write down two negative aspects of the loss and then instruct them that when they are fully ready and committed to moving on and moving forward they are to crumple up the paper and throw it away. Some teams have even gone the next step, and ceremoniously "emptied the trash" as a team.

MOVING FORWARD

After identifying physical, tactical, and mental factors that may have contributed to the loss and then aiding your players in the process of learning and growing from the experience, it is now time to get the players to recognize how much they have improved since the emotional loss. Identify and ask them to identify what they learned from that game and how have they improved on it over the previous week in practice. This might be challenging for some players so it is important to show them specific examples of the progress they have made. It is critical that they recognize both the physical improvements they have made, but also the mental improvements they have made. Provide examples from the previous week of practice and you may also want to show videos from throughout the season. With this you can outline the fact that this was just one game and is not a representation of who they are and how they normally play. Playoff games typically have a lot of emotion involved and based on the emotional experience and the focused week of practice your players are now equipped to recognize and deal with the high emotions and intensity of playoffs.

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