

9 WAYS TO HELP YOUR TEAM WIN ON THE ROAD

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One of the true tests of a successful team is the ability to win on the road. While several teams seem to play well at home, for some reason winning on the road tends to be an overly complicated task. Too many teams simply accept the fact that winning on the road is too difficult of a proposition and often mentally lose the game before it starts.□

In looking at the home and road records of teams across a variety of sports, the home team wins an average of 54-60% of the time. This fact is shown year after year in the NBA (60%), NFL (57%), NHL (55%), MLB (54%), and plays out similarly in college and high school athletics. Further, in looking at the history of the NBA for example, the 1995-96 Chicago Bulls with Michael Jordan won an amazing 44 straight games at home. In comparison, the longest road-winning streak was a mere 16 games accomplished many decades ago by the 1971-72 Lakers.

Some team's home and road records are as different as night and day. To take an extreme Jekyll and Hyde example, at the All-Star break of the 2010/11 NBA season the Washington Wizards were a respectable 14-13 when playing at home versus an utterly abysmal 1-26 on the road. How can the Wizards and other teams win 52% of their games at home and only 4% on the road?

HOME COURT ADVANTAGE A MISNOMER?

A past study of ACC basketball teams' standings and stats discovered that the Home Court Advantage might actually be a misnomer. The researcher discovered that the home team played to a moderate level of performance as measured by points scored and field goal percentage. What really

happened is that the visiting team's level of performance dropped off significantly from their standard levels. Thus, it appears as if the home team does not gain a particular "advantage" per se by performing better at home but that the visiting team might be at a disadvantage. Perhaps the phenomenon should be renamed from the Home Court/Field/Ice Advantage to the Visiting Team Disadvantage.

What are the possible reasons for the visiting team's decline in performance?

Obviously there are **SOME** physical factors at play. Fatigue could be caused by travel schedules, sleeping in different beds, and time zone changes. Also, the visiting team can be at a disadvantage by not knowing the particular nuances of the field or court. (It is said that winning in Boston Garden was so tough because the Celtics knew exactly where all the dead spots were in the famed parquet floor and would deliberately funnel their opponents to them.) Finally, it can be argued that referees and umpires might sometimes be biased by the home crowd and bend backwards to please them. Of course this is why many college coaches insist on having officials from their own conference work non-conference games.

Despite the challenges posed by these physical factors, I don't believe that these reasons are sufficient enough to account for the entire discrepancy between home and away winning percentages. While physical factors contribute to making winning on the road a difficult challenge, my contention is that many of the perceived problems are largely ***mental*** in nature.

Too many teams go into away games HOPING they have a chance to win - not believing they are going to win. With this limiting, defeatist attitude, visiting teams tend to not put their best effort into the game. Or if they do, they fold too easily and quickly once the home team goes on a run and the crowd gets into the game.

How can you get your team to be more mentally tough on road games?

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1. LET THEM KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT.

One of the first things you can do to prepare your younger players is to let them know what to expect. I often ask veteran players to share with the newcomers what the environment and atmosphere is going to be like. In this way, players can mentally prepare themselves for the possible distractions so that there are no surprises.

For example, some baseball and softball stadiums are notorious for having obnoxious frat boys in the outfield who attempt to distract the outfielders. By prepping our players ahead of time, you can talk about staying focused on the game and not getting caught up in the distractions around them.

Further, sometimes Olympic officials will travel to a venue ahead of time to film the competition site, training room, dining hall, dorm rooms, etc. They then show these videos to the athletes in an effort to help them visualize what to expect and to become more familiar with their eventual surroundings. Encourage your athletes to visualize competing at your upcoming opponents' fields, arenas, pools, etc. If they haven't already been there, attempt to get video or pictures of them.

2. ESTABLISH A CONSISTENT ROUTINE.

Routines are great for establishing comfort and consistency. With the help of your players, devise a consistent routine when you are on the road

as much as possible. Give your players an itinerary detailing what you will be doing throughout the day.

Also, create a consistent pre-game warm-up routine that you will use both at home and on the road. The consistent pattern will help your players get into a mental rhythm regardless of their surroundings.

3. CONTROL THE CONTROLLABLES.

Controlling the Controllables is probably one of the best strategies for winning on the road. While it sounds simple, mentally it is tough to do. Basically your players should focus on taking care of themselves. While they can't control the travel delays, field/court conditions, officials' questionable calls, time zone changes, and especially the size and rabid nature of the opposing crowd, they can control their reactions to these things.

Remind your athletes about the importance of staying in control of themselves and maintaining their poise in every situation. The crowd is intentionally trying to take them out of their game through intimidation or making them feel self-conscious. The players may not be able to control what the crowd does or says, but they can control how they choose to respond to it. Encourage your players to play on an even keel - because opposing crowds love to prey on players who get too high or too low.

4. ENCOURAGE YOUR PLAYERS TO FOCUS ON PLAYING.

Your players' primary responsibility is to play. Tell them it is your job as a coach to take care of all the rest. For example, the US women's soccer team experienced some problems and delays before a game in the Olympics. Before the players could get caught up in the problems and get distracted, the coaches and support staff, led by sport psychologist Colleen Hacker, told the players that it was their job to play and it was the support

staff's job to handle the problems and politics. This effectively diffused a potentially distracting situation and kept the players focused on the upcoming game.

5. BE AGGRESSIVE.

Look to take it to the home team early and get/keep the crowd out of the game. Be in an aggressive, attack mode from the start and let everyone know that you came to play. If you can take it to the home team early, they might have a tendency to tense up and panic.

6. WEATHER THE STORMS.

While starting strong would be great, perhaps the biggest key to winning on the road is to successfully weather the storms. Help your players understand that the home team is going to make some good plays and go on runs during the game. And the home crowd is going to get into it and make it seem like they have a tremendous edge. However, remind your players that these moments of success are temporary and it is your job to be patient, work your strategy, and soon you will go on a run of your own. Basically what we are talking about here is momentum. The home team's crowd can make your opponent's momentum seem stronger than it actually is. Your test is to keep your composure, stay aggressive, and in time the momentum will swing back your way again - provided that you keep battling.

7. ENJOY THE BATTLE.

Winning on the road depends on your players developing a WARRIOR-like attitude. This means that it doesn't matter who or where you are playing - that you are going to fight and give your best effort regardless. Successful teams take as much pride in going into enemy territory and coming out with a big win as they do when they are defending their own turf. They love the battle and they especially love shutting up a boisterous crowd that is fervently rooting against them.

8. CREATE AN “US AGAINST THE WORLD” MENTALITY.

Several teams seem to respond well when you can create an “us against the world” mentality. The adversity of playing on the road can be a unifying force for your team. It causes your players to band together and fight as a team when it seems like the entire world is rooting against them.

9. THE GAME ITSELF DOESN'T KNOW WHO'S "HOME" OR "AWAY".

Remind your athletes that the game itself has no clue who the "home" team is or who the "away" team is. The game itself doesn't actually care. The game rewards the team that scores more points/goals/runs than the other team - regardless of who wears the home jerseys or away jerseys or where it is played. The only place where it largely makes a difference is between your athletes' ears.

Instead of succumbing to the notion that it is too tough to win on the road, try using these strategies to have your players mentally ready to compete whether you are playing in Tucson, Tuscaloosa, Taiwan, or Timbuktu. As Gene Hackman so perfectly demonstrated in a **classic scene from the movie *Hoosiers*** when he had his awestruck players measure the height of the rim before playing on the road in the state championships, the game itself is still the same whether you are at home or on the road.

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