

The Old Man In The Gym

By Coach Bob Taylor
with Terry Ayrault

['OLD MAN']
[IN THE GYM]



Making sense of youth basketball nonsense

What the coaches are saying:

“A coaching veteran of close to 30 years, Bob Taylor has written a book that changes how we teach and think about youth basketball. Bob goes far beyond the surface level and discusses the ‘what,’ ‘how’ and ‘why’ of teaching youth basketball. As a former high school and college coach, Bob has authentic basketball experience and background. He has also coached at the youth level recently in addition to raising three children who are, or will soon be, college basketball student-athletes. He understands this topic inside and out and shares his insights. This book is a must-read for youth coaches and anyone who wants a deeper understanding of how to help improve our game.”

— **Dean Lockwood**, *Assistant Women's Basketball Coach, University of Tennessee*

“Bob Taylor is truly a basketball junkie! He loves the game, but more importantly, he loves teaching the game. While he had much success coaching at the college level, his method of teaching youth how to think the game and execute fundamentals could be his greatest contribution and accomplishment.”

— **Patti Tibaldi**, *AP High School Coach of the Year Class B; BCAM Coach of the Year 1988; BCAM Hall of Fame; Member National Coaches Hall of Fame, NALA; four-time NALA District Basketball Coach of the Year*

“I first met Bob in the mid-80s when he became the head coach of the Women's program at Oakland University. Bob has one of the brightest basketball minds I have been around. Not only does Bob know the game, but he has the unique ability to break down the game and teach it where kids can understand. The young people that have been under Bob's guidance have always improved their game.”

— **Garth Pleasant**, *United States Collegiate Athletic Association Hall of Fame; Basketball Coaches of Michigan Hall of Fame; Rochester College Hall of Fame; National Small College Athletic Association National Coach of the Year, 1986 and 1995; United States Collegiate Athletic Association National Coach of the Year, 2004 and 2005*

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Published by Great American Media Services,
P.O. Box 128, Sparta, MI 49345
For additional copies or information on other publications offered by Great American Media Services, write to the above address.
Telephone: 616-887-9008 Fax: 616-887-2666
Email: frontdesk@greatamericanpublish.com

Manufactured in The United States of America

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“A person who never
made a mistake never tried
anything new.”

— *Albert Einstein*



This book is dedicated to Kristen, Ellie, Maizie and R.J.
Thanks for your patience, support and understanding.
Together we make a great starting 5.

Power Foreword

There's no easy way to humbly say that you're an expert. But, after deep self-discovery, I believe that after writing this book, I qualify as an "expert" in youth basketball.

Okay. I guess I can come to grips with my expertise. But, it's not that I consider myself some kind of genius or guru. Only that I have — by the hand of God — been given the lifetime of experiences that put me in a unique place. Experiences that set me apart from anyone I have ever known. This is not a book of theory or simple observation, but rather a culmination of the real-life experiences and methods that have worked time and again on the basketball court.

Through 30 years of coaching at the high school and collegiate levels, I have seen the players change at each interval. Coming up through the "camp route," I was able to witness, in person, how the youth game was changing. By getting a bird's-eye view through coaching my own kids, I was able to observe what was going on and understand the path a player must take in order to make varsity and earn playing time. You might say that this book is documentation of my basketball epiphany. One that has turned out to be as simple and as plain as the oversized nose on my face.

Like I tell my friends and club parents all the time, much like Andy Dufresne in the film *Shawshank Redemption*, I too have swam through a sewer to find my freedom. But, the stink washes off in the end. And paradise is worth the effort. My sewer was all of the youth tournaments I endured — dealing with the parents, the refs, the practices — all in an effort to improve our up-and-coming athletes.

While swimming along, I learned how to make a flotation device to keep our players above the smell of wasted time, money and frustration. It was a time-tested, spirit-tested endeavor that included

taking an average fifth-grade team and turning it into an eighth-grade AAU state champion. Not to mention, an experience that allowed nearly everyone who participated to make their varsity team as a freshman and play for a college team.

The book is masterly co-written by my brother-in-law, Terry Ayrault, whose daughter, Hannah, is an up-and-coming music star, and recent graduate of Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. He said he accepted the assignment because he truly believed in what I was doing. We both saw the value of setting out similar paths for our children: Lead with the heart, give them a solid understanding, then help them grow and learn in a fun, challenging environment. But, provide players with the opportunity to learn the true joy of grit, perseverance and passion. The basketball player and the musician — like the golfer, the sailor, the poet, the sculptor, the football player, the singer, the painter, the dancer — must be allowed to learn what it takes to succeed.

We both believe that learning to grow from failure is imperative. We both have learned, as does the rock cutter, that it's not the last blow that breaks the rock, but the 1,000 hits before.

This book is untraditional in that it can be read in different ways. From front to back, or from back to front. Or, from middle to end and front again. Or, from one random chapter to the next. Open it anywhere and begin. Finish wherever you like. Each chapter is written with a lesson, concept, or an insight aimed at varying ages. All for the purpose of having quick reference that can virtually apply to every baller. These methods should work for any generation. Timeless, solid, simple and sound, they are the rational, reasonable keystones to building better basketball.

Taking into account the differences between the generations who will read these pages, it's important to note that the right process doesn't discriminate by age. Likewise, a sound and precise process like the ones I've established don't discriminate by sport. That is, much of the learning that comes from these pages could easily be applied to golf, volleyball or hockey. You name it.

Note that these lessons also can be good for your relationship with your child. Being supportive, attentive and excited about their progress, as they put these lessons to practice, can be a positive parental experience that bonds. Connecting you with your kids like never before.

I feel much like Robin Williams in the *Dead Poet's Society*. We must teach from the heart and from there the feet, hands and mind will sprint alongside.

God has, in all his infinite grace, allowed me to share what is written here. And for that, I am eternally thankful. I am praying these anecdotes and musings work as well for you as they did for us. (At writing, we've successfully earned two full-ride scholarships for my two daughters and recruiting interest in my son, who is too young to commit). I would be proud to help you take your game, or your child's game, to the next level. Feel free to check out my website for further instruction and information, if you like what you read here. Until then, with my apologies to Casey Kasem, keep your feet off the ground, and keep reaching for the rim.

— *Bob Taylor*

“In order to achieve positive results, one must work for them, not hope for them.”

— *Bob Knight*



Bob Taylor Résumé

- 500 career wins (high school and college)
- Took both a men's and women's team to NCAA Tournament
- Took a women's team to NCAA Elite Eight twice
- Took a women's team to NCAA Final Four
- Ran large summer youth camps
- Ran "Meyer in Michigan" Camp
- Director of Michigan Fastbreak basketball travel club for boys and girls
- Coached fifth-grade team to eventual AAU state championship as eighth-graders
- All but one player on aforementioned eighth-grade AAU team made high school varsity as freshmen
- Every player from eighth-grade team who chose basketball as first sport played in college
- Three children, all Division 1 scholarship-caliber players

- Two daughters won AAU state championships
- One daughter won two seventh-grade AAU state championships
- Coached youth, high school and college (and then back to youth)

Bob Taylor's Student Section

Listed below are all college players from Michigan Fastbreak and Michigan Fastbreak Shock that I was fortunate enough to have worked with at some point in their youth careers:

Kierra Fletcher – Georgia Tech University

Ellie Taylor – St. Louis University

Sam Thomas – University Arizona

Bailey Thomas – UNLV

Nia Ahart – Colgate University

Kaylee Wasco – Binghamton University

Alex VanSumeren – Aquinas College

Sadie Dewildt – Lake Superior State University

Taylor Bryant – Lake Superior State University

Tylar Bennett – Clemson University

Bridget Hintz – Northern Colorado University

Jess Walter – Indiana University

Ellie Juengel – Cedarville University

Lindsay Winter – Michigan Tech University

Lexi Gussert – Michigan State University

Jenna Queary – Rose Hulman Institute of Technology

Josie Queary – Lawrence Tech University

Nicole Buckingham – Lawrence Tech University

Laurel Jacqmain – Saginaw Valley State University

Hailey Leidel – University of Massachusetts

Charley Hengesbach – Alma College
Abbigale Phillipson – Alma College
Chloee King – Alma College
Emily Long – Alma College
Allie Miller – Tiffin University
Courtney Mcinerney – Davenport University
Asjia Blanton – Albion College
Antoinette Miller – University of Cincinnati
Alyssa Smith – Hope College
Maddie Barrie – Saginaw Valley State University
Hannah Smith – Hope College
Karli Herrington – Northwood University
McKenna Walker – Northwood University
Halee Nieman – University of West Florida
Jade Abenth – Delta College
Natalee Kunse – Trine University
Kaylee Argyle – Trine University
Jenna Gregory – Lake Superior State University
Haley Brefka – Delta College
Leah Humes – Ferris State University
Sam Thomas – University of Arizona

SECTION 1

Building the Foundation

1: The Big Rocks

“I may not be as strong as
I think, but I know many
tricks and I have resolution.”

— Ernest Hemingway,
The Old Man and the Sea



A pile of rocks is unloaded in your driveway, and you are tasked with moving that pile to the other side of your yard by wheelbarrow. The most efficient way to move the pile is to load the big rocks first, following with the smaller rocks, stones, pebbles and gravel until your wheelbarrow is full. If you were to load the wheelbarrow in the opposite manner, you would find that, by the time you get to the big rocks, there's simply not enough room for it all.

That is the secret to teaching basketball to younger children. The big rocks have to be put in first.

So, what are the big rocks? What are the secrets of the Old Man in the Gym? We'll get to that in a bit. In the meantime, let's talk about today's game ...

While most coaches in any youth basketball program — organized or otherwise — will drive your youngster to exhaustion with dribbling, passing and shooting drills, those fundamentals (and this may come as a shock) are not the foundational elements we need to begin with to properly teach the game.

When I was coaching college basketball (for almost three decades), I saw a significant change in the players I recruited from year to year. It was if, as the complexities of the game became more intricate, there was a drop off in the players' court sense, or their "feel" for the game. Quick decision-making, seeing the floor, anticipating a teammate's cut or the defender's next move — these concepts seemed to take a backseat to the systematic, formatted training that has been ingrained in players since Dr. James Naismith put up the peach basket.

For example, coaches tell players to take 500 jump shots each day, jump rope to develop the quick twitch muscles, and keep a low center of gravity on defense. While these are all fine training tips, perfecting these is just putting the gravel and the pebbles in the wheelbarrow. The proverbial instruction guide, while well-intentioned, seemed to be missing quite a few pages.

When I saw new crops of kids coming into the college game without an understanding of real basketball concepts, I was a bit mortified. That

is, I couldn't quite conceptualize why basketball seemed to be changing. Or why *true* skills on the court were being overshadowed by flash.

My perception of how we were incorrectly instructing basketball players was verified in 2010 when I left college coaching. That's when I became supervisor of the youth basketball program at my local community center in Midland, Michigan.

It was during this time that I truly began to realize that the problem wasn't just in how we were teaching kids the game, it was in how kids were learning it. It was specialized. It was organized. It was set up to promote tactics and individual moves. We were force-feeding fundamentals and rewarding skill development. We weren't teaching concepts or instincts, basketball IQ, or court sense. We were ultimately neglecting to supply the players with the truly big rocks.

When I was a kid in the 1960s and 1970s, pick-up basketball was so popular that wherever there was a court, there was a game. My friends and I would spend hours at the park or high school playing pick-up games until our moms called us for dinner. We became obsessed with finding games we could join in on.

Looking back, I thank the heavens that my mother recognized this passion to play at all costs, and that she supported me in my quest to follow the basketball path. And I thank the ghost of George Mikan that during the summer she sent me off to basketball camp, a week worth of high-intensity hoops under the tutelage of some true basketball gurus.

Times have certainly changed since my days as a young basketball nut roaming the streets of Sparta, Michigan. Today, while the popularity of the game seems to be wavering, the way kids learn the game is different than how we learned to play on those asphalt courts with no coaching from the sidelines.

Most players today never get to experience what it's like to play on a cement court with other basketball junkies and gym rats — shirts versus skins, first one to 11, win by two.

Want proof? Drive by any outdoor court on any given summer afternoon. You'll be hard pressed to see young kids waiting with ball

in hand yelling, “Next!” In the years I spent coaching in the college ranks, I witnessed a significant decline in the common player’s court sense. But, I can’t attribute this drop off to the lack of court time or interest in the game.

Personally, I attribute it to overcoaching. Youth leagues, recreation leagues, club organizations, personal training, overbearing parents — they’re all responsible for this phenomenon.

But, I also attribute it to busy schedules. Kids don’t have the time to head to their local court for a pick-up game. Especially when they have team trainings, practices, multiple sports and extra-curricular activities every day of the week. Add homework, social media, mobile phone time, videogames and the internet to the equation, and you have a schedule that rivals U.S. presidents. It’s like we’re trying too hard, pushing too much and forgetting what’s really important.

It’s not like we, as parents, don’t have good intentions. We have been taught that fundamental instruction builds a player’s game. So, we hire trainers if our kid is showing any sign of having a decent jump shot, and we begin to build our vacation days around our kid’s AAU schedule. The fact is, we put so much effort, time and money into getting our kids the “proper fundamental coaching,” that it becomes a burden. Hopeful that the secret sauce of success is in a personal motivator firing passes at little Joey or Sally outside the 3-point arc in the driveway, we slowly see interest wane. When it does, we do the math to realize that none of it is worth the dividend.

But basketball isn’t golf or tennis; basketball is a team sport. Forgotten in all the fundamental training is the idea that the best *players* are the best *teammates*. Let me say that even more succinctly: Great players are the ones who make the entire team better. The only way they can possibly become a great teammate is to play with others, and to have a deeper understanding of the concepts of the game.

The constant instruction and overcoaching of it all seems to be standing in the way of the youth player’s success, because they’re not taught concepts of the game at a young age. They’re taught offense, defense, blocking out and out-of-bounds plays. They’re taught the

importance of winning. But, they're not taught how to apply the concepts to this conceptually difficult game.

When I stopped coaching and began creating youth basketball programs, there was one constant among the kids who had been playing organized ball. The young players I saw coming into our youth basketball program, in general, seemed consumed with their positioning on the court. They seemed to have the most trouble freelancing and letting the flow of the game come to them naturally. It was almost as if all of that time in the gym playing "organized" basketball was stifling their natural creativity. It was certainly affecting their proficiency at being a good teammate. It was definitely affecting their basketball IQs.

This concerned me because I knew, coming from the collegiate coaching ranks, that playing at the higher levels required players to have the "it" factor. Call it basketball instincts. Call it the "feel" for the game or "basketball IQ." Whatever you want to call it, looking at the crop of kids partaking in the community center program, it was obvious to me that we were failing our youngsters. We weren't helping them to learn how to make the right decisions and the right reads that can only be accomplished by learned behavior and trial and error.

This is what inspired me to write this book. I felt a dire need to change our current state of behavior by sharing the knowledge that I've garnished through years of playing, coaching, basketball camp counseling and teaching my own kids the game from the ground up.

My three kids, who were enrolled in the program, played differently from the others. They played freely. They played with clear heads and smiles on their faces. They seemed to thoroughly enjoy and value their time on the court. I could recognize that they had somehow developed innate basketball IQs.

So, I began to question what it was they had that the other players didn't. What advantages had they been given that made them stand out from the others? And then, it donned on me. They had my wife's genes, and my knowledge. A knowledge they received through osmosis (and heredity). I saw an obvious difference in the way my

own kids approached the game, compared to how a majority of the others played. So, I began to wonder how I could take what my wife and I had instilled in our kids and share it with the rest of the basketball world.

My intention for this book is to guide the youth player to a new understanding of the basketball concepts that all varsity coaches should crave by introducing them to the ideas that can carry them through their youth basketball development and, ultimately, accelerate their playing careers geometrically.

But it wasn't just written for the player; this book also was written for parents.

As parents, it's hard not to live vicariously through our children. In them, our parental tunnel vision mistakes their potential as hope. Hope that blossoms into blinders as we get laser-focused on our kids being able to attain something we could not. Quite nobly, we will do everything we can to help our kids succeed. But, the worst thing we can do as parents is to force our kids to do something that they don't love doing.

With this book as a guide, my hope is that parents will see that the path to success doesn't come from over-instructing, over-pushing and over-coaching the youth basketballer. It comes from establishing a real enjoyment for the game. Instilling a different mentality in kids by teaching them to understand how to overcome adversity, how to learn from failure, and what it means to be a leader both on and off the court.

These are the concepts we instilled in our children. They developed a passion, love and understanding of the game. These, in turn, became my three biggest "rocks."

With this book as their guide, players will learn to understand the game as a whole, which makes them more teachable. The lessons here encourage the development of vision and foresight — like a great billiards player who, with every shot, is thinking about the next one and the one after that, these teachings allow your athlete to see the game from 30,000 feet and understand it in the way that Albert Einstein understood relativity. This also benefits parents, because when

armed with this training, the player will welcome the learning. They'll become sponges, passionate about soaking up the game.

I've also written this book for my fellow coaches.

Whether you're a parent volunteer who has taken the initiative to coach your child, or a middle school teacher working your way toward a career in coaching, this book is intended to share the lessons, philosophies and knowledge that could very well propel your child's career — or your own career — to the next level and beyond.

Many of my coaching brethren and the basketball gurus I've known throughout the ages have told me that the timing of this book couldn't be better. It comes at a time when the game is suffering. The belief is that if we can spread this philosophy (and this work) to today's youth coach, we can improve the game as a whole. The reason is because we'll be developing the *whole* player. The future of the game lies in the hands of the youth coach, because that is when kids are learning to play the game for the very first time in an organized setting.

My hope is that this book gives enlightenment to all those who read it. It's meant to provide easy-to-follow direction for the youth player, their parents and the youth coach. But it is more of a compass than a road map. Meant not to provide a short cut, but reveal the right path. It's built to eliminate detours and traffic jams caused by the potholes that generally stand in the way of basketball excellence. My goal, above all else, is to provide the right direction. A means to an end. All in the effort to make an indelible mark on the game I love. I once wrote an article for the Basketball Coaches Association of Michigan in which I estimated that most ninth graders have learned 60 to 75 plays that the high school coach doesn't run. I've made it my mission to convince today's youth programs that teaching and learning those plays is not only a waste of quality court time, it's a hindrance to today's youth players for two reasons: Kids aren't playing as much on their own and, when they are playing, they're typically following specific instructions. This practice must stop.

The truth is, I wanted to give my kids the experience of playing varsity basketball in high school. What I eventually realized was

that they couldn't make the team if the real training didn't start until middle school. I could see what most fourth-, fifth- and sixth-graders were learning, and it was in no way correlated to making the varsity basketball team. There seemed to be no process. No slow, refined, meaningful, deep-tissue, long-lasting, highly-fortified process. One that flies in the face of the mainstream's "cattle herd" mentality. Personally, I would never trade the third- to eighth-grade experience I had helping my kids learn their craft. It allowed each of them to make their varsity teams as freshmen* and to attend college for free while playing the game they've grown to love.

Something to remember: The commitment to the practices of this book will require all readers to take the road less travelled. And it will include a teaching technique that doesn't stress winning a fifth-grade championship. Just like it takes a true artisan years to hone his craft, good things come to those who put in the time. This book acknowledges many goals, but it will take determination, dedication and hard work by the players themselves, their youth coaches and their parents to make their hoop dreams a reality.

Despite all of my success in the college ranks, what's most relevant and most important — and what gives me the audacity to call myself the original Old Man in The Gym — is my experience over the last seven years as a youth league administrator and coach. I've spent many hours each day coaching my two daughters and my eighth-grade son on their various youth teams. I must say, it's been a true labor of love to witness the success first hand.

With 41 years of youth camp experience, 28 years of college coaching experience, and almost 20 years of parenting up my sleeve, I believe I've got plenty of basketball knowledge. I've spent countless hours in gymnasiums, enjoying the smell of sweat, popcorn, floor varnish and the sound of squeaking sneakers. Often providing guidance to players I didn't even know in an attempt to share my wealth of knowledge. And now, it's time this Old Man In The Gym shared some of that knowledge to an even bigger audience. Why? Because The Old Man In The Gym isn't just about making players

better. He's about making the game better. This is bigger than any player or any team. This is about improving the game itself.

Now, I am not narcissistic enough to claim I can save the game. But, I also believe in having lofty goals. My intention is only to make the reader see how my tailor-made approach to the game can have value to players and programs all over the world. Saving the game? That's not up to me. It's up to the players, coaches and parents who take on this mantle and open their eyes to what's right there in front of them.

My brother-in-law recalls going to Detroit's St. Cecilia to play summer league games against some iconic Detroit-area players. Guys like Terry Mills, Derek Coleman, Terry Duerod — 1980s high school phenoms who could light up the gym with amazing basketball prowess and IQ. St. Cecilia is historic for hosting Detroit Public School summer basketball games that pit all-time greats against each other. Chris Webber played against Jalen Rose there. Steve Smith played against Derek Coleman. Some of the best players to come out of Michigan eventually found themselves playing at least one summer game at St. Cecilia's gym in the inner city. My brother-in-law and his suburban Detroit high school team would get clobbered. The Detroit public school teams would obliterate them. It was the Detroit players were accustomed to a less organized, more free game than his high school team. It was a great learning experience for the kids on his team, because they would learn freelancing and instinctual basketball.

But, the other thing he noticed about the gym were the outsiders in it. Guys who wandered the sidelines offering advice to kids on the court. They weren't coaches and parents. They were random basketball junkies who knew so much about the game it was scary. Guys who once had amazing careers and experiences that trumped anything his high school coach could come up with in his wildest dreams. My brother-in-law said that these old guys would help anyone. They'd share their knowledge with you whether you were white or black, suburban or inner-city. It didn't matter. They had secret formulas and "little tricks" that only experience could provide — and they wanted to

share it. They were the Old Man In the Gym. Each one of them. And years ago, every gym had a guy just like that.

The cool thing is, they had no agenda or ulterior motive. They just wanted to improve the game, one player at a time. That's what I want to resurrect. Teaching the game with the vantage point of my experience.

That's my goal. I believe that if you give, you get. When I was coaching my youth teams, going through the snow, the fire and the rain associated with playing teams that had already developed tactics, and dealing with parents who questioned my motives, and trying to explain to my own kid that winning wasn't everything. As she watched other less-talented teams hoist trophies, the lessons were hard to swallow.

But that five-year journey we had traveled made us better for wear. Our journey would someday help her, and the teammates who stuck with us, reach a dream so few would be able to achieve.

Players, I'm here to be your North Star and help you develop into the player you're fully capable of becoming. Parents, I'm here to make your son or daughter a better baller. Youth coaches, I'm here to help you find your inner Old Man In The Gym.

*My youngest child, RJ, is currently on his 8th grade team at the printing time of this book. If he is not on his varsity team as a freshman, I will eat a copy of this book!

Old Man In The Gymism:

**It's all fun and games
until someone takes all the
fun out of the game.**