*As a current coach and former player who is also a Cancer, I know all too well the effects emotion can have on a basketball player…..*

The game of basketball is a beautiful blend of both the physical and the mental. But what about the EMOTIONAL aspect of the game? This must also be trained to some degree in order to promote efficiency and cohesion.

Coaches spend hours drilling gameplans into their guys, only for the emotions of the game to take the team away from their strategy in a heartbeat.

Short Fuses Don’t Work

Look at DeMarcus Cousins as an example. He is as talented a player as there is in this league. His issue is not so much maturity as it is dealing with emotions. Often, a few bad calls or a slightly antagonistic opponent will completely minimize his effectiveness. Tim Duncan, by the same token, rarely has become de-railed during his illustrious career. Their skillsets are not all that different, but their wiring as a player is. It’s not enough just to have the skills, a player must have the synapses firing correctly to take advantage of those abilities consistently.

While coaching a summer pro scrimmage alongside Doug Christie recently, he observed one of the more talented players on the court being out-played by a much smaller and weaker player. He turned to me and reminisced on how when a player got rattled like that trying to score against him, that’s when Doug said he knew he had him – “ball game, I knew he was mine…..he’s playing against himself more than he is against me. The greats never did that.” This is an example of emotions taking one out of his game more than his opponent.

THE ENDLESS BATTLE

**You cannot change or control your emotions.** You can merely learn how to LIVE with them. This includes either releasing (transmuting) them or simply managing them.

Think of the people who go along day after day seeming to function normally, and all of a sudden they’ll explode in anger at something that seems relatively trivial and harmless. That’s one sign of someone who is trying to control or repress their emotions but their repressed emotions are leaking out.

The more anyone tries to control their emotions the more they resist control, and the more frightened people eventually become at what is seen to be a “loss of emotional control”. There is no band-aid here.

On the basketball court, this suppression of emotion followed by a sudden explosion can be disastrous to both execution of the gamplan and overall team chemistry.

In society, we are taught that showing emotion represents being ‘out of control’ and even causes some around us to be uncomfortable. On the basketball court, harnessing these emotions and using them to propel you forward can be a GOOD thing. However, it’s a double-edged sword.

Example: When a player feels like he isn’t getting respect from the referees he heads downcourt, lowers his head, and forces up a low percentage shot. He’s now fighting himself more than the opposing player or the refs (who indirectly sparked the emotion in the first place). He’s mad at the refs for not calling the foul and his opponent for being physical. He doesn’t know where to release this anger so it affects his decision-making. This competitor is now playing a game against himself - one he will likely lose every time.

The Difference Between Core Issues and Emotions

We each typically come into life with at least one core issue to resolve. Different situations will continue to present themselves in different (but repeating) patterns until you have dealt with these core issues.

A few examples of core issue are abandonment / victimization, demanding justice in all matters, living spiritually rather than materially. These are overarching issues that affect emotions completely. Many people find out about their core issues by learning to deal with their emotions. It’s a gentle pathway that leads you into a deeper knowing of your core issues.

In terms of professional basketball, each player’s core issues must be gently dealt with before training camp even starts. This sounds like a tedious and slippers slope to climb, but when millions of dollars are being invested in the physical specimens, what is so wrong about some non-physical training?...especially if it can de-rail a player’s physical gifts so quickly and easily.

When you have repressed emotions, your behavior and reactions to events in the present are really reactions to past events as well. This can have a negative effect on all aspects of the game being played. You can’t have one link in the chain of a team not working in the present. It will bring down the entire group. Substitutions are typically used to handle this issue during games, but sometimes more must be done in advance.

A simply way to initiate this would be to sit down each player on the roster and ask him one simple question ‘What is important to you?’…then continue to respond with ‘and why is that important to you?’ for each of his responses. Eventually you will get to his core. There is undoubtedly an emotion tied to that core desire/goal. Then you can deal with it specifically.

**The 3-on-3 Euro Game**

In my homeland (Serbia/Montenegro/Croatia/Bosnia/Slovenia), fullcourt 5-on-5 is rarely played growing up. Instead, a unique style of 3-on-3 basketball is taught.

Rules: you play to 21, Winners ball, NO ‘clearing’ the ball after missed shot/change of possession, NO checking off the ball whatsoever. After made basket, team can inbound underneath basket immediately (even for lay-up if it’s open). Missed shots can be put back by EITHER team. This game teaches players how to:

* Play through emotions (tensions/frustrations can mount in this style of game)
* Never put your head down after a mistake (it could mean lay-up or open shot for other team)
* React quickly to changes of possession (no time to casually matchup/react)
* How to take good shots (only shoot with rebounders in position – miss could mean lay-up for opposition)

To me, this last one is most significant. Far too many players attempt a ‘heat check’ today without regard for the position of their rebounders. I would rather a ‘cold’ player take a shot with his bigmen down low then a ‘hot’ one with his teammates still crossing halfcourt or even outside the lane.

I recommend to all my players that they occasionally play this Euro Style 3-on-3 game after practice. It pays off in numerous ways over the course of a long season in terms of building good habits.