CHAPTER 11

How Would a Basketball Coach Get a Team to Talk the Talk?

Sylvia Whitman

If you've ever played basketball, you've probably heard the coach's lament from the sidelines: "Talk to each other, guys!"

How might you carry that challenge into a TESOL classroom? By teaching students some conversation plays, of course.

With a court-centered lesson, you're likely to engage the sports fans in class. Appealing to varied learning styles, you can draw the plays or stage them so that people get up and move around. And whatever the vocabulary or language form you want students to master, along the way they're likely to pick up a few basketball terms handy for social conversations. Talk about the **shot clock** when you set time limits, award extra credit for **free throws**, or tell the class you want everyone to speak, not just the **ball hogs**. (For definitions of bold terms, see the glossary in this chapter's Appendix.) With a basketball theme, you can also draw in all sorts of film clips, from the cotton-candy song-and-dance numbers of *High School Musical* to the true-to-life civil rights struggles in *Remember the Titans.*

I belong to the Title IX generation of female athletes. Passed in 1972, Title IX required any educational institution receiving federal funds to offer equal opportunities to men and women—in sports as well as academics (The Margaret Fund of the National Women's Law Center, 2013). Long excluded, girls and young women began to get in the game at many levels. In the late 1970s, I played basketball on a middle school team dubbed the "Knickettes" in honor of the nearby New York City franchise, the Knicks. Although I switched to squash in high school and college, my son's and daughter's love of basketball has brought me back onto the court with a group of senior women athletes interested in serious play. They outshoot, outpass, and outdribble me, but they welcome all comers.

Coaches run practices every day; the good ones can teach instructors a thing

or two about how to structure a lesson (Pennington, 2009). "Always be prepared," says basketball coach Tim Sayles (2013), who suggests scaffolding drills so that players' skills advance in small increments from where they are to where you want them to be. His advice: "Keep them moving. . . . Make everything competitive. . . . Don't do any one thing too long."

Outstanding coaches build confidence as well as skill. Drilling mind and body, they use pace and challenge to improve motivation, essential for success. The winningest coach in Division I college basketball, Mike Krzyzewski, of Duke University and the U.S. Olympic team, has inspired generations of players with a sense that he cares about them as people as well as athletes. "Coach K only knows one way to go about his business, and that's with passion and with energy and with discipline," Houston Rockets forward Shane Battier told a reporter. "But at the same time, you always have a good time. . . . . He gets people to play hard and play together" (DuPree, 2006). Like great coaches, great teachers empower students as lifelong learners.

A BASKETBALL COACH'S TIPS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS

Communication is key in basketball, but it's usually short and fast. These lesson tips focus on speed, deft handoffs, and practice, practice, practice.

Need another voice to reiterate that message? Check out Johnson's (n.d.) 1-minute video on basketball fundamentals.

Tip 1: Emphasize the physical, as well as verbal, components of communication.

Good basketball and good conversation start with body language and spatial awareness. In a game, players communicate through eye contact, gestures, and positioning on the court. You might show videos of **fast breaks** and point out wordless "talk." For instance, in this clip from a 2010 National Basketball Association (NBA) game, Miami Heat teammates Eddie House and LeBron James keep their eyes both on the ball and on each other: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dmJoqqqSDk. In this clip, without a word, several Brooklyn Nets combine choreography and conversation: www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_FNaDu1z8A. How do these players use their faces and their arms to signal their readiness to receive the ball?

Drill: Over the Top

- In small groups students brainstorm body language "rules" that can improve conversation. dxpham (2008) lists 18, including nod, smile, and lean in. Students may come up with many other suggestions. They may also compare different cultural norms for conversation.

- Scribes from each group take turns writing their rules on the board. For a laugh, you can violate or overdo each action as students report it. For instance, to illustrate the elasticity of personal space for different types of conversations, you might stand in the doorway and shout, "I love you" to someone in the far corner of the room, or stand nose to nose with a student and whisper, "I want to discuss this contract."
- Divide the class into groups of three, and assign one student as observer. Give the conversation pairs a simple topic (e.g., *tell us about your name*), and challenge them to practice either good or inappropriate body language—slightly exaggerated for the sake of the observer. After a minute, the observer reports. Students then switch roles.

Drill: Triple Threat

When a player receives a pass, she or he must decide what to do with the ball. Coaches advise players to **pivot** to face the basket so that they pose a **triple threat**—ready to shoot, pass, or **dribble** (see Figure 1).

In conversation, a speaker also has options. You can help students get into triple threat position to respond to a question.

- With a ball in hand, demonstrate the triple threat move. You pass the student a question: "What is the office dress code on casual Friday?" The student pivots. Now she or he can do one of the following:
  a. Shoot. This is the best move if the student knows the answer. "Women can wear pants, and men can skip the jacket and tie."
  b. Pass the ball. The student might pass back the question. "Could you repeat that?" Or "Please explain what you mean by dress code." She or he might also pass the question to a teammate, but must do so with a transition. "Paul is better prepared to answer because he's worked here longer than I have." Or "Paul, what do people wear on casual Friday?"
  c. Dribble. The player moves the ball, buying time to shoot or pass. "Casual means less formal. But in our office we still see clients on Friday. I'm guessing that we have to be clean and neat, but we don't have to wear a full suit."

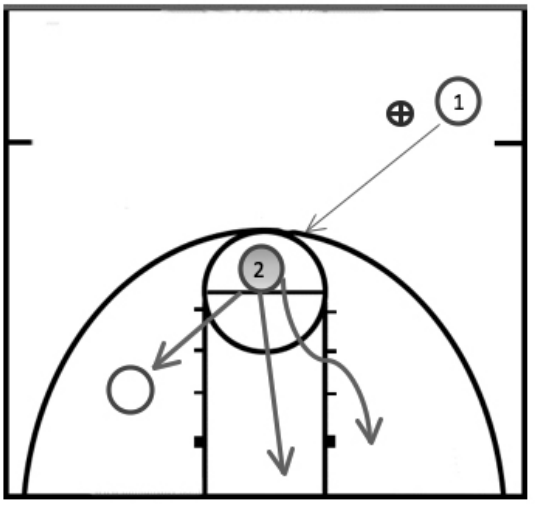

Figure 1. Triple Threat

- Divide the class into groups of three or four, and give each a stack of questions. In each group, Student 1 (the starter) passes a question to Student 2 (the receiver), who decides to shoot (answer), pass (call on a teammate), or dribble (think aloud before passing or answering). Once a shot has been made, a referee decides if the speaker has made a **bucket** with a good answer. Students rotate through the roles: starter, receiver, teammate(s).

Tip 2: Develop your own playbook of language drills.

Good game play is the sum of many small moves. Teach these skills to students, first walking them through the drills and gradually picking up the pace. Practice repeatedly until students can make these moves without thinking. For inspiration, check out basketball drills from The Coach's Clipboard (Gels, 2001–2013). Start with simple, stationary drills and then advance to plays that put several students in action together. Allow students to call **timeouts** when they need to ask questions.

If you want students to visualize the basketball metaphors, use a Nerf basketball if your class space can't accommodate a real ball. Set a metronome, tap a ruler, or use any other rhythmic sound to encourage speed. The following are some sample plays.

Drill: Stack

Player 1 holds the ball, prepared to throw it in from the sidelines. Players 2–5 line up. When Player 1 slaps the ball, the others scatter in all directions, ready to receive a pass (see Figure 2).

You could make this a vocabulary drill. Player 1 throws out a word, and all the other players have to come up with an example or a synonym. For instance:

> Pierre (#1, throw in): Fruit!
> Nan: Banana!
> Giselle: Apple!
> Paolo: Mango!

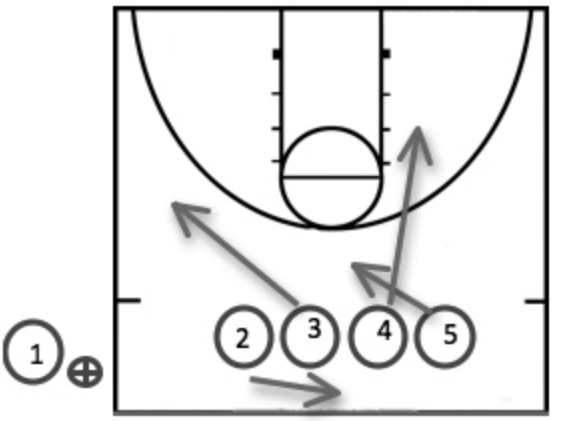

Figure 2. Stack

Drill: Fake

Player 1 (offense) moves in one direction, then backtracks to shake off a defender.

You could present this as a rhetorical move. Divide the class into pairs. Give the offense a list of "change of direction" words, such as *but, however, although, on the contrary,* and *on the other hand*.

> Linda (offense): I love cars.
> Jose (defense): You love cars.
> Linda: I love cars, but I hate trucks.

Drill: Layups

The most basic and reliable shot in basketball, a close-in bounce off the backboard, the **layup** requires arm-leg coordination. Coaches often set up two lines for a steady chain of practice (see Figure 3). Player 1 passes to the lead player in the shooting line (#2), who goes in for the shot. Player 1 **rebounds**, passes the ball back to the new lead of the rebounding line (#3), and circles into the shooting line while the shooter crosses to join the rebounding line.

Collocations, words that commonly go together in English, also imply coordination. Although the thesaurus often suggests a multitude of words with similar meanings, certain combinations sound right or wrong to the native speaker's ear. Mastering collocations gives language students an easy layup in English.

Have the class make two lines. Line 1 you prime with half a collocation. If you're interested in verb-object collocations, for instance, you give each player in Line 1 a card with a verb: *do, make, take, keep*, and so on. The lead player in Line 1 calls out the verb, and the lead player in Line 2 has to complete the collocation to score. If the Line 2 player misses, the Line 1 player can rebound and correct the collocation. Both players then switch lines.

Ahmed (in Line 1): Pay!
Layla (in Line 2): Attention!
Coach: Score!
Sammy (in Line 1): Do!
Warda (in Line 2): A mess!
Coach: Miss! Rebound, Sammy?
Sammy: Do business!
Coach: Score!

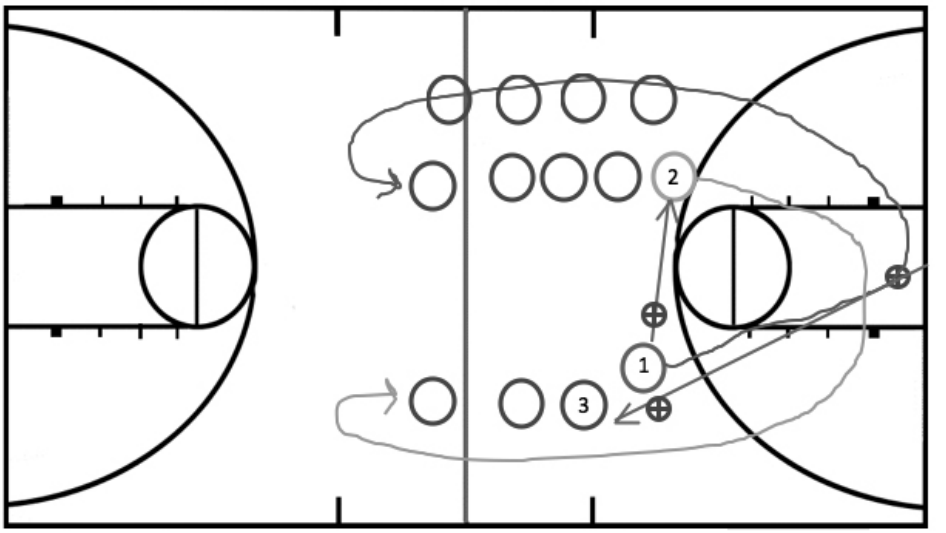

Figure 3. Layup

You can run the drill both ways, starting with the verb or the object. Other collocations include phrasal verbs (*put on a sweater*), adjective-noun combos (*busy bee*), noun-noun combos (*round of applause*), and so on. You can have students make collocation cards as they read texts for class or tap one of the many collocation lists on the Internet (EnglishClub, 1997–2013).

Drill: Rebound

Teams score many, many points off missed baskets that a player rebounds and shoots again. You can make rebounding a verb tense game, for instance.

Divide the class into groups. Each appoints a **point guard**, in charge of two stacks of notecards, one with verbs and another with tenses.

At the start of play, the point guard draws a card from each stack (e.g., *jump*/future tense), and the chosen shooter must make a sentence (e.g., *I will jump for joy tomorrow*). If the point guard feels the sentence is incorrect, she or he calls "Rebound!," and the next player must try for a correct sentence.

After students have practiced in groups, bring the class together for a team shootout. Appoint a referee, who will take on point guard responsibilities, and a scorekeeper. Teams line up so that everyone gets a turn. The referee announces the verb and the tense. The shooters at the head of each line race to articulate a sentence. The first one, if correct, earns two points. If it's incorrect, the referee calls "Rebound!," and anyone on either team can make a correction and score. Set a time or point limit for the game.

Drill: Give and Go

In this basketball standby, Player 1 passes to Player 2, Player 1 moves, and Player 2 passes it back (see Figure 4). Demonstrate with the ball.

Let's say you want students to practice the simple past tense in statements and questions. Divide the class in half, and then have students in each group line up across from each other and take turns.

Player 1 starts with the ball, asking the question. Player 2 answers and generates a new question. Player 1 fields the new question and answers.

> Chen: What did you do last night, Ahmed?
> Ahmed: I went to the movies. What did you do, Chen?
> Chen: I played basketball.

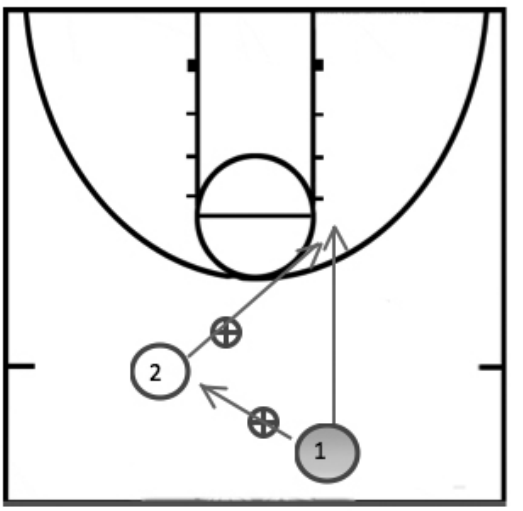

Figure 4. Give and Go

Drill: Page From the Playbook

Once you have a playbook, consider sharing a hard copy or online copy with the students. They will have a visual aid as you refer to plays by name. You might also invite students to design new plays to practice new material.

To change up the pace in the middle of class, for instance, you might call out, "Stack!," and review vocabulary for a few minutes. Or you might announce familiar plays as students converse and require them to implement those moves. You can have conversation scrimmages, fielding teams from the class and tracking **fouls** (errors) and buckets (perfect sentences/rhetorical moves).

Tip 3: Motivate your team.

In his *Ultimate Guide to Motivating Players,* Jeff Haefner (2013) emphasizes the importance of frequent, positive, specific feedback. Reward students—with words, a high five, recognition in front of the group, or time off for a game or favorite activity. Does a student speak a sentence without an error? Call out "**Swish**!" for a perfect shot. Instead of counting individual errors, you might track team "fouls." Make sure to name the **MVP** of the day, and give a reason for that honor. Pointing out what students do well, both in private and in public, encourages them to build on strengths. As the legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden remarked, "Youngsters . . . need models more than they need critics" (ESPN, 2001). Wooden was speaking about the coach's conduct, but helping students recognize their own fortes and find exemplars among their peers gives them many models to emulate.

Drill: Coach the Coach

If your constructive criticism rarely takes the form of praise, Haefner (2013) passes along a trick for improving your positive/negative comment ratio. Start with a handful of paper clips in your right pocket and a marble in your left. Whenever you compliment a student, move one paper clip to your left pocket. Whenever you critique a student, move the marble right. However, you may move the marble only when you've emptied the right pocket of all its paperclips. Repeat as necessary.

Drill: Head in the Game

As a listening or reading lesson, introduce students to inspirational sports quotes. As they parse the meaning and master the vocabulary, they may also internalize the message. You might start with these (Pumerantz, 2012):

- "An athlete cannot run with money in his pockets. He must run with hope in his heart and dreams in his head." Emil Zapotek, Czech long-distance runner who won three gold medals at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics

- "Champions keep playing until they get it right." Billie Jean King, U.S. women's tennis pro who won 12 Grand Slam titles
- "If you fail to prepare, you're prepared to fail." Mark Spitz, swimmer who won seven gold medals at the 1972 Munich Olympics
- "The more difficult the victory, the greater the happiness in winning." Pele, Brazilian soccer star

This lesson can expand in many directions; for instance, you can ask students to research the person quoted and present a short oral or written biography.

Drill: Diss This

Masters of disrespect, basketball players are famous for their trash talk. Although no one wants to spawn a class of braggarts, creative boasting may help shy and humble students break out of their shells. After giving some examples of disses (e.g., *I'm so good, your mama cheers for me*), divide the class into teams and give them a few minutes to come up with disses for the other group. The sassiest wins. To prime this activity for a lower level class, you can prompt the first half of the insult (e.g., *I'm so fast/You're so slow, I'm so good/you're so bad*). A tamer version of this game: Charge each team to come up with motivational quotes, along the lines of *Hustle and heart set us apart* or *Stand tall, talk small, and play ball.*

CONCLUSION

What makes a great coach? When the NBA surveyed hundreds of young visitors to its website, they said they wanted tough but fair mentors who balanced humor with straight talk. What should a coach care about most? Teaching new skills, replied 45% of respondents. But an almost equal number weighed in that a coach should give everyone a chance to play (Lyness, 2010). At the end of each class, ask yourself: Did everyone on your roster come off the bench and handle the ball? Drilling kinetically instead of asking questions and waiting for raised hands can draw in shy or underprepared students, especially when their classmates cheer them on. Team spirit can help every learner succeed.

Although a dynamic playbook will enliven a class, outstanding coaches bring more than technical knowledge and practice drills to the game. They have a vision. John Wooden pictured a "pyramid of success," a model he popularized not just for basketball but for business—and life. In 1973, his pyramid made the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* (see Figure 5 for an adaptation). When the legendary coach died in 2010, the flood of obituaries cited not just his winning record but his winning philosophy (Schudel, 2010).

What's your big picture?

Many academic institutions require instructors to lay out course objectives on their syllabi. The list may inform students and assessment committees, but it's

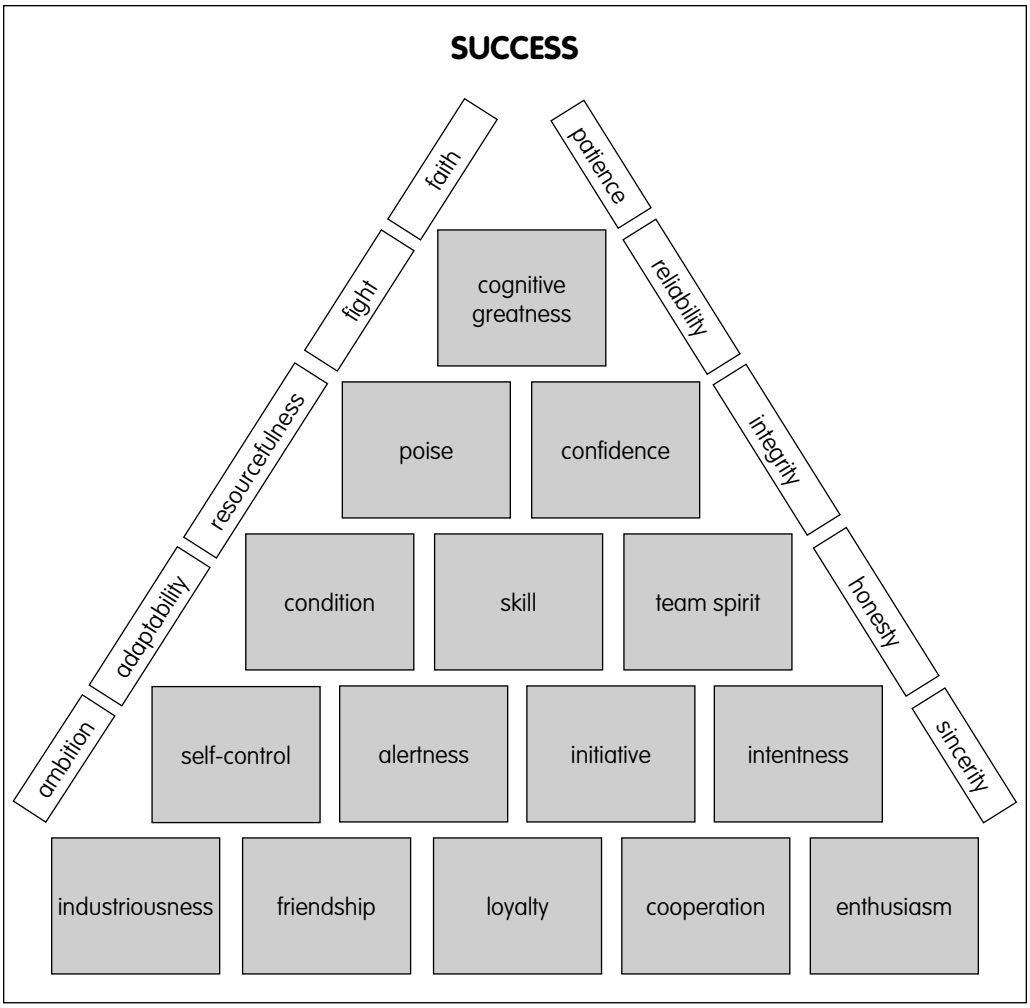

Figure 5. Wooden's Pyramid of Success

often a numbing read: *students will identify count and noncount nouns; correctly employ modal auxiliaries; receive, interpret correctly, and respond accurately to basic verbal messages and other cues that are commonly heard in college classroom settings as measured by completion and accuracy of individual and group tasks that are graded by teacher-generated rubrics and student self-evaluation*, and so on. Of course, a teacher needs to set measurable and achievable language goals for the semester. But on Wooden's pyramid, note that *skill* is not the pinnacle; it rests on a foundation of industriousness and enthusiasm and underpins poise and confidence. What do you dream for students, and what do you do as a teacher to incorporate that into your lessons?

Articulating your philosophy can transform your teaching and inspire both your peers and students. Coaching websites often provide models for reflection

(Fryer, 2012; Hanson, 2007–2013), as do faculty development sites (University of Minnesota, n.d.). If the word *philosophy* sounds intimidating, Gabriela Montell (2003) offers down-to-earth advice about tone and content. Get started by freewriting on questions like *What do you believe about teaching? About learning? What do you dislike in other classrooms? What's your style?* Ground every buzzword (*student-centered lesson, collaboration*) with an example of how you bring that about.

Although teaching has long been the sidecar to research in U.S. higher education, it is gaining importance, thanks in no small part to Pace University emeritus professor of management Peter Seldin. His books (Seldin & Miller, 2008; Seldin, Miller, & Seldin, 2010) and crusading as a consultant have prompted many colleges and universities to rethink assessment and urge instructors to build teaching portfolios, either for hiring and promotion (summative) or for improving their classroom practice (formative; Ohio State University, 2013). With a playbook, a teaching statement, and perhaps excerpts from student and institutional evaluations, you are well on the way to creating a portfolio for self-improvement or job hunting.

Doing all this work off the court allows you to come to practice with a game plan for students' success. As college coach Bobby Knight famously remarked, "The key is not the will to win . . . everybody has that. It is the will to prepare to win that is important" (BrainyQuote, 2001–2013). Understanding yourself, your students, and your lesson, you can create a class that is both purposeful and fun.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Hoops U

Free printable court diagrams are widely available online, including at this *Hoops U* website: http://www.hoopsu.com/basketball-court-diagrams

Ming, Y., & Bucher, R. (2004). *Yao: A life in two worlds.* New York, NY: Miramax.

International readers may take a particular interest in the journey of basketball phenomenon Yao Ming from the Shanghai Sharks to the Houston Rockets. In this clear and direct autobiography, the towering Ming (7 feet 6 inches) compares his native China to the United States and discusses the culture shock of being the NBA's first foreign #1 draft pick.

Nater, S., & Gallimore, R. (2005). *You haven't taught until they have learned: John Wooden's teaching principles and practices.* Morgantown, WV: Fitness Info Tech.

Distinguished UCLA psychology professor emeritus Ronald Gallimore and player and literacy coach Swen Nater team up to highlight best practices that cross from coaching into teaching. Nater played basketball under Wooden at UCLA, and Nater and his former coach published a book on the offense.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Sylvia Whitman is no pro, having ended her scholastic basketball career in ninth grade as a Knickette. As a basketball mom, however, she watches a lot of games and has started playing again in an Arlington County, Virginia, intramural league for women over 50. She works as a writing specialist at Marymount University, supervising peer writing consultants and supporting faculty across the curriculum who assign writing. Off court, she writes books for kids. Her first novel for young adults, The Milk of Birds*, was published by Atheneum in spring 2013.*

APPENDIX: GLOSSARY

You can find basketball glossaries all over the web, including these:

http://www.basketball.org/glossary/

http://www.firstbasesports.com/basketball_glossary.html

http://hoopedia.nba.com/index.php?title=Common_Basketball_Terms

Ball hog: Player who keeps the ball to himself or herself.

Bucket: Basket, as in *make a bucket.*

Dribble: Rhythmic move of bouncing the ball on the floor.

Fake: Move that fools an opponent into thinking you're moving in another direction.

Fast break: Quick offensive play after a change of possession with a long pass down the court.

Foul: Illegal action.

Free throw: Unchallenged shot taken after a foul.

Give and go: Quick play in which a player passes a ball and moves before receiving it back.

Layup: Near-basket shot bounced off the backboard.

MVP: Most valuable player.

Pivot: Move in which a player twirls on a toe to improve his or her position.

Point guard: The team's best ball handler, who leads the offense.

Rebound: Grab for the ball after an attempted basket.

Shot clock: Clock tracking the time limit (24 seconds in the NBA) for the offense to make a shot.

Swish: Basket made when the ball glides through the net without hitting the rim.

Timeout: Short suspension in play, during which players get advice from the coach.

Triple threat: Position from which a player may shoot, pass, or dribble.