

- Good for coaches to read

Maryland Coach Brenda Frese walked into the press conference following her team's overtime victory against Duke in the NCAA championship game looking a little winded from not only the game, but the post game celebration.

The Terps scored just 28 points in the first half, falling behind by 10 at the break. But Maryland stormed out of the locker room and lit up the scoreboard - and Duke - with 42 points in the second half and eventually won in OT. Frese had to make some offensive adjustments at halftime. She needed to get her team to score if they were to get back into the game. But what can a coach do in order to come up with a few more points - not only during the course of a game - but during the course of a season? Good question. Let's see if we can find some answers.

1. Creating Unselfishness

There were plenty of reasons why Maryland excelled this year. It takes a lot of ingredients to cook up a national champion. But Frese said one thing stood out from all the others. "The key to our success this past season was the unselfishness of our players," she said. "Our five starters all averaged double figures, so opponents couldn't key on one or two of our players. We had a very effective inside-outside game and if they keyed on taking away our inside game, we would turn to our outside game. Whatever they took away, we would exploit another strength of our team."

Creating a mindset where the players put the name on the front of the jersey ahead of the name on the back is a good start to a better offense. Nothing disrupts an offense more than selfish players worried about how they look in the box score. "Our starters and our bench players all sacrificed individual numbers for the sake of the team," Frese said. "When you can find players that care more about the team's success than their own success, you have something special. The goal was to win the game, not to see which player scored the most points."

Florida State University assistant coach Cori Close says unselfishness is part of what she calls the big picture - it has to do with not only putting the team first, but understanding your role that helps put the team first. For example, if a player's role is to set good screens to free the good shooters, then that is what she needs to do. Or if a player's job is to penetrate and draw a double team so she can kick it back to the three-pointer shooters, then that is what she needs to do. "If we are only a total of our individual pieces, then we will only be limited to that," said Close, whose club averaged 71.3 points and went 20-10 this season. "You need to find a group of individual players that will mold to become the best collective group and therefore the strongest team. And sometimes it's not always the five best players."

2. In-bound Plays

"I've always been big on creating easy baskets off in-bound plays," said Butler University Coach Beth Couture, who guided the Bulldogs to a .500 record in 2005-06 despite a starting lineup that included three sophomores and a freshman. "I believe you can pick up as many as 8 to 10 points in a game from in-bound plays and under the basket plays. At the very least I expect us to get a good shot off these plays. If we don't, then we don't succeed."

3. Watching Film

As the "offensive coordinator" at FSU, Close is responsible for developing the offensive schemes that best suit the Seminoles' personnel. A big part of her day is watching film and identifying weaknesses in an opponent's defense.

"When we input offensive schemes, we look at what are the strengths of our team and how do we make that our first, second, and third look and force them to take that away first," Close said. "After you design your offensive sets around the strengths of your own team, then you are trying to apply them to the teams in the conference. What is that team's strengths and how can we attack creatively with different match ups so that we get our strengths instead of theirs."

Close and her FSU club plays in the tough ACC against the likes of Maryland and Duke, so finding a weakness in the opponent isn't always easy. Because of this, more adjustments are usually necessary. For example, Duke's size caused plenty of problems for its opponents, including Florida State.

"They are really big in the middle and really big two through five," Close said. "They have Alison Bales who is 6-foot-7 and is a great shot blocker. So I am going to pull her away from the basket and try to apply offensive sets that give us better post-up options. And that might be our two player. We want to create matchups in high percentage places that are better for us."

Couture, who is just eight victories shy of 300 wins for her career, also spends plenty of time in the film room. "I am watching how our opponent defends us, especially how they typically defend the pick and roll," she said. "I want to see how they deal with screens and pick out ways we can counter what they're doing. We are big on on-ball screens and pick and rolls, it's a big part of what we like to do. So I want to know how people are going to try and defend these."

To know going in what an opponent's tendencies are likely to be against your style of offense will help you counter. This extra film study also is likely to result in extra points. "You look for a weakness, like a player that is an average or below average ballplayer and try to exploit that," Frese said. "We will set a trap so we can get a steal and turn that into a layup. You can certainly see things on film that will allow your defense, especially through pressure, to create easy shots for your offense."

4. The Little Things

Jose Fernandez, whose South Florida club lost to Southern California in the first round of the NCAA Tournament and finished 19-12 this past season, says improving individual and team fundamentals can be a way to add a few more buckets.

"I really stress the little things because they all add up to the big things," he said. "I want my players setting good, solid screens. I want them reading what the defense is giving them. I want good player movement away from the basketball."

"We stress giving passes to where someone can catch the ball and be in a position to do something with it," Fernandez said. "We don't want our players making passes for the sake of making passes."

5. Comfort Zone

When a team needs a basket in a key situation, many coaches prefer to go with a play that has been in the playbook for awhile. "We will call a specific set that we know we can execute," Frese said. "We want to keep it simple. That's important. In these kinds of situations (such as late in the game) I prefer running a set that we've run in practice a hundred times and are familiar with. "Running a newer play can sometimes cause timing issues, or we won't get a good screen set because players aren't sure where they are supposed to be. The goal is to get a good shot, a high percentage shot. Keeping it simple will help reduce the number of problems that can occur."

6. Understanding

Strengths and Weaknesses

Admitting your team has weaknesses is the first step on the road to more offense. The second step is developing a game plan to overcome these weaknesses.

"We knew at the beginning of the year that we weren't going to be a tremendous shooting team on a consistent basis, especially from the perimeter," Close said. "You have to honestly assess your ability and convince yourself that there are lots of ways to win basketball games."

7. Free-Throw Misses

When your team heads to the free-throw line, don't believe that it is necessarily the end of your offensive possession. Instead, consider a miss another great chance for a possession. Frese sees a free-throw miss by one of her players as a great opportunity for a few more points. "I want my players to be aggressive when we are shooting free throws," she said. "Some really good opportunities present themselves off misses at the free-throw line."

This is a great chance to turn a missed free throw into two points from what usually is a high percentage shot because many times the ball comes off the rim and the opponent isn't in the best position to play defense. With a defense scrambling, the player that rebounds the ball has the option of going right back up for a shot. Sometimes, though, making a quick pass can result in an even easier shot attempt because the defense isn't set.

8. Turnovers

Nothing kills an offense faster than turnovers. Even bad shots have a chance of going in and there is always a chance for a rebound. But you can't score when you turn the ball over. "My players run for every missed layup and every turnover. I can deal with everything else," said Fernandez, whose South Florida team has been in the top 10 in the country the past two years for least turnovers.

Couture's Butler team wasn't the best at hitting the offensive glass this past season, so limiting the number of turnovers was key. "Having a good point guard is the key to help cutting back on turnovers," she said. "I want the ball in my point guard's hands 80 percent of the time. And she has to recognize when to push it and when to set it up."

9. Better Shots

"So how do we shoot a higher percentage when we aren't a very good shooting team," asks Close. "We do this by getting more shots in the battle zone, which we call the eight foot box around the basket."

And how do you do that? "Well, we gotta get the ball inside more, we gotta post our guards and we've gotta get offensive rebounds, that's one way. The other way is getting extra possessions. And getting offensive rebounds is one way of getting extra possessions. Other ways are winning 50-50 balls, getting loose balls and making hustle plays. We knew that if we shot the same amount of times as our opponent we would probably lose unless we took better shots."

Frese, who has led the Terps to three straight NCAA appearances, doesn't believe in the more shots the better philosophy.

"Good shots should come in the natural flow of an offense if it's being executed properly," she said. "I prefer better shots over more shots."

Learning what is a good shot and what isn't can come during the course of a game or in practice. "We will go through a game film or stop practice to point out where a better shot might be and where a shot was taken that wasn't what we consider a high percentage shot."

Couture says that a good shot doesn't necessarily mean where on the floor you're shooting from. "Good shot selection leads to more points," she said. "A good shot also can mean getting the ball in the hands of the hot player or the better shooters. We allow our kids to run, but we also want them to recognize when to set it up. When you set up the offense, you usually get better looks than you do trying to force something that's not there on the break."

10. Recruiting

College coaches can try and solve offensive woes through recruiting. "It's a combination of circumstance and identifying a weakness that we were going to need to improve the shooters we have as well as recruit some shooters that can stretch defenses," said Close, who was a four-year starting point guard and captained Santa Barbara's two NCAA Tournament teams in 1992 and 1993. "For instance right now, we probably have more talent pieces, but in terms of leadership and character we need some help. We call them rope holders, people that hold the ropes and make sure the team is held together. We are going after rope holders right now that will put our talent pieces in a position to be more interconnected. So, as a recruiter you are always trying to go after the best possible players, but that is only part of the recruiting class. Then you are trying to go after puzzle pieces. We have a major big-time player coming here next year so we now need to find people to compliment her because she is going to be one of the engines in our car. We can't have 12 engines on the basketball team."