

THE PRE-FREE THROW RITUAL

THERE is no one right way to perform your pre-shot ritual. Put 10 great foul shooters on the foul line and you will see 10 different rituals. In the final analysis, the "best" pre-shot ritual is the one that works best for you.

Though styles vary, all have certain basic components. What the best shooters will do before they shoot:

1. *Say a positive phrase* or think a positive thought. Every good shooter says something positive to himself each time he prepares to shoot.

2. *Imagine the ball going in before you shoot.* You will find it simple to imagine a ball spinning in the air, then going through the net; or to imagine the feeling in your body and arms as you release the ball perfectly.

3. *Position your feet* exactly the same way each time.

4. *Physically rehearse the stroke* before you dribble (bounce) the ball. Former Boston Celtic star Cedric Maxwell was known for this. Larry Bird, the highest percentage free-throw shooter in the NBA, also rehearses his stroke. Note: You will never see a baseball player or a golfer get set to swing without first taking a few practice swings.

You can do this before the referee hands you the ball or after, while holding the ball in your left hand. This is an extremely important part of your ritual, something I highly recommend. It will put you on the perfect path.

5. *Bend or bounce your knees*—"settle in," get comfortable.

6. *Dribble the ball* a set number of times. Keep the dribbles short and simple, and always dribble the same number of times. Never bounce the ball more than three



Laura Seiden of the U. of New Hampshire, top free-thrower in North Atlantic Conference, an advocate of the "80% Program."
(Photo by Peter Vandemark)

times or bounce it in highly elaborate ways.

7. *A breathing sequence*, including at least one deep exhalation to help you relax. When you are actually shooting, it is best to hold your breath.

8. *A visual sequence* that determines precisely what you look at from the time the referee gives you the ball until it goes through the net. Once you understand the importance of this, you will quickly make it a simple habit.

Here is an example of a visual routine:

1. Ref tosses you the ball.

Visual focus: the whole ball.

2. You look at the basket.

Visual focus: Spot on top of the front of the rim.

3. You bounce the ball.

Visual focus: Spot on the ball (air valve; intersection of seams).

4. You stop dribbling and prepare to shoot.

Visual focus: Spot on top of the front of rim.

5. You shoot.

Visual focus: Same.

6. Follow-through.

Visual focus: Same.

7. Swish.

Visual focus: Same.

These precise focus points minimize the distracting visual stimuli and help focus your eyes on the right things.

9. When shooting free throws, you have to block out external sounds (crowd noises, etc.), think positively, and concentrate. Two types of positive thoughts will help you shoot well under pressure.

a. *Positive statements* (that you quietly say to yourself) before bouncing the ball and shooting can serve to:

...*build confidence* ("I'm a great free-throw shooter," "Yes," "I love pressure," or "You can do it!").

...*calm you down* ("Relax" or "Just do your best").

...*remind yourself* of something important ("Just shoot it straight,"

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or "Good follow-through"). These positive statements should be in your own words.

b. A *verbal sequence* that is synchronized with the rhythm of the ritual. Some excellent shooters claim that this makes a huge difference in their shooting.

For example, you can say, "Bounce, bounce, sight, swish," coordinating each word with a specific part of the ritual. This will give you a greater sense of rhythm and help block out external noises. Other examples of synchronized verbal focus points:

Players at Stan Kellner's "Yes, I Can Basketball Camp" are taught to say:

"Bounce, bounce, sight, feel."

"1, 2, 3."

"Free and easy."

"1, 2, sight, reach."

An unusual example of a Verbal Routine:

One college athlete told me that she says, "North Carolina State" in a three-beat rhythm as she bounces the ball three times before shooting. Why "North Carolina State?" Because she played the best game of her career against State and saying it to herself makes her feel positive and confident.

10. *Hold the ball the same way each time.* Most great shooters hold the ball a very specific way after their dribble.

11. A *pre-release* position that remains the same every time, including the position of the elbow, hand, etc. You should work with your

coach to determine the technique that is best for you, then do it the same way each time.

12. A *certain follow-through position*, especially in your dominant hand. This position is commonly referred to as a "goose-neck" or "hanging your fingers over the front edge of the rim." Most players pull their arm and hand back too quickly after releasing the ball, which causes a loss of control. Watch great shooters and you'll see most of them hold their arm in the follow-through position for a second or two after releasing the ball.

13. *Physical sensations that correspond with successful shots* can help you develop an effective, grooved stroke and execute it under pressure.

The three key physical sensations to choose from:

a. The general feeling of rhythm in your body as you shoot.

b. The general feeling of the ball rolling off your fingertips during the release.

c. The feeling in your hand and wrist after the ball is released; the follow-through.

You probably won't be able to verbalize anything about these physical sensations, except to say that a particular stroke feels good or bad. This is something every athlete has to teach himself—how the right motion feels. Giving yourself one specific thing to focus on as you shoot will facilitate this process.

At this point, you may be wondering...

How in the world am I going to remember all this?

Any extensive listing of components makes the ritual seem much more complicated than it really is. With a little practice, however, the ritual becomes a simple habit. You will quickly reach the point where just focusing on two or three key things will make everything else happen automatically.

On the other hand, it's helpful for rituals to be a little complicated. A good ritual demands your attention, and this takes your mind off the external distractions and negative thinking that cause so many errors.

About the Author And His Book

Convinced that successful foul shooting is predicated mostly on *confidence*, Sport Psychology Consultant Peter C. Greider launched an extensive research project among coaches, players, and teams that culminated in a large, meticulously organized spiral-bound book titled, *80%, How You Can Shoot Foul Shots Better Than the Pros*. His focus: cataloguing and expounding all the many psychological forces that go into the making of outstanding foul shooting, such as conquering self-doubt, finding the groove, developing the habit of success, concentrating under pressure, and practicing intelligently. Greider demystifies the arcana and puts it all into understandable terms and a sound, practical teaching program.

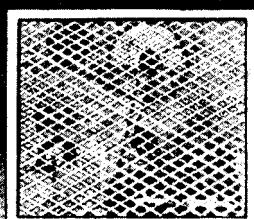
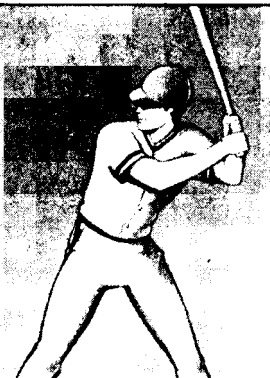
For a free copy of Mr. Greider's 7-page special report, "The 80% Video—How to Make a 3-Minute Video Tape that Will Boost Your Team's Confidence from the Line," or for information about his book, tapes, and workshops, contact him at 74 State Road, #101, Kittery, ME 03904, or call him at (207) 439-8808.

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