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The final shot is a valuable learning experience for young players

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"Timeout!"

The Warriors are down one, 10 seconds to go, and just advanced the ball to half court after the Elite hit a jumper.

Scenario 1

The young coach pulls out the clipboard and draws up a play.

"Sophie, you inbound. Jessica, down-screen for Tamika on the weakside block. Meanwhile, Angie, start in the far corner and come down the baseline. Ivory, you set the screen for Angie. So Sophie, you can look for Tamika coming to the top of the key or Angie in the corner."

He looks around confidently. "Got it?"

Well, no, they don't. They've never practiced this play, and the odds of them running it well are slim. The only chance, though, is to go over it again, step-by-step.

But the coach thinks of something else. "Ivory, make sure you're set. Don't let the ref call you for an illegal screen." And then something else. "Sophie, look for the return pass after you inbound it. The defense will forget about you." And another thing. "Tamika, go left on this girl. She's been overplaying your right hand all game."

The outcome here is pretty obvious. The Warriors are not going to run this play. If they're lucky, two of the kids will, hopefully two who are supposed to be screening for each other. Sophie will get the ball inbounds, and if Angie or Tamika are good players, they'll create something and the Warriors might win.

But the Xs and Os will have had little to do with it. Remember that the best players in the world, 30-year-olds making lots of money, consistently fail to execute in pressure situations. Players will be left alone on inbounds plays. Dumb passes will be made. Screens will, or will not, be switched.

And yet, coaches of young girls will try to draw up an unfamiliar play in a 60-second timeout, then get upset when their players don't do it right.

Scenario 2

The older coach pulls out the clipboard. "OK, we're going to run Illinois. Remember?" Everyone nods, because this is one of the Warriors' sideline out-of-bounds' plays.

"Once we get it in, we'll set up Princeton -- that's the pick-and-roll for Tamika. Ivory, you'll set the screen. Here's where everyone else should be."

The players nod again. They have a pretty good idea of what's going on.

And then the other team goes into a 2-3 zone, which it hasn't played this half. The girls look over to the frustrated coach, but there are no more timeouts, and Angie winds up throwing up a prayer of a 3 at the buzzer.

Teams that rely too much on plays, too much on what the coach says to do, are always going to be vulnerable to the unexpected -- and the girls on the team will be better play-runners than basketball players.

Scenario 3

The Elite hits that jumper, and the Warriors' coach doesn't say a word. The ball is inbounded to his point guard, who pushes the ball up the floor. The Elite defenders are fully aware of the situation, and as usual, one or two defenders try to do too much. They overshift to stop the point guard's penetration, and when she makes the pass to Angie on the weakside, she has a wide-open 15-footer.

Maybe it goes in, and maybe it doesn't. Maybe she makes the prayer against the zone, but which is the better shot? What scenario gives the Warriors the best chance to win? What scenario helps young basketball players develop more?

For parents, it's about minutes for their daughter, and winning. (They can excuse their daughter not playing as much as they'd like if the team wins; if it doesn't, there's no excuse for what passes for the coaching staff.) For many coaches, it's about being a strategic genius, about having young people do what they're told and about accepting congratulations at game's end.

But what about the players? Shouldn't the girls be learning the lessons of sport, learning how to deal with pressure, how to succeed and (more important) how to fail? And what do they learn if they are merely automata, extensions of the coach's will and parental pressure?

To me, at least, the answers are obvious. Basketball is a players' game, and youth sports aren't about winning, but about learning and growing as individuals in a group framework.

Or to put it another way: Just let the girls play.

Clay Kallam is a contributor to ESPN HoopGurlz. He is the founder of Full Court Press, an online magazine devoted to women's basketball; the author of "Girls Basketball: Building a Winning Program" and a voter for several national awards, including McDonald's and Parade All-Americans and the Wooden Award.

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