

# **better than a layup**

*Challenging Basketball's Conventional Wisdom*



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## **Time Trumps Territory**

Basketball's First Law

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### **Author's Note**

I originally wrote and posted this essay in February, 2015, a full season before the rule requiring a five-second count on closely guarded dribblers was eliminated and the rule allotting ten-seconds to advance the ball past half court was revised to prevent resetting the count if there was a stoppage.

I have not revised the essay to account for these rule changes as the broader context and basic principles of time explored in the essay remain the same.

-- Mark S. Seeberg  
December 21, 2016

## Introduction

In competitive sports, coaches and players seek to control two elements fundamental to many games – **time** and **space**.

By *time*, I mean a range of things from the *pace* or *tempo* of play to the concepts of *timing* and *rhythm* as players attempt to harmonize their movements with one another and with the various *time limits* inherent in games governed by a clock.

By *space*, I refer to the playing field or "territory" in which the game takes place – its boundaries and limits, its surface, the various physical conditions that affect the movement of players.

As we shall see, **basketball is fundamentally a game of time**. The elimination of the jump ball after made baskets and free throws in the late 1930's transformed basketball into a game of continuous action with teams converting from offense to defense and back again in near seamless fashion. In basketball we don't "conquer and hold territory" – instead we "pass through it." It's a game of transition.

Understanding this reality affects how you "see" the game and consequently coach or play it. In fact, one's ability to manage time most often determines who wins and who loses.

Truly, **time trumps territory** is the first law of basketball.

## Time and Space in Different Sports

Understanding how time governs the nature of basketball is most easily illustrated by exploring its role in three other games – golf, baseball, and football.

Golf is an ideal place to start this exploration as it dramatically illustrates the differences between time and space, and provides a frame of reference for understanding how these elements impact other games.

**Golf is the ultimate terrain game** for the space in which the game takes place – *the course* – is the critical feature of the game. The purpose of the game is to get the ball in the hole in as few strokes as possible. To do so you must negotiate the golf course, hitting a succession of shots through and over the terrain *as you find it*.

Indeed, golf's charm – its integrity and tradition – is encapsulated in the adage, "Play the ball as it lies, play the course as you find it..."

Once you have teed off, you are expected to play the ball where you find it – from sand and divots and tall grass, from behind trees and shrubs, or from "ideal" spots in the middle of the fairway. You

are not to touch the ball except to place it on the tee, to mark and clean it once you are on the green, or to remove it from play after you have "holed out." Under certain foul weather conditions you may also move the ball – situations involving "winter rules," "standing water," and the like. But aside from such instances, you may not touch or move the ball without incurring a penalty.

Negotiating the course, attempting to set up each shot with the one that preceded it, is an art. Understanding the *shape* of the course – the tree line, creek bed, changes in the speed and direction of the wind, the speed and roll of the greens, the breaks and undulations, what particular holes will allow and not allow – is learned only through long and arduous experience. Managing these terrain features is the essence of the game. Indeed, golf is one of the few games that can be played and enjoyed by oneself for the true opponent is always present – the course.

**The element of time plays almost no role in the game of golf.** There is no clock governing the pace of the game. The length of the game is determined by how long it takes one to traverse the particular course he is playing. For this reason, golf has a timeless quality.

Only protocol and courtesy compel players to move forward at a reasonable pace so as not to slow play unnecessarily for others. Players are instructed by local club rules and peer pressure to aim for a round lasting no longer than four hours – about 15 minutes per hole. Some clubs set a specific "time par" for each hole and monitor each foursome's pace, warning groups that fall behind. On the pro tour and in formal club competition you may even be docked penalty strokes for slow play.

But rules governing fast play are not inherent in the actual nature of the game. They're contrivances or conventions imposed from the *outside* for the good of the playing field and spectators. They were formulated to honor the players' desire to play at a consistent and steady pace. This desire speaks to the only significant role time actually plays in the game of golf: *the rhythm or timing of the golf swing*.

The golf swing consists of a series of economical movements that must be exquisitely timed to be effective. To play well, a player must manage the internal clock of his body. Like a shooter on a rifle range, the golfer attempts to control his breathing and temperament.

Sam Snead claimed that he swung in *three quarter time*. "I try to get *oily*," he said in his 1986 biography, *Slammin' Sam*. "Oily means a smooth motion. It's the feeling that all your bones and muscles are so in sync, any movement you make is going to be smooth and graceful."

Any disruption – dwelling on a missed two-footer or errand drive, slow play, or the pressure of the moment – can cause the muscles to tense. When the muscles tense, the golfer loses his fluidity and sense of touch, and his next shot may go astray.

**Baseball shares the timeless nature of golf.** Play is not measured by the passage of time but by a *series of events* – 27 outs spread over nine, three-out innings. The team ahead when its opponent reaches its 27<sup>th</sup> out is the winner of the game. (A tie score at the end of the 27<sup>th</sup> out moves the game into "extra innings.")

Like golf, the game's only time limits are contrivances imposed from "outside" in an attempt to increase the pace of play, making the contest more attractive to spectators. For example, in professional baseball when no one is on base, the pitcher must deliver ball within 12 seconds of the batter entering batting box. The batter must leave two bats in the on-deck circle so that he can get a new bat quickly if he breaks the first one; the music accompanying batter's stroll to the box can blare for only 10 seconds; and pitching changes must take no more than two and one half minutes from the time the reliever leaves the bullpen to the time he assumes his place on the mound ready to make his first pitch.

**As to the role of terrain or space, baseball is very different from golf.** Unlike the uneven terrain of golf, varying dramatically from hole to hole and course to course, baseball's infield is laid out in perfect symmetry. The space defining the diamond is known and certain: 90 ft. separates each of the bases; the distance from third base to first base and second base to home plate is exactly 127 ft., 3 3/8 inches; the top of the pitcher's mound consists of a plateau that is 5 ft. wide, 10 1/2 inches high, the rubber precisely 60 ft. 6 inches from home plate. And so forth.

Beyond the infield, the precision of shape and distance gives way to infinitely and timelessness. In theory, the first and third base foul lines extend *forever* recalling the agrarian origins of the game. On the sandlot or makeshift baseball fields of the American prairie, there are no constraining walls. When the ball is hit over the heads of the outfielders it can in principle roll *forever*. Only in the modern ballpark does field of play end with a wall, and technically, even then the ball remains in play if the outfielder is able to physically transcend the limits of the wall and catch it. As Roger Kahn in *A Season in the Sun* so aptly said, "The ball field itself is a mystic creation, the Stonehenge of America."

**The ball players' relationship to the field of play and to one another also differs from other sports.** Rather than conquering and holding space, the participants try instead to position themselves in relationship to the ball. The hitting team attempts to place the ball in play in such a way as to advance its runners safely along the base path and ultimately to "home" where they are rewarded with a "run scored." Correspondingly, instead of blocking or "holding" the base path, the infielders position themselves to field the ball and pass it to one another before the runners can achieve the safety of the base. In effect, the offense and defense exist in reciprocal relationship to one another.

Baseball, then, is a game of angles and positioning. Aside from the timing and rhythm involved in hitting the baseball or executing a throw, time plays virtually no role and the perimeters of the field are important only as they define the area in which the angling and positioning must occur.

**In football, time and space converge making it the ultimate "coach's game."**

No American game better symbolizes our culture's fascination with complex planning and management, and the alpha male's desire to direct "an army in battle." The game unfolds in both time and space, challenging the coach to harmonize the two. It requires his team to gain possession of the ball and then advance it *through* the defense, *across* the terrain to the end zone, and to do so in concert with the *passage of time*. Throughout, he must manage these elements in relationship to one another. In doing so he is confronted with numerous decisions based on the position of the ball, field conditions, players, score, and time on the clock.

The game is endlessly complex.

- In baseball the offensive men enter the field of play in succession, one at a time, never more than four aligned along the base paths at the same time. **In football, the full compliment of offensive and defensive players are on the field all the time, simultaneously.**
- In baseball only the infield is precisely defined, the outfield dimensions varying from park to park. **In football the entire playing surface is circumscribed by standard boundaries,** 160' wide, 360' or 120 yards long, the interior divided in ten-yard increments with end zones at either end.
- In baseball there is no clock. **In college football a strict time limit is imposed on the game.** The game consists of two equal 30-minute halves. The winner is the team ahead in points at the end of 60 minutes. Additionally, there are rules governing the passage of the game clock: incomplete passes, stepping out of bounds, making a first down and "moving the chains," penalties, and timeouts. And to complicate things further, there's also a "play clock" independent of the "game clock" requiring the offensive team to begin each play within 25 seconds of the referees declaring the ball "ready for play."
- Most importantly, **in football the offense initiates play and dictates its pace.** The offense takes possession of territory as it advances the ball toward the goal line. In effect, the offense attempts to "back up" the defenders until they run out of room to defend. Baseball is unique in that the defense controls the ball until it is hit. The goal is not to advance the ball but to advance the runners before the defense can regain possession of the ball and force the runners to stop their movement before one or more of them crosses home plate.

It is this last distinction that melds time and space, making football the true "coach's game." Here's why.

**Football is a stop-start-stop sport.** It unfolds as a series of distinct actions called "plays" initiated by the offense. The offense's forward movement across the field to the goal line is characterized by either one play that "goes the distance" or more likely by a succession of plays that proceed in stop-start-stop fashion. To start the sequence of action, the offense sets, snaps the ball to initiate play, and then attempts to advance the ball until the defense stops the forward motion and the play is whistled dead. Then, the whole sequence begins again. You have four attempts or "downs" to advance the ball ten yards to keep possession of the ball for another round of four. If you fail, your opponent "captures" the ball and mounts its own journey across the playing field, or you can elect to "trade" the ball for more favorable defensive field possession by punting.

Meanwhile, the game clock is counting off 60 minutes, stopping only temporarily for time outs, plays ending out-of-bounds, moving the chains, penalties, and incomplete passes.

**The stop-start-stop nature of the game, paralleled by the ticking game and play clocks, present coaches with a continuous stream of choices.**

*Where are we on the field? How much time is left? Are we ahead or behind? By how much? Should we attempt to slow the pace of play or speed it up? What is the condition of the field? Is it dry or wet? Is there a strong wind? In what direction? How far away are we / they from attaining a first down? Pass or run? Where are we / they most vulnerable? On the perimeter or the interior? Blitz or contain? Do we have the right mix of personnel on the field at this point in the game?*

For both offense and defense, managing the relationship between time and space is critical. This is most easily viewed from the offensive perspective.

To put the ball in play and advance it forward, you must first organize your players *in space*. Play unfolds from pre-set positions called “formations” so that the snap, movement of the players, exchange of the ball, and the timing of blocks can begin at the same time. Otherwise, you have mass confusion.

Formationaling, including line splits and motioning players before the snap, is both an art and a science. By aligning in particular ways the offense hopes to influence the position of the defenders so that they can be out-maneuvered, out-manned, or out-angled.

On a strategic level, a coach adopts a particular offensive system that embodies his philosophy of play or that caters to the kind of players he has on his squad, or both. For example, America’s service academies rely heavily on various forms of triple option football to mask their deficiencies in size and natural talent while maximizing their quickness, discipline, and smarts. The option formations – wishbone, wing bone, etc. -- tend to *balance the field*, forcing man coverage. Rather than spreading the field from sideline to sideline, the option initially *bunches* its players forcing the defense to mirror the offensive alignment. Instead of blocking every defensive player at the point of attack, it uses angles, double-teams, and cut blocks on some defenders, and options the rest. Essentially it works from the “inside-out” forcing the defense to stop the interior run, then attacking the perimeter when the defense over commits.



Here’s a photo of the University of Texas in the classic Wishbone formation. Note how the balanced nature of the formation in turn balances the defensive alignment. The number of offensive players to the right and left of the center is the same, with the center, quarterback, and fullback stacked one after the other in the middle. One side of the offensive alignment is no stronger than the other. Once the ball is snapped the offense can move in either direction “with equal weight.” Consequently, the defense must respect both sides “equally.” This creates a certain level of

predictability and clarifies the reads the quarterback will have to make as the play unfolds.

Colleges and professional teams that can field rosters with a wider variety of players in terms of size, talent, smarts, etc. than the military academies often employ wide-open passing offenses that spread

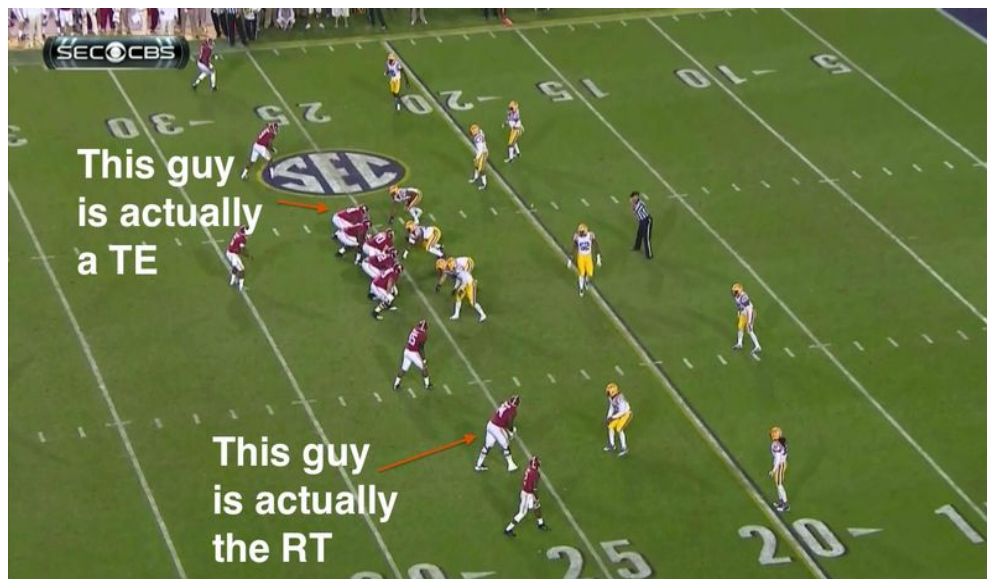


the field and force defenders to “play in space.” The photo below shows the effect of such an alignment on the defense.



On a tactical level, a coach may use a particular formation to confuse the defense and gain a temporary advantage. For example, during the 2014 season, defending national champion Alabama used a trick alignment to defeat LSU. Here’s how it worked.

On the snap of the ball, an offense has to have at least seven players on the line of scrimmage but only the two closest to their respective sidelines are eligible to catch a pass. They’re the two we customarily call “ends” because each is at “the end of the line. The five players in between them are not eligible receivers. Now, look at the following photograph extracted from the CBS telecast and annotated by sbnation.com.



In the photograph you can see that Alabama has spread its offense across the width of the field and is



employing an “empty backfield” – that is, aside from the quarterback there are no other backs in close proximity to the quarterback and center – they’re spread across the field forcing the defense to defend “more space.” Here’s how sbnation.com described the setup:

*Look at the bottom of Alabama's formation. You see two players on the line. By rule, the one closest to the out-of-bounds line is eligible, while the other is not. The one who isn't is No. 74, Cam Robinson, Alabama's left tackle. Although he looks like he's split out as a receiver, he's "covered" by the receiver below him, and therefore ineligible to catch a pass.*

*Going up the formation, we see RB Jalston Fowler, who's a few steps back from the line of scrimmage (and therefore eligible), and then the five "offensive linemen" on the line. The one on top who looks like a left tackle is not "covered" -- both receivers to his left are standing off the line -- and therefore is an eligible receiver as a tight end.*

*This is a tackle-eligible play. The tackle in question is Brandon Greene, and he's going to win Bama the game.*

At the snap of the ball, the 304-pound offensive lineman – masquerading as the left tackle – bursts up field, finds an open seam, and snares the pass for a touchdown. Confused by the alignment, LSU never recovers.

Just as the offense attempts to control space through formationing, blocking and running angles, and pass routes using multiple receivers, **it controls time by slowing or speeding the tempo or pace of the game.** They accomplish this by employing a particular style of play and coordinating the play clock with the game clock. To return to our example above, the service academies attempt to create long possessions, eating up the game clock in the process, thus reducing the number of possessions left to its more talented opponents and generally frustrating them with the “nickel and dime” nature of the attack. A no-huddle or hurry-up offense attempts the opposite: the possessions occur more quickly increasing the opportunities to score, fatiguing and confusing one’s opponent with the speed of attack.

On a tactical or situational level, with the game clock winding down, teams may abandon or adjust their preferred style of attack. The team holding the lead will eat as much of the play clock as possible to lengthen the possession and run the ball, passing only when necessary to keep possession. Conversely, a team that is trailing will attempt to conserve time by using sideline pass routes to stop the clock when the receiver goes out of bounds and calling timeouts to prolong the possession.

## **Time and Space in Basketball**

Basketball turns the time/space equation on its head.

Like football, the game is played in an area defined in exquisite detail. The court is 94’ long by 50’ wide, 4,700 square feet in all. The distance from each end line to the face of its respective backboard is precisely 4’; from the face of the backboard to the center of the cylinder 15”; the cylinder is 18” in diameter and 10’ from the top of the rim to the floor. Drop a plumb-line from the center of the cylinder to the floor, then measure 13’9” to reach the free throw line; add 7’ more and you arrive at the 3-point arc. And so forth.



In basketball, “field position” is not really the issue. **The passage of time is what moves the game.** For example, once you take possession of the ball you have 10 seconds to advance it across half court – regardless of where in the backcourt you gain possession. The backcourt is 47 feet long; it doesn’t make a difference whether you steal the ball just short of the half court line or take possession after your opponent’s score and must travel the full 47 feet to cross half court. You’ve got 10 seconds, no more, no less. Imagine if a football team had to cross midfield within 10 seconds of gaining possession of the ball?

Additionally, you are confronted by other time constraints. When inbounding you have 5 seconds or “counts” to put the ball into play; similarly, if closely guarded, a ball handler has 5 seconds to “advance” the ball by passing it to a teammate or by dribbling it, “moving his head and shoulders past his defender.” Most importantly, after taking possession you must attempt a field goal within 35 seconds. Fail to meet this deadline and you lose possession of the ball. In football, the play clock does not limit the length of possession. In theory, as long as the offensive team can make first downs, it can retain possession of the ball for an entire half without ever attempting a score.

**Second, unlike football, there are no static lines or fronts.** Basketball is not a stop-start-stop game during which the offense and defense align across from one another, snap the ball to initiate play, then, do it all over again. Instead, the action is continuous and fluid, the players’ positions ever-shifting in relationship to the ball, the basket, and the movement of one another. Like football it’s possible to align or set a formation to influence the alignment of your opponent but the initial formation almost always morphs into a totally different alignment or spacing of players as the action unfolds. What begins as a 3-on-2 break ends as a 2-on-1 situation or 3-on-3 or some other variation; what at first appears to be a full-court man-to-man press suddenly becomes a 2-2-1 zone trap. The formation and spacing between players constantly shifts as the players react to one another and the movement of the ball.

Consequently, **basketball is a game of freelance.** Even teams committed to regimented patterns or a series of pre-set plays are ultimately reduced to freelance as the intended offensive action breaks down in the face of defense and the attackers are forced to make a different set of choices in response. This constant movement is governed by rhythm, timing, and tempo – all elements of time.

The history of basketball is marked by dozens of rule changes and innovations since its founding in 1891 – from permitting continuous dribbling and shots off the dribble in 1909 to establishing the midcourt line in 1932 followed by the ten-second limit a year later to the three-second lane violation in 1936 to the 3-point shot in 1986 – but two changes in particular were critical to the game’s evolution: the elimination of the jump ball after made free throws and baskets in the late 1930’s and the rise of the jump shot as a potent offensive weapon in the early 1950’s.

- The elimination of the jump ball after made free throws and baskets meant that play would no longer resemble the stop-start-stop nature of football but instead would be continuous, the ebb and flow of offense to defense and back again, fluid and seamless. From this point forward, basketball evolved as a game of *transition*. The adoption of the shot clock in 1985 merely cemented what had already been in existence for nearly fifty years.

- The emergence of the jump shot in the late 1940's followed by its rapid adoption across the country in the 1950's altered the relationship between time and space once again. It made the game *vertical*, liberating the offensive player to maneuver *on his own*. The jump shooter's quick release combined with the height attained made it necessary for the defensive player to play much tighter than what was previously needed. The defender's aggressiveness made him vulnerable to the fake and drive and, in particular, to a brand new maneuver – the lethal pull-up jumper.

Together, these two changes fundamentally altered the nature of the game, shifting its focal point from “territory” to “time,” and correspondingly from “the coach” to “the players.” Successful coaching requires an understanding of movement, rhythm, and transition, and a willingness to give up the control that football coaches enjoy.

### **The Rule of Five**

Basketball expresses itself in five different types of time.

**Tempo is the pace or speed at which something occurs.** In basketball, it's the pace of the game -- fast or slow, or something in between. The team that establishes and is able to maintain its preferred tempo or pace is usually the victor.

Tempo impacts the game on a *strategic* level. It directly impacts the number of possessions and shot attempts, and consequently, scoring. It often reveals a coach's offensive and defensive philosophy and his tolerance of risk and error. At one end of the spectrum we may see a team that favors a highly conservative approach: a containment press followed by a zone or pack line defense intended to consume the shot clock paralleled by a methodical, time-consuming offense to limit the number of possessions and frustrate an impatient opponent. At the other end, a wide-open running and gambling team like Paul Westhead's Loyola Marymount's squads, willing to give up open shots and even layups in order to speed the game until the sheer pace of play fatigues and disorients their opponent, leading to a catastrophic meltdown.

**Rhythm refers to how well all the parts of a team's offense and defense work together.** Rhythm expresses the relationship between moving parts – the sequence of motion, the order in which things happen and how well they are “timed” or in sync with one another. One team may prefer a fast pace, another a slower tempo, but both styles of tempo require rhythm to be effective.

Rhythm and tempo work together. A team attempting to play fast can grow impatient or out of control. “Be quick but don't hurry,” John Wooden used to say, cautioning his teams against the tendency to unnecessarily force action. Conversely, a team desiring a slower pace may risk becoming regimented and mechanical, passing up opportunities that naturally present themselves during a game. Instead of “playing the game,” they become obsessed with “running the play.” Good rhythm and tempo generally compliment and massage one another. In this dynamic nothing is more important than good shooting. When a team isn't shooting well everything else seems to get out of sync.

**Reaction time is the time it takes for one player to react to the movement another player.**

People don't react instantly to stimuli; there's always a delay between the recognition of the stimulus and the triggering of the response. The widely accepted time delay is one-fifth of a second – the average for humans pushing buttons or stepping on brake pedals in response to visual or aural cues. A teenager is likely to respond a bit quicker than a senior citizen but one-fifth is the average

While tempo is strategic in nature, reaction time is *tactical*. To succeed you just have to be faster than your opponent at a particular moment in time. For example, how long will it take for a defensive player to react to the movement of an offensive player and adjust his position accordingly? The answer depends on the distance between players and their relative quickness. In order to react in time the defensive player must create a cushion – a position that allows him to pressure the ball yet protect the basket. If he is quicker than his opponent he can play tighter and more aggressively, but if he is slower, he will need a bigger cushion to give himself time to react.

The purpose of any offensive cut is to destroy the defender's cushion – that is, to close the distance between players and shorten the resulting reaction time. One reason the development of the jump shot helped make basketball a game of transition is that it dramatically shortened defensive reaction time. It made straight man-for-man tactics between players of equal ability obsolete. Most of the time the offensive player will get the shot he wants. To defend against a good jump shooter the defender is forced to play tighter and thus is more susceptible to a shot fake and subsequent drive, or to the pull-up jumper if he is able to recover in time to stop the drive. Effective offensive schemes place defenders in floor positions where their reaction time is shortened and where it is difficult to receive help from teammates. Effective defensive schemes may use denial techniques to extend the offensive passing lanes supported by help and rotation tactics to increase their reaction time, or employ various zone and combination defenses to confuse their opponents and limit their freelance opportunities.

**Clock time is the passage of time measured on an actual clock** – the 20-minute halves governed by the “game” clock, the 35-second “shot” clock, and the relationship between the two. In a losing situation at the end of a game, a coach may use a combination of timeouts and fouls to stop the game clock and “extend” the game; in contrast his opponent may milk the shot clock and with it, the corresponding game clock in an effort to limit the number of remaining possessions thus “shortening” the game.

In the NBA, where teams play 12-minute quarters instead of 20-minute halves, teams often look to create “two for one” scoring opportunities by utilizing the difference in time between the 24-second shot clock and game clock in order to guarantee an extra possession at the end of a quarter. For example, regardless of its preferred tempo team a team may rush the ball up the floor to generate a quick shot and possible score knowing full well that its opponent will now face the limits of the 24-second shot clock and that they will get the ball back again for another possession and possible score. Whether their opponent scores or not, they know that they will have a chance to score *twice* to their opponent's *once* before the game clock ends the quarter.

**Referee time represents the various “countdowns” employed by the game officials to govern different situations of play** – inbound the ball, crossing the half court line, the closely guarded

ball handler, etc. This “clock” exists in the mind of the referee and is signified by the physical movement of his arm back and forth at waist level as he mentally counts each “second.” Coaches instruct their players in tactics to avoid needless turnovers in these situations. For example, when facing full-court pressure, the in-bounder has five seconds to complete the throw-in. The count does not begin until he takes possession of the ball either by picking it up himself or waiting patiently for the official to “place the ball at his disposal.” A coach who desires his team to set-up their press attack will instruct his in-bounder to let the official track down the ball after a score rather than rushing to pick it up himself. This gives his teammates time to get to their designated spots before the throw-in is attempted.

## **Conclusion**

*Time trumps territory* is appropriately our first law for it is the starting or fundamental premise upon which the remaining laws of basketball are built. Because time trumps territory, basketball is a game in constant flux and by nature, therefore, a game of freelance. Coaching good basketball means, “letting go.” If you want your players to “play in the flow,” you can’t constantly interrupt the flow.

In such a game played “on the fly,” with the defense and offense ebbing and flowing seamlessly from one to the other and back again, coaches and players need a set of navigation tools to help them “see” and make the right choices quickly.

What are the principles by which you read or see the game and its myriad of choices? How does one plot the game’s “latitudes and longitudes” accurately? How does one develop “court sense”?

Understanding basketball’s next three laws provides the navigation tools needed to answer these questions.