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THE TRIALS PLAYBOOK: THE COMPLETE GUIDE

The whole playbook in one place: before, during and after the trial, from the criteria framework and court planning to time-segment evaluation, the 5pm rule and stop/start/keep feedback, with a one-page checklist. The overview has the short version.

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INTRODUCTION

Why trials go wrong, and how to fix them

Trials are the most consequential event in a junior basketball coach's calendar. They determine which athletes get which opportunities. They shape how athletes feel about the sport, about themselves, and about the adults who run it. And they are, in most clubs and associations across Australia, run without any formal framework, with criteria that exist only in the head of the head coach, and with feedback that is too vague to be useful.

This guide compiles everything the Talking Split podcast said about running better trials, from the physical setup to the evaluation methodology to the announcement and feedback process. It is designed to be used before, during, and after your next trial.

> *"If you've got those dot points (this is our criteria, this is what we laid out) that's going to help that chat every time. Every single time."*
>
> Season 2

PART ONE: BEFORE THE TRIAL

Planning and preparation

STEP 1: WRITE YOUR CRITERIA BEFORE ANYONE WALKS THROUGH THE DOOR

The most important thing you can do before a trial is write down, specifically and in advance, what you are evaluating. Criteria that exist only in the head of the head coach are applied inconsistently, even by the coach themselves. What you are looking for changes based on who you're watching, what just happened in the last drill, and how tired you are.

A practical starting framework across five areas:

- Technical skills: shooting mechanics, finishing, ball handling, passing accuracy.

- Decision-making: does the athlete read the game, or do they react only to the ball?
- Defensive effort and habits: stance, communication, staying in front.
- Coachability: does the athlete implement feedback during the trial? Do they listen?
- Team behaviours: communication, encouragement of teammates, response to mistakes.

> **Critical rule**
>
> *Share your criteria with every evaluator before the trial begins. Run a 15-minute briefing. Every person watching the trial should be evaluating the same things in the same way.*

STEP 2: COUNT YOUR COURTS FIRST

Before you plan anything else, before you design a single drill, count the number of courts available and divide by the number of athletes expected. No athlete at a trial should have extended standing time. Not because standing is harmful, but because standing time is unobserved time. Every athlete deserves the chance to be seen.

The formula: if you have two courts and 24 athletes, you can run 6v6 on each court simultaneously, keeping all athletes active. If you have one court and 24 athletes, you need to design stations or rotation formats that keep the athletes not in the primary activity engaged in something observable.

STEP 3: PLAN THE FORMAT, MOVE TO GAMEPLAY QUICKLY

The most common trial design mistake: too much isolated skill work and not enough game play. A player who looks spectacular in a ball-handling drill may be poor under defensive pressure. A player who looks rough in isolation may be a highly efficient decision-maker in game conditions.

- Warm-up and brief individual skills observation: 15 minutes maximum.
- Small-sided games (3v3 or 4v4): 30 to 40 minutes. This is where most of your evaluation happens.
- 5v5 full game: 20 minutes. Observe how athletes function in a full team context.
- Position-specific work if needed: 10 minutes.

> **Try this**
>
> *Before your next trial, build a one-page run sheet that shows every activity, its duration, which court it runs on, and how many athletes are active at any one time. If any activity has more than a third of athletes standing, redesign it. Active athletes are evaluable athletes.*

PART TWO: DURING THE TRIAL

Evaluation methodology

TIME-SEGMENT EVALUATION: THE MOST IMPORTANT TOOL

Research into talent identification in sport (discussed in Season 6 with Dr Alex Roberts) produced one of the most practically impactful findings in the podcast's history: evaluative impressions crystallise within the first hour of observation, whether you acknowledge that or not. Everything after that first impression is largely confirmation of what you already decided.

The protection against this is structured time-segment evaluation: every evaluator independently rates each athlete after 20 minutes of observation, then again at 40 minutes, then at the end of the trial. The ratings are recorded separately each time, not updated, but re-evaluated fresh.

The value: comparing ratings across segments reveals athletes who started poorly and improved (late starters worth noting), athletes who started well and faded (potentially fitness-related), and athletes whose initial impression dominated your rating regardless of subsequent performance.

> *"Evaluative impressions crystallise within the first hour of observation. Everything after that is confirmation of what you already decided."*
>
> Dr Alex Roberts, Season 6

THE SELF-EVALUATION PROTOCOL

An innovation from the BV national program approach described in Season 1: before the coaching staff gives any feedback to an athlete, the athlete gives feedback to themselves. The self-evaluation form has two columns: athlete assessment and staff assessment. The comparison between the two is often more revealing than either alone.

Athletes whose self-perception is wildly disconnected from reality (either dramatically lower or higher than observed performance) flag a development need that technical feedback alone won't address. The athlete who consistently rates themselves far below their actual performance may need confidence support. The athlete who consistently rates themselves far above it may need an honest conversation about awareness.

MANAGING REPUTATION BIAS: THE KNOWN ATHLETE PROBLEM

The most common bias in junior basketball trials: the athlete whose reputation precedes them. Coaches who have seen an athlete play for years bring an existing mental model that shapes what they see. The athlete who was excellent at 14 gets the benefit of the doubt at 16. The athlete from a less-known club or association doesn't.

The practical protection: if possible, have at least one evaluator at every trial who has not seen the athletes before. Fresh eyes produce fresh data. Also: review your evaluation sheets before the announcement and check whether the athletes from less-known programs received genuinely equal attention.

KEEPING IT MOVING: THE ONE-MINUTE RULE

A trial that feels slow is a trial where athletes are spending too long waiting. The energy and effort level of athletes under evaluation drops significantly when they have been waiting for more than two or three minutes. Design your trial so that transitions between activities take no more than 60 seconds, and brief instructions to athletes take no more than one minute. Demonstrate rather than explain wherever possible.

> **Try this**
>
> *Run a stopwatch on your next trial. Every time athletes are waiting (in a line, during a coach briefing, during a rotation) log it. At the end of the trial, add up the waiting time. If it exceeds 20% of the total trial duration, your next trial needs a redesign focused specifically on reducing transitions and standing time.*

PART THREE: AFTER THE TRIAL

Announcements, feedback, and follow-up

THE ANNOUNCEMENT: TIMING MATTERS MORE THAN YOU THINK

One of the most immediately actionable insights from Season 1: announcing team selections online at 10am on a school day means athletes find out alone, in a public environment, without support around them. The athlete who is disappointed is sitting in a classroom when they read the news.

The de facto standard the coaches arrived at through experience: post results at 5pm on a weekday. Families are likely to be together or available. The athlete who is disappointed has someone around them. The change costs nothing and the impact on athletes at their most vulnerable moment is significant.

> **5pm Rule**
>
> *Announce team selections at 5pm on a weekday, not at 10am, not on a weekend morning when families may be separated. This single change is one of the lowest-cost, highest-impact improvements any program can make to its trial process.*

FEEDBACK: THE STOP/START/KEEP FRAMEWORK

The feedback framework the coaches converged on across multiple seasons: two or three specific dot-points per athlete, structured as stop, start, keep. What to stop doing, what to start doing, what to keep doing.

Not twelve pieces of feedback. Two or three. An athlete processing disappointment cannot absorb twelve pieces of information simultaneously. The discipline of limiting feedback to the most important things is both a communication skill and an act of kindness.

The delivery sequence that produces the best outcomes:

1. Ask the athlete to self-evaluate first: 'What do you think went well? What do you think needs work?' Listen genuinely.
2. Confirm what they identified correctly. Add what they missed. Correct what they misjudged.
3. Give the two or three specific actions they can work on.
4. Close with genuine encouragement, not platitudes, but something specific you observed.

THE WRITTEN FEEDBACK STANDARD

The recommendation from multiple seasons: feedback should be provided in writing, not only verbally. The athlete who hears feedback in an emotional state retains very little of it. The written version, sent via email or message, gives them something to return to when they are ready to process it calmly.

Written feedback also protects the coach: it provides a record of what was communicated, prevents misremembering, and makes it possible to show a parent exactly what was said and what development areas were identified.

THE PARENT CONVERSATION: BEFORE AND AFTER

Before the trial: send a brief communication to families explaining what the trial will involve, what criteria are being used, and when and how results will be communicated. Setting expectations before the trial dramatically reduces the temperature of any subsequent conversation.

After the trial: implement the 24-hour rule. No parent may approach a coach about selection decisions immediately after a trial. Request that any concerns be submitted via message or email and allow 24 hours before a conversation. The conversation that happens 24 hours later is almost always more productive than the one that happens in the car park.

> **Try this**
>
> *After your next trial, send a written feedback message to every athlete who attended, selected or not. For athletes who were selected, one specific strength and one area to work on. For athletes who were not selected, the stop/start/keep framework with two specific items. This takes 10 to 15 minutes per athlete and is the single most impactful thing you can do for the health of your program's relationship with its athletes and families.*

QUICK REFERENCE

Trials checklist at a glance

BEFORE THE TRIAL

- ☐ Write your selection criteria, at least five areas, before the trial begins
- ☐ Brief every evaluator on the criteria: run a 15-minute pre-trial alignment session
- ☐ Count courts available and design the format so no athlete waits more than 2-3 minutes
- ☐ Plan to move into gameplay (3v3 or 4v4) within the first 20 minutes
- ☐ Prepare self-evaluation forms for athletes to complete during or after the trial
- ☐ Send a pre-trial communication to families explaining criteria and announcement timing

DURING THE TRIAL

- ☐ Every evaluator rates athletes independently after 20 minutes, 40 minutes, and at the end
- ☐ No evaluator shares their ratings with others until all ratings are complete
- ☐ Monitor standing time: if any athlete waits more than 3 minutes, intervene
- ☐ Keep instructions to athletes under 60 seconds: demonstrate rather than explain
- ☐ Note athletes whose performance changed significantly across the time segments

AFTER THE TRIAL

- ☐ Announce results at 5pm on a weekday, not 10am, not on a weekend morning
- ☐ Ask every athlete to self-evaluate before giving staff feedback
- ☐ Send written stop/start/keep feedback to every athlete, selected or not
- ☐ Implement the 24-hour rule for parent feedback requests
- ☐ Review your evaluation process: did any athletes from less-known programs receive equal attention?

RELATED GUIDES

Part of The Talking Split Library. See also the Parent Communication Toolkit and The Unofficial Book, or browse all coaching resources. Back to the trials playbook overview.

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