

A Parent's Guide to Great Falls Select Basketball Tryouts

The toughest challenge with the tryout process is that some players will not be selected to play Select Basketball, and some may not make the A team in age groups where we run an A team and a B team. This year we'll have some age groups with over forty players trying out for only twenty spots, and in every age group we'll have many more players trying out than we have roster spots available. Usually each coach will choose only ten players for a team, sometimes fewer. Some thoughts on the process:

Supporting Your Player

Organizations such as the *Positive Coaching Alliance* recommend that parents carefully consider how stressful a competitive tryout can be for youth athletes. They recommend that parents avoid adding to that stress by making the player feel that his or her parents will be disappointed in an unsuccessful tryout, or that not making the team will be a crisis. Be your player's biggest supporter, whatever the outcome.

Try to avoid coaching your player on what to do at tryouts or how to stand out among the other players... this kind of coaching is usually well-intentioned but often adds to the player's anxiety and may have unintended consequences. For instance, every year we see players who seem to have been coached to show their skills by shooting every time they get the ball... this backfires because the coach at the tryout sees "poor shot selection" or, worse, "poor teamwork." Coaches will make what they're looking for at tryouts very clear to the participants; multiple sources of tryout coaching can be confusing to the player.

Before the tryout process begins, it's usually a good idea to have a talk with your player about what happens if they don't make the team. Not making the team is a real possibility for most players in most tryouts, so don't be caught by surprise. How could an unsuccessful tryout still be a positive – or at least a constructive – experience? How could it be a "teachable moment?" A good way to fill your player's emotional tank before and during tryouts is to praise him or her for the courage it takes to put themselves in a position where things might not work out.

Understanding "The Bubble"

In the tryout for most age groups, there will be a group of several players who are easy to identify as the better players in the tryout. They may be the most athletic, the earliest bloomers, the tallest, etc.; but most often they're the players who have been playing and practicing more than the other players.

There will also be a group of players who clearly don't have the skills (yet!) to be competitive players in Select-level basketball. They may be late bloomers, they may just not have played a lot of basketball yet, or they may be players for whom basketball has not been a high-priority endeavor.

In most age groups, this leaves a lot of players competing for a few (typically four to six) remaining spots. This is "the bubble," and among the players on the bubble, there typically are not huge differences in overall talent. So it's hard for coaches to determine which bubble players to choose. Oftentimes the coach will look at the remaining spots as an opportunity to balance the team: if the best few players were smaller guards, the coach might look for bigger players to round out the team. The coach might look for players who excel at something specific such as defense, setting screens, or rebounding. Every coach makes final cuts knowing that they might be cutting the wrong player, but each coach has to make those decisions.

Year after year, when parents are upset about a coach's selections, it's usually because they've tried to stack-rank the players competing for the bubble spots on the roster ("Jimmy is probably the seventh player and Ben is

probably the eighth player, but John should make the team as the ninth player"). The problem is that the parent's assessments may turn out to be a lot different than the coach's assessments. The reality is that unless a player is clearly among the top few players in the tryout process, they're at some risk of not making the team.

We employ independent, qualified evaluators in the tryout process. Part of their job is to blow the whistle on any situation where the coach is preparing to cut a player who is clearly one of best players in the tryout (or to *select* a player who is clearly one of the weaker players in the tryout). However, even among very experienced coaches and trainers, there may be disagreement about the last few "bubble" candidates for the roster. In those cases we support the coaches' decisions as final.

Not making a team is not the end of the world. Kids change a great deal from fifth grade to eighth grade, so a player who got cut one year could be one of the better candidates next year if they keep playing and working on their game. This area is blessed with tremendous resources for players who want to get better: trainers, camps, summer leagues, AAU teams, etc. We're a relatively small community and any player who is really committed to make a team next year has a good chance.

What About the Coach's Kid?

In cases where the coach has a son or daughter trying out for the team, that player may be one of the better players in the tryout, but *they don't have to be* in order to make the team. It seems obvious that - given the extraordinary commitment of time and energy that coaching requires – we would not expect a coach to *cut his own son or daughter* from the team.

As part of the GFSB's annual open process for coach selection, we do screen for situations where a potential coach's son or daughter is not a viable Select player. However, our clear first priority is to select the most-qualified coaches available. If Phil Jackson retires to Great Falls with his eleven NBA championship rings and applies to coach in the GFSB system, Coach Jackson's grandson is likely to make the team even if he's not one of the best players.

Other Notes About the Tryout Process

Coaches may not permit parents to stay in the gym during tryouts. Coaches have no discretion to interpret or selectively apply this rule – no parents in the gym during tryouts, no exceptions. Parents should drop their players at the gym at least 10 minutes prior to the scheduled start, then return to the gym no earlier than the scheduled finish. No fair returning to the gym twenty minutes before the tryout ends – the coach would be required to ask you to leave. We trust that parents understand the reasons for this rule and understand that we need to enforce it without exception.

Note: this rule applies equally to parents who may expect to be an assistant coach if their son or daughter makes the team. Prospective assistant coaches can attend tryouts only if they *do not* have a son or daughter participating.

Players need to attend at least one tryout in order to be selected. Most team will run three tryouts before making final player selections. It's best for most players to go to every scheduled tryout if at all possible in order to provide the best chance of making the team. Failing that, plan to go to at least two of the first three tryouts. It's theoretically possible to make a team on the basis of one tryout session, but it puts a great deal of pressure on the player to excel on that evening, especially if the only tryout they attend is the third tryout (by then, many players will already have been cut). We have made exceptions to this rule in the past in order to accommodate players who have tried out with another program during the GFSB tryout process, but those situations are rare.

We understand there will be tryout schedule conflicts with other sports and activities, but good coaches in any fall sport understand that Select basketball tryouts are in early October every year – it's not a surprise - and should not begrudge players missing a practice or two if necessary.

Coaches will need to make cuts after every tryout. Some age groups will start the tryout process with more than 30 players and will need to start the third tryout with no more than 15 players (probably fewer) still in the mix. So, depending on the size of the age group, coaches will need to make some cuts after each tryout. We ask coaches to send e-mails after each tryout; some of those messages will invite players to continue the tryout process and some will send regrets to players who will not move forward.

Note: we do not ask or require coaches to provide individual player evaluations as part of the cut process, or to explain to players or parents why a player was not selected. At this level of the game, if a player gets cut it usually means he or she just needs to practice more, play more and work on fundamentals with a qualified coach or trainer. We do ask coaches to consider providing feedback to parents if a player's attitude and behavior at tryouts were negative factors in the selection process. If you do ask coaches for feedback and they are willing to provide it, understand that candid and accurate assessments are usually a mix of positive and not-so-positive feedback.

We encourage coaches to use their two zip code exceptions. Per the Fairfax County Youth Basketball League's rules, each team can select two players from outside the program's recruiting area (for the GFSB program, that means players from outside Great Falls and portions of Vienna, Reston, and Herndon). We expect coaches to recruit and roster the best players available and we do not reserve those two spots on the roster for Great Falls residents.

We may form B teams in some age groups. By the end of the first or second tryout we will have a sense of whether each age group has enough talented players to form a second team. In that case we may select an A team by the end of the second or third tryout, so that a third or fourth tryout can focus on selecting a B team.

For questions about the GFSB tryout process that are not addressed in this note, contact dick@gfhoops.com or the head coach in your son or daughter's age group.