



NAVIGATING THE SCHEDULE OF AN NBA SEASON—COACHING PERSPECTIVE

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For newcomers to the National Basketball Association (NBA), navigating through the season is one of the most difficult challenges they face. Regardless of one's position within an organization, the schedule is something that impacts many daily decisions and the overall training philosophy. This is no more true than with the strength and conditioning coach, whose success is predicated on structure and progression.

Having worked as a strength and conditioning coach in the NBA for close to a decade, not only have I been able to seek advice from my peers, but I have also been able to test different approaches to training as it pertains to scheduling. The purpose of this article is to present the NBA season cycles in order to provide a better understanding of the yearly requirements and an appreciation for the amount of time and effort strength and conditioning coaches invest into the success of their teams.

Obviously, there is no one right way. Some coaches will shorten phases and extend others based upon both personal and team philosophies. However, the overall NBA schedule remains the same. Also, it is important to note that a successful NBA strength and conditioning coach needs to be flexible because of the ever-changing schedule. This is something I had to learn quickly during my first season. I realized how many different and unforeseeable variables there are in the course of a week, let alone an entire season.

The scope of this article only includes strength and conditioning routines as they relate to basketball-specific resistance training. Obviously, other factors should be accounted for, such as injury

prevention exercises, muscle activation exercises, physical therapy, and extra conditioning.

THE PRE-SEASON (AUGUST - OCTOBER)

Pre-season is the time of year that coaches have the most individual time with the players and can address specific issues while working on overall strength and power. At this point in the season, the priority of strength and conditioning is to prepare the players' bodies for a long season. This is the time of year to form the strength and conditioning base from which to progress throughout the year. With the lack of games and travel during this time, it is often possible to have a progressive schedule that is consistent and structured. During my time as a strength and conditioning coach in the NBA, my programs emphasized pre-season training. I generally designed three- or four-day splits depending on the player, experience, and goals, and then added a few conditioning days to address aerobic capacity. From my experience, the majority of avoidable soft tissue injuries occurred in the first few months of the season; it was imperative to have the players in sound shape to limit their chances of injury and keep them focused on playing basketball.

Players would return for pre-season training anywhere from the beginning of August to the end of September; the younger players generally returned earlier than the veterans. Generally, it worked best to start slow with the players during their first week back and try to gauge their current physical condition to how it compares to the previous year. I would start by measuring body fat and body mass, and discussing short-term goals.

I would always provide weekends off because some players would travel back home to visit their family and recoup for an upcoming week. For training purposes, the less a player would travel during this training period the better. However, this time often represented the last chance that players would get to spend quality time with their families before the season and, mentally, this had a profound positive effect that outweighed the possible negative effect of jet lag. During the weekdays, the players would generally arrive anywhere between 8:00 am – 12:00 pm, and engage in basketball skill work either before or after lifting. During this time, they also tried to complete all their pre-season testing and physicals before training camp, which took place during the first week of October.

The other aspects that required attention during this period were individual basketball workouts and pick-up 5-on-5 games. This is why it was imperative to have an open dialogue with the director of player development or whoever is controlling the workouts at that point in the season. I would collaborate with this individual on how we to condition the players before and during the season. Sometimes it would be on the court during the skill work or 5-on-5 games, and other times it would be during training on the track or in the boxing ring. However, we made sure to communicate so that we were not doubling up on their conditioning and inadvertently overloading the players.

IN-SEASON (OCTOBER – APRIL)

During the NBA season, strength and conditioning coaches do not have a tremendous amount of time to work with the players, so it is important to be as efficient as possible. It is important to be flexible due to changes from variables like travel, injuries, and trades during the season. The following is what I incorporated into my training schedule to help me deal with some of these variables. One strategy I incorporated was lifting on game days; though this was sometimes limited by the quality of the weight rooms in various arenas.

Once the season started, my normal approach was to get all the players on a consistent lifting routine. Generally speaking, I would try to get my young players to lift four times per week and my veterans to lift at least two times per week—some weeks we were able to get three or four lifts depending on the schedule and physical condition. The young players would typically have longer workouts of about 45 min to one hour. Those playing a lot of minutes in the games would generally be limited to 30 min to finish their lifting routine.

I preferred to have both the rotation and non-rotational players lift the day of a game, though the approach was slightly different for each. I was always fortunate to have a quality weight room in my home arena that I could access before and after games, but that is not always the case for every strength and conditioning coach. The non-rotational players would usually lift for a couple of hours before games. These players were not likely to play, so we would get a quality lift in, whenever possible. Also, being later in the day, their bodies were awake and warm so they could typically get a better lift in compared to working out in the morning. Perhaps a

couple times per year because of circumstances in a game, these guys would get playing time in the evening after a training session. Generally, it was not a lot of playing time and if they had been doing this routine long enough they were not fatigued during the game. However, if they started playing more regularly, then their training would be adjusted accordingly. What I found interesting was that once players got into a routine of lifting before games, they reported that it made them feel better and more alert.

The rotation players typically had more flexibility as to when they did their strength training. I gave players flexibility in choosing the time of day during which they lifted because, psychologically, if the players did not buy into the time of day they lifted, it would probably not be a quality lift anyways. In addition, some players had family responsibilities that made lifting at certain times difficult.

I presented my rotation players the option of lifting after a game. Initially it was a tough sell, but they eventually bought in once I explained to them that it would be quicker than a pre-game lift because they would not need to do all the warm-ups and, more importantly, they would get the next day off from strength training to fully rest their legs.

After games, players were already warmed up and loose, and could jump right into lifting, cutting the amount of time in the weight room in half. For example, in terms of a recovery day, rather than playing Sunday, lifting Monday, and playing Tuesday without resting their legs, they had Monday to recover their legs after getting their workout in the night before. At some points in the season, I would have ten players lifting after a game. First, this says a lot about the character of the players and that team, but it also says something about this method because the players obviously felt it benefited them. If the players did not see a benefit in lifting after home games, they definitely would have to let me know.

As the in-season equates to a lot of traveling, I tried to get the bulk of our lifting completed at home. Personally, I found the quality was much better at home than on the road. While traveling, we never really knew what equipment we would have access to or if we would have the necessary time. There were situations when the team would be gone for a week and we would have to do some type of team lift. Sometimes, I had to be creative. For example, during the warm-ups for practice, I would add some band work or plyometrics. However, for the most part, if it was just a quick two-day trip, I would wait until we got back home to do the bulk of our lifting. The non-rotation guys were the exception because I had more time with them and did not have to manage game recovery. I tried to keep the players training as consistently as possible despite being limited by equipment and travel.

This in-season method happened to work for my particular team setting, but may not work for all. I know many strength coaches who successfully employed different strategies. I always tried to be open-minded in terms of our in-season training schedule. With the constant turnover of players, staff members, and the new schedule, I was constantly adjusting for the new season. I needed to come up

with a strategy that would give our players the best ability to get in a good lift on a consistent basis.

THE OFF-SEASON (MAY – JULY)

One of the busiest times of year for the strength and conditioning coach in the NBA is the off-season. For most teams, the season ends in the middle of April (the regular season) or a couple of weeks later in the playoffs. Each year, a few teams have the pleasure of playing into June and competing for the championship, which is a consideration that should be taken into account as the end of the season nears.

Generally speaking, as soon as the season would end, I liked my rotation players to get away and refresh both physically and mentally. I would have them stay active with some sort of fun activity, while being careful to avoid burning out. I would like them to start lifting in June to establish their base for the next season. In July and August I would start implementing some conditioning. Each player was different in the amount of time it took to prepare for the season. That is why it was important to keep an open dialogue with them throughout the summer.

Every year in May the NBA Combine occurred, which all strength and conditioning coaches generally attended unless they were still in the playoffs. Even then, an assistant would go in their place so as not to lose valuable contact time with potential draft prospects. Following the Combine, teams would bring in draft prospects right up to the day of the draft, which was at the end of June. Teams may bring in anywhere from a couple of players to over 80; because each organization had their own approach and method to player evaluation, the approach was often very different. Teams were allowed to bring in no more than six draft prospects per day. These prospects were subjected to individual team performance testing conducted by the strength and conditioning staff and court work conducted by the coaching staff. Management would then use the data collected during the performance testing as a resource during the draft selection process.

The difficult part for strength and conditioning coaches was that the draft coincided with the training of current roster players competing on the summer league team in July. Usually these players started training at least a month prior on a standard Monday through Friday summer schedule. Time management was crucial at this time of year. I would generally have the summer league players train in the morning and the draft prospects in the afternoon. It was not uncommon for draft prospects to come in on the weekends.

After the summer league games in July, I would visit veterans in their respective cities to monitor some of their training. Some teams began to organize team camps at this time, which was a tremendous help because it allowed me to check in with all of the players at once. Most strength and conditioning coaches take their vacations at the end of July or the beginning of August, before the players start to come back in August and September.

CONCLUSION

This outline is an oversimplification of an NBA season from the perspective of a strength and conditioning coach. The variables of an NBA season constantly change, which requires strength and conditioning coaches to adjust accordingly. Just as the NBA season is different, so are the individual teams in the NBA. Each individual's approach to scheduling might be different with a young team compared to a team of veterans. The success of the program is often heavily influenced by the coach's ability to combine strength and conditioning principles with common sense and their ability to adjust to the yearly schedule.

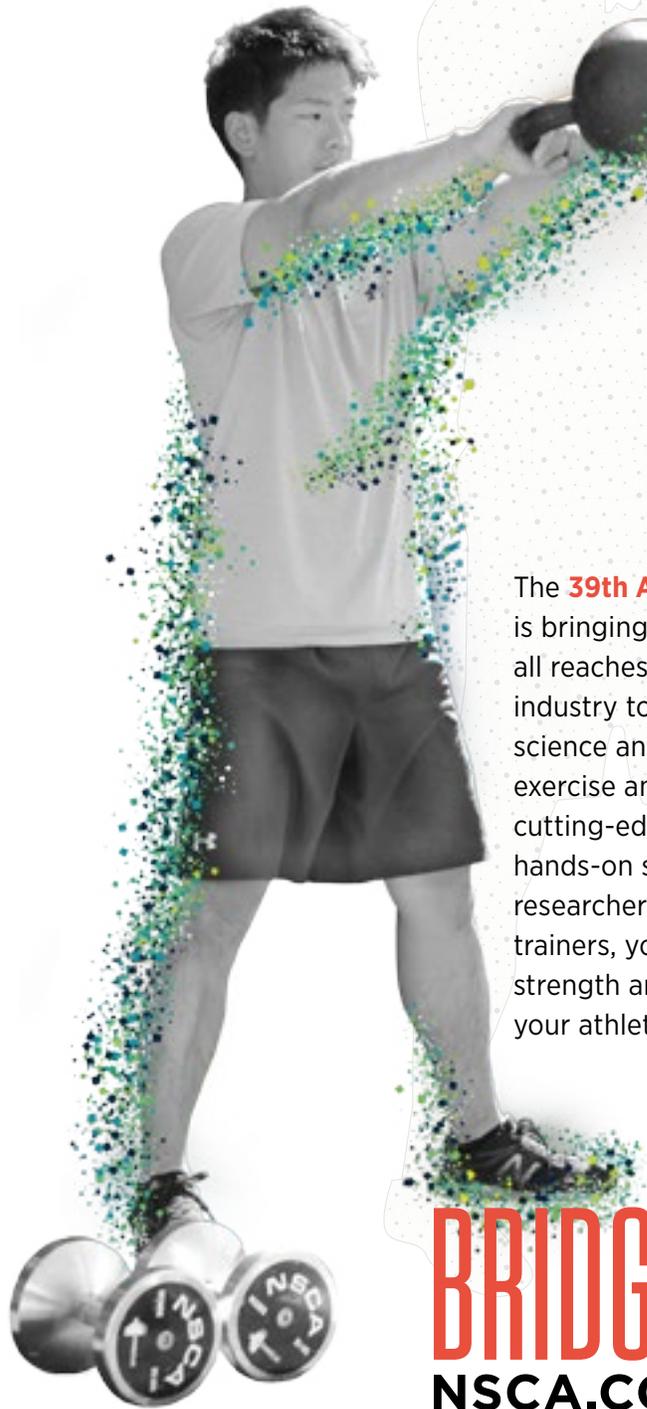
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For over fifteen years, Joe Rogowski has worked in a variety of sports—including soccer, football and basketball – developing and evaluating strength and conditioning protocols for players. Currently, he is the Director of Sports Medicine and Research for the National Basketball Player's Union. For several years, he served as the Head Strength and Conditioning Coach for the Orlando Magic and, most recently, was the Director of Science and Research for the Houston Rockets. Rogowski's published work includes articles relating to injury prevention, strength and conditioning, performance analytics, and echocardiology. He was an adjunct instructor in Exercise Physiology at the University of Florida and served as President of the National Basketball Strength Coaches Association (NBSCA). In addition, he has served on the NBA Science Advisory Committee and the NCAA Cardiac Task Force. Rogowski is a graduate of DePauw University and received a Master's degree in Exercise Physiology from the University of Central Florida.

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