DESIGN THE GAME. LET PLAYERS FIND A WAY.

Constraints-led basketball

Start with a basketball problem. Change the space, numbers or scoring so players have a reason to explore it. Watch what happens, ask a useful question, then let them play again.

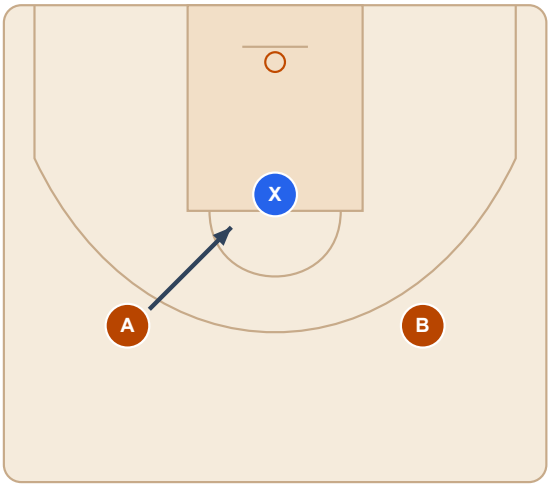
A practical starting point

Understand individual, environmental and task constraints.

Try six small-sided games, with clear scoring and rotations.

Adapt the challenge from U9 to U17.

Plan, observe and review using a reusable worksheet.



2v1: one defender, two attackers and a real choice between a drive and a pass.

WHAT IS CLA?

The constraints-led approach shapes learning through the interaction of the player, the environment and the task. Coaches design a problem, observe the decisions it invites and adjust the challenge.

KEEP THE GAME INFORMATION

Use a defender to read, a target to attack and teammates where the problem needs them. Small-sided games (SSGs) are a useful starting point; the rule you add should serve a clear learning purpose.

Read the guide and all six games online at swishplanner.com

THE COACHING APPROACH

One problem. One change. Play again.

INDIVIDUAL | Who is playing?

Each player's experience, confidence, reach, movement and energy affect the options they notice and can use. Notice who needs more time or a different matchup. Adapt the activity to give them a useful challenge.

ENVIRONMENTAL | What does the space offer?

The playing area and surroundings affect where players can move and the space available to them. Widen the court to open driving and passing lanes, or narrow it to increase pressure.

TASK | What is the game asking?

Rules, scoring, player numbers, time and equipment shape the problem players have to solve. Play 2v1, change the ball or basket to suit the group, or offer a bonus for a basket after a cut.

A weaker-hand rule is a task adjustment aimed at an individual need. The categories interact; use them to guide design rather than chase a perfect label.

1. CHOOSE A PROBLEM

Be specific: players crowd the ball, miss an open teammate or struggle to attack a recovering defender.

2. BUILD A SMALL GAME

Use 1v1, 2v1, 2v2 or 3v3. Keep the target, opponents and decisions relevant to that problem.

3. CHANGE ONE THING

Adjust space, numbers, a rule or a scoring reward. Explain the game and let players choose their solutions.

4. WATCH BEFORE STEPPING IN

Allow several possessions. Notice who gets involved, what players see and whether the rule creates the intended problem.

5. ASK, ADAPT AND REPLAY

Ask one short question. Keep, ease or change the constraint, then remove it and look for the same decisions in normal play.

Instruction: Drive baseline when you catch.

Constraint: A basket after a baseline drive earns one extra point.

Keep other baskets valid. If players force blocked drives for the bonus, change it.

GAME 01 | 4-6 MINUTES | 2-3 PLAYERS PER AREA

1v1: find the open gate

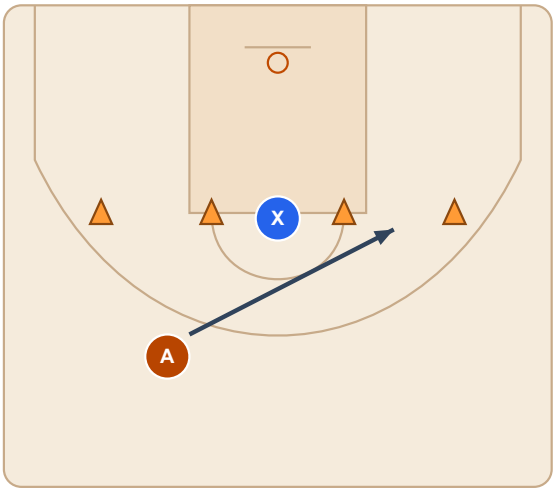
Read a defender and attack available space.

EQUIPMENT

One ball and four cones per area; a basket if available.

SET UP

Make two gates, each about two metres wide, with a clear gap between them. Attacker A starts about three metres in front; defender X starts between the gates. Give each pair a separate area.



X closes one gate; A reads the other. Arrow shows one possible choice.

Orange A-C: attack. Blue X-Z: defence. Starting positions are illustrative.

PLAY

On the attacker's first dribble, X steps into one gate and stays there until A crosses the other. A reads the choice and dribbles through the open gate. If using a basket, X can then recover to contest the finish. No contact at the gates.

SCORE

Without a basket: one point for crossing the open gate under control; defender earns one for a stop or turnover. With a basket: one point only for a legal basket after crossing the open gate; defender earns one for a stop, including a secured rebound.

ROTATE

Swap attack and defence after every attempt. With three players, rotate attacker to defender to resting observer to attacker. Change the starting side regularly.

MAKE IT EASIER

Widen the gates or keep the defender in the gate they choose for the whole attempt.

ADD CHALLENGE

Let the defender recover as soon as they have stepped into a gate. Keep both routes usable.

WATCH FOR

Does the attacker look at the defender and change direction, or decide their route before the defender moves?

ASK

What told you which gate was open?

RETURN TO NORMAL PLAY

Remove the gates and play live 1v1. Look for an attack into the space the defender leaves.

GAME 02 | 5-7 MINUTES | 3 PLAYERS PER BASKET

2v1: read the defender

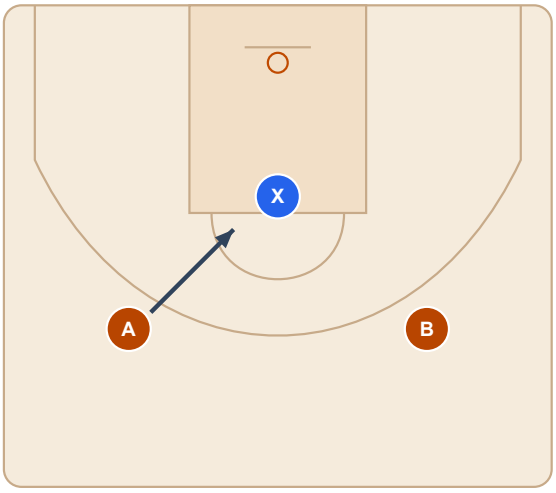
Recognise when to drive and when to pass.

EQUIPMENT

One ball, a basket and optional starting markers.

SET UP

Attacker A starts with the ball on a wing, B on the opposite wing and defender X between them and the basket. Use a distance from which both attackers can threaten the basket.



Two attackers threaten one defender. A can drive or find B.

Orange A-C: attack. Blue X-Z: defence. Starting positions are illustrative.

PLAY

Play a live 2v1 to one basket. Either attacker can drive, pass or shoot. End the possession on a basket, defensive rebound, turnover or ball out of bounds. Keep legal movement and normal contact rules.

SCORE

One point for a basket; one point for the defender on a stop. No required pass count: an open drive remains a useful choice.

ROTATE

After each possession, A becomes X, X becomes B and B becomes A. After each full rotation, start the ball on the other wing.

MAKE IT EASIER

Start the defender closer to the basket or give the attackers more width.

ADD CHALLENGE

Add a fourth player as a recovering defender, starting behind the ball on the first dribble. Rotate all four roles each possession.

WATCH FOR

Does the ball-handler draw the defender before passing? Does the teammate move to remain available?

ASK

When did the defender make the pass a better option than the drive?

RETURN TO NORMAL PLAY

Play 2v2 from the same starting spots. Watch whether players still recognise a drive or a teammate becoming free.

GAME 03 | 5-7 MINUTES | 5 PLAYERS PER BASKET

3v2: keep a passing option

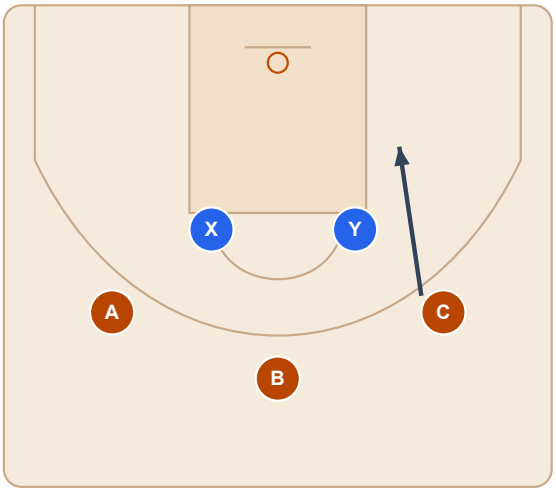
Create passing angles and move after a pass.

EQUIPMENT

One ball and a basket.

SET UP

Three attackers start across the top and wings, with two defenders between them and the basket. Leave enough width for players to cut without crowding each other.



A, B and C create options around two defenders. One possible cut is shown.

Orange A-C: attack. Blue X-Z: defence. Starting positions are illustrative.

PLAY

Play live to one basket. For this round, the ball-handler can pivot and pass but cannot dribble. Teammates move to receive or finish. End on a basket, defensive rebound, turnover or ball out of bounds.

SCORE

One point for a basket; defenders share one point for a stop. No extra points for a set number of passes.

ROTATE

Number players 1-5. Each possession, the next two numbers defend (1 and 2, then 2 and 3, and so on); the other three attack. Change who starts with the ball each time.

MAKE IT EASIER

Allow dribbling or widen the playing area if players struggle to create a pass.

ADD CHALLENGE

Add a sixth player as a third defender and allow dribbling again. Rotate the teams after each short round.

WATCH FOR

Are teammates creating new passing windows, or standing and calling for a pass through a defender?

ASK

Where could you move so the player with the ball can see you?

RETURN TO NORMAL PLAY

Restore normal dribbling in 3v3. Watch for useful movement after a pass without requiring it.

GAME 04 | 5-7 MINUTES | 4 PLAYERS PER BASKET

2v2: paint-touch bonus

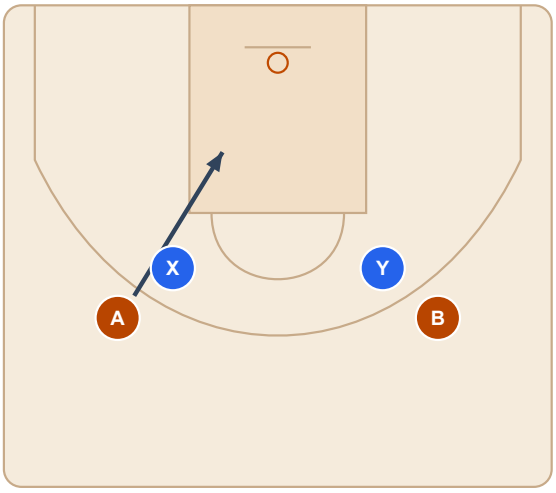
Use penetration to create a shot for yourself or a teammate.

EQUIPMENT

One ball and a basket with a marked paint area.

SET UP

Two attackers start on opposite wings with a defender each. Start the ball on alternating wings. Mark a suitably sized paint area if court lines are absent.



A attacks the paint; B stays available if Y helps. The drive is one option.

Orange A-C: attack. Blue X-Z: defence. Starting positions are illustrative.

PLAY

Play normal half-court 2v2. A paint touch means an attacker controls the ball with at least one foot in the paint, by dribbling or receiving there. Every legal shot remains available.

SCORE

One point for any basket, plus one bonus point if the team had a paint touch in that possession. A paint touch alone scores nothing. Defence earns one point for a stop.

ROTATE

Swap attack and defence after each possession ends on a basket, defensive rebound, turnover or ball out. Change matchups after each two-minute round.

MAKE IT EASIER

Start the on-ball defender a step behind the attacker to create a small advantage.

ADD CHALLENGE

Start both defenders in balanced positions and let them choose whether to help or stay with their player.

WATCH FOR

Do attackers notice a help defender and find the open teammate? Are they forcing a crowded drive just to chase the bonus?

ASK

What changed when the second defender helped?

RETURN TO NORMAL PLAY

Remove the bonus and keep playing 2v2. Look for penetration when it creates an advantage, with open shots still available.

GAME 05 | 6-8 MINUTES | 6 PLAYERS PER BASKET

3v3: cut into space

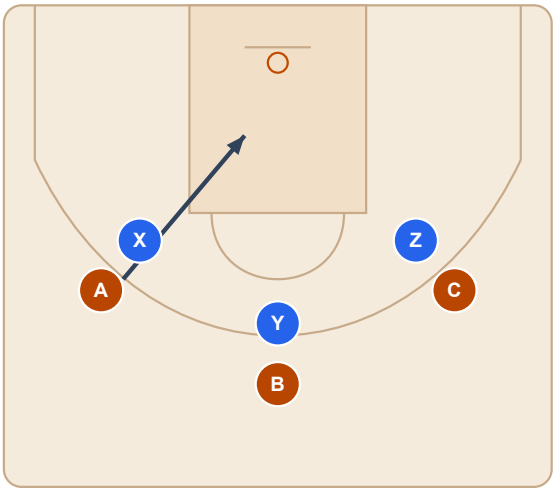
Create space for a teammate and time a cut.

EQUIPMENT

One ball, a basket and cones to mark an outside area if needed.

SET UP

Three attackers start around the perimeter with a defender each. Use a perimeter appropriate to their passing and shooting range; it need not be the three-point line.



One attacker cuts while teammates offer space and passing options.

Orange A-C: attack. Blue X-Z: defence. Starting positions are illustrative.

PLAY

Play live 3v3. An attacker can receive a pass outside the marked perimeter or while cutting into the paint. They cannot wait in the paint for a pass. After a legal catch, normal dribbling and finishing apply. A pass caught in a disallowed area ends the possession; rebounds are unrestricted.

SCORE

One point for any basket after a legal catch; defenders earn one point for a stop. Allow offensive rebounds and play on. Reset on a basket, defensive rebound, turnover or ball out.

ROTATE

Swap attack and defence after each possession. Rotate starting spots so everyone handles, cuts and defends. With extra players, substitute one each possession rather than leaving a whole team waiting.

MAKE IT EASIER

Play 3v2 and bring the outside perimeter closer to the basket.

ADD CHALLENGE

Return to 3v3 and give defenders freedom to deny, help or switch. Keep the catch rule as the only added restriction.

WATCH FOR

Are cuts timed to an open lane? Does another attacker fill the space left behind, or do all three cut together?

ASK

How did your movement make room for someone else?

RETURN TO NORMAL PLAY

Remove the catch restriction and play normal 3v3. Watch whether players still make space and time their cuts.

GAME 06 | 6-8 MINUTES | 6 PLAYERS PER BASKET

3v3: use the advantage

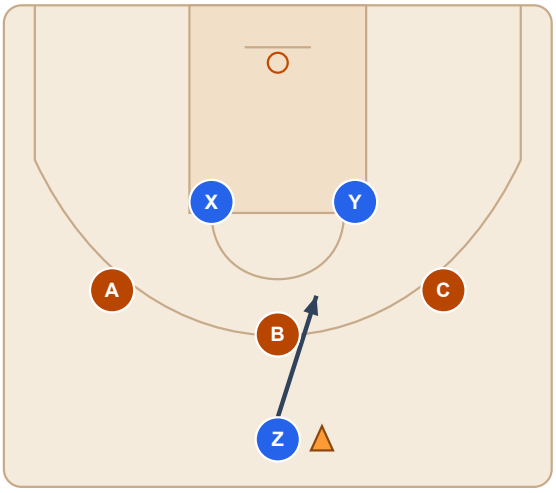
Recognise an advantage before a defender recovers.

EQUIPMENT

One ball, a basket, a cone and a visible or audible timer.

SET UP

Three attackers start at the top and wings. Two defenders are between them and the basket; the third starts at a cone a few steps behind the ball-handler, with a clear recovery route.



Z recovers from behind the ball. Attackers decide before the advantage closes.

Orange A-C: attack. Blue X-Z: defence. Starting positions are illustrative.

PLAY

On the first attacking movement, all players are live and the trailing defender recovers. Start an eight-second clock to release a shot. If released in time, switch off the clock and play rebounds out until the possession ends. Start a fresh clock for each new possession.

SCORE

One point for a basket. Defence earns one for a stop, including a late shot, defensive rebound or turnover. No requirement to shoot from a particular place.

ROTATE

Swap teams after each possession ends. Rotate the trailing defender and ball-handler every time their team takes that role. Keep recovery paths clear of other groups.

MAKE IT EASIER

Give ten or twelve seconds, or start the recovering defender further behind.

ADD CHALLENGE

Start the recovering defender closer. Change only that distance before considering a shorter clock.

WATCH FOR

Do players recognise the spare attacker? Does the clock sharpen a decision or simply cause rushed, off-balance shots?

ASK

When was your advantage biggest, and what did you do with it?

RETURN TO NORMAL PLAY

Remove the clock and recovery start. In normal 3v3, watch whether players recognise an advantage without rushing every possession.

DEVELOPMENT PATHWAY

Coach the player in front of you

Age groups are starting points, not tests or fixed limits. Experience, confidence and readiness guide the challenge.

U9

Love the game

Use simple movement games and 1v1 or 2v1, short rounds and reachable targets. Give every player frequent turns and chances to succeed.

Ask: Where is the space?

U11

Build foundations

Explore passing, cutting and attacking in 2v1, 2v2 and 3v3. Rotate roles and introduce one simple rule at a time.

Ask: What options did you have?

U13

Apply and understand

Use live defenders, number advantages and changing starting positions. Ask players to explain the information behind a decision.

Ask: What did the defender show you?

U15

Perform consistently

Increase pressure through recovery defenders, suitable time limits and team decisions. Keep individual feedback and reflection in the session.

Ask: How could you create a better advantage?

U17

Lead and transition

Let players lead short reviews and propose tactical adjustments. Vary defensive choices and use time-and-score situations.

Ask: What did you recognise, and how did you adapt?

For all groups: use suitable balls, basket heights and distances; keep playing areas clear; allow water as needed. Choose one game and one focus rather than fitting every example into one session.

CONSTRAINT-DESIGN SHEET

Plan a round. Notice what changes.

Date: _____ Group: _____ Coach: _____

1. The basketball problem

What are players doing now? What would a useful decision look like?

2. The small game and setup

Players, space, equipment, scoring, how a possession ends and how everyone rotates.

3. One constraint to try

What will you change? How might that invite the decision you want to see?

4. Easier / more challenging

What single adjustment can help each group find an achievable challenge?

5. Watch and ask

Who gets involved? What do they notice? Write one short question.

6. Remove it and review

What happened in normal play? What will you keep or change next time?

REFINE THE PRACTICE

Four checks for a stronger design

REPEAT THE PROBLEM, VARY THE PICTURE

Keep a learning focus while changing the starting side, partner or approach angle. Let players find different workable solutions instead of prescribing the same finish every time.

GIVE ATTENTION A USEFUL TARGET

Use a short cue about the intended effect, such as sending a pass into a teammate's path. Observe whether it helps rather than adding a running commentary on body positions.

STEP IN BRIEFLY WHEN IT HELPS

Game-based coaching still includes teaching. Offer a question, demonstration or short skill rehearsal when players need it, then reconnect that help to the game. Adapt the challenge to experience, not age alone.

LOOK BEYOND TODAY'S SCORE

Revisit the problem in a later session and normal play. One successful round is useful feedback; look for decisions players can repeat and adapt when conditions change.

Public further reading

FIBA/WABC Mini-Basketball Coaches Manual

Game-based teaching, adapting to skill level and small-sided formats. See sections 1.4, 2 and 5.

Basketball England Player Development Framework

Game awareness, enjoyment and long-term development across ages and stages.

Transforming Basketball: five CLA principles

A basketball coaching explanation of practice design, attentional focus and functional variability.

With thanks to Stroud Sharks Basketball Club for their input on player development and positive coaching.

Keep the player at the centre: value belonging, effort and progress; rotate roles; support different starting points; and give players a voice in the next round.

Read the Swish Planner CLA guide online

Edition: 25 October 2026. Free to download, print and use with your coaching staff.