To Become a Shooter
9/8/2006
By Otis Birdsong
Four Time NBA All-Star

In Otis Birdsong's 12 season NBA career, he scored over 14,000 points and was voted to the All-Star Game four times. With this feature, he explains what it takes to become the player who still remains the 12th highest scorer in NCAA history.

When I stepped out onto the court before a game, whether it was in college or the NBA, I had only one thought running through my head – what is my role defensively tonight? No, I wasn't trying to decide how best to get my shots off or even what moves I would make to get my teammates open. I wasn't thinking about my offensive game at all. I was preparing to shut my assignment down while playing team defense.

Now, aside from the fact that defense certainly is just as important as offense within the overall basketball scheme, I never thought about my offensive game because it was just that, my game. I wasn't going to adjust myself to another team, I was going to make my opponent adjust to me. I knew where my game had come from. It developed through my dedication to it and to constant practice. Every day, I would take 500 game shots. GAME SHOTS. That means, a shot you would legitimately take in a game. And that is not just from a game spot. It was a combination of a game spot at game speed. Shooting half court shots at game speed are just as worthless in your overall development as walking into your jump shot. Once on the court, I would remember all of those shots that I took and know that I was offensively ready.

Sure, I took my warm up shots. I wasn't just sitting on the bench watching the other team. I still needed to get my body loose and in order. But I warmed up with a purpose. I took game shots in the warm up just as I did in practice. I started off only a few feet from the basket and slowly worked my way around the goal. Then and only then, I took a step or two backwards and would continue that process. Eventually, I was shooting 3's from all around the arc and had progressed through every stage in between. That process combined with all the individual work before even stepping into the gym is what developed my confidence. Too many times, young players take two dribbles out on the court and start chucking 3s up at the goal. Or players will complain that they shoot for hours on end but never really improve. Their problem is not the amount of time they are spending on their game, it is the amount of quality time they are spending. An hour of game speed practice focused on development is many times more beneficial than many hours of non-focused, lazy practice. Don't get me wrong, it is more difficult to practice at game speed, but ultimately it makes the difference between a player who wants to get better and fights for it and a player who just wishes he were better.

There are many differing opinions on the importance of shooting form. Some will tell you to aim just over the front of the rim. Others will tell you to aim for the back of the rim. Still others think a shooter should aim for the clips that hold the net up. I always aimed for the middle of the rim. It seems obscure and obvious, but I ultimately wanted the ball to go through the middle of the rim so that is where I would aim.

As for the mechanics of shooting, I personally believe that above all else the shoulders are most important and to a slightly lesser extent, the feet. Just look at Reggie Miller. He could shoot from anywhere on the court and from any body position, but the one aspect of his shot that remained constant was his shoulders. He always squared up before he released a shot. All of the other basic shooting mechanics fall way down in importance compared to being squared up – having your feet and shoulders facing the basket.

As for the other touted mechanics (elbow in, feet shoulder width apart, toes towards the basket,

hold the follow through), teach them to developing players. If a young player is learning to shoot, then build him up from the basics, but in regards to an experienced player with poor form, let him be. I never shot with my elbow in and I don't believe that it is entirely necessary. I have never been a proponent of changing someone's shot as long as it works. In my opinion, messing with his form will only ruin his confidence and ultimately make him a less productive shooter.

By the way, I used to shoot 52% from the field (elbow out and all). Those numbers don't come from form, they only come through developing your confidence. Mechanics aside, a shooter's mental game means everything. If I played three minutes and missed my first four shots, I didn't quit shooting. I wasn't afraid that my teammates would hate me if I missed. I wasn't afraid that I would shoot our team out of the game. A shooter must have a short memory. If I missed four shots in a row, I knew that I would make the fifth. Do the math. If I shot 52%, I'm going to miss 48%. I would miss almost half the shots that I took. If I missed four in a row, the only thought running through my head would be that I would make the next four. I was not born with that level of confidence. It was not instinctual that I felt I wouldn't miss. I developed it through the sweat of shooting all of those aforementioned shots. I knew that I was a shooter because I had seen all of those shots in practice go in. Watching your shots splash through the net time and time again will develop your confidence. Eventually, you will expect your shots to go in rather than hope that they will.

Remember that the only way to become a great shooter is hard work and dedication to practicing with game like intensity. If you can accomplish game like intensity in practice, you are well on your way to rising above any other player.