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Investing in Free Throws Pays Off



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The [Dallas Mavericks](#), the N.B.A.'s top team this season, are no strangers to winning ways, but in getting an edge on opponents over the past several years, they have gone beyond sheer talent.

The Mavericks have what amounts to a secret weapon in Gary Boren, an investment banker who is the N.B.A.'s lone free-throw coach.

Boren, 67, has been with the Mavericks as an assistant since 1999 while working in banking. He is an adviser to The Equity Group, which is based in Dallas. Since he joined the Mavericks, they have finished in the top six in the league each season in free-throw shooting, including four first-place finishes. This season, Boren has them at 80.7 percent, the fourth time his team has been higher than 80 percent at the line.

“He has been invaluable to us and a big part of our success,” the Mavericks’ owner, [Mark Cuban](#), said in an e-mail message.

Boren begins by filming the players shooting free throws.

“What’s amazing is, these guys have seen miles of film running up and down the court and the coaches are yelling at them, but not one in a hundred has been filmed standing still shooting a free throw,” Boren said.

There are 41 common problems that Boren is looking for in the footage, but he cautions that merely telling a player what he is doing

wrong will not help him. He must first deal with the mental barriers that players put up.

“They all think they’re better shooters than they are,” Boren said.

“I’m not trying to make them all look like Mark Price,” Boren said of the former N.B.A. guard of the late 1980s and ’90s, who played mostly with the [Cleveland Cavaliers](#). Price was a 90 percent career free-throw shooter, the best in league history.

“I’m trying to take what they’ve got — because they’ve already shot thousands of shots — and tweak their shot in the most important areas that will give them a shot to get better.”

Even when the player wants to learn, Boren must conquer another barrier.

He tells them: “When I look at you, I see two things — a brain and a bunch of muscles — and the good news is the brain is really clicking. But the bad news is your muscles have been taking a siesta. They like it the old way and they’re not paying attention to any of this stuff. So when we get down there, they’re going to resist.”

Possibly Boren’s biggest success story was the 7-foot-6 center Shawn Bradley. During the early part of his career, Bradley shot mostly between 60 to 70 percent from the free-throw line. Working with Boren, he reeled off three consecutive seasons above 80 percent, including 92.2 percent in 53 games in 2001-2.

“Shawn worked on the mechanics, did everything I wanted him to, and he went to 90 percent,” Boren said.

In 1993, Boren approached Don Nelson, who was the coach of the Golden State Warriors, the league’s worst club from the free-throw line, and offered to help.

Nelson used Boren as a free-throw adviser with the Warriors and when he coached the [Knicks](#), then made him an assistant when he became the coach of the Mavericks.

Nelson and Avery Johnson, who replaced him as the coach of the Mavericks during the 2004-5 season, allowed Boren to have autonomy over free-throw shooting.

Boren credits Denny Price, Mark's father, with teaching him the fundamentals. Denny Price taught Mark free-throw shooting when he coached him in high school and continued to give his son advice throughout his N.B.A. career. When Boren decided to pursue ways to help players with free throws, he sought out Denny Price, whom he had met, and received pointers from him.

“By no stretch am I claiming to have dreamed all this stuff up,” Boren said, laughing. “I tell people that knew who Mark was and his daddy Denny that 98 percent of what you're hearing from me, just pretend you're listening to Denny Price talking.”

Despite Boren's success, no other teams have hired a free-throw coach.

“It's so simple what's going on here,” Boren said. “It's just crazy that there's no other free throw coaches in the league.”