12U Basketball Practice Plan: A Complete 90-Minute Session

10-12 | Practice Plans | Coach Nick & the YSC Coaching Team

It was twenty minutes into our second-to-last practice before the rec season opener, and I had six kids who could drive and finish, three who couldn't yet dribble with their left hand without looking down, and one kid — Tyler — who barely touched a basketball before October but somehow had the best floor sense of anyone on the team. That mix is 12U basketball. If your practice plan doesn't account for it, you end up spending 90 minutes in a way that challenges nobody and bores everyone.

The short version: A solid 12U basketball practice fits into five blocks — a 10-minute dynamic warm-up, a 30-minute three-station skill rotation (ball handling, shooting, passing reads), 20 minutes of competitive 3v3 small-sided games, a 20-minute 5v5 scrimmage with structured rotations, and a 10-minute team wrap-up. Adjust the scrimmage to 30 minutes if you have a full two hours.

At this age, players are ready for more than repetition circuits. They can track where teammates are cutting, hold a basic spacing concept for half a practice without constant reminders, and compete hard in drills without it feeling like punishment. This plan is built for where 12-year-olds actually are — not a watered-down version of what older teams run. Check out our full basketball coaching resource hub for the complete library of season-long plans.

Block 1: Dynamic Warm-Up (10 min)

Skip static stretching at the start. Movement prep wakes up the nervous system and sets an athletic tone before you've touched a ball. This block should feel competitive, not passive.

Step 1 — Locomotion Progressions (3 min) Players jog baseline to baseline, then switch to A-skips, B-skips, and high knees on the next pass. This is movement prep, not cardio punishment — keep the pace controlled. Coaching cue: "Drive the knee up, land softly on the ball of your foot."

Step 2 — Lateral and Hip Work (3 min) Lateral shuffles half-court and back, followed by a hip-open march — stepping and rotating the hip out over the planted foot. Finish with three consecutive broad jumps, landing and absorbing with soft knees. Coaching cue: "Soft knees on the landing — show me you're an athlete, not a 2x4."

Step 3 — Two-Ball Wake-Up (4 min) Two balls per player if possible. Stationary: alternating dribbles, crossovers, between-the-legs. Last 90 seconds: walk the baseline while dribbling both balls simultaneously. This is where you see immediately who has worked this fall and who hasn't. Don't shame it — note it. Coaching cue: "Eyes up, ball down. If you're staring at the ball, someone just cut behind you and you'll never see them."

Block 2: Three-Station Skill Rotation (30 min — three 10-minute stations)

Split the team into three equal groups. Groups rotate on a whistle every 10 minutes. Every player hits all three stations every single practice — no group ever misses a station because practice ran long.

Station A: Ball Handling — Attack and Retreat

The most common mistake in youth ball-handling training is practicing moves from too far away. At 12U, players practice their crossover from 10 feet out — which is exactly where it won't work in a real game. Our full ball handling drills progression breaks

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Station A — Cone Attack Series (10 min) Set two cones 8 feet apart at the three-point arc on each wing. Player dribbles hard toward one cone — the "defender" — and makes a crossover or between-the-legs move at close contact range, then attacks the basket for a layup. First 4 minutes: right-hand lead. Next 4 minutes: left-hand lead. Final 2 minutes: a partner replaces the cone and plays live one-on-one. Coaching cue: "Get within arm's reach of the defender before you cross. A move from 10 feet out is no move at all."

Station B: Shooting — Form Under Pressure

12-year-olds can hold proper form when they're standing still and comfortable. What breaks down is form under fatigue and after movement. This station builds both into every single rep. See the full youth basketball shooting form progression to extend this concept across multiple practices as the season builds.

Station B — Elbow-to-Elbow Form Shooting (10 min) Players start at the left elbow (free-throw line extended), catch a pass from a partner and shoot with a full second hold on the follow-through. Hit or miss, they sprint to the right elbow and receive the next pass immediately. Goal: 15 makes across both elbows before rotation. Coaching cue: "Hold the follow-through until the ball hits the rim. That's the only way to know if your wrist actually snapped through."

Station C: Passing — Skip Pass Reads

Most 12U teams can chest-pass in a stationary circle. What they can't do is recognize a defensive rotation and hit the skip-pass before the closeout. This is the gap that separates coached teams from teams that just show up — and this is exactly the age when the recognition piece starts to click.

Station C — 3-2 Skip Pass Read (10 min) Three offensive players on the perimeter (left corner, right corner, top of key), two defenders positioned inside. Point guard holds the ball at the top. If the left-corner defender sags off, the point guard skips it to the open corner immediately. If the defender closes hard, the ball swings opposite. Rotate the two defenders every 90 seconds. The first two minutes will be chaotic — stick with it. Coaching cue: "See the gap before you catch it. Make the pass decision while the ball is in the air to you, not after."

Block 3: Competitive Small-Sided Games (20 min)

Two-on-two and three-on-three games do more for offensive decision-making than any isolated drill. In small-sided play, every player touches the ball multiple times per possession, and every defensive mistake is immediately punished. At 12U, run these games with real rules and real competition.

3v3 Half-Court — Continuous Teams (20 min) Divide into four teams of three. Two teams play while two wait at half-court. Win: stay on. Lose: rotate out and the waiting team comes on. Games run to 5 baskets or 3 minutes, whichever comes first. The real coaching in this block happens on the sideline — watch for players who ball-watch on defense, teammates who never cut, and guards who refuse to skip the open corner. Call it once per team on the sideline. Coaching cue for players on the floor: "If you're not handling the ball, you are either cutting or spacing. Standing still is wrong every single time."

Block 4: 5v5 Scrimmage with Structured Rotations (20 min)

This is where the skip-pass reads from Station C should show up. Watch for them — and when one happens, stop play and point it out. One positive call-out per scrimmage does more for your team's execution than five corrections.

The part most coaches get wrong here is playing time. One resource on youth basketball substitution rotation lays out the standard clearly: sub 3 players at a time, every 2–4 minutes, so that every athlete gets even minutes and nobody sits more than one shift. The critical step is deciding your rotation before the scrimmage starts — write out who goes in at minutes 4, 8, 12, 16 on a notepad before you blow the whistle. If you wait until the moment to decide, you will unconsciously play your strongest kids

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During the scrimmage itself, pick one teaching point per possession sequence and let everything else go. At 12U, calling every mistake creates decision paralysis — players start thinking instead of competing.

Block 5: Team Wrap-Up (10 min)

This block is the one coaches most often cut when practice runs long. Don't. At 12, players are old enough to absorb a teaching moment when they're still energized from competition — it lands differently than a chalk-talk at the start of practice.

> **Team Huddle Protocol (10 min)** Two minutes: name one thing the team did well tonight — be specific ("we had four skip passes in the scrimmage" beats "great effort"). Three minutes: one thing to fix before the next practice, demonstrated live with two volunteers right there on the floor. Two minutes: open floor — players can ask one question about anything they saw in the scrimmage. Coaching cue to the group: "I'll ask the question, you answer it — what do you do when your defender sags off and dares you to shoot?"

The Athletic Development Layer You Won't Find Anywhere Else

The locomotion progressions in Block 1 and the 3v3 games in Block 3 aren't just basketball activities — they're agility and athletic development work built directly into your practice structure.

The lateral shuffle, the hip-open march, the broad jump landing — these train the same neuromuscular patterns as dedicated sports-specific agility work, but they don't feel like conditioning. For a 12-year-old who also plays flag football or soccer in the fall, this is exactly the kind of cross-training that builds a more complete athlete without burning them out on single-sport repetition.

At 12, physical development — not basketball IQ alone — is the biggest predictor of who will still be playing and improving at 14 and 16. A practice plan that runs only basketball drills is leaving long-term athlete development on the table.

Adjusting the Plan for Your Team

If you have 60 minutes: Cut Block 3 (3v3 games) and shorten the scrimmage to 15 minutes. Do not cut the wrap-up.

If your team skews lower-skill: Extend Station A (ball handling) to 15 minutes and cut Station C to 5. Passing reads require a baseline of ball security first — don't try to build the roof before the foundation is down.

If your team skews higher-skill: Add a five-minute press-break walk-through to Block 3 before the 3v3 games. Simple alignment spots — one player stays deep, pass instead of dribbling under pressure, step back after the screen — take one practice to install and pay off the entire season once rec-league teams start pressing you. Our youth basketball defensive drills guide has the full press-break progression if you want to build on this concept week by week.

If you're coaching a first-year team: Run the plan as written for the first three practices, then start adding complexity. The structure itself — block rotation, competitive games, team wrap-up — is the most important thing. Drills can evolve; broken structure doesn't fix itself mid-season.

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