

Doc Rivers: Filling Players' Emotional Tanks

This is the Responsible Sports Podcast presented by Liberty Mutual, episode number six: Doc Rivers. Responsible Sports is a program dedicated to supporting coaches and parents who help our children succeed on and off the field. Each episode, our host, Jim Thompson, Executive Director of Positive Coaching Alliance, will be joined by one of the most influential players and coaches to share their thoughts and experiences with responsible coaching and responsible sports parenting.

In this episode Jim catches up with NBA head coach Doc Rivers right after practice and the two discuss how to keep players' emotional tanks full.

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1:06 - NARRATOR: Doc shares his strategies for coaching positively from the sidelines; how to involve both starters and bench players; how players can fill each other's emotional tanks; and he even shares some of his techniques used in pre-game and halftime chalk talks. The funding for this program has been generously provided by Liberty Mutual. Responsibility: what's your policy?

01:48 – JIM: Doc, first let me introduce you to our audience although everybody knows you as the head coach of the Boston Celtics. Doc Rivers was born and grew up in Chicago, graduated from Marquette University. He was drafted in the 1983 draft and started his playing career at Atlanta; went on to play with the Clippers, the New York Knicks, and the San Antonio Spurs. His first year as an NBA coach came in 1999 when he debuted with the Orlando Magic and won Coach of the Year honors that year, and guided the Magic to the play-offs the next three years. In 2004 he took over as head coach of the Celtics winning an NBA title in 2008. Doc is also a sports parent who has four children participating in sports at the high school and college level. Doc Rivers, thanks for joining us.

02:14 – DOC: Thanks for having me.

02:16 – JIM: Doc, there's a study that looked at professional sports teams and found that the home team wins about 60% of the time. Any thoughts on why that is?

02:26 – DOC: Well, I just think it's a comfort zone. I think that's a lot of it. I think when both teams are evenly matched any edge you can get helps prevail. It's also a positive environment and the fact that you're in your comfort zone, you're around your own fans – they're cheering for you. I think if you look at the home record and the home statistics, it's usually the role players you play better at home. I think the stars play well anywhere. That's because they have that great confident system inside of them. It's the role players, especially in the playoffs, who play and perform much better when they're comfortable and when they're in their home environment.

03:13 – JIM: Wow, that's a pretty interesting insight. You know we talk about responsible coaches keeping players' emotional tanks full. We actually talk about a portable home team advance, that if you're filling a kid's emotional tank and they're filling each other's tanks they can play like their playing in front of a home crowd wherever they play. You think that idea of emotional tank has application at the NBA level?

03:42 – DOC: Oh yeah. It's funny, I think on the outside people think that NBA players and the pro-players in general don't have or play with great intention. But, in fact, they do. I think college players find that out more when they get to our level; they're shocked at the level of intensity that's much higher than they've ever played. We talk about it all the time: playing hard is not an excuse not to play smart – you know, playing hard and smart. Well, the same thing goes for filling that emotional tank and having that confidence. You got to have the proper confidence though, it can't be a false bravado – that only lasts for a certain amount of time and then the real emotion and the concentration has to come in. You spend your time on the road building up your role players, telling them how great they are, how great they're going to play and really, for me, I try to keep them in a positive way. What I mean by that--I try to do is stay away from any of their faults. Any of the things that they can't do; I try never to ask any of my players to do something that they can't do. But on the road you really focus on that with your role players because if you can keep them in what they do well, then they have the chance to perform well on the road.

05:07 – DOC: You know, I read a study recently that said that when you focus on – this is with kids, but I think it works with adults, too – when you focus on kids' shortcomings versus focusing on their strengths you actually get different brain wave activity. You get more positive brain wave activity with people when you focus on their strengths.

05:27 – DOC: Well, there's no doubt that positive reinforcement is better than negative reinforcement. Even when I get on a player – and I do – I try to remind them later, and even at the time, that if I'm screaming at you or if I'm getting on you, it's never personal and I'm not trying to do it to intimidate you to do something well. I'm trying to coach you to make you better. There's a difference between a coach who, to me, in my opinion, who yells at players and there's...I call it "instructing loudly," but in a positive—you know, I can tell a player one thing loud and sometime you have no choice because of the environment you're in: it's a hostile crowd, it's noisy, but what I mean is the words you say have to be positive. An example: if I said "Glenn Davis, what are you doing?" That's stupid. That's negative. If I said, "Glenn Davis, what are you doing? You're better than that! You can do better than that!" That's positive. I'm trying to tell him that he's a better player. I think you have to be very careful when you do "get loud" make sure that message is a positive message.

06:46 – JIM: I think what you're demonstrating there is coaches need to have hard conversations with players but you can have that hard conversation in a way that fills their tank or drains their tank.

06:57 – DOC: Yeah, there's no doubt. I mean, you'll see me at time yelling: "You can do this! You're good enough to do this! You're ready for this!" I'm yelling it. And, so, somebody sitting up in the middle of the crowd is thinking, "Man! He's really getting on Rondo." And what I'm really telling Rondo is extremely positive: "Come on, Rondo! Focus! You can do this!" That's where I think, when you're having one of those difficult conversations, you got to try to end it with positive.

07:29 – JIM: So far we've been talking about verbal. How do you think a coach's body language on a sideline impacts player?

07:37 – DOC: Oh, it's huge. Some of the players, it has no impact, you know, and, again, I always go with the players with the extreme confidence. But you can send a message without saying a word. I do it. I can send a negative message at times and I work on not doing it, and I do it, I mean I'm guilty of that. That's something that we're talking about that I absolutely work on. Actually, I've watched tapes; I've had a camera watch me for two straight games and I instructed the camera to watch me. I just wanted that footage with the minutes on it. Then I wanted another footage of the game and I put the two together and I had a split screen. I wanted to watch my body language because I think it's that important. When things are going bad for a player or your team, the most important time is to show confidence. I think one of the coach's faults – and I do this and I try not to do it – it is said, a negative body positive is folded arms standing up. We all do that, and, so, those are things that I try not to do.

08:50 – JIM: We have a concept we teach both coaches and athletes: a teachable spirit, continuous improvement. What you're modeling right there is coaches at the highest level—you got to get better.

09:02 – DOC: We're all improving. I tell my players that every day. I have a saying to them, I say, "I'll never coach you to who you are today. I'll coach you to who we think you should be someday." It's funny, we're talking about this right now, I just had a talk with one of my really good players on the team. He said, "Boy, you've been really pushing me." And I said, "Yeah. You're not where you should be yet. You're going to get there. But you don't want me to coach you to where you're at today, do you?" I think that's really important. Players, coaches – we all settle at times. Good is the enemy of great because you settle. As a coach you can't settle and as a player you can't settle.

09:50 – JIM: Injuries are a big issue in professional sports because people are pushing their bodies and their minds so hard and you've had some tough injuries in the past. How do you deal – how much time do you spend coaching players working their way back from injuries? How do you keep their tanks full when they're not able to play yet?

10:10 – DOC: It's very difficult, especially in our league because there's game after game and you're moving on, you're traveling – not players trying to work back. A lot of times it's a lonely thing because when he's working we're gone. A lot of times we leave those guys back on the road so they can do their rehab and you feel like you've been

torn apart from your team. One of the things I do when they're with our team traveling to get healthy is I try to involve them in team decisions. I try to involve them even in our practice. Last year when Kevin was out we actually had him charting things like he was a coach. I thought that allowed him to feel like he was still part of the team because you are part of the team.

10:59 – JIM: That's great. It seems like when you get a team of people who are filling each other's tanks so it doesn't always have to be the coaches, that you really have a team going somewhere. Do you know players, either on the Celtics or that you've had in other teams or people you've worked with, played with, who are really good at filling their teammates' tanks?

11:20 – DOC: Yeah, there's a lot of them. You're hitting on something that I think is really important, as well: players policing players. It's great, let's say if I give a halftime talk or pregame talk and even before practice, coaches – it doesn't have to be the head coach, any coach saying positive stuff to get the guys up. There's an impact there whether it's short-lived or not, it is an impact. But when you have teammates doing it, when there's team mates who other team mates can trust, they know he has great character, they know everything he does is for the team, you can't beat that. Kevin Garnett is one of those guys.

12:07 – JIM: Do you have any drills that you do at practice at times when you feel players' energies are low?

12:15 – DOC: Well, today we had a quiet drill. We had a half hour stretch where there would be no talking. I did it because I thought our energy was low and I was trying to show the point how important being verbal is in practice, and being loud in practice. It was amazing, right after we finished the little half hour, and I said "Okay, let's go back to our normal way" how loud the practice got and how the energy picked up. But, the best part when you're having a low-tank day in practice is you got to do something with a winner and a loser involved; you got to make it competitive. That's what we do. That's what players do. They are competitive by nature. I think, if you're having a low day, especially with energy, you can always pick your practice up – it can be a shooting game, it can be a regular game, but you have to do something where there's a winner and a loser at stake.

13:13 – JIM: Oh, that's great. You talked about half time and pre-game talks; post-game talks can be a powerful place where you can fill or drain tanks. Do you have a regular way you handle...

13:26 – DOC: Yeah, I do. I think post-games talks have to be short and, I think, for the most part, you have to be careful. I think it's the most sensitive time of the night. I think players are open and willing before the game, I think they're that way at half time and, obviously, after the game you have to be careful because that's when their emotions are as high as they ever will be. A lot of times, and I've learned from trial and error, obviously, is you have to be careful. You have to be really careful after games because

you're emotional. Usually, I give them about five minutes with nobody else in the locker room but the players because maybe they can talk if there's something that needs to be said. Then, I walk in and I literally don't go more than a minute or two minutes. If we lost, it's usually: "Hey, guys, you know, a lot of things didn't go well. We got to build. We got to keep working. Let's get together tomorrow." And, then, you tend to have calmed down the next day, even after watching the film, I think you do a much better job.

14:33 – JIM: That's great. Mistakes tend to lead to drained tanks. How do you handle when players make mistakes in practice?

14:41 – DOC: Play forward. We talk about it all the time. The only time I say this to my players – is all the time, actually; I say it 10 times a day to one guy: "I'm never going to get upset at you about a mistake. I'm going to get mad at you for making the next mistake because you're still thinking about the last mistake." We move on. Life moves on. Life never stops and we never stop. We just keep playing. Play through your mistakes. We talk about that all the time as a group.

15:11 – JIM: That's a great concept. We teach coaches to "flush mistakes." They make a flushing motion, a kid looks at their coach and—I like that idea: "play it forward" or play through your mistakes.

15:21 – DOC: Yeah, you have to because you can't play in a rearview mirror. What's happened, whether it's good or bad, actually—you have to be careful with the good. We had a rookie in one of our pre-season games who made a jump shot and he ran back in his little homerun jog, you know, kind of trying to be cool, and the opposing team got the ball in bounds, his guy ran right by him and scored a bucket. So I called a timeout and the kid, obviously, was mortified because our number one thing is transition D. Instead of making that a negative moment because I knew that he knew what he did wrong, I had all the team come in to the huddle. I told everybody to get really tight and clap and start applause and give him applause that he scored. I said, "The guy scored, let's give him a hand." And everybody started clapping and everybody started laughing. The message was sent, but we did it through sarcasm and through laughter. Right after the game he walked in and, "Coach, I'm sorry. I'll never do that again." But he didn't feel bad about himself when he went back out on the floor.

16:29 – JIM: Wow, that's like the perfect example of the teachable moment.

16:33 – DOC: Yeah, it was the right timing; the timeout was coming anyway and I just thought "Wow, this is a good moment to teach him a great lesson, but not beat him down because he was embarrassed by what had happened."

16: 45 – JIM: Yeah, that's great. Of the players you coached, who's been really good at bouncing back from mistakes?

16:50 – DOC: Oh, Kevin. I think Garnett is great. Typically, it's your great players. I would say Paul Pierce if I had to say *one* guy is probably the best at it. He tends to

never get rattled. He plays basketball with a poker face. You talked earlier about body language. Well, before I coached the Celtics I never liked Paul's body language, I thought it was a negative language – it always looked like he was mad or upset. When I took the job I actually thought "Man, does Paul like us? Does he not like being here?" And, then, you realize that he's just a really focused guy when he gets on the floor and he doesn't show expression a lot. You had to get used to that. That's maybe one reason. He's always thinking about the game and the next moment and, I think, that's why he's so able to get over a bad game or a mistake. I tell my kids this all the time, and this is the best story I tell at all camps. There was a game that Paul was, I think he was 0 for nine, 0 for 10 at halftime and 0 for four from the free throw line. At halftime, we were talking and I said, "Paul, you're good?" And he says, "Oh, I'm great! I'll go for mine next half! I might go out for 50!" It's amazing how positive; he said it as a matter of fact. Well, he had 41 points in the second half. It was funny, he literally had convinced himself that the odds were on his side, that there's no way – "I'm a great player, I'm already 0 for nine. It's impossible for me to miss any more shots because I'm a 50% shooter." In his mind, that's how he thought.

18:37 – JIM: You know, you talk about his, what you might call, "game face" but every once in a while he gets this beautiful smile when something happens.

18:47 – DOC: It's amazing when he does smile, it lights up the room. I actually told him that about two years ago, I say, "Listen, I know you're focused and how you're playing the poker face, but every once in a while flashing a smile is huge for our team. Without saying a word, you can give our team an amazing amount of energy." I think he's really improved at that over the last two years.

19:13 – JIM: That's beautiful. Talk a little bit about your coaching staff and how you get your assistant coaches aligned around certain principles like getting players up, filling emotional tanks. How do you do that?

19:29 – DOC: I delegate. It's really important for a head coach to do that. I think a lot of us coaches think that the players can only hear their voice and some of us are insecure with if you allow one coach to teach something and it looks like you don't know it. And, it doesn't. It just frees you up to watch the entire team. I have a defensive coach, I have an offensive coach and, also, I look at my players and we split them up; I give Armond Hill three players. That's the non-basketball part I'm talking about when I say I split them up. These are your three guys. You have to check on them. You have to make sure emotionally they're right. They're always thinking about the team. You have to find out what's going on in their off-the-court life. I do it with each coach so we have the entire team covered.

20:24 – JIM: One last question, Doc. This has been fantastic. If you could change anything about youth sports just by saying it or magic wand or whatever, what would you change about youth sports?

20:26 – DOC: I would remove the parents. I'm half joking; I really am. I love AAU, but I think there are some tough things with the AAU, with the gym shoe companies, and the power of the AAU coach especially if you're coaching one of these good teams. But, to all who are listening, if you're parents, allow your coach of your kid to coach the team. You be a parent and a fan. Sit up there and cheer. I got to these AAU games because I have a kid, and every single play there's a parent standing up "Jimmy run!" "Johnny, shoot the ball!" "What are you doing?" That's the coach's job. Your job as a parent and our job as a parent is to build our kids back up and to give them confidence because, now, I don't care how much you teach them, if they don't have confidence and they don't believe that they measure up, they will not be successful. It can't happen. My suggestion and my advice is not to the coaches, it's to the parents: allow your kids to play and you be a parent.

21: 48 – JIM: That's fantastic. That confidence; help them build that confidence. That's terrific. Doc, I know you just came from practice and getting ready for the beginning of the season. I want to thank you for taking the time to share with me and our Responsible Sports listeners your thoughts both as a coach and as a parent. Great insights today. People who hear this are going to really benefit from it. I want to thank you for your time today and your strong support for the Positive Coaching Alliance.

22:17 – DOC: Thank you, Jim. Keep doing what you're doing. I think it's great for our day.

22:21 – JIM: Great. Thanks so much.