shooting, I always ask, "Do you want style or substance?" Use the routine that puts the ball in the basket, not the one that looks good. After the game is over, which will the crowd remember? What will it say in the sports page the next morning? "He missed his free throws but, hey, he had some beautiful moves before he took the shot." I don't think so.

Okay, so you're sold on the value of ritual. But you're wondering what your ritual should be. Well, you're in luck. I spent two years developing the perfect free throw ritual. And now I'm going to tell you exactly what you have to do to put the ball in the basket. But first I want your commitment to trying something that might, at first, seem unnatural.

LEAVING THE COMFORT ZONE

As I talk about the mechanics of free throw shooting, I will probably be recommending some changes to your present style of shooting. Some of these movements may feel unnatural at first. Because they feel different you may be uncomfortable—and this might even make you think the technique is wrong. Let me make something very clear: When you shoot your free throws in the game, I want you to be as comfortable as possible. How do you become comfortable? By practicing the right mechanics *until* the movements become comfortable.

You have to trust me on this one, but after you blend together and practice my seven steps, you will feel more comfortable at the free throw line—because you will know you're about to make two points. Remember what it was like learning to drive a car. You had to consciously remind yourself to step on the clutch when shifting gears. You had to think about all your actions. Do you do that after even six months of driving? No. Those motions have been assigned

to other areas of your brain while you think of the big picture—where you want to go.

How long will it take for my method of free throw shooting to feel comfortable? It depends on how much you practice and how deeply you commit to adopting this method. UCLA Coach Jim Harrick says that it takes twenty-eight days to fully integrate a change to your playing style. I've also heard that it's five times harder to break a bad habit than it is to develop a good one. That's why it's important to develop good fundamentals when you're starting to play basketball, rather than making changes when you are older.

Right now you are probably doing some things that are not conducive to sinking free throws (that's why you are reading this book). But you are "comfortable" with your style. It has given you, let's say, a free throw shooting average of 70 percent in practice and 60 percent in games.

The question facing you now is, Do you want to remain comfortable with the wrong mechanics and a low free throw percentage? Or are you willing to be uncomfortable—for a short time—with the *right* mechanics, to eventually improve? Let me put it this way, if you achieved a 90 percent free throw average in practice, would you feel more comfortable going to the line in a tight game than you do now with a 70 percent average? Learn to do it the right way, see the results you get, and your comfort factor will go way up.

SEVEN STEPS TO A PERFECT FREE THROW

I do all of the following seven steps each time I shoot a free throw. The steps are designed to coordinate the physical and mental requirements of free throw shooting. I think of this ritual as my six-second trance. I focus and concentrate just long enough to make the free throws. Then I relax.

Step 1. Feet square to the line.

When I first began practicing free throws, I taped dimes to the floor where I wanted my feet to be. Then I could slide my feet until I felt the tips of my shoes hit the dimes—and I knew my feet were in exactly the right position. There is an easier way to find the right position on the free throw line.

When the lines are painted on a basketball court, the painter drives a nail into the center of the free throw line. A string is tied to this nail and used to draw the circular shape for the top of the key. This little dot is called the "painter's hole" and it is dead center on the free throw line. You can use it to make your shots dead center in the back of the net.

When you're getting ready to shoot a free throw, use the painter's hole to make sure you are centered on the foul line. Straddle the hole, feet about shoulder-width apart, squared to the line. Using the painter's hole will guarantee you are in exactly the same place on the line every time.

I see a lot of players who are "pointers." They have one foot forward pointing at the basket. This may feel more natural—in fact, it's been recommended by some free throw experts. But there are two problems with pointing.

First, with one foot back, your shoulders turn and you can miss the shot to the left or right. Secondly, if you pull one foot back from the line (your left foot for right-handers) you can never set up in exactly the same way each time. There is no line on the floor to position your back foot. Your left foot will always be in a different position. You might say your left foot could only vary in its position by an inch or two. My answer to that is, "Have you ever missed a shot by an inch or two?"

In case you haven't picked this up so far, I'll come right out and say it. In order to get the highest possible free throw average, you have to try to turn you body into a machine. What I'm telling you now will put that machine into the best possible position to score.

Recently I was at a college game, and a coach came up to me and said, "Have you noticed how many pros are squaring up when they take their free throws?" Not only that, but many of the best shooters square up as they take their jumpers. They may say they don't, but if you study pictures, you'll see that as they release the ball, their shoulders and feet are square to the ball's line of flight. Squaring up puts your body in just the right position to go straight at the basket with your shooting arm.

I should also mention that a good free throw shooter has his or her weight forward on the balls of the feet. The body should be leaning toward the basket in a balanced, active stance, not standing straight up. You will actually be closer to your target in this position—and that doesn't hurt either.

Step 2. Bounce the ball three times with the inflation hole up.

When I first started teaching my free throw method, I was invited to work with some of the players on the Long Beach State University '49ers. One player was really struggling at the line, with a free throw shooting average of only 40 percent. After I coached him, he improved dramatically for a while, then began to lose ground again. A friend of mine, who shot my instructional video, also tapes all the '49er's games. One day he reviewed my seven steps with this player and found that, while he was using most of the steps, he had not been looking at the inflation hole to trigger a state of focus and concentration.

Several weeks passed, and the player came up to my friend and said, "You know, I've been using that thing about the inflation hole. Now I'm really kicking butt." This player

had been using my technique and getting adequate results, without using the secret that holds it all together. Two days later I read in the sports page that this player hit two free throws in the final minutes of play. According to the sports writer, those free throws sparked a rally that won a tight game.

Let's look at how to use the inflation hole to help you focus and concentrate on making all your free throws. When the ref hands you the ball, turn it so the inflation hole is up. With your eye on this little black rubber dot, bounce the ball slowly three times. Don't dribble the ball. Bounce it slowly and deliberately. This will bring you back to the here and now. It will remind you that this is a different shot, a "game within a game." It will create a quiet, isolated period of concentration where the tempo is different.

Bouncing the ball will keep the blood flowing through your shooting arm and hand. This keeps your muscles relaxed and your movements fluid. You never want to shoot from an absolutely frozen stance. If you do, the first motion is apt to be jerky and exaggerated.

Most players already bounce the ball. So that's not a difficult transition for you to make. But why look at the inflation hole?

In a practical sense, locating the inflation hole guarantees that, when you hold the ball before shooting, you will hold it the same way every time. But looking at the inflation hole is also a mental step. As I said before, the inflation hole is meaningless, completely neutral. Everything else you might look at in the gym would put more pressure on you—the scoreboard, the clock, your coach. So looking at this little round rubber dot will help you clear your mind of all the pressure-producing thoughts that build up during a tight game.

Pretend the inflation hole is the black hole of the universe, gathering up all your scattered thoughts and focusing your concentration into one small point. This, combined with bouncing the ball three times, will clear your mind and allow your ritual to begin. As your ritual begins, your mind and body will work together, not fight each other.

Step 3. Put your thumb in the channel, your third finger pointing at the inflation hole.

No matter how much I've tried to mechanize the shooting process, it ultimately comes down to a sense of *feel*. Your connection to the basketball is your hand, or actually, your fingertips. The ball has to feel good in your hand. When you hold the ball before your free throw, your body should be saying, *Yeah, this feels good—I'm gonna drill this one.*

You've got to hold the ball in some way. Why not hold it the same way every time? The way it feels best, almost molded to your hand. Don't think of the ball as a separate object that resists you. Think of it as an extension of your body—your will—that will obey you even after it's left your finger tips and is arcing toward the basket.

You'll find that when you catch the ball after the third bounce, you can simultaneously put your hand in the correct position. Practicing this move will make the steps blend together smoothly. Put your thumb in the "channel," or groove, in such a way that your third finger is pointed at the inflation hole. Now don't move your hand again. Don't slide your hand around or spin the ball. Your hand is in the best position for shooting right where it is.

Putting your thumb in the channel will also put some rotation, or backspin, on the ball as you release it. You don't have to try to do anything extra. With the correct release from your fingertips and thumb, the rotation will automatically be added to the shot. This rotation can make the differ-

ence between shooting a basket and throwing up a brick.

Putting your hand in the correct position will give you the "shooter's touch." What is the shooter's touch? Technically, it's the way you release the ball when you shoot. If you've got the right rotation, the ball lands softly when it hits the rim and drops in for a basket. If you haven't got the touch, the ball accelerates when it hits the rim. It rattles around and jumps out.

After years of shooting baskets, I have to say that the shooter's touch is something above and beyond just rotation on the ball. It's that last little extra bit of *feel* that any great athlete has. It's the feel you get when you love the sport you play. The feel you only develop when you eat, sleep, and drink your sport.

Step 4. Elbow in.

The first three steps have gotten you into the best possible position to sink a free throw. Your mind is clear of extraneous thoughts and you are holding the ball with your thumb in the groove. The next four steps are the actual shooting steps.

I have separated these four motions into separate steps to help you learn, remember, and practice them. In reality, they are interrelated, overlapping, and blending together so smoothly they will seem like one fluid motion, always leading to the basket. This process begins when you bring your elbow into the "shot pocket."

What is the shot pocket? I'll show you how to find it by adopting the motto of many successful people: "Work backward." High achievers see where they want to go, then figure out what steps it will take to get them there. Do that now for free throw shooting.

Set the ball down for a moment. Now take up your stance

straddling the painter's hole on the free throw line. Extend your arm toward the middle of the back rim of the basket. Imagine your arm is 15 feet long. Picture yourself dropping the ball softly through the hoop. Pull your arm back until your hand is in the middle of your chest. Your shooting hand is now on an imaginary line that runs through your body and leads to the center of the basket.

Now pick up the ball, hold it with your thumb in the groove, and put your hand in the same position. If you are like a lot of players, you may still have your elbow out in the breeze somewhere. You need to bring it into position, so your elbow is in the "shot pocket."

There are only four ways to miss a basket: short, long, right, or left. With the correct knee bend (covered in the next step), your distance will be precise and you won't be long or short. Now, if you bring your elbow in and straighten your arm so your fingers go right at the basket, you eliminate missing to the right and left. You've just cut your misses down by 50 percent.

Of all the steps I recommend, bringing the elbow in feels the most unnatural to many players. *But it is also the most important of all the free throw shooting mechanics.*

I often see players shooting from the outside with their elbow stuck out. They do that to ward off defenders who are trying to strip the ball away. But remember what I said earlier: the free throw is different. No one's in your face. You're in complete control. So you want to shoot it the way that will give you the highest consistency. That means bringing the elbow in.

Think about this for a second. When a right hander extends his or her arm with the elbow out while shooting, the ball is pushed across the target, ending with the hand positioned to one side of the basket. To hit the target, you have to release the ball at just that fraction of a second

when the hand is in the exact right position. To do this you need extremely good *feel* and *touch*. Those are the first things to desert you when you're under pressure at the free throw line.

When you start the shot with the elbow in, the hand and the ball are traveling right down the line that leads to the basket. While it may feel machinelike at first, that's okay. I want you to turn yourself into a scoring machine. So bring that elbow in and relax—tell yourself that there's no way you can miss right or left.

Step 5. Bend your knees.

Some experts have suggested that free throw shooting should be an upper body movement. I completely disagree. Bending your legs—the same amount each time—will give your shot just the right distance. Then your arm can guide the ball into the basket. If you don't believe me, try shooting while you're sitting in a chair. Sure you can reach the basket. But when you're straining for distance, your accuracy suffers.

When shooting, we tend to forget the legs and overemphasize the arm, hand, and fingertips. That's because the ball is in our hands. We feel it with our fingers. But the shot is actually a series of linked actions that move from the ground up. Not only do you get the right distance with the proper knee bend, you also set up a smooth flow for the actions that follow. The knee bend sends a fluid wave through the whole body that launches the ball toward the center of the basket.

In Wilt Chamberlain's autobiography he says he was a great free throw shooter in high school. But then he injured his knee so that when he bent it while shooting from the line, it hurt him. He changed his free throw shooting

method, and his percentage went way down. Throughout his career he was plagued by his reputation as a lousy free throw shooter. He was so distressed by this he actually went to a psychiatrist to find out why he was missing.

There is another good reason to originate the shot from the legs. The big leg muscles are more reliable when you get jitters on the line when shooting a clutch free throw. The movements of the smaller arm, wrist, and hand muscles are apt to be jerky and exaggerated.

How deeply should you bend the legs? You have to experiment. But it will probably be a little more than you think. Bend the legs enough so your arm feels as if it isn't doing any work at all. You'll see that the knee bend naturally adds a nice high arc to the ball, too.

With a good knee bend you will never miss short of the rim. If I were forced to choose, a shot that is too long is better than one that is too short. A long shot still has a chance of going in, even when it banks off the backboard. But an air ball is not only a lost point, it's a complete embarrassment.

Once you find your legs giving the right distance to the shot, groove this feeling and let it blend with the rest of your free throw shot. Remember, the arc of the ball is a combination of the knee bend and the angle at which your arm extends. Let these factors work together smoothly.

One other thing. When you get under pressure, the muscles in the body tighten. This is most noticeable in the legs. You tend to stand stiff-legged when you're under the gun. Just before you begin your ritual, do a couple of knee bends to keep loose. Then, when you get into your routine, your knees will bend just the way they did in practice.

Step 6. Eyes on the target.

Someone once told me that it's not important where you *are* that counts, it's what your sights are set on that will bring you success or failure. You could live in a shack and dig ditches for a living. But if you consistently think of living in a mansion on a hill, working at a dream job, you'll eventually find a way to get there.

In this step, you are going to set your sights on where you want the ball to go and keep them there until you hear the crowd cheer. In other words, before you even shoot the ball, tell your body you are not going to watch the ball in flight. This keeps your body still and sends your mind a powerful message: The ball is going to find the target.

The eyes are powerful motivators of physical motion. If, as you shoot the ball, you are filled with doubt, you will quickly glance at the ball to see where it's going. You might cut off your follow-through—or "pull the string," as it's sometimes described. Your release won't be smooth. The ball will hit the rim like a brick.

Okay, so what should you look at when you shoot?

There have been many theories about where to look when shooting. Your first instinct is to focus on the front of the rim since that's what you see when you look at the basket. But this causes shots to miss short. If you look at the front of the rim, you hit the front of the rim. This doesn't indicate a problem with your shot. The problem is what you are aiming at.

Other shooters say they aim for the back of the rim. But you don't want to hit that either. If you actually hit the rim, you can't be sure that the ball will drop into the basket.

Your target is actually an empty space, a cylinder of air though which you want the ball to drop. Look at the space above the back rim and keep your eyes there until you see the ball drop through it on the way into the basket.

Those of you who are paying close attention may be puzzled by the order of these steps. I have told you to bend your knees, then look up at the target. You might feel that I'm not allowing enough time to look at the target before you shoot.

This is the whole idea. You don't want to look at the target too long before shooting. In fact, you want to shoot while that first image of the basket is flashing onto the screen of your brain. This keeps you from thinking. At this moment "thinking" is the worst thing your could do. Why? What's to think about?

As I've said before, you already know where the basket is. The danger is not having too little time to look at the basket. The danger is looking at the basket so long you interrupt the flow of these interconnected motions.

While writing this book I looked at high-speed videos of my free throw shooting. I found that bringing my elbow in, bending my knees, and looking up at the target all overlapped. It is important to remember the steps. But don't rigidly enforce this order. And don't try to separate them. Let them blend together with your natural rhythm.

Step 7. Shoot and follow through.

Your feet and shoulders are square to the basket, your elbow is tucked in, your knees are giving just the right push to the shot, and your eyes are locked on the target. Your preparation up to this point is so good the shot will almost take care of itself. Notice I said, *almost.*

You still need to extend your shooting arm smoothly from the shot pocket straight at the target. You need to have a good release and make sure your follow-through is complete. However, you have already placed your body in position so that those motions will follow naturally and smoothly.

Why is the follow-through important? You might argue that the only thing that matters is what you do while the ball is touching your fingertips. Once it's gone, who cares what your follow-through looks like? When I was playing college ball, the coach didn't want you to follow through. They thought that was hot doggin'.

But now we know the follow-through is important because it has a strong influence on what comes just before it—the release. If you begin and continue a shot, even when the ball is on its way, you'll guarantee the best arc, backspin and touch. Some coaches even recommend holding your follow-through for one full second after the ball is on its way. This isn't showing off. It will make your movements smooth and complete.

Good free throw shooting comes from smoothly blending interrelated fundamentals. In my seven steps I've focused on the key movements that make up a successful free throw. Now I'd like to comment on several related questions that you might be wondering about.

THE OFF-HAND

The off-hand, or "helper hand," is important because it holds the ball in the right position until the shooting arm provides the push. I like to keep things simple. I don't want to have to think of anything extra. So let's get the off-hand in the right position and then focus on other things.

The easiest way to describe the off-hand is to compare it to a tee in golf. It holds the ball in the right position until the moment that the club strikes it. The tee wouldn't be doing its job if it held the ball in different places or moved it around. In basketball it's the same way. You want stability and consistency from the off-hand.

When your shooting arm is in the shot pocket, much of the weight of the ball is resting on the off-hand. If you don't like the golf tee analogy, pretend you are holding a tray of food. If you are positioned correctly, your forearms and elbows are close together. As you shoot, your off-hand remains in the same position as your shooting arm straightens.

The off-hand should not change position very much. If it begins to sneak up, following the shooting arm as it extends, you are adding unnecessary motion. The next thing you know, the offhand will be wanting to get into the action. Then you're shooting a jumper and not a set shot.

To be consistent at the line, you have to do everything the same way every time. Keep this helper hand under the ball and close to your body. Check its position in practice to make sure it's not drifting around. Then, in the games, put it out of your mind and focus on your distance and accuracy.

COCKING THE WRIST

Shooting coaches stress the importance of cocking the wrist as you prepare to shoot. The snap that the wrist provides as it straightens is the last motion in shooting a basketball. This motion is valuable because it adds rotation to the ball. As I mentioned earlier, this rotation makes the ball land softly if it hits the rim.

My feeling about the wrist cock is: Why complicate matters? Why add an extra element to the free throw process? If you get the shooting arm into the right position, with the ball close to your body in the shot pocket, the wrist automatically cocks. If you relax and follow through, the wrist will uncock and provide the needed rotation.

Get your basketball and put yourself in the right position to shoot a free throw, with your arm in the shot pocket and your elbow tucked in. Now look at your wrist. Is the skin on

the back of your hand wrinkled? Then your hand is cocked. Now relax and forget about wrist cocking.

THE ARC OF A FREE THROW

Shooting the ball with the correct arc is important. But it's hard to prescribe one arc for every player. One player might be six feet tall while the next is 7'3". That's a difference of 15 inches. The arc for these two players should be different, too.

When trying to change your arc, or when looking for the proper arc, you should examine the movements that cause the arc rather than directly trying to control the angle at which the ball leaves your hand. The arc comes from three factors: the power from the legs, the angle of the shooting arm, and the mental concept you hold of the flight of the shot.

Many shooters, even good ones, throw up a flat shot one time, a high one the next. I think this is because, as the shooting motion progresses through the body, you sense whether the push from the legs is strong enough. If it is, the arc is good and the shot probably swishes through the net. But if the legs don't do their job, you try to compensate by shooting harder with your arm. You tend to push the ball at the basket rather than shooting it with a smooth follow-through. Sometimes you get lucky and drill it. Other times the ball hits the front of the rim.

My experience has shown me that, as you practice, your arc should be a little higher than you think it needs to be. This would probably be a medium arc of between 35 and 45 degrees. A medium arc allows for better control and closely matches the natural shooting style of most players. With this arc a perfect shot will hit the back of the net. If it hits the rim, it still has a good chance of dropping in.

Naturally, you will need to adjust your arc if you are having trouble hitting the target. You might have the right force behind the shot, but if the arc is too high or too flat, the ball will miss the basket. So instead of adjusting the power behind the shot, change your arc. If the shot is long, raise the arc; if the shot is short, lower the arc.

Let me give you a simple way to adjust the arc of your free throws. It may seem strange, but this can be accomplished by changing the way you *think* about the shot. To keep my arc just right, I look at the space above the basket and imagine the ball going into the hoop. This creates the right mental picture of the ball clearing the front rim and dropping into the net. It helps me produce shots that have a nice natural loft without tying myself in knots analyzing trajectories and angles.

The words you use to think about sports are important. Rick Barry, who was a great shooter, says that too many players think about shooting "at" the basket. Then, the ball isn't shot, it's pushed. The ball is often short and hits the front of the rim. Instead, he thinks of shooting "up to" the basket. I think this is good advice. If I didn't already have my key thought, I might change.

However you achieve your arc, just remember: The arc you put on the ball should be a natural product of your shooting style. Shoot to make the basket, not to put a specific arc on the ball.

ONE FLUID MOTION

After reading this you might feel like you now have a lot of things to remember. I didn't develop these steps to give you "paralysis of analysis." I did it for one reason: to score more points from the line. And if your free throw shooting improves, the rest of your game will improve,