INTRODUCTION

If you're interested in *Coaching the System,* you're probably desperate. Or crazy. Or both. A normal human being wouldn't even *consider* running the System, right? But what you know about it intrigues you, and you're hopeful this book will be a good resource. Maybe you are searching to find a different approach, anything that will help your team improve, or that might be a better fit for your personnel next year than whatever it is you've been doing. And you're desperate enough to try anything, even something as crazy—or "chaotic," as we prefer to think of it—as The System.

On the other hand, you might be a coach who has run some version of this extreme up-tempo style, and want to learn more details, deepen you knowledge base, or pick up a few new wrinkles that will give your team an edge. You love the approach, have used it for a few years, and already own a good library of instructional videos related to System basketball.

Regardless of your category (desperate, crazy, or normal), we wrote this book with you in mind. We are pretty sure you aren't picking it up as casual beach reading material, so we're writing a technical book that tries to answer a lot of the same questions we had when we were starting out. It is—intentionally—fairly detailed, which might lead you to believe the System is complicated. It is not. In fact, a refrain you will encounter frequently in these pages is "Less is more."

SOME IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

So let's start by making a few points. First, you need to keep it simple. Installing the System, and using it successfully, does not depend on mastering every detail in this book. Stick to the basic concepts at first, and then add what you need as your team "evolves"—another good System concept. The surest path to failure will be to teach too much too soon.

Second: let go! This style is based on giving players more freedom, or to look at it from the opposite perspective, it is based on the coach (i.e. you) "letting go of control." If you have a tendency to micro-manage your team—and what coach doesn't?—you're going to find that such an approach doesn't mesh well with System basketball. You'll have to accept that giving up a little control to the players will actually help them execute better, and it might help you relax and

enjoy the process more. And don't worry, giving up control doesn't mean you aren't doing your job. It does mean you won't be supervising hours of mind-numbing practice repetition or defensive shell drill rotations! Practices will be shorter, harder, and more focused. But *you* won't be the center of the process because there's no way in this style for you to coach as fast as the players are playing, which means you'll have to wait twenty to thirty seconds for the "bout" to end before throwing your two cents in.

A third point we want to make has to do with the name of this approach. In case it's been bothering you, we'd like to reassure you about the term "The System." Calling a particular style of play THE System sounds presumptuous, like we don't believe there's any other way to play the game, or any other system that works as well—kind of like when fans in Ohio refer to *"The* Ohio State University" or mathematicians discuss *"The* Calculus".   First of all, it's not our term. We don't know who invented it, but it's not meant to imply there are no other good systems. With that said, we still intend to indicate our respect for those who developed it, granting a literary "tip of the hat" throughout this book by referring to this particular style as "The System" (capital "S") to distinguish it from other approaches to playing basketball.   We believe this unique designation is appropriate because the System itself is unique. And as we'll explain later on, the reason it's unique is that it's not based on getting *better* shots than your opponent (sounds like basketball heresy, doesn't it?), but rather on getting a lot *more* shots. To our way of thinking, that distinction in itself justifies a special title. So—for want of a better label—it's been called The System by those who know a good idea when they see it. Remember, it's not our term, but we like it!

We also need to point out that there are different ways to run the System. From what we've been able to discover, it was first developed—or at least popularized—by Paul Westhead at Loyola Marymount University in the late 1980s when he combined the "Numbered Fast Break" he learned from Sonny Allen with a full-court pressing scheme. Like a mad scientist, he was one of the first to make full use of a 1986 rule change by stirring in a volatile brew of three-point shooting. In the early 1990s, David Arseneault at Division III Grinnell College in Iowa adapted the System to his situation by platooning players and shortening each five-player unit's "shift" to less than sixty seconds.

At both LMU and Grinnell, the experiment was successful. Westhead's teams advanced deep into the NCAA tournament, losing in 1990 to eventual national champion UNLV, and setting an NCAA scoring record of 122 points per game.

Arseneault turned around Grinnell's program which hadn't had a winning season in thirty years, capturing several conference titles and breaking almost every scoring record in the NCAA book.

Finally, we'd like to say a brief word about the use of gender-neutral terms. Gary coached men's basketball for forty years, and Doug has coached women for over thirty. Rather than use the awkward conventions "his/her" or "he/she," we have simply chosen to write as we normally speak about our respective teams. In sections which were written primarily by Doug, he tends to use "she," while Gary uses "he" most of the time in the sections where he is the author. No grammatical choice is a perfect solution, but any reference to "he" in the text should not be taken to mean the ideas don't apply to female athletes, nor do references to "she" indicate that we think a particular technique or concept isn't applicable to male players. Both of us have the greatest respect for athletes—male or female—and we hope you won't take our choice of pronouns to indicate anything to the contrary.

OUR BACKGROUNDS

Both of us have long histories with the System. We have each used the LMU approach at various times in our careers, and we both eventually adopted the Grinnell style. Most of what we will detail in this book is not original with us. Arseneault and Westhead are the artists; we are mere copiers. But we pride ourselves on stealing from the best! Although we have tweaked the System here and there to suit our temperaments and our personnel, we have not tinkered with the "Formula for Success," Coach Arseneault's statistics-based blueprint for running the System. Any mistakes in explaining the details of System basketball in the pages that follow are ours, and not the originators.

But before getting started with the "meat and potatoes" we wanted to take a few minutes to tell you a little bit about our background, and why we are excited to share with you our experiences in coaching the System.

Gary

In developing my coaching philosophy at the University of Redlands beginning in 1971-72, I valued playing with great effort—"playing hard"—above all else. I was influenced toward "disruption" type defenses in the mid 1970's by Bob Kloppenburg and his pressure man-to-man switching tactics, which incorporated a lot of trapping and a full-court dimension. Bob developed much of his

philosophy at an NAIA school in southern California. Later in his career he was an assistant for Jerry Tarkanian at UNLV during their outstanding run, and with George Karl in the NBA at Seattle. Bob was in charge of the Sonics defense the year they set the NBA record—which still stands, by the way—for most turnovers created.

The switching/denial defense we used at the University of Redlands from 1974 through 1987 created considerable chaos for our opponents, making it very difficult for them to run any semblance of an offense. A couple of our mottos during that time were "controlled chaos" and "playing on the edge." We had our share of successes in the won-lost column using this defense, but played a very deliberate offensive game, often making six passes before even thinking about shooting during this pre- shot clock era. We spent a lot of practice time on defensive technique, and the end result was that we were able to a large extent to control the way the game was played. We didn't always win, but we did control the tempo through our combination of very deliberate offense and a disruptive "switch and deny" defensive philosophy.

After a below-average season or two in the late 1980's, and aware of the success Paul Westhead was enjoying with his up-tempo game just down the road at Loyola Marymount, I was motivated to learn more about his approach. Paul shared a great deal with me about his philosophy, and after watching numerous LMU practices we decided to make the move. This surprised a lot of my coaching peers, as we went from averaging in the low- to mid-60s (with a good number of games in the 40s), to averaging over 100 points per game during the 1988-89 season. But it was not as big a leap for me as it might have appeared, because the System was an extension of our two foundation stones: finding a way to get our team to play hard, and an effective means of controlling the *way* a game was played.

In five seasons with the LMU system, we led all NCAA Division III teams in scoring three times, averaging between 100 and 104.5 points per game. During that time, among all NCAA men's teams only LMU averaged more than Redlands. The last couple of years we were not as successful, and due to personnel considerations stepped back from the LMU style to use a more conventional attack, running the Triangle offense and then a Motion game during the next six years.

In 2002-03 we decided we had the personnel to return to an up-tempo approach, and after having enjoyed the LMU style in those previous years I

wanted to "go fast" again. I was also ready to try something new and different. Variety being the spice of life, I found myself looking for a coaching challenge, something on the cutting edge. I knew a little about what Dave Arseneault was doing at Grinnell, and like many coaches around the country was intrigued by his style. At first my intention was to go back to playing like we had in the early 1990s, but after researching the Grinnell System decided to move in that direction.

Unfortunately, in that first season we attempted a hybrid approach by trying to combine the Grinnell offense with some of our previous switch-and-deny man-to-man concepts. This was my first reality check, as I learned the nature of a true system: you either jump in all the way, or don't jump in at all. Even though we were exciting and averaged nearly 100 points per game, that first year was not as successful as I'd hoped. So, during the summer of 2003 I visited Coach Arseneault in Iowa and spent a good deal of time refining my thinking about the System. Coach A, as he is known by the "Run and Gun" fraternity, was—and has continued to be—extremely generous with his time and the sharing of his knowledge. From the 2003-04 season on we were literally "off and running."

We ran at Redlands for four more years, 2003-04 through 2006-07, averaging at least 114 points per game every year, and as a tribute to the team's success, I had the honor of being named D-3 Hoops NCAA West Region Coach of the Year following my last season. The 2004-05 season in particular was a storybook year as our 132.4 points per game average set an all-time record for men's college basketball: NCAA Division I, II, III, or NAIA—and as far as we know, at any level of basketball anywhere in the world. From 1988-89 through 2010-11, with the exception of 1990 and 1993, either Grinnell or Redlands has led the NCAA Division III in scoring.

After retiring from Redlands at the conclusion of the 2006-07 season, I spent the next season as Coach Arseneault's assistant at Grinnell. This experience was invaluable in my understanding of the System, its nuances, and the thought processes of its originator. Since that time, I've enjoyed sharing my ideas and passion for the System while speaking at various clinics in the United States and Germany, corresponding with coaches throughout the country, and traveling overseas to help install the System with a foreign team.

With that said, although Doug and I did not invent the System, we've had a variety of wonderful experiences with this approach to the game; we love coaching it and talking about it. So while it might be presumptuous on our part

to undertake this project, it's truly been a labor of love. Our goal is to share our experiences to help make your path a little smoother—whether you are interested in adopting the System, or just learning more about this exciting style of play. While in no way attempting to speak for Coach Arseneault or Coach Westhead, we will refer to them rather frequently. What follows is an overview of our personal experiences: the lessons we have learned through study, trial and error, and the joys and rewards we've derived from "Coaching the System."

Doug

Like Gary, I was drawn to this unique style of play by my desire to do something completely different. But my journey towards adopting System basketball was also fueled by desperation.

I'd always been a believer in up-tempo basketball, modeling my approach after Dean Smith and John Wooden, two great fast-break advocates. In the late 1980s while a high school coach, I installed Paul Westhead's Loyola Marymount fast break after viewing his video, *Basketball in the Fast Lane.* Unfortunately, Coach Westhead did not reveal his entire system in the video, saying nothing about his defensive philosophy, so I had an incomplete grasp of what he was trying to do at LMU.

Still, I continued using elements of LMU's numbered fast break for years, combined with Dean Smith's pressure run-and-jump man-to-man defensive principles, enjoying success with it during the first several years of my college coaching career. In 2000-01, however, season-ending injuries to our two quickest players led me to change our defensive approach, incorporating Wisconsin Coach Dick Bennett's "Pack Defense." The problem with the "Pack" we soon learned, was that it severely limited our fast break opportunities. Over the next several seasons, we became more and more conservative and less and less successful, with steadily increasing personnel problems. Playing a slower style and a shorter bench resulted in much higher "attrition." Young players who did not get immediate opportunities to contribute quit the program, and older players' attitudes soured as I became frustrated with our lack of success.

When I first began hearing about the Grinnell approach almost twenty years ago, my first impression was decidedly negative. I regarded the System—or what I thought was the System—as a huge gimmick. I'd been told (incorrectly) that Grinnell's offense kept two shooters stationed at all times in the offensive end behind the arc. Meanwhile, three teammates defended as best they could, and

inbounded the ball quickly after an opponent's score to cherry-pick a three-point shot. I even heard the style referred to as "Goon-Ball."

Now, who wants to coach "Goon-Ball?" I certainly didn't. But I eventually discovered that my initial impression of Grinnell's offense as an unsound approach was wrong. I learned upon further investigation that although Coach A's teams do occasionally use what he calls the "Goon-ball" tactic, he only does so on rare occasions when an opponent chooses to "freeze" the ball in order to hold the score down—what System coaches call "playing defense on offense". I had always had a strong distaste for such stalling tactics myself because they seemed to me to violate the spirit of the game. Coach Arseneault's effective if unusual "goon-ball" counter to this strategy forced me to reconsider my earlier opinion. I began to ask myself if maybe there was something more to this Grinnell System than met the eye.

I ordered Coach Arseneault's book *The Running Game: A Formula for Success* and discovered the author was not a desperate publicity seeker, but a very bright, innovative, and organized guy. I learned that he had once been in a situation similar in many ways to the one in which I found myself: coaching unhappy, uncommitted players, and struggling to find a way to help them succeed both on and off the court. And his solution to these problems started to make more and more sense to me.

So I decided to travel the five hours from the Chicago area to Iowa to see Grinnell play. The game was a revelation. Far from playing a disorganized style, I saw a team that was exceptionally sound and well-disciplined. They were just disciplined at 100 mph! Grinnell ran at breakneck speed, rained three-pointers, played a hyperactive, maniacal trapping defense, and were tenacious on the offensive glass. Everyone played a role and played together. The bench was cheering, and the crowd was beside itself throughout the entire game, one which Grinnell both won and had fun: two goals that seemed to fit together "hand-in-glove" with this style.

With that game fresh in my memory, I promptly went home and convinced myself I couldn't run the System with my team. Instead, I decided to give conventional basketball one more try, but hedged my bets by recruiting players who should be able to play System basketball: smaller, quicker players with good shooting range.

The grand Conventional Basketball Experiment started in 2003 with a bang. We began very well with a 6-1 record by playing a packed in, hard-nosed man-to-

man defense. We were disciplined and patient on offense, keeping our top players on the floor almost exclusively throughout the game, with nobody below the top seven getting off the bench until the game was decided. Our mantra was "let's not beat ourselves."

And then the wheels came off. We had the flu run through our team in early December, and we never seemed to recover our momentum. When I called on the non-regulars to pitch in and help, they weren't prepared. We started to lose, and kept losing even after the regulars got well. The low-point came in the first round of our conference tournament. We were scheduled to play a big rival, they the fourth seed, we the fifth.   We had not played well against them during our two regular season matchups, both losses, but I was determined to give conventional basketball one last shot. We spent hours breaking down tape and walking through scouting reports, leaving no stone unturned in our game preparation. I recounted the results of that game the next day in an email posting to a "Run and Gun" chat group of System coaches that I'd joined several months previously.

> *Date: March 3, 2004*
> *To: runandgun@yahoogroups.com*
> *Re: Incredible Finish!*
>
> *Note to all:*
> *Our women's season at Olivet Nazarene University ended tonight on an incredible note, and the Run and Gun era began.*
>
> *This past year I've really enjoyed learning from many of you, absorbing your thoughts about the system. Even snuck up in January to catch Grinnell at an away-game in Wisconsin; wanted to see the team in action. They played extremely well but I was still convinced that we would probably need to wait to implement this approach until next year because: a) we don't have a lot of depth or quickness, and b) I was afraid that if we put this in at mid-season—half-baked—and struggled with it, the players would be much less receptive to giving it a try in the future. I still think my reasoning was valid, but 13 minutes into our 1st round conference tournament game tonight on the road, we decided there was nothing else to lose.*

You would think I'd have learned by now. The game plan went out the window in about five minutes as our opponent hit eight of their first ten shots and had us down 19-3. Three timeouts later it was 39-13, and the light bulb finally went on in my head. I knew that at this point we didn't have anything to lose. We could continue to get pounded, or we could go down swinging. Now remember, we don't even teach a System zone press, so the best we could do was tell our kids to pick up full-court man-to-man, try to turn and trap the dribbler whenever possible, and start shooting quicker. That's about all of the System we had time to put in with a 1 minute timeout.

But it worked...we went on a run and by halftime it was "only" 49-30. At halftime, we explained a bit more: "Take the first open shot you can get. All the shooters have the green light...don't worry about missing. Drive-and-kick when you can't get the shot off, and everyone crash the offensive boards. We'll sub for you every 2-3 minutes to give you a breather. (Not pure "System," but in the same area code).

In the second half, we continued closing the gap. Players who'd been struggling from the arc all year were knocking down shots. My high post player, who's a streaky shooter, hit a three-pointer almost two steps outside the arc. I looked down the sideline with six minutes to play and their coach was at half-court screaming at his team to "Take away the three!" A couple of their players were doubled over, gasping for breath. Chaos was in the air as we cut a 26 point lead to two, 78-80 with just two minutes to play.

I wish I could report a Cinderella finish, but fatigue and our eight-player rotation caught up with us. Two key turnovers, including a charge along with a blown layup by my best penetrator, gave them the opportunity they needed to come up for air. We had to foul at the end and they got away, 80-85.

It hurt, but not as bad as it would have if we hadn't taken the first baby steps towards the future. The players don't know that what they did was our beginning. They don't know "System" from nothing, and I haven't told them yet. All they know is that we did pretty well running and pressing, hitting for fifty in the second half, and outscoring them 67-46 in the last 2/3 of the game. Tomorrow we'll give them a hint when we meet for our post-season wrap up. After

our spring break, we'll lay it all out for them, and meanwhile continue to recruit for quickness and shooting. I can't wait for next year!

Doug Porter, ONU

Over the next seven years our teams at ONU won three conference titles, and finished a close second three times. The 2007-08 season was our best year offensively, as we won 24 games and averaged 104.1 points, the highest scoring average ever for a four-year college women's team. In 2010-11 we had our best defensive team, forcing 36.3 turnovers per game, and finishing 27-7 while averaging 103.9 points per game. We advanced to the second round of the NAIA tournament before bowing out to the two-time defending national champions in a close, hard-fought game. The 2011 squad also had the distinction of breaking our own record for most 100+ point games in a season (24).

WHY THIS BOOK?

The two of us have been friends for a long time, and a few years ago when we started talking about the idea of collaborating on a book it seemed like the obvious conclusion of a long journey for both of us. We've each coached this great game for over thirty years, one of us entirely on the men's side, the other with women. But the things we had in common included our love for the up-tempo style, our similar beliefs about how the game should be played, and what players and coaches ought to be getting out of participating. We also both believe that John Wooden was right when he said, "Basketball is a game that was meant to be played fast," and agree with him that an overemphasis on winning—focusing on the end product rather than the process—is counterproductive.

The System focuses on the process. It's not just a style of play, it is a philosophy, an approach to coaching the game that is so far outside the mainstream it might as well be a different sport entirely. But maybe the System isn't as crazy as some critics try to tell us it is. Maybe it represents the way the game should have been. Maybe the full-court, high-paced style would have become the norm if—like hockey—basketball rules permitted substitutions on the fly. And maybe the System might have become mainstream had coaches not given in to the siren-call to control

the tempo in order to—supposedly—win more, instead of realizing that perhaps over-control was in fact *costing* their team wins by limiting its potential.

But don't play the System just because you think it might help you win more games. Any style can be successful if you teach it well and have good players. It's true the two of us have experienced success coaching the System, as measured in the win-loss columns. But our greatest successes have been the satisfaction our players gained from playing in the System: they just seem a lot *happier*. Of course when players are happy, coaching any style of play is more fun, but when you are "Coaching the System" the game is a blast!

Good luck!