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Free-throw expert regularly take shots at perfection

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Ron Medvescek / Arizona Daily Star

He's not likely to miss. Bill Killian lines up a shot during a game of H-O-R-S-E at Northwest YMCA, 7770 N. Shannon Road. Killian, a former chaplain at Tucson Medical Center, has refined the skill of making free throws.

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When 74-year-old Bill Killian practices free throws, he accepts nothing less than perfection. He strives to not only make his shots, but place the ball into the back of the net with just enough backspin so that it hits the floor and rolls right back to him.

“The perfect shot comes back to you between your feet,” said Killian, who volunteers as a shot doctor, tutoring young players on the finer points of hitting set shots. “If it does not hit any iron and if it hits the net at a good momentum, the rotation on the ball will hit the floor and roll back between your feet. It’s interesting to watch. I leave the court after I make a perfect shot. That’s one of my goals.”

Two or three times a week, Killian practices his craft for about an hour, most often at the Northwest YMCA Pima Community Center, 7770 N. Shannon Road. Sometimes he plays friendly games of H-O-R-S-E with his friends, whom he lovingly calls “old codgers.” Sometimes he tutors those who seek his tips, and in other instances he just focuses on his own technique.

On those occasions, sometimes crowds gather around Killian as he nails shot after shot. On 124 occasions he has hit 100 shots in a row. Sometimes the sports director offers to rebound shots for Killian, but when Killian’s form is on, his services are not needed because the ball makes its way back to him on its own.

Killian has tried to make a side career out of his free-throw tutelage. He operates freethrowdoc.com and sells a self-published instructional DVD. Sales aren’t close to covering the costs it took to make the video. He used to charge for tutoring sessions, but has long since given up on trying to make money on his hobby.

“I’ve made very little money on it,” he said without a twinge of disappointment. “I haven’t sold enough to recoup the money I put into making it. It’s been a work of love, basically. Giving my time.”

His dream is to shoot with Arizona basketball coach Sean Miller, a respected free throw shooter himself, but Killian said the school’s athletic department has so far rebuffed his requests.

Killian said he aims to place the ball between seven and eight inches away from the back rim — just off-center of its 18-inch diameter.

“People will say you gotta concentrate, but it’s not a mental deal. It’s a physical deal,” Killian said. “Physical principles are what basketball is all about. It’s not a matter of luck. There’s no such thing as luck in basketball. If you do everything right, the ball is going to go in, guaranteed.”

Killian’s shots are usually going to go in. His consecutive shots record is 260.

“I’m just having fun with it,” Killian said. “I love shooting, and kids want to learn. Most of them are teachable.”

Free throws, he said, can make the difference between good and great players and mediocre and

Info box

Bill Killian's free throw system

Killian's instructions are intricately detailed. He tells players to find the center nail on the flooring just behind the free-throw line, then recommends aiming for the nail or screw that affixes the rim to the backboard.

The rest of his advice starts makes up the anagram "FREE THROW."

- * Feet first.
- * Read the rim.
- * Energize the body.
- * Ease and fluidity at the line, authority at the net.
- * Throw out all myths and any variations.
- * Hold the follow-through for a two-count.
- * Read the results of each release on the floor and in your private box score.
- * Observe your trends, consult with the winners, and teach what you have learned.
- * Watch out for iron, haste, tension, and fatigue.

successful teams. It could even be the deciding factor of a college scholarship — that's an impression he makes on high school students he works with.

"Exciting games that count — tournament games, rivalry games — are all won and lost at the free throw line," he said. "You look at how many points a team lost by and how many free throws they missed. If everything else is equal on the court, the line is the deciding factor."

He praises Los Angeles Lakers point guard Steve Nash as the prime example of perfect shooting form.

Killian no longer takes part in team basketball. He played at Indiana Wesleyan from 1957 to 1961 and then was with the professional Continental Basketball Association's Rockford Lightning for a year, in which he learned "I better not quit my day job."

That day job turned out to be chaplain at Tucson Medical Center, where he worked from 1980 until retiring in 2001. He still works part time in that capacity at various hospitals around town.

Killian also writes song lyrics, books of poetry and short stories, and acts in local indie films. He has been married to his wife, Linda, for 52 years, and has three children and six grandchildren, with whom he shares his love of sports.

Kevin Marts, sports director at the Northwest YMCA, said Killian is something of a legend on the court.

"I think he can be intimidating," Marts said. "He shoots hundreds of free throws, and at some points in time other people in the gym stop shooting to watch him."

Marts said he admires Killian's technique.

"His stroke is a very consistent, well-practiced motion," he said. "Some analysts might say it's not a perfect motion, but it works for him."

Marts said he wants to put a fundraiser together to let Killian take on all comers in shooting contests.

Killian's favorite part about shooting is competition. He invites anyone who can make more than 90 percent of their free throws to a shooting contest. He can be contacted through his website.

He said he's not the shooter he once was, partially due to lack of competition.

"I would say my skills are lessening because I am not practicing very much," he said, before pausing. "I think maybe my age has something to do with it."