

## Yao's Work Ethic

As he does before every game, Yao arrives at the arena at 9:00 am, an hour and a half before the shoot-around. As always, Thibodeau is there to meet him. The coach begins by going over tape, showing Yao how he will be defended by a pair of 6'11" Pacers; center Jeff Foster and power forward Jermaine O'Neal. After 45 minutes, the two men head to the court, where Yao runs through shooting drills for another 45 minutes. Then, sweaty and breathing hard, Yao joins his teammates, some of who have just arrived and are still sleepy-eyed, for the shoot-around.

Yao is also the first on the floor at the Toyota Center that evening, hitting the floor at 6:00 pm for an 8:30 game. He begins with spot shooting, circling through nine locations, seven on the perimeter, and the two "short" corners, 15 feet to either side of the basket along the baseline. The goal is to hit eight of 10 from each spot; if Yao fails, Thibodeau gives him a second chance. Most of the time, he doesn't need it.

Yao makes 9 of 10 from the left elbow, then only seven of 10 from the wing. On misses he grimaces or shakes his head. Alston calls Yao's approach "almost perfectionist" while Rockets forward Juwan Howard says it "extreme, in a good way." To watch him shoot is to see the motion at its most refined. He keeps the ball high and releases it with his right hand in a short flicking action. He does not jump and barely even moves his legs. It is almost robotic.

Next Yao steps to the line, where he hits all 10 of his free throws. Through Sunday he was shooting 86.0%, second only to Kobe Bryant among players who were averaging eight or more attempts per game. Yao's percentage not only led the team (he frequently shoots the Rocket's technicals) but also was nearly six percentage points better than that of any other center. In fact, there has never been a back-to-the-basket center as accurate from the line. (Jack Sikma shot 84.9% for his career – almost three points higher than Yao's five-season average – but he was a 6'11" jump shooter.)

"Ok, post moves next," commands Thibodeau.

Yao sets up on the right block, practicing jump hooks, then turnarounds. It is part of his continuing education as a low-post player: developing counters, taking angles, rooting for position. "What people forget is that he was an elbow player when we got him," says Dawson. "He had a lot of finesse things in his system, and we felt like power moves were what he needed." When Yao gets position and faces up, he is virtually un-guardable, as is clear two hours later versus the Pacers.

Rockets coaches have noticed a change in attitude. Van Gundy says Yao has added the proper amount of stubbornness, and Thibodeau says, "His self-assurance now is as high as it's ever been." Yao agrees that he feels more confident, but despite his numbers, he still sees himself as an outsider among the NBA elite. "I still have a long way to go," he says. "I feel that every year I am getting better, better, then – boom – next level. And then new, stronger players are coming. And I feel, where's the end?" He pauses. "If you relax or take it easy for your-self, they will beat you, someday. Maybe tomorrow, maybe day after tomorrow."

Nearly an hour after the end of the game, Yao arrives at his locker to meet reporters. Immediately after every game, while his teammates shower, he heads off to lift for 40 minutes. As Yao is speaking to the reporters, Thibodeau is going over game film in an adjacent room. By morning he will have a DVD ready. The next time the two men meet, Yao will study the DVD, look for tiny mistakes and determine what adjustments he should make. Then he will practice those adjustments over and over, until they become part of him, until he has evolved further. This, Yao Ming hopes, is how he will overcome history, his oversized limbs and the expectations of an entire country. This is how the experiment continues.