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RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Coaches' Perspectives on the Differences between 3×3 and 5×5 Basketball: Implications for Training, Tactics, and Performance

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Abstract:

Introduction/Objective: The rapid growth of 3×3 basketball as an Olympic discipline has raised questions regarding its differences from traditional 5×5 basketball. Although previous research has examined physiological and performance characteristics, coaches' perspectives remain underexplored. This study investigated coaches' perceptions of differences between 3×3 and 5×5 basketball in terms of physical conditioning, training structure, tactical approaches, and psychological demands.

Methods: A qualitative design was employed using semi-structured interviews with eleven experienced basketball coaches involved in 3×3 competitions. Twelve open-ended questions explored coaching practices, training priorities, and perceptions of both formats. Data were analyzed through Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and independently coded by two researchers, with disagreements resolved through consensus.

Results: Three themes emerged, namely physical conditioning, training structure and tactics, and psychological factors. Coaches described 3×3 as emphasizing speed, explosiveness, rapid transitions, individual technical skills, frequent pick-and-roll situations, and faster decision-making under time pressure. Conversely, 5×5 was perceived as requiring greater endurance, strength, structured team organization, coordinated offensive systems, and more complex defensive strategies. While both formats were considered competitive and entertaining, 3×3 involved greater individual responsibility and cognitive demands, whereas 5×5 emphasized teamwork and collective tactical execution.

Discussion: The findings indicate that 3×3 represents a distinct performance environment rather than merely a reduced version of 5×5 basketball.

Conclusion: Recognizing these differences may help coaches develop format-specific training programs and better prepare athletes for the physical, tactical, and psychological demands of each game.

Keywords: Coaching perceptions, Decision-making, Performance analysis, Game-based training, Tactical behavior, Basketball performance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Basketball is one of the most widely practiced team sports worldwide and has been extensively studied due to the complex interaction of physical, technical, tactical, and psychological factors that influence performance. The sport requires athletes to repeatedly perform high-intensity movements such as accelerations, decelerations, jumps, and rapid changes of direction while making quick decisions in dynamic game environments [1]. Because of these multidimensional demands, basketball performance has been widely examined in sport science literature, particularly regarding the physical and tactical characteristics of competition.

In recent years, the sport has evolved considerably with the emergence of alternative formats that modify the traditional structure of basketball while preserving its fundamental principles. One of the most important developments has been the rapid global growth of 3×3 basketball, a condensed version of traditional 5×5 basketball, which has gained increasing international popularity. Recent scientific literature has highlighted that 3×3 basketball possesses specific physical, physiological, and tactical characteristics that differentiate it from the traditional format of the sport [2].

Although 3×3 basketball derives from the traditional 5×5 game, the two formats differ substantially in terms of rules, playing environment, and competition structure. In 3×3 basketball, games are played on a half-court with three players per team and a single basket, while traditional basketball is played on a full court with five players per team. These structural differences influence the tempo of the game, the spatial organization of players, and the tactical options available during competition [2].

A growing body of research has examined the physical and physiological demands of 3×3 basketball. Studies analyzing international competitions have shown that the game is characterized by intermittent high-intensity activity and frequent accelerations and decelerations performed within a relatively small playing area [2]. Due to the shorter duration of possessions and the continuous transitions between offense and defense, players are required to repeatedly perform explosive movements while maintaining high physiological output throughout the game [2]. In this context, research on training methodologies in invasion games has demonstrated that manipulating task constraints such as the number of players and exercise duration in small-sided games can significantly alter physical and physiological responses, supporting the relevance of reduced-format games such as 3×3 basketball in training design [3]. Additionally, research on small-sided basketball games has shown that athletes' perceived exertion and physiological responses are strongly influenced by task constraints, reinforcing the importance of game design in controlling training load [4]. Furthermore, research examining elite 3×3 basketball players has indicated that sprinting ability, jumping performance, and change-of-direction capacity represent important determinants of performance in this format [5]. Comparative studies have also suggested that differences may exist between 3×3 and 5×5 players regarding sprint and jumping performance, reflecting the specific physical demands of each game format [6]. Supporting this, youth basketball studies have also demonstrated distinct physiological responses and technical-tactical performance differences between 3×3 and 5×5 formats, further emphasizing the specificity of each game structure [7].

Beyond the physical demands of the sport, differences between 3×3 and 5×5 basketball have also been identified in technical and tactical performance. Research comparing simulated games between the two formats has shown that the reduced number of players and the increased space available per player in 3×3 basketball often result in a higher frequency of individual actions such as one-on-one situations and rapid offensive decisions [7]. From an ecological dynamics perspective, performance in team sports is strongly influenced by the interaction between players and task constraints, where perception–action coupling and emergent behaviors are shaped by the structure of the game environment [3]. In contrast, traditional 5×5 basketball typically involves more complex tactical systems and coordinated team movements that require structured offensive and defensive collaboration [8]. Recent comparative performance analysis has further shown that high-level teams exhibit significant differences in the execution of technical and tactical actions between 3×3 and 5×5 basketball, particularly in offensive efficiency and decision-making speed [9]. Moreover, there are significant differences in shot selection and shooting efficiency, indicating that 3×3 basketball is characterized by faster offensive actions and more constrained shooting opportunities compared to the traditional format [10].

Performance analysis studies have also highlighted differences in shot selection and scoring efficiency between the two formats. For example, it was reported that the spatial configuration and scoring structure of 3×3 basketball influence shot selection patterns compared with traditional basketball [10]. Similarly, research comparing shooting efficiency between 3×3 and 5×5 basketball has shown significant differences in shot structure and effectiveness, with 3×3 emphasizing faster and more situational shooting decisions [8]. Similarly, it was found that effective offensive phases in elite 3×3 basketball frequently involve rapid decision-making and efficient shooting performance [11]. In addition, sport analytics research in other basketball contexts, such as wheelchair basketball, has demonstrated the importance of game statistics and performance indicators in understanding competitive outcomes, highlighting the broader applicability of performance analysis across basketball variations [12]. Furthermore, research on performance outcomes has raised questions regarding the extent to which success in 3×3 basketball is influenced by skill *versus* situational variability, suggesting that match outcomes may be more sensitive to contextual factors compared to 5×5 basketball [13].

In addition to performance characteristics, recent research has also begun to explore player development and talent identification in 3×3 basketball. Evidence suggests that anthropometric characteristics, maturation, and motor performance variables may influence talent selection and athlete development pathways in this format [14]. These findings indicate that 3×3 basketball may gradually develop its own performance model rather than simply representing a reduced version of traditional basketball.

Despite the growing body of research on 3×3 basketball, the current literature remains relatively limited and fragmented. Most studies have focused primarily on physiological responses, match demands, or statistical performance indicators [9]. While these approaches provide valuable insights into the physical and tactical demands of the sport, they offer a limited understanding of how these differences are interpreted and applied in real coaching environments.

In particular, coaches' perspectives regarding the differences between 3×3 and 5×5 basketball remain largely underexplored in the scientific literature. Coaches play a central role in designing training programs, implementing tactical strategies, and preparing athletes for competition. Their practical experience may therefore provide valuable insights into the applied implications of the structural differences between the two formats of the game. Research on basketball coaching has shown that coaches' experiences, including how they manage performance transitions and turnaround seasons, significantly influence coaching behaviors and decision-making processes [15]. Furthermore, studies have highlighted that basketball coaches perceive sport development as a dynamic process influenced by multiple contextual factors [16], while youth coaching research emphasizes the importance of integrating fundamental movement skill development into training practice [17]. Research on basketball coaching has shown that perceptual and cognitive processes, such as visual search strategies, play a crucial role in how coaches interpret game situations and make decisions during competition [17]. Therefore, further research adopting qualitative approaches is needed to explore these differences from the perspective of coaches. Understanding how coaches perceive the physical, technical, tactical, and psychological characteristics of 3×3 and 5×5 basketball may contribute to bridging the gap between scientific research and applied coaching practice.

Based on these considerations, the purpose of the present study was to explore the differences between 3×3 and 5×5 basketball from the perspective of basketball coaches. Specifically, the study aimed to examine coaches' perceptions regarding physical conditioning demands, training structure, tactical approaches, and psychological aspects, including entertainment and competitiveness, associated with the two formats of the game.

2. METHOD

2.1. Study Design

The present study was designed as a qualitative, exploratory, cross-sectional research study based on semi-structured interviews with experienced basketball coaches. The design classification follows established methodological frameworks for research design typology in psychology and sport sciences.

2.2. Sample

A total of 11 interviews were conducted with 3x3 coaches. Among the participants, 3 were women, and 8 were men; 3 coached women's teams, while 8 coached men's teams. The coaches' ages averaged 34.82 years (SD = 15.30), and their coaching experience averaged 11.18 years (SD = 9.74). The inclusion criteria for the sample were participation in a 3x3 tournament as a coach. The sampling was carried out at a single point in time during the tournament. Data collection was performed using convenience sampling, as the sample consisted of athletes from teams who agreed to participate in the present study. Given the qualitative nature of the study, sample size was determined by the depth and relevance of the information obtained rather than by statistical power considerations. A total of 11 semi-structured interviews was considered appropriate for an in-depth thematic exploration of coaches' experiences and perceptions. In qualitative interview research, relatively small purposive or convenience samples are commonly used when participants possess direct and relevant experience of the phenomenon under investigation. The sample size was therefore considered sufficient to allow the identification of recurring patterns, similarities, and differences across participants while preserving the depth and contextual richness required for thematic analysis. Moreover, the relatively focused research aim and the participants' shared experience as coaches actively involved in 3×3 basketball increased the information power of the sample.

2.3. Instruments

The interviews conducted for the present study consisted of 12 open-ended questions designed specifically for basketball coaches. These questions were structured to explore in depth the coaches' perspectives, practices, and experiences, providing insights into their approach to team training, game preparation, and player development. The open-ended format allowed the participants to freely elaborate on their methods, highlight the priorities they place on physical conditioning, technical and tactical skills, and share their reflections on the satisfaction and challenges experienced by their teams during competitions or tournaments. The questions were based on the literature and previous studies [15, 18].

2.4. Procedure

During training sessions or matches, coaches were asked to allow researchers to record their thoughts on the game, with a focus on the training programs they implement with their teams, emphasizing physical conditioning, technical-tactical approaches, and the satisfaction they experience when participating in competitions or tournaments. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the researcher took notes during the interview. After the interviews were transcribed, they were returned to participants for comments or corrections, and the responses were then grouped and categorized to facilitate qualitative data analysis. The researcher was trained prior to conducting the interviews to ensure their effective administration. The interviews' duration was approximately 15 minutes. The participants' answers, as well as their statements, remain confidential and will be securely stored. Additionally, participants will have the opportunity to receive a copy of the study results. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (289/2025) and has followed the Helsinki Declaration for involving human subjects in the study. Three participants refused to take part in the present research due to recording. Data saturation was not discussed.

2.5. Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide designed to explore coaches' perceptions of the differences between 3×3 and 5×5 basketball in relation to physical conditioning, training structure, tactical demands, and psychological factors. All interviews were conducted in Greek, allowing participants to express their views in their native language. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide designed to explore coaches' perceptions of the differences between 3×3 and 5×5 basketball in relation to physical conditioning, training structure, tactical demands, and psychological factors. All interviews were conducted in Greek, allowing participants to express their views in their native language. The interviews were audio-recorded and manually transcribed verbatim by the research team; no automated transcription software was used. The Greek-language transcripts were used for the qualitative analysis. Following completion of the analysis, the quotations selected for presentation in the manuscript were translated from Greek into English. The translated quotations were subsequently checked against the original Greek transcripts to ensure that their meaning and context were preserved. The interview data were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach to systematically identify, interpret, and report recurring patterns within the participants' accounts. The analytical process followed the six-phase framework of thematic analysis, comprising familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, construction of potential themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and preparation of the final report. Two researchers were involved in the analytical process. The transcripts were first read repeatedly to ensure familiarization with the data, after which meaningful segments relevant to the research questions were identified and assigned initial codes. Codes reflecting similar meanings were compared and grouped into broader categories and sub-themes, which were subsequently reviewed, refined, and organized into overarching themes. A formal coding tree was not developed; rather, the coding structure was developed iteratively through continuous comparison of the original transcripts, codes, sub-themes, and emerging themes. Data saturation was assessed iteratively throughout data collection and analysis. Following each interview, the researchers considered whether additional codes, concepts, or thematic patterns emerged. To enhance the consistency and trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, both researchers reviewed the coding and thematic structure and compared the emerging interpretations against the original interview transcripts. Any differences in coding or interpretation were discussed between the researchers and resolved through consensus. Code and theme definitions were refined throughout the analytical process, and representative quotations were checked against the original transcripts to ensure that they accurately reflected the meaning and context of participants' responses.

3. RESULTS

Three main themes were highlighted related to physical conditioning, training structure tactics, and psychological factors. Two of the themes presented also had sub-themes. Specifically, tactics were divided into offense and defense, and psychological factors were categorized into entertainment and competitiveness.

3.1. Theme 1: Physical Conditioning between 3x3 and 5x5

The participants identified a lot of differences in physical conditioning demands between 3x3 and 5x5. One interviewee said:

"In 3x3, players cover a shorter distance (half court), and after a made basket there is no inbound pass (unless the ball goes out of bounds), which results in frequent player transitions and continuous play. In 5x5, training

also includes aerobic endurance components due to the longer duration of the game."

This is a finding that highlights the specific demands of each play according to physical conditioning demands. Specifically, it refers to the aerobic endurance one has in 5x5 and the continuous play and transitions in 3x3. Another interviewee mentioned:

"3x3 basketball is an intermittent sport which, due to the limited playing space, involves high-intensity efforts of short duration with frequent accelerations and decelerations. It is characterized by high external loads, as players must cope with a large number of eccentric actions and changes of direction during a game. Moreover, 3x3 athletes perform more changes of direction compared to 5x5 basketball players. The number of accelerations and decelerations is also greater in a 3x3 game than in 5x5 basketball."

The finding above shows that in 3x3 basketball, the game is played on a half court and with fewer players (3 *versus* 5), which results in faster and more frequent changes in pace. Athletes in the 3x3 format are required to perform continuous accelerations, decelerations, and rapid changes of direction within short time intervals. This substantially increases the demands on anaerobic capacity, that is, the body's ability to produce energy without the use of oxygen through explosive movements and short, high-intensity efforts. Another interviewee specifies the ability an athlete has to show in 3x3 basketball:

"3x3 basketball is a high-intensity sport, as it is played on a half court, requiring athletes to possess well-developed aerobic and anaerobic capacities in order to effectively meet the demands of the game. It is a short-duration team sport characterized by intense fluctuations in effort, involving continuous accelerations, decelerations, frequent changes of direction, and jumps, which place significant stress on the neuromuscular and physiological systems of the players. The high physiological load imposed by the game makes proper physical preparation a crucial factor for performance, as inadequate conditioning can negatively affect on-court performance. In 5x5 basketball, training frequency is generally higher, as more components of the game must be developed, and training intensities typically alternate between sessions (high to moderate intensity)."

This finding highlights that the duration of the 3x3 game is short, but the intensity is extremely high. This means that the neuromuscular system, which is responsible for muscle activation and rapid movements, is placed under considerable stress. Players must be capable of performing repeated sprints, jumps, and quick reactive actions, while simultaneously recovering rapidly in order to reproduce these bursts of energy within the limited duration of the game. Another interview highlighted that 3x3 training should focus on power and explosiveness for short, high-intensity efforts, whereas in 5x5, due to longer game duration and more frequent stoppages, players also need strength endurance to cope with prolonged physical demands. Specifically:

"In 3x3 training, emphasis should be placed on the development of power and explosiveness, focusing on short-duration efforts and the rapid repetition of high-intensity actions. On the other hand, modern 5x5 basketball also includes many of these elements; however, due to the longer game duration, more frequent stoppages in play, and a greater number of substitutions, players have more opportunities to recover energy. Nevertheless, in situations where a player must compete for extended periods, they must be trained in strength endurance in order to cope effectively with the required physical loads."

3x3 basketball is differentiated from 5x5 in traits such as speed, explosiveness, and dynamic movement. Specifically, 3x3 basketball demands greater speed, explosiveness, and dynamic movement due to the smaller court and constant role changes, while 5x5 basketball emphasizes strength and endurance because of longer game duration and the need to cover multiple positions.

"In 3x3 basketball, greater speed, explosiveness, and dynamic movement are required due to the smaller playing area and the continuous switching of roles. In 5x5 basketball, strength and endurance play a more significant role because of the longer game duration and the physical demands associated with covering more positions."

3.2. Theme 2: Training Structure between 3x3 and 5x5

Differences were identified in training between the two styles of play, 3x3 and 5x5, with regard to the basic technical skills. One interviewee said:

"In 3x3, emphasis is placed on individual skills and decision-making under time constraints. In 5x5, training includes systems and adaptations to different types of defense."

This excerpt shows that in 3x3, training focuses primarily on individual skills and the multidimensional development of abilities, as players must perform multiple roles (offense, defense, playmaking, and scoring). Emphasis is placed on agility, initiative, personal creativity in offense, and rapid situation reading, since the game unfolds in a much smaller space and at a faster pace. Skills such as dribbling, shooting from all distances, and individual defense are practiced intensively. 3x3 training is less structured tactically but much more demanding technically and physically on an individual level. Another interviewee mentioned:

"In 3x3, technical emphasis is placed on close- and long-range shooting, quick passes, and one-on-one situations. Tactically, 3x3 focuses on fast-paced play using pick-and-roll or off-ball screens. In 5x5, the focus is on spacing, team plays with multiple passes, and small-sided games such as 2v2, 3v3, and 4v4. The 5x5 game also utilizes systems with many pick-and-rolls and numerous off-ball movements."

This excerpt highlights the differences in technical and tactical demands between 3x3 and 5x5 basketball. In 3x3, players require well-developed individual skills, such as close and long-range shooting, quick passes, and one-on-

one situations, and the game relies on fast decision-making through pick-and-rolls or off-ball screens. In contrast, 5x5 emphasizes teamwork and coordinated play, with more complex systems and numerous off-ball movements that require a deeper understanding of tactics. Training in 5x5 often includes small-sided games, such as 2v2, 3v3, and 4v4, to develop spacing and collaboration before full 5v5 matches.

3.3. Theme 3: Tactics between 3x3 and 5x5

3.3.1. Sub-theme 1: Offensive Tactics

Another theme that was highlighted was the difference in tactics between 3x3 and 5x5. According to offensive tactics, the interviewees said:

"In 3x3, there is greater spacing, more direct and tight plays, possibly more general instructions and guidelines, freer play, and players have less control over the pace of the game. In 5x5, more tactical emphasis is placed on transition (both defensive and offensive), while the flow of the offense plays a significant role, and the presence of five players reduces the available free space. Each player has four possible passing options, which greatly increases the complexity of both offensive and defensive tactics."

"In 3x3, play relies more on each player's individual skills, with greater emphasis on 1v1 situations and pick-and-roll. In 5x5, tactical play predominates."

"In 3x3, there is more space per player, which leads to more individual play with faster decision-making, focusing mainly on pick-and-roll, isolation plays, and cut passes. Individual defense and quick adjustments after screens dominate. In 5x5, more systems and complex combination plays are possible, with coverage and defensive tactics. Organized defense is implemented, with greater emphasis on team tactics and positional rotations. This includes zone defenses, mixed defenses, full- or half-court presses, and various game management tactics such as fouls and timeouts."

These excerpts highlight that in 3x3, the greater space per player and fewer teammates on the court place a stronger emphasis on individual skills, such as 1v1 situations, pick-and-roll, isolation plays, and quick decision-making. Offensive strategies are simpler, more direct, and rely on each player's ability to read the defense and exploit immediate opportunities. In contrast, 5x5 offense is more structured and tactical, requiring coordinated team movements, complex combination plays, and careful management of spacing to create scoring opportunities against a full five-player defense. The presence of more players allows for greater variety in passing options and offensive systems, including set plays, off-ball movement, and coordinated rotations, making scoring more dependent on teamwork and tactical execution rather than individual actions alone.

The responses are more specific in offensive cooperation. Specifically, it was mentioned:

"In 3x3, depending on the game situation, we encounter scenarios such as 1v1, 2v2, 3v3, and often 2v1 or 3v2. In 5x5, we encounter 1v1, 2v2, 3v3, 4v4, 5v5, 2v1, 3v1, 3v2, 4v3, 5v3, and 5v4. This occurs because in 3x3 there are 3 players per team, for a total of 6 on the court, whereas in 5x5 there are 5 players per team, for a total of 10. Additionally, 3x3 is played on a half-court with a single basket, while 5x5 is played on the full court. Finally, the rules greatly influence the occurrence of different situations. For example, in modern 5x5, unlike 3x3, there is no check-ball rule, which results in more fast-break situations following a missed shot by the opposing team."

"In 3x3, more emphasis is placed on two-player collaborations. In 5x5, offensive collaborations are clearly more complex than in 3x3 because the entire five-player defense must be engaged in order to create an advantage for the offense to achieve its objectives."

These excerpts explain that 3x3 basketball involves fewer players, simpler court situations, and more focus on individual and two-player collaborations, while 5x5 basketball has more players, more complex game scenarios, and requires coordinated teamwork to create offensive advantages. The coaches' responses also included pick-and-roll situations. Specifically:

"In 3x3, when executing a pick-and-roll, the two players involved must "read" the defensive response of the two defenders and act accordingly. In 5x5, because there are more defenders, more complex actions involving multiple players are required for the offense to find the weak spot in the defense and score."

"In 3x3, the pick-and-roll is used frequently. Attacks in 3x3 are simpler and rely more on individual initiative. In 5x5, the pick-and-roll is critical for breaking down the defense and creating scoring opportunities."

These responses illustrate the differences in how the pick-and-roll is used in 3x3 and 5x5 basketball. In 3x3, the play relies heavily on the individual skills and decision-making of the two players involved, with simpler offensive patterns and more immediate execution. In contrast, 5x5 requires more complex coordination among multiple players to effectively break down the larger defensive structure, making the pick-and-roll a critical tactical tool for creating scoring opportunities and exploiting defensive weaknesses. This highlights how offensive strategies in 5x5 are more structured and team-oriented, while in 3x3 they emphasize individual initiative and quick adaptation.

Other interviewees mentioned the presence of screen and off-ball screens:

"In 5x5, the following screens are usually used: Down, Cross, Back, Stagger and Double Stagger, Flare, Pick and roll (Top, Side).

In 3x3, the screens include: Away, Down, Back, Flare, Pick and roll (Top, Side). In 3x3, I rely more on back, flare, and away screens, with several re-screen situations to exploit switches. In 5x5, all types of off-ball screens are used."

These responses highlight that in 5x5, the game is more structured. With five players on the floor, spacing is different, and there is more opportunity for weak-side

actions, stagger and double stagger screens, elevator actions, pick-and-roll, and complex off-ball sequences. Teams can manipulate the defense through multiple screening layers and timing-based execution. All types of off-ball screens are valuable because the defense must cover more space, help rotations, and multiple passing lanes. However, in 3x3, especially under the philosophy of FIBA 3x3 basketball, the game is faster, more direct, and more reactive. With only three players and a 12-second shot clock, actions must be efficient and immediately threatening. That is why back screens, flare screens, and away screens become more prominent as they create instant advantages and force quick defensive decisions. Re-screens are extremely effective because switches are common in 3x3, and exploiting mismatches or miscommunication becomes a primary tactical weapon.

According to the offense, the case of shots also emerged. Specifically, the interviewees said:

"In 3x3, shots made from beyond the three-point line count for 2 points, and shots made inside the line count for 1 point. On free throws, a foul inside the three-point line results in 1 free throw, while a foul outside the three-point line results in 2 free throws.

In 5x5, shots made from beyond the three-point line count for 3 points, and shots made inside the line count for 2 points. On free throws, a foul inside the three-point line results in 2 free throws, while a foul outside the three-point line results in 3 free throws."

"In 3x3, free throws and two-point shots count as 1 point, while three-point shots count as 2 points. In 5x5, free throws count as 1 point, two-point shots count as 2 points, and three-point shots count as 3 points."

These quotes highlight one of the most fundamental differences between 3x3 and 5x5 basketball: the scoring structure and how it shapes tactics. In 3x3, shots inside the arc count for 1 point and shots beyond the arc count for 2 points, meaning the outside shot is worth double the inside shot, which significantly increases the value of perimeter shooting and creates faster scoring swings. Free throws are also simplified, with each shot counting as 1 point, reinforcing the fast and direct nature of the game. In contrast, 5x5 follows the traditional 1–2–3 scoring system, where a three-point shot (3 points) is worth 50% more than a two-point shot (2 points), allowing for a more balanced inside–outside offensive approach and more nuanced foul situations (2 or 3 free throws depending on the shot).

3.3.2. Sub-theme 2: Defensive Tactics

The presence of defensive tactics was also shown. Specifically, the interviewees said:

"In 3x3, individual defense is used. In 5x5, defense is based on teamwork and help defense".

"In 3x3, there is more 1v1 play and individual defensive principles, fewer rotations, and even greater emphasis on switches. In 5x5, there is a larger volume of defensive tactics, more players providing help, defensive principles are emphasized, and a full-court mentality is applied (press, zone press)."

"In 3x3, there is a man-to-man defense, and there are few switches and help. In 5x5, there are various types of defense and different ways to defend screens."

"In 3x3, defense is primarily based on man-to-man principles with a strong emphasis on individual responsibility, 1v1 containment, physicality, and immediate switching due to limited space and the 12-second shot clock. Because there are only three defenders and no weak-side "extra" help defender, rotations are shorter, and help defense is more selective and calculated. In contrast, 5x5 defense is more collective and system-oriented: it incorporates help-and-recover principles, multiple pick-and-roll coverages (hedge, drop, switch, trap), weak-side rotations, and even full-court schemes such as press and zone press. Therefore, while 3x3 demands high-level individual defensive efficiency and adaptability in switch situations, 5x5 requires coordinated team defense, communication across multiple lines of help, and tactical versatility in different defensive structures."

3.4. Theme 3: Psychological Factors between 3x3 and 5x5

3.4.1. Sub-theme 1: Entertainment

"It is fast-paced, exciting, and 3x3 basketball is open to everyone. The speed of the game and the smaller distances mean more possessions and more scoring opportunities, which is both important and very enjoyable on its own. Since it requires less space and fewer players, it also automatically means that fewer rules are needed compared to 5x5. Finally, 3x3 basketball is suitable for anyone, regardless of age or skill level. 5x5 basketball can be a fun and engaging activity for people of all ages. From playing casual games with friends to watching or even participating in professional matches, basketball offers various ways for individuals to enjoy the sport. It is a fast and dynamic game with constant pace and frequent changes in possession and scoring, making it exciting from start to finish."

"The game of 3x3 basketball is entertaining because it is freer and less structured compared to 5x5. It offers plenty of spectacle and presents a challenge for every player, as each one must make quick decisions within just 10 minutes. The level of entertainment is high. The level of entertainment in 5x5 basketball is equally high, as it keeps spectators on the edge of their seats, offers exciting moments, and showcases the cooperation of five players working together toward victory. This involves both offensive and defensive tactics that they have practiced in training."

"Basketball provides an opportunity for social interaction among participants, which has been shown to motivate inactive individuals to engage in regular exercise. Participation in 3x3 basketball contributes to mental health by reducing stress, increasing self-confidence, enhancing psychological well-being, and promoting socialization in new environments. The intensity of competition in tournaments has highlighted

that competitive events address different psychological needs for men and women, fulfilling distinct goals related to recreation and personal fulfillment for the participants."

Basketball, in both its 3x3 and 5x5 formats, offers a high level of entertainment for players and spectators alike. 3x3 basketball is fast-paced, dynamic, and less structured, creating more scoring opportunities and demanding rapid decision-making, which makes it immediately exciting and accessible to participants of all ages and skill levels. Its shorter duration and smaller court also contribute to continuous action, enhancing the spectator experience. Meanwhile, 5x5 basketball delivers entertainment through strategic complexity, teamwork, and coordinated offensive and defensive tactics, keeping audiences engaged with suspenseful plays and collective effort toward victory. In both formats, the combination of action, challenge, and social interaction ensures that basketball is not only a sport but also a highly enjoyable and engaging form of recreation.

3.4.2. Sub-theme 2: Competitiveness

The level of competitiveness was also mentioned by the interviewed coaches. The coaches said:

"3x3 basketball has been played in a more informal form for many years on courts around the world. It has grown significantly in recent years, especially since its official inclusion in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games. Each year it receives increasing exposure, which has resulted in a rise in both the level of play and the level of competition worldwide. Traditional 5x5 basketball currently remains more competitive compared to 3x3 and is more widespread and widely recognized by the general public."

"The level of competitiveness in 3x3 is quite significant, but it mainly depends on the athletes who participate. They define that level. Similarly in 5x5, it is quite significant here as well, but in this case too, it depends on the athletes... they will determine how competitive it will be".

"Competition in 3x3 basketball is usually more individual, with greater opportunities for personal excellence. Players are required to demonstrate not only physical ability but also exceptional game awareness. In 5x5 basketball, competition is more organized, with players following team strategies and collaborating to a greater extent. Team dynamics and tactics influence the outcome of the game more than individual performance."

The contrasting nature of competition in 3x3 and 5x5 basketball is highlighted. In 3x3, competitiveness is highly dependent on the individual athletes, who must demonstrate physical skill, quick decision-making, and exceptional game awareness, making the game more personal and providing greater opportunities for individual excellence. In 5x5, competition is more structured and team-oriented, with strategies, coordination, and collective tactics playing a larger role in determining the outcome. While both formats are competitive, 3x3 emphasizes individual performance, whereas 5x5 emphasizes teamwork and organized play, illustrating how the structure of each game shapes the way competition unfolds. This information is presented in Table **1**.

Table 1. Themes, sub-themes and codes from the thematic analysis.

THEMES	SUB-THEMES	CODES
Theme 1: Physical Conditioning between 3x3 and 5x5	-	"In 3x3, players cover a shorter distance (half court), and after a made basket there is no inbound pass (unless the ball goes out of bounds), which results in frequent player transitions and continuous play. In 5x5, training also includes aerobic endurance components due to the longer duration of the game." "3x3 basketball is an intermittent sport which, due to the limited playing space, involves high-intensity efforts of short duration with frequent accelerations and decelerations. It is characterized by high external loads, as players must cope with a large number of eccentric actions and changes of direction during a game. Moreover, 3x3 athletes perform more changes of direction compared to 5x5 basketball players. The number of accelerations and decelerations is also greater in a 3x3 game than in 5x5 basketball."
Theme 2: Training Structure between 3x3 and 5x5	-	"In 3x3, emphasis is placed on individual skills and decision-making under time constraints. In 5x5, training includes systems and adaptations to different types of defense." "In 3x3, technical emphasis is placed on close- and long-range shooting, quick passes, and one-on-one situations. Tactically, 3x3 focuses on fast-paced play using pick-and-roll or off-ball screens. In 5x5, the focus is on spacing, team plays with multiple passes, and small-sided games such as 2v2, 3v3, and 4v4. The 5x5 game also utilizes systems with many pick-and-rolls and numerous off-ball movements."
Theme 3: Tactics between 3x3 and 5x5	***Sub-theme 1: Offensive tactics***	"In 3x3, there is greater spacing, more direct and tight plays, possibly more general instructions and guidelines, freer play, and players have less control over the pace of the game. In 5x5, more tactical emphasis is placed on transition (both defensive and offensive), while the flow of the offense plays a significant role, and the presence of five players reduces the available free space. Each player has four possible passing options, which greatly increases the complexity of both offensive and defensive tactics." "In 3x3, play relies more on each player's individual skills, with greater emphasis on 1v1 situations and pick-and-roll. In 5x5, tactical play predominates."
-	***Sub-theme 2: Defensive tactics***	"In 3x3, individual defense is used. In 5x5, defense is based on teamwork and help defense". "In 3x3, there is more 1v1 play and individual defensive principles, fewer rotations, and even greater emphasis on switches. In 5x5, there is a larger volume of defensive tactics, more players providing help, defensive principles are emphasized, and a full-court mentality is applied (press, zone press)." "In 3x3, there is a man-to-man defense, and there are few switches and help. In 5x5, there are various types of defense and different ways to defend screens."

(Table 1) contd.....

THEMES	SUB-THEMES	CODES
Theme 3: Psychological Factors between 3x3 and 5x5	***Sub-theme 1: Entertainment***	"It is fast-paced, exciting, and 3x3 basketball is open to everyone. The speed of the game and the smaller distances mean more possessions and more scoring opportunities, which is both important and very enjoyable on its own. Since it requires less space and fewer players, it also automatically means that fewer rules are needed compared to 5x5. Finally, 3x3 basketball is suitable for anyone, regardless of age or skill level. 5x5 basketball can be a fun and engaging activity for people of all ages." "The game of 3x3 basketball is entertaining because it is freer and less structured compared to 5x5. It offers plenty of spectacle and presents a challenge for every player, as each one must make quick decisions within just 10 minutes. The level of entertainment is high. The level of entertainment in 5x5 basketball is equally high, as it keeps spectators on the edge of their seats, offers exciting moments, and showcases the cooperation of five players working together toward victory. This involves both offensive and defensive tactics that they have practiced in training."
-	***Sub-theme 2: Competitiveness***	"3x3 basketball has been played in a more informal form for many years on courts around the world. It has grown significantly in recent years, especially since its official inclusion in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games. Traditional 5x5 basketball currently remains more competitive compared to 3x3 and is more widespread and widely recognized by the general public." "The level of competitiveness in 3x3 is quite significant, but it mainly depends on the athletes who participate. They define that level. Similarly in 5x5, it is quite significant here as well, but in this case too, it depends on the athletes… they will determine how competitive it will be." "Competition in 3x3 basketball is usually more individual, with greater opportunities for personal excellence. Players are required to demonstrate not only physical ability but also exceptional game awareness. In 5x5 basketball, competition is more organized, with players following team strategies and collaborating to a greater extent. Team dynamics and tactics influence the outcome of the game more than individual performance."

4. DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to explore the differences between 3×3 and 5×5 basketball from the perspective of basketball coaches, focusing on physical conditioning, training structure, tactical approaches, and psychological factors. Overall, the findings indicate that although both formats share common technical foundations, they differ considerably in terms of physical demands, tactical organization, and player involvement during the game. These differences appear to be strongly influenced by the structural characteristics of each format, including the number of players, the playing space, and the pace of the game.

One of the most prominent findings of the present study concerns the physical conditioning requirements of the two formats. Coaches emphasized that 3×3 basketball demands greater speed, explosiveness, and rapid changes of direction, whereas 5×5 basketball requires greater endurance and the ability to sustain performance over longer periods of play. These observations are consistent with previous time motion analyses indicating that basketball involves repeated high-intensity actions such as sprinting, jumping, and rapid directional changes. Moreover, systematic reviews examining basketball match demands have shown that players frequently alternate between periods of intense activity and brief recovery, highlighting the importance of both aerobic and anaerobic energy systems during competition [19].

However, structural modifications in game formats can significantly influence the physical load experienced by players. Research examining small-sided games has demonstrated that reducing the number of players and playing space increases the intensity of physical actions and the frequency of technical involvement during play [20]. These findings help explain why coaches in the present study perceived 3×3 basketball as requiring greater explosiveness and repeated high-intensity actions.

The results of the present study also highlight important differences in training structure and skill development between the two formats. Coaches reported that training in 3×3 basketball focuses more strongly on individual skills and rapid decision-making, whereas 5×5 basketball emphasizes structured team play and coordinated tactical systems. Previous research has shown that reducing the number of players increases the frequency of ball possessions and individual technical actions performed by each athlete [21]. This increased involvement may create an environment that promotes individual skill development and tactical awareness.

Furthermore, studies examining deliberate play and skill acquisition in basketball have suggested that environments with greater player involvement and decision-making opportunities may enhance tactical development and creativity among athletes [22]. From this perspective, the structure of 3×3 basketball may provide valuable opportunities for developing versatile players capable of performing multiple roles during the game.

Another important finding concerns the tactical characteristics of the two formats. Coaches described 3×3 basketball as relying more heavily on individual offensive actions, particularly one-on-one situations and pick-and-roll plays, while 5×5 basketball involves more complex offensive systems and coordinated team movements. These findings align with theoretical frameworks of tactical behavior in team sports, which suggest that the complexity of tactical interactions increases as the number of players involved in the game increases [23].

With five players on the court, teams can implement more sophisticated tactical structures involving multiple screens, off-ball movements, and spatial coordination among teammates [24]. In contrast, smaller game formats tend to produce simpler tactical solutions due to the reduced number of passing options and defensive rotations. Research analyzing offensive–defensive inter-

actions in basketball has also demonstrated that player positioning and spatial dynamics play a critical role in determining tactical outcomes during competition [25]. Similarly, modeling studies examining play-by-play basketball data have shown that tactical interactions between players are highly dynamic and influenced by spatial constraints and decision-making processes during the game [26].

The study also revealed differences in defensive strategies between the two formats. Coaches indicated that 3×3 basketball emphasizes individual defensive responsibility and switching situations, whereas 5×5 basketball incorporates more complex defensive systems such as help defense and coordinated rotations. Previous research examining basketball competition has shown that defensive organization becomes increasingly complex as the number of players and tactical options increases [27]. As a result, traditional basketball requires greater collective coordination and communication among teammates during defensive play.

Another important dimension highlighted by the findings concerns the psychological and experiential aspects of participation in the two formats. Coaches described 3×3 basketball as a faster and more dynamic format that places greater responsibility on individual players. Participation in team sports has been associated with numerous psychological and social benefits, including increased motivation, social interaction, and psychological well-being [28-30]. In addition, dynamic training environments that involve constant interaction and decision-making have been shown to enhance skill acquisition and perceptual–cognitive development in athletes [31].

Finally, the findings of the present study suggest that the structural characteristics of the game influence not only the physical and tactical demands but also the overall competitive experience of athletes. Previous research examining competition schedules in basketball has demonstrated that factors such as game frequency, recovery strategies, and cumulative fatigue can significantly influence performance during tournaments. These considerations may be particularly relevant in 3×3 competitions, which often involve multiple games within short time periods.

5. STUDY LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, participants were recruited through convenience sampling, which may have introduced selection bias and may limit the extent to which the findings reflect the perspectives of coaches with different backgrounds or levels of experience. Second, data were collected within a single tournament setting, and participants' responses may therefore have been influenced by the specific competitive, organizational, and contextual characteristics of that event. Third, the relatively limited sample size restricts the breadth of perspectives represented in the study. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as broadly generalizable to all 3×3 and 5×5 basketball coaches. Rather, they should be considered context-specific insights that may be transferable to similar competitive and coaching settings, while further research involving larger and more diverse samples across multiple tournaments and competitive levels is needed to examine the applicability of these findings in other contexts.

CONCLUSION

The present study provides evidence that 3×3 and 5×5 basketball represent structurally and functionally different performance environments from the perspective of basketball coaches. The main contribution of this study is the identification of clear differences in physical demands, tactical organization, training structure, and psychological requirements between the two formats. Specifically, 3×3 basketball is characterized by higher speed, explosiveness, and individual decision-making demands, whereas 5×5 basketball emphasizes endurance, tactical complexity, and collective coordination. These findings contribute to the existing literature by providing applied, coach-based evidence supporting the classification of 3×3 basketball as a distinct competitive format rather than a simplified version of traditional basketball. The results may assist coaches and practitioners in optimizing training design according to the specific demands of each format.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should aim to expand the current findings by including larger and more diverse samples of coaches and athletes from different countries and competitive levels. In addition, mixed-method approaches combining qualitative interviews with performance analysis and physiological monitoring could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the differences between 3×3 and 5×5 basketball. Longitudinal studies examining the role of 3×3 basketball in player development pathways may also provide valuable insights into how participation in this format influences skill acquisition, tactical decision-making, and long-term athlete development.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors confirm their contributions to the paper as follows: D.S., G.S. and A.L.: Study conception and design; D.S.: Data collection; G.S. and A.L.: Analysis and interpretation of results; A.N., E.K.: Draft manuscript. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

The study received ethical approval from Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece (Approval No. 289/2025).

HUMAN AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the committee responsible for human experimentation

(institutional and national), and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2013.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

STANDARDS OF REPORTING

COREQ guidelines were followed.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author [G.S.] upon reasonable request.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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