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*The Speed Game* is Paul Westhead's personal account of how he tried to revolutionize basketball through fast breaks on offense and full-court pressure on defense, with the goal of wearing out the opposition while scoring more points. The book is quite engaging, and the reader becomes engrossed in Westhead's adventures.

Westhead, a Philadelphia native, grew up in the suburbs and was a reserve at St. Joseph's University when Jack Ramsey coached the team. After college, he coached high school basketball in Cheltenham and taught English before becoming the head coach at LaSalle University. When his friend Jack McKinney became head coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, he hired Westhead, who had worn out his welcome at LaSalle University as an assistant. After McKinney suffered major injuries in a bicycling accident, Westhead became interim head coach and led the Lakers to the 1979-80 NBA title. However, his efforts to implement “the speed game” met resistance from Magic Johnson, and the Lakers fired Westhead during his third season as head coach.

Following his dismissal, Westhead briefly coached the Chicago Bulls, but he only lasted one season. Next, he moved back to Los Angeles and became head coach at Loyola Marymount University (LMU). Two players from Philadelphia, Hank Gathers and Bo Kimble, thrived in Westhead's system, and LMU became known for high-scoring games. LMU reached the Elite Eight in 1990, losing to eventual champion University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) in the regional final. Gathers's death from a heart condition during the conference tournament undoubtedly affected their championship aspirations.

Following his five years at LMU, Westhead went back to the NBA to become head coach of the Denver Nuggets. Just like in Chicago, Westhead tried to implement the speed game in Denver, but he failed because the team's personnel either did not want to do it or did not possess the skills necessary to implement it. What Westhead advocated was revolutionary, and NBA players tended to prefer the status quo over revolutionary change. Denver averaged almost 120 points a game, but they also gave up an average of 130 points a game. After Denver, Westhead returned to university level and became the head coach at George Mason University. But this time the speed game did not succeed like it had at Loyola Marymount. He then returned to the NBA as an assistant with the Golden State Warriors, Orlando Magic, and Seattle SuperSonics/Oklahoma City Thunder.
Almost half of the book focuses on Westhead’s stint as Lakers head coach and about one-sixth on his time at Loyola Marymount. While it does make sense to concentrate on successes—a NBA championship and an Elite Eight berth—it would have been nice if Westhead had written more about his experiences coaching in Japan (less than one sentence) and coaching women’s teams. He does spend two-and-a-half pages on his time with the Phoenix Mercury and notes that star Diana Taurasi, just like NBA stars, balked at running the fast break offense. This time, Westhead adapted when the team could not handle the full-court defense, and the Mercury won the WNBA championship. He also briefly mentions coaching the women’s team at Oregon, but there, too, his system failed.

Overall, if you are interested in the mindset of someone who tried to revolutionize basketball, I highly recommend The Speed Game. It is a quick read, and Westhead does an outstanding job explaining how the system should work. Unfortunately for Westhead, he either seldom had the personnel to run the fast break offense/full-court defense effectively at the professional level or the players objected to doing something that both required a lot of effort and endurance on their part and was so different from anything they had done before. Still, he is the only coach to have won titles in both the NBA and WNBA, and his story shows why being a visionary does not always lead to success.

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