

The Fifteen-Second Rule

She had the fastest hands on the team. That turned out to be the smaller problem.

5 min read

Before you read

- **scrim** — a practice match against another team
- **drill** — an exercise repeated to build a skill
- **rotation** — the planned order in which players move or act
- **composure** — staying calm under pressure
- **debrief** — a discussion after an event to review what happened
- **liability** — something that causes loss or damage rather than help



The academy practice room in Seoul, five screens in a row, late afternoon light through the blinds

¹ The practice room on the fourth floor had five chairs, five screens and a clock on the wall that nobody looked at. Ji-woo had wanted to sit in one of those chairs since she was nine. Three weeks after she finally got one, she was beginning to understand that wanting a thing and being good at it were not the same skill.

² Her hands were not the problem. In the reaction drills she ran at the start of every session, she was the quickest in the academy by a clear margin — quicker, the coaches said, than two of the players on the senior roster. Coach Baek had watched her numbers for a week without comment. On the eighth day he pulled a chair round and sat on it backwards.

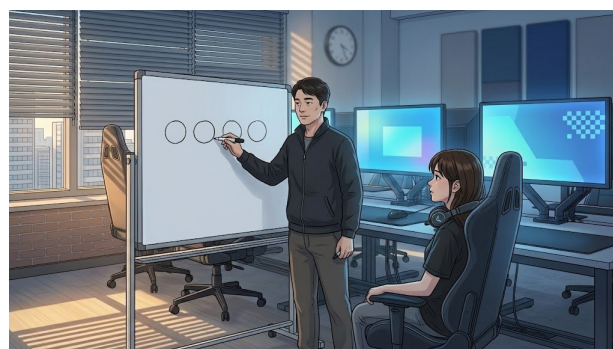
³ "You lost four rounds yesterday," he said. "Tell me how."

⁴ Ji-woo could have described each one. She had replayed them in bed, which was part of the trouble. In round nine she had pushed forward alone and been caught between two opponents. In round eleven she had still been thinking about round nine, and had hesitated for half a second on a rotation that needed all four of them moving together. In rounds twelve and thirteen she had said almost nothing on the team call, because she was embarrassed.

⁵ "So the first mistake cost you one round," Coach Baek said. "And the other three rounds were the mistake you made about the mistake."

⁶ He stood up and drew four circles on the whiteboard, which was the only old-fashioned object in the building.

⁷ "Fifteen seconds," he said. "After anything goes wrong, you get fifteen seconds. Say what happened, say what you will do instead, and then it is finished. Not forgiven — finished. We look at it again in the debrief, when it cannot cost us anything."



Coach Baek drawing the four-player rotation on a whiteboard while Ji-woo watches

⁸ It sounded, at first, like a way of letting people off. Ji-woo tried it in the next scrim because she had been told to, not because she believed in it. Round three: she pushed too far again, died early, and heard her own voice come through the headset, flat and quick — "Overextended on the left, I'll hold with Minseo next time." Somebody said "copy". The round carried on without her.

⁹ What surprised her was not that she played better afterwards. It was that Minseo did. Minseo had spent six weeks apologising in long, miserable sentences that ate thirty seconds of a round the team could not spare. With the rule in place, the apologies stopped and the information started.

¹⁰ At the debrief that Friday, Coach Baek put a single number on the screen: the team's win rate in the round immediately following a lost round. Before the rule it had been 31 per cent. After two weeks it was 54.

¹¹ "Your reactions are a gift," he told Ji-woo on the way out. "But a player who cannot recover is a liability no matter how fast her hands are. Speed wins you a fight. Composure wins you the half."

¹² Ji-woo thought about that on the train home, and then thought about it again before a maths test the following Tuesday, which was not what Coach Baek had meant at all, and worked anyway.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. What was Ji-woo better at than almost anyone else in the academy?

- ☐ (A) Planning team rotations
- ☐ (B) Reaction speed in drills
- ☐ (C) Talking on the team call
- ☐ (D) Reading opponents' strategies

2. According to Coach Baek, how many of Ji-woo's four lost rounds were caused by the original mistake itself?

- ☐ (A) All four
- ☐ (B) Three
- ☐ (C) One
- ☐ (D) None

3. What does the fifteen-second rule require a player to do?

- ☐ (A) Apologise properly before carrying on
- ☐ (B) Say what happened and what they will do instead, then stop
- ☐ (C) Stay silent until the debrief
- ☐ (D) Replay the round before the next one starts

4. What happened to the team's win rate in the round after a lost round?

- ☐ (A) It fell from 54 per cent to 31
- ☐ (B) It stayed roughly the same
- ☐ (C) It rose from 31 per cent to 54
- ☐ (D) It was not measured

5. In paragraph 11, 'liability' is closest in meaning to:

- ☐ (A) someone who is unusually fast
- ☐ (B) someone who costs the team more than they give
- ☐ (C) someone who is new to a team
- ☐ (D) someone who refuses to practise

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences.

6. Why does Coach Baek say the rule means a mistake is 'finished' but not 'forgiven'? What is the difference?

7. Minseo was not the player being corrected, yet Minseo improved too. Explain why.

8. Ji-woo tried the rule 'because she had been told to, not because she believed in it'. What does this tell you about her at that point in the story?

9. The writer says the whiteboard was 'the only old-fashioned object in the building'. Why do you think that detail was included?

Part C**Think deeper**

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

10. Coach Baek measured whether his rule worked instead of simply asking the players whether they liked it. Was that the better approach? Give your reasons.

11. Ji-woo used the rule before a maths test, which 'was not what Coach Baek had meant at all, and worked anyway'. Where else could this rule be useful, and where might it be a bad idea?

12. The passage argues that recovering from a mistake matters more than avoiding one. Do you agree? Use something from your own experience to support your answer.

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — Reaction speed in drills | 2. C — One | 3. B — Say what happened and what they will do instead, then stop | 4. C — It rose from 31 per cent to 54 | 5. B — someone who costs the team more than they give

Part B

6. 'Finished' means the team stops spending attention on it during play; 'forgiven' would mean it no longer matters at all. It still gets examined in the debrief, when there is no cost to doing so. Accept any answer that catches the distinction between postponing and excusing.
7. Minseo's long apologies were using up time the team needed during a round. The rule gave a short, fixed format, so the apologies were replaced by useful information. Accept answers noting that a rule aimed at one person changed what the whole team did.
8. She was willing to follow instruction without being convinced — she was obedient, or disciplined, or sceptical but cooperative. Accept answers that distinguish doing something from believing in it. A strong answer notes that the evidence changed her mind afterwards.
9. It marks the whiteboard out as deliberately simple in a high-technology building, which suits a lesson that is about thinking rather than equipment. Accept any answer linking the detail to the idea that the fix was not technological.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

10. A strong answer weighs both: measuring gives evidence that is hard to argue with, but the number does not show why it worked or how the players felt. A weaker answer simply says measuring is good. Prompt with: what would asking them have told him that the number did not?
11. Look for a sensible transfer (exams, sport, music performance, arguments at home) plus one genuine limit — for example, a situation where a mistake needs dealing with immediately rather than shelved, or where fifteen seconds is not enough.
12. Either position is acceptable. The reasoning is what counts: a strong answer gives a concrete example and explains what the recovery did or did not change. Prompt rather than correct if the example is thin.

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