33 Ways to Become a Tougher Player

When I faced a tough opponent, I wasn't worried that I would get hit -- I was concerned that I would get sealed on ball reversal by a tough post man, or that I would get boxed out on every play, or that my assignment would sprint the floor on every possession and get something easy on me. The toughest guys I had to guard were the ones who made it tough on me.

Toughness has nothing to do with size, physical strength or athleticism. Some players may be born tough, but I believe that toughness is a skill, and it is a skill that can be developed and improved. Michigan State coach Tom Izzo always says, "Players play, but tough players win." He is right. Here are some of the ways true toughness is exhibited in basketball:

1. **Set a good screen**: The toughest players to guard are the players who set good screens. When you set a good screen, you are improving the chances for a teammate to get open, and you are greatly improving your chances of getting open. A good screen can force the defense to make a mistake. A lazy or bad screen is a waste of everyone's time and energy. To be a tough player, you need to be a "screener/scorer," a player who screens hard and immediately looks for an opportunity on offense. On the 1984 U.S. Olympic Team, Bob Knight made Michael Jordan set a screen before he could get a shot. If it is good enough for Jordan, arguably the toughest player ever, it is good enough for you.
2. **Set up your cut**: The toughest players make hard cuts, and set up their cuts. Basketball is about deception. Take your defender one way, and then plant the foot opposite of the direction you want to go and cut hard. A hard cut may get you a basket, but it may also get a teammate a basket. If you do not make a hard cut, you will not get anyone open. Setting up your cut, making the proper read of the defense, and making a hard cut require alertness, good conditioning and good concentration. Golden State's Stephen Curry is hardly a physical muscle-man, but he is a tough player because he is in constant motion, he changes speeds, he sets up his cuts, and he cuts hard. Curry is hard to guard, and he is a tough player.
3. **Talk on defense**: The toughest players talk on defense, and communicate with their teammates. It is almost impossible to talk on defense and not be in a stance, down and ready, with a vision of man and ball. If you talk, you let your teammates know you are there, and make them and yourself better defenders. It also lets your opponent know that you are fully engaged.
4. **Jump to the ball**: When on defense, the tough defenders move as the ball moves. The toughest players move on the flight of the ball, not when it gets to its destination. And the toughest players jump to the ball and take away the ball side of the cut. Tough players don't let cutters cut across their face -- they make the cutter change his path.
5. **Don't get screened**: No coach can give a player the proper footwork to get through every screen. Tough players have a sense of urgency not to get screened and to get through screens so that the cutter cannot catch the ball where he wants to. A tough player makes the catch difficult.
6. **Get your hands up**: A pass discouraged is just as good as a pass denied. Tough players play with their hands up to take away vision, get deflections and to discourage a pass in order to allow a teammate to cover up. Cutters and post players will get open, if only for a count. If your hands are up, you can keep the passer from seeing a momentary opening.
7. **Play the ball, see your man**: Most defenders see the ball and hug their man, because they are afraid to get beat. A tough defender plays the ball and sees his man. There is a difference.
8. **Get on the floor**: In my first road game as a freshman, there was a loose ball that I thought I could pick up and take the other way for an easy one. While I was bending over at the waist, one of my opponents dove on the floor and got possession of the ball. My coach was livid. We lost possession of the ball because I wasn't tough enough to get on the floor for it. I tried like hell never to get out-toughed like that again. The first player to get to the floor is usually the one to come up with any loose ball.

9. **Close out under control**: It is too easy to fly at a shooter and think you are a tough defender. A tough defender closes out under control, takes away a straight line drive and takes away the shot. A tough player has a sense of urgency but has the discipline to do it the right way.
10. **Post your man, not a spot**: Most post players just blindly run to the low block and get into a shoving match for a spot on the floor. The toughest post players are posting their defensive man. A tough post player is always open, and working to get the ball to the proper angle to get a post feed. Tough post players seal on ball reversal and call for the ball, and they continue to post strong even if their teammates miss them.
11. **Run the floor**: Tough players sprint the floor, which drags the defense and opens up things for others. Tough players run hard and get "easy" baskets, even though there is nothing easy about them. Easy baskets are hard to get. Tough players don't take tough shots -- they work hard to make them easy.
12. **Play so hard, your coach has to take you out**: I was a really hard worker in high school and college. But I worked and trained exceptionally hard to make playing easier. I was wrong. I once read that Bob Knight had criticized a player of his by saying, "You just want to be comfortable out there!" Well, that was me, and when I read that, it clicked with me. I needed to work to increase my capacity for work, not to make it easier to play. I needed to work in order to be more productive in my time on the floor. Tough players play so hard that their coaches have to take them out to get rest so they can put them back in. The toughest players don't pace themselves.
13. **Get to your teammate first**: When your teammate lays his body on the line to dive on the floor or take a charge, the tough players get to him first to help him back up. If your teammate misses a free throw, tough players get to him right away. Tough players are also great teammates.
14. **Take responsibility for your teammates**: Tough players expect a lot from their teammates, but they also put them first. When the bus leaves at 9 a.m., tough players not only get themselves there, but they also make sure their teammates are up and get there, too. Tough players take responsibility for others in addition to themselves. They make sure their teammates eat first, and they give credit to their teammates before taking it themselves.
15. **Take a charge**: Tough players are in a stance, playing the ball, and alert in coming over from the weak side and taking a charge. Tough players understand the difference between being in the right spot and being in the right spot with the intention of stopping somebody. Some players will look puzzled and say, "But I was in the right spot." Tough players know that they have to get to the right spot with the sense of urgency to stop someone. The toughest players never shy away from taking a charge.
16. **Get in a stance**: Tough players don't play straight up and down and put themselves in the position of having to get ready to get ready. Tough players are down in a stance on both ends of the floor, with feet staggered and ready to move. Tough players are the aggressor, and the aggressor is in a stance.
17. **Finish plays**: Tough players don't just get fouled, they get fouled and complete the play. They don't give up on a play or assume that a teammate will do it. A tough player plays through to the end of the play and works to finish every play.
18. **Work on your pass**: A tough player doesn't have his passes deflected. A tough player gets down, pivots, pass-fakes, and works to get the proper angle to pass away from the defense and deliver the ball.
19. **Throw yourself into your team's defense**: A tough player fills his tank on the defensive end, not on offense. A tough player is not deterred by a missed shot. A tough player values his performance first by how well he defended.
20. **Take and give criticism the right way**: Tough players can take criticism without feeling the need to answer back or give excuses. They are open to getting better and expect to be challenged and hear tough things. You will never again in your life have the opportunity you have now at the college level: a coaching staff that is totally and completely dedicated to making you and your team better. Tough players listen and are not afraid to say what other teammates may not want to hear, but need to hear.
21. **Show strength in your body language**: Tough players project confidence and security with their body language. They do not hang their heads, do not react negatively to a mistake of a teammate, and do not whine and complain to officials. Tough players project strength, and do not cause their teammates to worry about them. Tough players do their jobs, and their body language communicates that to their teammates -- and to their opponents.

22. **Catch and face**: Teams that press and trap are banking on the receiver's falling apart and making a mistake. When pressed, tough players set up their cuts, cut hard to an open area and present themselves as a receiver to the passer. Tough players catch, face the defense, and make the right read and play, and they do it with poise. Tough players do not just catch and dribble; they catch and face.
23. **Don't get split**: If you trap, a tough player gets shoulder-to-shoulder with his teammate and does not allow the handler to split the trap and gain an advantage on the back side of the trap.
24. **Be alert**: Tough players are not "cool." Tough players are alert and active, and tough players communicate with teammates so that they are alert, too. Tough players echo commands until everyone is on the same page. They understand the best teams play five as one. Tough players are alert in transition and get back to protect the basket and the 3-point line. Tough players don't just run back to find their man, they run back to stop the ball and protect the basket.
25. **Concentrate, and encourage your teammates to concentrate**: Concentration is a skill, and tough players work hard to concentrate on every play. Tough players go as hard as they can for as long as they can. No team can be great defensively without communication and concentration.
26. **It's not your shot; it's our shot**: Tough players don't take bad shots, and they certainly don't worry about getting "my" shots. Tough players work for good shots and understand that it is not "my" shot, it is "our" shot. Tough players celebrate when "we" score.
27. **Box out and go to the glass every time**: Tough players are disciplined enough to lay a body on someone. They make first contact and go after the ball. And tough players do it on every possession, not just when they feel like it. They understand defense is not complete until they secure the ball.
28. **Take responsibility for your actions**: Tough players make no excuses. They take responsibility for their actions. Take James Johnson for example. With 17 seconds to go in Wake's game against Duke on Wednesday, Jon Scheyer missed a 3-pointer that bounced right to Johnson. But instead of aggressively pursuing the ball with a sense of urgency, Johnson stood there and waited for the ball to come to him. It never did. Scheyer grabbed it, called a timeout and the Blue Devils hit a game-tying shot on a possession they never should've had. Going after the loose ball is toughness -- and Johnson didn't show it on that play. But what happened next? He re-focused, slipped a screen for the winning basket, and after the game -- when he could've been basking only in the glow of victory -- manned up to the mistake that could've cost his team the win. "That was my responsibility -- I should have had that," Johnson said of the goof. No excuses. Shouldering the responsibility. That's toughness.
29. **Look your coaches and teammates in the eye**: Tough players never drop their heads. They always look coaches and teammates in the eye, because if they are talking, it is important to them and to you.
30. **Move on to the next play**: Tough players don't waste time celebrating a good play or lamenting a bad one. They understand that basketball is too fast a game to waste time and opportunities with celebratory gestures or angry reactions. Tough players move on to the next play. They know that the most important play in any game is the next one.
31. **Be hard to play against, and easy to play with**: Tough players make their teammates' jobs easier, and their opponents' jobs tougher.
32. **Make every game important**: Tough players don't categorize opponents and games. They know that if they are playing, it is important. Tough players understand that if they want to play in championship games, they must treat every game as a championship game.
33. **Make getting better every day your goal**: Tough players come to work every day to get better, and keep their horizons short. They meet victory and defeat the same way: They get up the next day and go to work to be better than they were the day before. Tough players hate losing but are not shaken or deterred by a loss. Tough players enjoy winning but are never satisfied. For tough players, a championship or a trophy is not a goal; it is a destination. The goal is to get better every day.

When I was playing, the players I respected most were not the best or most talented players. The players I respected most were the toughest players. I don't remember anything about the players who talked a good game or blocked a shot and acted like a fool. I remember the players who were tough to play against.

Anybody can talk. Not anybody can be tough.