



The Ten New Commandments of Volleyball

- John Kessel, USA Volleyball Director of Sport Development

As I watch new coaches begin by teaching the way they were taught, I wonder how to get these well intentioned humans to change to better ways. As most good coaches know that given a choice, they would chose the “a lot of a little” side, rather than “a little of a lot” – I offer to you the ten most important traditions and coaching methods I wish you would change to....

1. **Be Demanding, but NEVER Demeaning** – When I do coaching clinics, I oft ask how many coaches can still remember a demeaning or hurtful thing a coach said to them when they were young. Almost every coach present can still remember those harsh and likely inaccurate statements a coach said, even though it is years, if not decades later. We must stop “teaching” in any way that is demeaning, and become a positive coach. There is no room in coaching volleyball for a coach who by voice or action, is belittling a player.

Please let me become the kind of person my dog thinks I am...

2. **Use the NET** – I never cease to be amazed at the hundreds of thousands of hours cumulatively taken to set up the net each session. The more amazing thing is, for all the hundreds of thousands of hours spent putting up the nets, coaches then spend millions of hours letting their players pass in pairs in front of that same net. WHY DID YOU PUT UP THE NET IF YOU ARE NOT GOING TO USE IT? Of course, it is a rare gym that puts volleyball first, but one can always dream... When I coached at CU and ran Club Sports Programming, the nets were put up all the time, and had to be taken down by those wanting to shoot baskets, who would then have to lower the baskets into position. At the end the point is simple, the net is not a wall. Let player practice without a net away from the gym, but once your net is up, use it from beginning to end in practice – for in a precious few minutes, it will be gone until your next training.

The Net is GOLD, the Ball is SILVER, the Court is BRONZE

3. **Hit each practice from the three meter line first, and daily.** – A chorus of common cries from most coaches in the world would include - “Stay outta the net!...Stay off the net...Get out of the net...Don't hit the net...Set further back... This comes from coaches starting training, even for short youth players, on the net. For the young ones – and those who are vertically challenged later in life - the net is a huge wall. It is also where the block gets to be its biggest, and where ankle sprains abound as inexperienced hitters join with inexperienced setters to set up collisions with inexperienced blockers at the net. A collar to this is those coaches who promote wall spiking, see commandment eight for more. Start off the net and over time, move closer, but stay off the net so your offense can run well!

Teach hitting over first, and down second; speed first, accuracy second.

4. **Use Front/Back Format for Most Hitting Drills.** - Most players in the world are right handed, and naturally focus on hitting the left side from both playing areas. We have thus created many players who are good at hitting left, setting frontsets and blocking moving to the right. We fail to give adequate time in developing players who can hit the right side, back set, or move left blocking. The simple solution is to train more with setters on the same side of the net, alternating setting duties in a rapid cycle, and having spiking all headed to the same side of the gym. We need to get better at hitting both sides of the net.

Develop all-around players – play more doubles, monarch of the court and hit the right side

5. **Catch them Doing Things Right** – Most coaches turn their coaching radar on when they walk into the gym, by crossing their arms and beginning their head sweep, from side to side. When they lock in on a target, they come up “to help,” and give some feedback on that error that just occurred. Then, radar humming, they seek another player making a mistake to talk to. The players, after the coach leaves say – “Sheesh, do ten right, where is coach? Nowhere. Do one wrong thing and there coach is...yammer, yammer, yammer...” We are coaching backwards. We need to let single errors pass through our web, catch them doing what we want often, and only give errors attention when they are repeated. Beware however of commandment six in this formula....

Summary feedback means speak on the average of 5-10 contacts, not the one error.

6. **Teach and Talk More About READING, and Less About TECHNIQUE.** - The vast majority of errors on the court come from being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet coaches around the world spend most their energy talking about the technique errors they feel they see. Do this, Don't do that, and technical comment after technical comment pours forth. Do this from now on – first, check for understanding of the technique and have them do the skill without the ball. If they show incorrect form in this situation, you must teach technique. If they show you good form, they KNOW the technique, and could even teach it to others. What they are erring in is their judgment, timing, anticipation and reading. They have a choice when the ball and their body are not at the right sweet spot in time. Do the technique and miss the ball, or get their body to contact the ball, even though the technique will look “wrong.” Invariably they will make ball contact over form, and then hear the coach yammering again about their “technique error.” Please, help them read and anticipate better by training in situations where the reading is game like and thus of value. Technique is important, but even most little kids can show you they understand the skill and form without a ball. The problem is in part, the same ball used by Olympians is used by most volleyball players and...the same gravity is at work. So many errors happen along the learning path in volleyball. Help them see what you knew and they will have better technique showing as they get to the right place and time.

Old age and treachery will beat youth and skill every time....

7. **Ask Questions, Stop Telling Them Your Answers.** – The BEST way to teach is to ask questions, and in your own style of coaching – guide them to the discovery of the right answers. Too many coaches tell the players the answers, and then in the match you will see the players after every error, wrench their neck looking to the bench and the coach for “the solution.” If your players are looking at you in the match, you have not coached them. Guided discovery, that is the best way to coach, as each player has within them a unique way to play the game. Help it come out and do not make them all look like sextuplets, for they are not. Ask questions, ask question and ask questions. In beach, the players do not have coaches in the Olympics who can coach during the game. If you are a smart program and you have your kids playing beach/grass doubles in the summer, leave them be. Guide them, but do not coach them, let them have some time to PLAY with all the answers coming from within themselves.

Talk WITH your players, not TO them...

8. **Begin with, and Focus on, Teaching Good Errors, not Bad Errors.** – As we play a game that basically ends every point with some sort of “error,” we must give players a range of erring that ties into the vital team concept of “bettering the ball,” mistakes that make the opponents think, or give us a chance to recover. Serve over, not into the net; Pass/Dig up, not tight or over the net; Set too high, not too low/Set too far off the net, not too tight or over; Hit over, not into the net (hey, there are blockers to touch!); Miss a block and stay out of the net, rather than blocking and netting...and many more.

The Women's National Team has taken to calling it, good misses over bad misses...

9. **Teach using BOTH hands to play a ball over the net.** – Too many players have only one hand that they can play a ball with. While being one sided in defense is a problem, in hitting, it can be disastrous. Most right handed players have bad left knees. Why? Because when the ball is set past their body on the left side of the court, they lean left with their body to hit it with their right hand.

Players must first play digs and passes UP, and hits OVER the net, no matter which hand does the work...

10. **Make Things GAME LIKE as Possible** – One could teach an entire course, as CAP does, on how to stop doing traditional things that are supposedly game like. Become the Gold Medalist in pair passing, and what does it get you for being a serve receiver?...Very little! Be the World Champion Wall Spiker and what will you do in the game most likely?...Hit into the net!... Be the National Champion in tossing a volleyball to the setter, and what do you get?...Hitters who are late to hit after passing and setters who cannot read a passer! Slap a free ball so the blockers move off the net and what do you get? Free ball passer who are late, backing up as the ball comes over, not before...The list is almost endless as to the traditional drilling that is non- game like. Just ask yourself, if my players become the world's best at this drill, will they be doing what I want them to do in the game? Too often, sadly, the answer is a resounding NO!. The best drill? Volleyball...

Remember, this is a GAME, so take plenty of time to have FUN and give them a love of the sport...life is short, play more!