



The Most Important Skill in Volleyball

- John Kessel, USA Volleyball Director of Sport Development

Many coaches spend a great deal of time focusing on the skills of serving, passing, setting, spiking blocking and digging. They add in a virtual verbal barrage of technique comments to each player, in practice and even in the middle of games. Reach! Extend! Get on top of the ball!, they command a spiker. “You gotta hit the ball in!” they even point out, or call a time out to say “We need a pass.” While these statements are both obvious and well known already by players, they continue to be shouted in from the sidelines, or in a time out huddle. What is sadly lacking and even ignored however is help for players in the most important skill – **READING**.

Why is it most coaches on the sideline of every game, could get up off the bench, walk out onto the court, and get a tip that is falling – yet the team of six who are all closest to the action, simply let it fall. Is it the coaches digging technique of “walking?” Then to fix this, most coaches stand in front of the net can fling balls at players frantically flopping like fish out of water to and fro, as they weave with several other teammates to dig these tosses. The coach flings balls at them from below the waist, shooting the ball out of the reach of the defender being trained, often launching them into one corner then the other, so the players learn to dig a ball. What are they teaching their team in reading? That the ball will be tipped over the net, drop down to below waist height at the net, then it will shoot out, rocket propelled perhaps, parallel to the floor, and into a corner. Why do we do this? The only time I have seen this happen in a game now that the rules allow whole body digging, is when a blocker lands and desperation kicks at a ball just before it hits the floor behind the block. Tips go over the net and go...straight down, gravity accelerating the movement with each passing microsecond.

So again I ask, why can you get the tip from the bench coach? Perhaps it is better to ask, what percentage of your success in walking from the bench to get a tip happens BEFORE the ball is tipped? The answer is most of it, as you remembered your team blocked that hitter the last few times, you see the hitter run in a bit hesitantly, or you see the set be lower than expected, or many other precursors to the ball actually being tipped. Since most players watch the ball, and not the player, you then will mostly hear the cry of “TIP!!!!”...AFTER the ball is tipped. What we need to help guide our players to, is to be able to make that cry before it is tipped. This does not come in “tipping” drills, but by learning to read the game flow and watching the attacker, jump, swing and all, not the ball.

When you ask a coach who has played, what percentage of a serve receiver’s success is happening while the ball is on the OTHER side of the net, they reply with answers that are all well over half. Those who see jump serves say it is 90 percent. Yet these same coaches let their kids, when the very short and precious time of team practice is happening, start every session with partner passing and peppering, in pairs, standing in front of the net. Let’s imagine two of your players do partner passing so darn well, they are the world’s best at it, the Olympic gold medalists even. Now put them on the court to serve receive for an average high school program, and what success will these two world’s best have at passing a kid’s bullet serve from 50-60 feet away, to a target called the setter who is about 20 feet away, and off on an angle?

When you read this, I consider your time as a coach digesting these ideas to be YOUR practice time. When you attend a CAP or other coaching clinic, it is also practice time for you, as you bounce ideas, learn new things, and confirm other thoughts. When the practice of your players starts, that is your competition you must win. "Practice is the battle you must win," is how USA Men's Team Head coach Hugh McCutcheon says it. Then when your teams are in a match, you are on "vacation" comparatively. You get to enjoy the fruits of your labor, call a time out or two, substitute perhaps, and chose a new line up between games. Relative to the nonstop hours of a CAP course, and the weeks of preseason and the countless practices, it is vacation, for the coach. In Anson Dorrance's words "*Coaching is about effect. If you have to yell at them from the sidelines, you haven't coached them.*"

How many beach coaches do you know? They are few and far between, as the game teaches the game so well. One of the newer indoor collegiate coaches is Jon Stevenson. His background as an AVP beach player and even president, did not merge into indoor coaching until he attended a US Jr. Olympic Championships, and he saw the hundreds of junior teams competing under one roof, with thousands of players and their supportive families, friends and teammates creating a cacophony that went from early morning to late at night. Moving from assistant to head coach, he brought his years of reading and anticipating players on the beach, where he had to cover the whole court with just one teammate, and daily shares his thoughts and questions with his new charges, on what they are seeing before the ball is touched. His Saint Mary's team rose to a top twenty NCAA finish, from seasons of ignominy.

The game teaches the game, better than any other drill you can create. This is why coaches all over the world can be heard at the end of a day's tournament having a dialogue, alone, to parents, fans and others, that goes something like this

"We need to get up a bit earlier, as the players seemed to be a bit off at the start...the second game we woke up and were in it and if we only had not missed those two serves in the third match, we would have made the playoffs...The kids really started to get what we have been teaching them, by the end of the day, very encouraging..."

Now take a dispassionate look at what really happened. You played 3 matches, best two of three, each match taking about 45 minutes on average. Total time playing, with only 6 players on the court, the rest watching, comes to a bit over 2 hours. The question is, why are you not having the same impact and understanding every two hours of your practice? Usually it is due to far too many non-gamelike drills, teaching passing without the ball coming over the net, teaching serving without the game intensity and focus, learning to dig coaches throws, rather than the attacks of an opponent over the net, and so on.

So take time to teach why you knew that would happen, to teach the game and all its wonderfully chaotic, never to be repeated that exact same way again possibilities. Don't tell them the answers, ask questions and guide their discovery so they can problem solve during the game, without having to turn to look to you, or to hear your voice, for "the answers." Play lots of doubles, triples, monarch of the court, and more, for the most important drill in volleyball is...playing the game. .