Simplicity is the Ultimate Sophistication
by Dr. Carl McGown

The philosopher William Of Occam (1300-1349) reputedly said: "Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem." This statement has come to be known in science as Occam's Razor and it usually is translated this way: "Of two competing theories or explanations, all other things being equal, the simpler one is to be preferred."

Two centuries or so after William of Occam, Leonardo DaVinci, the great renaissance artist, inventor, and scientist, is credited with saying: "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."

In the last century (isn't it amazing that the 20th Century was the last century?) Einstein argued for logical simplicity. He stated: "if there are too many hypothetical elements one cannot believe one is on the right track." He also said "the laws of physics should be simple." Someone asked: "what if they are not simple?" His reply was: "Then I would not be interested in them."

Is there any reason to believe that simplicity has a place in training or coaching? One compelling argument seems to come from asking this question: "Where are the best basketball players in the world developed?" The answer seems to be: from the playgrounds of America (from the inner cities of New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, and etc.). What happens on these playgrounds is simply this: basketball players learn to play basketball by playing basketball. No coaches, nothing complicated. Just basketball. Lots of it, all day long.

A similar phenomenon once existed in volleyball in the USA. For a long time the best volleyball players were developed on the beaches of Southern California. No coaches, nothing complicated. Just volleyball and lots of it, all day long. And if you lost you had to sit and didn't get to play again for another two or three hours.

Maybe, simplicity is the ultimate sophistication, even in training and coaching.

One principle from the laws of learning that points in this direction is this: abilities are specific.

Psychologists say it this way: "It is no longer possible to justify the concept of unitary abilities such as coordination and agility since the evidence shows that these abilities are specific to the task or activity (Franklin Henry)."

Physiologists say it this way: "Training is specific. The maximum benefits of a training stimulus can only be obtained when the stimulus replicates the
movements and energy systems involved in the activities of a sport. **This principle may suggest that there is no better training than actually performing in the sport** (Rushall and Pike)."

If we decide that we are going to have our kids learn to play volleyball by playing volleyball our coaching life changes. It probably changes dramatically.

We come to realize that unless our drills are like the game of volleyball there won't be a lot of transfer. We employ very little part practice. The vast majority of our drills are not coach-centered drills. Our progressions are like the game of volleyball and always have appropriate regulatory stimuli in them. What happens is our kids play volleyball, we give them feedback, they get a lot better, and they have a great time in practice. Because they are better and having a lot of fun they want to play more and work harder, and because they are playing more and working harder they get a lot better, and because . . . .

One of the truly great puzzles of my coaching life is this: Why don't more coaches believe that their athletes can learn to play by playing?

It is a puzzle and I don't know the answer.

It must be because just playing is too simple.