

Growing the Game Together Volume III



Insights into the science, facts, & principles of sport and volleyball

USA Volleyball

usavolleyball.org

By John Kessel



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JOHN L. KESSEL



Since 1985 John has been working for the National Governing Body of the sport, USA Volleyball (USAV), now as Director of Sport Development. He serves as the staff liaison for Disabled Programs, USA Deaflympic Teams, Starlings USA, National Parks and Recreation Assoc., the YMCA and over 30 other Affiliated Organizations working with USAV. He is Secretary of the NORCECA Technical, Coaches and Development Commission, and World Organization for the Disabled Director of Development. He was Team Leader for the 2000 USA Olympic Beach Volleyball Teams in Sydney, which brought home one gold medal, and for the 2004 USA Paralympic Women's Sitting Volleyball Team in Athens, which came home with the bronze medal. In 1995, *Volleyball Magazine's* special Centennial issue named him one of the 50 most important people in the sport in the past 100 years.

He has been coaching since 1971 at the collegiate level or above, including Women's U.S. Open titles in 1986 & 87. A sought after international lecturer, he has conducted seminars in all 50 states, and in over 30 nations, in such diverse nations as China, Denmark, Bolivia, Barbados, France, Germany, Egypt, England, Italy, Japan, Iceland, Puerto Rico, Samoa, Canada, Guatemala, Venezuela, Greece, Israel, Australia, Jamaica, New Zealand, Holland, England, Belize, Trinidad Tobago, Ireland, Tonga, Belgium, Haiti, Vanuatu, Costa Rica, Fiji and El Salvador. He is also a busy author, with over half a dozen USAV books, including the IMPACT coaching manual, the Jr. Olympic Volleyball Program Guide, and most recently the Minivolley 4 Youth , Youth Coloring Book, and countless articles. His blog called "Growing the Game Together" is the second most popular blog of the hundreds found on the US Olympic Committee's Team USA website and he promotes the "Grassroots" Button on the USAV website with material, posters, and information for clubs, schools, coaches, parents, players, and officials. He has received many awards, including USA Volleyball's Honorable Mention in 1978 and 1986, the Harry Wilson Distinguished International Service in 2004, the George Fisher Leader in Volleyball in 2006 and in 2007 was named a Sport Ethics Fellow by the Institute for International Sport.

From 1982 to 1990 he was Director and Coaches' Coach of the Albuquerque Junior Olympic Volleyball Program. For a month in the summer of 1991, he was one of four featured speakers at the first ever International Youth Volleyball Coaches Symposium in Olympia, Greece, attended by over 50 nations, and he repeated that role in the International Volleyball in the Schools Seminar in Canada in summer of 1995 and in Canada in 2007. That same year he was the principal speaker at the Centennial Advanced Teaching and Coaching Seminar in Beijing, China. He was on staff for both the 1984 and 1988 Olympics, and served as producer for both the 1996 Centennial Olympics for indoor volleyball in Atlanta, and subsequently producer and announcer for the 1996 Paralympics in Sitting and Standing volleyball. For 1999-2000 he was director of the U.S. Olympic Challenge Series, the Olympic qualifying series, which included an FIVB World Tour Grand Slam stop in Chicago with \$400,000 in prize money for that one stop alone. He also served as head coach/team leader for the 1999 and 2003 USA Pan Am Games Beach teams, with a silver medal, and 4th and 5th place finishes in the four events. In 2004 and 2005, he directed the National High Performance Beach Camp, and worked his 10th US Jr. Olympic Beach Volleyball Championships for USA Volleyball in Hermosa Beach, along with the AVP and AVPNext program.

For over a decade he served as one of 8 members of the International Volleyball Federation's Technical Commission, as Secretary, and he remains a FIVB Level IV Instructor. Since 2001 he has served on the NORCECA Technical and Coaches Commission, developing clinics and the "Leave a Ball Behind" Program to enhance zonal volleyball growth, and directed a two year State Department Sports United Grant to assist coaches in six NORCECA nations in 2011-12. He helped run the World Sitting Volleyball Championships in 2010, is was voted in as Director of the World Organization of Volleyball for the Disabled (WOVD)

Development Commission for 2012-2016, and will serve on Jury at the London 2012 Paralympics for Sitting Volleyball. He pioneered USA Volleyball on the Internet, helping Tom Jack develop the original site, one of the first 1,000 websites listed on Yahoo, and still contributes the usenet group Rec.Sport.Volleyball. From 1987 to 1991 he was the tournament director for the U.S. Jr. Olympic Volleyball Championships and began the U.S. Junior Olympic Beach Volleyball Championships in 1993, directing them until 2000. He also designed and directed the Nike VolleyVan program with 4 years of daily clinics in the lower 48 states, and currently directs the MVP project, working to get a “Million Volleyball Participants connected to USA Volleyball. For that, he has developed a series of CDs, with animated drills, skill posters, videos and dozens of articles for growing the game for – JO Girls, JO Boys, Youth, Disabled, Beach, and NIRSA programs.

As a player he has participated in 16 U.S. Open Championships, and was a 7 time Regional Champion. He also has played professionally with the Denver Comets in the old International Volleyball Association, and a year in Italy for the Alessandria Volleyball Club. Recently he competed for the Time Lords in the 55 & over division, 36 years after his first US Open in 1973. In 2004, he finished in the USA Outdoor National Championships, in the top 15 of the Men’s BB, playing with his son, Cody, and has won several King of the Mountain Father Son Doubles tournaments in Colorado. He returned to Junior Olympic coaching when his children wanted to play, and his daughter McKenzie’s 13 and under team in the Stellar VBC won the Bronze medal at the 2007 US Jr. Olympics in Minneapolis, MN. She was a member of Cheyenne Mountain High School’s volleyball team which won state titles in 2008-2011 and will play volleyball for Bowdoin College 2012-2016. He coached his son Cody’s 2010 Palmer High School team in the Colorado State Boys HS league. Cody was a member of the 2010 USA Junior National Training team, and started as a freshman for Princeton’s men’s varsity program. John also has coached lacrosse for the Cheyenne Mtn LAX Boys and Girls teams since 2000.

His main goal is to help make coaches more efficient, positive and creative, no matter what level - 7 year olds in an elementary school program or National team players and programs. He challenges old ways of thinking and help coaches create what they need, while having fun in the process. John has a BA in Biology and Economics received from The Colorado College in 1974, and is a single dad, raising his kids alone since 1996, His pastimes beside volleyball include fly-fishing, writing, skiing, lacrosse, upland game hunting, deep-sea fishing and travel. John can be reached at USA Volleyball – 719.228.6800 and john.kessel@usav.org



Current Activities:

International Volleyball Federation Level IV/Course Instructor (since 1986) www.fivb.org

Director, World Organization of Volleyball for the Disabled (WOVD) Development Commission – www.wovd.info

Secretary, NORCECA Technical, Coaches and Development Commission, 2000-2012.

Jury member, London 2012 Paralympics –Sitting Volleyball Competition.

USA Volleyball Director of Sport Development - Staff liaison to the USA Deaf National Volleyball Teams and the World Organization for Disabled Volleyball, Special Olympics International, National Parks and Recreation Assoc., Positive Coaching Alliance, Girl Scouts USA Sports, Starlings USA, YMCA/YWCA, and many other national volleyball programs (including the Leave a Ball Behind program), and the USAV Diversity, Grassroots, Sports Medicine and Performance, and Disabled Volleyball Commissions www.usavolleyball.org

Author of The Coach's Encyclopedia, the Coaches Guide to Beginning Volleyball Programs, The Junior Olympic Volleyball Program Guidebook, Collegiate Recruiting Guide, IMPACT Manual, IMPACT Plus Manual, Summer Camps Success, Thoughts & Quotes for Coaches, Kessel's Krazy Kollection, Places to Play, Minivolley 4 Youth, USAV Boys/NIRSA/Youth/Beach/Disabled/Girls Development CDs, and more.

USOC/US Paralympics – Sponsor Trainings, Olympic University lecturer, Symposium speaker for Developing Amazing Leaders (2007-12), Paralympic Military Sports Outreach training for coaches and players, Tournament Director – Wounded Warrior Games (2010-2012) Director U.S. State Department Sports United Grant for Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Barbados and Trinidad Tobago.

USAV Blog on Growing the Game <http://www.teamusa.org/USA-Volleyball/Grassroots/Grow-The-Game-Blog.aspx> - 2nd most popular blog on the US Olympic Committee Team USA website for the last 4 years.

USA Coaches Accreditation Program Level III Charter Cadre Instructor since 1988.
Positive Coaching Alliance Double Goal Coach Instructor – www.positivecoach.org
Parents for Good Sports Fellow and National Instructor www.parentsforgoodsports.org

Clinician for the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, Native American Sports Council, National Parks and Recreation Association, AAHPERD Regional & National Sessions, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Boys Scouts of America, National High School Federation, AVCA, YMCA, YWCA, USA Disabled Sports, Athletic Business Convention, Gold Medal Squared, Positive Coaching Alliance Against the Grain, Character Counts Youth Summit, Girl Scouts USA, NCAA National Youth Sports Program, Police Athletic League, USA Volleyball/US Olympic Committee national clinics, USAFA National Character and Leadership Symposium, Olympic University Lecturer on Listening and Change topics.

Head Coach - USA National Development Camps -18 years USAV Regional Official, since 1975

Member of Mensa, AAPHERD, National Strength Coaches Association, American Volleyball Coaches Association

Creating a Low Cost Volleyball

May 29, 2014

OK Volleyball Thinkers. I need some help in creating a ball for young kids.



About 20 years ago I created a “balloon ball” – a fabric shell patterned after one of those plastic/vinyl beach balls that are like 6 colors with a plastic valve to inflate by mouth. The pattern/info on how to make them is in the MiniVolley book on pages 90-92. You can get that free [here](#) and know that we have free Spanish and Italian editions too. Tens of thousands of fabric balls have been made, including a pink series for cancer fundraisers as seen below, or in the color of a college VB program, to be given away to camp kids. You just put a balloon into the fabric shell, which has a button hole where you insert the balloon, and you have an almost no cost ball for kids. If you make the material from nylon, it is even a slower traveling/falling ball due to the lighter weight shell. Make it like these two from cloth and it travels a bit faster. Construct it from pack nylon cloth, aka cordura, and you have a ball that almost plays full court normal.

Molten took the idea and had the shell made into 18 panels, stitched far better, added a real valve and weighted it to create their popular red/white/blue “First Touch” ball – in 70g, 140g (my favorite) and 210g. These cost just over \$10 each, and need to be used only indoors, and never overinflated to protect the seam sewing. They are a great lower cost option to be able to include in a player registration fee, so every player goes home with a ball.

Those of you who have visited my office know I have a LOT of memories up to view and remember. Some might even call it stuff. Specific to this blog, I find inspiration and hope with a ball made from banana leaves, from a kid in Africa, where not having a ball means you make them. I have another more “modern” African “city” ball, made from strips of rubber wrapped around soft milk “cartons” that are refilled with air. I have a rattan Sepak Takraw ball and a plastic one that can hold up in the less humid climates where rattan would dry and break. I have about a dozen youth balls that all are lighter, but all cost \$15 or more dollars.



I have searched the world’s manufacturers to get a balloon made from nitrile, rather than the normal latex due to some schools allergy policies, but no luck yet. The fabric shell version protects the kids from contacting the balloon, but we still want to also have very low cost balloons printed like a volleyball as USAV giveaways to grow the game. Some of the most intense and fun volleyball games I have played have been over the seat rows in airports, or in living rooms over a table. The slower falling ball gives even 3 year olds a chance to volley the ball, plus there is zero pain at contact, unlike heavier volleyballs.

In the end, it is about slowing the ball down so younger kids have more time to track it/move to it and keep it in the air. A balloon works well and we are now looking at punch ball thickness options to slow it down but make it a bit more durable. The other idea you can see from the picture here, is to put duct or masking tape around a balloon so it falls a bit faster, but still slower than a regular volleyball. Increasing the number of tape strips to vary the weight and speed of balloon, thus changing the difficulty factor for the class or team. As they improve, the balloon should fall faster, as you add more tape strips. This is a screen capture from the youth video I did in 1998 for Puerto Rico, which while in Spanish, is still a good youth video with small court (12 on one basketball court space), skills, games and grill ideas for their school program – every school got a copy thanks to sponsor donations back then. You can see the whole [video here](#) if you missed it.



I have filled balls with helium to slow them down – it works only at the balloon thickness level, any other ball is too heavy for the helium to have an impact. Mylar permanently helium inflated balloons only come in a flatter, seam side stamped versions – I don't think they can make a truly round volleyball from mylar with the valve they use. As the video shows and as an option, the “market balls” that are permanently inflated, printed in fun colors and images, are another lower cost option. They however are bulky, not something we all can carry in our bag and give away, and still a bit pricey for giveaways. I have the beach ball pattern fabric shells in my briefcase, and balloons and give them away, and the smile on a kids face as they go off to play with their “ball” is priceless.

What I am looking for are two options.

1. A volleyball like (seams printed), punch ball thickness, nitrile balloon...and if we can't get it at low cost in nitrile, then it will have to be latex I am thinking.
2. A beach ball, sized a bit oversized from a volleyball, with the core five skills of the game on each panel, and the basic rules on the sixth panel

The latter idea I have been pitching for years to fast food companies as their kid's meal giveaway. Again with no luck nationally. Rather than have a plastic toy that you “play” with for about 5 min then never use again, a giveaway of sports “balls” (soccer, basketball, volleyball, etc.) would be PLAYED with. Don't get me started on the obesity problem in our nation and just ... I have seen a beach ball from this idea for sale, but it is like \$3. I am looking for pennies per ball so all of us can have dozens to give away/play the game with.

Anyone have any good contacts? I want to make 100,000, maybe even a million so that all of us can create games to play with kids and show them the fun that comes from volleyball – 1 v 1 to 9 v 9. Is there a way to create a penny per ball type volleyball to give to kids? I don't think 3-D printers are going to work...lol.

Please share any idea in the comment section and thanks in advance for all your work in growing the game together.

Give the Boys a Chance

June 02, 2014

I simply would like to ask everyone reading this blog to share, as I am about to, their best practices, other sport successes and brainstorming thoughts on how to give boys 5-18 years old a chance to make volleyball their sport for a lifetime.

I spent the past week in Phoenix at our USAV Annual meetings that lead into the US Open – an event that included 3 men’s teams playing in the 79 and over age bracket. Those guys are playing day one -- a pool of three, day two – a pool of three again, and then we offered day three to have their finals be single elimination. You’d have thought we asked if they could not play the event...so day three was a double elimination for the three teams.

We also honored and interviewed the first USA Olympians in Volleyball at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, it shows the lifetime nature of our sport and other ideas. Look for their wonderful reflections and insights on the game later this summer on the USAV website. The record for the sport of a lifetime in film goes to the Norwegian documentary “Optimistene,” a delightful hour show about the 90 and over Norwegian women’s team. My copy was a gift of Norway Coach Hansen, thanks Tomm!

Yes, my dad played doubles in the 1950s, and I have played for over 50 years, and now my son is carrying the torch at Princeton. Boys’ volleyball continues to grow steadily at the high school level. It also does at the collegiate level, being the first men’s sport in 15 years to be added to the NCAA National Championships, when DIII was added two seasons ago. There are now 136 NCAA men’s teams in the nation. There are HUNDREDS of Collegiate Club Men’s programs in the nation – make sure to check out www.ncvfvolleyball.org. Additionally, the most updated statistics show that at the high school level, boys volleyball is behind girls 50,353 to 420,208 participants / 2,257 schools to 15,565 (but up from 393 schools 7,059 participants in 1984).

We have the flyer below, providing facts to those considering adding boys volleyball to their school, at both the high school and the collegiate levels.



Top Ten Reasons to Start a Boy's High School Program

Exercise! A great way to get in shape; boosts mental concentration.

Teamwork. It is the ultimate team sport.

Valuable lessons. Helps develop social interaction and relationship building skills. Boys learn sportsmanship, commitment, responsibility, and selflessness.

Lifetime sport. It is a sport that provides opportunities to compete at all age levels.

NCAA Championships. A Men's NCAA Division III Championship was added in 2012.

Non-contact sport, decreased percentage of injury compared to contact sports.

Adaptable. Can be played anywhere! Grass, beach, indoor, on any surface.

Relatively low-cost & durable equipment, maintenance and set-up.

Easy to learn. Basic skills can be acquired quickly with little practice.

It's FUN! Volleyball is contagious once the skills and rules are learned.

For more information contact: MVP@usav.org



The Sport Development Department of USA Volleyball has grants available for regions, schools, and colleges to add/grow boys' volleyball – This information is found in the new [Boys/Men's Program](#) area of the Grassroots page. There is a new Coordinator, since December, for USAV's boys and men's programs, Leslee Harms (leslee.harms@usav.org). She would love to hear from you about your successes, best practices and interests in growing the game for both boys and men. In our sport, the diversity gap is about 100 to 1 in scholarships, and 8:1 at the high school level. Tom Tait also heads up our NCAA Men's Collegiate Commission, which Leslee oversees and she can put you in touch with that group as well.

I would love to see others who have had success in growing boys or men's programming share their ideas in the comment section below, if emailing Leslee does not work for you. In the meantime, here is a compilation of some of the ideas being used by grantees, regions and others in connection with USA Volleyball:

PowerPuff Volleyball - A counter-part at high school to girls playing powderpuff football. The girls' varsity volleyball players coach a team of seniors vs juniors after the basketball season ends in a volleyball battle that is a fundraiser for a good cause too. The girls are good at getting the boys basketball players out to perhaps experience the game for their first time in a more organized and powerful way.

Coed Competition – The game is just a wonderful sport at all ages to be played coed – with the net being raised for boys to the adult men's height starting at the 15 and under level

Smashbal – This version of the game at the elementary school level has grown boys' volleyball in Holland by 240 percent – see the video [here](#) if you have missed it.

Father Son/Mother Son volleyball competition on Father's/Mother's Day –Friday afternoon, juniors get a clinic on playing the doubles game with the rule differences and playing fast, fun, five minute games against as many other junior teams as time permits. Saturday, the juniors play age group doubles, while parents watch or visit the area. Sunday (Father's Day/Mother's Day), Parent/Child competition takes place in 18 & under and 15 & under divisions. Parents with two or more kids are allowed to substitute the kids freely, even point by point, as long as the oldest child's age division is competed in.

Boys Spring Volleyball Event - One way a club or program can create an inexpensive, coed optional, after school league to give more boys the chance to experience volleyball on the lower 7'4 ¼" net. Each evening's competition only takes 3 hours yet provides as much competition as many nearly all day tournaments. [Download](#) this informative USAV Grassroots department document.

Creating a School Boys' Team - Why not? [Click here](#) to read how to.

"LOST BOYS" Volleyball Project—A program in which boys are rewarded by skill, effort, and improvement through playing the game. Some award ideas may include T-shirt decals or something as simple as stickers. Check out the entire program by clicking [HERE](#).

Increasing Awareness for Boys Volleyball- Include boys' volleyball teams at major girl's events. Designate a court or two for boys or men to use during the girls tournament. Coordinate with high school, club, or collegiate programs to get their guys involved.

Adding a Boys Program JO style- Add boys, in either a coed training fashion, or as a team in your junior program, is strongly encouraged to enhance a program. Your program can do this by helping the middle and elementary schools to add boy's teams for inter-school training and competition. Your players and parents can help guide, coach and train the school leagues. This is best first done at the 10-14 year old level, where the boys compete on the girls' height net. These little brothers and other boys need your program to get the chance to play this wonderful sport of a lifetime.

Mad Hatter Event – You don't need a team to play! Everyone signs up as an individual and new teams are drawn before every round. Depending on how many courts you have you can draw numbers out of a hat or use poker chips. All players with the same number or color are a team for that set. Play one set to 25, take a short water break, record their scores on a big blank chart with their names and a bunch of other blank columns for their score difference each set (example +4 or-4) and then redraw teams. At the end total everyone's score for prizes. You can give out prizes for the highest score, lowest score and the score closest to zero.

Thank you in advance for any new ideas that are shared and as always, thank you for helping grow the game together.

LIMIT Your Coaching...

June 04, 2014

As I have found, some of the coaches most needing to read the science and ideas in this blog are simply not reading the ideas in their entirety. I have changed the STOP series to more accurately reflect the core ideas. We don't want to lose those who need to read, learn and hopefully understand perhaps the most from these thoughts.

Thus this blog would have originally been titled "STOP Coaching" and the first sentence would then have followed with "...and start being a better guided discovery expert." Explicit learning – traditional coaching where the coach says what to do, is the worst retained by the athletes. Implicit learning, where you figure it ALL out yourself as a player, is the BEST retained. Guided discovery, where using questions and other ways the coach guides the players to the best solutions or options, is retained almost as well as implicit learning. It is my hope that this blog guides coaches to limit their traditional coaching style of telling, and dramatically increase the time questioning/guiding, even though it takes more time, in the end you save time by having the athletes remember better.

I recently spent a long weekend at the Collegiate Sand Nationals for women. While I grew up playing doubles with not one coach to be found, but only the game and better opponents who happened to usually be adults that aided me in discovering how to stay on the court in the "winners stay on" culture – this event now has "coaches" who sit in the team box and are paid to share their wisdom with the athletes who have chosen this new varsity college sport. Down the beach, on 40 other courts were 10-18 year-old junior beach players who also had dozens of coaches on the sideline. Fortunately for the kids' learning there is limited "coaching" going on during the games, but still, a place where so many kids grew up learning the game on their own, has now been replaced by being told what to do. That, coupled with the fact that fewer juniors are competing in adult doubles competition, and the learning slows down even more. Adult supervision these days is important, but learning mastery and higher speeds by playing adults, not age group competition, even if the juniors lose on the scoreboard, is something to make happen as often as possible in the summer. Letting these players learn from the experienced, older, faster, wiser adults is important for the kids, as is [Learning by Doing](#).

I was very lucky to have spent two days interviewing over a dozen of our 1964 Olympians last week. They had come to the US Open in Phoenix in honor of their 50th anniversary of the Tokyo Olympic games. Jane Ward, Sharon Peterson, Linda Murphy, Butch May, Rolf Engen, Mike OHara, Ernie and Rudy Suwara and so many others were there to share their story. We will be sharing their stories this summer, but one of the themes that ran throughout was how much they learned to play by playing, beach especially, or by competing against/with adults when they were still teens. I did not know that Rolf Engen played basketball for John Wooden, and after having a sand court built behind his fraternity, the Mike OHara started playing volleyball there too, after a basketball upbringing, in Mike's junior year, at UCLA.

So for the past few months I have been researching, and sharing, how people learn and the area of cognitive psychology. Really, that is why I am asking coaches to "stop coaching" for the research in this area has been going on for over 125 years but has been particularly robust in the last decade. [Thinking Fast and Slow](#) by Daniel Kahneman which I blogged about a couple of years ago has insights. As many of you might have missed his TED talk on experience vs. memory (and this is about better remembering in the end) I would urge you to take 20 minutes [to watch this speech](#) or to [read the transcript](#) (36 language options, this is the English one). The new [Think Like a Freak](#) book by Levitt and Dubner is well worth the buy. But, you can test drive it – in relation to working with a growth mindset - with this [podcast](#). The book that I have reread twice now, however, is the best I feel about learning (and thus REMEMBERING). It is called, [Make It Stick](#), by Brown, Roediger and McDaniel. I will share some quotes from this important book for coaches, teachers and parents, starting with this from page one of the preface.

A body of insights that constitute a growing science of learning: highly effective, evidence based strategies that are rooted in theory, lore and intuition. But there's a catch: the most effective learning strategies are not intuitive.

The book came from a collaborative effort (sidebar to that word – have you seen the collaborative lesson plans we have posted to the Grassroots section for elementary (2/3 person teams), junior high (4/6 person teams) and high school (6 person teams) PE teachers and Junior clubs. Check it out and contribute [HERE](#). Among eleven cognitive psychologists who got a large research grant and worked 10 years to "translate" cognitive science to education (science). I hope all reading this can agree that useful learning requires memory and it is best instill in our youth to be a lifelong learner – on and off the court, and that learning can be enhanced and developed as a skill.

The authors make some claims at the start of their book worth sharing. The emphasis (CAPS) is the authors, not mine by the way....

1. *Learning is deeper and more durable when it is EFFORTFUL. Learning that's easy is like writing in sand, here today, gone tomorrow.*

2. *We are POOR JUDGES of when we are learning well and when we are not. When the going is harder and slower and doesn't feel productive, we are drawn to strategies that fell more fruitful, unaware that the gains from these strategies are often temporary*
 3. *MASS PRACTICE of a skill or new knowledge is by far the preferred study strategies of learners of all stripes, but they're also among the LEAST PRODUCTIVE. By massed practice we mean the single-minded, rapid-fire repetition of something you are trying to burn into memory the "practice-practice-practice" of conventional wisdom.*
 4. *Trying to solve a problem BEFORE BEING TAUGHT THE SOLUTION leads to better learning, even when errors are made in the attempt.*
 5. *The popular notion that you learn better with your PREFERRED LEARNING STYLE, for example as an auditory or visual learner, is NOT SUPPORTED BY THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH.*
1. *When you are adept at extracting the UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES OR "RULES" that differentiate types of problems, you're more successful at picking the right solutions in unfamiliar situations. This skill is better acquired through INTERLEAVED AND VARIED PRACTICE than massed practice.*

So much of what the book shares, starting with the above, has actually already been shared in the USAV IMPACT manual since I wrote the first edition (now in its 25th edition...) in 1988. The authors point out research in baseball with collegiate players who already are pretty good batters, with one group getting 15 curve balls, changeups, then fastballs, each in a row, while the other half were simply never knew what pitch was coming – i.e. varied/random training. Practice looked better for the mass practice group over the 6 weeks of 2 extra batting practices a week. Yet at the close of the six weeks of training, *“those who had practiced on the randomly interspersed pitches now displayed markedly better hitting relative to those who had practiced on one type of pitch thrown over and over.”*

Two other recent blogs, again perhaps due to the title and not the content, have troubled a few coaches. [STOP Doing Drills](#), and [STOP Teaching Technique](#). I of course am not saying stop doing either when you read the entire article, I am simply asking for EVERY coach to increase the amount of random, varied GAMELIKE as possible training, and guide the discovery in every one of their athletes in the areas of their sport's IQ – which comes from figuring things out themselves through the random nature of the game and getting tips from their coaches in reading and game flow anticipation. What most of us do is OVER-teach, especially in competition.

This and other blogs, webinars, Youtube clips, books, clinic time, Volleyball Coaches & Trainers group on Facebook - those are a coach's practice time. The player's team training sessions are the “competition” a coach must win, by helping the players learn as much as possible in these focused, deliberate practice times. Then when the match happens, just like other motor learning professionals in music (both vocal and instrumental), dance, theatre, and so many more – the player's competition/performance is where the coach/teacher now takes notes for the next training.

Having just done a High Performance camp last weekend for the Delta Region of USA Volleyball, with 20 other great regional coaches, the session on what was retained in training was even more important as in just two days, their “coach” was gone. It was even more about teaching them to teach themselves/the player who knows why beats the player who knows how. After giving the parents and players insights into motor learning principles, they were met with coaches, myself included, wearing this camp shirt we designed in Sport Development. Point at “What Happened” and you are asking them to tell you about their decision/the situation, to guide them to increase their VB IQ. Point at the moving arms or legs and you want them to tell you/ guide the discussion on what you saw in their movement. The sleeve says Citius, Altius, Fortius, for training is always about increasing your personal “ER” – SwiftER, HighER, StrongER, not about the “___EST,” that is someone on a gold medal Olympic team, not my team. Finally, the back says “Are You Learning? (Deliberate Practice Matters)” as we speak about motor learning principles and note that in a 120 min practice for 12 kids on the court, you only average 10 min per training of “attention” from the coach. What gets a player good is the other 110 min in a training session, where the coach is teaching/guiding a teammate and their back is to you. THAT is when you go from good to great.



When I say limit YOUR coaching – it is in no small part due to the effectiveness of learning that comes from player empowered practicing, not the traditional coach led training. Indeed, it is important to vastly increase the players’ coaching. This recent article from Athlete Assessment sums up so much of the research and enhanced effectiveness of moving from a coach centered, to a player centered training, that it is a [must read](#).

The reason it’s called youth sports is obvious. Coaches, please stop living through your athletes. Parents, please stop living through your kids. Join an adult volleyball league if you want to play. I live for the day when I walk into a competition, and when players err, I never see their next “motor program” or response being an immediate head twist to look at the coach on the bench or their parents in the stands. We want athletes who err and have no need or worry about having to look at the bench or stands for answers, but who can problem solve on their own. As most of you reading are not likely following me on Twitter ([@JohnKesselUSAV](#) if you want to), I am going to share my most popular tweet so far from the nearly 600 I have sent – it has been retweeted over 800 times, which I am told by those in social media, is a heckuva lot – and it was first shared in my USAV article, [Learning vs. Teaching](#). The article posted over 1,000 likes on the USAV website itself. So, as it relates to what we need to focus on as coaches and parents, I share it AGAIN (when you read the book [Make It Stick](#), you will see why...lol).

So what do great coaches do, if they don’t “coach?” They observe, they check for understanding, they provide FEEDFORWARD (as feedback is seen as criticism and what happened can’t be controlled, only the next performance can), they are specific if they do speak (76 % of John Wooden’s information was and they do all this while aware of what variability means in a player’s training. In IMPACT I called it “coaching on the averages;” in the science of motor learning it is about both “summary feedback” and “bandwidth feedback.” No matter what you call it, you want to give the players time to learn by trial and error and not be harping at them constantly. Give them a break, and concentrate on one or two cue words on the core things, while being VERY aware of the difference between reading/judgment mistakes and true technical (I don’t know how to perform the skill without a ball even) errors.

I do an [IMPACT](#) clinic teachable moment that does share some other ideas, ones that I argue we all already know, from having great teachers in our lives, though sadly they are few in number. Few, as in the average college graduate has had over 30 teachers, and the average response I get to “how many GREAT teachers (not coaches) have you had in your scholastic life from kindergarten on” is just

THREE. That is a 1:10 ratio that we need to increase. So when I next ask “What words come to mind when you think of these great teachers?” this list is what they have shared:

Great Teachers in your life---what words come to mind when you remember them?

Believed in me	Balance	Non-threatening
Created a team environment	Compassion	Non-judgmental
Respect	Confidence	Encouraging
Creative	Humor	Challenging
Caring	Common sense	Patient
Made things interesting	Appreciation	Supportive
Educated me	Resilient	Positive
Unconventional	Understanding	Funny
Passionate	Positive	Understanding
Mother nun spiting fire and brimstone	Patient	Knowledgeable
FUN	Energetic	Passionate
Visionary	Dynamic	Calm
Happy	Generous	Inspiring
Demanding	Knowledgeable	Listened
Enthusiastic	Personal connection	Consistent
Entertaining	Empowering	Fair
Always had time for me	Empathetic	Made it interesting
Adventure	Supportive	Organized
Creativity	Open	They liked being there too, more maybe
Reflection	Approachable	

I will let the words of the Make it Stick authors have a final say on why I continue to ask others to change their “coaching.” In the book, these lead into some research by Daniel Kahnemann, Carol Dweck and others. *“The truth is we’re all hardwired to make errors in judgment. Good judgment is a skill one must acquire, becoming an astute observer of one’s own thinking and performance. We start at a disadvantage for several reasons. One is that when we’re when we’re incompetent, we tend to overestimate our competence and see little reason to change. Another is, as humans, we are really misguided by illusions, cognitive biases, and the stories we construct to explain the world around us, and our place within it. To become more competent, or even expert, we must learn to recognize competence when we see it in others, become more accurate judges of what we ourselves know and don’t know, adopt learning strategies that get results, and find objective ways to track our progress.”* ...Be the one in charge...Mastery, especially of complex ideas, skills and processes, is a quest. It is not a grade on a test, something bestowed by a coach, or a quality that simply seeps into your being with old age and grey hairThe takeaway from Dweck, Tough and their colleagues working in this field is that more than IQ, it’s discipline, grit and a growth mindset that imbue a person with the sense of possibility and the creativity and persistence needed for higher learning and success. “Study skills and learning skills are inert until they’re powered by an active ingredient,” Dweck says. *The active ingredient is the simple but profound realization that the power to increase your abilities lies largely within your control.*

If you have made it this far, my sense is you are a lifelong learner, an attribute of our top Olympic coaches. I will close with this beautiful video of surfing and ask you to consider how many of these amazingly talented athletes, who are responding creatively to what Mother Nature throws at them, have coaches. If they do, how involved are they in the competition? However, if you are tired of thinking, just sit back and watch the beauty of the waves and the people who love to ride them.

In any case, thank you in advance for any comments, including those which can guide me and others to be a better coach, and for growing the game together.

Need Some Support?

June 17, 2014

The below poster is not meant for the normal situation, but perhaps for a player, coach, or program member who has been hit hard by the challenges and randomness of life. This support from USA Volleyball is for someone who has cancer, or had an accident, or a season ending ACL injury for instance.



One morning I was thinking how lucky I was to have our troops allowing me to have the freedoms I have in the USA, and how the randomness of battle makes some who give all, but all who give some, especially the wounded warriors. I have been working with the Paralympic program for 20 years now, since preparing to produce the Atlanta Paralympics in 1996. So when cancer or an accident in any situation challenges a member of our volleyball family, we are often asked to provide some sort of support. It is an honor to do so on behalf of USA Volleyball.

So my idea, shaped from its creation by other caring USAV staffers, is below – something we call a “Compassion Poster.” You or someone sends us an email that includes a picture at the highest possible resolution of the volleyball person you want to insert into the poster. We add his/her name and the photo and will email you the completed poster back. The recipient can then, take the .jpg file image to the local photo department and print it in any size, up to 20x30 in. for under \$10.

If you have gotten this far in this blog, it would mean to me you are a person of compassion, a core part of being the best you can be. So I will share with you a final “poster” as it were or maybe a picture guiding how to find your purpose. Maybe it is growing the game of volleyball at any level, as doing so worldwide for all ages and for indoor, beach and ParaVolley. It sums up what I believe you can find. Thanks as always for your help in growing the game together and we hope that volleyball becomes part of your passion for a lifetime.



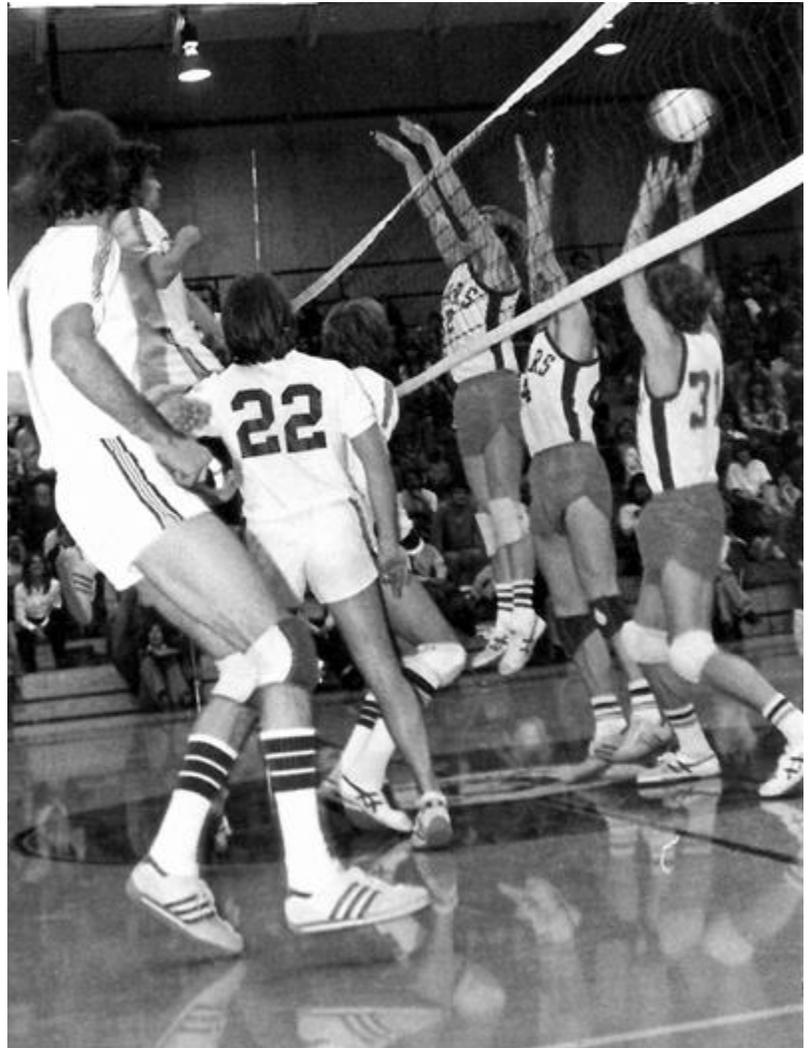
There is NO Magic

June 19, 2014

There is only hard work, the science and randomness of our sport. At the start of my coaching, I was looking for “the answer” or the “drills” that would make me a winning coach. When I discovered the science of motor learning, I also learned that there is no magic, thanks to the knowledge of a coach that has been my mentor for nearly 40 years.

This same guy has impacted USA Volleyball at the highest level for decades, and yet many coaches, old and new, do not know of him. From the men’s 1984 Olympic gold medal success to the 2008 Olympic Gold, one man has been there at every Olympics and virtually every World Championship, Pan American Games and when it has mattered to the USA men’s program. He also coached our USA National team from 1973 to 1976, one of three Olympiads which the USA teams trained (far, far less than now) and did not qualify for the Olympics. He has coached Karch Kiraly and Hugh McCutcheon, and countless other National team members. As shared in my blog, my son Cody and daughter McKenzie were fortunate enough to spend time with him last summer during training camps that we were doing together in Italy. If you want a sneak preview of who this blog is about, read the blog [HERE](#).

Hugh McCutcheon, two time Olympic medal winning head coach, approached me at a coaching clinic I was doing in Christchurch New Zealand as a tall and earnest 17 year old volleyball player, asking for help and guidance about coming to play college volleyball in the USA. Brigham Young University became his best fit, as it would allow him to play for and be mentored by this amazing coach, who after coaching their club team for decades, finally got BYU to move the program to varsity level. Their second year as a program, with Hugh playing, they were 2-25 while leading the nation in blocking. Three years later they ended second at 21-6, and have gone on to win three national titles, two of them while my mentor coach was at the helm and was National Coach of the Year. His son is now the head coach, and this year, BYU senior Taylor Sander made the jump from 3rd place at the NCAAs to starting on the USA team with Reid Priddy out for the season due to a knee injury, and helping the USA to a current 6-0 record in World League.

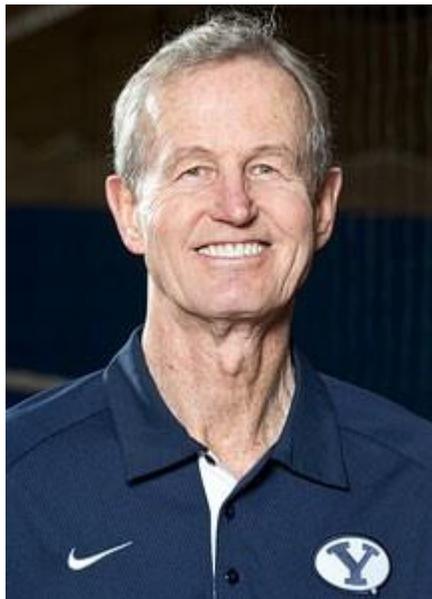


I started playing against BYU in 1975 – as this picture shows me spiking. It also allowed me to connect with this coach, who still will help anyone asking for such and having a growth

mindset, open to the science of the sport – Maybe that is why one of the better volleyball books out there is [The Science of Coaching Volleyball](#), and the current USAV Coaching Accreditation Program (CAP), uses his book [Winning Volleyball](#), as our Level One textbook. When I wrote the first edition of the [IMPACT](#) manual in 1988, he was the core source of the pivotal Motor Learning Science chapter. When I sent this pic recently to him of me spiking over a very poorly formed BYU block, he started working on figuring out what he could have done better, 40 years later... that speaks volumes about Carl McGown’s commitment to being a lifetime learner.

I think the other wonderful thing is that Carl and his sweet wife Susan have passed the love of the game down to his son, Chris – something that I can relate to – who for the last five years has head coached BYU, being assisted by of course, his dad. Chris last year was the national coach of the year, and continues to grow the game as well. He was not able to join us in Italy but you can see from these quotes from the *Herald* how well he knows the game too.

“There are in every season opportunities to look back and wonder if only,” said BYU head coach Chris McGown. “We wonder if we hadn’t had some of our players be hurt, if we’d played better in the match against UC Santa Barbara or in the fifth set at Long Beach State. You can always look back, but we were doing the best we can in those moments. “You can torture yourself, but what we talk about at end of the season with the players is that if you worked as hard as you could, if you gave all you could every day, you will win the championship — unless you don’t.”



*McGown said that was how he saw this year for the Cougar men’s volleyball team. It was a success in the effort that the players gave. “Sometimes an opponent is better or luckier and the breaks just don’t go your way,” he said. “**You have to be satisfied with what Carl (McGown) calls the dignity of your effort.** Thinking back, I’m satisfied with that. They worked hard, they were committed to each other, and they gave their hearts. It was a fun team to watch. I don’t feel left anything out there on that front.”*

To read the whole article, [CLICK HERE](#).

Carl is a fellow member of the American Volleyball Coaches Hall of Fame – but of course he led me in getting there. *“I consider Dr. McGown the greatest mind of the game of volleyball today,”* wrote University of Washington head women’s volleyball coach Jim McLaughlin in his AVCA Coaches Hall of Fame endorsement letter of McGown. *“In fact, in my estimation, because of his practice methods, systems and match preparation, he is the best volleyball coach in the United States, and, probably, in the world today.”* I totally agree with Jim...

Most recently, the USA Volleyball’s highest coaching award, named after the late and great Jim Coleman, finally went to this coach of coaches. He spent this past season assistant coaching for his son, always mentoring coaches, and players alike that make a difference in our sport both in the USA and around the world. So thank you Carl McGown, for your

lifetime of service to our sport, as your impact is at every level and your legacy will live on. To read more specifics about Carl [CLICK HERE](#).

So now that we have confirmed there is no magic (with thanks and kudos to any Penn and Teller show you can find on YouTube) – I share [this final link](#) that shows what can be done with hard work and deliberate practice, in the form of magic. So how the heck does this guy do it?!!!

Thanks for your help in growing the game, together. If you have any McGownisms, or stories of how Carl has impacted your coaching, I would love for you to share them below....

Please Know What Marfan Syndrome Is...

June 23, 2014

If you come to visit us at USA Volleyball's offices in Colorado Springs (please do!), and I am in town I will take you on a tour. One of the first stops, after the "Gold Room" where all staff meetings are held surrounded by pictures of all the US Olympic gold medal teams to date, beach and indoor, is this corner by CEO Doug Beal's office.



It is one of several statues commissioned in honor of 1984 Olympic silver medalist Flo Hyman. The statue is also located on the grounds of the Colorado Springs Olympic Training Center, where she trained from 1977-1980; at Daiei's gym, the professional volleyball team in Japan she was playing for when she died; and at the International Volleyball Federation's (FIVB) headquarters in Switzerland. In all cases, the statue is mounted to have the top of the ball be her height, 6'5", and here at USAV, we have a quote by her also:

"To be true to oneself is the ultimate test in life. To have the courage and sensitivity to follow your hidden dreams and stand tall against the odds that are bound to fall in your path. Life is too short and precious to be dealt with in any other fashion. This thought I hold dear to my heart, and I always try to be true to myself and others that I might encounter along the way – Flo Hyman

It has now been almost 30 years since her passing. Flo was playing in Japan in a pro league match when she asked the coach to be taken out. She went to the bench, collapsed and died. It was discovered only in autopsy that she had Marfan's syndrome.

Back then, Sport's Illustrated did a feature article on her passing – [CLICK HERE](#) – which included this passage:

An autopsy performed in Culver City, Calif. at the request of Hyman's family six days after her death revealed that what killed this strong and vital 31-year-old athlete was a disorder much less common than a heart attack. Hyman, the star of the 1984 U.S. silver medal-winning team, had died of a ruptured aorta caused by Marfan syndrome, a congenital condition that exacts a disproportionately large toll among tall, lanky people such as Hyman, who was 6'5". For this reason, Marfan syndrome is—or should be—of special interest to physicians who treat basketball and volleyball players and other athletes who tend to be tall.

The pathologist who performed the autopsy, Dr. Victor Rosen, was given permission by Hyman's family to talk to SI about his findings. Rosen, once an assistant in the office of Los Angeles County coroner Thomas Noguchi, said that Hyman had been in superb condition except for a single fatal flaw—a dime-sized weak spot in her aorta, the massive artery that carries the entire flow of blood

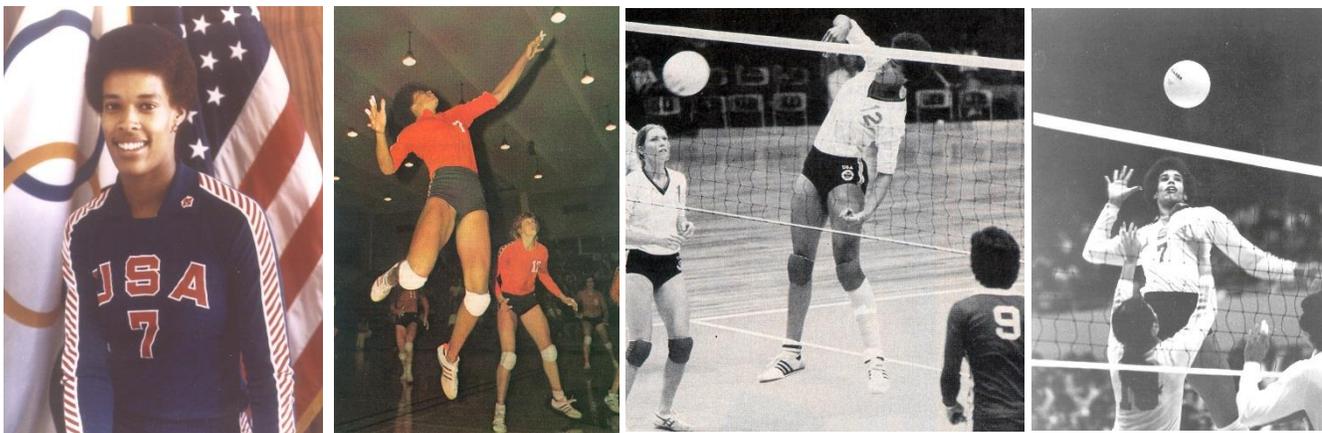
leaving the heart. That small spot, less than an inch above her heart, had been there since her birth, and there the artery had burst, exploding inside her chest as she sat on the sideline in Matsue. It was the result of Marfan syndrome.

In the months that followed, Sports Illustrated received dozens of letters (back in the pre-Internet era) stating that due to this story, a coach/parent had their son/daughter checked out and discovered that their athlete had the syndrome and their life was saved, even though they could no longer compete in high level athletic competition. Even Flo's own brother's life was saved when they discovered he also had the syndrome.

So today I found myself shocked to learn that likely [NBA first round pick Isaiah Austin](#) from Baylor had just discovered he had the same thing as Flo. I am sharing this blog simply to ask you to be proactive in checking out your athletes who show the same symptoms as shared back in 1986:

The malady was first described in 1896 by Antoine Marfan, a French pediatrician. It is a genetic abnormality that affects connective tissue—the stuff that binds and supports all the cells in the human body. The defective genes that cause Marfan syndrome result in critical changes in the protein that gives connective tissue its strength. This weakens and, in effect, loosens the tissue, producing, in ways that are not always clear, characteristics by which victims of Marfan syndrome are commonly identified: tallness, long fingers, deformities of the breastbone (in some cases protruded, or pigeon-breasted, and in other cases indented) and nearsightedness. Hyman was nearsighted and wore glasses off the court. To some experts, Abraham Lincoln's long fingers and great height (he was 6'4") indicate that he may have suffered from the syndrome. It has also been suggested that the long fingers that helped account for Niccolò Paganini's dexterity on the violin were the result of Marfan syndrome

All athletes who are tall and nearsighted do not have the problem – just 1 in 10,000 it is estimated. Still, as our sports get taller, we need to make sure that this is checked for in advance, not as it was in Flo's case, post mortem. Isaiah Austin is devastated of course, but he is alive, and likely the exposure to this level of athlete discovering the malady in such an inopportune time will help others as Flo once did decades ago.



Sunlight or Shadow Coach?

June 25, 2014

Recently I was tagged on a quote about being a teammate. I said this quote many moons ago, and it's found in part two of my "Grow the Game Together Sport Quotes" collection options – [CLICK HERE](#) to download.

False teammates are like our shadows. They keep close to us when we are all walking in the sunshine, but they are gone the instant we just go into the shade, let alone the darkness.
— John Kessel



At the 2014 Sitting World Championships in Poland in June, I watched a wide variety of coaching styles and while there are over 20 nations and their cultures competing here, the styles fall into basically two different camps – often within the same coach. I agree with Sylvester Stallone's Rocky Balboa's character who in the 2006 Rocky film said:

Let me tell you something you already know. The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and nasty place, and I don't care how tough you are, it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard you hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward; how much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done! Now, if you know what you're worth, then go out

and get what you're worth. But you gotta be willing to take the hits, and not pointing fingers saying you ain't where you wanna be because of him, or her, or anybody. Cowards do that and that ain't you. You're better than that! I'm always gonna love you, no matter what. No matter what happens. You're my son and you're my blood. You're the best thing in my life. But until you start believing in yourself, you ain't gonna have a life.

For those wanting to view this excerpt from the actual movie, while also having it subtitled in Spanish, [CLICK HERE](#).

It's one of my favorite quotes, and Hugh McCutcheon often paraphrases it to something like rainbows and ponies, but it is true, in life, as well as in the chaos and randomness of sport. It is true for not just the competitors, but the coaches teams as well. It is part of the "growth mindset" that those teaching can impact their charges with. I especially like this summary of Carol Dweck's research brought into her book *Mindset* that address this skill of taking hits, aka - You see, to be in the sunlight, you opt for less challenging, faster to solve challenges, so that [Carol writes](#): "Speed and perfection are the enemy of difficult learning: 'If you think I'm smart when I'm fast and perfect, I'd better not take on anything challenging.'"

So I have been pondering about improving coaching performance in the heat of competition after serving on jury for over a week at the championships and watching coaches hours on end. At the risk of being relentlessly positive to the point of discomfort for many negative people, I have some questions if you are going to be a sunlight or shadow coach in competition and in practices...

Do you light your players' way or bury them in your personal landslide of disgust?

Are you a shelter from the chaos or a tornado of frustration and visible disgust?

Are you a **HERE I AM!** or a **THERE THEY ARE!** Coach?

Are you Coach Jekyll or Coach Hyde?

If they have doubt in themselves during the match, can they look over at you and find all the confidence they need, or will they see no such support?

Would your player consider you a teacher or a warden?

Does your body language express belief, or doubt?

Do you see failure as part of the learning process always or get angry when you see it happen in competition?

Are you a sequoia or a willow?

Can the players rely on your consistency or do you leave them bewildered with your inconsistent actions on the bench –all the while DEMANDING they are consistent in their on court performance?

Do the fans and everyone on court see you as a hand clapper or a foot stomper?

Are you specific with your feedback, or spouting nonspecific things every player already knows?

Would your parents see you as a high fiving arm raiser or a clipboard slammer?

If your grandma was watching you coach, would she approve of how you treat your players?

If someone posted a video of your coaching in competition on YouTube, what would your first grade teacher say about your teaching competencies?

Do you understand that mistakes are part of learning, or think errors are done on purpose?

Do you let the referees err at times without yelling at them, knowing they make far fewer errors than each of your players – or would you like them to yell at you as often as you do at them, for your own coaching staff or player mistakes on the court?

Do you call your players “my kids” or recognize that the parents are the only ones whose kids they really are, as it is them who takes their kid to school, the doctor, feed/clothe and house them for nearly two decades?

Are you a relationship counselor between your players and their love of the game through all its ups and downs, or are you a taskmaster who the athletes fear playing for?

Do your players err and turn to one another on the court to focus on the next point or do the athletes, every time they err, turn to look at you on the bench?

Have you empowered your players to compete at their highest through your practices so they can fight in competition even if you are not there, as Hugh McCutcheon tragically experienced in the 2008 Olympic Games?

Would fans say that you sure showed your players how to compete, or that you are simply a showboat?

The game has countless streaks, both short and long, and the calmer you are when these streaks don't go your way, the more the kids will love the game. In Poland the top teams turned inwardly to celebrate each point or even error, while other teams would err and all eyes would then stare, often filled with fear, at the coach.

You see, as much as the game is random and chaotic, the effort and consistency of a coach should not be. I love to watch athletes risk in competition against any foe. I dislike intensely (not hate, a word I teach and personally save that wording for the worst in life, like say Adolf Hitler) coaches who verbally and visually give up on their players. I saw in this event coaches who scoffed, chided and became very angered when streaks were not in their favor. I watched one coach shoot an imaginary gun at players as the score went to 18-24, but then begin to “believe” when the team, despite the coach, fought back to 23-24. Olympians get to an Olympiad through the tens of thousands of failure that test their mettle. As Rocky said, it is about what you do after being hit by the errors, in the sunlight of successful plays, or the darkness of defeat and mistakes.

Sometimes I feel like writing a blog or book called “Zen and the Art of Volleyball Maintenance.” I would love for you to share your coaching best practices on how you teach teamwork and the power of being on a team sport to your athletes. I will start with three of my favorites.

1. Take 14 pencils to practice. Show the team how easy it is to break a single pencil (especially letting the player most needing this teachable moment do the breaking), then group the remaining 13 pencils all together (the roster plus the coach) to show it is impossible to break the group when it is together.
2. Give each player, or the teachable moment athlete if you wish, a sheet of paper. Have them “hit with an error” and tear the paper in half. Then have them tear the 2 pieces in half as they “get hit again” – Continue getting hit by tearing four pieces into eight, until you can no longer tear the “athlete or team” in half again with any more “hits” as the learning is deep and deliberate in practice.
3. Have a player compete 1 vs 6, one contact for the single teammate, normal three or less for the sextuplet on the court.

So what are your ways to show how the team is stronger together than apart in any way, including the sideline actions of a coach in any level of championships?

Change

July 02, 2014

I have written more than once about focusing on what you can control. This choice is important not only in sport, but in life itself. My dad always said life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans, something also attributed to John Lennon. One of my favorite poems about change is by Robert Burns, who in 1785 penned "*To a Mouse, on turning up her nest with a plough*" (He also wrote the song we often sing on New Year's Eve – Auld Lang Syne). These are the last two parts of his poem.

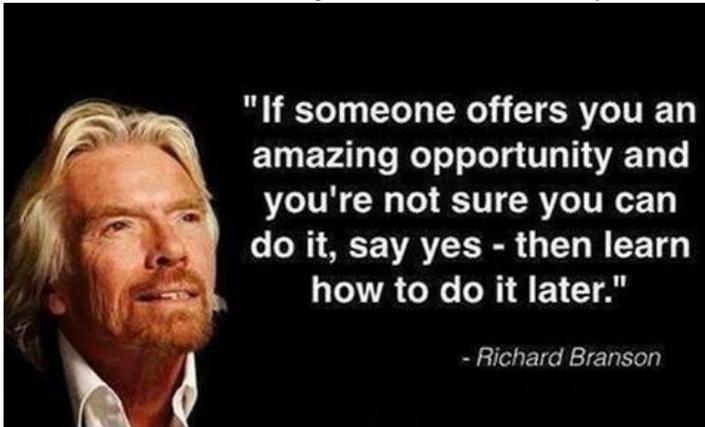
*But little Mouse, you are not alone,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes of mice and men
Go often askew,
And leave us nothing but grief and pain,
For promised joy!*

*Still you are blest, compared with me!
The present only touches you:
But oh! I backward cast my eye,
On prospects dreary!
And forward, though I cannot see,
I guess and fear!*

Life, as in sport, is lived in the present. You can't control the past, nor the future, but too often we fear or belabor them both. We must learn from this present given, so we are stronger, smarter, better teammates, competitors and members in society. When in training, a coach seeks that you are deliberately practicing – mindful of what is going on. The example I often use with my players is your handwriting – it is something you have been doing for years, decades most likely, but is it readable to others or just you? If you were told you were going to be an architect and had to have perfect writing, you would start concentrating again and change. Just doing something does not make it change, you must be mindful about changing.

Would you parachute? What if the most important person in your life depended on you jumping? We each can achieve so much more in life if we just commit to jumping – with a parachute of course. I recently tweeted this quote from Sir Richard Branson. We often are afraid of change, yet that is all life is.

You see the US Soccer team goalie become the secretary of defense and fulfilled his team role by matching a record not matched in



over 50 years, in stopping shots from getting into his area of the field. Meanwhile the randomness of the game means the ball bounces a bit swifter, higher, or stronger than expected and the chances to score don't happen, and as is ALWAYS the case, one of the teams loses. Nobody wants injuries, but they will happen. Nobody wants even death, but it is even more inevitable than injury. In every case, *it simply is what it is*...and the sooner you get back on track living life to its fullest, the better. Your teammates who can't play for whatever reason, want you and the team to succeed, to thrive, and to let that joy of play, the passion of living life to its fullest to keep happening.

What I love about volleyball is the complete team sport that it is. You cannot compete, let alone win, by playing alone against any good opponent. We must be thankful for those opponents who

are better than us, for they push us to a higher level of performance, and of living life.

This principle I am now following as I walk a new pathway of grief, as my loved one just passed away suddenly this week. I lost her to the opponent alcohol, but for some of you it might be drugs, or cancer, or just the randomness of life that makes a car crash happen in a place that just 2 seconds later would have been safe. Caca occurs. *You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them*, Maya Angelou once wrote, while Kahlil Gibran taught me that "*The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain. Inseparable, together they come, and when one sits, alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.*"

I choose to control what I can control and help proactively teach coaches to be better coaches, so they can better impact the lives of their athletes. Not that I won't also help others fight their addictions, but I believe good mentors, parents and coaches give the blank

slates of children immensely valuable lessons as role models on the nurture side of nature. I choose to meet my loss head on, and live my life even more passionately – for that is what anyone who truly loves you, wants you to do when they are gone. When you lose a teammate to injury, you can see, hear and feel them in real time from the bench. When you lose them to heaven, I know if you listen hard enough, you will still hear them imploring you to live.

I must give special thanks to the aptly named Rise Volleyball Club, led so well by Loren Anderson. In everything we do, we must be compassionate, and the best we can work to see things through other's eyes. As an example of best practices in compassion, by a very, very good coach, I share this timely message:

John, those who know me well know that I am pretty bad at expressing the empathy I feel. In such a hard time for you, I wanted to tell you how much you have meant to me and my program. I started my volleyball club because of your "tryouts and our deepest fear" blog in 2010. I have followed your blog and teaching for years, and while we have never met, the few phone conversations we have had are special moments for me. I asked a couple of my girls, who have heard your name a thousand times in our gym, if they had the chance to say anything they wanted to John Kessel, what would they say:

"Dear John Kessel, I know you have no clue who I am, but you have made a tremendous impact on my life and my identity as a volleyball player. My name is Mali Sawyer, and I live in Eagle, Idaho. Living in a small town in Idaho limits the opportunities for good volleyball. I started playing in 7th grade with lessons once a week and that sprouted into being in the gym every day for countless hours. Loren Anderson has been my coach for roughly 5 years now. Your name has been mentioned in camps, clinics, and practices numerous times. You inspired Loren to start his volleyball club, Rise, which has been pretty much my life for the past 4 years. He has used your coaching style and advice to teach hundreds of girls how to get better at this game we both love. For me, it means much more than just a team to represent and play for. Rise Volleyball is my family. They have been with me through my parents' divorce and my journey through high school. It is the most constant and healthy part of my life. I have learned to be a better person and player through Loren's inspiration from you. I am incredibly thankful for the way that you inspire and continue to inspire coaches and players all over the world. In an indirect way, you have changed and shaped my life in a huge way. Thank you for everything you have done for the volleyball community, and I can't imagine what I would have done without you and Loren in my life. -Mali Sawyer"

"Hello, my name is Serra Anderson and I am a senior at Rocky Mountain High here in Meridian, Idaho. I have been with Loren for about 5 years now playing both club and in clinics. Ever since I started playing for Loren and attending his clinics, his passion for the sport began to grow on me and still continues to grow. Being in Rise Volleyball Academy since the beginning, a man named John Kessel was constantly being referenced, whether it was an article Loren had read or a video he watched. I had no idea who this man was. Throughout the years, this man was referenced more and more and began to learn more about this man. Being coached by Loren, it became apparent how truly inspired he was by you. This in turn, created more inspiration by myself and the other girls in this gym. I've come to realize how crazy it is to think that a complete stranger can have so much impact on my life. I cannot stress enough how thankful I am for all that you have done and continue to do for the sport of volleyball. You have not only inspired me but the other girls in this gym as well. I am one girl from Meridian, Idaho whose life is impacted by what you teach and I am sure you have done the same for players and coaches around the world. And for that, I am extremely grateful."

Thank you John for being an inspiration... and know that you are thought of daily here. I wish you well in such a tough time, and ask that you let me know if I can ever return all the kindness and inspiration you have sent my way.

Tonight, I will be with my amazing daughter, and two dear friends, Matt and Dana McShane. Their home burned up in just 8 minutes just a year ago to the Black Forest fire, one of the first homes to turn to ashes of the 500 lost. It is what it is, and their new home is nearly finished on the same spot in the forest, amidst the burned tree trunks, as life returns on the forest floor and in the new seedlings.



We will no doubt cry together listening to Sarah McLachlan at the most beautiful place on earth sometimes – Red Rocks Music Amphitheatre. The last time I was there was with my partner Tammie, to listen, past midnight, to her favorite singer, Lyle Lovett. Many of you might have met her, as she journeyed around the world and the USA with me, and was there at my table at my Hall of Fame induction. She was a gentle, caring soul who loved being part of the volleyball family. This time at Red Rocks, the skies will be crying a bit too most likely, while I will be no doubt shed tears to songs like “In the Arms of the Angel”...and “I Will Remember You...” I choose to build on the love I have shared, and to do my small part to make a difference, and I hope you choose to focus on what you can control and do the same. So be compassionate and say you love someone. Life is short – Play more... and for those of you who love music, playing and change – Playing for Change is a website I have mentioned before. [CLICK HERE](#) to hear their newest, Guantanamera, sung by 75 different Cubans around the world. RIP T.



Warm Up Songs for Practice and Competition

July 05, 2014

In the van ride to the competition venue last month at the Sitting Volleyball World Championships, music from Poland's airwaves would reverberate as we wove our way thru Elblag (founded in 1237) traffic. One song that was a hit that I had never heard was Fly Project's "Toca Toca," a fun one in Spanish. Then at the competition hall, music would blare out that I either recognized, or had never heard and had to ask what the lyrics were saying. Add in the beating of big drums and horns (I bought one to bring home that is powered by mouth and emblazoned "Polska" on the side) and you have the place rocking.

Sven, one of my fellow jury members was saying how much he dislikes loud music – except when it is used to warm up/power up for practice or competition. I simply love music, loud or not, especially when I watch an act perform their acquired motor skills live in front of an audience. I have over 100 music DVDs of artists performing their craft live, while also appreciating the creativity found in most single song videos an artist produces.

So symbolically, the best group I learned about here was played in the technical staff room by Jenny, a delightful classifier from Australia. Sidebar: Some classifier humor that you will need to search for yourself – what is the name of the dangling part of your skin at the elbow? I think you will find it a good chuckle as you keep becoming a lifelong learner, both on and off the court.

The name of the group Jenny was listening to is the Great Big Sea – and thus as a World Championships and the invention of the Wright brothers and so many other tweaks to a principle of flight allow us to gather together from afar – I am thankful for my volleyball family friends who gathered from all over the world to compete, and the music they share with me.

Great Big Sea is a Canadian group who have been singing folk songs for over a decade, and yet I have never heard of them. So I went to YouTube, searched for them and using snipmp3.com started listening to their most popular songs – my favorites are "My Apology" and "Consequence Free" and if you like full on Irish, go for "Lukey." If you like Irish songs, accapella, and fun lyrics, you will enjoy them too. They remind me of one of my family's favorite groups, Carbon Leaf, another one of those niche bands you likely have not heard of, but should know about. In my ride to Red Rocks to see Sara McLachlan music topics had the McShanes adding the group Vertical Horizon to this group, starting with the song "Everything You Want."

Music is such a great way to connect players and the volleyball family from a world of national differences. The diversity of cultures, languages and teams at an event like this always amazes me. The gentle giant from Kazakhstan whose head rises above the net, to his ever smiling libero double AK (above the knee amputee) teammate. The joy of being in a new "classroom" for 1,500 elementary school kids, who know enough about the game to draw pictures like these and more, as they rock out to the music of the venue disk jockey's song selection.



I am a World ParaVolley board member, and at this event we fiscally assisted the VolleySLIDE group, our "Level Zero Educational Group" to collect and share player blogs, videos and much more. I gave them my radar gun to record top spike/serve speeds. The group recorded hours of net cam videos, including one I asked for showing from ground level (aka a duck's eye view) the dance that happens in the sitting game as the legs from both sides pass on, off and UNDER the net, one of the four major rule differences between the Olympic and Paralympic version of the game. As no one is jumping in the sitting game, going under the net is allowed, and I look forward to getting this dance shared for anyone interested in this choice of playing the sport – whether you are disabled or not. Click www.volleyslide.net and see the great stuff collected and shared from this year's World Championships.

Gordon Neale, one of my fellow jury members, retired at this event after over 30 years of supporting and growing the sitting game around the world. I hope to see him this fall at the Invictus Games in London that Prince Harry created, but in case I couldn't, I asked Gordon about how music impacted his life. Gordon grew up with a father in the British military, and when we were talking about whole vs part training, he told the story of how he learned to swim when he was young and living in Egypt. His father one day took off Gordon's floating ring and tossed him into the Suez Canal and said swim.... He spoke of two songs, the first was burned into his brain when after six months of being stationed in an Indonesian jungle outpost, and the helicopters that came to take them home were blaring the Animals song "We Gotta Get Outta this Place." His favorite warm up song was "SunChyme" by Dario G, which has a very unique humans as African animals video you can see while listening to the song [HERE](#).

So in the interests of collaboration and learning from one another, would you please share below in the comments, the YouTube link or just the name of your favorite songs to warm up to. If you know the group name/version you like most, please share that as well. Thanks yet again for your part in growing the game together and I look forward to learning new great warm up tunes from your contributions.

Need a Coach?

July 08, 2014

As we grow the game together, there are three places we need to create for kids to get a chance to make volleyball their lifetime sport:

1. Places to play
2. Coaches to teach
3. Officials to officiate

#1 can be solved by using the four nets on a rope idea, working with USAV Affiliated Organizations such as, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs and other facilities, or setting courts up outdoors on grass or sand.

#3 is also very important. We are reaching out to parents to give them something more to do than just watch. We want them to work with the high school and Parks and Recs to find and train more officials through the [USA Volleyball website](#).

This blog is about #2 – the “shortage” of coaches. I am going to share a few examples of how I think we can solve the shortage, and in advance ask anyone with other ideas that are working to provide enough coaches to run more programs for more kids.

1. **My First Coach was the Game** – This is a line from great Brazilian Olympic players who reflected on how they began playing volleyball. These days it seems “coaching” is where an adult is telling a youngster what to do, begins before kindergarten age – and even involves specialization. Let the game be a child’s first coach by setting up a barrier (table, string, whatever) and let these little ones have at it with a balloon. For older first timers, show them a couple of core things – ball shaped hands/fly like superman for OHP/Setting, standing spike motion perhaps, then let them play.



2. **Physical Education Teacher Model** – There are tens of millions of kids who annually learn sport thru the teaching skills of what used to be the main source of volleyball teaching opportunities – the PE teacher. This is why we have created the SportKit DVD, Lesson Plans and so much assistance for these teacher who often, at Elementary and Middle School level are the ones who first give kids an experience with volleyball. The point in regards to this blog is simple. These coaches work with 24-30 plus kids by themselves. They have 6 hoops to do it with in most gyms, but only 1 net, thus the SportKit examples of getting 6-12 nets up in the same space so volleyball can be played by doing, not watching or waiting in line.
3. **Little Kids Coaching Littler Kids** – If you have not seen this video yet of the Elementary School Championships of Thailand (2013) or of Japan (1990), [CLICK HERE](#). For over 25 years what happens at the school level is simple – the school day ends,

and the 1st-3rd graders are “coached” for 30-45 min by the 4th-6th graders, and the adult just supervises, then the older kids play under the guidance of the PE teacher for the remainder of the training. Some colleges and even high schools note they do this for summer camp with their varsity players giving back to the sport, which is great. Where I am coming from is the principle of “That Which You Teach, You Learn” and getting young kids to coach even younger kids. Junior high kids mentoring elementary aged kids. Yes, have your 13 and 14 & under aged kids trade coaching each week night such that one hour of their two hour practice twice a month they teach. This kind of learning by teaching allows the coach to see how their own teachings are being learned. It also allows for a very low cost program to be conducted. I should again mention here USA Volleyball Regions often offer a FREE 8 & under membership and a very low cost (under \$15 a year) 11 & under membership, to help you get these young players started.

4. **Parents** – This model is best seen in soccer, and is easily done in volleyball as well. Like #3 above, in order to not have an overload of feedback/instruction at this level even with guided discovery, team size should be 2-3 per side, and the parent can just guide, or be the setter if they are skilled (or using the Smashball option of catching and throwing the 2nd contact/set if unskilled) for the 2-3 player team.
5. **Open Gym** – Set up a net in the yard – a front yard so other kids might come over to join in - or in the cul-de-sac and just have an adult oversee while the kids play. Set up courts in the gym and let the kids determine the teams, or play work up ladder / Monarch of the court competitions. Let them playing. [CLICK HERE](#) for some great examples.
6. **High School & College Community Service** – There are many schools at this level who ask and even require their students, not just athletes, to give back to the city they are studying. Check with the school, starting with the volleyball coaching staff, to see if coaching for a certain amount of time in your program might be an option.

Yes mentors/teachers are important, to guide discovery and share their wisdom. The thing is, a youth programming can happen well with just an adult supervisor and the chance to play – not a horde of coaches. It happens best/faster with 2v2 and 3v3 team sizes, not 6v6. If you have other ideas/examples of running quality programming with a limited number of coaches, or other ideas for finding additional programs, please share them below and thanks for your help in Growing the Game Together.

Somewhere Over the Rainbow

July 25, 2014

In advance know that this is a two topic blog, woven together by my favorite songs. This first part is for those coaches who need to know more about developing creative players with VB IQ, then I will close with things I have learned from my recent losses of those dear to me. They blend together thanks to music.

First off, PLEASE take the time to listen to Tommy Emmanuel. He is not only the greatest guitar player on the planet, he is a teacher, an entertainer, and someone who will make you happy when you listen to him. I first discovered him over 20 years ago while working in Australia, and just can't say enough about how important he is to have as part of your musical life, no matter what other genres you listen to.

Tommy is a solo guitarist, not a singer, not with a band, but he can make the guitar come alive with a band alone, and make it sing like no other. He cannot read or write music (he can write a song, just not write it out), and had no training, just taught himself after catching the bug when he listened to Chet Atkins, who called Tommy "the most fearless player he had ever seen." He is following his passion, being in the "happiness business" not entertainment work. He shares how he thinks like a band (think teamwork/team) and that is how he performs even though he is unaccompanied.

In this TedxMelbourne talk, he states "*My music has been played at weddings and funerals...others have learned my songs and make their living playing like I do. My music has brought life to Alzheimer patients, willpower to cancer survivors, escape for grieving families, joy to people's daily drive to work.*" *Being fearless is about breaking molds and raising self-belief, I ignore the critics and I keep working to make my show and my life better and better.*" *And just remember folks that life is not a rehearsal, so you better get on with it.*" So this video is a MUST view, IMHO as is any link that YouTube then gives you as an option to listen to more of Tommy "[live](#)" or [in studio](#).

Specific to the song that has always brought me joy, Tommy performs "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" like no other [here](#), but you cannot listen to his version without words, without then listening to the late, great [Izzy do his version](#) with his melodic voice.

Music has helped me in these last days of my mother's life, to fill her hospice room with the songs she, my dad, our family and friends sang so often together. It brings you joy and peace, and bonds you both physically and mentally. My parting song to mom yesterday came about because of an Australian friend, who asked me to sing my mom a song – and so she listened to me sing Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree... That I have three or four Kookaburras in my office, including my prized Paul Margocsy original painting that makes me laugh with them. Mom and Dad loved Mexico, and the songs of performers like Edie Gorme and the Trio Los Panchos. Thanks to our "sisters" Diane & Caroline May of the KessMay family, we played 3 CDs over and over, to fill mom's mind with those joyful words and sounds. The night nurse on the 8am shift change bubbled over with pleasure listening to them all, and shared a musician I had forgotten, Rosa Passos, from Brazil. Her song "[Besame Mucho](#)" is right up my parent's alley.

As soon as you headed into the hallway though from my mom's room, the music would stop. We have spent a lot of time in hallways growing up. Nodding at some, hugging others, perhaps even being bullied by those with little else in their life. This past month has been a challenge in the passage, first losing my partner, and now my mom. My old friend Margie Plath helped by sharing the group "Passenger's song "Feathers on a Clyde," and talked about how exciting it was to meet Brett Dennon this month at Red Rocks, for his song "[When I Go](#)" is also very comforting.

We are really nothing but memories and dreams, which meant I have been singing John Denver's "[Poem's Prayers and Promises](#)," more than usual too – "What about the dreams and all the memories we share?" These weeks have been made better by friends and family, who have shared their memories and hopes with me. The most impactful ones I wish to share, to help others in the future deal with loss, on and off the court.

You see, the quote that has helped the most is about hallways... "*When life opens one door, it closes another, but it is hell in the hallway...*"



I loved how much my mom enjoyed my blog about [her as a “coach.”](#) What I learned there is to make sure to share with your loved ones in advance, not after they have passed.

My mom said there are two kinds of people. Those who when you see each other say “There you are!” – while the others say “Here I am...” She is being welcomed by the many who have gone before her soon, with a hearty “There you are!” on both sides. It is hard to see a loved one go from a joyful dancer, even if using a walker, to a frail, skeleton like body in a fetal position in just a week. All you can do is hold their hands and tell them it is ok to go, letting them know of all who love them and wish them Godspeed. When a loved one becomes a memory, the memory becomes a treasure; that message my assistant so wisely shared with me which helps. I don’t know what the future holds, but I know who holds my future.

One of my oldest friends, from elementary school, John Borel, who went with us on Mammoth winter ski and summer sea Mexico trips shared this one that helped:

“To Those I Love And Those Who Love Me”

When I am gone, release me. Let me go

I have so many things to see and do.

You mustn't tie yourself to me with tears,

Be happy, we had so many years.

I gave you my love and you can only guess

How much you gave to me in happiness.

I thank you for the love you each have shown

But now it's time I traveled alone.

So grieve a while for me if grieve you must

Then let your grief be comforted by trust.

It's only for a while that we must part

So bless those memories in your heart.

I won't be far away for life goes on

So if you need me, call and I will come.

Though you can't see or touch me, I'll be near

with all my love around you soft and clear.

And then, when you must come this way alone,

I'll greet you with a smile and "Welcome You Home".

While Rick Swan, who I have known for decades and who coaches at my alma mater, The Colorado College, shared this that also helped a bunch:

GONE FROM MY SIGHT by Henry Van Dyke "I am standing upon the seashore. A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength. I stand and watch her until at length she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other. Then, someone at my side says; "There, she is gone!" "Gone where?" Gone from my sight. That is all. She is just as large in mast and hull and spar as she was when she left my side and she is just as able to bear her load of living freight to her destined port. Her diminished size is in me, not in her. And just at the moment when someone at my side says, "There, she is gone!" There are other eyes watching her coming, and other voices ready to take up the glad shout; "Here she comes!" And that is dying.

Make sure to share and listen to the stories delivered to your loved one. My daughter faceted in from thousands of miles away and the technology allows them to listen and you to learn. The stories shared when loved ones say thank you, opens your eyes to the wide impact you did not know that person had on other's lives.

Share fun... My sis and I talked about a game I had not played – Left/Right/Center – there are even dice made for playing it, though frugal me wondered how to make the same game happen with just regular dice (you can do it...), while I taught her how the "straw twirl" race first shared with my daughter Mac by Eric Hodgson- still a video that makes me laugh so hard to watch, but I am banned from posting to YouTube...

What is time after all? In Einstein's relativity it goes too slow when bad happens and too fast during good times. George Carlin had a line about the shortest measurable amount of time - the time it takes from a light to turn green and a NY driver to honk – which has always made me laugh. It is also time that allowed me to be with her in her last days...while technology allowed me to share with my sister and brother this morning when mom breathed her last breath. The angels are lucky today....

All I know now, in her honor for she would want me to, is that it is time after work today for my weekend to be filled with the joy of others she touches by having raised me. Time to put up a USAV booth at the Rocky Mountain State Games today and tonight, get to Denver to deliver some “secrets” to the near 100 coaches at the Colorado State High School Association’s annual coaching clinic, run the State Game Volleyball tournament, and then fly to work a special camp with the kids and coaches of the Makah Tribe in Neah Bay, in the same state my mother was born in. She came into this life in Olympia, Washington no less – somehow prophetic in this journey to grow the game together, now in her honor too. If you have any other words of wisdom you have had to learn the hard way through the loss of someone important to you, please share – my bet is it will impact others, the way others have impacted me, and for all of those who have in my life, I thank you.

3000 Years of Life and Games

August 01, 2014

I returned this week to a special place of ancestors, a village I first was lucky to visit a decade ago, the Makah Nation. They have hunted, harvested and played games for thousands of years up in what we would say today is the farthest North and West you can go in our continental United States – Cape Flattery area of the state of Washington.

You see, growing the game together means not just to train those kids living in wealthy areas and those dense in population, but to serve those who love sport but live in economically disadvantaged and remote areas of our world. This is in part the mission of the Starlings USA program (www.starlings.org) who USA Volleyball supports and partners with – led by former national team member Byron Shewman –and your support of their mission is appreciated as part of your membership in USAV. It is also my annual commitment, to work in an area where amazing kids and coaches seek to learn to become better in our sport, with special attention to our Native Americans. Thus I have been blessed to work in Fairbanks and points north in Alaska; Saskatchewan with the Inuits; in Tuba City Arizona; Farmington and Gallup New Mexico with the Navajo; with leaders like **Nanabah Allison-Brewer** at her Native American Volleyball Academy (www.nava.org) and at the all Native American Haskell University in Lawrence, KS. It is the right thing to do, for it may not be fiscally profitable, but it is morally and spiritually what William G. Morgan would have wanted to see...



So a day after my mom passed, I caught a late night flight to Seattle to once again join with the Neah Bay High School head coach, Rebekah Monette. First you need to drive about 4-5 hours north from the airport, to a place my phone had no signal and the fog rolls in and out almost as much as the Pacific waves the Makah fish on, while eagles and crows weave unknown patterns in the sky above. On these narrow winding roads near the sea, my favorite sign as a driver was “Delay of five vehicles is illegal - Use Pullouts.”

Some 500 years ago a huge hill side slid onto their longhouse homes, burying everything in an instant not unlike the Pompeii volcano did in Italy. About 44 years ago heavy seas began to unveil this centuries old disaster, and after 11 years of archaeological work, a museum also was built to house the tens of thousands of articles uncovered, showing life long ago. This included games with paddles and other implements, including the bone game that is still contested today. In a special tour, I was able to see the games and material that they have in special storage, some from a site around 3,000 years old. If that does not put things into perspective, I don't know what will...

The Makah are whale and seal hunters, using canoes built from cedar trees which are hollowed out to a point of carving by burning into the log. They are also fishermen and craftsmen with nets and hooks, including a halibut hook crafted from wood with a bone barb that only catches halibut, not dogfish and other less edible bottom fish. My oldest friends from elementary school, Scott Graves and John Borel, are salmon fishing in that area this week too, but I have more volleyball to grow and could not join them...this year.

Rebekah is one amazing coach and parent. Her sons Eli, a skilled fisherman, and Joshua, who is studying the linguistics and culture of his tribe at a deep level – becoming witness for his nation to the 40th anniversary of the “Boldt Decision” and working with whale bone to a point that his nickname might be “HeSoStinky...” So what does Coach Monette do now that her sons are adults and thriving? Adopts two young Makah girls, aged 20m and 3 years, who need care and a family.

This is an area of the northwest that John Wayne used to visit by boat so much, they named a marina after him. Where I again see the same “Tsunami Evacuation Route” signs I see when I work in the South Pacific. Where National Geographic Survivor show is led on scouting trips by Rebekah, who works for the museum and knows the ancestral places they must protect, to have risky adventures on

the seaside cliffs. Where hunting and fishing shows are filmed, as well as an episode of “my five wives” – some reality show where the guy has 24 kids, whose father lives in the Port Angeles area, about 50 miles from Neah Bay. It is a place where they feed the elders first, where their reputation for being generous with food led to crossing paths with National Geographic’s Mick Dodge and his film crew at dinner one evening. One of the larger than life characters, Billy Frank, who was from the Nisqually nation, cursed so eloquently that some thought their name must be “gol-darnit” (in G rated terms) as in “GD it is good to see you...” He was also described by former congressman Norm Dicks as “one of the most effective leaders that he ever met.” It is also a place where volleyball is played where some seasons their coach has a front row line up that does not exceed 5’2”... so what did we work on a lot?



Attitude --- setting high expectations from the very first moments, asking for a culture of play (next day many kids came in 30 min early, so they could just play...), and reminding them that hustle beats talent when talent does not hustle, and that we may win or we may lose, but NOBODY is going to outhustle us. They walked in on the first whistle then flew faster than feet should be able to carry a player, after that...

I have to share what Eric Hodgson, my USAV Grassroots Chair, shared this month about a camp he did in North Dakota. *“Tiniest girl on my court this week, literally 4-10 or 11 maybe. She was awesome, warrior kid. First day, beside her name on the board I put the Shakespeare quote, **“Tho she be but small, she be fierce.”** Told her to have it tatted by last day of camp. She was quiet, not very outgoing but really came out of her shell this week. We kept talking about colored sleeve or jailhouse black and what kind of lettering. Finally told her Wed. night if she didn't come in with the tat the other girls were going to have to do pushups and crunches. She shows up with this on Thursday morning. How do you not love an athlete? Yeah, Eric gets it...*

We taught shots galore, and how not to hit where you are looking, and the national team back row attack calls of A/Pipe-Bic/D.

They watched the volleyball documentary “Court and Spark” about not so tall Olympian Courtney Thompson who is from their same state.

They need a really mean serve, so the radar gun came out, and they worked on being 5 meters behind the endline and bombing away floaters. Serving torque serves if little, so all were blasting away.

They needed lots of reps to catch up, as many do not discover volleyball until 9th grade, so the Procter and Gamble multisport netband was used about half the camp, as they played 1v1, 1v1 plus 1, 3 person weave pepper, 2 vs 0 and speedball, all over the net of course...

They need lots of serve/serve receive reps (not passing skills), so Rebekah was pleased to see the impact of the 8 balls/four groups of three serve/reception contest, as found on page 52 of the [MiniVolley book](#).

The high school group in just 30 hours of summer vacation, trained 10 hours in the gym, the younger kids, those nine and over, did six hours. They played “loser becomes the net” singles, doubles and even triples, Chaos ball (two balls served at the same time), circulation variations, and triple ball (MaxiScoring in the [MiniVolley book](#))

At the end, having learned of my mom’s passing, I learned of drums silenced for a year and the comfort of a Pendelton Neah Bay high school colored black and red raven blanket. At the end of camp, they did a small ceremony, wrapped me in the blanket head to toe and though the tears flowed, so did a powerful peace. It now protects me at home as I sleep, thanks to their generosity and kindness. My mom would have approved...



Mikey Makes the Serve

August 13, 2014

I often talk about variance and bell curves in coaching and player courses, as being aware of this fact of life, including in sports, is important. Someone on this planet is the tallest person alive, and someone else is the shortest – and while the Guinness Book of World Records may track that sort of thing, what matters is that variance along the bell curve is reality. The same goes for selfish/unselfish people on almost a hero continuum. This past weekend I again go to work with one of my heroes, Mike Hulett, Director of the Adversity Volleyball Club.

He's put his life savings on the line to run a club, to give boys, not just girls, a chance to discover the life lessons that come from playing on a team in the sport of volleyball. Those who remember the classic Life cereal commercial know the astonishment of Mikey liking something. Well Mikey does not just like, he gets his love from giving back to volleyball to thousands of others... So last weekend, six of USA Volleyball's top CAP cadre came to Chicago, and spent two days sharing "secrets" and ideas in growing the game together by being a better teacher of the sport. The coaches came from as far away as New York and California, and included the Great Lakes Regional Commissioner Sandy Abbinati, who wanted to see what is new and different since her last coaching course in the 1980s.



I learned some new things yet again while teaching over the weekend, two of them I will share here. The first came up while talking about measuring your success by [never being a child's last coach](#). A coach told the story of a mom who yelled out to her husband and kids who were out playing hard on the lawn, "Be careful of the lawn!" The dad replied, "We aren't raising grass, we are raising kids..." I love it.

The second one I will use going forward in any coaching clinic I conduct. The coach said he simply asks the question "Where do you play volleyball..." and lets the discussion begin. The players reply with towns, club names, etc. so he asks again...this time they might narrow things down to a gym, park or court, and so he asks again, and again until they come to realize that you play volleyball on the OTHER side of the net. What a great way to get others to think more about reading through the net, not reacting as it comes over it, or worse, training from in front of the net doing the classic partner "ball control" drill of pair passing or pepper. To get this over the net learning happening at all ages, the USAV net bands, four nets on a rope and 2" wide ribbons were all in full force to start, and then again on Sunday night well after the coaching course was over.

Fellow cadre members were long time Florida State University head coach Cecile Reynaud, who should move to California and write comedy, not coach, as she is so sharp witted. We were watching a new drill together on wall passing, something that we eliminated from training decades ago based on how non-specific it is, that was promoted as "teaching platform control." Kneeling, standing on one leg like a stork, and machine gunning dozens of balls in a minute into a little square...when Cecile made me spew my Powerade when she asked "do people get a lot of out-of-control platforms in our game?" Stu Sherman from Graceland University, and Robin Sparks were also sharing secrets, along with Bill Hamiter, our USA Director of Paralympic Volleyball.

Mike, Bill and I did the sitting volleyball module together, starting with me speaking about how you can do 3 sitting courts on a single regular court (endline to 3 meter line, 3m to 3m and the other endline to the other 3m line, and how fun it is for anyone, not disabled players to learn to use their hands in playing VB and for sheer fun at ANY age. Now I have been doing Paralympic Volleyball for over 25 years, but after my opening part, I said – “You have the 1996 Paralympic head men’s coach, the 2000 Paralympic head men’s coach, the 2004 Paralympic bronze medal women’s head coach, the 2008 Paralympic silver medal women’s head coach – all in Mike Hulett AND the 2004 Paralympic men’s head coach and 2012 Paralympic Silver medal women’s head coach Bill Hamiter here in front of you. I am going to go sit down, listen and learn...”



Sunday night happened as Mike hosts a kids program too, for kids learning the game whose ages are only in the single digits. So after the course was done, I was asked by Michelle, a mom of 5 who helps Mike’s Adversity program to stay around and be a guest at their youth volleyball training. I am so glad I did, for I got to work with some neat parents and their kids, and to see the power of Mike shine. You see, most American kids are taught to serve like we throw, as we live in a sports culture of football and baseball throwers. This means most little kids can’t serve over the net, and are traditionally taught to serve from the 3 m line, then as they get better/stronger to serve from deeper and deeper until finally they are able to serve from the full court end line. When kids are introduced to the torque serve (aka roundhouse, aka Asian style), they suddenly are given enough power by utilizing full shoulder rotation and a faster arm, that even little players can serve long distances.



I don’t know how many kids served their first ball over the net on a regular court that night, but it was a bunch. That’s always cool to see. What they got to see, that will inspire me until the day I die, was that even Coach Hulett realized he could again serve a ball over an adult net. Sure you could say he had the advantage of being able to hit with a rigid contact because he was using his metal claws he has on his prosthetic arms. The challenge there though is that those Captain Hook shaped claws are hardly consistent as they are well curved. Those wooden arms don’t move fast with muscles in them either, so he loses that option to hit the ball too. Torque though, he still has his shoulders, and after raising his wheelchair arm up and out of the way, and fighting the balance war to make a low toss to himself with his other hook/arm, Mikey practiced (see pic) then hummed not one, but two balls over the net in several trials. It took me back to when I helped a Marine Wounded Warrior’s dad help his blind, double leg amputee son serve the ball over the net. His name was Chuck, and in his case while he had arms to toss and move

fast, his not being able to see the net/ball, meant dad guided him in how he was doing in his learning totally kinesthetically how to serve the ball. Chuck became that training camp’s designated server, and was able to hum ball after ball “flean,” as our national team calls a flat and clean serve, over the net.

Two years ago I wrote about Mike receiving USA Volleyball’s highest award, the Frier, [in this blog](#). He has been my hero for despite the loss of both legs and arms, he still gives back to the sport by growing the game together. He sure could have thrown in the towel, but instead he pushes himself citius, altius, and fortius by hosting and attending CAP and teaching IMPACT. If you ever see him pattering around a gym in his wheelchair, walk up and say, nice serve Mikey...

Dear Cut Player

August 18, 2014

Ouch, it hurts, even the word “cut” comes from the action of your body being sliced open to some level. It might even seem right now that your hope or even long term dream of playing at a higher level seems over. The fact is, ending that dream is your choice really, and not in the control of the coach who just cut you. If you like playing, then simply come up with other ways to play until the next round of school or club programming. If you are cut from all levels of a program you tried out for, you can still play against and with adults in Park and Rec, take classes, enter into doubles tournaments with one other passionate volleyball friend - even coed, do intramurals, or even form your own club. For volleyball, join with another cut player/friend and play doubles all summer, or even fall/spring if where you live allows it indoors or outside. Learn to officiate. Coach younger players as that which you teach, you learn. Getting better, even great, at a sport is a rollercoaster path. It is NOT a straight line upward, nor a single cliff you fall off if you get cut. If you love playing, play. See this poster which really works for playing not only after school is done, but at all ages.

You see, volleyball is a lifetime sport, and importantly it is a LATE skill level sport. Olympic Volleyball Gold medalist Phil Dalhausser did not even start playing until he was in college. Olympic Volleyball Silver medalist Mike Whitmarsh started volleyball after an NBA career. The average age of our USA Silver and gold medal indoor team was almost 29 years old for the women (with the oldest almost 40 years old!) and 31 years old for the men (with the oldest over 37). The chart below shows ages in black and height (centimeters) in red. To keep playing, and learning, you should know that USA Volleyball has age group national championships starting at 11 and under, but it goes all the way up to men’s 79 & over divisions! Getting cut hurts but in no way is it even close to the end of your time to learn to play, for it really is just beginning. "It takes a lot of courage to go after what you want in life" said a wise coach recently. Just as long as it is something YOU want to do, then keep at it.

Place	Team	Team (á 12) with libero	Reg. players without libero	Team Min	Team Max	Libero	Team (á 12) with libero	Reg. Players without libero	Team Min	Team Max	Age of libero
1	BRA	133.08	184.36	169.00	196.00	169.00	27.73	27.30	23.35	32.59	32.43
2	USA	133.75	185.27	167.00	200.00	167.00	28.74	28.60	23.82	39.86	30.30
3	JPN	174.92	176.36	159.00	186.00	159.00	27.60	27.10	22.08	34.40	33.04
4	KOR	131.83	183.09	168.00	192.00	168.00	27.37	27.28	21.28	32.15	28.40
5	CHN	134.00	185.55	167.00	196.00	167.00	24.51	24.25	20.84	28.03	27.40
5	DOM	134.83	186.45	167.00	196.00	167.00	25.56	26.05	20.18	33.82	20.18
5	ITA	130.42	181.64	167.00	189.00	167.00	29.15	28.67	18.53	34.90	34.43
5	RUS	138.33	189.64	172.00	202.00	174.00	28.48	28.57	23.19	37.07	27.47
Average value place 1 - 4		130.90	182.27	165.75	193.50	165.75	27.86	27.57	22.64	34.75	31.04
s		3.52	3.50	3.96	5.17	3.96	0.53	0.60	1.01	3.07	1.83
Average value place 5 - 8		134.40	185.82	168.25	195.75	168.75	26.92	26.88	20.69	33.45	27.37
s		2.81	2.85	2.17	4.60	3.03	1.94	1.85	1.58	3.34	5.04
Average value place 1 - 8		132.65	184.05	167.00	194.63	167.25	27.39	27.23	21.66	34.10	29.21
s		3.64	3.65	3.43	5.02	3.03	1.50	1.42	1.59	3.27	4.21
Minimum place 1 - 8		174.92	176.36	159.00	186.00	159.00	24.51	24.25	18.53	28.03	20.18
Maximum place 1 - 8		138.33	189.64	172.00	202.00	174.00	29.15	28.67	23.82	39.86	34.43

If you choose to stop playing, accepting the decision of someone who may not even know you or your real interest in volleyball, that is also your choice. How you handle the immediate aftermath says a lot about who you are as a person. Some choose to bad mouth the team, the coach, the program, yet they live in the same community and go to the same school. What if there are injuries and you get “called back?” It is important to be a class act, even if you get cut. You might see if you can be a team manager in some way to be around the team perhaps, or go on to experience a different sport or school activity. Please know that there are many Olympians in sport who got cut from a sport when young. There are players, like basketball great Michael Jordan who was cut from varsity at 16, and put on the JV team. Persistence is one of the key strengths of all great sports stars, something that comes from your decision to stay at it. Yes you need to be realistic but if you love the game, why not just keep playing in other ways suggested? Indeed, being cut is simply a test to see if you really want your sport to be part of your life. Remember the “Serenity Prayer” that you change what you can control, accept what you can’t control, and know the difference between the two. Gabe Gardner won an Olympic gold medal in 2008 after over a decade of training with the US Men’s National Team and shares his insights into perseverance [in this free webinar](#).

If you were cut before even getting a chance to show your volleyball skills, that is even harder. Sadly it still is done by coaches who are not fully aware of the principles of specificity in motor learning – something covered in this blog called [STOP Teaching Running](#). Why coaches use running to determine your success in volleyball means they do not understand the principle of specificity. The only thing you can do it keep becoming the best volleyball player you can be in other ways, as coaches who thinking long distance running, or even shorter sprints, are somehow a predictor of how good a player you will be, are likely not to change. Alas, life is not fair. You just need to determine how to get over this obstacle, for it is there to see how much you really want to do your sport. You can use any obstacle as a stepping stone, or as a stopping point – it is your choice.

You should also take some time to read the article “[It's Not Where you Are, It's Who You Are](#)” for in a related way, some athletes shortchange their sport career by not focusing on what they can do to get better, and instead are concerned on where they are from – town, school or club.

There are two people I suggest you learn from to help you gain a perspective on being cut. Randy Pausch’s story in both video – which can be seen [HERE](#), and his subsequent bestselling book [The Last Lecture](#), is first on my list. [A Man’s Search for Meaning](#) by Viktor Frankel is the other, one I give every graduate who shares the good news of their success by an announcement they send me, and one I use for team season discussion topics. Both are will teach important things about attitude, something you can control. This being cut experience is simply part of the journey, an obstacle to see how much you want to get over it. You can decide if being cut is a stepping stone, or a “stopping stone.”

You might have been cut because you are “not tall enough” – Well again, life is not fair, and some coaches are fooled by height. My own daughter was cut at 14, for being the shortest player trying out (as she stood there with size 11 feet). She is now taller than any one of those players who were kept. This is why I wrote “[STOP Cutting Players](#),” for height and skill change, so keeping as many players as long as possible is what we suggest. If you question your height, read this article called “[Am I Too Short to Play Volleyball?](#)” With the bronze medal setter for Japan in 2012 being 5’2” – it is also possible for you, if you love the game to prove with your volleyball IQ, skills, mental toughness, and being the best teammate you can be, that height does not matter as much as coaches think it does.

I think you will find inspiration and insight from an award winning documentary supported by USA Volleyball’s Puget Sound Region, on 2012 USA Olympian, and silver medalist, Courtney Thompson – “Court and Spark” ([order it here](#)). Watch it with your parents, and your friends. When Courtney was struggling with being cut from the traveling teams, she felt like giving up. Her dad wisely asked “Courtney, if you were doing well, would you want to quit the team too?” As her answer was of course not...he then noted that life is not always fair, there are ups and downs along the way, and to stick with it. That resilience, that persistence, you have inside you, and you too can use this being cut to get even better at volleyball, or choose a different path. It really is what you, and nobody else, can determine. After all, you will also fail at doing things you may not like doing, so why not deal with some of those frustrations and failures that come in living, challenging, pushing yourself by doing it in something you love?



Psychologist Angela Lee Duckworth after looking at learners in many different educational environments, calls this perseverance, “GRIT,” which more than anything else (like health, IQ, social intelligence, “good looks”, etc.) determines a person’s ultimate success. In a great TED talk that includes important references to a “[growth mindset](#).” She said “In all those different contexts, one factor emerged as a secret to success, and it wasn’t social intelligence, good looks, physical health or IQ. It was grit,” “*Grit is passion or perseverance for very long-term goals. Grit is having stamina. Grit is sticking with your future, day in and day out — not just for a day, not just for a month, but for years — to make that future a reality.*”

In the end, I think that Professor Dumbledore said it best -

"It is our choices, Harry, that show what we are truly are, far more than our abilities." - J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*

Post Script on Commitment – A wise coach named Peter Wung shared his version of a great story which seems an ideal follow up for both those getting cut, as well as those who made the team...about the Chicken or the Pig. Here you go with thanks to Peter!

The past Olympics gave us plenty of examples of the committed athlete, those that have all suffered, sacrificed, and suppressed their own egos for the good of their team and sport. The depths to which these athletes have dug within themselves are exemplified by the heights that they have climbed. Hearing the stories of what the Iraqi athletes had to endure just to train, or what the women athletes in male dominated societies had to endure just for the chance to play sports is both sobering and inspiring. It boggles the mind at what these athletes are willing to endure just for a chance to compete, to be “Citius, Altius, and Fortius” – Swifter, higher, and stronger. Not many will walk away with glory and ribbons, all are willing to suffer some more just for the chance.

So what does this have to do with junior volleyball? In my conversations about volleyball with players and parents, young and old, male and female, I will inevitably hear the following clichés when the subject of commitment comes up:

- *“I don’t need to work hard; I won’t play volleyball in college.”*
- *“I need to impress the college coaches, so I need to stand out from the rest of these losers and make sure the college coach knows that I am not one of them.”*
- *“I should be playing all around but the coach is biased against tall players*
- *“Why should I have to give up prom/junk food and soda/ego for volleyball?”*

The common theme is the assumption that sports exists for the sole purpose of extrinsic rewards and if there are no extrinsic rewards, such as trophies, scholarships, personal indulgences, then it is not worth the sacrifice to be so committed to working hard. I am sure Michael Phelps treasures his eight gold medals from this Olympics, but I doubt he put himself through the early morning workouts, live in isolation while in training, and suffer through skull numbing and monotonous laps just because he might like to have eight shiny gold medals to show off.

Medals, money, and praise serve merely as reminders to the athlete of what they have accomplished intrinsically. It is a reminder that they have breached the limits of what was once deemed impossible; that their dedication, talent and skills, when combined skillfully and intelligently can accomplish wondrous things. People who participate for the sake of those extrinsic baubles fall away from sports and life at the same rate as their personal integrity and character disappears in the face of adversity.

Those who get, “it”, understand that the rewards don’t show up in a pretty ribbon or wrapper. “It” does not show up to feed the ego. “It” is there to make you better, inside and outside. “It” prepares you for today and tomorrow, the next day, and forever. “It” allow you to treat obstacles and challenges with the aplomb and confidence of the well prepared. “It” grows inside you, enables you, and supports you through the bad times, and “it” keeps you grounded through the good. “It” is the best tool anyone can have in life, because “it” is timeless, fundamental, and ethereal, because not everyone gets “it”. In fact less and less people get “it”.

“It”, however, does not come cheap; “it” needs commitment, not involvement. Involvement is showing up; commitment is showing up ready. Involvement is being a dilettante; commitment is being an expert. Involvement is sitting out practice with every excuse known to mankind; commitment is dealing with pain wisely and logically. Involvement is doing the right thing only when it benefits you; commitment is doing the right thing because it is the right thing. Involvement is pouting when you are subbed out; commitment is telling the person who took your spot how to play the position effectively. Involvement is watching teammates struggle through suicides; commitment is to run with them even if you don’t have to, to help pace them because you care. Involvement is all about you; commitment is all about the team and the sport. Involvement is about being interested; commitment is about being passionate. Involvement is short term, commitment is long term.

When you want to differentiate between involvement and commitment, just remember breakfast, because when you talk about bacon and eggs, the chicken is involved but the pig is committed. Which are you: the chicken or the pig?

To Teach the Teachers

September 08, 2014

I have been an International Volleyball Federation (FIVB) Instructor doing Level 1,2 and 3 courses since 1987. Over 50 nations and counting and each time I learn new things from those who I am teaching. This most recent trip was prompted when the Minister of Education for the British Virgin Islands mandated that all the PE teachers in the nation would need to attend the FIVB Level One course that NORCECA was offering, if I would be the instructor. These are not USAV work functions per se, so I have to take my vacation days to do them, but the chance to impact an entire nation's PE program by sharing new motor learning and teaching research made it worth the while.

Some 3,000 air miles from Colorado Springs, the last leg was a doozy, hopping into an 8 seater Cessna twin prop in San Juan, we had to fly right through a tropical depression named "Cristobal" which the next day became a hurricane as it headed north towards the USA. The plane did things only small planes can do, and still stay in the air, flying sideways sometimes it seemed, and only the pilot and I were able to keep our stomachs. You only fly at about 10,000 feet above the sea, so I had cell phone service all the way there, which helped my hosts who said they had been told all flights were cancelled that day. It was a flight I will never forget.

Two days I worked with national team players and coaches, getting them to be training more game-like and in the sand. The only problem was if they erred to one end of the court during the competitive games, the ball went sailing into the marina and you had to do a sort of human chain to get hands on the ball from the dock level. They have some good leapers and talented youth players, both male and female.

Some random observations and thoughts about the BVI. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of large boats for hire – so that the area is known as the sailing capital of the world in large part because of the hundreds of large and small islands that allow for line of sight sailing... Basketball is a big sport for kids, and hoopsters have even been known to vandalize volleyball standards to keep on top... They have a beautiful flowering tree they call a "flamboyant" tree... there are thousands of wild chickens roaming the streets, making for a very interesting warm up/motor skill game of "catch the chicken" – which the chickens always win... there is a road around the main island, and then a hill road that goes right over the top... frequent on the main roads through town are "sleeping policemen" – huge speed bumps you must slow to a crawl to get over safely... BVI has three desalination plants to provide drinking water in mostly bottled form... We started at 830 each morning, but I was told that culturally "if you show up on time, you are a fool." ...with "surprises" for being on time, there was a cultural shift at least for the class... Mario, a retired PE teacher from Italy still goes back and teaches, while running a gelato shop that brought back memories of Italy with that dessert to close out lunch.

So like most nations in the world, making volleyball happen starts with having enough volleyballs – Some school teachers spoke to the concept of having three balls – a volleyball, a basketball and a soccer ball. Nonetheless, with help from our NORCECA zone, there are more volleyballs. That allows for the small sided games that the FIVB Cool Volley program promotes, of 2 v 2 on smaller courts using overhead passing, to happen. Everything for the course took place within walking distance of the hotel. The gym was a national stadium type gym, with a classroom within it, so no time was wasted.

Each of the days we started in class discussing the aspects of a Level one course, as seen below in the FIVB Level One Coaching Manual Table of Contents

There were two eye opening moments in the gym for the course participants. One was sitting volleyball, which they played as a warm up game leading to regular competition. They really enjoyed it, surprised at how much fun it was, and that there are only 4 major differences between the regular game and the ParaVolley version (1. Court size/net height 2. Blocking of the serve is allowed 3. Legs/feet can be over any line, even at the net, as long as the athlete's bottom is behind the line 4. "Air butt" as the player's bottom must have at least one cheek on the floor when contacting the ball). The second came when we set up 12-16 smaller courts in the gym space where just 1 net was planned to be set up. These courts leading to high level of physical activity and learning was then highlighted when a soccer coach took over half the gym with 12 boys and generally one ball/coach controlled training took place. On our half of the gym some 36 kids were totally active on about 10 small nets/courts with the teachers letting the players control the drills and games.

The final day I added the topic of determining the most important needs for BVI development level growth. A spirited discussion took place, especially on the topic of "How do we get the principal informed in advance and in support?" The solution was to give a plan to the minister of Education. Then give the letter to each principal. Communication to schools thru the principals. The other needs were determined to be a school travel kit, a primary school championships and special volleyball training blocks.

The PE teacher travel kit comes from the fact that they don't just teach at one school, but travel around to several schools, on other islands too. This kit would best be made up of:

1. Balls (6)
2. Mesh bag for balls
3. Net band
4. Standards – maintenance department makes a permanent system – Wood X or tire/pole/concrete. Use basketball poles (depends on the time of day) Have a Primary School Championship Day – Coed - 1 boy 2 girls or 2 boys and 1 girl. It would be 3 v 3 for grades 1-4 4 vs 4 for grade 5 and 6.

Then they came up with the idea of having a predetermined national school championship day for both boys and girls, for the older kids. Option two was to have Saturday morning trainings in main complex that leads to a tournament on 1-2 weekends. Finally it was felt to work on after-school activities in addition to those which could be made to occur during school, as there has been success with a Monday, Wednesday and Saturday morning's training featuring Jackie from BVI Federation.

It was a very worthwhile final discussion, as was the entire trip. My hosts were helpful, the participants engaged and the schedule successful. There are now wiser and more creative teachers of both life and volleyball all over the nation. The link to the pictures of the course [is here](#).

One my favorite shots from the course is:



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Top Ten Reasons for a Club to do Sitting Volleyball Training

September 22, 2014

I am not an expert at the sport of Sitting Volleyball. The experts are Bill Hamiter, Mike Hulett and Elliot Blake, and the Paralympians who compete in it. However, I have spent over 20 years in growing the disabled game together. I have coached it from Paralympians to kindergarten level; taught it to USOC sponsors and all branches of our amazing military, injured or not, 3 star generals to privates; fundraised for it; and am currently serving on the World ParaVolley Board of Directors as Director of Sport Development.

I think this top ten list might help other clubs, teams, and programs. You are welcome to comment below to make it a top 15...or more. I know anytime I find myself "losing" the gym, for 10 minutes or a whole practice I have simply brought out the ribbon, tied it off to a couple of chairs or other anchor point at about a meter high, and played on whatever surface we found.



Top Ten Reasons:

1. Fun
2. A break from jumping
3. Empathy/awareness for them for disabled/Paralympic sport
4. Get them to be talent scouts for any possible future Paralympians
5. Gets you to use your overhead skills well
6. A way to keep lower limb injury teammates bonded/playing with the team at times
7. Practice arm movement for blocking but no need for a "box"
8. Speed up reading of opponent's upper body - net at 1.15m and court half the length of regular makes for FAST ball net crossing/arrival
9. A great leveler for tall to short - and parents can play too
10. Fun

Elliot Blake heads up our sport development side for the sitting game. This summer he hosted a great summit at the University of Central Oklahoma, where our two USA Sitting National Team Programs live and train to compete internationally, including qualifying and thus competing in the Paralympics. About a quarter of our USA Volleyball Regions sent representatives and are now working in their area with clubs, VA Hospitals, and other disabled sports groups to grow the sitting game. This summer, USA Volleyball became the official NGB (National Governing Body) for ParaVolley, including the sitting discipline. You see, you really have three choices to play at any level, from beginner to international. The indoor game of 6 v 6, the beach game, and sitting volleyball.

For the last six years, I have been blessed to be able to give back just a tiny bit to those who have given so much by tournament directing the sitting volleyball portion of the Warrior Games. The wonderful thing about having a great staff and skilled officials is that once the match's first whistle sounds, I have time to float around and take pictures and just enjoy the competition. Since the event is moving out of Colorado Springs, these are my last shots of the event, enjoy.

[Warrior Games Day 1](#)

[Warrior Games Day 2 & 3](#)

[Warrior Games Bronze Medal match Army vs Air Force](#)

[Warrior Games Gold Medal match Navy vs Marines](#)

Hey, get in touch with Elliot at elliott.blake@usav.org if your club or program is willing to help us in expanding the sitting discipline of our sport. If you have any sitting story examples or thoughts, feel free to share them below in the comments. Thanks for your help in growing the game together.

Limit Your Wall Drills

October 06, 2014

“Where is volleyball played?” is a question to ask your players or other coaches if you want to start an interesting discussion. “What is the most important skill in volleyball?” is the second question I ask to prompt some serious conversation. In regards to the first one, people will normally respond with the city/club/school they play for, so you then ask the question again... They will look at you a bit quizzically, then usually say, in the gym followed by on the court. When you ask the question again they will really think you are having problems and finally, usually give up. They are right about it being on the court, but part of the guided discovery lesson you are teaching here is to get them to realize the game is played ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COURT. Given the short distances between opponents and the speed of the ball, by the time the ball crosses the net on its way to your team, you are either going to do well or do poorly, because, no matter what your age, reaction time, or experience, you are either in the right place and time, or you are not. This is why the most important skill in our sport is READING. Reading is covered more in depth [in this blog](#) from a while ago.

Many coaches teach “ball control,” [CLICK HERE](#) for an example I believe of great “ball control” at the team level. In that desire to gain such control, they do all sorts of methods that are not founded in reality or the specificity of motor learning of a sport. The average total contact time for Olympians in a single match is about 4 total seconds, except for the setter. The rest of an over 1 hour match, the players are working hard to move to be in that sweet spot in time, where technique matches the reality of ball and body flight intersecting. With the average human reaction time being about .2 seconds – and that is just reaction time, not “move/adjust time,” by the time any ball crosses the net, a player is going to be able to do it “correctly” or have to make some adjustments to get to the best intersection moment of their body to the ball. This is then why we say the game is played on the other side of the net.

WHAT YOU SEE DETERMINES HOW YOU MOVE. This wise statement by my friend and mentor Carl McGown must be understood. It is also known by the term “perception-action coupling.” When someone throws a ball to a setter, hits at them from a box, or in front of the net the action a player makes is specifically much different from what they would do in reality, where the teammate is digging/serve receiving it or the opponent delivering it over the net from a jump. Long before the contact, good readers of the game (often called high VB IQ players) are seeing things that are determining their movement BEFORE contact. It is so important to understand this, as it should change any coach’s drills to be far more game like than we currently see being implemented. The best example of this is seen starting at [5:37 in this clip](#) about soccer star Ronaldo handling corner kicks which are played despite the lights going out right after the corner is contacted. What he sees determines how he moves to play the ball without even seeing the last half of its flight.



So what do you learn in ANY traditional wall drill? I have seen players train in a wide variety of ways against the wall; standing, sitting, laying down, kneeling, and on one leg all methods that coaches believe are teaching “ball control” when in reality these are just more methods not founded on the specificity of motor learning. When you watch diggers get six packed or hit on any part of the body other than the desired hand/arm contact point, why is that happening? Is it because their platform has suddenly gone on strike and “out of control?” If a ball changes flight, as floater serves do, in the last 2-3 meters of flight, ANY player, Olympian or 12 year old, will more likely shank it. There just is no time left to adjust in

the last part of any ball’s flight to contact, just like you can’t catch the money in the “dollar drill drop” game. Take for instance, this slide I use in my coaching clinics of FIVB 2x Olympian and 2x medalist, including a gold, Natalie Cook. I have been fortunate to know Nat since she was a kid in Australia. She is hard-working, passionate about the sport, and one who by playing doubles most of her life has had maybe a million “opportunities to respond” - the motor learning phrase coaches usually call repetitions or “reps.” One of the beauties of beach volleyball is that you get to work in the skill you are worst at, for if you are a worse serve receiver than your teammate, you are likely to get all the serves. Another though is that there are no walls and instead the game is played far more often OVER the net than in traditional indoor training.

As a side note, why is it that indoor players miss so many overpasses when they first start learning? The other team’s serve reception goes just a bit over the net and falls? That is because the reading cues for the six person game has 3 blockers at the net, who handle all those just over the net errors. With the advent of being able to block over the net and thus a taller/shorter partnership in beach, this

happens more often to the teams who don't have a tall enough player to be a real blocker. Another very important thing about training over a net, is that when players train without it, the closer they get to their drill teammate, the more they just tap the ball to them. When there is a NET, the reality/skill of "the closer you get to your teammate, the more the ball must go up" is learned. The reality of a net being in the way is simply too often ignored, despite its "regulatory stimuli" (to use the motor learning science term) role in playing the game.

Again, what are you learning about for the actual game of volleyball when you wall drill? If you are doing it in truly "traditional" way, you are getting thousands of reps at being a bad volleyball player. There, I said it, you are working on being a worse player, as you are becoming an Olympic gold medalist at putting the ball straight back to where it came from. That is what "jungle ball" or very beginner volleyball looks like in part as one hit shots back over the net, especially to a team working on learning 3 hit volleyball, score points. The amazing thing about our sport is that at the lowest level, the WORST team WINS. The team doing the "right" thing has 3 chances for error and a much smaller "correct" zone target. While the one hit wonders just have to clear the net at ANY height and get it to land ANYWHERE in the 81 square meter opponents court. This is also, by the way, what is being learned in pair passing and pair passing one hit over the net.

The other bad motor program/habit being acquired in traditional floor bouncing wall drills is to make the negative error (into the net/block) vs the positive one (over the net/off the blockers hands). The most common wall spiking drill is one that if the skill was done in the game the coach gets upset at the error, even though the coach has been allowing it to be trained for years.

So am I saying never use the wall? No, it can be used in one or more "stations" to get reps while others use the court. This allows the rest of the players to get more balls in the air ON the court, OVER the net, so players are learning/reading by doing, not standing in lines watching. I would much rather see players playing 2 vs 0 and 1 vs 1 loser becomes the net, for the reading and habits being acquired are GOOD ones for competition and play, unless you want to win by hitting the ball over the net on one hit.

There is one way to use the wall, even if the reading cues being learned will not transfer to better digging/serve reception, the reaction/habits being established are ones making GOOD mistakes from perfect, not bad ones (For more on that read FROM POSITIVE TO PERFECTION). This good error habit being developed is seen best in this video of two 11 year olds learning against the wall in ways that very few programs do, but hopefully you are beginning to understand why they are training this way.

So how good is the pass back to where it came from skill of "ball control" as developed in single contact rebounding against the wall and in pair passing? Ask any setter. Paint the scenario of a serve being ripped down the line to zones 4 and 5, the left side of the court well in front of the setter. Ask them where those balls are passed to and they will point well in front of them. That is their current reality and only be stopping with the pair passing and wall drills and replacing them with games and grills of servers vs. server receivers, not passers, will their teammates get enough reps to more consistently get the ball to the setter target. This is why I wrote the blog saying STOP Teaching Passing. We simply want great serve receivers, who read the ball on the other side of the net, not passers, who are learning how to be bad serve receivers. Most of us have limited time to train, and to come into the gym, where the net is up, and to ignore it, is wrong. Thus I close with these pictures of people in Kesselville:



Please read the sentence at the bottom of the sign. Just the last sentence is also a sign in the back of the [MiniVolley book](#), to remind all teaching the game that the net is worth gold, and should be used essentially every minute of a practice, where time is precious, as it will also be done in every minute of the game. Thanks for your work in growing the game together.

Irrelevant Training

October 20, 2014

This short blog is a response to a coach who felt that worrying that all drills are game like was irrelevant. It is not irrelevant, nor anal. It is principle driven. In the interest of meaning what I say, but not being mean when I say it, methods which are not based on principles are sure to have trouble. The most important skill in our sport is reading, part of the perception/action coupling. Our game is play by tenths/hundredths of seconds to be perfect or to err. We do not get to hold onto the ball to adjust for errors. We have to learn to be in the right place at the right time or else we look technically flawed and then get coaches yammering about technique when in reality the athlete KNOWS the technique, but just failed to be in the right place and time.

In both my experience, and the research, specificity in training is a core principle. The art of coaching is to be as game like as possible. Emphasis on the "as possible," as my time is so limited to teach all the aspects of the game. Let me give a "train in reality" example, using the classic traditional coaching "skill" of ball slapping. Free ball transition work. In clinics, I ask for 3 coaches of either gender and explain only that I will be seeing how good they are at identifying and transitioning for a free ball. They stand at the net, arms raised in R/M/L positions and I slap the ball. Immediately, in a way to make Pavlov joyful, they fly away from the net as I throw the ball over the net, and they transition kill with pride.

Why not let this "tradition" continue? Because these well-meaning coaches, teaching the way they were taught, are training their players to be late off the net and when that same late retreat happens in the game, the coach yells at them. When if there is any blame it should fall on the coach, as he/she trained them to be late. These players are backing up as the ball comes over the net. They are not ever learning to identify free or down or gotta block that ball 2nd contacts. When should they be backing off? After the 2nd ball contact/flight shows a free ball 3rd contact to be happening, as soon as possible based on the "success" of the 2nd contact. Thus they should be ready for the free ball and reading the 3rd contact, (is the player coaches height or 6 foot 6) to determine where to move to (low, might hit the top of the net?, forearm passed/overhead passed/standing spike happening each with unique key reading cues to react to), not moving off the net. Not reading a slapped/thrown ball. I did it in the 1970s, but not once I started working with Dr. Carl McGown in motor learning science research.

This goes further into the concept I worked to help coaches understand under "[STOP Teach Free Balls.](#)" Do you want the coach or the players to be effective, creative, skillful ball-sender-over-the-net players on 3rd contact? Coaches who chose to throw/standing spike etc. the ball, are becoming the best at sending the 3rd contact over not the players, yet no coach plays a single point in any match. Teaching the players, without a ball slap, to send it over in a way they would in a game is the most efficient, and increases the opportunities to respond in game like ways. Reps. It also gets the coach out of the game/drill so they can move around and teach and not have the exercise grind to a halt if they need to be showing/teaching something. That is the information the science shows to be most important, and what I have taken time to contribute to this important group of dedicated coaches. I am not seeking a debate, I am just sharing information on what I have learned the hard way (losing to teams better taught the game/reading/play) and nothing more.

A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats

November 03, 2014

I participate in a Facebook group I helped Brian Swenty found less than two years ago, which now has over 6,000 coaches. It is the one place that, at no cost other than time, I see one of my favorite things happening – A rising tide that lifts all boats...to paraphrase a quote I love.

I first blogged about the [VCT group here](#). The guidelines for the discussion in the group are worth knowing, as they in general would apply to any group discussion, like a club page or group email thread.

VCT - Guiding Principles and Philosophies

Our intention is to create a forum where we can discuss our profession openly and honestly, growing the game together. Not only the practical / on the court topics, but where our sport is headed, the best associations of which to be a member, and to share and promote the sport of volleyball amongst coaches, trainers, and advocates.

To do this effectively and efficiently, we would like to offer a set of guiding principles to govern behavior and communication within our group:

1) **Say what you mean, mean you what say, and don't be mean when you say it.** Defend your position, just don't be defensive of your position.

2) There are many ways to skin a cat. **"Our job is to fill an empty mind with an open one."**

3) **Share Expert Knowledge** - Many of you are experts in our sport. This group will thrive because you share your knowledge, questions, and discussions with everyone, thereby allowing us to grow. ([Albion.com](#) Netiquette Guide)

4) This is a group expressly designed for Coaches and Trainers, not for athletes (unless of course they coach and train others in volleyball) - . Who are defined as Coaches and Trainers:

Elem/Middle School, High School, Collegiate, Club, and International Coaches and Volleyball Trainers. Because of possible recruiting violations, we ask that all players be out of high school and/or have exhausted their collegiate playing careers. You may be a player, but you must be willing to "Grow the Game" as a coach.

*5) This group is not intended to be a for profit enterprise or an advertising dump for your product, organization, self, etc. We are here to help one another grow the sport and one another. Certainly, relationships will be developed where individuals will benefit, but please message one another privately to discuss any ventures.

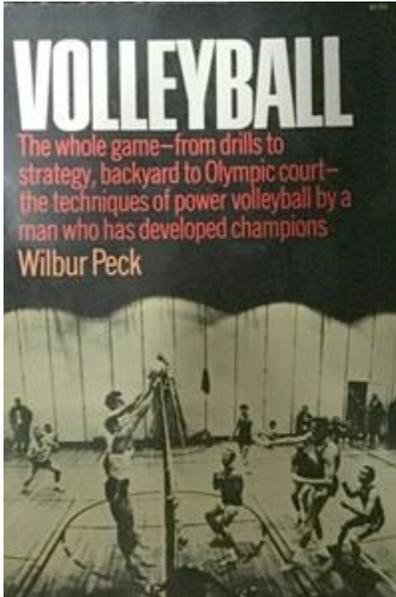
This group was founded to help coaches who want to become better teachers of and to grow the game together to collaborate. While we seek the science and facts over opinions (the believers that the earth is flat is also a FB page), we are here to share information, NOT criticism. We believe in principles over methods, known in the research found in the sciences of motor learning, psychology, and more. It is for individuals, not companies or groups, to freely share best practices, and help one another in the spirit of Olympism – Citius, Altius, Fortius. We are here not to be better at coaching volleyball, but to be better at coaching amazing athletes, of any age, and develop their leadership and teamwork capabilities. Our ultimate goal is to never be a child's last coach, for we know the fact is that 50% of the teams competing since this game was created in 1895, lose...

If you are new, please click on the Photo tab up above. There you can see, and contribute to, the core videos and blog stories we find of value for all to know. This includes USA Volleyball's Growing the Game Together blog, now in its 7th year, where many concepts are shared for new, and old, coaches alike. We are working on a way to compile and highlight the best threads of our contributing coaches, but for now move your way down the threads to topics with dozens, if not hundreds of comments, to find those likely gems. If you are a NEW coach, first off thank you, and welcome. We suggest starting with [this link](#) - everything is free, books, skill/drill videos, posters, articles, webinars, and more.

Make sure you make use of the "search" feature in this group. If you look to the bottom right of the group logo, you will see a magnifying glass. If you click that, you can search of words that have been used in all the posts to the groups (ie "apps" or "blocking"). Chances are we have discussed a topic you are looking for.

Thank you all for your contributions to this sport for a lifetime, and may the variance be with you...Any questions can be messaged to the Group Administrators - [Brian Swenty](#), [John Kessel](#), [Pete Wung](#), Loren Anderson, [Dan Mickle](#), [Katie Charles](#), and last but not least, the immortal [Sean Manzi](#). Thank you for your support and let's Grow the Game Together!

*Excerpts borrowed in part or whole from Kevin Cleary (Strength and Conditioning Practitioners FB Group)



I myself participate in this group to help the tide rise, so that coaches, who care enough to read and discuss within it, get better at this VERY important role of teaching young athletes. When I first started coaching in 1970, while my mom was a first grade teacher, I immediately bought a book by Wilbur Peck, appropriately titled [Volleyball](#), and a book on strength and conditioning. Wil went on to be a wonderful friend, mentor, and president of USVBA, now known as USA Volleyball. I love the price of the book - \$2.95. When John Wooden's book [They Call Me Coach](#) came out, I brought it, though as a college student still I was frugal, so I waited until the paperback. Now, over 40 years later I still have both of these books on my library shelf and read through them at times. Over a thousand books later, I am still learning, as the science and research progress things forward and my bookshelves are filled to overflowing, at home and at the office. Luckily, our USAV CEO Doug Beal knew it was important to create a library of all the resource and memorabilia in our sport. We have about ¼ mile of shelving now in the Jim Coleman Memorial Library and I would argue one of the top three repositories of the written, photographed and videoed items of volleyball for the past 100 plus years, in the world. The FIVB and the internet through search engines being the other two for those wondering.

So with groups like VCT, VolleyTalk, and other websites and blogs a coach can learn something new and improved every minute of their wakeful life, if they so choose. To coach the way you were coached is a lot like an artist painting the same picture over and over. Please go way beyond this blog and read about what is happening.

You see, what I don't like is coaches who chose to teach the way they were taught. Who do not go to clinics. Who do not read and learn to be a better teacher of any sport. Who rather than read and learn from others, use their players as their own guinea pigs in their gym laboratory. When we decided to write the first edition of IMPACT, Bill Neville said something to the effect that, "My son is only going to be 15 once in his life, and I don't want some coach practicing with him to learn, I want my kid's coach to know the principles of coaching and have their own coaching philosophy written down so I know they thought about it and I can see if it fits what I want for my kid to experience." Too many coaches present methods not founded in principles, and spend no time learning about and researching for those principles. Then, when someone questions their methods, they take umbrage when you do to the coach EXACTLY what that coach is doing to their athletes – give feedback and advice. They can dish it out, but they refuse to take it. Please, take not just IMPACT ([on-demand available here](#)), but a CAP course ([CAP can be found here](#)).

That said, I still am learning too. I learn from all the contributors to VCT and those commenting on my blogs. I wanted to share two postings from this month that I learned from, as things got heated over a video posted by a coach. The first is from the founder of VCT, and the second from a wise contributor/coach.

All - Definitely agree regarding tone of some of the messages. Thank you coach for having the guts to film and then post your practice. That is the only way any of us will grow. We must be willing to open our environment to others so that we can receive constructive criticism. We definitely do not know it all, but we all know a little. As John Kessel likes to often quote - "He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me." — Thomas Jefferson. — Brian Swenty.

C'mon...show some aloha and give the guy a break. He's doing something that gives his team something challenging, creates some team bonding and gives him a moment to brag about his team. Take that into consideration before you jump all over him. If you're

fortuitous enough to have been educated in strength and conditioning, SHARE...no need to challenge, cuzins. If you have, GIVE. If you know, TEACH. You weren't always as smart as you are right now and you didn't know what you know right now. Like my dad always taught me in his old Hawaiian style, "No forget, you not always this smart." Remember...you spent a lot of years in the splendid place of ignorance where you didn't know what you didn't know. Don't get all sanctimonious now that you do. – Kuuipo Tom

Thank you Kuuipo for your wise words and Brian for your countless hours helping us grow the game together...I hope all readers sense how passionate I am about helping coaches be better teachers and learners of sport, not just volleyball. To those who feel this passion in a negative way, I apologize in advance, it is not my intent.

Standing on Others Shoulders

November 10, 2014

I love to read. Enter my USA Volleyball office, or my little home built back in 1899 and you might be taken aback by how many books are sitting on so many shelves. I love to read because the lifelong learner in me wants to know more. By making sure there is time in my day to read, I get to ponder what others have considered valuable enough to write about. I get to stand on the shoulders of those people, and maybe make something even bigger, taller, and better.

This blog is twofold. First, to share something a coach I respect from Spain shared with me and second to share some of what I consider MUST read commencement speeches.

Have you ever heard of Catalan Castling? Until Oriol Pascual shared it with me I never had. Which by itself always amazes me, that something so important to tens of millions in one country, I did not know about until I was over half a century old. That's what I love about Atul Gawande's quote, bold emphasis is mine –

*“To be sure, we need innovations to expand our knowledge and therapies, whether for CF or childhood lymphoma or heart disease or any of the other countless ways in which the human body fails. **But we have not effectively used the abilities science has already given us. And we have not made remotely adequate efforts to change that. When we've made a science of performance ... thousands of lives have been saved.**”* Gawande, A. (2008) [Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance](#)

So here is what Oriol shared with me. I found [the video](#) of the tower that won this year. Please note that you get two possible achievements: to build the castle and another one, and harder even, is to unbuild it "in an elegant way"... I just tell you to understand the end of the video when the group of Vilafranca is so very happy...

A climax happened in 2006, when Vilafranca build the very first in history a castle of 10 levels, [watch here](#).

And imagine, for the first time, was also unbuild in 2009 by the group from town Terrassa, [watch here](#).

And you can count that every different castle was built and unbuild some days for the first time by any of the strongest groups (there are plenty of varieties! 7, 8, 9, 10 levels... and 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or up to 6 people per level, and with a second base, or a third base... crazy people these catalans... I tell you!), so every time a big celebration!

Nevertheless, is a pure team's work, with hard practices several times a week, serious construction design, professional planning, and hours in the gym as well, for a short summer season, but the real hero is the "Enxaneta", the little boy or girl that reaches the top of the castle! Without them the castle is not considered as built, and they are free to decide if they go ahead or if they go back... all honours for these brave youngsters, [watch here](#).

Wow. Now THAT is a lesson in teamwork ANY sports group can understand and marvel at. Gracias Oriol for letting us stand on your shoulders and learn of another form of teamwork that is astounding.

The second shoulders to stand on are those brave, enough to deliver a college commencement speech. My favorite of all time, is David Foster Wallace's delivered to Kenyon College in 2005. It can be found [HERE](#) on the USAV Grassroots Player section, as I wish every player reads it. It will pop up, if you need to share it at a later time, by simply searching for the title "This is Water – by DF Wallace." It is about learning how to be better learners, by being better thinkers, and ties wonderfully into how any player needs to be more skillful at both on and off the court life.

I also love watching the mayor of the big island of Hawaii, Billy Kenoi, deliver his speech recently that I call "[No Can.](#)" This talk teaches everyone, coach/teacher/parents and athletes/students/children alive how to be better at family/ohana and at doing...My favorite line I say often now, in a Hawaiian tone, and sometimes even body language, "***No such thing as no can, only always can, only thing you gotta figure out is how can.***"

Rounding out my top three is [Conan O'Brien's speech](#) to his alma mater, Harvard, about a decade ago. The road to success is not linear, as many coaches and parents might think, and his talk is filled with both humor and insight that helps anyone.

So feel free to share your favorite commencement speech link and reasons it resonated and taught you to be a better person...NPR did some pretty impressive legwork for you already, [as here are their top 300](#) - I look forward to learning from you.

PS. Since I can add my own postscript, if you have never watched Randy Pausch's "[The Last Lecture](#)" (in the spirit of my not knowing about Catalan Castling), PLEASE carve out an hour this week to watch it. You will be glad you did.

Train Ugly

November 17, 2014

About a decade ago my kids and I went up to Lander, Wyoming to run a high school volleyball camp at the base of the Wind River Range, and home of the famous “cheesewheel” (a batter fried cheeseburger) and NOLS, the National Outdoor Leadership School. We went to help the Ragan family, mom Janet was head coach then, daughter Ali went on to become a teammate my daughter at Bowdoin College, sons Eric and Trevor were into sports too. Eric now coaches college volleyball, while Trevor stuck with his sport, basketball.

A couple of years ago, Trevor got in touch about motor learning science wondering how the principles would apply to his sport of basketball. After several long talks and countless emails, he founded his hoops camp, “Championship Basketball School” using a more competitive and game based method to training, with solid success. The thing is, when you do summer camps for your living you have 9 months of free time and Trevor, a growth mindset based learner, took full advantage of those months to learn to be a better basketball teacher.

This led to his visiting our USA National Team training site in Anaheim, and seeing firsthand the concept of “training ugly,” which he has recently set up a website about, in order to extend the impact of the science in sport beyond just basketball, and into all sports. I have enjoyed assisting him in his efforts. I urge you to follow his sharing of the things he learned, and is learning at www.trainugly.com.

Dr. Richard Schmidt, the great motor learning science professor and author of five editions of the important “drill” book Motor Learning Science, Principles to Practice, is one of those Trevor has dialogued with. One of the most powerful “aha” moments for many US Olympic coaches came a few years back we got a chance to hear Dr. Schmidt speak at the Olympic Training Center here in town. He would be asked about a drill that was not random or whole that one sport might do, and he queried back **“Are you practicing for practice, or for performance?”** Of course these high level coaches would respond, performance, as they help guide athletes to Olympic medal success, to which he then would respond something to the effect of well then don’t do that...

Fast forward to last week when I got a chance to sit in on a fantastic talk to the USA Swimming National Age Group coaches by the talented teacher/scientist John Medina. He is also the author of one of the must read books for any aspiring coach and parent, entitled Brain Rules, which I hope to find time this season to cover more in depth. During this gathering, a passionate discussion took place about Dr. Brent Rushall’s two articles in their #1 swimming science periodical about USARPT. It was there I heard a term that resonated with me for volleyball, “Irrelevant Training.” I certainly see such training in every sport, especially in volleyball. The majority of “drills” VB coaches do, fall into this category of training, as what is being learned as a “skill” is either irrelevant to the way the game is actually played, or they are developing motor programs which result in poor volleyball game action, while learning a drill action that is not correct for the game. Thus, [the blogs I write](#) about “STOP _____” (now being termed “limit” so that those who can’t understand the grey, not black or white, aspect of these observations) and “Evolution of _____”

I daily get wonderful thank you calls/letters/emails/Facebook posts, from coaches who have changed from drills to grills (fully game-like drills), to scoring in games played by any size of “team,” especially 1 vs 1, 2 vs 0 and 1 vs 1 plus 1, to player run grills/games, and to coaching through guided discovery, not extrinsic learning. They have become comfortable with the “ugly” aspect of training, with the countless variations that comes from our complex random rebound sport. Sadly, there remains a large population of teachers of our sport who resist changing from teaching the way they were taught. They prefer to look good in practice, even if performance is not happening in game play, and often lament with variations of the comment “Ee look so good in practice...what happened”

This frustration led to a growth mindset coach writing Dr. Peter Vint, the US Olympic Committee’s Director of Competitive Analysis, Research and Innovation, and me about how might he help his club directors embrace the changes science has given us. He wrote us saying the director of the club argued (as most coaches do) that *“A coach can control exactly where the ball is hit forcing the player to execute a specific skill and with players serving the number of reps is much lower for the passers than when the coach inputs balls.”* And that *“with unlimited time and resources random may be better but with the limited amount of time in club volleyball (4 to 6 hours a week) player needed the half a practice of blocked reps and the club’s previous success was proof of that....”* The coach then closed our discussion with *“It’s funny how when I started coaching my response to random/variable practices was “all they do is play, they should break it down more” to now where I am almost 180 degrees opposite and advocating for more play and less drills! I appreciate the time you guys both devote to grassroots and all coaches for that matter.”* My responses would be well known if you read anything in my blog, and follow Peter’s response, which he graciously said to use here. I felt of import as it is not just me again saying why...but a scientist who not only knows, but loves our sport. Here is what he said:

Thanks for your patience with my response. It should come as no surprise that both John and I will advocate for variable over blocked practice at almost every step. While blocked practice with frequent and immediate feedback may be indicated for true novices, once the athletes understand what is being asked of them tactically and/or technically, variable practice and bandwidth or summary feedback should be introduced.

The issue you're experiencing is an absolutely classic one. As coaches, we have fallen into the trap of believing that "getting reps" is important and that the best way to do this is through coach-controlled, blocked practice. While repetitions are absolutely important, we believe that striving toward "repetitions without repetitiveness" is actually the best way to carry out learning-focused training.

In quoting, "...the coach can control exactly where the ball is hit forcing the player to execute a specific skill..." The coach in question is clearly and solely focused on a specific aspect of a specific technical skill. What is lost in this approach is the perceptual skills that are required to execute this skill during continuous match play. So, while he may feel he's maximizing time, he's actually wasting it by removing elements of play that are absolutely essential to execution during competition.

The references John has sent should serve you well. However, I would add that your last question is a very good one and points to some of the challenge in implementing a designed variable practice (Note – John will respond that random practice is absolutely easy to design – just let them play!). But, what I would offer is that you can introduce variation "thematically" if it helps you manage time. What I mean by this is that even if the coach insists on staying with blocked practices (e.g., serving balls to passers; hitting over the net to defenders) - which I am in no way advocating - he can still introduce huge variance into blocked drills by varying speed, location, trajectory, etc. Collectively, as long as players understand what is expected of them, this is still best done with a wholly variable/random practice that mimics game play (explicitly meaning the coach never enters a ball). Kess may roll his eyes as he reads, but introducing elements like this is simply one way to get the proverbial foot in the door if it is currently closed.

I concede that random/variable practice will look messier. And, according to all scientific accounts will cause decrements in practice "performance". However, it is unequivocally superior in terms of facilitating motor, cognitive, and perceptual learning – when it matters most. Who CARES if performance in practice is good if it all falls apart in game play? So, it IS a leap of faith to adopt these ideas, but I have yet to encounter a circumstance where it hasn't worked out. And, just for a good dose of irony, athletes tend to like variable practice way more than blocked practices anyway.

Hope it helps. Good luck!

Peter

My response was shorter but contains some new reads only shared in my twitter account ([@JohnKesselUSAV](#))

It is not that the half of practice has no transfer, it is just so little, that they are only getting good at the other half when they play games, in increasing their VB IQ.

1. Buy [Faster, Higher, Stronger](#) – by Mark McCluskey, just out. Solid stuff.
2. Have him visit www.trainugly.com this is where I am helping Trevor impact hoops and beyond, who have the same mentality.
3. Have him read any of my "STOP Teaching _____" [in my blog](#).
4. Carl's article "[The Superiority of Whole Training over Blocked](#)" impacts this area too – though it is focused on whole, the random research is woven into it clearly. Hard to refute. (note, for a copy, email me a john.kessel@usav.org)
5. [Read this blog too](#), just out – small sample size but some remarkable results on injury reduction through game like training.

As always, comments are welcomed, just make sure to mean what you say, say what you mean, and don't be mean when you say it.

Variance and Risk Management in Volleyball

December 18, 2014

There is something that all coaches need to make part of their training at any level. It is breaking tradition to manage and be comfortable with the risks of variance as found in volleyball. Two-time Olympic medal winning coach Hugh McCutcheon termed it risk management. No matter what the sport, variance is ever present, contact to contact. I would contend strongly that the training traditions of our sport teach players to err on the “negative” side of the bell curve – something I have previously covered in my article “[From Positive to Perfection](#).” The other fact is that through variance, and the random nature of learning in any sport – the motor program is far better established. Research articles which bring more facts to override opinions found in sport include:

1. *Nature Neuroscience* (Feb 2014 - Vol 17 No. 2) “**Motor variability is not noise, but grist for the learning mill**,” by David J Herzfeld & Reza Shadmehr – *Here the study demonstrates that variability in how people perform a movement can predict the rate of motor learning on an individual basis. This suggests that motor ‘noise’ is a central component of motor learning.*
2. *Nature Neuroscience* (Feb 2014 – Vol 17 no. 2) - **Temporal structure of motor variability is dynamically regulated and predicts motor learning ability**” by Howard G Wu, Yohsuke R Miyamoto, Luis Nicolas Gonzalez Castro, Bence P Ölveczky & Maurice A Smith – The summary abstract states “ *Individual differences in motor learning ability are widely acknowledged, yet little is known about the factors that underlie them. Here we explore whether movement-to-movement variability in motor output, a ubiquitous if often unwanted characteristic of motor performance, predicts motor learning ability. Surprisingly, we found that higher levels of task-relevant motor variability predicted faster learning both across individuals and across tasks in two different paradigms, one relying on reward-based learning to shape specific arm movement trajectories and the other relying on error-based learning to adapt movements in novel physical environments. We proceeded to show that training can reshape the temporal structure of motor variability, aligning it with the trained task to improve learning. These results provide experimental support for the importance of action exploration, a key idea from reinforcement learning theory, showing that motor variability facilitates motor learning in humans and that our nervous systems actively regulate it to improve learning.*
3. **The Superiority of Whole vs. Part Training** by Dr. Carl McGown and Dr. Steve Bain – This article which appeared in the American Volleyball Coaches Journal in 2012 included this statement: “*The neuronal explanation for these effects are perhaps best exemplified by our own observations (Bain and McGown), of inexperienced coaches training novice players where the instructor(s) become frustrated by the performance variability and lack of successful repetitions of new learners. As a consequence, these inexperienced coaches limit or abandon whole teaching methods for part, and random practice for blocked. Unfortunately, this course of action deprives the learner of the environmental variability and sensory inputs that are essential for the formation of motor maps and implicit behaviors, which are ultimately reflected in the acquisition of functional skills and expert performance.*” Feel free to email me for a no-cost copy of this article if you have not seen it.

Specific to volleyball, I wanted to cover each skill from the point of view of training within the variance.

Serving – The tradition is to focus on “clearing the net.” The problem is that, even in the only closed motor program in our sport, variance means when you focus on the top of the net, half of your errors are going to zip happily into the net. I put up a string for more experienced players, and a ribbon for those less skilled, from antenna to antenna.

Spiking – When coaches say “Hit Line” you are setting them up for variance failure in that the line shot as an athlete would internalize makes for half the shots going wide. With SportCourt tiles and painters tape put about a meter inside the line, you again help a player stay aggressive with a fast arm/hard hit, while allowing for the ball to stay inside the court lines within the variance within. The shorter players may also need the same string noted above as a guidance point. Karch addressed this well in his USAV Webinar recently, [found HERE](#).

Serve Reception - The location of the setter as the target needs changing from tradition. When you put the setter, as most do since the net is the only real reference point seen above the floor level, at the net, you are setting yourself up for a lot of overpasses. These overpassed balls may be crushed on you, at the higher levels, or even score points at the lowest level as the ball falls untouched. In any case, with the variance of the serve reception/setter target, it is important to put the target at least a meter off the net. For our USA

national teams, given the speed and level of jump serves seen, the target is over a meter off. For less experienced players, whose serve reception variance levels are quite wide, I would suggest a target that is two, maybe even three meters off the net.

Setting – This oh-so-important second contact to better the ball has several areas to change/teach regarding variance – all focused on making the ball hittable. The setter who is told to “set to the antenna/pin” is thus being taught to set half their errors beyond the antenna. The problem here is that while a perfect set inside the antenna might be killed at over 50%, the ball set past the antenna drops to a kill rate well below 20% at most levels. Not to mention balls set past the antenna result in lower limb injuries at a much higher rate. The ball error too far inside is still being killed at over a 50% rate for the record. So put up a swim noodle vertically, or tape duct/painters tape on the net – a meter inside the court. This is the target all players, especially non-setters, are to aim at when setting sidelines.

Setting variance #2 to consider on the range of axis options is how far off the net a ball is set. If perfect is a meter or more back, so you can avoid the block/net/injury. Most coaches start on the net, then spend the rest of their season begging the setter to set farther back. I strongly suggest teaching hitting back row – 3 meters off, first and every practice and warm up. This way their “habit” is to vary deeper, not on or often over the net with their errors.

The final axis variance is setting height. It is better to set a ball too high, rather than too low, as higher gives time to save/adjust to a ball off of perfect. So I suggest weaving swim noodles vertically thru the net on spots where the hitters are being asked to attack, using the noodle height to show/teach the height you want the setter to put the ball to (this is for the faster sets, not a high outside). The noodles should start a bit higher than perfect, so the variance seen will still all be hittable and not too low. This vertical set of noodles may also vary along the net, not unlike a cell phone signal “bar” series, to put you and the setters/hitters on the same page of what height a ball should be set for the quicker sets.

Digging – When rockets come in from about 6 meters away, the variance even with very skilled players can be large – so our USA teams digging target is in the middle of the court – 4.5 meters off the net, 4.5m from each sideline – so that you can make a mistake of over 4 meter and...the ball is still on your side.

Blocking – As touching the net will always make any great stuff, or even subsequent amazing dig have no value, and given the distance between hitter/blocker (usually very close), I use swim noodles to kinesthetically teach sealing the gap so a ball cannot pass thru. By putting up the larger/thicker swim noodles at full length (cutting the noodle on one side to the center of the noodle, not unlike when you clean a fish) that cost about \$5 or more, a player can learn to press against the “net” while penetrating over, but not look at the net (a common error in training without a ball/hitter, when they look at the net). This kinesthetic awareness is a subtle form of variance awareness.

Another area coaches need to be aware of the variance in sport is in their perception and realities of being part of a random event. Between knowledge of the impact of finite markov chains, regression to the mean and the age/experience level of athletes, things can get frustrating. Younger players have a much wider variance in play levels, but every team, and over the course of every season, teams are subjected to the fact of variance. Those of you who coach at the elementary/middle school level for any length of time can no doubt relate the fact that I have been ahead 24-0 and lost, and have won set one 25-0 then lost the second set 0-25. I have covered this in my blog “Stuff Happens” and would urge you to take the time to read and understand it, along with three other articles:

Undeserving Champions – Examining Variance in the Post Season

The Book – Playing the Percentages in Volleyball – a solid discussion on regression to the mean and the number of trials needed to limit the amount of impact luck has on your performance.

“Decisions, Decisions” – a *Discover* magazine article on Nobel laureate and founder of behavioral economics Dr. Daniel Kahneman – something you can get a copy of (long out of print from 1985) by sending me an email request (john.kessel@usav.org). This TED talk by Dr. Kahneman on how our experiencing selves" and our "remembering selves" perceive happiness differently is related to this blog, and also worth the viewing and can be seen [HERE](#).

So I hope that this blog, and any other comments below suggested helps you teach more effectively, and thanks for your help in growing the game together...

Always Learning

December 22, 2014

This end of the year blog is where I share what/where I have learned. It is mostly books, but also some video clips I found worth watching. I love that Michelangelo at age 87 said “I am still learning.” I find that most people who struggle with the research found in motor learning science, are simply uncomfortable, or too set in their ways and refuse to change based on what they believe vs. what the science is adding to our knowledge. These people usually will fall back on statements like “100 years ago the science said this, and we know that is not true now...” If you want to be first in getting the material and research finds I dig up, follow me [@JohnKesselUSAV](#).

Books:

Faster, Higher, Stronger by Mark McClusky – I am jealous of my friend Mark, as not only does he get to work at *Wired* magazine, but he got to go around the world and learn from in honor of the title of this blog, [I share first the book insights by an interview done by John O’Sullivan](#). As a reminder of the one MUST read book/blog – Daniel Coyle’s *The Talent Code*, this line comes from his review of Mark’s book “*Success in top-level sports is no longer just an athletic contest- it’s a learning contest that takes place on the frontiers of science, technology and the human body. If you’re intested in understanding and competing in this new world, you need to buy Mark McClusky’s smart, invigorating and useful book right now.*”

Boys in the Boat – We work in a team sport, but I don’t think there is any more beautiful team sport than 8 person rowing. To watch that many people working in total unison with such power and speed is just a wonder to behold. My grandfather was a rower for the University of Washington in like 1908. [This book](#) has had nearly 10,000 reviews on Amazon, and has a 5.0 rating. It is that good.

Brain Rules – John Medina - The book can be [purchased here](#). [Brain Rules](#) reveals – in plain English – 12 ways our brains truly work. John has visited Colorado Springs to work with NGB Educators and the US Air Force Academy, and I know I benefited from our talks.

The Rise by Sarah Lewis – “Creativity, the gift of failure and the search for mastery” is the subtitle. It is written by a ceramicist, who uses innovation and insight into getting across the chasms of self-doubt. [It is a pretty unique read](#).

Being Mortal – Atul Gawande - I think I am sharing [this one](#) not for the volleyball side of things, but for the those with older parents or even those of us who are older coaches. Atul shares guidance on how to live to the last with autonomy, dignity and joy. Given what has happened to me in this past year, I can only say Amen.

Make it Stick – by Peter Brown, Henry Roediger & Mark McDaniel - [A book on learning](#) that uses stories about people who have achieved mastery of complex knowledge and skills by a wide variety of people who have mastered complex skills to illustrate their arguments about how successful learning takes place. For those who are teaching in the motor skill science area, the debunking of massed vs distributed/more random learning is particularly important.

Top Dog – The Science of Winning and Losing – Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman - While [this book](#) came out in 2013, I am re-noting it as it covers such a key area of sport – The science of competition. As our USA teams have learned how to balance cooperation and competition, calling it “coopetition,” the research behind this area is important to know. Some of it is culture – Japanese kids hate the game of musical chairs, so insights into this area are also of value.

Leaders Eat Last – Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don’t – by Simon Sinek – The author of Start with Why and one of the top 3 TED talks ([How Great Leaders Inspire Action](#)) news on leadership [belongs on your bookshelf](#).

Websites:

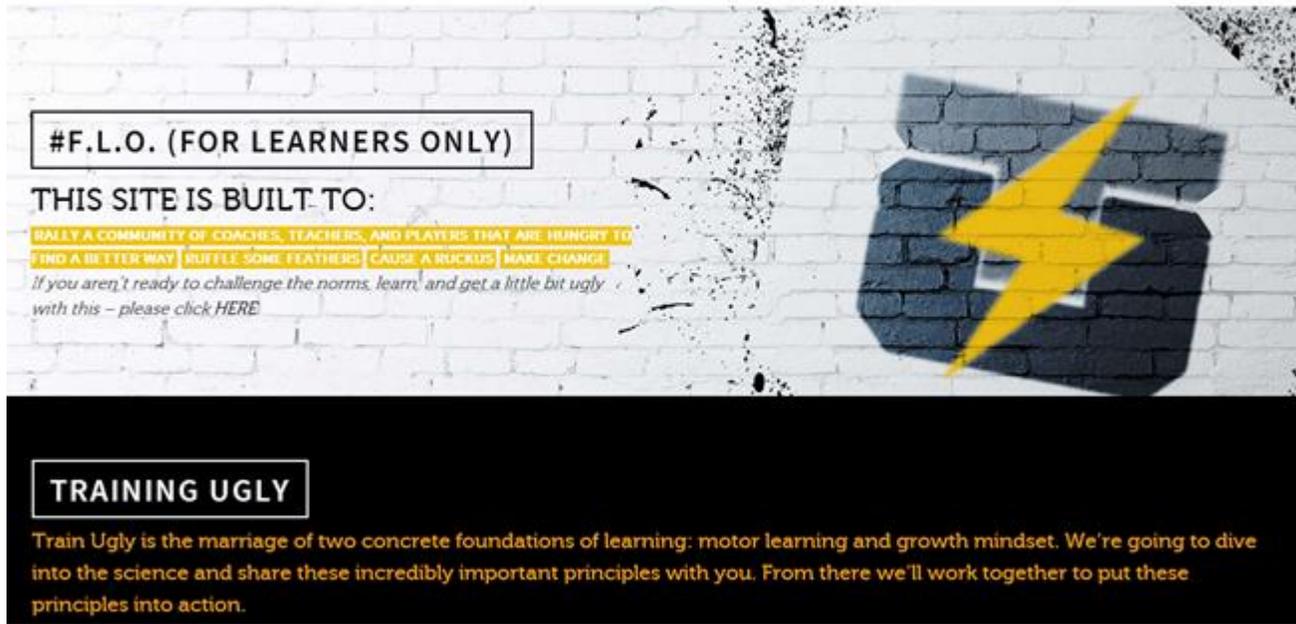
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FOOTBLOGBALL

Mark O'Sullivan just does some good stuff.



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What makes a good sports Program– This poster I shared with my friend Dan Coyle, and he turned it into one of his [most commented on blogs](#) –including a classic troll! – Remember the USAV Grassroots section has about 100 free posters to download and print, no cost from our end [here](#).

A Tale of Two Sports Programs

<i>Couch Already Knows it All</i>	<i>Couch is a Lifelong Learner</i>
<i>Mistakes are NOT Allowed</i>	<i>Our Training Site is a Exploration</i>
<i>Fixed Mindset</i>	<i>Growth Mindset</i>
<i>Couch Centered</i>	<i>Athlete Empowered</i>
<i>My Way or the Highway</i>	<i>Athletes Think & Question</i>
<i>Athletes Drill</i>	<i>Athletes Play</i>
<i>Athletes Learn to Follow</i>	<i>Athletes Learn to Lead</i>
<i>Athletes Watch the Ball</i>	<i>Athletes Learn to Read & Anticipate</i>
<i>One Size Fits ALL</i>	<i>One Size Fits EVERYONE</i>
<i>Regimented Learning</i>	<i>Guided Discovery</i>
<i>Train According to Our System</i>	<i>Create What is Needed</i>
<i>Couch Determines Rules</i>	<i>Rules Not Necessary</i>
<i>Losers Physically Punished</i>	<i>Winners Stay On</i>
<i>Equipment Issues</i>	<i>Equipment in Game Regulation Form</i>
<i>Catching Sharp Crisping Mistakes</i>	<i>Couch Catches Them Doing it Right</i>
<i>Bad Practice isn't till Next Week</i>	<i>Can't Wait for Next Practice</i>
<i>Drills Explanation by Couch</i>	<i>Drills on White Board for ALL to See</i>
<i>Emphasizing the Outcome</i>	<i>Emphasizing the Process and Mastery</i>
<i>Couching by what They Think & Feel</i>	<i>Use of Stats/Video to Make Decisions</i>
<i>Athletes Trained to Make Negative Errors</i>	<i>Athletes Taught from the Start to Make Positive Errors</i>
<i>Athletes Specialized - Great at One Skill</i>	<i>Athletes Good at All Skills & Great at One or Two</i>
<i>Athletes Must be Technically Exact</i>	<i>Athletes Get to Right Place & Time</i>
<i>Couch Expects Machine like Consistency</i>	<i>Couch Understands the Impact of Variability</i>
<i>Parents are the Couches Enemy if ANY Kids</i>	<i>Parents are Part of the Team for THEIR Kids</i>
<i>Drills are Many & Based on Opinion & Current Fash</i>	<i>Drills are Few & Principle Based with Subtle Variations</i>
<i>Success is Based on the Team Record</i>	<i>Success is How Many Athletes Keep Playing Next Year</i>
<i>Couch Plays like They Intend</i>	<i>Couch Explains Team Roles to Each Athlete</i>



usavolleyball.org

Movies:

Court & Spark – Which was released in Dec 2013, and I have blogged about...just it is so good to teach kids how it is the size of your heart that matters.

When the Game Stands Tall –A true story based in the sport of football about team over personal records and a caring coach.

Catching Kayla – An inspiring ESPN video on the cost of competing...10 min of how to be there for your athletes and the importance of just being normal.

Will Power – Another powerful ESPN video. Dan Gable, who narrates it, lost only one match in his school career. Will won only one. A great story about process, effort, willpower and great parenting.

Burnout in Sports

January 05, 2015

As someone who has not yet burned out on the sport I love, still playing in the dinosaur division with my son and doing my sport 7 days a week for over 40 years, I hope to share some ideas with you on how to avoid burn out. In no particular order, I share my “Top Ten” thoughts in the hope one or more might help you...

1. If it really is your passion and even purpose, burn out is minimized or eliminated. I would sum it up this way, keep doing lots of sports until you find the one you LOVE. If you find the one you love early in your life (your love, not one force on you by others) GREAT, stick with it. If not, keep giving other sports a go until you find one you love.

This diagram might help you in finding your passion and purpose in sports, and in life. I know it sums up well how I feel:



2. The words you say to yourself can cause a range of doubt that can move into burnout. Many top athletes have surprising high levels of self-doubt in their striving to be perfect. I have covered before in my Grow the Game Together blogs on eliminating words like “try,” “don’t” and “but” as those words negatively impact your performance and passion. The thing is, many other words and phrases you might say to yourself can do the same. So if the words you say to yourself were to appear on your skin, would people still see yourself as strong or confident? Imagine saying those same harsh words you say to yourself, to your teammates...would you ever say them? You would not...so stop saying them to yourself!

3. There is no such thing as overtraining, but most people do not give themselves enough recovery/rest time. A lack of recovery time impacts both learning time- by not getting enough sleep and because fatigue is detrimental to learning – and increases burn out. The USOC just spent millions on an athlete recovery center. Your own center starts at home, in your room, where you need to make sure you schedule in rest time, and in training, where you schedule breaks from practice. As a wise woodsman once said, you need to take time to sharpen your saw/axe – or else you have to work harder and harder with a duller and duller tool.

4. That which you teach, you learn – If you feel like you are burned out playing, take time to teach your sport to others less experienced/skilled than you. If you are burned out coaching, take time to play. Working with elementary aged kids, Paralympian, and Special Olympians in your sport will help you realize how lucky you are to play at the level you do.

5. Never let the pressure of competition get in the way of the pleasure of competition. Remember, in every event you compete in, there is only one gold medalist. In team sports, 50 percent of the teams lose every single day. Focus on what you can control and enjoy!

6. Likewise, if you feel like you have hit a wall in a skill set, challenge yourself to see things through other’s eyes by playing a new position. In volleyball, you will be a better hitter if you set, and a better setter if you hit, for example. Learn something completely new or foreign to your current skill set. Play a different team sized game from what you are used to – singles players in tennis can play doubles, indoor volleyball players can play outdoor doubles, and so forth.

7. Make practice FUN – Practice needs variety. It needs deliberate practice for sure. Work with yourself, or your coaches, to make sure that the GAME side of your sport is included, wacky scoring, fun endings. I have to admire this list of ways to make something that takes thousands of hours of training with not much variety, into much more fun:



Ending Challenges & Games

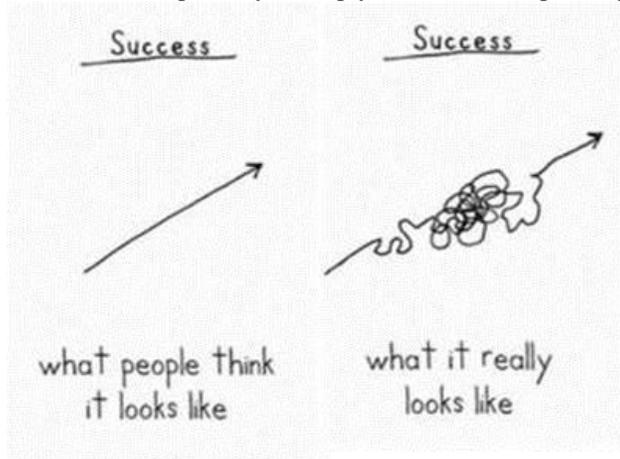
- no goggle
- Hypoxic
- Relay
- no breath
- 25 dolphin kick back
- perfect turns
- mid pool turn +1
- jump turn lane 3 under return
- underwater open turns
- British Day
- crowded warm-up
- no warm-up
- kicking relay
- ladder-small dolphin
- 25 dolphin kick tummy
- 7 dolphin kicks off
- get out swim
- back tuck somersault
- Descend
- head up
- open turn timing
- Sportsmanship
- time to 1st 15m mark
- peer coaching
- 5 kick race
- get out early
- No Lane Lines
- Timed turns-flip
- sculling
- negative split
- running dive
- trophy start
- Noodle Targets
- 15m sprints –hold breath
- no breath
- weak stroke
- legs finish
- win your heat
- Fly Golf (15)
- front quadrant breathing
- caps off
- Vertical Kick
- Legs on Fire
- Chasers
- variable sprints ef/fe/aenobr/af
- Take Pulse
- Dolphin First Pull Out
- SR x SL = V
- Gun Slinger
- Sit Down
- Starter
- middle pool starts
- Dive Time
- Holding Breath Exercises
- Flip Turn -Toes Out First
- Vertical to Horizontal Breast Kick w/ Medball
- Flip Turns for Fly & Free
- Diving Well
- Time from 15 m to wall
- How Far in 20 sec?



The Bolles Sharks have a tradition of developing swimmers from learning how to swim to becoming Olympic Champions!
Bollesswimming.org



8. Citius, Altius, Fortius – Again the Olympic motto comes to assist, for it is about excelling, not winning, the process, not the outcome, as the pathway is simply not linear. The pathway is more like this:



9. In the end, it is about caring for yourself first, so you can care for others, teammates included, better. You know what you love beyond sport – so DO THOSE TOO. Sport is great, there just is a lot more to life than sport – music, books, movies, different sports, comedy, cooking...thousands of other ways to take a break and add to your specific sport success.

10. It's not about the nail. – I feel I have to close with one of the funniest clips I have ever seen – that is about the relationship with yourself and your loved ones, who just need to listen to your concerns about burn out...Jason Headley makes a brilliant clip – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4EDhdAHRog>

Follow me on twitter to be first in getting the material I dig up, @JohnKesselUSAV.

Why Four Nets on a Rope

January 09, 2015

Recently, I spoke at the AVCA Convention to an overflow crowd, using a ribbon down the middle of the court (thanks to Sports Imports for the use of a box and standard to give me an anchor point). The title of the talk was *Small Sided Games for Warm Up*. I showed 1 v 0, 2 v 0. 1 v 1, 1 v 1 plus 1, and [loser becomes the net](#) games.

You see, what most coaches fail to realize, is that volleyball mostly is played...**ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE NET**...For traditional reasons – including the ease of “ball control” that is provided by ignoring the net – most players warm up in some form of pair pepper and passing. This ignoring of reality (the net is known as regulatory stimuli), makes for a false, and even bad form of “ball control” where the players are best a reading a ball bumped/passed to them, straight back to where it came from, without the “feedback” of using the net. Without a wall for an anchor point ([see this video](#) to see how to put up 6 wall “standards” under the six baskets found in most schools). You can also watch the beach Maximum Contact Net System Video here:

<http://www.teamusa.org/USA-Volleyball/Features/2015/January/09/Why-Four-Nets-on-a-Rope#oid=wwYTFwcjplh9UZYOG6jlHwe8ZtIzk74C>

I could only show the two options USA Volleyball has created. Those are the Proctor and Gamble Net Band, and the “Four Nets on One Rope” system. Yes, those are 8 swim noodles being used as antennas on the four net system. My bet is your can make your own four net system by simply threading one long good rope through the two unused/damaged nets sitting in the gym closet. We will soon have a video on how to make such a system from two low cost nets.



The importance and value of playing over the net/on the other side of the net is well known by our USA National teams. When you walk into their training center in Anaheim, CA in the morning, the coaches have 39 courts available all under one roof. So our USA program is never at a loss for having enough nets to play over, and thus can easily play 2 v. 2 and 3 v. 3 games using a variety of scoring options at any point and time. Indeed, Riley Salmon and Rich Lambourne played competitive 1 v. 1 for warm up for almost a decade.

The one warm up game I wish we could get our sport to replace the tradition of two person pepper with, is a game we call 2 v 0. You can see some 10 year olds [playing it here](#), at its first level just using overhead passing as the skill. As you get better, you add in forearm passing/digging, standing spiking, then finally jump setting and spiking in the air. In every version with spiking, you want your players to remember to not hit where they are facing, while still keep this cooperatively scored game going by facing away from their partner so the either cross body/wrist and wrist away/arm swings are learned. It is also of high importance that each player learns to warm up/swing with the non-dominant hand (the why of this being covered in this article on [injury prevention](#)).

I have seen this game played 3 v. 0, where each player goes to the other side of the net/ribbon/floor marker “net, which is of course another option. The reason I do not advocate this version is simple for those who understand the importance of doing/getting reps in acquiring any skill – you get 50 percent LESS repetitions for the group of three as compared to a pair warming up with this game, in the same amount of time.

I also want to strongly encourage all coaches, **to increase the number of two contact games you play.** Why? Because the most important skill is reading – especially as noted in the start of this blog, that of the ball being sent over the net by an opponent. When you play two contact games, vs the three contacts normally used and allowed by the rules, you increase the number of chances to READ the opponent’s attack/send over ball by 50 PERCENT You also get to train more chaotically/ugly, as we say in the nation team gym, and learn to attack/better the ball over the net which arrive in imperfect and far more random/different ways.

This reduced contact option in warm up and games is well seen in beach (a warm up often called “vollis”) and indoor in the warm up game covered in this blog “[Tennis Anyone?](#)” When you warm up with one, then two contact games – starting with cooperative scoring, then going to transition and finally competitive scoring – your players, both youth and Olympians, get to read the over the net “attacks” (even if they are limited to only forearm passing or overhead passing), by the opponent. This one hit reading skill is VERY important at the youngest levels, where the worst teams too often win the matches by simply hitting EVERY first ball back over the net to your team – any way, any height, any place over the net they can. Warm up with 3 groups of four on the ribbon, or in two groups circulating on and off the court after contacting a ball over a full size net (teams of 2, wait on the court until you touch a ball and rotate off to come back on). One hit or two, you get more chances to read the ball. A similar one hit, standing spike/overhead/forearm pass warm up game is called “Chaos” where you put TWO balls into play – one by each team, and only lose the point when both balls fall on your side. If one of the balls has landed on your side, any player can run/get the ball back to a “server” who once they serve the ball into play, continue on. You only win a point when you get BOTH balls to fall on the opponent’s side of the net before they can serve the one ball back into action that has fallen on their side.

Some coaching friends noted that “Kessel used a BOX!” when I moved the box of Senoh standards to one endline of my court during my presentation as I said at the start of this blog. This tease comes from the fact that I never use a box in my practices to hit from/stand on to block from etc. As Karch noted in the same convention, “I have never seen my opponents hit on a box in any game...” It should be noted however that I do use a “box’...just not a box.... Kathy, one of the coaches attending our CAP clinic in Millersville University, PA this month said this idea was worth the entire clinic for her – it was her “money ball” What is that ball you might ask? It is another idea shared along with the “skull and crossbones” ball idea – one special ball which when “activated” is worth 2-5x the points, while the “toxic” ball when activated in a game or drill took ALL the points away from the team losing that point. So what was this idea? Simply lowering the net down to 4, 5 or 6 feet, so the players on your court can do the skills of hitting and blocking – in the right place – just without jumping. You know, like you coaches want to do when you use a box. The thing is, the ENTIRE COURT and space beyond the court lines is now your BOX....This warm up/game is shown here in “[Two Balls Revivable.](#)” You can also see a variation of this, which has helped the Dutch increase boys volleyball participation by 240 percent they say – in this game called “[SMASHBALL.](#)” In any case, the idea is to simply lower the net and let your athletes warm up/play the whole GAME – 1 v. 1 to 6 v. 6 and all other team sizes in between.

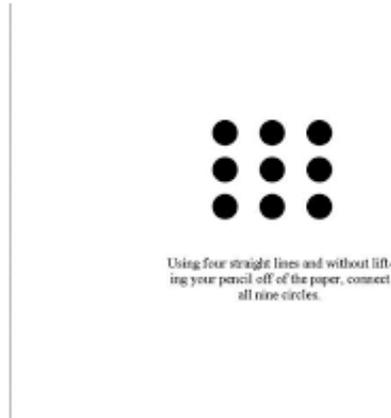
You can see by clicking here, how to set up a permanent multiple nets system on one rope, using rope wall “[standards.](#)” You can buy a pre-made 4 net version by contacting the USA Volleyball Sport Department at mvp@usav.org, but I bet you can make your own system from those two unused/imperfect nets sitting in the closet right now. You simply run a new, low stretch 5/8 or so inch (it needs to be small enough to run through the top band of the net!) 100 foot long rope through the top of those two full nets. Then you cut the two 10 meter full nets into four 5 meter nets. Seal the cut edges with a flame and over those net edges in duct tape and you are set. If your space is different, you can make 3 nets on one rope, or even 5-6 smaller nets. Just make sure to allow for a 2 meter buffer space between the nets. When you want, you simply close the two smaller nets together, and make a full size net. Add in a pair of full length swim noodles woven into the net squares on the side edge of each smaller net, and you have both required “regulatory stimuli – net and antennas – for athletes to get good at playing the game as it is supposed to be – OVER the net.

Note that those teams wanting to double the repetition on one court by playing “narrow court” doubles, should use swim noodles to be the inside “antennas,” rather than moving one antenna to the middle of the court. It is important to keep a 2 meter buffer between the two narrow courts you create in this fashion, for safety, and not put up one antenna to mark a shared court sideline. As an added bonus you can loop swim noodles at the top of the net into the shape of a ‘support our troops” ribbon and create a “blocker” for the hitters to hit over/around. This is valuable when you have a team too short to put up a block like your opponents are able to do against you.

Divergent and Juxtaposition Thinking

January 14, 2015

One of the topics in my clinics is working on getting our sport families to think divergently, where it is not just “this OR that” but “this AND that.” Where somehow you get $1 + 1 = 3$ and make more from what we have. I find the concept of “thinking outside the box” to be very important these days, as we have an eternity to be thinking inside the box. Share this challenge with yourself and program if not seen, to prove a point.



Lately, I have found a growing collection of quotes that inspire me. It seems appropriate as the new year begins to share them with all reading this blog, as part of the journey we are all on to be our best while being able to change, even when change might be uncomfortable. I have fished all my life, knowing what ‘coach’ Henry David Thoreau knew to be true, that *"Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after."* For me there are two quotes that resonated in this divergent way which have impacted me through life. The first is that, *"I would rather face an army of lions led by a sheep, than an army of sheep led by a lion."*

The second is something I have had since I played in Italy, as it is about the hard work needed by all. This picture is from a copy my kids hand colored for me, while the original was in an advertisement done by one of my teammates.

This translates to –

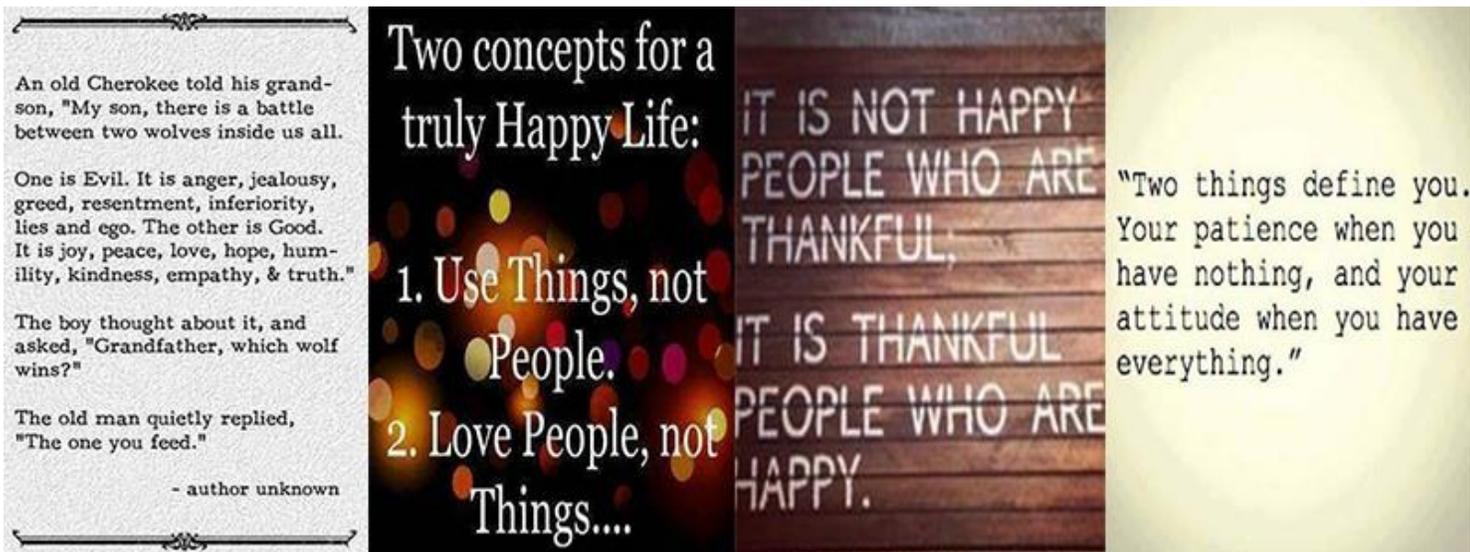
“Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up
Who knows he must run faster than the lion,
Or he will be killed.

Every morning in Africa a Lion wakes up
Who knows he must run faster than the gazelle
Or he will die of hunger

When you get out of bed in the morning
It does not matter if you are a lion or a gazelle
It is best that you begin to run...”

So I will run with some of the other quotes that have made me ponder, in part of the juxtapositioning that is core to the statement.





"It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare, it is because we do not dare that they are difficult." - Lucius Annaeus

"Beautiful people are not always good, but good people are always beautiful." - Unknown

"With the right music you can either forget everything or remember everything." - Anon

"True friends say good things about you behind your back and bad things to your face." - Anon

"Never trust someone who lies to you; never lie to someone who trusts you." - Unknown

"Respect people who make time for you in their busy schedule, but love people who never look at their schedule when you need them." - Unknown

"Most coaches do not listen with the intent to understand and guide discovery, they listen with the intent to reply and tell their athletes what to do." - John Kessel

"Speak in such a way that others love to listen to you. Listen in such a way that others love to speak to you." - Unknown

"A lie has many variations, the truth none." - African Proverb

"It's impossible to forget someone who gave you so much to remember." - Unknown

"The problem is not the problem; the problem is your attitude about the problem." - Captain Jack Sparrow

"In this world it is not what we take up, but what we give up, that makes us rich." - Henry War

"It is not true that people stop pursuing dreams because they grow old, they grow old because they stop pursuing dreams." - Gabriel Garcia Marquez

"A man once asked his father, how do I find the right woman? The father's responded - "Forget finding the right woman; focus on being the right man..." - Unknown

"It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live." - Marcus Aurelius

"It is not titles that honor men, but men that honor titles." - Niccolo Machiavelli



In closing, these thoughts for us all from a wise thinker, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "*It is not doing the things we like to do, but liking the things we have to do, that makes life blessed.*"

And remember, in the wise words of Bill Nye, the science guy, "***Everyone you ever meet knows something you don't...***"

Got any other "juxtaposition" quotes to share with everyone? Please add them to the comment section and thanks for your help in growing the game together.

Standing in Line

January 16, 2015

This email came in from a coach who has a daughter who loves volleyball. It just made me so frustrated to realize that despite IMPACT, CAP, VCT, and all that we know about teaching in a way that kids learn to love sport, any sport, that coaches still don't know that learning is done by doing and not by watching. If they do know this, they still too often are resorting to old habits of one ball/action while everyone else stands in a line.

We just pulled our youngest daughter out of her club program. I don't feel it is right to entrust her to "coaches" who teach her to stand in line, teach her incorrect skills, and go out of their way to destroy her self-confidence. We can experience those things for free just by walking out the door and experiencing life, I can't justify spending \$2,500 (or even a penny) to entrust incompetent coaches and program directors to make her unhappy with sports and life. We are going to find a way to make the situation positive for her.

So many think that when I say "let your first coach be the game" and "the game teaches the game" that I am not about technique or even drilling. I confess that I don't like most drills I see, but if they are game-like, then have at it. For both game-like drills and in a game in practice use guided discovery to teach technique, shaping their technique to be the best for them. What we don't want to do is start with a box of 64 colors of crayons and have everyone end up a blue crayon.

I have to leave it to the clinics and watching the world's best, online and live, to get the skills taught right. My observations on each skill are shared in this blog already, and in the videos in the multimedia section of grassroots for USA Volleyball. Standing in line, and destroying self-confidence however, is something else far more concerning to me.

Standing in line does not happen when you are playing a game. I don't know the club this parent pulled his daughter from, but I do know that standing in line is a tradition that just needs to be improved. Passing, for example, is too often taught in a circle drill – coach controlled even-where the players wait in a line for a ball delivered by the coach. This is the classic way coaches still warm up when their team is off the court in tournaments.

At a clinic last year in Dubai, UAE, I worked to help the coaches change their traditions from standing in line while the coach "warmed them up" (getting 12x more warm up than the players) to fun relays and games. Even in relays, it is often seen that teams break in half for the competition – ie 2 groups of 6. First, there might even be the group of 12 running in circles, but I have already gone there. What I am asking you to do is for both these relays, and the games, to get them into smaller training groups, as THEY LEARN BY DOING, not standing and watching. Wean yourself off of large group/coach controlled training first by doing the butterfly in a player controlled way, then push your comfort zone to three groups of four....then four groups of three...and finally to SIX groups of TWO.

If you just go from two balls in the air/groups, to THREE, you increase your contacts per hour by 50 percent. That is a significant increase in the training volume, and lets you have more groups/players to speak with. If you have a wall, you can have two groups of two playing cooperative 2 vs 0 against the wall/over the game height tape on the wall. The game can be played where each player gets 3 contacts in a row, or alternate contacts, [as in this example](#) of over the net 2 vs 0. Please note that by, playing 2 vs 0 instead of 3 vs 0 you again increase your contacts per hour by 50 percent. This is why I opt to warm up in pairs, not threes.

Posters and Deliberate Practice

January 20, 2015

Last month, I was the keynote speaker at the 12 court Richmond Volleyball Club's 25th anniversary celebration, we also did a CAP course, and some grassroots outreach. While I was there I was able to see the history on Monument Street and the environs, including the Arthur Ashe monument. It also gave me time to catch up with former USAV staffer Andy Pai who now is thriving in VA and is the USAV Old Dominion Region Education big cheese.

What I loved seeing, was the framed display of FIVB volleyball posters up on the walls so that players, parents, and fans could learn more about our sport. In this case, it was a project I did while serving as secretary for the FIVB Technical and Coaches Commission, skill posters of the Russian women and USA men as the 1988 Olympic gold medalists. The spiker show primarily? None other than Karch Kiraly, it was a great project. They are still found, [here](#). Downloadable in super large sizes to be able to print high resolution, just like RVC has done.

Technology marches on, so you and your athletes should also see the new posters, with built in video clips are found, [here](#).



FIVB Skill Posters

FIVB Video Clips

USAV Posters

Posters have been around for sharing information for thousands of years, starting with the Romans. These days, with Pinterest and memes and the power of computer graphics, posters have proliferated online. They remain an important tool in deliberate practice, making any school or club gym be a deeper place of learning. Teaching while waiting for a team's turn in training, as a learning station, or even during water breaks.

Like other "gems" that seem to be hidden on the [Grassroots section of USA Volleyball](#), I felt it important to share with everyone some of the most important [posters](#) the Sport Development department has created. USAV does not sell them, but provides them to be printed on location, by your simply taking them to a photo printer. The 11x17 versions many can print at home. Places like Costco and Sam's Club will print 16x20 sizes for about \$6, and 20x30 sized pictures are under \$10. We have inspirational, educational, and skill versions for all three disciplines, including beach and sitting, and both genders.

And as technology races on...you can see quite a collection of volleyball sayings and posters that might also be valuable to add to your gym walls, just by searching www.pinterest.com for the word "volleyball" or follow [USA Volleyball on Pinterest](#) for all things volleyball. The options are pretty vast. The point is, your place of training should have these inspirational and skill based posters up on the wall, to increase the deliberate practice time for your players. This is especially important for those athletes who care so much they come early and/or stay late...since you certainly won't have any player standing around in a line when you have your all too short and precious time on the court...right?

Coach Taught or Player Learned?

January 23, 2015

The fact that things in sport are no longer athletic battles, but learning competitions is shown with the release of [Faster, Higher Stronger](#)_. I hope you find time to learn, by reading what *Wired* magazine editor Mark McClusky has diligently compiled on how athletes learn now. It is one of the more important books on sport science in the last decade for sure, and just became available in November 2014.

Add in how Karch has elevated the USA gym to higher level of learning and you are starting to see the changes needed in learning a motor skill. You can [listen here](#) if you missed his great webinar.



With the hundreds of thousands of golf pros, why is it that Bubba Watson, whose dad simply put a whiffle ball down and said, “hit it as hard as you can,” able to make shots nobody else can and win not just one, but TWO Masters green jackets recently, all while never having a golf pro/lesson? I love the statement by many top Brazilian Olympic volleyball players who all said, “my first coach was the game...” In that spirit, to help all programs starting new youth programs, there is a [new webinar](#) and a [new poster](#) that helps you get a court to have some 20-30 kids, on sand, grass, or indoor and let them lose by playing, letting the game teach the game, with minimal guidance from adults/coaches.

Recently in another area of complex motor learning, I [read this intriguing article](#).

Did you know that Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, and Prince, three of the all-time greats, all claim to be self-taught guitarists. Even John Lennon and Paul McCartney, were largely self-taught musicians. Give pause to what Cicero said over 2000 years ago (75 B.C. to be exact), "*The authority of those who teach is often an obstacle to those who wish to*

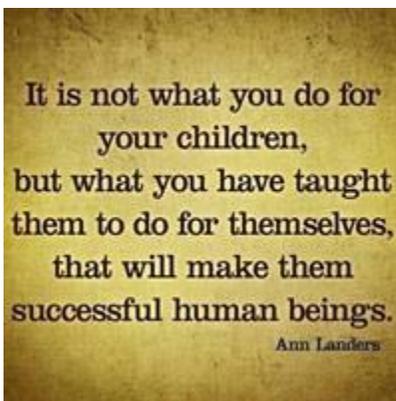
learn."

As a young coach, I told my players what to do, known as explicit learning and now know that in doing such I was making my teaching job far harder and longer, for the retention and problem solving in anyone is the worst when they are told what to do or the answers. It is not just about learning, it is about retention and re-remembering, so you should spend time at the start of practice asking your players what they did/learned at the last practice or two.

I liked the question in the post:

How is it possible that someone can attain such a level of expertise without any teacher providing the necessary instructions and guidance?

One of the [connected research articles](#) used had in the abstract the following: *“Results also indicated that the group who write music had significantly higher levels of musical self-esteem, willingness to play, motivational intensity, desire to learn, and perceived competence. Findings from this study suggest that pianists and guitarists both are intrinsically motivated, but for different reasons. The underlying motivational needs that are met by the instrument’s “culture” appear to focus on competence for pianists and on autonomy and relatedness for guitarists.”*



In the end, it really is the act of learning that is what is to be enjoyed, not the knowledge gained per se. As a coach, my role is simple to find be a relationship counselor between each athlete and their love of the game. I must know well what each player thinks I can do better to help them learn and teach them how they can learn faster. Every year, I take time to teach my parents and their children, what we know about motor learning science to date and how that will impact our gym as an “exploratorium,” as Bill Neville calls his two courts. As I noted

above, Karch, John Speraw, and the USA staff have learned how to help each unique USA team member become better learners. The

current World League gold for men and first ever World Championship gold for women speaks to their success at learning faster, deeper, and more creatively.

So in looking back, this is what I have come to learn about learning....

1. Athletes learn when they are SELF-motivated; intrinsic learning and guided discovery are vastly superior for retention/learning.
2. The reward of athletes is achieving the goal, so take advantage of that in your teaching process.
3. Deliberate practice, aka focused on what THEY are interested in, maximizes the learning process.
4. Coopetition, cooperation and competition, makes for the best learning by athletes. We learn best, and the most, when we collaborate with others.
5. That which you teach, you learn. The more athletes have to explain something to others, the better they get it.



A lifelong learner/coaching friend, Luka Slabe, the current Slovenian Men's national team coach, recently shared [this two year old article](#) on how musicians learn, which fits perfectly into the ideas of what I know about motor learning. He found it in the "Violinist Blog" and it well worth the read and ponder.

In closing, I offer another talented learner who had no coach, just a skill in art which magnifies his ideas on a far larger scale that only few might work in, Jorge Rodriquez. [This set from his identity series](#) is powerful I feel and might help us all understand how to better simply focus on doing things in reality, dealing with the randomness which any event presents each of us while this scale takes things to yet another level. Citius, Altius, Fortius in [yet another way](#).

Teaching History and Breaking Tradition

February 04, 2015

This is a personally emotional NORCECA meeting as one of my favorite mentors and friends in our volleyball family, and my long time Technical & Coaches Commission president, Eugenio George Lafitte passed away in the past year. My Cuban friend and mentor also found time to coach the Cuban women to THREE Olympic gold medals, yet most of you reading this blog likely don't even know this amazing man. That I am sitting next to perhaps his best player over those Olympiads, and other world titles, helps, as we share stories about those teams. Again, few of our current players and coaches, even at the collegiate level, have any idea of the talent level that Mireya Luis brought to the court – So for those who want to see just 5 minutes of her amazing skill, [click here](#) to see some highlights. The other side of me is another Cuban who is growing the game all over NORCECA, Francisco. During our meetings, we unanimously voted in Ariel Sainz, the new Cuban Volleyball Federation president, to head up the commission, and permanently named it with Eugenio's name. With the opening of more relations with Cuba, let's hope more Americans get to go share our love of volleyball with an island nation, which has done something our USA women's program has yet been able to achieve – winning Olympic gold.

There is a sad lack of history in our sport, something USA Volleyball is working to fix. Many do not know of the historical articles we have compiled for those students wanting to know more about our history [HERE](#). Hidden almost as well is the FIVB historical videos section, called “[Volleyball 1947](#)” in honor of the year the FIVB was founded, by just 12 nations, including the USA. There are now 220 member nations, more than any sport, including soccer... [Take a look at this already done for you quiz](#), consider handing it out this season and starting to discuss the over century long history of our sport. I interviewed the majority of the 1964 men's and women's USA Olympians last year, and we will be posting the first of three great films, edited by the talented Leslee Harms of my Sport Development staff, to help you in this teaching of history. Next month, for the 10th year in a row, the [Women's Sports Foundation Women in Sport Day](#), named after our 1984 Olympian silver medalist Flo Hyman, will be conducted. Seems like a good name to teach to your players too, boys or girls.

I serve also on the NORCECA Development Commission, [click here for all NORCECA Commissions and members](#), no doubt in part due to my title at USA Volleyball as Director of Sport Development, and as the Director of Development for World ParaVolley. The PowerPoint summaries of grow the game projects happening in the over 40 nations in NORCECA, each ended with the phrase “Development is the name of the game...” In 2014, the zone doubled the number of coaches being taught FIVB courses, hitting well over 500. With Molten, some 40,000 Lite Touch 240g balls will be distributed to the small and medium sized nations in the zone over the next quadrennium. It is now finally seen where school volleyball grows, so does the next level of the sport. Israel Garcia, the “father” of Puerto Rico youth volleyball, must be smiling from heaven now. For years, we battled for the 2 and 3 person versions of the game to be more widely implemented. Coaches speak about how the beach game makes such a difference. Yeah, just because they are playing 2 v 2, and not standing around in lines during 6 person practices, or sitting on the bench in a tourney (or even watching as half the team touches a rally on their side, but they don't get to). I addressed this most recently in “[They Learn by Doing](#)” as that is what matters most. So string up a ribbon or four nets down the middle of your court and get your kids playing doubles, indoors too, more...

A recent trip to Nicaragua, brought home a sobering reality for many in our volleyball family. We worked with a large group of coaches and school kids, putting up 8 nets on the one main national federation court, and keeping over 50 people active. Rene Quintana, the president of the Nicaragua Volleyball Federation, said to me that “in the public schools, they only have 3 balls...” Wow, I thought, that makes for some challenging practices. He then said, “‘Juanito’, that means they have ONE futbol, ONE basketball and ONE volleyball...” So you can see the impact the 40K volleyballs will have in these nations. If you are not aware, the USAV Sport Development department has been collecting used volleyballs for over a decade in our “[Leave a Ball Behind](#)” program. Send just one ball per club team at your season's end to us, write good luck messages on it from the team if you wish, and we will make sure to ship those balls to teams needing them in both the USA and around the world. Contact mvp@usav.org for more information. I took 20 balls and dozens of cool event shirts this trip, donated by the [Florida Region of USAV](#), and gave them to a deserving program run by Hermes in Ensenada, Mexico. It is just part of growing the game together.

I stayed on one more day to teach the Baja California coaches in sitting volleyball setup/training and in youth/physical training. I was very glad to see that of the [40 coaches in attendance](#), nearly half were women. The Baja Training Center is a massive place, bigger

than our Colorado Olympic Training Center. You can take a look at the place [HERE](#). My roomie Pat Powers (more history, 84 USA men's Olympic gold medalist) started the training with the changes to the rules of the game. The most significant which will start in the USA September 1 of this year, is that ANY contact of the net in the area of playing the ball will be prohibited again. Not just the top, any part. So that led to some interesting discussion. Juan Cartegegna, a fellow FIVB International Instructor, spoke about season planning, while Joao Moraes from Brazil put them through their paces on the sand for beach doubles training ideas. The car ride back brought up a discussion on why USA players are so competitive. I spoke about my experience as a kid, playing king of the hill, and doubles play, where I got the needed reps as a young player and where my punishment was never running lines or doing push/sit ups, but learning the hard way, that [Winners Stay On](#).

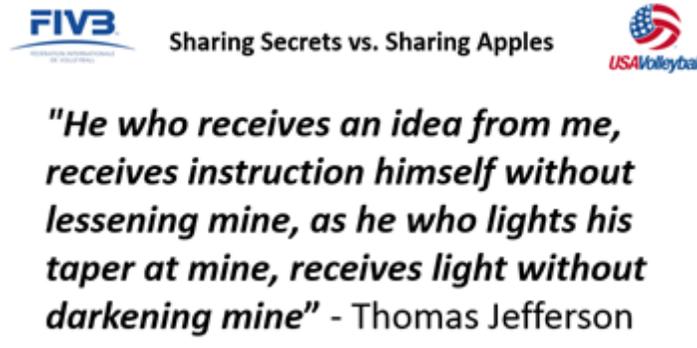
In honor of the start of this New Year, I will close with The Call's song "Let the Day Begin..."

Seeking a Historic Gift

February 24, 2015

Arizona State's ice hockey club recently asked for help in going varsity. They asked their player's friends and contacts to donate – and that same month, received a donation of \$32 million, to fund their program. So I am simply asking also, not for ice hockey (a great sport mind you that I have both played and coached), but for this wonderful sport of a lifetime, volleyball. Not for one team of 25 guys annually, but for our United States and based on our world ranking and respect for the world. Not for our national teams, but for their future through the grassroots levels of Sport Development. A gift to help the players, parents, coaches, and officials in our sport at all levels, including Paralympians to Special Olympians. One boost for those who learn to play with a balloon at age 4, to those 95 year old seniors playing beach and balloon seated volleyball, and everyone in between. A way to go from success to significance – as such a gift would not just help volleyball, but all in sport, for we work daily and hard to share secrets and get children to be more active in any sport they connect with.

This slide I start my international and USA based clinics with shows that focus and it also sits on my desk at USA Volleyball etched in glass to remind me.



As my son attends Princeton, playing volleyball, I get the "Princeton Weekly," not by email but a full color, flip real pages, put it by the bedside magazine. Every week, I get to marvel at the leaders his university has helped develop who impact our world, Nobel Laureates to Silicon Valley. I also read of the passing of alumni from the classes in the 1930s now, all aged 95-100 plus years old, and realize that there still is a lot of time to make a difference in sport. Each issue I read of a "Historic Gift" given to Princeton. Last week my daughter, en route to Cuba on her spring break from Bowdoin, joined me in watching her brother play. She spoke of how Friendsy, a Princeton school think tank startup, had swept her campus in just a couple of days, everyone joining and chatting in this new way. We strolled through the on campus art museum, viewing Monets and Warhols, and attended a lecture class on Monasticism, learning the origins and that dentrite monks live in trees. I appreciate the over 25 billion in endowment that Princeton's alumni have given, and wonder....do any of those who have achieved success fiscally realize how significant they would be in giving to volleyball?

I spent a couple of days in Washington DC for the Partnership for a Healthy America, as USA Volleyball is a founding partner of the group, and shared our ideas on how Olympic Sports are part of the solution. I learned that with all the food that we can now grow, we still have over 800 million humans who are not getting enough food to eat daily – while we also now have over a billion people who are overweight. As one of the simplest, low cost and team building sports on the planet, we continue to work to make volleyball be a positive part of everyone's lives. Sure we have a right to be proud of our national team successes, as the only major international power without a full time professional league in either gender, we are the only nation to have medaled in every Olympic games since 1984 and only one of two (Brazil being the other with tens of millions more in support annually) nations to have qualified for every Olympics since 1980. Additionally, we have had Paralympic teams, men's or women's, in every Paralympic Games since volleyball was included in 1988. No other nation has had such a level of international success other than America. All of us can be proud of for being a part of this, yet we can do better.

When seven time Olympic coach/leader Jim Coleman passed a decade ago, his materials contribution formed the basis for what is now perhaps the best volleyball library in the world – housed in the center of USA Volleyball's main office. Browse through the 1943 US Volleyball Association Guide/Rule book and see how we kept the sport growing through World War II. Pop in a digitized version of the 1962 instructional film "This is Volleyball" featuring our soon to be 1964 Olympians. Set one of the never used 30 year old International Association first colored volleyballs in the USA IVA coed pro league donated by former Denver Comet owner Bill Johnson.

We have had some who have made significant impact fiscally. Bob and Shorty Lindsay almost single handily kept our USA Women's team afloat and successful back in the 1970s and 80s. Many billions have been given in the impactful donation of time as volunteers –

coaches, officials and administrators over the past 125 years, giving that which is truly priceless, and the gift of one's self. My son is writing his senior thesis for his history major, on primarily the first 50 years of volleyball, and I marvel at what Pop Idell, the YMCA leadership and our armed forces did to grow the game. Recently, we hosted the leadership of the Bulgarian Federation, their president and secretary general included, and shared our "secrets" and best practices from all departments. From them, I now sport a red and white string on my wrist, a tradition of friendship and family in their nation ([CLICK HERE](#) to learn more about it) waiting to see the first blossom of this spring to tie it next to, and have my wish come true. To be able to tell the story of our own "Historic Gift" given to volleyball. If any of you reading this know who that donor might be, [you know how to reach us!](#)

Also, if you have historical volleyball memorabilia that you'd like to donate, let us know at mvp@usav.org.

Top Five Priorities

March 17, 2015

A few facts, not opinions, about our great sport first...

USA Volleyball is the national governing body (NGB) for indoor, beach and sitting volleyball. Most people don't realize that, in that role, we must partner with three core groups. As a national federation, we must adhere to the rules and regulations of our international federation – in our case the FIVB (Federation Internationale de VolleyBall). Then there is the U.S. Congress which, through the Amateur Sports Act, has placed the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) in control of Olympic sports. We then are governed by the USOC and partner to send the best Olympic teams every four years, if we qualify. We also serve our 40 “branch offices” called our Regional Volleyball Associations. That is where I started and still where I grow the game the most. I have been to more than 50 nations, and all 50 states more than once in my roles with USAV, now as director of sport development.

Players/coaches for the last 30 years assume the U.S. volleyball teams will be in the Olympic Games. But for almost 20 years – from 1969-1983 – we did not.

Neither of our indoor teams qualified for the Olympic Games in 1972 and '76. The women qualified for Moscow in 1980 while the men did not. The 1980 Olympic boycott took a chance for a medal away from the women, who were ranked No. 2 in the world that year. It was sad, but we moved on to silver for the women and gold for the men in 1984. Beach volleyball was made an official Olympic sport in 1996 and the U.S. has won at least one beach gold medal in every Summer Games.



There is also the Paralympic discipline of sitting volleyball, for which USA Volleyball serves as the NGB. We see it as another discipline for those wanting to play this sport for a lifetime. Indeed, the national volleyball federation for the Netherlands, NEVOBO, has more than 3,000 members in their sitting volleyball area, but only 500 are disabled. The others just want to play the sitting game. I serve on the World ParaVolley Board of Directors and as their Development Director, growing the disabled versions of the game. We have a [WPV SportKit DVD](#) as a resource to help programs start all over the world. Our women have won bronze, silver and silver at the past three Paralympic Games. The men took eighth in 2004 and have not qualified since. These are the gaps we seek to replace with qualification. I will be serving as head of the jury for the 2015 Para Panamerican Games in Toronto, which serve as the qualifier for the 2016 Paralympic Games. Canada will be the main opponent for the U.S. Men's Sitting Team.

One thing people simply don't understand is that by supporting/being a member of USA Volleyball, they are not only part of one of the finest national federations in the world, they are also helping us grow the game for little kids

(Did you know membership in USA Volleyball for those 8-and-under, insurance included, is FREE?), for the disabled, and for the diversity of our sport. For example, we help support Starlings USA for economically disadvantaged girls who want to play. We are also working to increase boys' and men's volleyball programming (for there is a 10:1 ratio of females to males in our sport, scholastically and in USAV itself).

Annually, we give more than \$100K in grants for those who are working for boys, diversity, starting college men's programs, and other underserved areas. [We hand out this flyer](#), which has a lot of information about USAV and the way we seek to direct the sport.

So on to the top five...

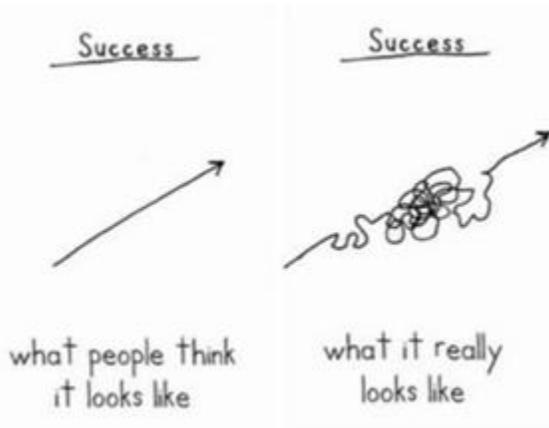
USA Volleyball has a board of directors, which just met last month to determine our top-five priorities as an organization. For the past eight years we have been aiming for:

You are Paying for Practice Not Playing

March 30, 2015

So the glow of your child being chosen to play for a club, perhaps even the experience of having to choose between multiple clubs and not cut, has faded. We are now into the heart of the season, where the coaches are making decisions on starters, subs and bench sitters based on both what they have seen in months of practices and tournaments. Depending on the team size, you are likely to be a parent who feels your child should be playing more, and may even be wondering why you chose this club, as they are not “winning enough.” I am going to share some observations and thoughts as a dad who has also been coaching the sport for over half a century, with kids, who both played at the college level, for about half that period.

You are paying for practice, NOT tournament play.



This actually is what is happening across ALL levels of a program. Let me explain this reality further – If your child is on a team of 12, when they are playing in tournaments, there is one person touching, and 23 others watching - including the opponents you are playing and their subs. Each side has parents usually too focused on the winning, and not the process, and each want their loving child to play. As we learn by doing, NOT watching (just think about how a child has watched you drive for more than 15 years, but has no clue to how to drive until they DO it), tournaments are not where you get good. Play in a tourney pool of four and not advance, as half the teams experience, and your child has been part of a 1 touch/23 watch totally gamelike learning experience for about 2.5 hours on average (3 matches lasting 50 min each). Meanwhile at practice, done even just twice a week for 2 hours for 2 weeks before the next tourney, with just playing you have 8 hours at a 1 touch/11 watch ratio. As about half of practice at this period is smaller group training you have 4 hours of 1

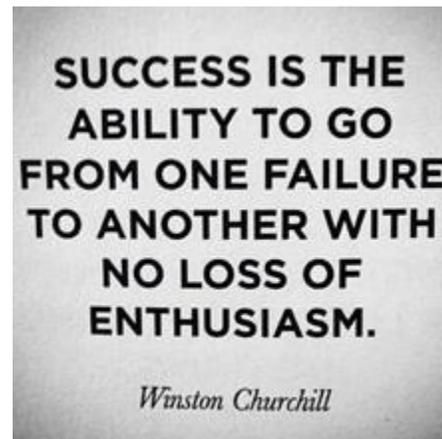
touch/5 or so watch (if doubles 1 touch/3 watch ratio, so lots of learning by doing) and 4 of 1/11 so that averages to 8 hours of about a 1 to 8 ratio – 3 times the learning-by-doing ratio and for almost 3 times as long. This means practice adds up to nearly a 10 fold level of learning for your child compared to competitions. Playing in tournaments is PART of why you practice, but if your child is not a starter, they are not missing out on that much learning by contacting the ball in those 2.5 hours comparatively. Want to get your child more learning beyond practice and tourneys? Have them go play or compete in doubles play, against anyone willing, on any surface of court, including against adults, and they will get better faster for the indoor game. Playing time does not translate to college scholarships, it is how good an athlete is from the countless hours of deliberate practice. My boss, USAV CEO Doug Beal a three time Olympic coach summed it up simply, “*The best players are those who play the best...*” and since we play a ton more in training than in a match, that means in practice first, to earn a spot in competition. The stronger the team, and level of play as you go up the ladder of sport success, the smaller the difference between a starter and a bench player when competition rolls around. After all, on our 12 player Olympic rosters in a match, only half of them are on the court – the others are ...even as the best 12 in our nation... watching from the sidelines.

Have you been specific enough from the start?

It is not enough to be told your child will get to “play a lot...” You should have some form of written material, a contract even with the club, which defines the club’s mission, philosophy and expectations for parents, players and coaches alike. At a national level, many clubs simply start the best players, and sub only for injury or strategic, short term reasons. At the more local level, clubs may require equal playing time. This range is seen from young to old, based on the club philosophy mostly – summed up with 1. Equal playing time or 2. Playing time based on practice performance.

You are paying for leadership development, teamwork skills, being physically active, not just sport skill development

These happen before, after and during practices and tournaments, and have little to do with your child being on the court. Indeed, the memories your athlete will have are far more often to be about the trips, meals, silly or inspirational travel moments, NOT the playing time or wins/losses. You are paying for developing resilience and grit in your child, which is developed over time, including from the bench, by being a GREAT bench teammate. When your athlete picks a team sport, winning and losing are out of one player's control – and they should be learning about always putting in the effort and deliberate practice it takes to get better – which increases but does not ever guarantee an outcome victory on the scoreboard. A person's team attitude means a LOT, and is seen/developed over the season, not just at a tryout. When you pick a TEAM sport, the coach determines the positions, not the player. Our first world's best libero at the USA men's team level, came into the program as an outside hitter. Lineups, playing time, injury adaptations/solutions, leadership development - these are best for the team decisions by a coach. Sometimes the newest players to a sport over the season become the best players! In practice, play AND off the court, Doc Rivers noted - *Good players want to be coached; great players want to be told the truth.* Please also note, college scholarships are NOT something a player "deserves" or that a program can promise. While customer service is part of any business, sports included, you pay for the expertise of the coaches leading your athlete in training and tourney/travel. Coaches are the experts for their teams, as parents are the experts for their children. I have never heard of a coach coming to a home or workplace and telling the parent how to do their job (unless they are in a relationship), while the coaches, and ALL officials also, deserve that same respect as they perform their work.



Sport is a lifetime option, not just a season of activity

If you work to support your child to love the game, wins or losses, starting or not, you have given them a gift of health for their lifetime. This is the first generation to have kids who are expected to die younger than their parent's life expectancy. That is not the case for your child if they love to be active through sport. Do you realize that USA Volleyball hosts national championships for the 79 and OVER age group? This love of the game is one of the things you pay for.

Your child will be a better player if she coaches younger players

We all know that which you teach, you learn. Is your club letting this happen for your child's sake? It's not about playing time, it is about learning time – mentoring younger players helps you coach yourself better when the coach is not watching. After all, if there are 12 players and 1 coach, an athlete can only expect to get 10 min of attention in a two hour practice. So while those 10 minutes of coach feedback is valuable to be sure, it is the other 110 minutes when the coach is working with the other players, that an athlete gets better. That said, private lessons give more feedback, perhaps even too much, but they are usually so non-gamelike that there is only limited transfer. Your money is better spent on buying a good outdoor net and getting your kids to play doubles in the summer.

Lately, as Tiger, Helicopter, Lawnmower (even Bulldozer) parents steal the resilience, life lesson's experiences and problem solving creativity from their children, we are now even seeing in sport, lawsuits based on being cut/playing time. I know of a good coach who was begged by a parent to PLEASE not cut but keep a child just as a practice player. When injuries in the early season allowed that practice player to play in a tournament, what happened? That parent complained about the child's lack of playing time. Next time, that coach is likely to just say, thanks, but no thanks, and cut the player. It is well-meaning but over-the-top parents that cause some coaches to want to just coach at an orphanage. I can tell you this – if you are wanting your child to play at the college level, and feel the need to file a lawsuit, I would also expect few, if any, college programs would consider recruiting your child.

In closing, if you love to watch your child play as much as I do, get to practice more and enjoy watching her play! Hopefully your coach has read my blog enough so you will see not see the athletes standing in line, but instead warming up playing 2 v 0, reading balls coming OVER the net, competing in small games like 2v2/3v3 speedball, and learning by doing. We lost a legendary coach recently, who wisely told every player on their team, no matter how good they were, simply *"I can promise you that if you work really hard & display a team first attitude, then you stand a great chance of playing but under no circumstance do I promise playing time."* Sports are a meritocracy, not a democracy and in that, it is practice that matters – fiscally, mentally, physically, not playing time. Playing time is EARNED.

Developing Real Ball Control

April 09, 2015

Lately I have been wondering why so many well-meaning coaches, and players, speak to the importance of ball control. I know I will be up against the many attendees of the Church of tradition and ball control (CTBC as I call it) yet this is really important stuff to change. Nearly every player spends thousands of total hours doing partner passing. Last time I googled “volleyball drills” I got 3.8 million options, and I am certain if I asked the creators 99% of them, they would all be in no small part intended to “improve ball control.” The only other words used as much by the CTBC are “technique” and “fundamentals.” So I was inspired to return to this topic after learning that a longtime colleague of mine from the basketball world, Brian McCormick, with whom I have shared many conversations about motor learning over the decades, just wrote a kindle book called “Fake Fundamentals.”



When I want to see ball control, I watch Rhythmic Gymnastics. For example take a look at the Bulgarian Team showing impressive, closed motor program, control of a ball. I am certain, with all their talents, they could not serve receive or spike a single ball with any control – despite the skills they have, in no small part due to specificity of training. Yet I see volleyballs bouncing on the floor, being slapped for timing purposes, being thrown in the air to setters or spikers and so on...even though NONE of those things will ever happen in a match...ever....

The skill of learning to be at the right place and time, an open motor program in volleyball, is honestly the most important skill in any sport. Given the .008-.1s contact times on a player's body while in a game that is basically controlled by an adversary about half the time. I think it is simply vital to our games core. We call it “reading,” and coupled with the other core skill in sport, learning, I sadly see huge gaps in the teaching of these two cornerstone skills. When you bring the science of motor learning and the principle of perception action coupling, I find that maybe only 10 percent of any drill that athletes are told to perform, simply do not teach this coupling. The Great One, Wayne Gretzky, said in his fast paced sport of ice hockey, “I skate to where the puck is going to be.” I have said it before, but I will say it again due to its

importance in perhaps a new way WHAT WE SEE DETERMINES HOW WE MOVE AND HOW GOOD OUR BALL CONTROL IS....

Let me share the abstract to some specific to volleyball research that addresses this. This is from *Psychological Research*(2012)

Long- and short-term plastic modeling of action prediction abilities in volleyball by Cosimo Urgesi · Maria Maddalena Savonitto · Franco Fabbro · Salvatore M. Aglioti

Abstract *Athletes show superior abilities not only in executing complex actions, but also in anticipating others' moves. Here, we explored how visual and motor experiences contribute to forge elite action prediction abilities in volleyball players. Both adult athletes and supporters were more accurate than novices in predicting the fate of volleyball floating services by viewing the initial ball trajectory, while only athletes could base their predictions on body kinematics. Importantly, adolescents assigned to physical practice training improved their ability to predict the fate of the actions by reading body kinematics, while those assigned to the observational practice training improved only in understanding the ball trajectory. The results suggest that physical and observational practice might provide complementary and mutually reinforcing contributions to the superior perceptual abilities of elite athletes. Moreover, direct motor experience is required to establish novel perceptuo-motor representations that are used to predict others' actions ahead of realization.*

That said, let's get up-to-date with an article on the same concept that was published this year, not 4 years ago, in *European Journal of Sport Science*, 2015 Vol. 15, No. 4, 322–331,

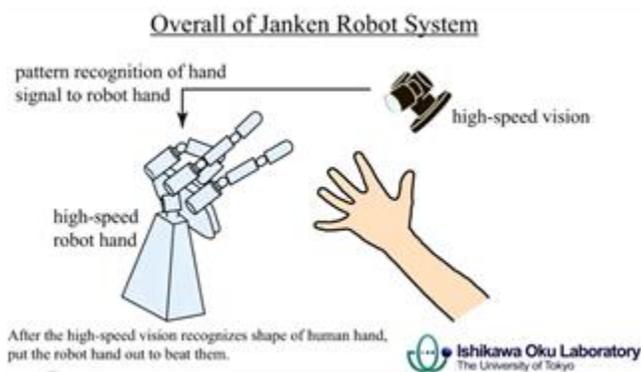
Perceptual-cognitive skill training and its transfer to expert performance in the field: Future research directions by David P. Broadbent, Joe Causer, A. Mark Williams, & Paul R. Ford

Abstract *Perceptual-cognitive skills training provides a potentially valuable method for training athletes on key skills, such as anticipation and decision-making. It can be used when athletes are unable to physically train or are unable to experience repeated key situations from their sport. In this article, we review research on perceptual-cognitive skills training and describe future research areas focusing on a number of key theories and principles. The main aim of any training intervention should be the efficacy of retention and transfer of learning from training to field situations, which should be the key consideration when designing the representative tasks used in perceptual-cognitive skills training. We review the principles that seek to create practice tasks that replicate those found in the field, so as to increase the amount of transfer that occurs. These principles are perception–action coupling, the contextual interference effect and contextual information, which suggest there should be a high level of similarity between training and real-life performance when designing perceptual-cognitive skills training. In the final section, we discuss the*

transfer of retained skill acquisition from perceptual-cognitive skills training to field performance, which we suggest to be the key area for future research in this area. Keywords: Expert performance, skill acquisition, anticipation, decision-making

In none of the research I am reading do I see that partner anything for volleyball has any worthwhile transfer, as it is not really like what happens in a game. The net is a crucial regulatory stimuli that gets ignored simply too often, while drills do not have the CONTEXTUAL information that is vital for REAL, not irrelevant, learning.

Let's take what happens on a perfect serve reception (not pass, please, NOT a pass – we rarely put a volleyball back to where it came from in our sport) from both the attacker and the opposing libero. The game flow means all 5 attackers might attack. Most drills don't teach this advance reading skill of being able to narrow, at game speed, the options most likely to come. The middle then is not set, nor the bic, and one of the pin hitters gets the set (outside or opposite). This attacker has been making decisions as the play develops on if they will have a fully formed block, be one on one, or even face, if the set to them is high, a triple block. As the attacker approaches they then have to adjust to the reality of the set – perfect, too low, past the pin, well off the net – etc. We know the setter INTENDS to deliver a perfect set every time, but with the wide variance of incoming receptions, a setter has their own variances to deliver which impact the success of their delivery. As the attacker approaches, knowing the likely opponent defense being played, the block forms but the hitter has already decided that shot to employ and where to direct the ball. Side note that this is done unlike ANY other sport. Volleyball players having to max jump and while up there in the air, max swing, it is one of the more remarkable things in sport, I feel. Get baseball/softball pitchers to jump as high as they can as they bat, and not allow for ANY balls or strikes and you might get my drift. Now back to the libero, who has the challenge of reading the attackers options and narrowing them down to the most likely ones, all the while moving to intercept that hard driven ball before it hits the floor. With the distance from attacker to floor being an average of about 7 meters, with a ball going 100 plus meters per hour, and recalling our average human reaction time of .2s – this does not include the time it takes to move, but just react, then intercept the ball so it goes UP (not over the net back to where it came from, and not like some worm burner golf shot inches off the floor for many meters). So does ANY real ball control get learned from being able to pair pass in the myriad of methods created by coaches, to develop it? I see coaches passing, spiking, even rolling balls UNDER the net and call them “ball control” exercises. I ask these drill creators to tell me what motor program would be learned if the players became the “world's best” or “gold medalists” at that habit being formed. What are they really reading in anticipation and performing in a way that brought into the actual game? Would it still be a good thing? In every case, the answer is no. These are examples of what are called “irrelevant training,” something players and coaches pressed for time when together in a gym, simply don't have time to do.



Specificity is so specific... Why don't golfers play better after countless buckets of balls on a driving range? After hitting thousands of times on a flat surface for “ball control” on the range and then how many shots do you take on a fairway vs. in the rough, traps, standing on slanted surfaces with one or both feet in a novel place, the ball below or above your feet. It can be ugly, as can any sport in learning the REALITIES, not the perfect form, required to play at the top level. If a player can show you the proper technique without a ball, let them play and guide them to be in the right place and time. For more on how our national teams “train ugly” visit www.trainugly.com. This is why Bubba Watson's training and play is so good. He played golf, never took a lesson, and let the games variation make him an amazing player. This specificity is wrapped very tightly into reading in that the sooner I can

best determine what I am seeing, the better ball control I will have. This example of a paper-scissors-rock robot winning 100% of the time, happens as the high speed cameras “read” the opponent faster than human reaction time. The robot forms the winning response as, even after the opponent, and “wins.”

Recently, I had the joyful pleasure of working with about 100 employees and participants in the Goodwill Industries headquarters here in Colorado Springs. Some were blind, some unable to get out of their wheelchairs, so we modified the game to be chair volleyball, and put the net up at the height of their waist when seated. Bring out the beach ball to slow the ball down a bit but more so to reduce any head contact injury and they played. There was no discussion of technique nor fundamentals, they knew that the ball was not supposed to hit the floor and that the ball would not hit the floor on their side if they simply immediately put it over to the other teams side as fast as possible. That is what you see at the first level of the game, hot potato VB. They loved it, cheering wildly for every point. Next time they play, they will shift to cooperative scoring, and see how many times both sides can rally in a row, even though it will still be one hit, so that the ball goes up more and we might raise the net a bit. What kind of ball control did they have? The same I see developed in pair drills – putting the ball back to where it came from.

What if our first tradition in the game became either 1 v 1 (as our sport's creator William Morgan allowed as an option) or 2 vs 0? Not back and forth ball control, but one where we 1. Put ball one over the net 2. Put our side's first contact UP, not back over the net (nearer to the net as we get better). 3. Put the second contact UP on our side off the net and inside the antenna always 4. The final contact goes OVER a net. As we get better, we go from cooperative scoring to 2 vs 2 competitive scoring, and we play doubles for years of our youth, not 6 vs 6. We steal millions of gamelike repetition opportunities when we go to the 6 person variation of the game. We waste millions more when we fail our players by ignoring the net, and playing pair pepper – developing a “fake fundamental” which, if we were the worlds best at it, would result in certain defeat if that actual skill, delivering it back to the opponent, was done in the match. Yet we call this “ball control.”

Real ball control is learned by playing opponents on the other side of the net. Real ball control is gained by setters delivering a ball from usually their left side and delivering it on a totally new angle and ball flight. Not back to where it came from. Real ball control comes from reading a setter (and even the passing teammate to start off and get clues as to what the set will be like), who most often is moving and learning to jump at the right place and time – that sweet spot in time of full extension – while SIMULTANEOUSLY make the best decision on how to send it over the net and over/around/off/through a block of 1-3 opponents. Yet we spend millions of hours hitting from the ground (there's that pair pepper skill again), hitting it down with nobody ever blocking (or doing hitting without a single blocker) or against a wall/without a “net” which means the player becomes great at hitting it down in a way they never will in a match. These traditions not only cause fake fundamentals, but truly they are developing fake techniques and fake skill which have no value in an actual match. They just look good in practice...but not when it comes to performance time, as the transfer we “expect” is not happening in reality.



I have shared this video on Cristian Ronaldo before in my blog, but it needs to be seen again, in full, as it teaches some of the realities of ball control which apply in our sport – mostly reading, power generation, ball contact and timing.

These last couple of months I have had the pleasure of doing some clinics in Denver for some USAV clubs, parents, players and coaches together. The ribbon goes up, and the parents see how many hundreds more over the net/reality like contacts their child is getting playing 2 v 0 – and the “lack” as it were, of ball control. Could we do it 3 v 0? Sure, but your child gets 50 % less repetitions that way and you are paying for gamelike reps. Could we do it 2 v 2? YES, but most programs train over just 10 meters of net, thus they lack the net space to do doubles (unlike our 50 or so USA national team players each morning who have 35 nets in their Anaheim Sport Center). I will let the words of a coach, just a bit after the clinic, in an email she sent me do the sharing. Mind you, I get lots of testimonial thank

you's, but since we are not selling any product, but learning, collaborating and pondering, I feel a bit less like a infomercial I guess, ha.

I wanted to email you and thank you for showing us the ribbon drills 1v1, 2v0, etc... I have been using them with my 16-1s team and my 13-2s and it has made a HUGE difference even after incorporating it into the practices since you've come to my club....My two teams are completely different skill levels but has helped them in different ways. IT'S AMAZING.

Let me add in some words from a video clip I took during the most recent USA Volleyball High Performance Clinic, by someone CTBCer's might listen to more than just me, Karch Kiraly. In a breakout session we were discussing defense/pepper. This was what was said:

HP Coach: And that posture is specific, like she asked if serve receive defense was a whole ‘nother animal in terms of the posture they're in.

KARCH: I think our posture is not unlike what Laurent was talking about just in terms of I'm going to be in this position here and I've got to put out good surfaces when the ball is at close range, and then I got to move a couple of steps I don't get much time to move with the speed of the offense in our gym anyway. So it's three steps and get back we have our, you've see it in our gym, we've got tape X's on all the base positions and then we've got to move as best we can to get back and still, especially down the line we've got to just put some surfaces out and get hit by the ball and if it gets hit up here hopefully

I'm a little more like this, but still can go forward and then I can point some of these surfaces up a little higher because there are lots of plays where I don't get to put a nice clean, forearm platform on it.

HP Coach: So do you still want them (your players) straight back on defense? Can I still sprawl for a ball up in front from an upright position?

KARCH: Well, whatever works for you balance wise. I can go forward from that position and I can still do something like that. But maybe if I'm moving back here, it's probably just something like 1, 2, 3 and now I'm ready to go, but I'm not playing defense like this because it's really hard. What's going to happen if does hit me nice and clean here, is it going to go under the net or back over the net?

HP Coach: Under the net.

KARCH: We want to keep it on our side. So we're trying to angle everything up. I think he (Laurent Tille) was having players dig and go set so there is some value in just the idea of getting the ball straight up. *Straight up is awesome if you could dig to yourself every time you'd be one of the better defenders in the world if you could make the ball hit you a lot. So a lot of it is getting hit by the ball and then once you make the ball hit you and make it go straight up, you'd be fantastic.*



So I am going to ask, again, for you readers of this blog to stop teaching the way you were taught and to change in tradition. I hope what I have written gives you something to ponder about. Look at what you do and ask yourself "if my player became the 3 time Olympic Gold Medalist at this skill as this drill is teaching, it is a reality of ball control that will happen in a match?" From "pepper" the way it is currently taught, to hitting "lines" (including running under the net and tossing balls), we need to change to teach and form good habits not bad ones. To see more on this, read my article "From Positive to Perfection," and other blogs in the "STOP....." series.

Then again...if you want to teach REAL ball control, specifically speaking, take a shot at learning what [this gal has](#).

May the variance be with you.

The Impact We Can Have

April 23, 2015

Two time USA Olympic Coach challenged me with the words on the 5 medal Beijing poster you see, which I framed and had in my office for years - "Kess - If you don't get this ball rolling, there is no gold medal..."



So that challenge started this blog, to share insights into how we can grow the game together. It also propelled me to learn and collaborate with others around the world, including the over 7,500 coaches in the wonderful Facebook closed group "[Volleyball Coaches and Trainers](#)," and to continue with IMPACT updates, CAP and FIVB training all over the world. So when an email comes in late at night from a program I have loved and known for decades, Milwaukee Sting, with such wonderful insights into how we are and can be better growing the game together - well, I have to share it. Maybe because it made Jen, the director of operations for USAV's great [Badger Region](#) cry, when I forwarded it to her...no, it's because Brad's kids are our future, and we need to make sure we keep connecting to them as the athletes can do so well. Thanks Brad for letting me share your words...

Mr. Kessel

I had the pleasure of watching a practice followed by a scrimmage between Illinois and Minnesota earlier this month, with my two young daughters ages 3 and 6. Our club was fortunate to have the two teams scrimmage in our local gym and many of our club parents, players, and coaches were able to watch, although the crowd was not overwhelming. It was the first time for my daughters watching collegiate volleyball. My wife had gladly taken the day to herself and I was excited to bring my girls to the scrimmage. Selfishly, I wanted to see the practice as well, so I made sure the girls packed their first touch balls, snacks, crayons, and coloring books, knowing I would stay longer than their attention spans. Goldfish crackers are an amazing patience extender.

I was struck with two things, both I wanted to mention as I read your blog regularly and enjoy the concepts and the title.

The practice was filled with play. Almost the entire time there was nothing but pure competition. Divide into teams with players from both squads, enter balls from various angles and in and out of system balls, keep running the score up as high as the flip boards will allow, and make sure the volleyballs are fed continuously. Players were engaged, players were happy, players kept competing. It was not a grind, run this drill until you get it correct that I remember when I was younger playing indoor growing up in California. It truly reminded me of the days outdoor and hours spent at the beach, hoping all the guys brought their volleyballs so we could keep the rally going till sunset if one of the balls rolled into the water. After attending CAP 1 last year, it was a blessing to see one of the finest coaches in the US living the mantra of let the game teach the game.

The second item pertains to the players. There was no designated time for interaction with the athletes. There was no expectation of crowd interaction, it was a small crowd, less than that at a local middle school match. The love of the game that was in the gym kept my youngest quiet and focused on the action on the court. During the scrimmage the communication, effort, and heart the athletes showed was better than ice cream at holding the attention of my three year old. Post-match, my youngest daughter asked me if she could speak with the players while they were stretching, we happened to be closest to the Minnesota post scrimmage stretch huddle. She waddled up with her first touch and a pen in her hand, the first touch almost larger than she is, gently asked if she could have a signer, and a wonderful young lady or two, along with

Coach Hugh after she grabbed her father for some courage, all penned a memory on her First Touch. I'm sure it's no surprise to you that Hugh's team and he were nothing but first class, and that several of them went out of their way to be nice to someone that could do nothing for them. I was immediately coerced to purchase her first net, and the backyard grass will likely never be the same again, as we now play "how many can you get over the net" every night I get home before dark. What I wanted to say, is that those moments, those gifts of inspiration that players or coaches give back to our youth, are the reason this sport grows. I recall my first interaction with someone who inspired the game for me, and 25 years later, I still have the lunch card from the Al Scates camp Ricci Luyties signed for me when I was a youngster. He penned a funny note, called my group of teammates the turkeyballers, and he made the experience of my first volleyball camp a blast and we played a lot. If we truly want to grow the game, we need to create more interaction between young fans and players of various ages and levels, in situations where their love of the game and passion for competition shine through and inspire. My daughter might forget who signed her first touch in 5 or 10 years, but her dad will always remember who inspired her to wear out my grass and play how many times can we hit it over the net in the backyard. I'll likely now get to enjoy watching whatever level of competition satisfies her desire and ability, and the game will keep getting bigger because a college athlete made time for a three year old that could do nothing for her but smile.

Keep up the great blogging,

Brad Van Dam

Milwaukee Sting



Thanks again to Brad for writing and sharing his thoughts. They are special for ALL of us at USA Volleyball, as we work 365/24/7 to grow volleyball for all ages. As to Hugh's challenge, even he as you can see, now at Minnesota, continues to work with USAV and grow the game together. I must say though, the first thing that came to mind about keeping the ball "rolling" brought to mind this clip on [Gloucester Cheese Rolling](#), we humans will do some very remarkable things for such little reward. I might add, that I am certain NONE of these human rollers ever did a drill on getting the cheese, they just went out and learned by doing it full speed...it is just not something I want to learn to do.

To Become a Skillful Spiker

May 06, 2015

Recently, another spiking machine video was shown in an [online coaching group](#) that I am a part of, as I enjoy collaborating with others around the world. One of the coaches looked at it and said WWJKS (What Would John Kessel Say), so I'm going to share the science and my thoughts based on motor learning as to it relates to most machines. Specificity in motor learning is clearly more specific than the creators of many devices to "improve" a player's game understand. If you look and the hundreds of millions of patents out there, clearly there is a desire to build a better mousetrap. However, in sport, most of the devices created take away from the true development of the most important "machine" on the playing field – the actual human playing.

*"Training is specific. The maximum benefits of a training stimulus can only be obtained when it 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.** This text maintains that the principle of specificity is the single most pervading factor that influences the improvement of performance..."* – Drs. Carl McGown & Steve Bain

Why is it we only see spiking machines for jumping and reaching for volleyball? I have not seen a tennis serving machines or basketball "reach developing" rebounding devices. To be a spiker, you must adjust your approach timing and position as you run in to the infinite number of set variations possible. Tall or short, even jump and bump setters. Ball flights which are set high to low, too near to too far off the net. Each one of these requires the attacker adjust to hit at that full reach sweet spot in time the spiking machines promote. Hitters at any age need to learn to read their setters and then flight of the ball. The spiking machines take away this skill development. If you set this machine for one spiker to hit the ball at full extension before she starts to fatigue, unless everyone else following hits at that same height (despite being varied in height and jumps) all those following in a line are going to be hitting the ball at the wrong place and time. The most important skill players need to gain is in reading the subtleties of the game flow in order to spike in a certain place and time AND direction/placement. It is something that randomly varies with every single swing no matter how good the setter is. Finally, there's no antenna or block when a machine is used, so there's very little chance to hit all the angles of the game, including adjustments require by the set placement relative to the block and antenna. When a machine does not randomize, they basically help players look good in that practice and have negative impact on performance. Take a look at the way these 11 year olds in the USAV video "[Game-like Wall Practice](#)" are working on not hitting where they look and hitting OVER the net, not into the net... You can do the same thing when you approach in a "neutral" way then chance the direction of your spike while in the air. Last time I checked, no machines were allowed in a match, but blockers, the net and antenna are...

As I coach many ages, I want to take time to share three things I believe our volleyball family need to change their traditional teaching. 1. Can't pass/Can't hit needs to change to *"Hi, I am a volleyball coach, let's hit!"* 2. Setting youth and beginners right on the net, should instead be *"The first sets I am going to teach you are the same sets of the USA Olympic teams – this line is the 3 meter line and three of the sets are known as A, Pipe and D."* 3. Beginners should start with high sets to *"The first thing we will do to discover the joy of our sport is to hit the lower version of the "pipe" set, known as the 'Bic'."* Let's build out what I mean by these key three points of better spike development:

1. The FIRST skill we should teach kids is spiking. Sure it can be done like [Smashbal](#), but in my experience you don't need to, in order to hook kids on volleyball. You simply pair up, have one beginner throw the ball to the receiver/hitter. That player overhead or forearm passes the ball back to the tosser/setter who sets the "bic"(meter above the net at most, moving with the setter so the hitter adjusts and the setter puts up the "same" ball every time), and the hitter runs, jumps and swings at it. This video shows ribbon being used to create 12 sitting "nets" and all the pairs of cadets learning to spike in the sitting game.
2. The tradition of hitting right on the net comes from adults training kids and not changing the game for the kids' sake. By starting with teaching back row attacks, the players learn to swing and hit OVER a net, not into the net. The sets they hit will vary at the starting level, but no under the net worries develop as all hitting takes place well off the net. Plus the athletes are hitting sets they will hear/see done at the Olympics, and connect better to the sport and team. They are not doing a beginners set/spike, they are doing the highest level and CAN do it, just not down at the angle of the international players.
3. The higher the set, the faster the ball falls through the sweet spot in time of full extension contact. By setting a "bic" the ball is in this sweet spot in time the longest. It also promotes the players to make a fast approach, and, as the set is the "same" the hitter learns to vary their approach based on where they themselves put their pass to. Even as the players work hard to have a consistent "bic" set, their beginner level variance will be broad and randomize the learning of the skills for faster learning in reality.

Back to machines, another problem when you have one is they promote standing in the line. This is simply not how sport is played, yet it is how some coaches train far too often. Sport is random, chaotic, even ugly. Most devices are designed to eliminate the realities of the game and help a player look good in practice, even though the transfer, for lack of true specificity, will not occur. This also takes place when another “machine” tosses sets for hitters – the coach. Sure a coach could set, but again that is stealing repetitions and reading from the team’s actual setters. Tossing is just another form of blocking the training to look good for practice and not performance. For more on not standing in line, please refer to my blog [Standing in Line](#). Why are there such great baseball players from Cuba and the island of Curaçao? I find it amazing that on an island like Cuba they can be world-class competitive for decades winning three gold medals while 90 miles away our program has yet to win our first Olympic gold. There are no spiking machines there, nor in most other nations that play at the very high level that the USA teams do. There are just players getting lots of repetitions, spiking real sets and learning to vary their jump to get their own maximum reach, based on the variability found in every ball ever set.

So I simply have to say that the “machines” to use are three – 1. Teammates. 2. More nets. 3. Recording/instant replay devices. Teammates are the reality we need to learn and read, against and with them. The best spike machine is not as good as even a little brother sister or friend setting real sets, or playing doubles over the net with them. More net span like a ribbon, or nets, allow smaller groups to receive/set/attack. The BAM video delay, Coaches Eye, Dartfish, Ubersense and other tablet/phone recording apps allow for a player to attack, and then go see immediately if the video confirms what they felt/thought. When it is a no-no or a yes-yes response, the confirmation is all the player needs. When it is a yes-no/no-yes, the player needs to ponder a bit why they thought it was right, but see it was not, or vice versa. Seeing with your own eyes what you were feeling is a very important part of learning and deliberate practice.

The intent of the spiking machine is important and understood – to get reps at hitting at full extension on a full jump at full power. Creating stations to ADD reps to your practices, including a machine set up in a corner to motivate the players arriving early to jump and reach to some level,. Using it during practice to take ONE athlete out and get them to jump train, rather than stand in line, fine. This single player use of the machine is better than a player standing around or talking on a cell phone before practice. While I am at it, please do not waste their time having them stand on boxes to do any skill. It simply slows down their learning, and is yet another example of training to look good in practice and not in the realities of the game. Personally, due to lack of transfer and specificity, I simply would rather spend the money on more volleyballs and net spans creatively put up so pairs of players can receive-set-attack is all.

Additionally, the development of full extension spike contact needs reflection and understand that most coaches currently don’t have. Most coaches when they see a player spike “low” say one of the following five common “technical” statements. 1. Reach! 2. Get on TOP of the ball! 3. Extend! 4. Keep your elbow UP! 5. Don’t drop your elbow! Then they either send the player over to the spike machine for that “training” or they “coach” the player by tossing more “sets.” If you have said any of these five statements or their variations, please keep reading. Without a machine or a ball, you first simply ask the player to run, jump and swing at full extension. If the player does that without a ball, then you both know they understand the technique. If not, you need to use video and/or intrinsic (player) and extrinsic (coach) feedback until you both know/see that the player can jump to swing at full reach. Since they know what the right technique is, now you need to help guide them to do the same with the infinite variety of sets. In 99 percent of the spikes where the athlete does not “reach” it is simply because they are late – and rather than reach “technically” to full extension and hit the ball off their elbow, they put their hand on the ball at this late and lower contact point. Do they need a machine? No, they need to swing sooner, swing faster and really probably both.

- **New Titleist Pro V1x golf ball** – The 2015 Pro V1 and Pro V1x golf balls feature patented thermostat urethane elastomer cover that delivers more short game spin and control, and a softer feel.
- **Titleist 915D2 driver** – The wide sole channel delivers more distance by actively flexing at impact to launch the ball off the face with higher speed and lower spin.
- **Titleist 915F fairway metal** – The forward positioned channel delivers distance from both tee to turf through higher speed and lower spin.
- **Titleist 915Hd hybrid** - The high speed face insert increases ball speed off the face on off-center hits.
- **Titleist AP2 irons** – Tour proven profile with progressive weighting, face thickness and sole widths.
- **Titleist Vokey Design SM5 wedges** - Increased groove durability from a high frequency face heat treatment for longer spin retention over the life of the wedge.
- **Titleist Scotty Cameron putter** – Each model incorporates new multi-material, aircraft-grade aluminum and precision milled 303 stainless steel construction for increased stability and unbelievable forgiveness.

Other sports where the game is also random and rebounded, use tools for play. [Click here](#), to see the millions spent on Jordan Spieth’s Titleist tools. They can keep making “better” tennis rackets that are bigger and bigger, and driver heads that get larger and larger but in our sport there are no implements to buy to make you really any better. The rules don’t allow you to buy longer blocking arm extenders, setting paddles or spiking bats. The only implement

that you can really buy to make you a better player is a pair of kneepads for your body so you can go more confidently to the floor. You can't play on a box, or hitting off a machine.

The fastest way to learn is to play doubles, 2 v 0, 1 v 1 plus 1 and speedball, then progress to triples. After that, put the kids on the court for the first time to play 6 v 6 and you will see something amazing. They can read, move, and play THREE hit volleyball, and do it just fine. Indeed they like having others helping cover the court that just two or three of them had to cover before – even on smaller court ribbon net training. It is how my daughter's first team of 12U learned, one formed by the “me and my friends want to play volleyball and you are the coach dad” tryout process. We only played 6 v 6 in the league, while the other league they played in was 4 v 4 against women's B teams. Training was just small groups, no larger than 3. Loren Anderson at the Rise Academy in Idaho gets it. This is what he shared – *“My 4 month long experiment ended yesterday. I decided this year to test the limits of game like training with our 12u teams....24 girls in total... Four had experience with the sport before we started the season...We ran single contact drills three times during the season... You go I throw.... We played 1v1 & 2v2 about 80% of total practice time over the season... With 4v4 making up the remaining 20%. We played 6v6 once in practice...They went to 5 tournaments... One of which was an indoor doubles tournament....This past weekend 12 SISU, the better of the three teams, went to SLC to play in a two day tournament. Nine girls: one 10 year old, four 11 year olds and four 12 year olds...they end up third overall...With multiple comments from other parents, officials and coaches on how well the 'played the game'successful experiment”*

The machines you need are that net, a ball, and teammates even if it is your grandmother setting you to hit over a short span of rope or ribbon in the back yard. I think she would enjoy spending time with you, and having the chance to help you be a better spiker, and with any luck, she will treat you to ice cream afterwards. No machine will ever be able to both give you the randomness of sets you need and the reward of a treat with someone you care about afterwards.

How Old School Are You?

May 23, 2015

There are long time players who reminisce about the way volleyball used to be played in the days of sideout, not rally, scoring. Having played for years, I remember the competitions which started at 8 am and went until 4am the next day, or speaking to parents about their child still playing in an event after midnight. Sideout scoring, when you only got a point when you served, at times meant the score would still be 0-0 after 10 minutes of play. Still, players fondly remember those battles and even play the game by "old school" rules. If you really want to play by the old rules, you can read William G. Morgan's rules from 1897, and play on a 6 foot 6in net, with "air dribbling," a 25 foot court, and even games of 1 vs 1.

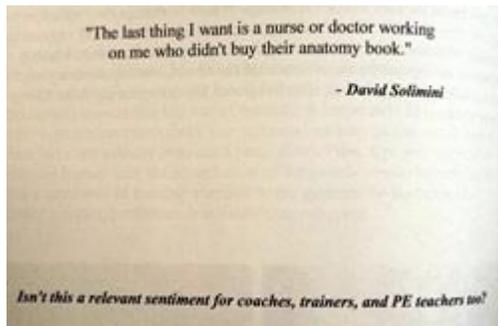
A doctor friend was recently listening to my frustrations in the ways coaches simply keep teaching the way they were taught. So many coaches don't think they need to attend any clinics because they feel they are already good coaches, since they either played (no matter if jungle ball or college ball level) or have watched the game.

As we observed these self-anointed "coaches" who either lacked any formal training, or who have not taken time to learn the facts, science, research and lessons from IMPACT, in favor of their own opinions, he made comment that hit home with me – "If I practiced medicine the way I did just ten years ago, I would be sued for malpractice..." Then we sat and watched who "coached" by making kids run after losses or even do push-ups during a match after some sort of error.

We looked over to another court where the coach was acting disgusted, slamming a clip board even, as if the players below average performance was somehow done on purpose and a personal insult to their coaching "expertise."

Behind us was another court where we did not even have to see the court as we heard a coach yelling at her young players about not caring enough to win and for missing so many "stupid serves."

What will it take for these supposed coaches to get with the times? To begin being a teacher rather than a sports talk commentator? To give specific positive feed forward rather bailing out on the job of teaching and simply making kids run? To "coach" in the roots of the word, taking valuable cargo from one place to another SAFELY. I bet few of them even know about the ongoing development of safe sport by the US Olympic Committee, but I will share it here www.safesport.org for parents and players may know more than the coach, and have to teach a lesson.



I could pull anyone in off the street to coach those players who love the game. You know those ones who come in early. Stay late. Do the extra homework. That is not the sign of a good coach. It's what they do with the weakest link on their team and how much they can move that bottom player on the team to excellence. It's how many of their players play the NEXT season, after their coaching. It's how many players are given by the coach, a love of the game which will keep them playing even if they encounter a poor coach. It's how well the players are guided to discover the answers on their own, rather than being told what to do. It's how a coach develops the relationship between the athletes and the ups and downs of the game's variance and random nature which impacts every player.

Brian Swenty, one of my fellow admins of the over 8,000 member Facebook page Volleyball Coaches and Trainers, knows of my frustration and shared this preface page to Lon Kilgour's outstanding book [Anatomy Without a Scalpel](#).

I wonder how these same coaches teach animals who don't talk... I've addressed what some great animal trainers do in the blogs "[Coaching the Human Animal](#)" and in "[Quantum Hoops II](#)." Old coaching peers tell me that I need to share again my article from 20 years ago titled "[How to Wreck a Player](#)." So here it is, and in full, to finish this blog to give you a look at how things were being looked at two decades ago.

The guidelines herein are possibly known by you as a committed coach, but are not properly enforced. These guidelines and suggestions will insure that you, your ego and its desire to win will take precedence over any individual or team development situation.

PRACTICE

1. Design all drills to be controlled by the coach, never by the athletes.
2. The longer the warm up without handling volleyballs in game-like ways, the better.
3. Make sure to condition the players thoroughly before they begin skill training so they "learn to play tired."
4. Be committed to training until it hurts.
5. Never let any players think for themselves, always tell them what to do rather than waiting or helping them figure out the answer.

6. *Make sure to always tell the player what he or she did wrong.*
7. *Never show what you want, if one thousand words will do. All explanations should be as wordy as possible to demonstrate your vast knowledge of the game.*
8. *The longer the line in a drill, the more they get a chance to stand around and watch and compare themselves to the others, thus learning who is good.*
9. *Keep your feedback as unspecific as possible: "That's it, Nice try, Good job," etc, so that they don't know what you are thinking.*
10. *If they fail to do what you want in a skill, physically punish them with push-ups, sit-ups, running, etc., so they will be certain to do the skill correctly the next time.*
11. *Be as judgmental as possible, as you know the difference between a mistake and the perfection you demand.*
12. *Punish personally and often, taking revenge so you'll feel better, but never provide an alternative to the undesired behavior.*
13. *Be as inconsistent as possible.*
14. *Teach volleyball the way it is supposed to be taught, on the chalkboard.*
15. *Never let the athletes influence you, as you must retain control.*
16. *What you say and what you do should not match. For example, do not permit your players to drink alcohol, but make sure you do often as you are of age.*
17. *Swear without using actual swear words, to emphasize your powerful command of the English language.*
18. *Be rigid, ensuring that practice is sacrosanct, rather than let players attend school functions for leadership acknowledgement or homecoming activities of any sort.*
19. *Fire up players by threatening to demote them to a non-starter role or down to the JV team if already on varsity, so they know your omnipotence.*
20. *Since they can't toss, a skill that took you hours to learn, ensure they never throw in any drill.*

MATCH PLAY

1. *During streaks of poor skill performance, point out the way the game is played. For example, if players are not passing well to the setter, call a time out and let them know that "we need a pass."*
2. *The officials, who must be perfect, need you to demonstrate in body language and/or vocalization when they have not called a contact by your personal standard of judgment.*
3. *Having ensured over training in practice, demand better game-level performance than that in practice.*
4. *Make sure to bawl players out about their mistakes, win or lose. It is better to do this in front of a whole gym full of spectators, rather than in the locker room, or worse, one on one in private.*
5. *If they lose badly, deny them the traditional post-match occasion so they will play better next time.*
6. *When you discover that a player who has been motivated enough to make every practice is actually not motivated, point out your plan to put someone in who "wants to play."*
7. *When a player misses a shot, makes other similar unforgivable errors, or exhibits other human-like traits, do the following:*
 - A. *Substitute them immediately.*
 - B. *Grab them physically and, at minimum, shake them up a little bit.*
 - C. *Sit them on the bench, as far away from you as possible, and ignore them, so they will learn.*
8. *When possible, leap off the bench, cross the court and berate the official from up close, rather than throwing your tantrum from far away on the bench. The more you can put yourself as coach in the limelight, and take away from the players playing, the better.*
9. *Rejoice in your being the locus of all control and answers, each time a player errs, when the mistake is followed by a wrenching head twist to the bench where you sit, so they can find a solution.*
10. *Keep on course to coach by fear, for these competitions are where players can show best their timidity and concern of your wrath.*
11. *Enhance, encourage and allow infighting when the players are going through a down cycle in their play.*
12. *Motivate by threats, such as "If you lose, you run, "or "We will practice after midnight if you lose."*
13. *In pre-match warm-ups, make sure you the coach set or toss all the balls for spiking, rather than the setter. You need the practice tossing and the setter is likely very nervous and will appreciate the chance to watch.*
14. *Tell your players every time where to serve, never let them learn to choose their own spots of weakness.*

OFF-THE-COURT LIFE

This may take care of itself if you can commit to training four hours or more than the Olympic team does.

1. *Class assignment - The time to study is a very low priority, after training, weights, chalk talks, team travel, etc. Athletes are to train, not also to be good students.*
2. *Penalize players for doing homework, studying or attending labs, instead of practicing.*
3. *Make sure to increase training time AND intensity, rather than reducing time and increasing intensity, during the hardest parts of the school semester.*
4. *Members of the opposite sex are the enemy, set an 8 p.m. curfew.*
5. *Keep them away from corruptive parents who might influence their own child.*

6. Show your players only the gyms and transportation options of the world, never the culture, history and unique aspects of the area that you are visiting.
7. When possible, leave your players alone in new environments, so they can learn to "take care of themselves." This is especially true with younger players, where you should ensure that any chaperons, in addition to coaches, should disappear.
8. Only focus on volleyball, never do other things where players might be able to demonstrate competency, maybe even being better than you at something.

Remember, ruining an athlete, especially those motivated to play at this higher level of competition, requires diligence, miscommunication and a total lack of understanding. Make sure not to go to any clinics, especially your National Governing Body's Coaching Courses, events, since you already know so much. For that matter, make sure not to help in any committees either. Indeed, why are you even reading this coaching information article? Good luck, and be sure not to change, since it worked when you were a player, there is no reason to think things might have improved.

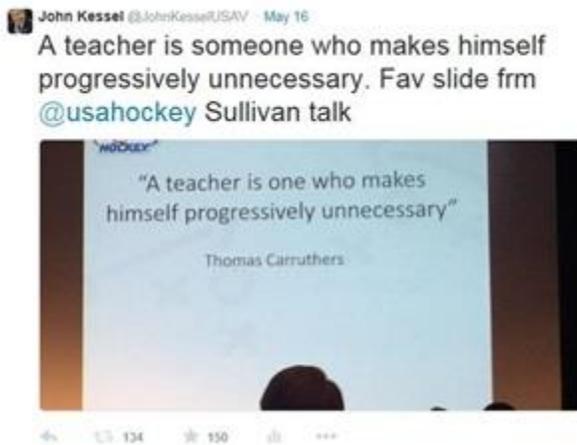
I challenge all my readers, no matter what sport you may be involved in, to take time to learn the latest on how we best learn. It's a lot like how everyone on the world learned to ride a bike, how skateboarders and BMX riders learn to do their tricks, how Bubba Watson learned to play golf and how you learned to walk...

I am a Teacher of Athletes

June 01, 2015

This month some kid I know really well has his senior year athlete banquet. I was looking at the Princeton website, and at the top of the athletic department's home page was a quote I had never heard that impacted me – *"I am the teacher of athletes, He that by me spreads a wider breadth than my own proves the width of my own, He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher."* --Walt Whitman

This same month, I was honored to speak to about 75 of USA Hockey's core coaches, in their first ever High Performance Summit in town at the Olympic Training Center. I spoke of "[never being a child's last coach](#)," and some other things which I have learned the hard way. There were several NHL players now giving back to the sport and one, Mike Sullivan, who now scouts for the Chicago Blackhawks, spoke about things he had learned. This is taken from my seat in the back, where the power outlets hide out.



Each evening we listened to a panel of hockey legends and heard their stories. Then we got to sit around together and hash out what the day had done to impact us. Being the odd duck of the group, I learned that what I had shared impacted them as I simply was there to help them learn, with no stake or really history in the hockey world. So they did not put it through their hockey history filter, and since none of them really knew volleyball, they were able to hear the facts and principles. This collaboration between sports I strongly believe in. I have done keynote speeches for the National Pole Vaulting Summit ([click here](#) for a compilation of vaulting fails, a sport where mistakes in learning are far more severe), the US Synchronized Swimming International Symposium (299 women and guy from Venezuela), US Tennis Association, USA Shooting, and many more. My favorite group are the coaches and parents of Ski and Snowboard Club Vail, who listen to volleyball stories and make them fit racing and doing tricks at the world class level.

That first evening some hockey attendees came up to thank me for my presentation, and I found out one guy has three kids, 14, 10 and 7 years old and the other a 15 year old. We started sharing parenting stories and ideas. Two hours later we were still talking about our role as coaches and parents. I asked one of my new friends what was the most important take away from the summit and he said one word – "Evolve." The biology major in me smiled. It was not until I got home that I found out one of the guys, who gave me his card, was a 13 year NHL vet and Stanley cup winner – Kevyn Adams. The other, in addition to being an NHL player for the Buffalo Sabres, was one of the key reasons that Canada won the Olympic Gold medal over the USA in that epic contest – Michael Peca. Evolve, the value of hard work, and so many laughs about the joys of parenting and coaching, such an enjoyable time sharing. Some Russian star player, whose name I did not catch, but who they respected, Kevyn said impacted his coaching when he said *"The player who thinks fast will beat the player who skates fast..."*

Hockey is more traditional than volleyball in training it seems. I mean, they still call players midgets, not by age/birth year. I remember when we did, and standing up in a USAV meeting and saying how we need to drop names like midget and bantam, as we are 1. Not hockey, 2. Not midgets 3. Need to just say their age, not some name new parents have to translate. That was one of my more successful short "speeches."

The last evening, something magical happened. Sitting with Michael, talking about growth mindset and guiding the discovery of kids as a coach and parent, he shared his story on the most impactful moment of his playing career. It happened to him when he was 9 years old, and scored his 100th goal. He showboated afterwards, and let the bench know too when he came off the ice. His coach saw the teachable moment at hand and asked – would you have done the same thing for your 6th goal? Then he made a difference in a future NHL and Canadian Olympic Hockey gold medalist's life and said **"When you do something bad, say little; when you do something great, say less..."**

I was speechless, then I asked Kevyn if he knew that story, as they are partners working with one of the finest hockey academies in the USA, if not world, and he did not. So I just could not let that story be so "untold" and asked Michael if I could video tape it to share. He graciously said yes, and you can see it here. If you do anything to help you be a better teacher this month, please listen to his story, it will only take 2 minutes of your precious life minutes.

[Video here:](#)

At the end of this special week with all the hockey family, I spoke on the "[Technical Timeout](#)" podcast with a former Canadian National team and pro player, Louis-Pierre Mainville. The 45 minutes somehow stretched into over an hour and a half, as we spoke

about things that I think matter in coaching in general. He asked me a question that I would ask all of you reading my blog to ask yourself and share in the comments or with your club coaches -- "What one thing would you tell your younger self that you know now?"

I am going to share more of the things I learned, for I think perhaps the most important thing that too many coaches are failing to do, I wrote about in this blog – [Ancora Imparo](#). It is also how I sign most of my emails now, as it is so important. I mean, if the great Michelangelo said at when he was 87, it is a principle that is important for all coaches and their players.

[Video here:](#)

Finally, from USA Hockey, what else did I learn, outside of what I feel are priceless new ideas seen above that I will weave into my teaching? Here are more....

A you a Recruitment Program or a Development Program? ***“Do not shorten the bench until the they are 15U...”*** – USA Hockey staff

I don’t think I am better than anyone, I just want it more than anyone. – Tony Granato

The Journey is the Thing, the Result Will Come Through it – Finnish Federation goalie coach.

The day your talent is more than your work ethic is the day you leave the NHL – Unknown NHL player.

Crap Inoculation – Run towards things that are uncomfortable.

You will become clever with your mistakes – German Proverb.

Target the Struggle – not the comfort zone. Struggle is not an option, it is a biological requirement – Mike Sullivan – Chicago Blackhawks Player Development

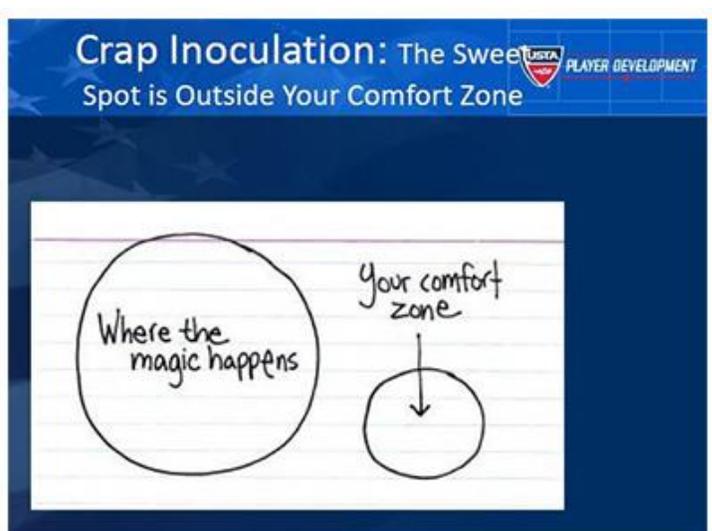
A you in a Race to the Wrong Finish Line? – Unknown at an OTC lunch

Tie the Knot – Don told a story of a military guy he met traveling. The serviceman said “I want to tell you a story about my son, you have to teach your young men to tie the knots. At 14 my son came into kitchen, and I told him he as to take the garbage out. Tie it in a knot before you take it out. One day he would, next day I did. Then I stopped and let my son do it. All the way thru high school. Son did you tie the knot? Yes. So for 4 years his my son did that.” You have to make sure your players tie the knot. That is what player development is.

Compete or be beaten worse – Don Granato

Use what you have, don’t complain – Don Granato

What you permit, you promote – USAV Ohio Valley RVA Commissioner Bob Price’s father said this, which came up after I shared the Peca video.



Thank you Ken Martel for inviting me to share, and I am looking forward to the Level 5 gathering in summer of 2016. Thank you Kevyn for letting yourself risk by evolving. Thank you Mike Sullivan for reminding me my role is to be unnecessary. And thank you

Michael for sharing your story with the coaches lucky enough to hear it. Maybe it is time to retitle my blog “Growing the Games Together...” Please share your stories below about becoming unnecessary yet impactful in athletes’ lives....we all will be a bit better teacher for it.

STOP Teaching Robots

June 09, 2015

Watching some 80 year old players at the US Open and seeing their joy for a sport of a lifetime has me wondering why any kid in the last few decades stops playing. Kids I teach keep playing the game after high school and college, while I keep seeing the dropout rate for kids playing after high school and college. I hear of “burn out” – but I learned by playing and never burned out. We played doubles until they kicked us out of the gym, or on the grass/sand for hours, losers in the end buying the winners Slurpee’s and together getting painful cold headaches at the same moment. Nobody made me go to learn, I wanted to. I see this in young players, those under 13 with the love of playing and doing things for and with teammates. Then, somewhere for too many, this love of learning and the game is gone, beaten down by drill after drill, technical demands, coaches demeaning the players and parents consumed with the outcome of victory rather than the process of learning to be a player.

Technique is important, but not at the expense of kids not wanting to play our game. It’s not about being a perfect volleyball machine, it is about getting better at the game with the core techniques that are understood to be the goal. It is simple, show them and let them do it. Check for understanding then guide their discovery AS THEY PLAY, as they WANT to get better, they just are going to be in the wrong place and time a LOT when young. This is why we play doubles on smaller courts primarily, so the reading demands are limited and expanded as they learn to read better. If they can show you they can demonstrate the core technique WITHOUT the ball they KNOW the technique. They just need to learn when and where to do it in an imperfect game.



One coaching friend shared [this video](#) with me recently about basketball “training.” Where the kids reminded me of robots. I know many coaches, and parents, can relate to the feeling of how “right” these drills seem to be. Indeed, another coaching colleague shared this discussion with a parent in his club that I found of value for other parents.

This weekend I saw a parent watching a match on the court next to us. As our match ended and the girls had a break I wandered over to see what he was watching. As we chatted he said "I love how disciplined both teams are. I'm not complaining, I know

you have your way, and your theory on how to teach volleyball. But look at those teams - the way they warm-up, listen to their coach, and play. It is like watching a choreographed dance. Everything is controlled, directed and just seems 'right'." I watched for a moment and then started pointing out some things - that girl was just subbed out because she missed two spikes in a row. That libero was replaced because she missed a serve receive. Why does the only thing the coach ever says to them is to point out their mistakes. Then I asked him one question - "They look great, but do they know how to play, or do they only know what their coach tells them to do, when, where, and how he tells them to do it?" The next day - we beat one of those teams in the quarterfinals. And the other one in the semis. Both were shocked to have lost to this “ugly” little low cost team from the boondocks.

Consider this Phil Jackson quote - *“If the players were going to learn the offense, they would have to have the confidence to make decisions on their own. That would never happen if they were constantly searching for direction from me. I wanted them to disconnect themselves from me, so they could connect with their teammates – and the game.”*

Recently Karch Kiraly, women’s national team head coach, noted that the USA women play out of system 48% of the time. My 13s play out of system even more. The serve reception, no matter how perfectly done technically, does not fly to the intended in system target often as human reaction time does not allow for final adjustment in the last .2s of incoming ball flight. With less experienced athletes of ANY age, if you don’t know where to go before the ball crosses the net, your serve reception success will be low as you are in the wrong place and time. You can machine them by giving the ball right to the players in training, and they will robotically look good in practice. This same thing I see happen when we pepper, and failing to hit at your partner you say “Sorry!”



Then when the realities of the game happen, and no ball is directed AT you, you struggle to perform the skill, and “technically” have a two choices 1. Look good technically and miss the ball 2. Contact the ball some way even though your technique is “flawed.” I want players, not robots, who can read and get to the best possible place and time to deliver the right next ball flight, even if technically they are out of form. When the ball does something in that last .2s of flight, you get even 5 time Olympians like my friend Natalie Cook receiving like this...and get to simply say “Way to keep your eye

on the ball Nat..." and move on to reading the next serve. There is nothing more to say to her for, as you can see in the picture, her technique is flawless, showing a platform any coach or player would be joyful to see in competition.

Having watched the Premier Volleyball League at the US Open recently, I would estimate half the time these talented men and women made contact with the ball in ways that simply is not learned in the traditional techniques drilled into the players. Playing balls out of the net or tipped over you as you land from a block, chasing down errant digs and serve receptions to deliver a perfect "set" with a one arm swing, keeping the ball in play with their non-dominant hand and countless other saves and split second adjustments – all forms of "Bettering the Ball" which great team players do for each contact.

This skill is simply not learned in a drill. I find it remarkable that the Amish, some of our more traditional people in our nation on many levels, play volleyball, and learn to play it simply by playing. They have no coaches throwing/hitting/tossing balls for them, they just play, anchoring the net/standards to buggies on each side. I wish I had a penny for every ball moving over the court from just two places - the robotic coaching spots of middle-deep-left-back-toss-to-the-setter and the left-front-off-the-court-hit-at-the-defenders, as I would be a millionaire. Ball after ball thrown on the same arc to the setter from the same spot. You could calibrate the GPS satellites of the world by how the balls come from the same spot on the court for decades, even though the ball cart has, gasp, wheels.



Coaches who train for having robots, want us to ignore specificity of learning. We don't play a game where there needs to be a "perfect golf swing" – we play a game where we need to pass off our arms, set off our fingers, block with our arms and hands, serve off our palm, dig with our whole body. How important is "technique" over learning by playing? Well watch these teams battle covering the whole court and tell me about their "Volleyball technique" When I show this to coaches who demand technique over playing/reading skills, they usually are speechless. We play a game where we don't EVER get to hold onto the ball, except to start our toss to ourselves for serving, which just happens to be the only closed motor program we do amidst an infinite number of random open motor programs. So as important as the core techniques are, it is more important to keep the ball off the floor.

Yes there are programs who tell us the best way to start in volleyball is with drills. Stations after station of doing pieces of a skill and "learning." Tens of thousands of wall and partner straight line drills. Sit in a chair run around it and then pair pass a thrown ball. Stand on a box and spike, even using a double arm lift. Blocking on a net that is lowered, even though the child will not be able to block for years to come. These athletes, of any age, are not learning the game in any way, they are learning the drills. The leaders training them are happy as the athletes look good in practice...yet are befuddled when their athletes cannot play the game. It is my experience that some programs win despite their drilling/robotic training for three reasons 1. The recruiting they do 2. The sheer amount of training hours in the gym over other programs and 3. The tournaments the players finally get to compete in, where the game is played, and cannot be drilled, where the players can finally merge the technical demands into the game's realities. We want players to have more and more options and solutions, while keeping things as simple as possible so we reduce the impact of variability.

Motor learning as done by the men's side since before the 1984 gold medal is now being fully applied to the women's game. Not just back row attacks and jump serves but training ugly. That is what Karch says about their training in the National team gym. I think this increase in training in reality is scaring some coaches who simply want to be in control and feel that perfectionism is a good thing. Brené Brown in the excellent book Daring Greatly notes wisely that "perfectionism is a hustle" which is also selfish – something that goes against the special uniqueness of volleyball as a truly team game

"Perfectionism is not self-improvement. Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval. Most perfectionists grew up being praised for achievement and performance (grades, manners, rule following, people pleasing, appearance, sports). Somewhere along the way, they adopted this dangerous and debilitating belief system: "I am what what I accomplish and how well I accomplish it. Please. Perform. Perfect."

Healthy striving is self-focused: How can I improve?

Perfectionism is other-focused: What will they think?

Perfectionism is a hustle."

- from Daring Greatly by Brené Brown

STAGE	Beginner	Advanced Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
SKILL LEVEL	Experience: 0-1 year	Experience: 1-3 years	Experience: 3-5 years	Experience: 5+ years
BALL	Lightweight ball (e.g., tennis ball)	Lightweight ball (e.g., tennis ball)	Standard volleyball	Standard volleyball
COURT SIZE	4 meters x 4 meters	6 meters x 6 meters	8 meters x 8 meters	10 meters x 10 meters
NET HEIGHT	Any net height (e.g., 1.5m)	1.5m	1.7m	2.0m
ADM	STAGE 1: Discover, Learn & Play (Ages 5-12)	STAGE 2: Discover & Exchange (Ages 10-18)	STAGE 3: Train & Compete (Ages 18-19)	STAGE 4: Participate & Showcase (Ages 19+)

USA Volleyball logo

Why do so many kids come out of the little state of Hawaii? Why do those kids keep playing after college? Why do they have thousands come watch them play? I address this in Ohana, as it is part of the reason but it is because they are instilled with a love of the game – one that will get them to keep loving it even when they might cross paths with a controlling coach. I share again this great poster – **MY FIRST COACH SHOULD BE THE GAME** –

In the end, it is not what you know as a coach, but what your athlete thinks. Your job in not making robots is to guide their discovery of when and where to jump, and why – not tell the player, but to get each athlete to better coach their unique self and understand what that feels like. In motor learning an athlete/coach four square game of learning looks like this

YES/YES YES/NO

NO/YES NO/NO

The goal is YES/YES – Player did it right/Coach saw that the player did it right). It is also ok to have NO/NO happen (Player felt it was done wrong/Coach see same wrong technique or option). The vast majority of coaches struggle with the Y/N and

N/Y, where what YOU see, the player simply does not know kinesthetically. Bring out the BAM video delay options on computers and tablet apps, as the player hits live sets in grills or games. You can just look at the player from off the court and if their ‘thumbs up/down’ matches yours, you smile and keep playing. When a Y/N or N/Y thumb response is seen, bring the player over to the replay option you have set up and guide their discovery together on what you know and the player simply does not....

I found this table in the first chapter of Cheryl Coker’s book Motor Learning & Control for Practitioners about Gentile’s multidimensional classification systems where a volleyball skill was compared to 15 other options in the motor program grid. As you can see, you can make robots in other simpler motor tasks. Volleyball however is the most complex, where body transport/object manipulation and moving/variability are at the highest challenge of a human’s motor skill activity. This goes not just for the shown serve reception skill, but for ALL volleyball skills but one – the closed motor program of serving. I might want my player to be more of a robot in serving, as a model of consistency with only subtle variations, but for every other skill, I need a player who can play the infinite time and place variations that will happen in our sport as it is volleyed OVER the net with up to three contacts per side which might be made an inch off the floor, or 3.5 meters in the air, while reading a ball that goes from slow tipped, to 140kph spikes and sets/receptions which might go 6-7 meters in the air. What fun it is to experience all this chaos and random variations in just one game, the lifetime sport we call volleyball.

12 CHAPTER 1

TABLE 1.1 Gentile's multidimensional classification system, with task examples.

		ACTION REQUIREMENTS			
		Neither body transport nor object manipulation	Object manipulation only	Body transport only	Both body transport and object manipulation
Stationary and fixed	Doing a sit-up	1	2	3	4
	Writing ABCs with foot for pencil manipulation	5	6	7	8
Moving and fixed	Floating on a bear in an inner tube	9	10	11	12
	Riding in a tube pulled by a speedboat	13	14	15	16

Seizing Serendipity Whether Graduating or Being Fired

June 15, 2015

I am lucky to have good friends. One is the USOC's Senior Director of Competitive Analysis, Research and Innovation, Dr. Peter Vint, who was kind enough to write this response to a sports leader friend of mine who was recently fired and reached out to me for counsel. We spoke by phone for some time, and then I brought in Peter, who shared the following amazing response. It included an article about Peter by Dave Richardson called "Seizing Serendipity" from the [Leaders in Sport](#) website. It is 404/not found right now, so I have placed at the end of this blog. I shared this response and article with my son who just graduated, as Peter's observations fit so well for anyone moving on from a place they were working or studying. This time of year being college graduation, that is a lot of people.

I only am adding a movie that relates to what my friend and my son are about to experience – the hero's journey of self-discovery – as told in the movie "[Finding Joe](#)." It is a movie all coaches and parents should make sure their teams/kids see I believe. So for those kids graduating from high school, college or even higher levels, and for those who have been fired, and for anyone who shares our passion for learning and wanting to make a difference, we all should say thanks to Peter for allowing me to share his wisdom and embrace the adventures ahead. Take it away Peter....

Thank you for the note. I'm happy to share my perspectives with you. I have taken a very long and strange path to where I am. I am not sure I could recommend it to anyone, but I'm also not sure I would trade any part of it in for anything. And, I am certain that my path isn't anywhere close to ending. I will say that I am doing things now that I never thought I'd do – even when I thought I knew exactly what I wanted to be doing. I thought I wanted to make an impact on the world of elite sport performance through applied biomechanics. As it turned out, that was just a start. Now, I simply want to make an impact on the world of elite sport performance, regardless of whether that includes science, technology, analytics, or business decisions. I would have never imagined that.

As it turns out, my true north was and remains "performance." To quote the great American track coach, Bev Kearney, "I am a crackhead for performance." Obsessed. I try to be completely no nonsense in my evaluation of what works and what doesn't and why. I like synergies and intersections. And, I think from what I've seen, this is somewhat unique in the sporting world.

I won't repeat here the path I've taken, but will steer you to this [site](#) and the attached paper (see below the end of this response) for fair accounts of my journey, my philosophy, and some of the things that drive me.

In terms of your most practical question of where to turn for work, I can't really answer with any certainty. What I can say is that there ARE opportunities and there is absolutely need for smart, well informed/well trained, courageous practitioners to help break through "old school" mentality. It is pervasive at every level of sport in America. And that, combined with the internet age, probably provides a remarkable window of opportunity that didn't really exist when I was starting out. I say the following knowing full well that it won't pay the bills. Not initially, anyway. But, consider volunteering at one or more local sport programs. Consider high schools, community colleges, colleges, clubs, National Governing Bodies, etc. Offer to help – even if it means starting in something a bit more distant to what you really want to do and even if it means doing so for free. Put more bluntly, Find door. Insert foot.

Then do the best work you've ever done. And, write about it. So many people I know who now work, full time or part time in elite sport, got their start blogging. There are thousands of blogs about performance or analytics or [you name it]. Write one. Make it great. Push it around. Find people who are great at this and follow them. Ask them to guest write. Interview them.

A friend of mine who is the head of international scouts at Chelsea (btw...the fact I can write that is hilarious to me, but I suppose testament to my path) once said, "if they're good enough, we'll find them." I can tell you that is true. The trick is to actually become "good enough" to be found. As I learned the hard way, it's counterproductive to be delusional about this. Being "good enough" is a no-bullshit proposition.

Perhaps one of the most powerful things I've ever experienced is, as a 21 year old aspiring graduate student, standing face to face with Dr. Jim Hay (godfather of sport biomechanics) in front of his lab at the University of Iowa and having him tell me, to my face, "I appreciate your interest in our program. Unfortunately, you're just not good enough." After the initial trauma, these five words, "You're just not good enough" became the most motivating thing in my life. This simple statement helped me calibrate my own "bar" which is now set so high that I'm pretty sure I'll never quite reach it. But, that's okay. It's what drives me. It is also what separates me from my peers. My standard of excellence is calibrated against the best in the world. And, again, that is a no-bullshit proposition.

In closing, appreciate in yourself the fact that you reached out. That's what it takes. When I started my business (MotionMax Sports Performance), all I knew is that I wanted to work in sport science. If the USOC wouldn't hire me, dammit, then I'll start a business and do it myself. Along the way, several remarkable things happened. First, I went into debt. I took a second mortgage, pulled money out of savings, borrowed from friends. Around this time, I came across the story of the explorer, Hernán Cortés, who ordered his men to "[burn the boats](#)". The lesson of the story is this: When you cut away the safety net, you have to survive. You have to be

100% committed. You have no other options. In the end, perhaps "burning the boats" is not the smartest thing in the world, but it absolutely forces you to do what you need to do. I burnt mine. It was a huge decision and ended up paying huge dividends.

Second, I learned that I had no clue about how to run a business. But, I lucked into a business accelerator program and was able to find people who were able to help. One woman who was a serial (and successful) entrepreneur told me (in a thick, southern accent), "My momma told me, 'if you don't A.S.K. You don't G.E.T.'" "As an introvert, I wasn't entirely thrilled with this, but it has turned out to be one of the most powerful truths I have ever encountered. Don't know something? Ask. Want to know what the guys in the EPL or Formula 1 or RedBull Stratos Project really do and what they really struggle with? Ask. I have been told no. But I have been "let in" far, far more often than I would have ever have imagined. And, it has made all the difference in who I am today. It drives my children crazy, but repeating this a zillion times will hopefully help them realize the power of simply A.S.K.'ing.

Third, "when God closes a door, he opens a window." I'm actually not religious in any way, but the sentiment captures another truth - as I've experienced it anyway. Once I decided to leave my full time job to start MotionMax (effectively, burning my boats), I A.S.K.'d some folks I knew at the USOC if I could come and meet with them to discuss the approach I was taking to my work. I wasn't trolling for business, but really wanted candid feedback. The meeting went well and I returned home motivated that I was on a good and viable path. Two months later I received an unsolicited call from the USOC stating, "Hey...we liked that stuff you showed us. We don't have a job for you right now, but if we could make one up, would you maybe consider coming to work for the USOC?"

No kidding.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Hope that was in some way helpful.

Peter

PETER VINT: SEIZING SERENDIPITY...BUT LEAVING LITTLE ELSE TO CHANCE

2:40pm Monday, 11th April 2011

Peter Vint, Ph.D., High Performance Director with the United States Olympic Committee shares his thoughts on leading, managing and embedding sports science into high performance sports. Bizarrely, Peter Vint and I share some childhood common ground. The current Director of High Performance at the US Olympic Committee describes his early years as an aspiring soccer player (or football player as I'd like to out it). He is a little more humble than I in that he didn't see himself as a particularly gifted athlete, yet he had a determination to make the starting lineup of his high school team. This determination was accompanied by a certain level of intellect that linked practice to performance.

The early years of Peter Vint were spent kicking a ball against a wall. I too recall with fondness the hours upon hours of my childhood spent playing 'wallie' with my mates. However, at no point did we discuss the merits of our practice. At no point did we discuss our developing ability to control and manipulate the ball. Peter's early experiences seem a little different to mine. As he tells the story, 'I'd end up kicking a ball against the large brick walls of my school for hours on end. In the process, I learned how I could make the ball 'knuckle' or 'dive' or bend. I could control the location, pace, trajectory, and, upon rebound, I could handle pretty much anything that the wall would throw back at me. And so, in that very beginning I taught myself both the discipline that was required to really be good at something and the type of work that was required to become skillful.'

It appears that 'wallie' is the same world over but we undertake skill development in different ways, deliberate, spontaneous, guided. It's not that Peter became a professional player, he didn't, but he understood the 'science' behind his practice from a very early age. He frames his journey in to sports science, biomechanics and motor control in particular around another serendipitous moment. A chance viewing of a breakout segment of an 'up close and personal' TV documentary with the 1984 Olympic volleyball champions, Team USA mesmerised Peter with the transformation of these players jumping through the air and being transformed in to stick figures. The very next day saw Peter alter his degree programme to a composite of sports science related disciplines. Following a master's degree and a 12-month stint with the US Olympic Committee (USOC) as a research assistant in biomechanics, Peter went on to complete his doctorate at Arizona State University. His programme of study was highly multi-disciplinary and involved an amalgam of biomechanics, bio-engineering and aspects of motor control. Upon graduation, Peter accepted a faculty position at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Peter's education wasn't finished, however, as he completed a post-doctoral fellowship in motor control before assuming a research scientist position with a human factors consulting firm.

For some time, Peter had believed he could help club athletes develop more robustly and at a faster pace through the effective, focused, and sport specific application of science and technology.

In 2004, he embarked on his own business venture, Motionmax Sports Performance. Wanting to leave no stone unturned regarding his methodologies or approach, Peter sought further dialogue with colleagues at the USOC. Months later he was extended an offer to join the organization full time.

Serendipity appears to envelop Peter's career choice. It appears that the guy moving the stick figures with the mouse on the breakaway TV segment of the US volleyball team was now the Director of Computer Science programming at USOC, 'I shook his hand and I thanked him for being one of those life altering people that you come across sometimes... it was pretty remarkable.'

Peter's belief in holistic athlete development is evident. The complexity of high performance sport is articulated and understood. His vision and belief that the USOC could impact sport performance in a more multi-disciplinary way resulted in an exhaustive critique of his current activity. Over time, Peter had developed a growing discontent in the under-utilisation of his projects, 'I had begun to spend progressively more of my time thinking about how we could better develop and deploy comprehensive sports performance services. I questioned how some of my own projects could have been more impactful and felt there were ways to help our work become more deeply integrated with the sport. I knew this was not a simple or one-sided endeavour. It was nuanced and it required taking a long-term view of performance planning and execution. But, I genuinely wanted to find a way for the best practices of sport science and medicine to take hold'. Subsequently, a team of highly qualified sports scientists was formed to help address the fundamental question of 'how the USOC could be more effective in the application and integration of sport science services and expertise to enhance sport performance'. Peter's enthusiasm and conviction is evident. He is also fully aware of the complex task that he is faced with.

This is a phenomenal task; to lead, manage and embed sports science provision across distinct domains of US Olympic sports including track and field, swimming, shooting, equestrian, and weightlifting, not to mention volleyball and the odd winter Olympic pursuit. Traditionally, the utilisation, application and/or understanding of sports science across the piece was not as effective nor as integrated within the fabric of each sporting domain as it could have been. 'The work that was being done by our sports science team was being done with the very best of intention. But, it was not always hitting the mark. Sometimes, the work was impeccable (from a scientific perspective) but was not being utilized or being sustained by the coaches or athletes or the National Governing Bodies with whom we were working'. Whilst sports science has been part of the USOC for some years, the scientists, and the athletes and coaches sometimes appeared to operate in distinct silos, 'a disassociation between what the scientists believed would be beneficial and what the coaches believed would be beneficial (or would be willing to adopt) appeared. The gap between knowledge and application had drifted wider. Over time, there had been varying attempts to return the focus of our Sports Science Division (currently called Sport Performance), back to the primary goal of the meaningful application of science and technology to help meet specific sport performance needs'.

The problem is a common feature of high performance sport. The science requires translation, application and relevance to the respective sport(s). The blame does not lie solely with the sports scientist. There is mutual accountability here. The sports scientists need to translate the relevance of their work to the respective culture of the sport. However, in order to do this the respective sports and aligned coaches and practitioners need to let the scientists in (now and again) to enable them to understand their world. The scientists need also to let the coaches and the athletes into 'their world' to help them understand the science. As an experienced academic and now high performance director Peter acknowledges the tensions of both worlds, 'I understand. The promotion and tenure model that many of these professionals [academics] work within does not often lend itself to investing heavily in these more applied [sport performance] pursuits. Many of these folks are required to pursue and land large money grants in public health, geriatric research, or military applications. They may be perfectly capable and keenly interested in doing applied work in the area of sport performance but the fact that they're held accountable to getting grants, writing peer review publications and of course have teaching responsibilities, does not allow a lot of time or flexibility to pursue limited grant monies from sporting organizations, or to spend weeks of their time doing applied work with coaches and athletes'.

The USOC has moved in a direction to address these concerns in earnest. 'We recognize the opportunities before us and are actively working to pair specific sport program needs with specific domain experts. And, this is already happening on a project-by-project basis. Our goal is to maintain a core of applied sport science experts at the USOC that are charged with not only developing service programs here directly but with reaching out to top industry and academic professionals to say, look we've got a question and we think you have what it takes to help us answer it. It may be a specific expertise and/or a specific capability we are seeking, but we're connecting with some of the best people on the planet to help us answer our questions and address our needs.' The model encourages a more complete integration of sports scientists, including the targeting of academic specialists and industry leaders who are able to continue to practice within their existing professional framework, but can be released on (say) secondments or as part of a more elaborate and appropriately funded project.

Peter recognises that the permeation of sports science through the distinct cultures and nuances of the respective sports is a challenge, 'It's never dull. Each sport and each discipline within a sport has its own personality and its own culture. Some within the sport may be particularly receptive to sport science and medicine and others may not. Oftentimes, our ability to be successful boils down to whether a coach or an athlete or an NGB trusts you and whether they believe you have their best interests in mind'. He describes his role quite simply as someone who continues to ask honest questions of the respective sports leaders and coaches with whom he works, 'I try to

ask good questions so that, for example, we can get to the bottom of whether we truly understand where our athletes stand relative to international competition and medal winning standards and what specifically we can do to target the factors that are critically related to the outcome of our athlete's performances'. It takes time to understand the various nuances of culture and practice. Indeed, Peter recognises the value and craft of the experts around him.

The first year and a half of his tenure as the high performance director was spent meeting face to face with coaches, athletes, and National Governing Body staff members in order 'to understand their sport, their environment, and the constraints within which they work. I have tried to understand any political pressures or motivations from specific constituents that they are trying to balance so that I can understand what they are really dealing with. I want to know what's real. I want to know which variables we really have to work with. Once we've established an honest relationship and a working understanding of their environment, then we can begin to ask, and have answered, these fundamental questions related to high performance planning and execution'. Political and relational astuteness is a characteristic that Peter possesses and one that he openly shares with his colleagues, 'I try to be honest and transparent in my words and in my actions. I think the world of my team and I'm committed to being honest about what I know and what I need from myself and from my team... [if we] simply share the constraints that we're trying to work within then everybody has a better sense of the constraints within which we work and how we can move forward together.

It is evident that Peter has surrounded himself with exceptional talent. His vision is clear and his attention to the detail of human performance appears to know no bounds. The ongoing daily challenge is to make sure that, 'we're focusing the right resources (human and material) on the right programs to maximize our impact on performance. That said, we know for our programs to be successful, our approach must be collaborative and iterative. We need to actively seek feedback from the coaches and athletes. We want to know what worked and what didn't and why. We want to know whether something was great in concept but failed to work in their actual training environment. We challenge our coaches and ourselves to address the question of whether a program was utilized as completely or as regularly as was intended. 'Why didn't it work?' and 'How can we be better'? If you are being completely honest, these can be terribly uncomfortable questions to ask and to answer. But I believe they are among the most important'. The process is clear, but it requires understanding, accountability, feedback, and action to attend to a common high performance goal. It also requires a long-term perspective. The reality of the Olympic endeavour is clear, 'there are [usually] only three medals that will be awarded in any given event during the Games. You can pretty well bet that at least three people from around the planet that are working their tails off every single day to beat you. Deep down, all exceptional coaches and athletes know this. Having the honest conversation of where they really stand and what competition they face is not hard, and when done right, is not at all offensive. Athletes know they get out of training what they put in. They know there is no magic to becoming great. And, in the end, we all know that they are the ones suiting up and competing. We want them to be absolutely prepared to compete and we try to help them by addressing performance from a comprehensive, whole human, perspective'.

It is clear that sports science and the sports scientist are critical in informing this argument. Peter advocates the deployment of his sport science staff across many sports as opposed to working in a silo of a single sport or a class of sports, 'inevitably, I believe the things we learn along the way will have application to somebody else in some other context. Without having those experiences in different environments, in different contexts, or with different types of athletes or coaches, I think our philosophical scope as well as our experiential scope is more limited than it would otherwise be'. Since Peter's introduction to the USOC, the model for sports science support has changed in both form and function. It no longer resembles an academic unit, but better reflects the multi-dimensional nature of human performance. Indeed, the traditional 'academic-looking' model has been replaced with multi-disciplinary teams that focus their efforts around particular sports, themes, or 'sportfolios' such as an 'endurance sportfolio' (e.g., running 800m and longer, swimming events of 400m or longer, cross country skiing, biathlon) or a 'strength and power sportfolio' which includes events focused primarily on explosiveness and short duration energy systems. Further tweaking of this approach has focused on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of communication between the National Governing Bodies and the USOC.

The most recent iteration of the USOC Sport Performance structure sought to reduce duplication of effort and ensure more direct communication channels. The model appears to be working but again, will be continually critiqued and developed to ensure its relevance and effectiveness to the respective coaches and athletes. Indeed, any new developments, practices or technologies are tested shared and measured. With a background in biomechanics and motor control, it comes as no surprise that Peter is an advocate of measurement, 'I believe that there are substantial and untapped opportunities to make meaningful differences in the quality and accuracy and insight of the feedback we deliver to our coaches and athletes'. There is a focus on the development of more meaningful, relevant, and timely measurement and feedback systems. 'However, there is balance we have to strike between the kinds of technologies that we can deploy based on the current state-of-the-art and the types of technologies we need to deploy to meet the needs of our coaches by providing efficient access to necessary information in the field. As an example, Peter recounts the importance of this distinction as his team of performance technologists engaged with the US Bobsled and Skeleton team. The coaches described the need for a real-time, wireless video playback technology system that would allow the coaches on the hill to provide more specific and verifiable feedback of what they were instructing the pilots to do on the next run. 'We identified a need that was simply based on improving the efficiency and reliability of a process. They wanted to provide more useful and more trustworthy information to their pilots. In the end, the solution was clever albeit relatively simple. It worked on the hill, in the snow, and exactly how they needed it.

We could have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars for a sophisticated satellite uplink and wireless communication system, but instead, we spent \$250 on a system we bought at a consumer electronics store. Simple is good. Simple and cheap is even better'. At this juncture we appear to return to the notion of the delivery of appropriate and timely feedback. I could have done with some of this when I was playing 'wallie'...

So where does Peter seek his inspiration for making this happen. The translation of a vision or a philosophy into practice is no easy task. As with the most acclaimed leaders and managers of this world, Peter is highly self-critical and seeks to discuss both the philosophical and pragmatic challenges of leadership with colleagues within the USOC and across other high performance domains. He cites the 'performance-focused' writings of Dr. Atul Gawande as a recent influence. Gawande is a highly skilled surgeon and a leader amongst a community of highly qualified and technical professionals, but he is also 'willing to ask the question of whether we're as good as we think we are? He asks whether we can challenge each other and actually go about the process of finding ways to be better, even in very complex and tradition rich environments. It's been very enlightening to see somebody like this, who certainly wouldn't have to challenge himself or his profession in this way; to do so in such an open and honest and fair-minded way. I think that is refreshing and I am invigorated by such challenges.' Gawande, it appears is meticulous. In particular, his book 'The Checklist Manifesto' has influenced Peter's thinking as he works with Team USA and their preparations for the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. Indeed, Peter draws from work of Gawande again as we finish off the interview, 'We understand that many things can go wrong in the world of Olympic sport. There are enormous pressures and expectations. It is often the culmination of a lifetime of work and sacrifice and dedication. But while sometimes mistakes happen because elite sport is fast and complex and variable, we need to remember that sometimes mistakes happen because we fail to attend to the simplest of details. This is one such avenue our team is working to make our knowledge actionable and useable and integrated into the daily work of our coaches and athletes. Truth be told, I feel the same principles apply to our own behaviour as professionals in elite sport.' Ironically, whilst Peter reports his serendipitous early years' experiences with biomechanics and high performance sport, it appears that he is prepared to leave little else to chance.

My final thoughts... the world of high performance sport is highly complex. We are humans and are subsequently hostage to an array of contextual factors that may influence our performance at any given time. We will miss stuff, we will forget stuff and we will inevitably be inconsistent. As Gawande applies these thoughts to health care, Peter Vint applies these thoughts to high performance sport; understand the controllable and control them. I'm not typically a 'check list' person but I've already ordered my copy of the Check List Manifesto! I'm sure others will follow my lead...

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Growing Kids Volleyball

June 23, 2015

CREATING KIDS' VOLLEYBALL SUCCESS

This year marks my 40th year of coaching youth volleyball, which I define as 12 and under. The last few years I have seen growth in this area, but far too much of it simply is adults coaching the adult 6 vs 6 game to little kids. This leads to far slower learning of the every important volleyball IQ area kids should be learning, as the one player touching the ball and 23 watching lack of doing in tournament play, leads the adults to do drills in practice – where kids either stand in line not learning, or learn the irrelevant “skills” of pair passing, usually from the same side of the net, ignoring the vital importance of the regulatory stimuli of the net itself. So some thoughts, from gems hidden on the grassroots section of USA Volleyball and other ideas learned over the last couple of seasons of clinics and coaching...



PAIR UP Pass/Set/Hit

One way to combat the boring standing in line tradition of training youth is to run practices just in pairs – OVER the net and doing Receive/Set/Attack variations every time. You can serve back and forth to your pair partner, and starting with the setter at the ribbon/net who tosses to their partner, do receive (both forearm and overhead)/Set (lowest to start and higher as their reading/setting/attacking skills advance)/attack games. It is NOT about passing or setting the ball back and forth over the net on one hit – that is jungle ball and what traditional pair passing teaches. It is about receive/set/attack, no matter how

young they are. When you run a long ribbon/net system – to get 25-40 meters of “net” and not 10 meters of a regulation net, you can lower the net for young ones and just get a whole class/group of 36 kids P/S/H in pairs, and get physical education/fitness by each group chasing their ball. You can put the ribbon nearer to one wall, not centered in the court/gym, so the chase is shorter and time on task even higher. You can either lower the net/ribbon, as seen in this photo of 2nd graders – or hit from off the net – letting them know the “bic” (low 1 meter high) set they are hitting is one of four main back row spikes ([A/Pipe /D are the others as seen HERE being practiced](#)) they will see by the USA men and women’s Olympic team.

TWO VS. ZERO

No matter what their age, from simply doing overhead passing only on all three contacts, to reaching a level of dig/receive – set, overhead attack play. There is nothing more valuable than having the REAL ball control that comes with this warm up/game. You can cooperatively score it, to set team/program records for in-a-row, and transition score it, where the pair cooperates to a certain number of net crossings before going full on competitive for the rest of the point. They then reset and cooperate to that pre-determined number of net crossings. [CLICK HERE](#) to see some 8 year olds playing 2 v 0 for the first time in their lives, and see what can be done at any age and level of skill.

LOSER BECOMES THE NET GAMES

Everyone knows monarch/queen/king of the court. So when just 3 or more kids are around, and no net, but they have a volleyball, just play 1 v 1 (3 hits a side) with the loser standing in the middle being the net. Got 4 kids? One team is doubles and plays regular. Same with five, only two doubles teams. Then when you get to six players, you can chose to play TWO groups of 1 v. 1 or one group of 2 v. 2 with each time the team losing the point stands in the middle (some kids might call this monkey in the middle from other sports games) arms raised and become the “net.” The net should be able to block – to learn to keep the sets off the net, but only the smaller players should be able to jump as the net. The idea is that the net can “jump” in order to get the “net” to be the women’s 7’ 4 ¼” net height or men’s 7’ 11 5/8” height (boys 15 and older play on the men’s height net). Higher skilled kids you challenge real ball control by saying how they have to hit it over the net, including with the non-dominate hand. Remember to keep score, every time you stay on, you get a point. To see examples of this game being played on sand, grass and even a parking lot, [CLICK HERE](#).



USAV Drill Video Loser Becomes the Net

5,327 views

12/13/2013

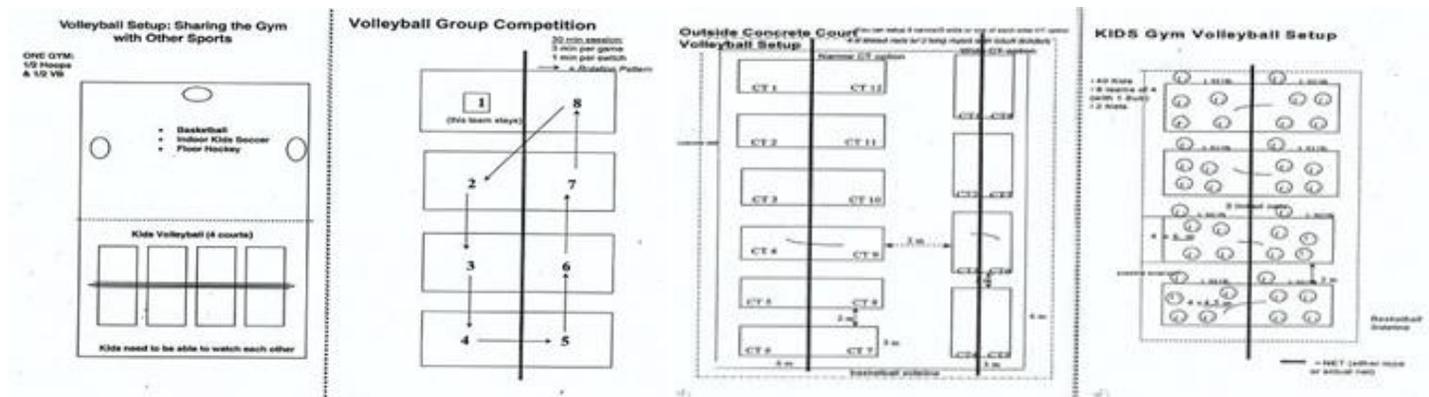
FOUR NETS ON A ROPE COMPETITIONS

Kids should be playing 2 v 2 as much as possible at this age. The four nets on a rope system (or ribbon / rope courts), allows you to get 8-16 doubles teams to compete on one regular adult court. Eight teams in a fast round robin timed games to 5-12 min each (there will be 7 rounds, so 5 min games take a half hour and 12 min games take about 90 min. For 12 teams, you do timed 3 team pools on the 4 courts take another 50% longer. Sixteen teams have you playing speedball for a certain amount of time, then rotate the winners “up” one way and the lowest scorer of the four teams the other way, so that quickly over the competition period the better teams play each other and the less skilled teams are competitive against teams more at their level. Note that in starting kids programs, it is better to NOT ask for the whole game, but rather just half the gym. Run the four nets from side basket to side basket in half the gym and let the kids soccer/basketball/other sports see your group having so much action and fun on your side.



Outdoors, if you link run TWO sets of 4 nets on a rope on two adult sand courts, you can do the above variations, getting twice as much play happening. Yes it is possible to have 32 teams, a grand total of 64 kids, playing doubles on just two adult sand courts. On grass courts, the same, and if there are more full sized courts, you can put up each with 4 nets on a rope (most commonly using wooden “X” standards staked out). And get 32 kids more per adult court, or put three or two, not four, larger and wider courts. Down the middle of each adult court. Of course you can also play doubles on the full sized 8x16m courts. In Vail when I run outdoor clinics ([CLICK HERE](#) on how I run those), I have had as many as 16 full grass doubles courts in a line, and simply tell the one team to stay, and everyone else to rotate, and with 4 min timed games, you get everyone to play everyone in one hour.

If you only have 8 or so kids, play 1 v 1 Speedball on two courts or just 1 v 1 on all four courts. That just happens to be how the creator of volleyball gave as the second rule of the game – where just one person played on a side (or two, or three or more....its where the term “sideout” came from). [CLICK HERE](#) to get a copy of the rules of volleyball in 1897. To see court size examples [CLICK HERE](#).



TWO CONTACT GAMES

While this might naturally happen with youth who lack ball control, along with one contact games, once their volleyball experience and IQ is ready, limit the per side contacts to two. Things will get uglier/more random/chaotic and each side, from small court doubles teams to even six a side, will get 50 percent more chances to read the ball coming over the net to read, compared to a three contact game. The more chaotic version of the game can be done for maybe 25 percent of your game play. I have also blogged previously about a national team favorite tennis like warm up, known also as “vallis” where both sides cooperatively then competitively purposefully send the ball back and forth with just one hit (and no bounce). Then there is “Chaos,” where TWO balls get served at the same time and not until one side gets both balls to be a point, does the game end – for when one ball is down, you can “revive” the ball by serving it to the opponent side before the second ball becomes a point also. Chaos as a warm up for any age and sized court is done usually with no jumping, and one to three contacts per side required. When teams warm up with balls and over the net, they simply get better at volleyball, while moving a lot as is needed in a warm up.

SITTING VOLLEYBALL

There too often comes a time when programs lose their gym space. So rather than cancel the practice, simply spend time doing the discipline of sitting volleyball (or go outside and set up a net and play if the weather and time of day allows), rather than cancel learning time. Share the court that is available as you can set up THREE sitting courts on one regular indoor court - endline to 3 meter line/3m line to 3m line/3m line to other endline. Put a couple of chairs centered on each endline and tighten the ribbon or rope and play. The court is .5m short officially is all, but who cares? The athletes will get better at overhead skills, laugh, and learn a bit more about the Paralympic version of the game. There are, after all, only four rule differences from the Olympic version beyond the smaller court. Those are blocking the serve is ok; feet can be over lines or under the net as long as your bottom is behind the lines; no "air butt" as you must stay on one cheek when blocking or attacking, not when going lower to defend, set or receive. Put the ribbon/rope over the top of the chair back, and weight it down with something heavier – weight plate from the weight room, 50 lb petfood bag or even someone sitting in the chair (seen in these pics). Link to VolleySlide Info Graphic project when we finish it next week.



KIDS COACHING YOUNGER KIDS

That which you teach, you learn. Sadly, many programs feel you need adults to teach kids at all levels. There are even programs where parents teach their kids one on one. Around the world, high levels of play by kids 11-12 years of age, have them teaching up to half their practice to the 7-10 year olds. The only adult you need is the head coach, who is there to guide the discovery of the older kids while they teach the younger kids in one, two and three person groups/teams. These young coaches become better players by coaching it, and are great, fitting role models for those just a few years younger than themselves.

ONE/TWO VS. FOUR/FIVE/SIX

Some days you might only have 5-6 players. You certainly can help quickly give the server or teams of a 2/3 vs 3 game balls quickly, so as to increase the contacts per hour. As they get better, it is also a good reward and challenge to have side just be one or two players maximum. This solo or pair team plays the remainder of the squad at practice. You can rotate thru, so every player sees how many points they can score in a set amount of time. You can also let the player on the larger numbered team size who earns the point to replace one of the pair/solo team players, swapping positions on the fly between serves. Count out loud to two seconds before the serving team can serve, to make sure they hustle and anticipate both having a ball ready to serve and move fast to the pair/solo team side.

PLAY COED

Whether you play with or against adults, or boys, competing against older/more experienced players and boys simply adds to any girls' team practice. Boys playing men is the same. This is a non-contact game we play and kids might lose on the scoreboard at the start, but they can learn faster by playing those faster and better than they are. Coed play is underrated in developing younger players skill sets.

THREE TEAM POOL EVENTS

So families can stay more local yet get nearly as many matches in an evening as they do in a day long tournament. This is for full court doubles, triples, four and six person team sizes playing. These pools are only three rounds, with the off team refereeing. Even the smallest gyms should be able to fit in two courts, if six hoops are up in the same gym. Playing either timed matches of 45 min, or best two of three to 21 (starting at 4-4), the pool play rounds take just over 2 hours, then the finals take place where the #1 teams from each pool compete on court 1 and the #2 teams playoff on court 2, with the #3 teams from the pools refereeing. In just over three hours four of the six teams have played three matches.

If you form these two court events into a chain of competition, each round you can advance the #1 team into a higher group, and move the team, or teams, finishing 3rd in the pool to a lower group.

You can do these three hour competitions on Friday evening – we call them date nite competitions/leagues which allow the parents to have time for dinner and a show. You can do them Saturday mornings, from 8-11, so the families have time for other activities, or Sunday afternoons/early evenings, after church.

In every case with athlete of any age or experience, you check them without the ball to see if they grasp the actual technique, by their showing you what they think it looks like. Once you are confident they know it, even when you don't see it in the game played above, you keep guiding them to learn how to be in the right place and time to best do each skill technically. The youngest can play with a balloon or beach ball to slow the flight time down, and on these smaller courts where the ball does not fly as fast or far. Still, they should be playing over the net, not ignoring it, and having fun.

SEE HIGHER LEVEL VOLLEYBALL

If you begin with the end in mind, you start by showing young players volleyball rallies like those found in the USAV Grassroots section called "[Longest Rallies Awards](#)." This way they understand first off the game is three contacts, with lots of movement and rallies. Then it is time to take them on a "field trip" to watch a high school or college game, of either gender. With lead time for larger groups, many schools will both arrange for free admission, and even a chance to meet/greet the team before or after the match. Even a Park and Rec Men's/Women's/Coed highest level of league play can substitute, with under an hour of play the kids experience what real volleyball is and can be. The [National Collegiate Volleyball Federation](#) has a season from fall to mid-April for their nationals, and those men and women would LOVE to have kids come watch their practices or tourneys on hundreds of college campuses from Oct to March, in the months leading up to nationals. It is also a way to show kids the options beyond playing varsity at the university level.

SET NO LIMITS BASED ON AGE

Finally, a reminder to those who think that young players don't learn well from playing 2 v. 0 and small sided games, I urge coaches and teachers of any age to take 12 minutes to break through those limiting beliefs. Note in advance some important things in this video seen now over a million times between the FIVB and USAV websites combined. 1. Boys are playing this game at a young and high level. 2. These are not all-star teams selected from tryouts and regional recruiting efforts; they are just that kids from each school. 3. No attacked ball is hit into the net. Over the net and out is the only attacking error they make. 4. All but three digs go UP, onto their side, not over the net. [CLICK HERE](#) to watch the 2013 Thailand School VB Championships.

If you have other ideas on how you have successfully created programs for kids under 12, please share them in the comment section. Remember USAV RVAs may have free full year/insurance included 8 & under memberships, and low cost (\$10-15) 11 & under memberships, along with very low cost 6-8 week USAV League memberships at about \$3 a player. Check with your USAV Region office and find out how they can help you grow the game together. [CLICK HERE](#) for the USAV RVA map.

Stay Quiet and Let Them Play

July 29, 2015

Sometimes as coaches, we need to stand back and see if we have taught them anything (the ducklings.) If you are simply quiet, and let them have a little independence, they'll prove your worth as a coach. There is no better feeling. This is a story by a coach about their first three days of summer open gym, that we all can learn from and relate to I think.

Day One

Started open gym on Tuesday - Four kids show up. It was initially two for 30 minutes until the two of them finished some rehearsal for their National Honor Society induction ceremony. They asked me to play – (I declined) I wanted to see what they did and how they interacted with one another. I intentionally stayed quiet. I set up the nets, tossed them the bag of balls and hopped onto the row machine and elliptical for 45 minutes.

Well, it was interesting. First, they started off by jogging two or three laps around the gym (something we don't do, but other sports do - ugh). Then they proceeded to pepper without the net for about 15 minutes...in their defense they were waiting for more to show up. Then the other two girls show up. They did a little warm-up and started serving straight away. Three of them are going to be seniors and one is going to be a 10th grader. After a little bit of this they decide to play 2's. It actually wasn't too bad...they started jump serving pretty straight away and some of the rallies weren't too bad. A lot of bumping back on three, but I digress. The freshman was really struggling as she does not have the ball control of the other girls. They were really nice about it and after 20 or so minutes, she improved drastically, at least to the point where balls were staying in play a bit longer. Not a bad first day...all of them vowed to come back on Thursday and tell more kids to show up.

Day Two

Walked down to the gym where I saw 16 kids today (whoa!)And five of them boys (mostly baseball players who stayed after to turn in their gear). One is 6'4" and gangly, but could be a pretty darn good volleyball player with some time. We set up the 2nd net because there were so many kids wanting to play, which was pretty cool. Again, I just sat back, said nothing, and just worked out on my rower.

Day Three....

USE OF THE COURT WITHOUT USE OF THE NET IS PROHIBITED

Today was a bit better; nice short warm-up, then straight into Queen of the Court 3's. The leaders began to emerge, teaching the boys how to play, giving technique tips on serving, passing, etc. It was pretty awesome to watch your players become coaches and to be hearing them say things that you have said to them. After about 20 minutes of Monarch of the Court, they decided to play 6's.

All during this time my best player, a great kid who will be a senior setter next year (who is also our best passer) from a wonderful family with hearts gold, is teaching a JV girl who initially said she was not going to play, how to serve consistently overhand. It was a pretty special moment. She worked with this girl, a 9th grader, for about 35 minutes. She finally got her to serve semi-consistent serves. That was pretty special; giving up her opportunity to play

with the others so she could teach, all the while giving cues like;

"Make solid contact just under the middle"

"If you want to hit the ball harder, you have to swing faster."

"That's it! Nice!"

I nearly cried.

Meanwhile, the 6's game was a bit disorganized, but they seemed to have a decent time. No real leadership emerged, so it fizzled quickly. Then the leaders got together and hatched an idea to use the 2nd court more effectively; let's play a 3's mini round robin tourney, games to 11, everyone switches courts, and everyone play, Pretty awesome. So they played 3's laughing and giggling, and hustling all over the place. I just sat there absorbing all of it. Then they began to trickle out.

A few of the kids stay for extra serving practice (including my senior setter). She is now rocketing her jump float and nailing all parts of the court; that took 1/2 a season last year. By the end I was openly grinning, smiling inside to see the improvement; the aggressiveness, the dedication to her craft, the leadership and...the joy of playing. Gosh, all it took was three days and me being quiet. I hope other programs let open gym be an "Exploratorium" of learning to love the game and your teammates, as kids these days have so few opportunities to be in control of their learning. Too often it is coming from extrinsic sources, and not from within. Let them play and you just sit back and learn too. I am going to enjoy these next open gyms a lot I am sure... Just put up these two signs conveniently included in this story, and then get out of the way...



The Game Will Find a Way

August 03, 2015

Spent some time in June based out of Pago Pago, teaching the coaches and players one of the farthest “regions” that USA Volleyball supports, American Samoa. Since 1878 the US had a naval station there, and during World War II a 2,500 ft long run way, airbase and mobile hospital. Many stateside do not realize that there are hundreds of thousands of US citizens, many who have fought and died for our nation in war and in peace, living in territories like Guam, US Virgin Islands and right here. This area is extra special for me, as my grandfather and father both worked the south pacific, my dad as a Navy captain in WWII. Thanks to them I can come here and share secrets to growing volleyball for all the people.

This specific event is the result of the Fa’a Samoa Initiative, sponsored by NFL great Troy Polamalu and his wife Theodora. It began in 2011 with Troy giving back to his homeland by doing football programming, then 2013 former University of Hawaii and USA National team member Allen Allen worked with him to add volleyball. Logan Tom, 4 time US Olympian is here with me, one of my favorite players I have been lucky to know since she was about 15 years old. She works with the kids in such a genuine caring and playful way, it is a joy to see. Both Troy and Allen are American Samoans who left their island home to find excellence in the USA. Troy’s brother this trip was recounting how he had recently found a goal list inside the panel of an electrical box, where Troy had listed about 10 goals in his high school final year. To get a 4.0, make defensive and offensive player of the year and win the title were some of them. The gritty thing about Troy you saw on the field, is seen in that he did not make any of those goals. He got a 3.9, and was injured, but not reaching them does not stop the growth mindset from grinding on, and outworking everyone. When I think of Troy, I think of the volleyball player challenge to practice as if you are the 13th player on a 12 person roster.



We taught for hours every day – at various high schools and “DWYA,” and the only “problem” was some kids got sore feet. Yes, in their hospitable ways we dined with the governor, with Samoan music, dance and food, listened and sang along to the ukulele and guitar in the home of the man who brought the Flaming Sword/Fire Knife dance to America, participated in a traditional Kava ceremony, had a real Samoan 3 roasted pig luau at a place on the ocean which was beyond breathtaking to me as the Pacific waves smashed into the lava rocks making the shoreline. . That is to be expected of such kind people, but the key thing is we got to work with the kids for hours every day. My drive to one gathering was in the back of a pickup truck, and one of the coaches filmed our discussion as we drove together to our destination. If you get carsick easily, maybe you should not watch, but otherwise **CLICK HERE** to watch and listen to the talk. <https://vimeo.com/134554968>



So after days and evenings of coaching clinics, woven around working directly with each high school and the players plus mornings and afternoons for over 100 kids 12 and under learning the joy of our game from Allen, we ended with a tournament on June 27th to do our part in the world record attempt by the FIVB of #VolleyballYourWay. This was an 11 team JV and varsity event, televised by no less than six cameras and two announcers. The hospitality of the Samoan people is a delight, as the gift of the Polamalu and their sponsors has been remarkable. Kids get both breakfast and lunch delivered to the training site, shoes and gear from Nike, and great training. There is an academic training portion, led by Penny from Pitt. A group of medical doctors are here screening and helping the athletes, and the boys are getting football training from NFL players. It's about the kids, from the opening to the closing ceremonies, and everything in between.

One of the Department of Education staffers who loves volleyball pulled me aside on the last day to share how the biggest takeaway for him is how we created so much net space to get the kids playing, and not standing in line. I brought one 4-nets-on-a-rope system (donated to the national team coach Tumua Matuu at the end of all training), 50 meters of 1.5 in white wired ribbon – cut up and used to help, along with swim noodles, 11 small courts for Allen's 12U groups where only 2 nets existed, and 5 Proctor and Gamble 100' long net bands for each of the High schools to take them from 10m of net to 40 meters. I swung by Ace Hardware and bought 100 feet of 5/8ths inch rope for the sixth school to have for extending training.

I challenged the coaches to create more places for the game to be played. There are single courts at most churches, and even set up in vacant lots or flat spots in every village. There they spend a lot of time chasing the balls. They never thought of using the oft empty tennis courts to be a training and playing spot, by tying rope as the standards at the end of each court, from the top to the bottom of the fence. Then you string up the rope/net/ribbon using the truckers knot to tighten, and draw the court lines with colored sidewalk chalk. It opens up dual use of the fenced in "gyms" to pack in 25-30 kids on to one tennis court – with no need to take the tennis net down as it serves as a low middle of the gym divider net/ball stopper.



I have also given away beach balls and balloons to all the little kids watching their older siblings, so they can go home and play together. The game finds a way with these low cost, slower traveling through the air options, in every home and without breaking things in the house. Most the time...lol. Some of the most intense volleyball "matches" I have ever seen have been 1 vs. 1 games with balloons, at homes, hotel rooms or airport gates. This trip just further reminded me of how important it is to get kids playing, not 6 vs. 6, but 1 vs. 1 and 2 vs. 2, having fun, learning to read, focused on their OWN play/partner and not worrying about others, developing volleyball IQ and simply no longer standing in lines. We went from day one of two lines of 12 kids waiting to hit, to pairs working together over the varied "nets" we created, teaching them to not just hit, but to be skillful. That is to say, players who can hit line and cut shots, short tips and deep pokey shots, wipe shots

from both sides of the court and...not just getting good at hitting from the left side/zone 4 – instead knowing how to spike from the back row first, and the right side often – even half the time. The volleyball traditions of standing in lines, throwing (instead of passing a live ball) and running under the net are less likely to waste the time of the kids here in America Samoa, and for that we have the great group of volleyball coaches who journeyed here, led by Allen Allen, and the Polamalus to thank, so Fa'a fatei.

If you'd like to see more pictures of the kids and coaches working on this project, some 600+ with about half being of the HS AllStar girls vs the NFL men – some funny action shots of ways football stars play our sport (they lost in 3 by the way...) CLICK HERE. <https://picasaweb.google.com/100632198530372561542/FaASamoa2015>

As a closing sidenote, I think it fitting that James Michener, prize winning author of best sellers like South Pacific, wrote in the epilogue of his tome Sports in America – *“I had learned volleyball in the navy, where all the captains and admirals wanted to be spikers, and I found then that a man who can subdue his own desires and master the art of serving others can make himself invaluable. In choosing sides, the team captain always chose the good spikers on the first and second choice, but then the spikers would grab his arm and whisper, ‘Take Michener.’ I was never chosen lower than third, because I was needed. I wasn't good, but I was faithful.”*

False Fundamentals

August 24, 2015

The term false or fake fundamentals, along with the concept of irrelevant training, is one that it seems coaches, parents and players simply want to ignore. Understandably so, as it gives them a feeling of success and mastery, even though it is not helping them in competition. It is what Dr. Richard Schmidt said to our US Olympic coaches multiple times “you are practicing for practice, and not performance...” There are some who think that by getting fundamentals to be learned through grills and game play and not blocked training that this is like heresy to the job of coaching. Those people better not start coaching any X games or other individual sports, for they will be out of a job – nor making an offer to coach Bubba Watson for sure. While not many kids learn to ride a bike with a “coach” – or drills or summer camps for that matter, the job of a team sport coach is to blend skilled individuals into team tactics, while tweaking the players’ skills for successful performance at their level and beyond.

In showing their disbelief in the science as we know it today for motor learning principles, they might even then determine that if the game teaches the game, then our best players will be in the US Open 80 years old and over division. While those players can often beat much younger players who also are far less experienced, and masters teams LOVE to do that in volleyball, losing the warm up but winning the match, the realities of aging do exist. I can attest to it as I got served off the court while playing a couple of summers ago with my son in the “Dinosaur” division of a doubles tourney – where your combined ages had to total 80 and over. Our best players are in general in their mid 20s and early 30s, where athleticism and game experience unite to make team like our 1988 and 2008 men’s gold medal teams, or we see multiple time Olympians like the great Tara Cross Battle, Danielle Scott Aruda and Lloy Ball holding court. Five time Olympian Danielle played in the PVL women’s division this past May in Detroit, and her wisdom shone thru, even if her jump was not as threatening as it once was.

Hugh McCutcheon had to teach players joining the national team how to serve, as the women’s game scholastically has so many subs and all that certain tall middle players did not serve before joining the national side. A chance to do it right from the start I guess, but amazing to me. Given the train ugly environment that now has existed on the women’s national team training courts since 2009, and the very gamelike training done in the men’s collegiate game, we are even seeing talented starters on both teams who are in their early 20s. The future is bright for sure, for Rio and beyond, as both Coach Kiraly and Speraw are working hard to lead and establish program consistency and continuity that will keep the USA very strong in our future quadrenniums.

Sports clubs that promote the pieces of the game will be successful no doubt, as long as they can recruit the talent in an area – usually by taking players from smaller clubs who have actually developed the players’ sport skills. When one program can recruit the best talent in an area, coaches can afford to train less efficiently, in part because despite so many coaches’ desires to be ON the playing surface of the court, they can’t be actually playing in the match. Thus, these talented players finally get to learn from the actual game and begin their understanding of game flow anticipation and increasing their real world volleyball IQ. That doesn’t stop a coach from yelling in after every contact what to do next, expressing their disgust when the players perform less than perfectly, benching a player to “teach them a lesson” and wanting to control a game that is random and in the control only of those six team members on the court.

So it is August, and volleyball at the high school level just was reported by the National Federation to have surpassed basketball to become the #1 team sport, and #2 most participated in sport, for girls. It also means nearly half a million athletes are in preseason. This means they are likely to be doing “Skill work,” and as we teach the way we were taught, these players are doing single skill reps...and standing in line...probably with a coach throwing all the balls “perfectly” so they can develop their “skills.” Ask them and they will tell you “we are working on skills, it’s boring, but we don’t get to play until we have our skills down.” It is too bad these traditions that are not based on science, but that most dangerous phrase in language, as Admiral Grace Hopper noted – “We’ve always done it this way...”

That we cannot separate out learning from playing is very well summarized in this quote on playing something beyond a sport, but still a complex motor program. *Not many years ago I began to play the cello. Most people would say that what I am doing is "learning to play" the cello. But these words carry into our mind the strange idea that there exists two very different processes: (1) learning to play the cello; and (2) playing the cello. They imply that I will do the first until I have completed it, at which point I will stop the first process and begin the second. In short, I will go on "learning to play" until I have "learned to play" and then I will begin to play. Of course, this is nonsense. There are not two processes, but one. We learn to do something by doing it. There is no other way... -- John Holt*

I just served as jury at the 2015 ParaPanAm Games in Toronto (congrats to our USA women for winning gold and the USA men silver – the men qualifying for Rio for the first time since 2004), and got to see a team, led by the late, great, Eugenio George. They scoured the nation for the best hitters, with the fastest arms, and turned them into setters, running a 6-2 while everyone else ran a 5-1. The Cuban women’s team playing in the Paralympics did not have either that level of talent (much smaller talent pool) or experience. In one match alone vs the USA they were aced 33 times in a 0-3 drubbing. They warmed up in pairs fine, hit their spiking lines technically well, and had a huge amount of passion. They just could not hit against the block (the block in the sitting game stays above

the net the entire time) which only was seen in the game, not warm up. They did not know whose ball it was as this is not learned in pair passing. They did not read the incoming serve, which comes at a pace just 5 meters, not 9, over a net just a meter, not over 2 meters, high. Their “offense” was to put the serve back over the net and hope for an opponent error – something that works well with lower level teams but not at the level they were now competing in. They came in confident from their training no doubt, but the game’s realities were not acquired yet, only false fundamentals. You can see the action photos from a USA CUB match here >>> <https://photos.google.com/album/AF1QipMswZY9ALRU86o2Bwu6xxwhf1OY5MkuBDpuWJSK> . Note that the picture of the tallest coach on the USA women’s staff is Laszlo Beltran, who in coaching in this Paralympic qualifying event, became the first Cuban coach to work with a USA team. Congrats and thanks to Laz, whose story is a powerful one that someday I hope to find the time to blog about.

The Cuban Paralympic hopeful women in Toronto simply reminded me of our own USA women’s sitting team in 2004 which, having qualified for Athens by beating Brazil, went to Europe and played a bunch of matches. That team did not win a game, and did not even break 20 points in any match. They too were young and inexperienced, but they came back to train with both a new sense of understanding and...they focused on training more gamelike, and over the net in grills and wash scoring when playing the game, as Athens was just 100 days away. I even borrowed a badminton court floor from USA Badminton that was the same smooth, synthetic compound surface as the Paralympic court would be (read –“gamelike as possible” as sliding on wood is much different) and piped in crowd noise as the departure to Athens got closer. We trained constantly over the net, refining both skills and decisions made for all six skills, in small sided games and six vs. six. End result, the USA women beat teams they had just lost to in Europe 100 days before, and they only lost to China en route to a Bronze medal.

I also had the pleasure this month of working alongside my mentor, Dr. Carl McGown, professor emeritus of Motor Learning from BYU, and his son Chris at a recent Gold Medal Squared clinic. Hugh McCutcheon, who now coaches at Minnesota after winning back to back Olympic medals in 2008 and 2012, and Jason Watson, head coach at Arizona State, both southern hemisphere athletes I had the good fortune of being able to help them come to the USA for their playing careers at BYU. Add in Mike and Patty Dodd teaching the beach game, and it was a very special weekend. There are some that say that the Gold Medal Squared program and USA Volleyball’s CAP program are at odds, but they could not be further from the truth. The IMPACT manual and CAP courses are principle driven just like GM2. Over the three days together, I found that the only difference really was that I get younger kids to overhead pass first, not forearm, and play over the net sooner that GM2 does, letting the players initiate things. We are both focused on the science of motor learning principles, the importance of random/“ugly” training over blocked and whole vs. part in skill development.

Carl and I taught passing together and there was only one blocked drill – the 1st, before things went random. Since I work often with programs which may have kids for just 2 or maybe 3 months including competition time, compared to scholastic programs with as many as four years of process development time, it is imperative to get the reality of the ball coming over the net on the 1st contact (ie develop a skillful serve from the actual endline) and then back over the net on no later than the 3rd contact. Yes, it needs to go OVER the net, not in front of it, or under it, or into it. These programs may also have 12-36 kids and one coach, so standing in line for a coach to perform a contact a player should be doing, just does not happen. The coach is outside of learning, being a teacher, not a player.

Part of the problem as I see it is the desire of coaches and programs to spend weeks, months, and even years honing these false fundamentals, mostly in blocked training. When I asked Dr. Schmidt how many trials at a blocked level should an athlete do before going to more game like and more random, and he responded “I have not seen a specific study on that, but from my experience and research in related ways, 6-10 blocked trials, or until they get the very simple concept of the skill, then go random...”

Mark Upton does some GREAT work in guiding those playing soccer to understand the importance of integrating the realities of that sport vs drilling. What he recently said so well, that weaves right into the need to stop teaching false fundamentals, can be found in a recent blog post linked [HERE](#). if you really want to know more examples and the common sense behind doing the whole/integrated development of skills – Mark notes so accurately that “*Old school way of thinking about learning is as you describe; the learner has to acquire some core competence, a motor programme that they can then roll out on demand and tweak to fit the current context. This, frankly, isn’t true at all. Learning really requires that you spend time learning to perceive the relevant information which will support your action selection and control, and this information is only created by the task as it unfolds. So learning to kick in drills is not learning to kick in the game and there really will be relearning required. Learning a task entails learning to perceive the information for that task and using that information to select and control appropriate actions. Because this is how it rolls, learning is highly context/task specific. So kicking in drills and kicking in a game is not kicking + context (same basic dynamic plus some other stuff) but actually more like kicking-in-drills and kicking-in-games (two different dynamics which create different information). If that is the case (and it likely is) then you would only expect limited transfer.*”

<http://www.sportsrelations.com.au/blog/blog/2015/03/24/how-do-you-learn-the-first-touch-skills-of-iniesta-context-practice-design/#more-906>

And for those who have not joined the special group of volleyball leaders on the closed Facebook group “Volleyball Coaches and Trainers” I would urge you to join and collaborate with over 9,000 other fellow coaches from around the world. Its free and it is one of my favorite spots online. A former player turned coach in upstate New York recently wrote something there I felt would be a great way to close this blog. Here is what Matt T said –

As Brett said earlier, I was a former player of his and unfortunately it was during his “dark days of coaching” as he puts it. Everything in practice was blocked, we did straight conditioning for the first half hour and he was frustrated with us when we didn’t perform in games. It was frustrating for him, myself and my teammates not because we lost but because we had a solid group of players who should have gone at least .750 and made a 2-3 game run in Sectionals. Needless to say we didn’t.

I think it was the 2nd year after I had left, Brett threw out everything he had done before and embraced new philosophies on everything - specifically implementing random practices. It took a couple of years to fully turn it around but I’ve witnessed first-hand as a player / alum the program finally gain respect and become a top contender at Sectionals every single year, even after graduating 3-4 starters.

I don’t feel that I truly learned how to play the sport until my sophomore year of college when I started playing again - this time without a coach. Never a single drill, just different variations of the game. I can’t even tell you how many lightbulbs went off personally in those few months without a coach giving me the answers and setting up practice in a way that would make me successful. I went from completely blocked to completely random practice. From a player’s perspective, random practices helped me get better because I learned how to read, anticipate, plan, adjust and adapt, etc.

While I agree with Larry C to a certain extent that sometimes you need blocked drills to teach a specific skill, I’m also more so of a believer that once you teach the fundamentals of that skill then you should throw them straight into the game. Going through hundreds of reps in a blocked format to me is time that can be better spent instead by going through hundreds of reps in a randomized game learning to APPLY that skill.

Let’s say we’re teaching the approach. Everybody has their own cues and specifics which is a discussion for another thread. However, I think it is safe to say that nobody here would tell the players “Okay, what you need to do is get off the net, then run towards the ball, jump and smash it! Okay, lineup 6v6 and lets get to it” and then expect everybody to understand how to do the skill. You’ll take a moment to teach the skill, step-by-step by demonstrating the movements, teaching them why they want to move this way, why they want their arms in this position, why they want this rhythm in their footwork, etc. Then the players will demonstrate it a few times, which in my opinion, if you can do it correctly 5 times in a row then you’ve proven that you understand what you are supposed to do. Now, the next step is to learn how to apply the approach in the context of the game.

Will it cut down on the number of specific reps that player gets vs spending the same amount of time doing the skill in a blocked drill? Absolutely. Will it promote better long-term learning and retention? Absolutely. Why? Because you’re learning how to apply multiple skills at the same time. You’re learning how to adapt, you’re learning how to anticipate and you’re learning how to perform the skill in its truest form.

Now can you take an absolute beginner, teach them the basics, give them 10 reps and then throw them into a few hours of 2v2 and expect them to be successful? In my personal observations - yes. I decided to run my own experiment with blocked vs random on kids who knew absolutely nothing about playing volleyball. I also did it with last year’s Varsity team, my club team last year and have come to this same conclusion every time. The only difference was those past teams had learned some skills in a blocked format previously. By using the incoming JV freshman, I knew I had a group of players that were starting from square 1 so I’d get an accurate result on whether random is superior to blocked with beginners.

We did some open gyms and a Summer league with these kids. It was the typical everybody plays ping-pong, swings their arms, underhand clubs the ball over the net when they’re attacking. You know, everything that will make your blood boil as a coach. We’ve gone with a completely random style of practice. I spent maybe 15 minutes of technical instruction in a blocked format to introduce different skills and about 30 minutes teaching rotations, base defense and serve receive concepts. The rest has been 2v2, 3v3, 4v4, 5v5 and 6v6.

And now for the results after 5 open gyms (1.5 hours each) and 5 weeks of league play..... I’m also going to throw out the fact that this is a Varsity league (small schools, no national level club players), not a JV league. We play 30 minute timed games against 4 other teams in each night in a round robin format. Week 1 - we lost every single game by 25+ points. Weeks 2 and 3.. same thing. Week 4.. Lost most of the games by 15 points but won a match. Then last week, we went 3-1 while getting all 16 players into each game. That seems like a pretty dramatic turn around and proves to me personally that random is FAR superior to blocked practice because it promotes TRUE learning and retention. Just my two cents

Matt said it and I agree. The national teams train this way – while still refining and tweaking each player’s skills. To borrow a phrase from Dr. Peter Vint of the USOC when discussing the myths in our sport and moving our training to more whole, random and ugly ways with the game teaching the game – “All it takes is a leap of faith...” I have faith in how our national teams are training – both mentally and physically, and hope you readers do too.

YET

August 26, 2015

My son had something in his dorm room which I gave to him at Princeton, in capital letters on an orange post-it note, the word “YET.” I think it is a very important word to use often in coaching, teaching and parenting, as it sums up such an important focus found in all who have developed skills not just specific to a sport, but life; they simply have not achieved a myriad of short and long term goals....yet. Indeed, getting players to focus on the process, not the outcome, can be one of the more challenging parts in all of teaching.

So you can't serve over the net? Yet. So you can't hit a float serve/with accuracy?.. Yet. So you can't jump serve? Yet... Everything you choose to do in a sport is a long process of learning. Do you remember learning to ride a bike? Some learn faster than others, but all of us learn to ride a bike. You simply did not know how to ride a bike...yet. Indeed, a coach I was working talking about this key word that it is one that you can actually say in the negative, and it remains positive. Can't dig a ball up on your side? Not Yet!



Within a sport like volleyball where things end with some sort of error, a fear of mistakes – or demand to be technically “perfect” in sport which are completely random, gets in the way of learning. What? Take a look at this motor learning article which shows that memories of errors foster faster learning – so we need to make more mistakes and sooner - http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/media/releases/memories_of_errors_foster_faster_learning

And this other study also notes how, beliefs about learning shape primarily involuntary error related brain signals – part of the research of Carol Dweck in her book *Mindset*. There are athletes who see errors as a big failure/proof of lack of talent (fixed mindset) and those who realize these errors are essential and expected stepping stones to learning -<http://www.wired.com/2011/10/why-do-some-people-learn-faster-2/>

The DESIRE to learn is woven hand and glove into this word “yet.” The first word national teacher of the year Jamie Escalante writes on his white board (hey coach, just where is your whiteboard in the gym, if you are a real teacher anyways) is GANAS, which in Spanish means desire. He states “Ganas, the desire to learn, the wish to get ahead. People are watching you, you are doing to do it...” It is best when it comes from within, as those things are also best learned. You will do best at that which you are passionate about. You will learn best that which you learn yourself. If you only get good when the coach is looking or imploring you, you will only get good for a few minutes of a practice. When you work hard when the coach or teacher is not looking, then you will maximize the minutes in anything you do, including getting the most out of any practice. Albert Einstein once noted that “*I’m not so smart, I just stick with the problem longer than others...*”

Learning to do new things is a process fraught with errors. Indeed, in many cases what we want to do is simply speed up the error rate by making errors faster. We have generations of coaches who say “just get the ball in...” which then impedes the learning of playing at a faster speed. This demand of accuracy over speed comes from coaches who want to win at their level, rather than be focused on the player’s overall process of development. They put the outcome first, over the player’s overall growth. Thus we have a lot of players who can hit the ball in, but who can’t hit it hard. Yet.

There is almost a reverence for doing things “right” and more so in not making errors. This leads players to want to do simpler and often repetitive easy skills in a non game like way, rather than show their faults in the actuality of the game. Some say that these simpler, often pair drills, instill a form of confidence in a player – and I agree, other than it is a false confidence. You watch pairs pass back and forth who can do it 100 times in a row (and even worse, against a wall), then place those kids out into the realities of the game and....they get aced over and over. They can perform the skill of pair passing, but they cannot serve receive. We see kids blocking on boxes, getting spiked into by the coach, who then have no clue as to how to read, time, position and block a live attacker. We see kids who can do a spike off of a ball thrown to them at the right place and time, who cannot themselves learn to read the variance in a set ball, nor jump at the right place and time. YET. Why yet? Because these kids are learning in the game itself, though not in the drills, and thus will finally learn. It is just that it takes so much longer, and time is one of the things we value the most and often use the worst in many sports.

There is a lot made of the “10,000 hour rule,” an amount of time that shows how long it will take to get past “YET...” For me, I think this quote from Neuroanthropology.net hits the nail on the head.”*Ericsson’s research suggests very strongly that what is really in short supply is the cultivation of expert performance is not initial ability, but rather expert coaching and motivation to continually develop greater skill.*” *When most people practice, they focus on things they already know how to do. Deliberate practice is different. It entails considerable, specific and sustained efforts to do something you can’t do well – or even at all. Research across domains shows that it is only by working at what you can’t do that you turn into the expert you want to become.*”

Another thing that Escalante uses so well in the classroom, that coaches should do more of, is ‘pattern Interruption,’ break away from the normal delivery of information to yourself, and as a coach to a player, by delivering information on skills/concepts in a new and unique way. Thus I will stand in a tuxedo in a trashcan on the field to explain why my teams never trash talk. The effect is known in learning as the Von Restorff effect and more can be seen [HERE](http://changingminds.org/explanations/memory/von_restorff.htm)http://changingminds.org/explanations/memory/von_restorff.htm

We know that fatigue is detrimental to learning, yet many coaches condition, run, and make players do push ups/burpees/sprints even when players perform poorly in practice or matches. This tradition shows a lack of understanding the learning process, and comes from a focus on outcome. The USOC just built a 27 million dollar athlete recovery center – for we know at all levels, including the Olympic level, that being tired slows down the learning process. To those coaches who seek to “teach” with physical punishment, please get with the times, and start catching your athletes doing it right and praise effort, rather than giving your biggest level of your attention to the times players are on the lower half of their learning process.

This INTENTsity of training and focus on improving one point, shot, pass or sentence at a time, is vital to becoming the best you, and only you can be. Some coaches call this practicing with a purpose. Take a look at your handwriting, something you may have been doing since first grade and yet, it has not improved for that happens not just by going through the actions but by being intent to change. A coach who maximizes the learning of players will know the clear difference between intent and outcome, and guide discovery so each player can increase their average by focusing on the processes need to get to that outcome.

When you err, but it is not on purpose, you start to learn with the intention of not making that error again. Thus your errors are appreciated as part of the learning process, not feared. Determined to learn, and no one can stop you, but if you are not willing to learn and fear failure, you will be stuck where you are and not progressing. You will likely do what you are already good at, rather than pushing your own envelope and making mistakes as quick and often as you can. A wise coach once told me “Fail first to be successful first.” Then that magical word comes back, for you will get better with deliberate practice, not mindless repetitions of simple skills,

you just are not as good as you will be later...yet. You see, failure is simply part of the process, and unless you just give up and walk away, you are not a failure. Mistakes are simply part of doing something new. It is that simple and not to be feared but embraced.

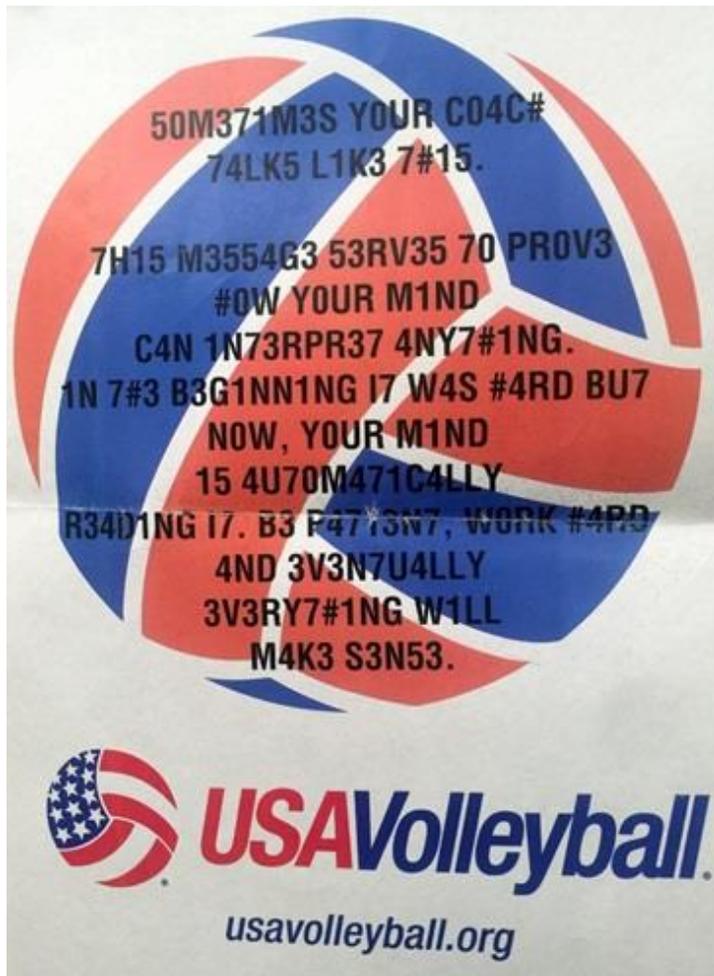
Finally, know that you will have an average in each skill you do. That means, with a play on words there for you having your own mean that half the time in training and in competition, you will be performing it below that middle point. Sometimes you will do multiple successes and raise your average, sometimes you will perform worse for multiple attempts. This too is just part of learning. The only point you can control is the next point, so focus on that point, over and over and over again. If you do, I promise you will raise your performance to higher levels...and yet...you can do even better with more chances to touch the ball in game like ways, even though that brings us back to making errors, for success is simply the result of countless failures.

So you are not good or great...Yet. Focus on what you can control and make mistakes faster, as they are simply an opportunity to learn.

Words of Little or a LOT of Meaning

August 27, 2015

Words have little meaning to beginners in motor learning. That is to say, when you tell a young golfer to “keep your head down,” they might bend down and put their head on the ball. Tell a batter to “keep your eye on the ball” in T-ball and they will go place their eye on the ball sitting on the tee. I have videos of these and many more which make me laugh while reminding me of the importance of words in their specificity, while showing how new players simply do not have the experience in their new endeavor to know what those words really mean. Then there is the importance of speaking with your actions – Coach your philosophy and only using words if necessary.



This month at the ParaPanAms, words came to mind again, as at the Opening Ceremonies, and all through the Paralympic Village, words come out in three official ways – English, Spanish and French. At the ceremonies two people were translating in real time into Spanish and English sign language, and fascinatingly some hand moves were identical, then they would be off into totally different hand gestures. I went later online and googled to learn that there are some 6,500 languages spoken worldwide, with about 2,000 of them being a way of communicating for a thousand people or less. With about 1.3 billion Mandarin Chinese speakers making it the most spoken first language. Thanks to the Internet and all, English is the most used language around the world and here all referees must be proficient in English to be considered/selected. .

Then there are dialects and accents. I learned this trip a couple of jokes about words – that CAN grew to Canada because of their propensity to say “eh;” this resulted in their nation being C-eh-D-eh-N-eh. Denis our assistant Tourney Director said his area of England does the same thing so that they say there are 52 letters in the Jersey alphabet A, eh, B, eh, C, eh.....

The main intent of this blog is to share two things, one how the mind can spell words even when there is not the exact letters intended, but to challenge. The other is to share my some of my favorite words especially those in Latin.

So take a look at this poster – How long does it take you to make sense of it? The mind is such a powerful tool to learn and create new things, both on and off the court. There are almost 100 posters (<http://www.teamusa.org/USA-Volleyball/Grassroots/Multimedia/Posters>) on the USAV Grassroots section of our website that you can download at no

cost and print to put more words that matter on your gym walls. Words and images which inspire, teach, and much more.

I am not sure why I like Latin so much. Never took it in school. Maybe its because you can go back to see the root of some words coming through many other languages. Maybe it because I grew up at a time that you had to learn Latin in school. In any case, use these to show your command of words and wisdom.

Ancora Imparo – Always Learning – Said by master painter Michelangelo at the age of 87.

Primum Non Nocere – First, Do No Harm – the start to the Hippocratic Oath

Citius, Altius, Fortius – SwiftER, HighER, StrongER, The Olympic motto, with coaches wisely using it to teach the ER, while in Latin you can see a very important team word woven in...US

Fac Diem Meam - Make My Day – I have this on an orange golf cap from none other than, Clint Eastwood.

A Posse Ad Esse – From Possibility To Actuality – a great coaching motto.

Absit Invidia – Let Ill Will/jealousy Be Absent – This is said in the context of excellence, to ward off jealous deities who might find the negative in those pursuing excellence.

Ad Astra Per Aspera – To the stars through difficulties, or a “rough road leads to the stars.” Found on the Apollo1 launch complex memorial plaque.

Gradatim Ferociter – By degrees, ferociously – the motto for the Blue Origin spaceflight company.

A Priori – From What is Before – is deduced without experience.

Carpe Diem – Seize The Day, and Carpe Noctum - Seize The Night. Robin Williams film Dead Poet Society remains a must see coaching film for how he taught so that the students learned.

Animas Sana En Corpe Sano – Sound Mind In a Sound Body – Did you know that is the reason the shoe company is named ASICS?

Yet & Not Yet – important words about the process of learning anything. It is such an important word for coaching that I recently blogged specifically about this word HERE >> <http://www.teamusa.org/USA-Volleyball/Features/2015/August/26/YET>

Try, Don't, But, Sorry, My Bad, I Can't... ALL words to ELIMINATE from your training environment. Try? When said by coaches gives an excuse to not do it. Don't? You give focus to what you want eliminated, and I simply want to be thinking of what I should do as opposed to the million things that are wrong. BUT? When coaches compliment, then say but...well, the door closes on whatever was said before; SORRY? Did you make the mistake on purpose...likely not, so on a team build on trust, this one should be gone; MY BAD? See what I said about sorry, unless you spend time also saying “my good” when it is done right; CAN'T – No coach will ask you do to something you are unable to do, you just need to start at say one out of 20 and take those steps that will get you to 20 out of 20.

Cue/Key Words - From a physical point of view, I have heard some wonderful and creative combinations for key/cue words for skills. All follow the 4x4 principle – no more than 4 words per cue and no more than 4 cues per skill. My favorites are – *Moose Antlers/Superman*, and *Marshmallow Unicorn* for setting (you set a big ol' marshmallow and put it down the unicorn horn). I would love for readers of my blog to add more of their favorites so we can all more positively impact kids' lives.

Askhole – A person who constantly asks you for advice, then always does the opposite of what you share with them.

Exhaustipated – I am too tired...to give a poop.

Funishments – We need to let losing be the only punishment, and let kids do FUNishments where the winners get to pick the silly thing the losers do...with coach veto.

Obsfucator – This is a three word generator device to help coaches create seemingly scientific or high level topics or facts to discuss – both in a positive or negative way.



KESSEL'S HANDY VOLLEYBALL OBFUSCATOR

When you need an authoritative phrase for a volleyball report for school, pull a three-digit number out of the air and select the corresponding words from the three columns. The number 026, for example, yields "Repetitive Motivating Situation." Use these with the media, on why you lost, or what you'll work on in next practice.

	A	B	C
(0)	Repetitive	Progressive	Model
(1)	Active	Demonstrative	Potential
(2)	Positive	Motivating	Principle
(3)	Quality	Organizational	Skill
(4)	Balanced	Flexible	Needs
(5)	Specific	Successful	Concept
(6)	Effective	Structured	Situation
(7)	Creative	Incremental	Environment
(8)	Functional	Transitional	Method
(9)	Total	Challenging	Reinforcement

KESSEL'S HANDY VOLLEYBALL OBFUSCATOR Negative Version

Whenever you need a negative idea, or phrase for a volleyball excuse or when talking with a reporter, pull a three-digit number out of the air and select the corresponding words from the three columns. The number 848, for example, yields "Rampant, inflexible obstacles." Many coaches are already very good at finding the negative in everything, and CAP/IMPACT trained coaches are aware of the inherent weaknesses in this style of coaching. Someone has to be a negative, inconsistent coach, so we have something for comparison with the positive, cooperating style. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde you know...

	A	B	C
(0)	Redundant	Negative	Imitation
(1)	Inactive	Interfering	Interference
(2)	Harmful	Despotic	Failure
(3)	Toxic	Jumbled	Disruption
(4)	Erratic	Inflexible	Impossibilities
(5)	Frail	Useless	Problems
(6)	Spineless	Offensive	Damnation
(7)	Uninventive	Overwhelming	Breeding
(8)	Rampant	Mutating	Obstacles
(9)	Inconsistent	Awkward	Punishment

Opportunityisnowhere - So what do you see in the poster on the right? This poster is one of many you can download at the before mentioned USAV Grassroots page link.

Compost Happens and ***Caca Occurs...*** for if someone tells you what they think in harsh ways, and they sell fertilizer as in a fancy way to say they spread bull.

Please share your favorite words in sport so we can all grow the game together!



It's all about the Reps, 'bout the Reps, and Game-like...

September 22, 2015

It's time to help some coaches understand the title to this blog, sung of course to the tune of "It's all about the Bass..." The principle of specificity says, "You must PRACTICE that which you want to DO," and that "What you SEE determines HOW you move..." There are millions of methods that do not follow that principle, and more often than not, these methods also fail the principle of learning by doing.

We learn by doing. Primarily. Always. We are hard-wired to MOVE and learn as we move. Do we learn by watching? Of course, but only a little in regard to motor learning – that of getting a new idea, or mirroring. That might only take one view, or "a-ha!" moment. Then you must DO it. What exasperates me is how many drills have kids standing in line. The reason for small sided games is that the kids are DOING. Every coach in every sport needs to take time to look at their practices and ponder – how can I get more reps in this same amount of time; how do I limit having athletes standing in a line?

Due to specificity, we not only need to get reps, we need to get *realistic* reps. Coaches sometimes fail to realize that just because players can do a simple drill, in blocked form, does not mean they can thus do the "same" skill in the speed and realities of the sport. We too often opt to train in ways that look good in practice, but simply do not transfer to the game.

The wall is ideally meant for hanging signs, ([Click HERE](#) to see hundreds of free USA Volleyball skill and think/ponder posters) like this quote I see 20 times each day in our USA Volleyball office. *"The habits we want to repeatedly do are ones that are game-like ones, since we are seeking game excellence, not drill excellence."*



A member of the 2nd largest volleyball coaching group in the world (Volleyball Coaches and Trainers on Facebook), posted this recently;

"Wall Passing: I know John Kessel is not a fan (not gamelike, and I agree), and for that reason I haven't done it in a while. However, last night with my 12s team I had them do it for 5 minutes, concentrating on forearm passing and staying in control. They averaged 200 passes each in those 5 minutes. They were tired from that, so I don't think more than 5 minutes is necessary, but I saw real value in it. Anyone else have thoughts pro/con of wall passing for a few minutes of practice? Most if not all of the other things we do in practice are short-sided games, etc."

This comment triggered this blog, as I wanted things to be clear about what I am a fan of.

1. **The game teaches the game.** Does this mean you stop teaching technically? *Not in the least!* It means you guide players discovery to perform the proper technique in the realities of the game. You teach. You pull players out, even if someone has to play alone (pass, set to self and hit) while you check for understanding and guide discovery on the error you are worried about.
2. **Once a player shows you they can DO it without the ball, they need to DO it always with the ball.** Over the net, in the game-like realities, where they will be learning and increasing their volleyball IQ.
3. **Feedback from the coach is essential.** Summary/bandwidth feedback means you let them DO it 4-6 times before jumping in with a concern, and more importantly that if they do it right 5 times and wrong once, you do NOT need to hammer the one wrong. You need to reinforce and give feedback on the five correct moves. When it's the opposite (5 wrong, 1 right) the coach needs to guide the player to discover the error and the correction.
4. **When the coach is in the drill, they are very poor feedback deliverers.** If you control the drill, the whole thing stops to give feedback. If you are in the drill you can't SEE all the pre-contact hints and cues the player is seeing/doing.
5. **Reps are incredibly important.** They are how we learn to do any motor program, from driving a car, to performing surgery to serve-receiving a volleyball. Too often, we forget to "catch the positive result."

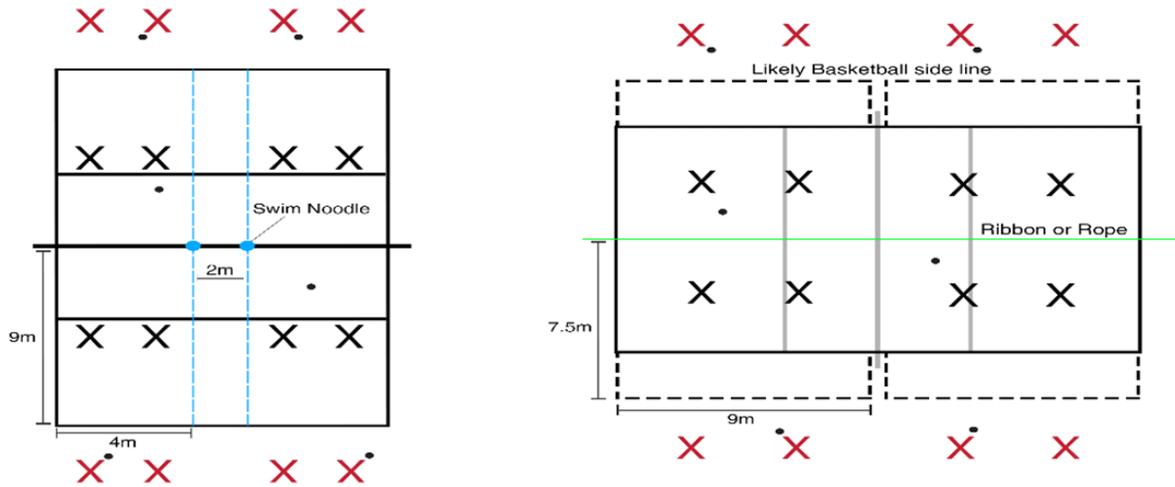
How about a Kessel Continuum/Flow Chart/Checklist...

1. Sit around the house and do nothing or play ANY sport they want, even if it is not VB? *I want kids to do ANY sport they want.*
2. Playing on your cell phone before practice versus practicing alone against the wall? *I want kids to be using the wall!*
3. Using the wall by passing repeatedly like a machine versus playing a game of 1 v 0 of self-pass (positive error), self-set, and hit the third ball over a net height stripe on the wall? *I prefer the 1v0 game as it is teaching positive error habits.*
4. Using the wall to play 1/2/3 or 4 v 0 versus using the net? *I would want to always use the net, as we play over a net. We need to read THRU the net since what we see determines how we move.*
5. Standing in line to use the net versus using the wall as a station to increase reps while playing 2 v 0 cooperative and competitive scored games? *Again, I would want to get more reps by using the wall.*
6. Scrimmage or wash scrimmage? Monarch of the court or Speedball? Speedball or Double-time Speedball? *In all cases I would prefer the latter option, and I explain this below.*

I am going to share a "secret drill" I created recently, for those who have gotten this far. We have not even had time to shoot it for the USAV website, but given this time of the season, everyone should be doing it with their teams, but first this important principle to ponder.

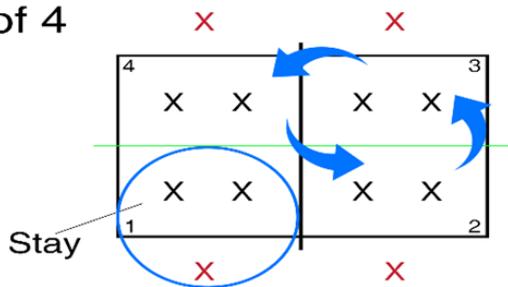
I have a principle – tied into focusing on getting more game like reps - that is "if you only have one ball in the air above your court, you should be wash scrimmaging." (3 ball wash scoring scrimmages get you nearly 33% more contacts per hour than just a scrimmage; it's about...reps!) What I see far too often is a full court, 12 kids and only one ball in the air. The kids? Standing in lines. Hitting lines. Passing lines. Sometimes lines and the ball is not even going over the net. And the worst...shagging lines. For example, a middle hitter vs middle blocker grill, with scoring and all. The coach is tossing the ball to the setter (not having the players pass/set/hit), and 2/3 of the team is standing around, ball retrieving. So many drills we do in sport could be done in wash scrimmages, so all the other players get to read, dig, react and learn; instead, we are "drilling..."

Most of you know how much I love the game/grill "Speedball." Remember, compared to monarch of the court, you get up to 33% more contacts per hour, as there is no "run to the other side/Are you ready?" time being wasted. The thing is, when you play speedball or monarch of the court, you still only have ONE ball in the air.... So I sat down and created Double-time Speedball aka Kesselisavolleydorkspeekball. I shared it with some clubs and one now calls it 2 v 2 plus 1. Call it what you like. In any case it is done by simply getting a second ball into the air above your court (and up to four balls if you do the four nets on a rope idea as [seen HERE](#). Result? 100% more reps compared to speedball in the same amount of time. See the drawing below.

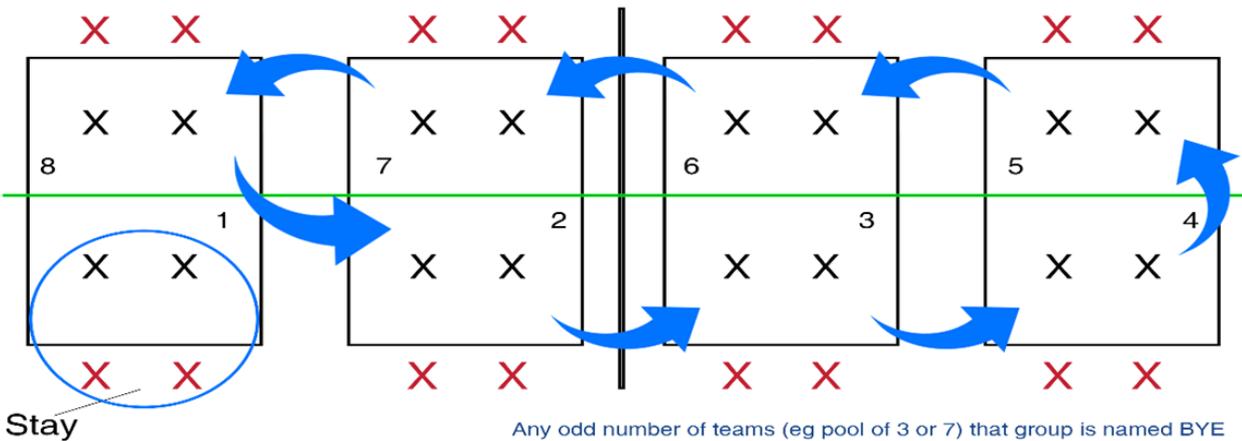


But wait, there's more! The topper is how great it is to then have a round robin tourney. As seen in IMPACT and the free [MiniVolley](#) book of USA Volleyball, you simply have one team stay put while the other teams rotate in such a way that nobody will play the same group of three twice, it is always a new team to play. Four teams, three rounds five min per group, a champion group in 15 min. Eight teams make for seven rounds, so play four min rounds and you take of 30 minutes of practice, no schedule needed.

Pool of 4



Pool of 8



Any odd number of teams (eg pool of 3 or 7) that group is named BYE

Finally, back to teaching technique. With the coaches out of the way and able to teach, they can at any time pull a player aside for guided discovery of the topic at hand, and the courts play on. We call this the teachable moment. So many coaches stop teaching during games, when this is the optimal time to teach. It's ok to say to a team of two "you play solo, you get three hits, I need to speak with this player..." If you have more players because you are a PE teacher, or you're not cutting kids (thank you!), you can have teams of three. With the four court version, you can play 48 kids! Even with doubles speedball on four courts you can have 32 kids active.

I hope we are clear. Specificity is a CORE principle which is too often ignored, but if you want to do something like play a tag game or something non-game like, go ahead. There are times when a wacky game of swim noodle soccer with a volleyball is the solution to what is ailing your team. Teams need to be bonded to battle. Nonetheless, those who get the most game-like reps, and at least some talent, they win most often. Funny how that works....

No More 16 Year Gaps

September 28, 2015

These two photos represent a very important fact, and provide the inspiration we need to pull the oars of our USAV boat together in the same powerful direction. It is a picture I look at daily in the USA Volleyball office of a gap in our Olympic, participation, the most important sporting event in the world. It is a 16 year gap.



When I was competing at the top level after college, I was also coaching. Back then the USA teams were not good enough to get past Cuba in volleyball. USA teams did not make it into the 1972, or the 1976, or the 1980 Olympic Games (the women were boycotted out in 1980.). From 1969 until summer of 1984, Americans did not see a USA Olympic team on television or in the news. You see, with now some 220 nations comprising the International Volleyball Federation, only 12 indoor and 32 beach teams qualify every four years to compete. 208 indoor program National Teams stay home and can only hope, dream and prepare to be there in the next quadrennium.

Since 1984 things have been different for the USA. Only two nations in the world have had their indoor teams attend every Olympics – Brazil and USA. 2016 will be the Vollelympics for indoor, beach and Paralympics. Brazil is spending tens of millions to succeed, as volleyball along with soccer are the biggest sports in the host nation. Worldwide the sport grows as well. Take a look at the picture the World Championships in Poland where each night over 60,000 fans came to watch. Brazil has been preparing for half a decade, but might be concerned, as no Brazil team won gold in any World title event. For us, look what has happened in the past year – the USA women won the World Championships and the USA men won the World League. We are in excellent shape to contend for the podium.



There have been some close calls. In 2004 the USA men won 15-13 over Cuba in an epic battle in the NORCECA zonal qualifier in Puerto Rico.

Hundreds more wanted to get in to see the battle, and they were smashing each other at the gates, but not allowed in as the stadium was already overfull. A two point swing and our team that made the medal round that year would not have been allowed in either. In beach since 1996 we have had teams, but again, we must qualify. USA Baseball, even with the #1 pro league for the sport did not qualify for the 2008 games...and baseball is no longer part of the Olympics.



These past 2 months, our USA teams have been battling in Japan and Toronto. Our USA Sitting men's team qualified for the Rio Paralympics in Toronto in the ParaPanAms, joining their female counterparts who had qualified for Rio by taking second in the 2014 World Championships. For the men's sitting team, it has been 11 long years since they qualified, losing twice in the 5th set to Brazil in the ParaPanAm gold medal match. The USA women's indoor team took the bronze medal in Japan in the World Cup, but this quad only the top two teams get a spot for Rio, so their qualification journey still continues. (Next chance: zonal NORCECA qualifier at a TBD site.) The USA men

faced off with Argentina in the very last match of the entire World Cup. Italy, who USA defeated, booked their ticket with a win over previously undefeated Poland. The men had to win to qualify, as a loss would put them at 9-2 and in 3^d place like the women, despite a superior sets won/lost ratio to any other team in the tournament. They won and consequently are headed to the Olympics in Brazil with over 300 days to prepare.

As our sport has grown over the past 125 years, I worry now that there are some who want to take advantage of the sport's growth, without supporting the group that has been growing the game over the century. USAV, known first as USVBA, was founded in 1928, almost 100 years ago. My son loves this game and spent two years working on his Princeton history thesis "How a Gentleman's Game Became a World Wide Power Sport." It chronicles how Americans first created then USAV and the YMCA grew the sport around the world leading to becoming one of the FIVB's first 12 founding nations. (If you would like a copy email me at john.kessel@usav.org). It was Dr. Harold Friermood of USAV who worked tirelessly to get the International Olympic Committee to add volleyball as an Olympic sport.

It comes as a surprise to most Americans and every other nation at the top level of volleyball to learn of some facts about volleyball in the USA:

1. We do not have any indoor pro league while every other top nation in the FIVB does.
2. It is the USAV national team program based in California that prepares our international teams year round, with the support of all USAV members. The same is true for our Paralympic teams who are trained and supported out of Oklahoma.
3. The men have just over 100 scholarships at the collegiate level and have won 3 Olympic golds.
4. The women have over 9,000 scholarships available and have yet to win an Olympic gold.
5. USAV was one of the 12 founding members of the FIVB, and many staff and volunteers continue to serve the sport internationally, including zonally (NORCECA) and with World ParaVolley.
6. For almost 100 years, USAV has been training and developing the referees from grassroots to international, including for the Paralympic level.
7. Since 1947 USAV has written the national rulebook which follows the rest of the world's rules set by the FIVB for youth, through high school, college and to the pro and Olympic level.

8. For over 30 years USAV has been accrediting (not just training) coaches, through IMPACT (Increased Mastery and Professional Application of Coaching Theory) and CAP (Coaching Accreditation Program). Every USAV coach has had low cost training in motor learning, coaching philosophy, drill design and much more.
9. For nearly a decade, USA Volleyball has had mandatory background checks for adults in the program, and has been a guiding member of the new US Olympic Committee SafeSport program and the US Anti-Doping Agency's TruSport program.
10. For nearly 20 years, USAV has been mentoring and identifying future talent through its high performance program, putting the best age level talent in America to learn together and the top players to represent the USA in the FIVB age group World Championships.
11. For over 70 years, USAV had held the US Open for adults, now with age group titles up to 79 & over.
12. For over 20 years USAV has supported the Paralympic (and Deaflympic) programs, and now has 3 full time staff focused on this disabled side of our sport.
13. USAV began its first junior national championships in 1977, and first junior beach championships in 1993, and for years operated these programs at a loss to grow the game.
14. USAV has given hundreds of thousands in grants over the last 2 decades to start NCAA men's programs (resulting in the first NCAA men's program national title in any sport being added with NCAA D3 Nationals), economically disadvantaged programs (especially through the Starlings USA program), boys programs and given away thousands of used and new volleyballs in the US and around the world through its Leave a Ball Behind program.
15. USAV shares, at no cost, hundreds of skill/drill videos, webinars, posters, articles, research information, and much more, all done to simply help all in the volleyball family grow the game together.

I majored in biology and one of the more impactful articles I read was Garret Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons." Part of the premise was that individuals are short-termed, self-interested, "rational" actors, seeking to maximize their own gains while being part of the "commons" (the land/resources) of the group. In other words, small and separate groups using the resources while giving nothing back. While more robust models now no doubt exist, I find it amazing how groups choose to not support USA Volleyball fiscally in any way. It seems that our sport is trending to become like boxing, where everyone wants to be a big fish in their little pond. Volleyball programs at all levels give the airlines, hotels and food establishments millions of dollars in total to move, shelter and feed everyone, not develop the sport. When flight prices go up, people pay whatever the travel costs are, even over \$100 increases for one event, yet somehow the small overall annual cost to join USAV and support the one organization serving as both the national and international federation for all 3 disciplines at all ages is seen as too expensive.

Many of these groups did not exist in the 16 year gap that USAV kept working to grow the game for all. I think the lack of support of the Olympic and Paralympic governing body is simply wrong, for as I have learned by being a team player in volleyball, success comes from putting WE before ME. No doubt there will be those who, despite the facts and history, will choose to follow their own path and not support USA Volleyball. Thanks to millions of Americans who served to make the freedom to have that choice, people can believe in whatever they wish, including those who are members of the flat earth society (yes, it really exists ----[LINK](#)----.)

You might not be aware that many organizations are affiliated members of USA Volleyball and our 40 RVAs (Regional Volleyball Associations) which serve essentially as "branch offices." such as;

National Federation of High Schools (NFHS, high school and middle school state organizations.)

- YMCA, SHAPE (formerly AAHPERD), Starlings USA, National Park and Rec, Police Athletic League
- All Branches of the Armed Forces
- NCAA, NAIA and NCVF (college club volleyball)
- And dozens more...

If you are a member (parent, coach, director or parent) of a group NOT supporting USA Volleyball and our Olympic and Paralympic success, simply [click HERE for a map](#) of our nation-wide network of Regional Volleyball Associations. Let's work together. Thank you to all those who already are, for as the collars inside the USA National team jersey says... "United We Stand..."

Dear Administrator

October 05, 2015

Dear Administrator

Would you please send my sport's tryout information to your sports coaches? I would like to point out some facts surrounding this request that, given your work load, you might not be aware of:

1. The high schools in this area average 1,200 kids each. As a taxpayer, I fully support the money being spent to develop both fitness and leadership through sport – both in Physical Education classes and scholastic competition.
2. The National Federation of State High Schools just shared this following 2014-15 on sports and other facts to be pleased about:

Based on figures from the 51 NFHS member state high school associations, which includes the District of Columbia, the number of participants in high school sports reached an all-time high of 7,807,047 – an increase of 11,389 from the previous year.

While boys participation dipped 8,682 from the previous year, girls participation increased for the 26th consecutive year with an additional 20,071 participants and set an all-time high of 3,287,735. The boys participation total of 4,519,312 is No. 2 all-time behind the 2013-14 total of 4,527,994.

Six of the top 10 girls sports registered increases in participation this past year, led by competitive spirit squads (5,170 additional participants) and cross country (3,495). While track and field remained the No. 1 sport for girls with 478,726 participants, volleyball (432,176) moved ahead of basketball (429,504) to secure the No. 2 spot. Ten years ago, basketball was No. 1 for girls, followed by track and field, and volleyball.

Among the top 10 boys sports, soccer registered the largest gain with an additional 15,150 participants, while wrestling (11,306) and 11-player football (9,617) had the largest declines in participation. Besides soccer, other top 10 boys sports that had increases in the number of participants were baseball (3,938) and basketball (425).

3. By my count at just the varsity level, there are 47 spots – 12 for fall volleyball, 15 for winter basketball and 20 for spring softball. It would really be great to let 47 kids experience those spots where leadership and fitness are best experienced, not just 20.

4. As a taxpayer, it would really trouble me if the same students took all the spots on each of these teams, that is 12 volleyball players went on to join 3 other basketball players and then that group added 5 more softball players. While this might win, school sports are not about winning first, they are about developing the most kids with values and life preparation experiences. I see a huge difference between 20 kids getting all the experience, and 47, and thus strongly support those kids who, like their peers in other scholastic endeavors, choose just to play one sport in high school.

5. That said, there are also Track and Field, Tennis, golf and other lifetime sports which this school's students can also experience. I love sports that are lifetime sports, and support them over sports that are professional pipeline opportunities. Did you know that the US Open in Volleyball has a National Championship for 79& over aged players? That is the kind of sport that our schools should be promoting to all students – and I urge you to look at the research that shows that this is the first generation who are expected to die earlier than other generations, in large part due to a lack of children being exposed to lifetime sport opportunities. <https://www.designedtomove.org/>

6. The school has other great programs, like music, dance and theatre. There, the participants often pay for private lessons. They also choose to do their activity year round. This allows them to become good at their passion – and I am sure the school supports and shares information about the groups who are promoting their hard work and practices, as well as the performances. Right?

7. Likewise, when our schools STEM or Math/Science Olympiad training happens (and even chess club), we make sure all the school's students and families are aware of these great opportunities, don't we?

8. Wouldn't it be crazy if we limited our students passions to just a short amount of time – "I am sorry, as you are now down with your chemistry learning, and you must choose another science or we will suspend you from other sciences." How about "Yes, you are a great musician/vocalist but you cannot play/sing any more, and we have a problem of the theatre department not getting enough people for their plays."

9. As this is about letting the kids grow up and make decisions, I trust you will share this information with all the kids in the school, so they can decide what is best for them.

10. Thank you; Gracias; Grazie; Danke and اركشش.



Creating Talent with What You Have

October 09, 2015

Guest blog written by: BJ LeRoy – Badger Region Northeast Board Representative

If you live in a place with thousands of players, this article might help you get better. If, however, you live in a small market, with just a few or maybe NO players (yet), this is a competitive advantage to help you take on those teams that seem to have all the talent.

The “experiment” is using the game and only the game (with some variations) to create a homegrown set of talent, starting with brand new players. This course of action comes from need; we’re a small town with other dominant sports, and we don’t get every athlete. We have to create talent, we can’t recruit it.

Results first. Using a few simple ideas through two years of very elementary local club, two summers of weekly “Open Field”, and a first foray into beach, we have a group of 12-year-olds playing decent doubles. Every girl can hit, receive, set, serve and play defense, and there are even occasional blocks. They communicate and laugh and play with intensity. These kids love to play.

We’ve taken on some of the big clubs in the gym, holding our own and sometimes winning against superior “talent”. We were the only team to beat our regional champions at the championships last spring. We have crawled out from the bottom to being “in the conversation” over two seasons.

Name dropping apology; there are some big names listed here, only to give these people credit for ideas they shared at clinics or in print. Our program doesn’t have ready access to these great minds, though I’m sure if you had a question, they’d entertain it.

Some basic ideas in relative order in case you want to skip ahead;

- Dialing it back (or up) for 11- and 12-year-olds.
- Mini-lessons for coaches.
- Principles.
- What success is.
- Training ideas; things that worked.

Through sports, family and friends, we rounded up a few girls and opened the lab. Todd Dagenais (UCF) proposed the idea of dialing intensity up and down, like volume on a stereo, 1 through 10. To **dial it up** and brew initial excitement, we started outdoor as 11s on grass. Comfortable but stable. Low net, light balls, fun games. Ugly is pretty nowadays, and it was pretty ugly. They kept coming back; victory #1.

It’s scary to teach BRAND new players, because you assume all their mistakes are yours. **Lesson #1**; don’t. Just teach. We call it Mistake Mountain; you have to make all the mistakes along the way to the top. We want them to make the mistakes faster so we can conquer them.

There is only a small amount of literature about teaching young players, mostly thanks to John Kessel. USAV IMPACT and MiniVolley are two great resources (and please ignore the clutter in the pictured basement on MiniVolley Page 9; my wife thanks you!)

Using the idea that you must create what you need, we designed our own drills for these ultimate beginners. Many old drills, but also new ones, which are explained at the end. Each of them was adapted from things we learned in other places. Dr. Carl McGown prefers that we teach beginning with **principles**, so here are ours for each new drill;

1. We hit early and often.
2. There is a competition.
3. The ball flies over the net.
4. Reading the game play is key.
5. The whole skill is used.
6. The players initiate the start of play (almost always.)

The second big lesson was patience. It comes in different sizes; patience to NOT correct every error, patience when one practice each week is optional due to other (valid) commitments, and patience to accept some losses. Patience when our practice is ugly, and everyone else’s is pretty.

Success is tricky to measure. From IMPACT, you know you need to win. Winning isn't always possible on the scoreboard, and convincing kids (and parents) of that is tough. Explain the progress, and reward their process. It eventually comes, and when it does, it's wonderful.

In our first season we had a few kids that couldn't serve over. In a short time, we had them torquing/round-housing. We didn't allow the underhand crutch, and it worked. One player couldn't serve over during the entire first season, despite perfect form. Patience! Between seasons, it clicked. She's now one of our most consistent, maybe because we encouraged her process and her form. Success.

We won about 40 percent of our games the first club season. That equates to zero tournament wins, 4 match wins out of 22, and about 15 game wins. We didn't win enough for some folks because we hadn't (yet) developed our talent. We lost a few good players between seasons. You can accept losing some players, because they didn't buy in to your program. (Matt McShane [Air Force] helped me through these losses in a pep talk at CAP III. I can't quote it here, but I'm forever grateful.)

Improving a little means a lot. We stayed the course and remained patient. We won 60 percent of our games in year two, AFTER losing two great players. This equates to 80 percent of the matches. We had a good run at our Region Championships. We routinely took second in tournaments, and got on a podium for the first time. We steadily got closer to elite teams in our region, and by some of their actions, we know they took notice. Success.

Scoreboard wins are the measure of **success** by most people. They're not my measure, so I'll say these additional things.

- Four players on our team of 10 are "setters", and all our players can and do use their hands.
- Everyone passes and everyone plays middle.
- Every player played at least a whole game in the championship match when we won our first medal.
- We corrected three goofy-footers while using the game-like approach.
- We also learned good arm-swings and transition footwork during game play.
- The kids know what to do when "out of system". (They know what out of system is!)
- Our transition is awesome. Kidding, it's a work in process, just OK for now. You didn't expect everything to be roses did you?

The greatest measure of all these successes is that we don't have the best players, just a lot of (now) good ones.

Having a good assistant is critical. If you're a guy, get a female assistant, whether you are coaching boys or girls. Females in general pick up on the things that you stereotypical males don't. The chatter, the team bonding, the need for a break, the need for a boost. Every day I felt I needed to justify our approach to my assistant, even though she didn't demand it. It made me better. She asked a lot of questions, nudged me at times, and did everything with enthusiasm (even though at times I suspected she didn't believe. YET.)

We aren't the best regional team (yet), but we can play with them, because our kids can play. With limited talent to draw from, we need THESE players to get better together. At 13s, with a net and ball change, we got the jump by playing this summer. Our Queen of the Yard tournament (pictured) was testament to that; six 12-year-olds playing 8 games each in a day-long event, with good rallies and strategies, using the adult ball on an adult net.

Next up; beginning blocking, improving setting location, refining passing technique, speeding up the offense, enhanced video analysis, and scouting ourselves better. Of course, we will look to do all these through the game, as experience has shown us it can be done that way. And it's fun. With credibility restored in our method, I hope to convince parents it isn't all about the scoreboard. Expectations should be high; make these players better faster. If we can teach that this season, big success.

Here are the drills for your use.



Training them is the critical piece of course. What do you do with a brand new player? We found weakest part of an 11-year-old volleyball player seems to be the shoulders. We had a bunch of strong-legged kids from soccer and basketball, but shoulders were weak. So we started with hitting in order to strengthen shoulders. Every time you hit, you create a ball to pass (dig) which also strengthens shoulders. And you're working on the part of the game Rob Browning (St. Mary) says you can't do enough of; serve and serve receive.

Of course we loved doubles, and Queen of the Court, and Speed Queens, and Backrow quads (or deep court exchange) and others. Assuming most people know these games, I'll just say, we used them often. The favorite is Speed Queens. You can look the rest up.

Our very first drill was **Partner Jump and Hit**, over the net. Partner One jumps and hits a self-tossed ball, Partner Two digs to self and catches. We taught (while they worked) how to float and spin the ball, planting right left, and swinging arms for momentum. Then it was alternating float and spin. Pretty soon, it was dig, set, catch. Then the partner had to move after she hit, to change angles and distances. Then it was time to compete, five minutes into Day 1. Dig and catch ten times as a team.

This is with ten kids all on the same net, total chaos. But look what they are doing; tossing, planting feet, jumping, hitting, digging and setting, reading, and concentrating. The room should sound like the seagulls in Finding Nemo (Mine! Mine! Mine!)

Then into **1 v 1**, with the skills they just learned. We like playing work-up; the court is split with antennae into 3 meter widths for short court (3 x 3 meter) 1 v 1 games to 5, win by 1. It's cut throat. Win and you move up, lose and you move down. A funny phenomenon occurs...since the courts are mini, the passes and sets tend to be mini. We just learned from Carl McGown at GMS that a dig needs to be 12 feet or higher to have a positive hitting efficiency (on the averages.) Watch for that if you play small court.

GMS also teaches that you first have to learn to move, and then you can learn to play. After reading Switch (Chris and Dan Heath), it's apparent that your elephant won't move unless it has motivation. At age 11, learning to move is boring. Playing the game was our way to show the kids that they need to learn to move.

We soon learned together that they didn't know how to move, so we started **Passing Ladders**. In CAP II, Kim Oden used a drill 5 players across the net in a line received tosses one by one. The players work together to receive X in a Row to one simple key, before they could move to the next key. In our version of Kim's drill, a coach stood at the bottom of a ladder. The players initiated the ball

over the net to the passer, and we started at the absolute bottom; call mine. Five “mines” in a row made the coach move up a rung. Then on to the next goal. Here were the steps to our ladder.

1. Call mine
2. Move to ball (plus above)
3. Move to ball with no mis-steps (plus everything above)
4. Move to ball and catch (plus above)
5. Touch ball on forearms
6. Pass upward
7. Pass above court
8. Pass to partner who catches
9. Partner could hand set
10. Pass set hit

Each must be done 5 in a row to make the coach (who is afraid of heights) go farther up that ladder. If you don’t get all 5, you start over at that rung. Set a timer; if they don’t make it, you have goals to accomplish next time (not yet.) “No mis-steps” was a critical rung for us.

Maybe the staple of our warmup is **Bring the Beach Inside**. We cut the net into thirds, and set the players up 2 v 2 on the two outside courts. Setter on one side is performing a beach warmup with a hitter on the left; hit to the hitter, dig, set, hit between the antennae. On the other side, a blocker and a digger. A “waiter” is shagging. Then the same pattern starts on the other side of the net; setter, hitter, blocker, digger, waiter. Both sides are going at once, and each hitter gets three balls. Every ball hit through the antennae is a chance to score. Scoring is individual (because teams are constantly changing). The hitting team each get a point if they score; digging team each get a point if they block, or if the blocker catches a ball the digger dug (they don’t hit back.) After each hitter has three balls, they rotate. Setter to hitter, hitter to blocker, blocker to digger, digger becomes “waiter” and “waiter” becomes the new setter on her side. All players are rotating on one large circle.

This is the second favorite drill for the players, and it’s the coaches favorite. So many places to stand and teach; the waiter is a natural “teaching moment”. This is where we teach form, footwork, platforms, eye focus. You can flip-flop the game to hit on the right, and we typically “popcorn” in the middle, meaning everyone scrambles to a new position. We play to a time limit or a high score, whichever comes first. We may restrict the blocker sometimes, so that the hitter has to hit angle or line. We sometimes let the defense call their block (yes, with fingers behind their butts like the pros). Another variation is introducing a “free ball” from the digger to the hitter.

Since the hitting lines drill teaches a lot of bad lessons, we use the Beach game above, or a game we call **Mine-Pass-A**. Some coaches call this a butterfly, but it really isn’t one. We make two courts the long way and slate into two groups. Two passers, a setter, and the rest servers. Serve, call “mine”, pass, and hit a backrow ball. Good passes stay; bad passes rotate to setter, setter to server, successful server to passer. It’s not an auto-rotate, so that’s the competition.

When we only have half the court during our match warmup, we run this sideways. We just pretend there is a net, and we don’t hit. If you put the servers behind one sideline, and the passers behind the other, it’s almost a game-like distance. Other coaches think we are crazy; refs often tell me there is one minute left for serving. “Aren’t we already doing that?”

12s spend about 90 percent of the time out of system. Julio Velasco’s out-of-system drills from HP 2015 had six players, all at once, self-tossing from random locations while imagining game situations where they had to bump the ball sideways to 5 feet off, 5 feet in. For 12s, we designed **Rock-the-Hula** (credit to Elvis.) A hula-hoop went on the court at about 5 and 5, and players did the same thing as Julio’s drill; except we got a point for bumping it into the hula hoop, and a point for catching it on the bounce. Of course there are many teachable moments here; we often asked, why are we doing this? Why should it be at 5 and 5? Great Rock-the-Hula competitions led us to the next natural step of playing doubles, with passes purposely going to 15 and 15, and the “setter” putting a ball to 5 and 5 for the passer to hit. Out of system issues solved. AND, we get to yell Rock-the-Hula at tournaments when we are out of system. More funny stares.

Coaches vs six. This became a necessity as we were often short on numbers at our optional practice. We liked controlling the action on our side, and giving the six side lots of new things to read. They started getting pretty good, and we enticed them by offering 3 points if they could pass-set-hit to win a point. As coaches, we sometimes played every ball over on 1, because we see so much of that from other teams. We also celebrate and high five and do all the things we want the kids to do, which fires them up, and teaches them how to react in between rallies.