

COACHING VOLLEYBALL

Technical and Tactical Skills



Cecile Reynaud

In cooperation with



American Sport Education Program

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preface

If you are a seasoned volleyball coach, surely you have experienced the frustration of watching your players perform well in practice, only to find them underperforming in matches. In your own playing days, you likely saw the same events unfold. In practice, your teammates, or perhaps even you, could pass the serve and hit the ball around the block and into the court just fine. You could perform these skills properly, but you could not transfer that kind of performance to the match. Although this book will not provide you with a magical quick fix to your players' problems, it will help you prepare your players for match day. Whether you are a veteran coach or are new to coaching, *Coaching Volleyball Technical and Tactical Skills* will help you take your players' games to the next level by providing you with the tools you need in order to teach them the sport of volleyball.

Every volleyball coach knows the importance of technical skills. The ability to serve and pass a variety of serves accurately; hit different types of sets to various areas of the court; and dig the ball up, keeping the opponents frustrated by never allowing the ball to hit the floor, can significantly affect the outcome of a match. This book discusses the basic and intermediate technical skills necessary for your players' success, including offensive and defensive skills. You will learn how to detect and correct errors in your players' performances of those skills and then help them transfer the knowledge and ability they gain in practice to matches.

Besides covering technical skills, this book also focuses on tactical skills, including offensive skills such as hitting the ball with different speeds, as well as setting the ball at different areas along the net. Your players will learn to identify which shots work best for them and in what situations based on the opposing team's defense. The book discusses the tactical triangle, an approach that teaches players to read a situation, acquire the knowledge they need to make a tactical decision, and apply decision-making skills to the problem. To advance this method, the book covers important cues that help athletes respond appropriately when they see a play developing, including important rules, match strategies, and the strengths and weaknesses of opponents.

In addition to presenting rigorous technical and tactical training to prepare your athletes for match situations, this book also provides guidance in how to improve your players' match performance by incorporating gamelike situations into daily training. We describe many traditional drills that can be effective as well as show you how to shape, focus, and enhance drills and minigames to help players transfer their technical skills to tactical situations that occur during matches. For example, you can change a tedious serving and passing drill into an exciting, competitive contest by keeping score of the number of perfect passes and how many times the team can attack a quick set out of the middle of the court.

Coaching Volleyball Technical and Tactical Skills also covers planning at several levels—the season plan, practice plans, and game plans. We offer a set of eight-session practice plans based on the games approach that covers the length of the practice session, the objective of the practice, the equipment needed, the warm-up, practice of previously taught skills, teaching and practicing new skills, the cool-down, and evaluation.

Of course, playing in matches is what your practices eventually lead to. This book shows you how to prepare long before the first match by establishing practice and match routines and addressing such issues as communicating with players and parents, scouting your opponents, and motivating your players.

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Teaching and Evaluating

Being a good coach requires more than simply knowing the sport of volleyball. You have to go beyond the sport and find a way to teach your athletes how to be better players. To improve your players' performance, you must know how to teach and evaluate them.

In chapter 1 we go over the fundamentals of teaching sport skills. We first provide a general overview of volleyball and talk about the importance of being an effective teacher. Next, we define some important skills, helping you gain a better understanding of technical and tactical skills before discussing the traditional and games approaches to coaching.

We build on the knowledge of how to teach sports skills by addressing the evaluation of technical and tactical skills in chapter 2. We discuss the importance of evaluating athletes and review the core skills you should assess and how you can best do so. This chapter stresses the importance of preseason, in-season, and postseason evaluations and provides you with tools you can use to evaluate your players.

By learning how to teach and evaluate your players, you will be better prepared to help them improve their performance.

Teaching Sport Skills

The sport of volleyball is a game most people have played at some time in their lives, whether in the backyard, on the beach, at picnics with family and friends, or competitively with an organized team. The objective of the game is fairly simple—keep the ball off the ground on your side of the court, and use up to three contacts to hit it back over the net into the opposing team’s court. The team that does this successfully will score a point. The team with the most points at the end of the game, or set, wins that particular game, and the team that wins the most sets wins the match. This sport, originally called *mintonette*, was invented in 1895 in Massachusetts by William G. Morgan for businessmen at the YMCA who wanted a less strenuous sport than basketball.

Volleyball has developed into a high-powered sport and is one of the most popular team sports. It is played at all levels by millions of people all over the world. Having six players on one side of the net moving in a small court only 900 square feet (81 square meters) in size while trying to stop the opponents from hitting the ball into their court requires good physical and mental skills. Volleyball is the ultimate team sport—the players must coordinate their movements by reading, reacting, and moving as quickly as possible while the volleyball is in play. To make the sport even more complex, the ball is always in the air when it is contacted by a player, beginning with the serve. Several skills are performed while the players are not even on the floor when they contact the ball, as in attacking or blocking. This makes this sport very unique in that there is virtually no time to stop and think before contacting the ball, nor can a player hold onto the ball or move while in possession of the ball.

Offensively, the players receive a serve from the opposing team and pass the volleyball to their setter. That player will then set the ball to one of their attackers, who will jump in the air to hit the ball over the net back into the opposing team's court. Defensively, the players must position themselves in such a way that the ball will deflect off their hands when blocking at the net back into the opposing team's court, and off their arms or hands up into their own court when they are in the backcourt digging. Making sure the players have the proper techniques for each skill will improve their ability to be successful. As the players gain experience in the sport, they usually start to specialize in certain positions on the court, such as setters, liberos, right-side (or opposite) hitters, middle hitters, and left-side (or outside) hitters. Tactically, the game can be compared to football, with the net serving as the line of scrimmage. The three front-row players are trying to hit the ball around or off the three defensive players at the net, known as blockers, and the strategies used to do this efficiently are what makes the game exciting to watch and play.

Effective Teaching

Whether you have played the game of volleyball or not, effective coaching requires you to learn the sport in a different way. Great volleyball players do not necessarily make good coaches, and great coaches may not have been fantastic players. Although it may be helpful to have played the game at a high level and to have experience using complicated tactics and strategies, the ability to teach and train a team of athletes will be an entirely different challenge. You must master the transition from playing the game to teaching the game, a more difficult step than most people realize. An athlete gradually gains a sense of how each skill feels—how she has to move and think to perform successfully. As a teacher, you have to search for ways to help athletes gain that sense, or feeling, of how to perform skills, and you must understand that different athletes often perceive and learn the same skill in different ways.

Additionally, you cannot be an effective teacher until you can accept responsibility for the performance of your athletes and team yet not take a poor performance personally nor make it all about you. If you hide behind the excuse that your athletes just can't play, you will never be motivated to find the teaching strategy that will produce improvement. But if you adopt the following credo—"The team will reflect everything the coach has taught the players, or everything the coach has allowed them to do"—you will understand that every player can improve. Even if an athlete's skill level is average, you can

- motivate her to hustle and give great effort on every contact,
- set up training opportunities for the athlete until she is able to perform the skills consistently, and
- inspire the athlete to help the whole be greater than the sum of the individual parts.

And if you continually search for new ways to teach the same skill, you will eventually find a meaningful phrase, drill, or concept that triggers an athlete's reactions in such a way that she finally starts showing improvement in areas where she previously struggled. As a coach you have the responsibility to find a way to teach, motivate, and inspire each athlete to improve her skills. This concept alone—your acceptance of responsibility for each athlete's performance—will pro-

duce creative, exciting, and extremely effective teaching, the kind of teaching that in turn results in improved skills and better performance by both the individual and, ultimately, the team.

Technical and Tactical Skills

A coach has the responsibility of patiently and systematically explaining and drilling the athletes on the basic skills that make up the game. These skills, called technical skills, are the fundamentals that provide each player with the tools to execute the physical requirements of the game. Each day at practice, you must also create situations on the court in which players need to use their technical skills in a gamelike situation, forcing them to make decisions that simulate the applications of the skills and the choices they will have to make in a game. These skills, called tactical skills, are the bridge between practice performance and game performance. Although the proper execution of technical skills is necessary for success, the ability of athletes to make appropriate decisions, known as tactical skills, is the key to having everything come together when it counts—in the actual game.

Obviously, other types of skills, such as pure physical capacity, mental skills, communication ability, and character traits, all contribute to athletic performance (Rainer Martens, *Successful Coaching, Third Edition*, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2004, p. 186-188). Although all these skills are important, effective teaching of the technical and tactical skills of the game still provides the foundation for successful volleyball coaching.

This book focuses on the essential basic to intermediate technical and tactical skills in volleyball. The goal is to provide a resource that will help you improve your understanding and instructional methods as you strive to teach your players this exciting sport.

Technical Skills

Technical skills are defined as “the specific procedures to move one’s body to perform the task that needs to be accomplished” (Martens, *Successful Coaching*, p. 169). The proper execution of the technical skills in volleyball is, obviously, crucial to successful performance. Most coaches, even those with little experience, know what the basic technical skills of volleyball are: serving, passing, setting, attacking, blocking, and digging. But the ability to teach athletes how to perform those skills usually develops only over a long period, as a coach gains knowledge and experience.

The goal of this book is to speed up the timetable of teaching skills, improving your ability to

- clearly communicate the basic elements of each skill to the athletes,
- construct drills and teaching situations to rehearse those skills in practice,
- detect and correct errors in the athletes’ performance of skills, and
- help athletes transfer knowledge and ability from practice into games.

Effective coaches have the capacity to transfer their knowledge and understanding of skills into improved performance of those skills by their athletes. This book outlines a plan that will help you do just that by teaching you how to become a master of the basic to intermediate technical skills of volleyball and assisting you in providing your athletes with the resources necessary for success.

Tactical Skills

Mastery of the technical skills of volleyball is important, but athletes must also learn the tactics of the game. Tactical skills are defined as “the decisions and actions of players in the contest to gain an advantage over the opposing team or players” (Martens, *Successful Coaching*, p. 170). Basic volleyball resources might focus on the technical skills of the game and may overlook the tactical aspects. Coaches even omit tactical considerations from practice because they focus so intently on teaching technical skills. For volleyball players to develop better as overall players, they need to learn techniques and tactics together. One way you can approach tactical skills is by focusing on three critical aspects, “the tactical triangle”:^{*}

- Reading the play or situation
- Acquiring the knowledge needed to make an appropriate tactical decision
- Applying correct decision-making skills to the problems at the correct time

This book as a whole provides you with the knowledge you need in order to teach players how to use the tactical triangle. Part III covers important cues that help athletes respond appropriately when they see a play developing, including important rules, game strategies, and opponents’ strengths and weaknesses that affect game situations, as well as ways to teach athletes how to acquire and use this knowledge. Part III will also help you teach athletes how to make appropriate choices in a given situation and show you how to empower players to recognize emerging situations on their own and make sound judgments.

Perhaps the greatest frustration for a coach is to witness athletes making errors in games on skills they have repeatedly done well in practice. For example, an attacker can successfully hit the ball hard and down into the opposing team’s court in practice, but in a game situation when a ball is set to her in a less than perfect manner or she is in front of two strong blockers, she is not able to hit the ball past the blockers. The transfer of skills from practice to the game can be difficult, but you can reduce errors by placing the athletes in gamelike situations in practice to work on tactical skill decisions. Only after rehearsing the tactical decision repeatedly in practice will the athletes be prepared to execute those decisions (while maintaining their execution of the related technical skills) in the game.

Traditional Versus Games Approach to Coaching

As mentioned previously, transferring skills from practices to games can be difficult. A sound background of technical and tactical training prepares athletes for game situations. But you can surpass this level by incorporating gamelike situations into daily training, further enhancing the likelihood that players will transfer skills from practices to games. To understand how to accomplish this, you must be aware of two approaches to coaching—the traditional approach and the games approach.

^{*}Adapted, by permission, from R. Martens, 2004, *Successful coaching*, 3rd ed. (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 215.

Part IV of this book provides examples of both the traditional approach and the games approach to coaching. Although each style has its particular advantages, the concept favored in this book is the games approach. The games approach provides athletes with a competitive situation governed by clear objectives and focused on specific individuals and concepts. The games approach creates a productive and meaningful learning environment in which athletes are motivated by both the structure of the drills and the improvements they make. Finally, the games approach prepares athletes for competition because they will have already experienced settings that closely resemble the tactical situations they will see in the game.

Traditional Approach

Although the games approach to coaching has much merit, the traditional approach to coaching also has value. The traditional approach often begins with a warm-up period, followed by individual drills, group drills, and then a substantial team period (or scrimmage) at the end of the practice. The traditional approach can be helpful in teaching the technical skills of volleyball. But unless you shape, focus, and enhance the team training with gamelike situational drills and games, the athletes may be unable to transfer the skills they learn in the drills into the scrimmage situation in practice or, worse, into effective performance, especially of tactical skills, in games.

Games Approach

The games approach emphasizes the use of games and minigames to help coaches provide their athletes with situations that are as close as possible to how a real game is played (Alan G. Launder, *Play Practice*, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2001). But this method requires more than just putting the players on the court, throwing out a ball, and letting them play. You should incorporate the following three components any time you use the games approach:

1. Shaping
2. Focusing
3. Enhancing

Shaping play allows you to modify the game in a way that is conducive to learning the skills for that particular concept. You can shape play by modifying the rules, the environment (playing area), the objectives of the game, and the number of players (Launder, p. 56). In scrimmage situations the stronger players often dominate, and the weaker players merely get through the scrimmage without playing a strong, active role. The goal is to increase each player's opportunities to respond, so if you shape play by reducing the playing area or number of players, every athlete will have the opportunity to gain more contacts as well as to learn and practice the skills for her specific position on the court.

You also need to *focus* the athletes on the specific objectives of the game. Players are more apt to learn, or at least be open to learning, if they know why they are playing the game and how the tactics they are rehearsing fit into the bigger picture. Provide the athletes with clear objectives of the skill, drill, or game and a straightforward explanation of how those objectives will help them become better volleyball players not just in practice but also in competition.

Finally, you must play an active role throughout practices, *enhancing* play either by stopping the game for the whole team at a teachable moment or by taking individual players aside and instructing them about how they could improve their decision making or technical skills in that situation.

An example of a games approach to teaching tactical skills in volleyball is a game called narrow-court triples. To set up the court, place an extra antenna in the middle of the net and a line on the floor down the middle of the court (lengthwise on both sides of the net). One side of the court will have three players on it, with two back deep to receive a serve and the third player at the net ready to set the pass. Three other players are on the other side of the net, with one of them serving the ball from behind the end line. Since the court has been made smaller, the server will need to be more accurate. The opposing team receives the serve and will pass it to the setter near the net. The setter will set the ball to one of the two hitters on her side of the net, or she can dump the ball over the net to try to score. The receiving team has a small area to cover and pass the ball, so they should experience more success.

The defensive team has only half the court to block and dig, so they can narrow their focus on the setter and two attackers. They will learn to read the hitter's movements and position themselves around the blocker so they will be able to dig up the volleyball. They must control the ball in a smaller court, so they will need to become more accurate with their dig up to their setter. This small court with fewer players teaches the athletes to be more accurate with their serving and attacking and narrows their focus on defense to cover a smaller area. A smaller court and fewer players also means more contacts per player in the same amount of time. Once the athletes go back to a regulation-size court, they will see the difference in how much they have learned.

Coaching volleyball is a challenging yet rewarding job. Volleyball coaches are responsible not only for the development of good players but also for the development of young men and women on and off the court. The emphasis of this book is on the concepts and strategies of teaching the essential basic to intermediate technical and tactical skills of volleyball, using both the traditional and games approaches. The foundation of effective teaching this book provides will help you master the art of helping your athletes refine and improve the array of skills and techniques, and their varied applications, that make up the fast-paced, complex, exciting game of volleyball.

Evaluating Technical and Tactical Skills

Volleyball is the ultimate team sport. Players need to master many technical skills and know how to apply those skills in tactical situations. Most of the focus in team practices and individual training sessions is on the development and improvement of volleyball skills. Coaches, however, must also be concerned about objectively analyzing and evaluating those individual skills and using that information to develop the team's season and game plans. For example, decisions about starting lineups, having players specialize in certain positions, and developing offensive and defensive tactics can be made only if coaches have the necessary information to make sound decisions.

In building a team, coaches should use specific and accurate evaluation tools to assess the development of the individual parts that make up the whole of the team. You must remember that basic physical skills contribute to the performance of the technical and tactical skills of volleyball. In addition, a vast array of non-physical skills, such as mental capacity, communication skills, and character training, overlay athletic performance and affect its development and should also be considered (Rainer Martens, *Successful Coaching, Third Edition*, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2004). But even though all these skills are important, the focus here is on evaluating the technical and tactical skills of volleyball. Please refer to *Successful Coaching, Third Edition*, to learn more about how to judge those other more intangible skills.

In this chapter we examine evaluation guidelines, exploring the specific skills that should be evaluated and the tools to accomplish that evaluation. Evaluations as described in this chapter will help you produce critiques of your volleyball players that are more objective, something you should continually strive for.

Guidelines for Evaluation

Regardless of the skill you are measuring and the evaluation tool you are using, you should observe the basic guidelines that govern the testing and evaluation process. These are as follows:

- Understanding the purpose of evaluation
- Motivating for improvement
- Providing objective measurement
- Effectively providing feedback
- Being credible

Understanding the Purpose of Evaluation

First, the athletes need to know and understand the purpose of the test and its relationship to the game of volleyball. If you are evaluating a technical skill, the correlation should be easy. But when you are evaluating physical skills or mental, communication, and character skills, you must explain the correlation between the skill and the aspect of the game that will benefit. Doing so speaks to the importance of giving players ownership over their development.

Motivating for Improvement

Coaches must motivate the athletes to improve. Understanding the correlation of the skill to volleyball will help, but sometimes the matches seem a long way away during practices and training. For physical skills, elevating the status of the testing process can help inspire the athletes. If you can create a gamelike atmosphere with many players watching as you conduct the testing, athletes will compete with more energy and enthusiasm than they would if you ran the tests in a more isolated fashion. Goal boards and record boards listing all-time-best performances can also motivate the athletes. The best of these boards have several categories, such as the top 5 or top 10 performances, to give more athletes a reasonable chance to compete for a spot on the board. Separating the team by positions is suggested.

The best motivation, though, is striving for a personal-best effort in physical skills testing or an improved score, compared with the last evaluation, on measurements of technical, tactical, communication, and mental skills. When an athlete compares herself today to herself yesterday, she can always succeed and make progress, regardless of the achievements of teammates. And when an athlete sees personal progress, she will be motivated to continue to practice and train. This concept, while focusing on the individual, does not conflict with the team concept. Rather, you can enhance team development by simply reminding the team that if every player gets better every day, the team will be getting better every day.

Providing Objective Measurement

All testing and evaluation must be unbiased, formal, and consistent. Athletes will easily recognize flaws in the testing process and subsequently lose confidence in the results. Coaches must be systematic and accurate, treating every athlete the same way, for the test to have integrity and meaningful results. No athlete should receive credit for a skill if she does not execute the test regimen perfectly.

You must mandate good form and attention to the details of the test. The same is true of evaluation tools that are not quantitatively measured. A volleyball coach who wants to evaluate technical skills must use the same tool for all athletes at their position and score them fairly and consistently for the players to trust the conclusions reached.

Effectively Providing Feedback

Coaches must convey feedback on testing and performance to the athletes professionally and, if possible, personally. No athlete wants to fail, and all are self-conscious to a certain extent when they don't perform to their expectations or the expectations of their coach. At the same time, each athlete has areas in which she needs to improve, and you must communicate those needs to the athlete, especially if she does not see or understand that she needs to make the improvement. Private regular meetings with athletes are crucial to the exchange of this information. Factual results, comparative charts ranking each athlete, historical records of previous test results, and even video analysis of the athlete's performances can discretely communicate both the positive areas of improvement and the areas where progress needs to be made. Discuss both results and goals for each athlete as well as a plan for how the athletes will reach their goals. If you have a large number of athletes, you can accomplish these individual meetings in occasional and subtle ways—by asking an athlete to stay for a few minutes after practice or a workout, by going out to practice early and creating an opportunity to talk to a player individually, or by calling a player into the office at regular times just to talk. These one-on-one meetings are by far the best method to communicate to athletes the areas in which they need to improve.

Being Credible

Finally, you must apply the principles you are asking of your players to the process of evaluating them. You must be an expert in terms of your knowledge of the technical and tactical skills of your sport so you can accurately and consistently analyze and evaluate the skills that you see your players perform. You must understand the value and importance of the physical skills to convey the importance of these skills to the game. You must exhibit outstanding communication skills to be effective in your teaching, and you must exhibit those same skills in your dealings with other staff members and coaching peers, especially when you are visible to the players, so that you can establish credibility with the players regarding communication.

Evaluating Skills

Clearly, players must know the technical skills demanded by their sport, and they must know how to apply those skills in tactical situations when they compete. You must remember, however, that basic physical skills contribute to the performance of the technical and tactical skills, and so they must be consciously incorporated into an athlete's training plan. In addition, an array of nonphysical skills such as mental capacity, communication skills, and character training also overlay all athletic performance and affect its development.