



# The Game Teaches the Game

By John Kessel, USA Volleyball Director of Sport Development

Often I open coaching courses, at any level, with the following “test” Fill in the blanks -- The game teaches \_\_\_\_\_ . I get all sorts of interesting answers like “good sportsmanship,” and “team work” – but the “correct” answer I am seeking is in the title above. . . . “the game.” I know this because of the time I spend working in beach volleyball, which has gone in my lifetime from a sport where the top players would win dinner for two at the Charthouse and bragging rights for the that week in the area, to Olympic gold medals, millions in endorsements and prize monies, and bragging rights for the world. All along the way to dozens of medals by the USA in the World Tour, including gold medals in the last four Olympics, the interesting point then can be asked – “How many beach volleyball coaches do you know?” The answer is invariably. . . . none. Yet the sporting industry states that nearly six million Americans play the game of doubles, on sand or grass. Who develops and coaches them? The players themselves. The key thing is simple, the flow of the game, the speed, the choices, decisions, variations – each play is unique and will never be repeated the same way again. So players must learn to train, and play, in reality. . . . which is the game.

Perhaps there is a better way to share this concept with you. There is a sport that the participants have been known to die in, and thousands annually are injured while learning. You would think with that track record, a huge safety industry and training program would exist. While safety has improved from my day, learning to ride a bike has not varied much at all. You get on the bike, you wobble a lot and crash some, and you learn to ride a bike. So tell me, did you go to a bike riding camp? Did you have a bike riding coach? Did you do bike riding drills? Since the answer is basically no – how did you learn to ride? I have many doctor friends, who point out that the only way they become great surgeons is by operating, something that is revealed by concentrating on performance with each operation.

Meanwhile, everyone loves to say they have “the way. . . .” from infomercials on how to create great abs, better golf swings or vertical jumps, thru radio spots for stock market secrets, over why you need to buy pain relieving ointment, to countless fat burning capsules, - there are so many secrets that you need to get that come from these experts. Every good coach wants to get better, yet those attending educational clinics are sadly the exception, rather than the rule in the sport of volleyball. The rest of the coaches to often learn by trial and error, with their teams each year being their learning experiments. I know one of my core beliefs is keep learning, “ancora imparo” as Michelangelo supposedly said on his deathbed, so that I will “Never be a child’s last coach. . . .”

So what is most important in coaching? Here is my top ten list and why:

1. *You are a teacher first, and need to follow the laws of learning.*
2. *If most of volleyball is mental, then your coaching needs to reflect that*
3. *There are only four ways to get a lead in rally scoring, and one way to protect that lead.*
4. *Always focus on what to do, not what not to do, and catch them being right.*
5. *Teach reading, and the game between contacts.*
6. *Gamelike, specific training is best – at game speed, over the net, following risk management of the game concepts, and with scoring.*
7. *Success is a journey, not a destination.*
8. *The player who knows why, beats the player who knows how*
9. *My coaching philosophy in three words – “develop amazing leaders”*
10. *Subtle variations of consistent themes*

## You Are a Teacher First and Foremost

When working with kids, - parenting at home, teaching in the classroom, or coaching in the gym, we are all doing the same thing – teaching. It is not how much you know, it is totally about how much you can get your student to

absorb and understand. You must be consistent, and you must be specific in your words. Long ago, I realized that kids do not care how much you know, until you know how much you care. This goes for anything I teach, sport, how to read, whatever. It is this trust of your caring for them, their development on and off the court, that is most sacrosanct. In our sport, coaches spend large amounts of time training – doing drills and teaching “technique,” and ironically touching so many balls that the coaches, not the players, get the largest number of contacts in a training. Let the kids run the drills, so you can coach, and they can get better at these skills. And also, that which you teach, you learn, so let the kids coach others, so they can better coach themselves and understand the game. If you think that yelling, or physical punishment (wind sprints, pushups, etc.) are principles of good teaching, then you would see your first grade teacher yelling at you, or your middle school teacher making you do wind sprints after errors in math, or your college professor having you do pushups for each error in a science experiment. Why don't they? – because yelling and physical punishment are NOT skills of a good teacher, nor should they be part of good coaching. Reflect on what comes to mind when you think of the best teachers you ever had, from first grade thru college, and DO those things. Remember your first gold stars from kindergarten? That still is important, as THAT WHICH GETS MEASURED AND REWARDED, IMPROVES. Like a doctor, we have a Coaches Oath - *Primum Non Nocere* - first, do no harm.

## 90 Percent of this Game is Half Mental

I think it was Yogi Berra who said that... Here is your next self test –What percentage of volleyball is mental? Most coaches say that it is about 75-90% mental. OK then, now how much are you teaching the mental side of the game in practice, how much are you training mentally? Do you ask them questions in the best “tradition” of Socrates, or do you simply tell them what you want, what they must do. Do you know what regression to the mean is, and the impact it has on human reasoning? Pick up your IMPACT manual, and see what you missed the first time in getting your players to be passionate about and good thinkers in volleyball. On your side, make sure to BE CONSISTENT, be SPECIFIC, and to build TRUST – for kids don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care.

Teach them leadership skills and how to lead. Build into them confidence, in self and in team. Anson Dorrance states that “*we value people for their humanity. ... quality humans are what create the most essential element of any team: great chemistry. We look for positive, hardworking players – the kind you don't hear whine and complain. To make our team, the only requirement is character. You don't have to be a great player, you just have to be a great person. In fact, being great in a sport is totally meaningless unless it has impacted on other aspects of your being.*”

## The Secret Four Ways to get a LEAD in Rally Scoring.

#1 – *Opponent error*. While this is somewhat out of your direct control, the mental side of the game here does come into play, by always exuding confidence, and never being out hustled, so that you frustrate and demoralize the opponent. Equally key here, as the most important thing at any level and something that goes hand in glove with the most important part of protecting your lead is to reduce your errors. Here, as any 12 and under coach can tell you, putting away the ball served at you matters most.

#2 – *Transition Kill* – When I ask what the four ways you score in volleyball, most coaches say “Kill!” What they do not realize is that it is really Serve, pass, set, spike, dig, set, KILL! Since our opponents have given us the chance, by not finishing off point #1 by killing the ball, and it has gotten past our block, we now get the most important way to get a LEAD...to dig it, set it, then kill it, no matter where the heck the dig and set went on the court. This is mostly done out of system of course, and to help with the idea of controlling the ball so they pay, we work on making the positive error first of digging the ball UP first, over the center of the court. American coaches do too many digging drills, and not enough dig/set/kill. We pepper, we do coach on one, hit at them and they “dig to a target.” Stop artificially terminating things and play it out.

#3 – *Service Ace* – Get great at serving. As a players serving skills (a closed motor program), will advance at the lower level faster than serve reception capabilities (an open motor program), serving can often rise to #1 in importance over first ball passing/setting/spiking at the beginner level, regardless of age. For years I have been getting letters from young players telling me in endearing fashion, that “I am only 5 foot, but I have a killer serve and last week served 15-0, so can I come be a member of the Olympic team now? I even get some now, though clearly fewer, with the advent of rally scoring saying “I served one game 25-0.”

#4 – Stuff Block – and if it gets past your block – that may not exist if you are short – then see rule #2. So if blocking is one of the top four ways to win – by getting a lead, ask yourself this question. How many times in a game, does my spiker hit against no block? Now ask that same question in practice. Around the world, the answers for a level where the blockers can block and the spikers deserve to be block, are usually – 5%, and “too often.” The reason it is “too often” is because a spiker needs to practice in game like situation against a blocker (first ball kill and transition kills, points #1 and 2), and of great importance due to this point #4, a blocker needs to block a game like spiker, reading and moving to be in the right place at the right time.

The biggest mistake I see in developing this point is that too many coaches practice perfection, by tossing the ball to the setter, and not doing pass-set-kill. Kids warm up indoors by tossing the ball perfectly to the setter then hitting it. Beach players warm up by passing or digging the ball to the setter (often resulting in an out of system setting situation) and then killing it. In beach, we know from the game teaching the game, that the team that wins can pass/dig – set – kill, mostly out of “system” better than anyone and can serve tough -- in any condition. USA Women’s coaches just estimated that currently they are running out of system 50 percent of their game play...and at the level of most of us reading this, that percentage is much higher, as should your training. One of the unique things of our game is that at the least experienced level, the worst team WINS. This is simply because of the tactic that exploits the experience weakness seen in the four points above. If you just bash the serve back over the net on your first contact, eliminating the need to have setting and attacking. Once you advance beyond this challenge, by having a modicum of ball control, you will never lose to those teams. Yet these four “secrets” of scoring, they remain consistent from kids volleyball to the Olympics– both indoor and beach, and in the Paralympics.

### Positive Errors and Charting

The concept of ball control, along with technique is oft spoken. How’s this for a sentence that would make my English teacher cringe from her grave – the best teams do the better job of bettering the ball. Also, they make positive errors. Are you training this in your kids? Do they hit over a net, learning to hit up with an error, or do they stand on the ground or pass/spike against a wall, and learn to make negative errors. Do they know how important it is to dig up, not over, to serve long, rather than into the net, to set off the net (by starting every practice with 3 meter line hits) rather than too tight. How about this – do they face the target – setter for passing or center of court for digging, or do they face the attacker/server? One makes balls go to teammates more often, the other out of bounds. Positive errors go to teammates, negative ones to the bench or parents... Toshi Yoshida, our 2004 Olympic Women’s head coach trains our top players this same mental way, using the terms “Good miss, Bad miss...” Make sure your players focus on good errors

“Mentally” do they know that once said, words cannot be taken back in, so it is likely better to say nothing if you are in doubt... Remember the concepts from IMPACT of summary feedback, and catching your kids doing it right, rather than turning on your radar and zeroing in on the errors they make. Chart things from a positive perspective, and work to make those numbers grow, including the number of positive mistakes over negative ones.

### Teach Reading and the Game Between Contacts

While many coaches will say that the most important skill in our sport is passing, or perhaps setting, serving, or spiking, the fact is simple – the most important skill is reading. Why can you, from the bench, go walk out and get just about any tip of your team’s opponents, but the players on the court cannot get it? It is because you can read the attacker, which includes the game flow before that tip, and the movement of the players before the actually contact of the tip. This does not come from tipping drills, but from the game teaching the game. You need to teach, guide, mentor each player to the things that happen BEFORE the contact, to this most important part of the life of a player who is on the court playing – the life BETWEEN contacts. Anticipation, judgment, timing... the movements and places you need to be before a contact is made is more important than the actual contact. This teaching weaves into focusing on the movement and action between contacts in a deliberate way. Indeed, research shows the main factors in being a great are deliberate practice and accurate feedback – or perhaps tying this all together we can use the word feedforward. Feedback guides (you cannot teach a negative), reinforces and motivates. Be the best teacher you can be by sharing your wisdom and insights, as it is not what you know, but what your players know.

## Train Gamelike & Teach How to Manage Risk

Re-read chapters three and four in your IMPACT manual, for the secrets are all hiding in there. Since we are playing a GAME, it should be, well, FUN! You will revisit how important it is to be competitive in your practice, creating what Anson Dorrance coined, “the competitive cauldron.” Since the scoreboard is always counting every point, you likely need to score more in your drills and come up with fun ways to score. If every point starts with a serve, then so should more of your drills and games. What game/drill do kids always moan about when you stop it? Monarch of the court! - so play that wonderful game maybe even a third of your practice, teaching the life lesson of winners stay on, and all the other fun reading and anticipation things that come from extending your area on a full court. Is there a whistle in a game? Well then, there should be one in practice at the appropriate times. Is there a net in the game? Well then, use it for every single precious minute of practice, for the players will do plenty of non-gamelike, no-net drills when they are out of the gym. Here is a related thought – if you think you train gamelike, tell me what skill starts virtually every point you will ever score? Yes, the serve...but...how many of your drills start with a serve? Not many, but the kids know this important, as it is why they like Monarch of the Court...it is gamelike, and starts with a serve. You need to stop doing so many drills, and start doing more games. Game speed, is too often only learned in the match itself, not in most drills. It is fun to see how much kids “learn” in a single tournament, even though the numbers from a 4 team pool, add up to something like a total of 3-4 hours of “training”...why don't you see the same quantum jumps in improvement and understanding in practice? Usually because it is not gamelike enough. I think the biggest error coaches make in the gym, is to ignore the net...we take a long time to set it up, then spend a huge amount of time using it as a wall, not as the regulatory stimuli that it is. Teams constantly are doing pair training in front of it, coaches stand on the ground in front of it and “run drill” – the sign I put up when I visit camps or gyms around the world is “Use of the Court Without Use of the Net, is Prohibited.”

I also find it important to note how speed needs to be a priority in player development. Motor skill research shows that speed should be developed first ahead of “accuracy.” Tiger Woods and Jack Nicklaus both noted how they “hit the ball as hard as I could, and I found the fairway later.” Andre Agassi tells how he would “hit the ball as hard as I can, and found the court later.” In a related way, note the “Little Sister” effect seen all through our sport, such as Olympians Elaine Youngs and Leanne Sato, each with older brothers – More in your control, there is the “playing up/against men” effects. Rod Wilde, one of the greatest diggers ever in the USA, started playing at the age of 10 on a men's AA team. Karch Kiraly started playing men's beach at the age of eight with his father. Misty May, N, Karch vs. men, not age group competition.

No matter what, the core idea of teaching risk management in our sport, is to help guide your players to making more positive errors than negative, in part by making your targets be more positive to start with. An example would include putting up swim noodles on the net, inside the antenna, so that the target the setters and importantly the NON setters aim for is not the antenna – but inside. This means all errors off target still stay inside the antenna, allowing the whole court to be hit. When the set is aimed at the antenna, half the errors go past the antenna, and thus make the ball almost unhittable into the court. Same goes for where the setter should wait as the target (more off the net) and the digs should be sent to (center of the court, not at the net). If we toss poorly, players who understand risk management make sure to let up and still put the ball into the court, rather than still blasting away. We keep the pressure on our opponents when we put the ball over the net, not into the net.

## Success is a Journey, not a Destination

Your players will remember the experiences and the lessons, not the games won or lost. They will remember the way you dealt with them, not what was their technique error. They will hear the tone of your voice, not the words you said. They can see what your body says, even if your words are saying something else. There are millions of athletes walking around 20 years after the fact, who can tell you of a hurtful remark or a negative moment that their coach inflicted on them. Be aware of your power to hurt or heal, to build up, or tear them down. Remember as Kathy DeBoer wisely noted, women bond to battle, while men battle to bond.

For yourself, keep learning, keep reading, in this journey to be the best coach you can be. If you do not have a passion for volleyball, find something you are passionate about – for the joy of coaching, win or lose, is vital to your success. You are a Jr. Olympic coach, and should know the motto of the Olympics, Citius, Altius, Fortius – as it is this daily process of guiding your players, and yourself, to be swifter, higher and stronger – the ER, not the EST. I recommend some great books in this process for you – [Good to Great](#), [The Man Watching](#), [Fooled by Randomness](#), and [A Man's Search for Meaning](#).

## The Player Who Knows Why Beats the Player Who Knows How

John Wooden has a book out wonderfully titled You Haven't Taught Them if They Haven't Learned. So many coaches think that just because I have said something, that the players have learned. We must teach our players much more the WHY of our sport, not the how. Sadly, most coaches tell the players what to do, rather than asking them why something happened. A term I use a lot as key phrase for coaches is "Check for Understanding" So, rather than tell blockers "Late, Early, Good" we need to get the players to tell us what they think they were. Too often, the player will say "late" when your own eyes and experience saw "early" and that disconnect means no learning was happening. When you and your player are in agreement, it is a form of catching them doing it right.

## Develop Amazing Leaders

When I do CAP courses, I often ask the coaches to put their coaching philosophy into 6 words or less, to get to the core of their reason for coaching. For me, it is to make each athlete a great leader, of themselves, of others, and of others whose lives they touch. The Positive Coaching Alliance has a program about the "Triple Impact Competitor" which is similar in focus. Since the process of leadership development is core to my beliefs in teaching/coaching, So, as an example, you will never see me with my hand behind a clipboard, telling the players the serving zone I think they should serve. It is my job in practice to teach this, and reward/guide it as they compete in their matches. I ache when I see a player err, then whip their head almost Exorcist-like to their coach on the bench. That shows me that the players cannot think or lead on their own. It is important that you are consistent to your coaching philosophy, whatever your main reason(s) for helping develop each athlete and thus grow our wonderful game.

When you work hard on this process with yourself as a player, the terms Citius, Altius, Fortius guide our development, along with the term "mindful repetitions." This has always bothered me, in that players think that practice makes perfect, or even the offshoot phrase "perfect practice makes perfect." I think far more important is that "one point at a time focused practice makes perfect." The best counter-example to this would be your handwriting. This is something you DO every day, yet does it get better? Nope. It only gets better when you become mindful in the process, the repetitions of doing it. Thus your handwriting would improve, as you can see in architects who have perfect printing. Work hard to help your players become great "right here, Right now" players working to improve each contact and practice, not just go through the motions as they do with their handwriting.

## Subtle Variations of a Different Gamelike Theme

Thanks to Dr. Carl McGown, and the gold medal performances of our men's Olympic teams, the science of sport is being better applied to volleyball. After the first nine points above, it comes simply down to playing more, holding your players accountable by scoring – just like in the game – and changing the games (formerly known as "drills") in simply subtle ways. Again, that which gets measured and recorded and rewarded . . . improves . . .

I wish to close here with a quote from one of my favorite coaches, Anson Dorrance, from his great for players, book Visions of a Champion. *"One of the themes that I tried to drive home was to create environments in practice that would psychologically harden the athletes and make them relentless. These sessions were designed to develop the muscle in the middle of your chest.: your heart. Your heart doesn't understand systems or shape or tactics, but it bleeds an indefatigable spirit and, if it's strong, it „grinds“ away in our game for 90 minutes, or sometimes 150 if necessary. This spirit goes beyond sport. It is the athletic experience at its best, and becomes a statement of your strength of character and who and what you are. . . the athletic experience only has meaning if we can draw something from it beyond the game. I say this so much our players think it is a cliché „Athletics doesn't develop character, but it certainly exposes it,“ and it's true. There is a range of experience in sports that truly tests the human spirit: yes, it can be euphoric, but some of it is not; in fact, at times it is devastating. Your reaction to this range will demonstrate the depth of your character."*