Training Tools for Jr. Olympic and Youth Volleyball

By John Kessel, USA Volleyball Director of Membership Development and Disabled Programs

These are successful training items I have created and used in the last 35 years of coaching kids – all of which are inexpensive and thus can be done at any grassroots level. They can be used to increase the time on task/contacts per hour for class or team training, making stations or in other ways to get more than one ball in the air over your court at the same time. They can also provide player feedback and feedforward information without the teacher/coach intrusion, in as gamelike of ways as possible. Please share these ideas with all who are helping connect to and grow the game with USA Volleyball.

Younger Players – These are the #1 training tools for older players at any level. "That which you teach, you learn, " is a well known adage and truth – yet I find most programs fail miserably at taking advantage of this opportunity to develop players. USA Volleyball has a full membership option, good starting in September of each year until November of the next year, which gives 11 and under kids the *Volleyball USA* magazine, USAV liability and sports accident insurance and *Rotations* e-newsletters, for $15 – and less if the Region you are in wishes to. That is about 4-6 youth league cycles for one membership fee.

EVERY Jr. Olympic Volleyball program should be taking time from their team practice to coach younger kids. You need not make it be every week for a certain team, but to the youth coming in, they get a practice and a match each week in a "First Touch" program for an 8-12 week cycle. Have your 14's teach on the four youth courts you get by putting a double net down the middle of their practice court, every other week night. Have your 13s do it the other two times a month. And have teams which practices weekends in the morning or afternoon, come early or stay a bit late to coach/officiate/score the league matches, using 2 out of 3 scoring that take place after or before their own practices. Other age groups can do more teams. You are creating a pipeline, helping your JOV players become better at self coaching, and young players get both positive role models and a great start to this lifetime sport. The costs are minimal, as the coaches are already USAV members, and the gym is also "free" as the JOV players become better players by coaching. My daughter's 13 & under JOV team did this last year, en route to a Bronze medal at the Junior Olympic Championships, and the time spent teaching, helped them all better self coach, while the young kids loved the role models teaching them.

Balls – Molten makes a wonderful ball line for getting players to start learning the game, in the house. The "First Touch" 70 gram weight (2.5 oz) is my choice for any niece, nephew or young child under who wants a real volleyball to play around the home. The 140 (5 oz) is a great ball for elementary school aged kids in a gym. The 210 oz (7.5 oz) is so close to the Lite Volleyballs (8.3oz) used for official 12 and under Jr. Olympic Volleyball age group play, that I opt for the regulation lite ball.

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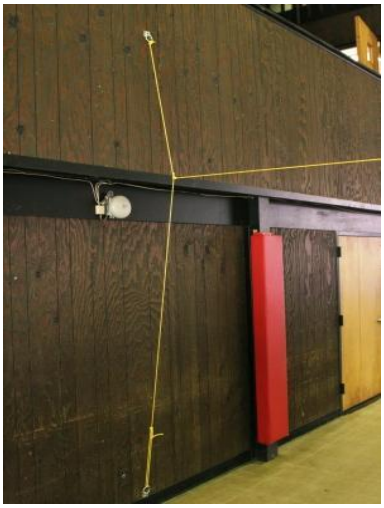
Balloons – It does not matter what age, the use of balloons to help keep rallies lasting a long time, and for introducing volleying and fun, is priceless. Some of the most intense volleyball "matches" I have seen have been between national team players using a balloon. Young kids can play much older, more talented players, and the balloon speed allows an almost level playing field. Balloon relay games for warm ups, where the players on both sides of the net must keep the "ball" in play as the team runs footwork/armwork patterns after the touch the balloon to the endline and back…in groups of 2 on each side, are great movement options.

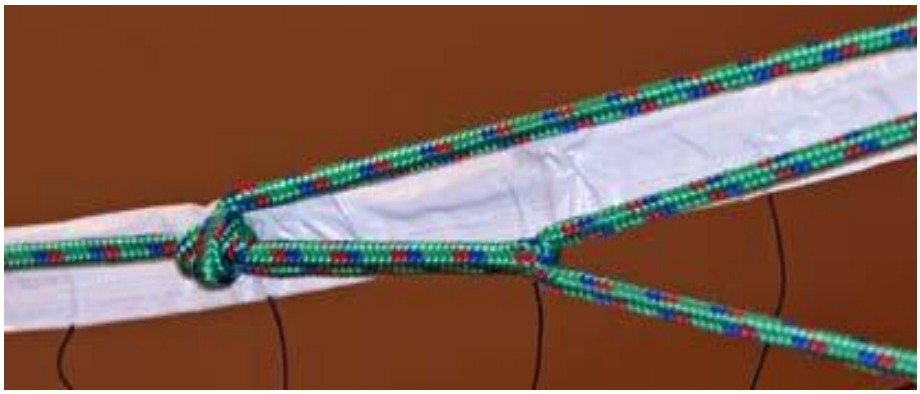
Rope – Down a normal practice court, to double the amount of learning for the whole team's start of practice, outside in the yard to make a personal small one on one court, or outdoors to play doubles or triples tournaments, a rope is a great net. Eliminate blocking, so the players learn to READ (and don't get smacked in the face by a spike that goes "into the net" that is not there. Rope can be lines too, for an outside court.

Nets – As my article "Gifts for a Volleyball Player" first notes, the game teaches the game, and kids who get the gift of a backyard net to play over with 3 other teammates, become the best players. There are many ways to create training stations inside and outside a gym.

Wall Anchored Nets – As every gym has SIX basketball hoops up, and one net, we need to create ways to put up four to eight youth nets, not one. The common error is to drill an eyebolt into the wall at the "right height" for a kids' net. While that works for one height, it stops you from being able to infinitely adjust the net. This is done by putting a hanging ring or eye bolt in behind the side baskets.



In the case of a set of bleachers, you can either put a rope behind that comes out for use as your vertical rope standard (if space allows) or anchor to places on the bleachers. This is seen below, showing how you can just move the net rope up or down along the rope standard. Both are tightened using a pulley knot (aka trucker's knot.) finished by a slip knot so you can untie it in just a simple pull taking a second.



Luggable Nets – Park and Sun and other companies make great luggable court set ups that contain all you need. www.parkandsun.com for a look at a wide variety of good nets that, using strong poles and guy ropes into the ground or, in the case of using them on the sand, attaching them to "deadmans" (foot long 2x4s or Frisbee like discs with anchor sections which are buried two to three feet under the top of the sand). Indoors you can also anchor these to power grips vacuum suctioned onto the gym floor.

2x4 Nets – As seen in the picture of a camp group playing doubles up in Alaska, just using rope anchored into the ground, and 2x4 wood beams crossed into an "X" is very do-able. The lines? The kids' shoes and socks. This is part of promoting more "unstructured play" so the kids are more versatile players.

Tennis Court Nets – A GREAT training areas untapped by volleyball programs are unused tennis courts. There you have a nice retaining fence, often with a wind break also built in, and a half court divider net (called a tennis net to those playing that sport). Put up rope nets on the "wall" of the chain link fence, and chalk the court lines and you have a whole outdoor gym to run a youth or junior grassroot program. The vast majority of the world's kids and adults, play on either dirt - or concrete/asphalt if they are lucky. The Chinese Nine-man Nationals are held in the streets of Chinatowns in San Fransciso and New York. Practice is held in parking lots, in the middle of summer, using car tires to anchor the outdoor net systems to, as you can see below.

Wallyball Nets – Playing in a racquetball court makes for big "booms" from spiking. It also means you do not need to go anywhere to retrieve the errant balls. The nets are sometimes attached in a court with holes up on the wall, but other places use the large vacuum power suction cups called "Power Grips" from Laurel, MT, which glass installers use to carry large plates of glass. These grips can be used both to anchor to the smooth walls or glass of a racquetball court or for an outdoor nets system, at the two anchor points on the floor for each standard.

Badminton Nets – simply raise the badminton nets up to the over 7 foot height of volleyball play for middle school by putting a 1 ½ inch PVC pipe piece that is about 3 feet long, over the actual badminton standard. Attach the badminton net (using the badminton court for a youth court size, either the doubles or the singles lines) to this extended PVC pipe, or just keep it lower at badminton regulation height or lower for younger kids.

Lines in the Sand - Some of the most intense competitions I have witnessed, were played over a table in a living room, using a balloon. Nemo, a special Starlings USA player who would ask "Are you a Starling" to anyone passing by her court on the beach, simply drew a line in the sand, and the kids played over that. At Santa Barbara High, the place where FIVB Player of the Century and 3 time Olympic Gold Medalist Karch Kiraly went to school, the best players get to hit on the asphalt nets, while the players still learning to play, simply play over a chain link fence…Stay outta the net takes on new meaning, and centerline errors and injuries vanish as well as you learn to play off the net.

Tournament Warm up "Net"- This is a thin light cord attached to two small carabineers. One end is attached to the net during your shared warm up time. The other end either is 1. Held by a coach who raises their arm high; 2. Attached to the divider netting at the end of the court; 3, Attached to a PVC pipe hook you make, that hooks up over the back of the backboard, and comes down to net height from the floor. This allows your kids to still keep training/reading/getting feedback from hitting over the "net" while only using half the court. You can see below, double nets, and other training tools on the court, along with the mission statement.

Other Standards – Wall "Standards" using screw in eyebolts are the most versatile, and noted above already. The rope net picture of the double grass courts in Alaska, are simply put up between two 2x4's bolted together, where net height can be adjusted by spreading or narrowing the base. Placing a wooden cross beam can also be done to more lock in the net height, or you can put in more carriage bolts and wing nuts. Heath Hoke out of Iowa created training court options down the middle of each regular court (as seen above) for the High Performance Camp I head coached. Using a large flat plunger head grip for the floor, weighed down by weight room weights, he used a one inch conduit pipe as the standard that was "anchored" at the top by the basketball hoop, placing the conduit inside the hoop. Finally, Cal Wickens out of New York shared this idea for kids courts using 5 gallon buckets and wood 1x1 posts. With a rubber gasket to seal the wing nut/bolt drilled into the wood as well, you can fill these kids standards with water, sand or dirt. Take them down by pouring out the weight and undoing the wing nuts, and stacking the buckets inside each other. Rope, badminton type or other light nets are plenty, and on the beach/river sand bars you can bury the buckets and make a very tight net system.

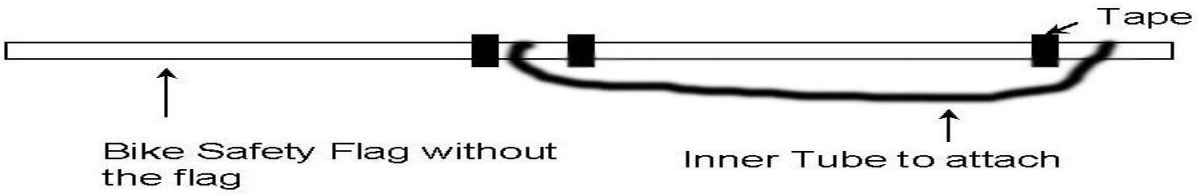
We have a new design of a large PVC "Candy Cane" which hangs over the backboards, and allows you to attach the rope/net to the "floating" tube, so you do not even have to go into the wall. More on this soon, including a picture of the device.

Swim Noodles – These have been my favorite training tool as they are cheap and versatile. Cut them in half, thirds or even smaller pieces. When cut in any size, then sliced with one more cut lengthwise that goes to the hole in the center of the noodle, you have great net marking tools. Longer noodles can be used by too-short players to put up a block on teammates. Longer noodles can be woven into the top of the double nets for youth courts, and with a cut to hold them at the bottom on the net twine, they can be large colorful antennas.

Elastic Bands – You can get this in varying widths, 3/8" is most versatile I have found, and use it to stretch from antenna to antenna, to be a 1) serve under target for flatter serving; 2) hit over target for spikers learning over the block armswing; 3) contact feedback for blockers learning to reach over – better done by sliding PVC t-joint over each antenna, then extending the elastic out over the OTHER side of the net in 4,6,8,12 inch or more increments based on the length of the t-joint attachment to teach penetration; 4) it can also be used for Chinese Jump Rope warm ups games.

Duct Tape – The tape now comes in colors, so brighten up/school color match your gym as you do this. Put up your set calls and sample ball flights on a 30 foot wall. – Athletes, even those not from volleyball, will come and see if they can set the flights you have put up on the wall. Remember, backsets too, says the lefty. More important however is to put up net height strips of 5-30 feet long, on smooth walls where you have them. This allows you to stop teaching the players repetitive wall spiking to the floor – thus teaching negative errors, and get the kids to start serving/attacking balls over the net that will be a barrier that specific height for about 50 years of their lives. Below, two athletes are playing a game of 1 v. 1 of dig to self, set to self and attack to a teammate over the "net" line. You can also see skill posters up so all kids standing in this area can self teach.

Bicycle Safety Flags – At antennas are a “regulatory stimuli,” to use a motor skill researcher term meaning something that impacts or regulates your competition play, they need to be up at all times for training, defining that edge of the court. When a small nation asked me to bring down a second set of antenna’s for their national team, as they only had one set in the country, I bought a couple of dozen bike safety flags, the ones with the white fiberglass rod and a fluorescent orange flag on the top. Took off the metal mounting device and the orange flag, and slid on half of a bike inner tube, to be the meter long anchor device around the net. The top was set with a small strip of athletic tape to hold the inner tube in place and the bottom tensioned on to more tape as a stopper. I even used grommets to make the inner tube holes for the antenna more durable. See below what one looks like.



Painters Tape – Make “Hollywood Star” moments - catching them doing excellent things and have a ceremony right then in practice, marking the place with the removable tape, signing it, dating it, etc. Mark on the floor where you want a player to start…dash lines for movement…mark the middle of the court for narrow court doubles…there are all sorts of uses for this stuff. Just replace it every week or so if on a wood floor, so you do not have a problem with the varnish. Putting down lines at one and two meters off the net on the right and left sides of the court reminds the players setting (setters and non-setter alike) where to deliver the ball OFF the net so their teammates can swing at the ball and not get blocked. This is especially important for younger and shorter players. See the article “From Positive to Perfection:” on the USAV website for more.

Golden Ball – Every bucket of balls needs an “extra point” ball which when it comes into play, increases the value at a pre-determined level of that rally. Marking it with quotes of power, or team sayings and the like, makes it even more valuable when an athlete is standing in line holding that ball.

Deer Netting – This is used in two ways. First, to create in a gym corner, a hitting station, where the players hit over a rope, and into the deer netting placed to deaden the spike and channel the ball back to the players to be used again. Second, use it as inexpensive divider nets, when your gym needs you to keep the volleyballs away from the other sports sharing the gym (I like to share the gym, so soccer, basketball and other sport youth can SEE us having fun spiking, serving, and playing, rather than take over the whole gym…). Simply put up another wall anchor rope system, and thread the rope thru the deer netting and raise it to the height of the netting. One program I worked with bought two rolls, and zip tied the netting together to make a very high net, for use with older kids. They also cut small doors thru the netting, very easy to do. Other netting can be bought, but I like deer netting as it currently is running about $15 for a 100 foot roll.

Refrigerator Boxes – An old favorite, you cut a parallel to the floor cut into two sides of an empty box at about halfway or a bit lower up the box. Then fold that part back against the box, so you have two walls above the box/container. Draw a setter with hands up using tempera paint of marking pens, and you have a great target you can put out to play “fill the box” challenge and set the standard games between passers and servers.

BopSock Dolls – Many coaches put out chairs for serving “targets” and reward the players for hitting the chair. If you teaching the way you were taught, you are just doing what your coaches did with you. The problem is, you are learning to serve right TO a player, rather than making the player move. BopSock Dolls, those bottom weighted inflatables can be used as "non-targets" which are even more vertical than a chair. Just remember hitting at a weaker player is good, but you must make them move, not hit right at them.

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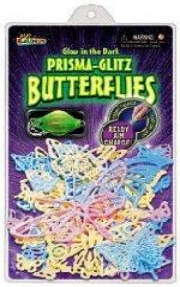
Hula Hoops – These are must haves for training kids. Their first role is as flat training targets, playing games like golf, or "H-O-R-S-E" as the hoops are moved around. Serving targets can be doubled up to give extra points for the overlapped. Section. They can be used for team building exercises. Held up by a coach they can be targets to set through. Playing a warm up game and relay races/tag games while doing a hula hoop is a fun challenge too.

Glow in the Dark Stars - Similar but longer lasting than awards on a lacrosse player's helmet, players are awarded with a star of various sizes/colors when you catch them doing things right. Awards can be given at the end of practices, once a month in a ceremony after practice, or you can stop practice and give it out right when it happens. Use a sharpie pen to put the day and award name, and give them a bit of the adhesive as well. They will go home and put it up in their room, creating a "volleyball galaxy" in time. Each night, all year long, the times you caught them doing great things on or off the court, shines as a reminder. I have had players take these moments off their home bedroom and transplant them to their college bedroom. The butterflies options can be use to celebrate change, from a caterpillar to a butterfly, as those moments are seen during the season. Space planet versions can be used to reward "out of this world" effort, attitude, concentration, communication, service streaks, and out of the gym conditioning – those things in a single player's control.



Pattern Interruption – This vital skill of a great teacher, breaking the normal delivery patterns you use, so that the information being shared is better retained, is a tool not often used enough by our coaches. Want them to remember your talk about "No Trash Talk on this Team?" – deliver it like I did from standing in a trash can. Need your point remembered about staying off the net 1-2 meters as the setter/target? – take off your shoes and socks and hang them from the net, so the players remember to stay away from the stinky socks.

Erasable Markers – My favorite idea is to use these to draw "eyes" on the base of kid's thumbs for passing, so they understand that the ball only knows the angle given. Therefore, the "eyes" MUST look at the setter/target on contact. I also used to tap each kid's arm when you catch them doing something right (and tally the number of marks) at the end of practice. When doing camps, I have the player write their name on their forearm or arm so we can read their name when we are first learning who everyone is.

Weighted Innertubes – Ankle weights do not work, so if you have them, stick them in your shorts when you go play next. The idea is to cut an inner tube at the valve area, to get rid of the value stem. Securely close off one end of the inner tube, then fill it with sand or small dense materials (a big carton of BB's works for part of the filling) and then close off that end securely as well. You now can wrap that tube around your waist and tie it down so you can play/jump/run with the weight where it should be, ABOVE your primary muscles used for jumping. Keep it light, under 5 lbs, and train on sand too for even extra jump training.

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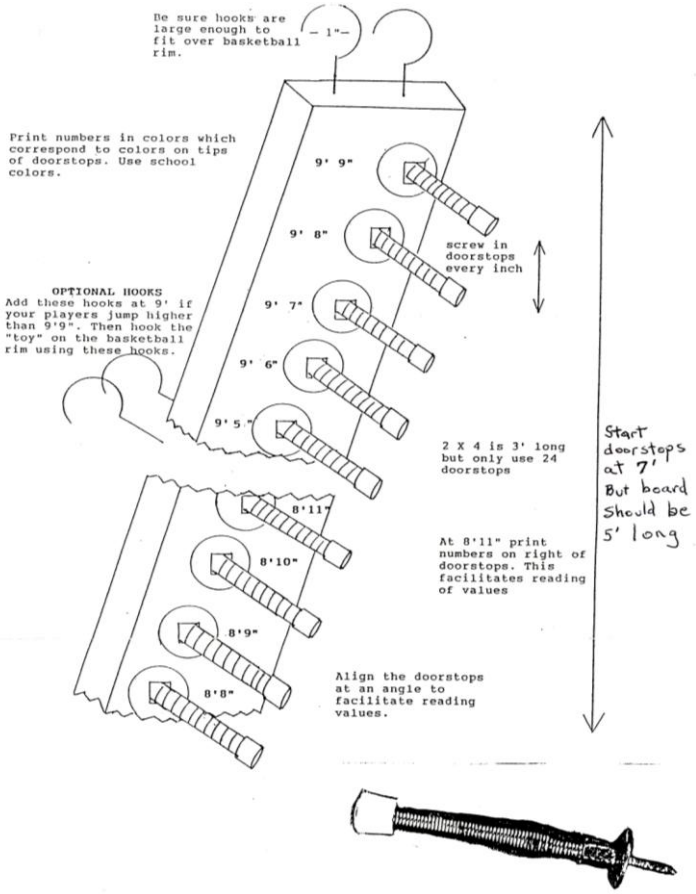
Jump Measuring Devices – Kids love to see how high they can jump. Putting up a permanent jump testing device is a good idea in any gym. You can simply mark the wall with colored duct tape and the inches written in, as one option. The other end, you can buy a Vertec, a time tested device used by many sports including our own National Team program. In the middle, you can make jump testing strips from duct tape, double folded, or fabric strips, or old flag football flags. Sid Feldman from Georgia makes one from door stops – called "The Springer" with the spring loaded doorstops placed at various heights on a board that attaches to a basketball hoop. Email mvp@usav.org if you want more information on the design.



Scoreboards – Too often forgotten, until the day of the tournament. The National Team uses a white/chalkboard on the court (wall attached or rolling) to simply keep writing the score on. Certainly a flip chart, made from binders and laminated numbers, or purchased, also works great. Additionally, we use laminated organization column charts you can get at any office store, to help the kids keep track/score of their competitive cauldron game scores. This tally job is for the kids to do, not the coach, so you can keep teaching and not become a stat collector.

Treats – It is said that players will do anything for a tootsie roll, and most the times they are right. Kids also love playing the M&M/GORP Target Chair, where you place a cup (with a lid) of the reward under the chair which is placed where we want to dig or serve receive to. When hit, by an arcing, playable ball (not a rocket low pass), the player performing the dig/pass gets to sit in the chair and snack on the treat, until someone else hits them (the target is now bigger than a chair with a player sitting there) and they trade places.

Sheets – These create the FLAT targets we need to train kids to aim for. Spread wide, they make a pretty big target. They can be folded up into smaller and smaller flat targets to get more challenging accuracy demands. Padded mats, used for yoga/Pilates and other PE activities (and even use the wall pads used for padding under each basket, if removable). Remember, you too can be a flat target, as the kids LOVE to hit you with a serve, and they get rewarded even further when you start to do sit-ups each time they can hit you. Hey, you need to get in shape too right? Why not make it a motivator for your team!

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I buy all black or all red sheets, king sized, to use for “blind volleyball” where you cover up the net (locking them in with the swim noodles) to have the players react to the ball coming over the net late. You can also get sheets from thrift stores and dye them any color you want. I use these two colors to also talk/impact about the need to hit OVER the net, and not into the “black hole” from the top of the net on down, or the “hell” (red), vs. the “heaven” that happens when you hit the ball over the net in the much larger “space” that goes from the top of the net to the ceiling – usually 3 times more space.

Sidewalk Chalk – Teams should let the public know when a volleyball event is being held in a gym, by chalking up the sidewalk right outside the gym with team sayings, spirit statements and even logo drawings.

Water / Sitting Volleyball

Use a rope, or a net, but a great chance to PLAY and laugh simply comes from taking the time to put a net across the pool and letting the athletes have at it in water volleyball. The same goes for giving 36 kids on one regular court the chance to experience the Paralympic game of Sitting Volleyball. Court size is 6 meters wide by 4.5 meters deep when you divide the court down the middle, making the endlines and 3 meter lines the sidelines of the sitting court. Net height is about a meter, and again, let them play. Inclusion is also possible with letting kids in wheelchairs play in their chair, or letting really little kids stand while the taller/older players sit.

Traditional Tools -- You may wonder why, by this stage, there is no mention of “Coaching Platforms” or “Blocking Devices.” The MOST important skill in our sport is reading, and the timing/judgment that comes hand in glove with it. Every skill in our amazing “rebound the ball” sport must be learned by the player’s body – we have no “longer blocking arms” to buy for a short player, or “passing platforms” we can buy to help a younger player. They must learn with their own unique body, something working over the years with the disabled USA teams has shown great examples of how to create playable rebound surfaces. The timing and judgment ONLY comes from gamelike play. We must, as Marv Dunphy wisely said, “TRAIN IN REALITY”

So, I rarely ever hit while standing on a coaching platform at a team, for 1) THEY need to learn to hit over the net, not me; 2) They need to read a moving attacker/blocker situation. To stand on a platform and block hitters, never teaches the blockers the most important skill of learning when and where to block/jump so that they are in the right place at the right time as the ball crosses the net. The same is true for hitting from a platform, you never learn how to adjust to a set ball.

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When you need to show an example of what you want, simply LOWER the net, so the ENTIRE floor becomes your coaching platform for that moment. Then raise the net and get back to reality. Please understand that I know there will be a few times for some levels where the coach or some other better skilled players need to save the sidearm – something of NO value in reading as no opponent ever does such – and let them dig live hitters jumping. Oh, and while I am at it, we need to also eradicate the "Ball Slap" too. Do any opponents ever give you a slapped ball for your kids to learn to move and react to? They need to SEE the second ball contact going errant, and MOVE before the third ball contact is made, NOT move off the net when you slap a ball and as the ball is coming over the net -- you are training your players to be LATE if you do this.

Blocking devices? Sure there are times when a very short team needs to put up a block for their hitters to experience. At the lowest level, few hitters deserve a block, and those that might, only deserve a single block. In the case of a team with nobody tall enough to block, either use the swim noodles held up over the net, buy an inflatable swim mat - the 4-5 tubes in a row kind -and hold it over the net, or snag a folding chair and hold it over the net, concave curved side facing the attacker. The expense of an expensive blocking device just makes you feel the need to use it, and thus take time from your players learning how to block themselves.

Why are there no "speed ladders," or "Russian Leapers," jump ropes or jump shoes, etc. First off, I believe that the great coach Anson Dorrance ad it right when he said *"Conditioning is Homework"* That means that all conditioning ideas you develop really should be created to be able to be done by your athletes at home/outside the volleyball court. Getting in shape is part of being an athlete, but not at the expense of specificity in training and court time. At recent many day US Olympic Committee seminar on Training Design, the presenters and coaches used the term "specificity in training" hundreds of times in all the sport examples. The jump devices? Not specific enough for good transfer. The Jump shoes? Due to their cost, players jumped more to justify that expense, but the increase in jumping came from jumping more, not the shoes. Speed ladders? They might be fun, but I will quote Dr. Schmidt from his book on Motor Learning, Principles to Practice - *Drills and lead-up activities take considerable practice time and do not produce much transfer, so use them sparingly in later practice stages." AND "It is fruitless to try to train fundamental abilities, (e.g. quickness, balance) so concentrate on the fundamental skills instead."*

Younger players need more unstructured play, and training for these athletes should have movement games in warm ups and other fun things as part of practice. As you get more experience, the game itself is fun, and should be your primary "training tool." The game teaches the game…that is why there are millions of skilled doubles players, and nobody coaching them.

If you have any other good, inexpensive, gamelike enhancing training tool ideas, please let us know at USA Volleyball by sending them to mvp@usav.org Best wishes in the gym!

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