

From Positive to Perfection

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

There is a new principle which I would ask all coaches and players to incorporate in their training, something that goes against the traditional way of training as well as the easier options currently being done. After almost 40 years of coaching, I have seen the very beneficial and successful impact of focusing on this concept at every age – from youth to Olympic team. The title says it all – to first teach positive errors on the path to perfection, in every training.

This change in culture will likely take time, as the options are more gamelike and thus more difficult than the non-game like traditions currently being used, but changing can make for significant and rapid improvement, especially at the younger levels. The concept here is to teach our kids to make mistakes that are better than those traditionally being developed. The intent is give developing players a margin of error, rather than a small point of perfection. A grey area over the bright light of the perfect contact, a space/area/side/flight or whatever that is OK, rather than the black holes of similar but far more rally ending contacts. Give them room to err as they learn perfection. Let me share with you the most common examples:

Spiking

The *Tradition* is let kids do wall spiking. Coaches speak of how it is done to develop wrist snap, and more. So if you become the Olympic gold medalist in wall spiking – what do you see happen when you as a world class wall spikers hit over a net? Yep, you are conditioned to hit into the net, into the block, heck, even under the net, with the habits you have formed.

The *New Tradition* – Put up a “net” on the wall at both men’s and women’s heights and teach the new tradition of playing games against the wall over that stripe. We used colored duct tape, giving each court and side a new color for the colorfulness of it. Set to yourself then hit against the wall over the tape, and repeat. Play one on one cooperatively to see how many dig to self, set to self, hit over the line three contacts you can make happen with a teammate.

Why positive over negative? - You want your players to hit the ball over the net, and make the opponents think and your teammates in practice learn - “In or out?” You want to give yourself a chance to hit off the blockers hands and out of bounds. When you hit over the net, you get tape shots that clear the net, and teach teammates that vital read and react skill. When you hit into the net, none of these important things can happen. Hitting into the net is a very negative error, hitting over the net and out is positive and should be taught from the start.

Passing

The *Tradition* is to pair up and partner pass. So if you become the Olympic Gold medalists at partner passing – what do you see happen when these world class partner passers actually serve receive? Ask any beginning coach, for they know as they see the first hit going back to where it came from, while they plead “Three hits, three hits, pass it to the setter....” Ask any setter, for they know when they see the ball being served to zones four and five that they must move from their setter target slot, forward, as the passers don’t pass over to them, but instead pass straight ahead. This bad habit is further promoted by wall passing, which is simply a disguised form of partner passing. Once again, I want to get even better than my Olympic Gold medal pair passing partner, I will go train by myself to get better (a good thing!), and pass thousands of balls against the wall. I now am the world’s best at putting the ball straight back to where it came from.

The *New Tradition* – From the start, the athletes need to see the ball coming from OVER the net. That said, you can err by passing off target but towards your teammates or you can pass away from the setter and away from your teammates. The good mistake is to err towards your other five friends, and not err by passing to the other court or fans.

The second positive error you want to make in passing is to pass UP first. The target is always the setter spot, but if you err up, the setter can run and still get to the ball, or another teammate can play it, even if your error is well off the setter target spot. Err low, and everyone whirls as the worm burning shot flies by below their knees, and someone says “Nice try...” This goes hand in glove with where the setter target should be, which is suggested to be 2 meters off the net, perhaps three meters for true beginners. This way you can err with your pass by two meters and the ball is still on your side and playable.

Serving

The *Tradition* - Like spiking, tradition sees focus on the negative error when you serve into the net. The other team could be wax statues on the court and they will get the point. We must learn to serve every error over the net, and at least get a chance to knock over a wax statue player, and get a point. Serve into the net, everyone knows it failed to clear; serve long and there are officials and line judges who have called a ball in, even when it was slightly out. In training, when you serve out, your teammates learn – In? Out? – an important decision and read. When you serve out long, your opponents will sometimes still pass the ball, and your error is no longer an error. Playing in the wind, I have never seen a ball blow up and over the net from being served too low. I have however seen the wind blow the ball back into the court, an ace virtually every time.

The *New Tradition* - In addition to serving over and not into the net, have your players RUN into the court to their designated backrow defense court position after every serve. That is what you want them to do in the game, so why not do the same in practice....

Setting

The *Tradition* - I remember learning to back set, standing in a straight line, and finally successfully sending the ball back over my head to my partner directly behind me. Should you become the Olympic Gold medalist at back setting in a line, when I get into the game, I will face where the ball comes from, out in the court beyond the 3 meter line most often, then fire up the habit my coach taught me, and launch the ball over the net behind me. The tradition is for the setter to stand right at the net, hand up, waving the famous “right here” motion. As noted in passing above, if you stand this close, you then have half of your almost perfect passes – one meter off target is all – to the setter, flying over the net to the opponents. Tradition also has us setting the ball right next to the net, and setting the ball high to first teach hitters how to hit.

The *New Traditions* - Start setting your very first sets on angles, while standing further away from the net, and setting at the 3 meter line. Young players might consider doing this whole triangle of pass off the setter’s toss-set off the net-hit over the net to occur even further off the net, say starting six meters back. As the players improve, or as good players warm up, you move your sets to be closer to the net, but never any closer than a meter off the net – as we must give the hitter room to swing through, to safely land off the centerline ankle spraining area (as we learn how to jump, read the set and adjust to the variances), and so that the hitter does not have a wall of hands inches away from their contact point, but instead has lots of space and angles to move past the block to the right, left or even over the block. For younger players, the NET is a huge block to clear, when they are set too near. Teaching in this new way, the back set first should be set to the 3 meter line and as their skills develop, they can put the ball two meters off the net, then finally one meter off the net, but never over the net as their shoulders might want the ball to go.

The three positive vs. negative concepts for setting are:

Better too high than too low (time to adjust)

Better too far off the net, than too tight to the net (room to swing and safer)

Better too far inside the court, rather than outside the antenna (you still have the whole court to hit and land safer)

Digging

The *Tradition* is to partner pepper, as coaches go on and on how it “teaches ball control and warms up their arms...” So....back to the Olympic Gold Medal standard – two of your players practice it so much and for so long they become the world’s best at partner pepper, and what do you have? You have two players who are the world’s best at digging a spiked ball straight back to where it came from... the best at hitting down (as in into the net), and directly at a player (rather than at spaces and away from a vertical target)...two players who, the better they get at pepper, the less they have to move (where great diggers can move more and more on the court), and much more. For the purposes of this article, the first two negative errors are the biggest concern. For when a player is taught to dig a ball coming in at no more than 2/3rd full speed, and to dig it back to the attacker, you can imagine where the ball is likely to go when an opponent is hitting a full game speed. As a lefty, I wish I had a dollar for every ball I spiked cross court from zone two, and watched it fly back over my head, while watching the setter spinning his wheels trying to cross the entire court and hearing that setter yelling “Help! Help!” as the ball was dug straight back to their zone four. It looks ok when a hit comes from zone four cross court to be dug straight back to their zone two, so the setter has a chance, but it is still a hidden negative error.

The *New Traditions* - Teach your players from the very beginning to make the positive error first and always if they err, by digging the ball up to themselves. Now when someone hits at game speed, the ball simply goes up higher on their side of the net. No low worm burners fly by. Indeed, it is better to dig a ball too high, rather than too low, so on slow balls, we teach adding to these slower flying volleyballs by popping the ball up high, giving one's teammates time to get to the ball. At the same time you want to learn to dig the ball towards a target on your side, but never over the net. So alternating pepper, where the hitter moves forward to be the setter /target half way between where they hit from and the ball is being dug, is a good option. So is three person pepper, where the players weave and move, create positive habits of digging the ball up half way in front of them or to one or the other side to their 3rd partner who is the setter at that moment, and never back to the hitter,

Blocking

The *Tradition* is to block standing on a platform, or block a coach who is on a hitting box, or "shadow" block. Let's imagine you and I become the world's best shadow blockers. What are we learning to do? To jump at the same time as the hitter, to not penetrate over the net, to block the ball, and to block in front of the hitter. So when we get in the game, we jump too early, (for the ball takes time to go from the hitter to our spot at the net, and the further back they hit from the later we must jump), we touch the net (as there is no one stopping our pressing but ourselves now), we don't know how to penetrate over the net, we watch the ball for timing (as it is the only thing moving), and we fail to take the favorite shot of every hitter around the world – the cross court hammer.

The *New Traditions* – Simply block live hitters, learning to watch the intelligent thing, the hitter, and not the air filled empty volleyball. The negative error is to net, or get tooled, the positive error is to not block a hitter who you think does not deserve a block (or where the set is not good enough for an aggressive attack to be mounted), or have your block be late, so you deflect the ball up, or to have to dig a ball since it was not blocked. Blockers must learn to watch the attacker as early as possible, preferably while they are starting or just into their approach. The only way to time a hitter is to practice blocking live hitters, hitting from all over the court.

Other Skills

Now, there are coaching negative errors as well - Disgust when they hit the back wall or out long, disappointment when the ball is passed off the net or set well of the net, frustration with "for gosh sake just hit it in!" statements when the players are being aggressive as they learn mastery and hitting the ball, are errors that bring a team to the negative side of the game. You must show consistency in practice and game reaction – you have to focus on mastery – not the performance, and praise the effort and learning along the way, despite the outcome.

I give a player a Wendy's Frosty for anytime a ball below a player's waist is dug up "too high" and hit the ceiling. We still get to play it of course, reading the rafter bounce and chasing it down. The point is, digging up too high is what we want all players to do in stress, so their teammates have time to get to the ball instead of watching it fly by and say, "gosh, good effort..." I have hung black sheets over the net not for the fun game of "blind" volleyball, but to make my point that, when you are lost in space, whirling and confused on the court and but having to send the third contact over the net, make the good mistake and hit into the light. That is the space from 7-8 feet off the floor (i.e. the top of the net) to the ceiling...and it is NOT the "black hole" from the top of the net down to the floor. When you are confused, hit the ball into the light above the black hole, as it is 2-5 times bigger of a space than from the net down. Even if you hit out, you make them think, but you never will win if you hit lots of balls into the black hole.

Another reason for these positive errors to be the training focus at practice is that the players will practice at home alone or with a friend. They will get tens of thousands of contacts against a wall or back and forth to a partner. From this common "bad miss" promoting training, when they walk into the gym, and we have a net and four or more players, it is time to work on the gamelike perfection we seek, while making everything a good miss, should we err.

ACL Saver

If I still have you this far into this article, I have one final tradition changing request to make. That is to help teach the players to use their non-dominant hand to attack, each and every practice, even if only for 1-2 minutes a training. Why? To save kids' ACLs, their anterior cruciate ligaments.

The most common knee injury to right handed players is to their left knee. This occurs when a player who only knows how to use their right hand in spiking, jumps to hit balls in games and drills from the number four "outside hitter" position, the

most common attack in volleyball. When a player misjudges the ball, and the setter makes the negative error of setting past the antenna, the hitter will lean over to their left to get into a position in the air to hit the ball with their right hand. They then land, and “bam” in one error, their left knee cannot take the stress of landing off balance and they pop their ACL. I hope you take time to develop each player’s non-dominant hand, not necessarily to powerfully attack the ball, but at least to be able to cut a ball outside their body to the other side of their body, the shot they will need to use to save a ball past the antenna, into the opponent’s court, without hitting the antenna. This same non-dominant hand need exists for lefties too, just from zone two, which would be cut across their body to zone two on the other side.

It is interesting to me, that when I work with other sport programs, the expectation is clear that the athletes should be able to use both their right and left hands. In basketball, you must know how to dribble and even shoot with both hands; in soccer you must know how to do the same with both feet. In lacrosse, if you only can shoot right, you will never be any good. Yet in volleyball, we expect the player to hit the ball with their dominant hand no matter how off balance that might make the player.

Please help teach your players how to use their non-dominant hand in play. Play short court warm ups and only allow non-dominant serves and attacks. Point out when they are getting near too far of a lean to their opposite side, and how they can use their other arm to stay more balanced in landing. It only takes one error in judgment to get injured in any sport – and for our game, we need to give them more tools to deal with the random, chaotic, angle changing, variable ball flights and speeds that come from rebounding the ball in such a crowded court space.

In many ways, this comes down to a form of “risk management” which is what Hugh McCutcheon used so well to propel the USA Olympic men to a gold medal in Beijing. Rather than rip every serve, if you don’t toss it perfectly to yourself, get it over and in, rather than erring – just take a little bit off it and keep it in play. If you toss it well, go for it. The USA men passing target is 2 meters OFF the net, and their digging target is the center of the court, 4.5 meters OFF the net. Positive errors first and always win medals!

Perception, anticipation and reading – the elements of being a savvy game player, can be taught through play. All the research notes that it is best to teach the whole, rather than the part/progressions, as the game teaches the game. Decision making and learning to win – it comes best through game play – small team size to full six vs. six, but always game play with the decisions of “what is best here” being made each time. Unstructured play helps problem solve new situations as well – thus your players never want monarch of the court games to end – and the wise coach helps create fun and varied scoring games to strengthen that passion to play. It really is simple, a volleyball player plays; if you want your athletes to become great volleyball players, play the game.