



An Open Letter to All Teaching Volleyball to Kids Aged 14 & Under

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

Dear Coach -

I went to a 12 and 10 & under volleyball league recently, and had flashbacks to my time playing Little League baseball as a Camarillo Eagle. I would hunker out there in "Right Field," just like the classic Peter Paul and Mary song by the same name, getting into a ready position over and over again, talking "chatter" to keep sane, and seeing a ball come my way once a game if I was very lucky. One ball an hour, maybe. Only at bat did you get anything to DO. I often think from all my "at bats" comes my desire to have volleyball serves be called by balls and strikes, so that players need not go for the ball every single time, as they must in volleyball. I then contrasted my baseball experiences, and the volleyball game in front of me, to my son's YMCA basketball adventures, and that of the successful Hoop-It-Up program, where the team size is three. I also thought back to how many hours I played one on one vs. a friend in hoops, and the vast amount of skill learning I gained during that time.

I continued in this nice volleyball only gym, to sit, watch and record my observations. What I saw frustrated me, as someone wanting kids to love the game while learning the game. There was about a 70 percent total failure rate that was some unique version of a service error - and I do I mean "unique" at times. Next I tracked about a 25 percent serve reception error - virtually all landing as an "untouched ace." Meanwhile, with every contact, the coaches and parents stand around and clap. WHAT are they clapping for? In the end, I saw five forearm passes, ones that went back over the net, and one forearm pass battlebot rally.

One rally, about 75 serve attempts in the 45 minutes. The kids learning better and better how to....*rotate*. And once every 12 times, they get their chance to fail at serving.

Now before I forget, there will also be the kid, most often from a volleyball family, who CAN do the closed motor program of serving successfully. This person CAN perform this single skill well, better than any other skill. So I get letters from wonderful kids who write things like "I am 12 and I can serve great, and just won a game 15-0 on my serving and I want to come to the Olympic Training Center now to help you." Such a boost to one's ego and morale by being such a great server at these lower levels is noted. However, 15-0 serving does not equal any skill learning of consequence for the other 11 kids out there, as they are just watching, not doing.

Please do not get me wrong. This is a program run by people who CARE, and who make a living at volleyball. They are supportive, indeed I bet they have calluses from clapping, and make positive statements to the kids. At this level, technique comments are not needed as much as coaches send them out, and these coaches were mostly encouraging and not flooding the kids with too much skill/technical info. I just saw about 20 people, kids on the court, parents, coaches and players off the court, all getting great amount of skill development in clapping, but little skill learning. We cheer with every error...one of our unique team building traditions.

What disappoints me greatly is that we continue in the USA to have young kids playing essentially the adult game of 6 vs. 6. Minivolley was created 40 years ago, in East Germany. Soccer learned the lesson of small sided games for kids, and continues its steady growth. And yet all over the USA, elementary school teachers and youth recreation programs continue to play a game that teaches kids to stand and clap, rather than touch and learn.

The short of it is...kids MUST play and practice more doubles, triples or four sided games, on smaller courts at the start. Then, when the skills of learning, reading, anticipating and timing the ball are acquired, they will be much better prepared and experienced to play the six person adult version of the game.

I often mention Karch Kiraly, but not because he was just recently selected the best male volleyball player of the 20th century. I mention him because he learned his foundations in the sport by playing doubles...on sand...with his dad. So did the latest Olympic Gold Medalist, Misty May, who I had the pleasure of Team Leading in Sydney, who was NCAA player of the year and National Champion. So did George Roumain, from Florida, who was a great star of our USA Men's National Team and now is playing on the sand.

Each of these talents began by learning to cover a court, even a whole adult court, with just one partner, thus taking the learning chance ratio from when the ball came over from about 15% to 50%. If you are a less experienced player, that percentage will go to perhaps 100%. Having recently played in the US Park Championships with my 12 year old son Cody, I can confirm that despite my obvious weaknesses, Cody received over three-quarters of all serves, as they avoided my ancient wisdom of the game.

You see, learning equals touching, NOT watching. One doing, eleven watching is NOT efficient learning. Touching the ball is doing, is learning both movement to the ball and the skill action when contacting that darn round thing. For those who want to learn about how very important DOING rather than watching is for learning, read Magic Trees of the Mind. Or, if you do not like to read, just consider your dancing skills. After years of watching others dance, from school dances to television dance shows and countless music videos, my bet is that those reading this dance better than me. However, being able to dance better than a flailing, dying alien, which is what my dancing has been compared to, is not something about which to be very proud. Watching dancers has NOT made most folks, starting with me, any better of a dancer.

The game teaches the game I say every CAP or FIVB course I teach, for it is true. To those reading this, how many beach volleyball coaches do you know? Yet there are millions playing the Olympic game of beach volleyball, from the Olympic level to 10 and under National AAU Championships, and millions more playing doubles, triples or four on four on grass or other harder surface. How are they learning to play? By doing, as the game of doubles teaches you to move and learn the whole game, all fundamental skills included, faster than any six person game ever will.

Partner drilling gets lots of touches but not in ways that result in learning to read, anticipate, judge and timing in game-like ways. The HUGE problem with most coach's training methods is they train the kids without using the net. It kills me to see coaches spend so long putting up a net...then have the kids stand in front of it and partner pass, or worse, circle pass. I am getting the heebie jeebies just typing this. Please, let the kids both warm up by using small courts, for over the net singles or doubles. Let them train and play on courts that share one adult net, or create on one adult net area, 4-10 courts over ropes or linked nets with much smaller boundaries. They will get plenty warm get lots of touches and see lots of balls coming over the net and learn where to go, in time this will be in advance of the ball hitting the floor where they should have been, as they play volleyball. I think it was Bill Neville who reminded us all that we PLAY volleyball we do not DRILL volleyball.

One other unseen problem is that partner training teaches young players to call the ball as mine, since it is coming to them - learning that when a ball comes to them, they are to call it. This however is only the case in serving, when an opponent delivers a ball that should NOT be to them, but that makes them move. Then in the next contact, done 1/3 the total amount in a game, and the key contact on any team, is done by a setter. At this level, the ball does not often go to the setter slot, but up in the air to one of the other five teammates areas. Their response thus becomes "Mine!" which is the incorrect one for real volleyball. The correct action is that seen in Monty Python and the Search For the Holy Grail when they meet the Rabbit..."RUN AWAY!", and thus create the space for the setter to come to where the ball is falling and set. The other option is to one-arm-stiff and bowl over a teammate who is still standing there, arms up, expecting to set.

Now, if by now you still want to run six vs. six, fine. I have failed in this short document to convince you. Perhaps our friends at the US Youth Volleyball League, www.usyvl.org, or email them at usyvl@aol.com, can convince you and help you with all the details of running a great youth program. I only ask you to do two things. First, encourage and let the kids to play doubles, against adults of lower skill levels, in their summer/off time. Secondly, please take the time to understand this fact: "You'll be a better hitter if you set." And then in your

younger kids games, run a 6-6 or a 6-3 offense, and not that darn 4-2 thing. We need our kids to learn to MOVE and think, and the 4-2 just does not do that.

For more info on both youth programming and team systems, get a copy of the 2002 IMPACT manual, where each skill and team system is covered in a condensed but informative way. The best two books for coaching younger kids are Coaching YMCA Winners Volleyball. - A guide for coaching volleyball the YMCA way, using the games approach, including curriculums and practice plans for 8-9 year olds, 10-11 year olds and 12-13 year olds. It addresses teaching four main components: tactics & skills, rules & traditions, fitness and character development; and Coaching YMCA Rookies Volleyball. The version for teaching the game to the 4 to 7 year old volleyball player using a pre-competitive, instructional program for the basic skills and rules of the game.

Those who have taken a USA Coaching Accreditation Program course at any level, know that the core of these ideas work at all age levels. Indeed, the National Teams have trained deep court three vs. three for decades as a core part of their skill/technique development. I just find it imperative that we work together to give the younger kids a great amount of small team number/court training opportunity so they can excel faster. Thanks for coaching, and for helping to grow the game.

By the way, "Right Field" was written in 1986 by Willy Welch. It appeared first on Peter Paul and Mary's "No Easy Walk to Freedom" album, and has been on other collections since then. To order this song on CD, and to learn more about what is up tour wise and all with Peter Paul and Mary, go to www.peterpaulandmary.com. Click on "music" and you can get the lyrics to the whole song. Here is an excerpt that brings up my point mentioned at the start, and thus why we need to have the kids play smaller sided/court games.

Playing right field can be lonely and dull
Little Leagues never have lefties that pull
I'd dream of the day they'd hit one my way
They never did, but still I would pray
That I'd make a fantastic catch on the run
And not lose the ball in the sun
And then I'd awake from this long reverie
And pray that the ball never came out to me
Here in...

(Chorus)

*Right field, it's easy, you know.
You can be awkward and you can be slow
That's why I'm here in right field
Just watching the dandelions grow*