

## Dear “Vocal” Coach

- John Kessel, USA Volleyball Director of Membership Development & Disabled Volleyball

Please read the following actual email from a dear friend, whose daughter plays volleyball. The names have been changed, and some sentences deleted, but none added/created by me, to make it be more of a generic version of what I see at USA Volleyball on a weekly basis:

>>My daughter is still into VB. She leaves on Saturday for our national season ending event. >>This week she's spending mornings at a VB class. A summer favorite  
>>She's learned so much this Club season from coach, but it wasn't always  
>>an easy time. He tends to yell and scowl when the girls make mistakes,  
>>and frankly the girls had never had a coach like that.  
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>>He's used to coaching the older teams, and his way did not work with 13 year olds,  
>>hormonal, insecure girls. His yelling made them "shut down" and they were so scared  
>>to make mistakes that they stopped being aggressive, didn't want to go to practice,  
>>played "scared".  
>>  
>>He eventually toned it down, and the girls learned (with parent  
>>encouragement) to speak up when they felt uncomfortable or didn't  
>>understand something. I wanted my daughter to learn that she didn't have  
>>to be passive about things. The team eventually got stronger by banding  
>>together and encouraging each other, and the girls learned to be a little  
>>more thick skinned about his comments. They don't like him, but they know  
>>he taught them a lot, as is evidenced by their amazing wins at the end of the season.  
  
>>My daughter still sets, but is more comfortable at outside hitter.  
>>She says there's less pressure on her when she doesn't set... and thus  
>>less chance for coach to yell at her. She has the talent to be setter,  
>>but I don't know if she has the mental toughness, or maybe she'll develop  
>>the mental toughness with another coach. She is also planning to go to  
>>Classic College VB camp at Classic College.

So, I am reading that we have:

*A coach the kids do not like;  
Kids who have to be thick skinned to be able to learn from a teacher;  
Athletes afraid to make mistakes  
A talented athlete who does not want to take the key role of setting due to a coach yelling.*

How does this happen in sport? How does such passion and time commitment on behalf of the kids, result in such negativity? Coaches who yell must be thinking that by doing such to help it will HELP the team succeed. That old school mentality results in what was read above, athletes who do not like the coach and who are afraid to push the envelope for fear of an error. Anson Dorrance, in Training Soccer Champions, subtitles one chapter with this statement. "If you have to yell at them from the sidelines, you haven't coached them...coaching is about effect."

The MOST important task of every coach, is to empower his or her athletes, giving them a better and better understanding of the game, while teaching them to enthusiastically move along past every mistake. Yelling does not empower athletes. A good coach uses the principles of good teaching, as they are a teacher first. If yelling (and its cousin “physical punishment – like pushups and windsprints) was such a principal, you would have first grade teachers yelling at you after you spelled “CAT” wrong, or Biology teachers screaming at you, or making you drop and give them twenty, after you dissected the frog incorrectly – “so you can learn faster.” I think you know if those teachers did such, the human principal would be in there that same day, to get that teacher back on track with the right way to teach. Yet sadly, coaches somehow think when they cross into the gym/field, that good teaching means yelling and physical punishment.

Remember, the kids play the game, not the coach. Learning from you, becoming your assistant coaches in practice, coaching themselves when you are not looking - for you are only one person helping in a field of play of a dozen kids usually. They then can better coach themselves during the match, as they should. One of the “technique movements” we need to eliminate from each skill is that head twisting (and heart wrenching) look to the bench/coach after an error. That shows kids who are not empowered to problem solve themselves, thinking instead that the answers do not come from within, but from the outside, from someone else. Consider these words from Ghandi back in 1931.

*Freedom is not worth having if it does not connote freedom to err. It passes my comprehension how human beings, be they ever so experienced and able, can delight in depriving other human beings of that precious right.*

You see, the best learning comes when there is no fear of mistakes. Each player will be asked to do things they have never done before, and thus, there will be lots of mistakes. Ignore them and focus on what is important – when they do it correctly or much closer to the intended goal. To quote Stephen Glenn – Mistakes are wonderful way to learn, or as he writes it “Mistakes are a wonderful way to learn.”

When the greats in other disciplines have problems, what is done is support is brought in. Have you ever seen musicians in a symphony making errors get out of their seat to drop and do 20 pushups? When Pavarotti has problems singing what do they do? They bring in more help with vocal coaches, but they do not yell at him or make him do situps – as his waistline shows. Production grows on an assembly line through cooperation and empowerment of the workers, including profit sharing plans. Gone are the screaming tyrant managers, and none of the workers are pulled off task to do physical exercises “so they learn.” The National Federation of State High School’s (NFSHS) Cynthia Doyle states “ Although rare, coaches, for example, have been known to disrespectfully address their own players, and offense that now can be penalized.” For 12.2.7f has been changed to state that unsportsmanlike conduct includes disrespectfully addressing, baiting, or taunting anyone involved in the contest, not only the opponent. Kudos to the Federation for that, and for changing to rally scoring.

No matter if you are training Jr. Olympians or not, all your players can follow the Olympic motto of Swifter, Higher, Stronger. Please note that this is a personal motto, one pushing each athlete to be their personal best. The motto is not Swiftest, Highest, Strongest.

Looking at it from another perspective, I have to say I was torn between the Yankees winning, based on the impact of the Eleventh, and the Diamondbacks, who are in the Colorado Rockies division, in the 2001 World Series. Both managers are humanistic, caring, and know they are coaching people, not baseball (see, when you get someone to say “I coach volleyball, hand them one and see how

they do with the ball, then remind them, you coach KIDS, or people, not volleyball...) In the end, I chose to cheer for Arizona when Brenly, their manager, kept the closer Kim in so long, and then put him in again in game 5 after Kim had been homered on in the bottom of the ninth in the fourth game loss. That is believing in your players, and letting them err. I must admit I loved the fact that Brenly took the previous manager's team rules/handbook, over an inch thick, and dropped it on the floor at the first spring training meeting of the team. He then pulled out a cocktail napkin with his rules scrawled on it: "Be on time. Play hard." That is good coaching.

I know I am also impacted by working with Lang Ping, coach of the 1996 Chinese Olympic Silver medal women's team...the first woman to coach in our sport at the Olympic level. She is a demanding, but fair and caring coach, who I have never seen yell at a player in practice. China beat Russia to move to the gold medal match. Many of you have seen Karpol, a coach who on the court is the poster boy for screaming coaches, and seen the look on the faces of the players "listening" to him. Such "coaching" is not what kids will thrive under. That Lang Ping now is coaching our own USA National Team for the 2004-08 quad, is a gift to our sport.

Another point about using fear/yelling is that you need to keep escalating to make it work over time. How much louder can you yell in a season? It would be better to take a tip from Joop Alberda, the 1996 Olympic Gold medal winning volleyball coach of the Dutch men's team, who, like Lang Ping, is humanistic, and empowering of his players. He told his team he would only get angry with them once a year...and left it at that. Those players knew he would be pushing them and guiding them without berating them or going off on tirades. He also did not have to get angry at all in some years.

Sure it is frustrating to see your kids learning, through mistakes. However, ask yourself a simple question..."Are they making these mistakes on purpose?" If a player is, that means you have other issues to deal with well beyond the error. If not, why would you get upset with them? If you can, get a copy of John Cleese's great article – "No More Mistakes and You're Through" from Forbes, Magazine (U.S.) " p. 126+, May 16, 1988, highlighting excerpts from John Cleese's "The Importance of Mistakes" speech. From other of his writings, these thoughts are appropriate.

*"I want to suggest to you today, that unless we have a tolerant attitude toward mistakes - I might almost say 'a positive attitude toward them' - we shall be behaving irrationally, unscientifically, and unsuccessfully. Now, of course, if you now say to me, 'Look here, you weird Limey, are you seriously advocating relaunching the Edsel?' I will reply, 'No.' There are mistakes - and mistakes. There are true, copper-bottom mistakes like spelling the word 'rabbit' with three Ms; wearing a black bra under a white shirt; or, to take a more masculine example, starting a land war in Asia. These are the kind of mistakes described by Mr. David Letterman as Brushes With Stupidity, because they have no reasonable chance of success."*

It might be helpful to see the three stages of coaching from a different perspective.

**The coach's practice time** – CAP Courses, clinics, summer camp talks late into the night with other coaches sharing ideas and being innovative, mulling around new thoughts and ideas.

**The coach's matches that must be won** – The players' practices and training.

**The coach's "vacation" time** – The actual match as the players must show what they have learned/can do. A coach gets to play with rotations/tactics, call 2 time outs, and a few subs...a comparative vacation...so relax, have fun, and enjoy the PLAYING of the game – not the anger, frustration, yelling of the game.

Here are some observations by others about making mistakes. I hope these shared thoughts will help you be a better coach, maximizing your strengths and minimizing your weaknesses, both on and off the court. Thank you for your time and energy in giving back to our sport through coaching.

*Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm. --Winston Churchill*

*Error is discipline through which we advance. --William E. Channing*

*Failure is only opportunity to more intelligently begin again. --Henry Ford*

*You always pass failure on the way to success. --Mickey Rooney*

*It is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation. --Herman Melville*

*Best men are often moulded out of faults. --Shakespeare*

*Failure is an event, never a person. --William D. Brown*

*I have learned throughout my life as a composer chiefly through my mistakes and pursuits of false assumptions, not by my exposure to founts of wisdom and knowledge. ---Igor Stravinsky*

*While one person hesitates because he feels inferior, another is busy making mistakes and becoming superior. --Henry C. Link*

*Don't be afraid to fail. Don't waste energy trying to cover up failure. Learn from your failures and go on to the next challenge. It is OK to fail. If you are not failing, you are not growing. --H. Stanley Judd*

*Mistakes are the portals of discovery. --James Joyce*

*Results! Why, man, I have gotten a lot of results. I know several thousand things that won't work. --Thomas Edison*

*An expert is a man who has made all the mistakes, which can be made, in a very narrow field. --Niels Henrik David Bohr, (1885-1962)*

*Sometimes we may learn more from a man's errors, than from his virtues. --Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

*Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has plenty; not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some. --Charles Dickens*

*History has demonstrated that the most notable winners usually encountered heartbreaking obstacles before they triumphed. They finally won by their defeats. --B. C. Forbes*

*You win only if you aren't afraid to lose. --Rocky Aoki*

*Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes. --Mahatma Gandhi*

*A child becomes an adult when he realizes that he has a right not only to be right but also to be wrong. --Thomas Szasz*

*There can be no real freedom without the freedom to fail. --Erich Fromm*