

It's Not Where You Are, It's Who You Are

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

This started as an email I sent to the top five USA Team battling to qualify as the two 2000 Beach Volleyball Teams for each gender. As the Olympic Team Leader in a sport that just now is allowing coaches, I enjoyed the challenge of preparing and forming teams from individuals and changing partnerships and to give the players all they needed to succeed on the sand in Sydney. I have used that experience again in the last two Pan American Games with our USA men and women's beach teams as Team Leader and coach. Most recently these ideas were used in Athens in 2004 as Team Leader for our first ever Paralympic Women's Sitting Volleyball Bronze Medal team, and to help kids playing volleyball who have inquired about how to deal with problem coaches and to assist those seeking to excel.

Originally, I titled this article "How to Excel Under Any Coach." On a trip to Alaska to attend the Eskimo Olympics (www.weio.org) and work with kids attending schools of such limited population they must play co-ed to field a team, I remembered Marv Dunphy's great line which now titles the article. A natural sub-title could be "It's not how tall you are; it's how tall you play," as skill, speed, awareness, and anticipation will beat height any time. The article summarizes what kids should be learning from fun on the court or field, in practices and games. Some thoughts are volleyball specific, but the majority relate to all sports.

Let me reflect on what you need to do to achieve your best performance. Some of these thoughts should help you approach your athletic potential. As a coach, I burn with the desire to help an athlete accelerate the development of a personal philosophy. The ideas which follow accumulated during decades of helping players achieve personal excellence.

The Olympic motto "Citius, Altius, Fortius" guides our efforts as staff and athletes. "Swifter, Higher, Stronger." To win, we must push ourselves, giving all we can for as long as we can, and then, if possible, beyond. The motto does not translate as "Swiftest, Highest, Strongest" even though the medals are awarded for those attributes. Rather, Olympism is the pursuit of excellence in yourself and of personal improvement every day, on and off the court. Remember this about your pursuit, "If it is meant to be, it is up to me...."

While there have been many people, experiences, and books from whom or which I have learned, John Wooden taught me most. A new book, "The Ultimate Guide to Life, Leadership, Friendship, and Love," (by Neville Johnson) describes and illustrates the ideas of John Wooden and his pyramid of success. Buy or borrow a copy of this book! It contains guidance which would help any person, athlete or not, become the best he or she can be. Marv Dunphy and Doug Beal, both Olympic Gold Medal coaches, also have contributed significantly to my education. As Marv once noted, "It is not where you are, it is who YOU are; it is not how big you are, it is how good or how great you are."

The following axioms summarize two generations of lessons for how to be a winner in life:

THERE IS ONLY ONE CHAMPION - This is our holy grail, and every team in our championship division is seeking that same trophy. Now, we must define what winning is. In this team sport of volleyball, one person cannot win the game by his or herself. It is a team sport, so the winning is out of just one player's control. So, winning is always, ALWAYS going to be defined as doing all you can to be the best you can be. John Wooden's classic Pyramid of Success has at its peak, the statement. "Success is peace of mind which is a direct result of self satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming." If you do this...the winning on the court will be more likely. Should you play your best, and lose in the point column, what more can you ask of yourself? Nothing...for you won. ...to quote George Moriarity, "Giving all, it seems to me, is not so far from victory."

TEACH OTHERS TO TEACH YOURSELF - If you coach, you will be a better player. This is true at any age level, so seek out and create time to coach others less skilled and/or experienced than you are. In Japan, the after school elementary school practices I worked with were 45 minutes of games and practice for the 7-10 year olds, who were coached by the 10-12 year olds under the watchful eye of the adult head coach, then 45 more minutes where the head coach trained these 10-12 year olds once they were done coaching. Make players coaching others a part of your programming, not just in camps but in your own practices. Grow the game and your game by coaching others.

COMPETE WITH YOURSELF - Demand more from yourself than from your teammate. This is the sign of a serious and true competitor. This is how you will become the best you can be, and thus help USA win a gold. To excel, focus on yourself first. No matter how small or unimportant it may seem, look for ways to be better when you leave training than when you walked in, whether it be the weight room, training room, physical testing, or the court. By competing as hard as you personally can, you will also help those around you be better. Gold Medalist Dan Jansen said " I do not try to be better than anyone else, I try to be better than myself."

TALENT IS A JOB, NOT A GIFT - If you have talent, you can be good without working hard, but to be great, you must work hard. Volleyball is a hard sport to learn, so do not expect it to be easy, for it takes years to be great. People see talent in two ways, One group sees that talent is to be developed through hard work, while others see it being something you either have or do not. Those athletes who know that skill takes time, will practice longer/have patience thru tough times. Research shows that higher performance happens with those athletes who expect to have to work long and hard to develop their talent. Superstars, like Karch, Jordan, Gretzky Woods, share an intensity and drive to constantly improve their talents. Karch's coaches and teammates describe him as the hardest worker in the gym/on the sand. You have to BE, before you can DO, and DO before you can HAVE.

LEARN EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE - STAY IN CONTROL - These same superstars share the ability to stay in control, despite the great pressures they encountered, using their emotions effectively. They stay focused, and efficient, the mental discipline, to act decisively when it counts. Karch would stay on the court in the sand during time outs, staring at the opponent's empty court, while one teammate called Jordan, the Predator. Controlling frustration, anger, fear, and even confidence is an athlete's responsibility, not that of the coach. Develop responses that focus on what you can control, and keep you in a "right here, right now" state of mind...

MAKE SURE TO GET REST - One of the key items I learned from the Prep for Sydney meetings for head coaches was realization that there is no such word as "Overtraining. " To be great you must train very hard sometimes. What you also must make sure you get is enough rest and recovery, for you are training hard. Everything you are doing en route to a gold medal is important, significant, and meaningful. As the distractions mount towards the end of a long season, it is vital to get enough good rest. At the same time, remember the words of Jerry West - "You can't get much done in life if you only work on the days you feel good, for work beats talent, unless talent works."

BE A TRUE TEAMMATE - One who is responsible for yourself, to your team's obligations and to your personal and team goals. You, no one else, are accountable for ALL your actions. Be honest and trustworthy to yourself, your teammates and the entire team staff. Ask when you have questions. You need to make sure that you are all pulling on the SAME end of the rope....together and strong.

TEACH YOUR COACH HOW TO HELP YOU LEARN BETTER - In the art of coaching, coaches have many colors and different paintbrushes on their pallet that they can use to help you learn to be your best. It is just that each of you are unique, and for us to excel, a coach should not treat, nor teach each of you the same. Skilled coaches have learned to be consistent with each of you, but not the same. They are there for you in every practice. It is not their job to hammering you with constant feedback, but letting you learn. They will summarize feedback at times, but anytime you want to ask a technique or tactic question, you can talk to your coach who will always listen. Day or night, on the court, by phone, or even email! It is what you learn, not what the coach knows, that matters. It is our role to help you become a player who is all you can be-- without the coach -- for you are the athlete on the court of competition, and we cannot think for you as you play. You will always be your best coach, for you are with yourself 24 hours a day...

COMMUNICATE - Talk and listen with your teammate and any staff helping you become your best. Share information you think will help us be our best. Silence equals acceptance, so speak out if you do not accept it. When off the court, read books and watch movies that can give you a new idea or inspiration to be great. If you have a problem, all energies will go towards the solution.

KNOW YOUR ROLE - You need to understand and perform your role, just as much as you need to perform technical skills. We have a GREAT staff assembled to help you be your best...so use us. Who is on the court will be determined by on the court competition when the points are tallied. Since a teammate does not err on purpose, you need to put those errors immediately in the past, and focus on what you can control, the next point.

SUCCESS IS A JOURNEY, NOT A DESTINATION - You get better one play at a time. Certainly touching the ball yourself helps you learn the most, but each contact, by your teammates as well, can be a joy and a learning experience. We all can see Scott Fortune kill the overpass for the Seoul Gold Medal match point...and should be able to see Eric Sato's jump serve that set it up. We have such a great sport to celebrate in, rally by rally. Enjoy this time as an elite athlete. It is exciting to be playing volleyball, especially at this level. Have fun and smile, it takes fewer muscles, and it makes you stronger.

PLAY SINGLES IN THE GARAGE - It is important to learn to play this game over a net. In the winter, you can still string up a rope, and play one on one with that one friend, or sibling, who shares your love of playing this game. Play one on two if someone else shows up, or even doubles, using a beach ball or a real ball. If you can, put up a net or just a rope for even a small distance in the backyard, and play these small sided games on smaller than normal courts. Learn to read and anticipate what an opponent is preparing to do before they send it over the net.

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL - A setter cannot control the passer, or the hitter, a passer cannot control the server. You cannot even control what your teammates say, think, or do. You can only control yourself, so focus on what YOU can do.

FOCUS POINT BY POINT - In a related way, every match has three parts, a past, present and future. You cannot control the past, even that last rally. Nor can you control the future (if you can, get into the stock market, make millions then give it back to volleyball please). So by focusing on the point at hand, playing one point at a time, you eliminate two-thirds of the worries many players have cluttering their heads as they play. What do you do NOW.

IF YOU WANT TO BE BETTER YOU MAY HAVE TO CHANGE - These changes may cause you to slide backwards for a bit of time. Pay close attention to the small successes you achieve by making these changes. Turn your wounds into wisdom, and hey, remember...50% of the teams playing today in 220 nations around the world - lose. The key is to keep pushing forward.

BE A POWERFUL PRESENCE - Be yourself, and be proud. If you gripe at calls, turn your back on teammate errors, hang your head or kick a ball, get frustrated outwardly, it gives energy to your opponents and weakens you and the team. Forget your mistakes and focus on what you can control...the upcoming play. Focus on what to do, not your errors, and always and only let them see that you are powerful and confident. Never let anyone out hustle you, even if they outscore you. As Bill Neville oft says, play like junkyard dawgs...

BETTER WHAT WAS GIVEN TO YOU- I remember Marv Dunphy summing up why he thought we won the gold medal in the Seoul Olympics. He felt at that time, just hours after the success, that it was due to playing better team defense and bettering the ball. It is your duty and focus as a teammate to make the ball you got better, no matter how difficult the incoming ball is. Every ball can and must be played! In our three contacts, we can improve the bad pass, if we are setting, kill the ball off of a wayward set. Bettering the ball happens not just on the court, but off. If you have ideas that might work in other areas of your development, share them, in order to make that also better for the next person.

RELENTLESS PURSUIT - For those of you who know my far side, you will understand then my two rules in this key area of pushing yourself on the court.

Rule #1, Go for EVERY ball.

Rule #2, If the ball is too far away to reach, see rule #1.

And a corollary to this high effort is: Winners never fear risking to lose.

WATCH THOSE BETTER THAN YOU - Watch videotapes of the Olympics, and NCAA Championships. Go watch levels of play higher than you compete in -the 18 and unders if a Junior Olympian, or collegiate matches, and the National Team any time you can catch them on TV or in person. Watch one player who you want to be like as they do the whole rally, by not focusing on the ball, but their actions before, during and after the rally, before during and after each contact. What are they looking at and learning to read? Why did they move to that spot before ball was hit and not some other place? There is much more learned by what is done before the ball is touched, that you need to develop too.

SHARE YOUR SECRETS - The best thing about our Prep for Sydney meetings in Chicago and Sydney, was the chance to share our ideas with other Olympic bound coaches and support staff. If you have an idea, share it, for unlike items, when you share ideas, you still have yours, while adding new ones to our tools to be our best.