



Please Use the Net

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

How can we get our coaches and players to change from the powerful tradition/habit of half-court-not-over-the-net training seen at all levels, to using the net all the time? Maybe if I just use that important word mom taught me, please, it will work? Coaches, please use the net. Please use it from start to finish in practice, as it is not there usually when they go home and practice with that one other volleyball loving friend. Please use it for warm up, passing drills, not just hitting drills.

Right now, I am watching a gym filled with kids so eager to learn this unique rebounding team game. I can see myself long ago, in the gyms of Colorado College's Cossitt Gym that is now a dance studio. I began as a player coach, coming from Southern California to Colorado. I had a dad who played doubles on the Emerald Bay sand in the 1950s, and I thus knew the game – now THAT is a good laugh. I see the smiles and positive coaching on each court, and I know that it is more important that the coaches instill a love of the game, than the skills of the game. Care first, teach technique and skills second. These coaches care, and that is important to see.

This question of changing to truly using the net, I have struggled with for decades, since camps would double up kids 10-12 each side of the net and the effuse about their gamelike training. I suppose it was gamelike in a sense, there is a ball and a court, and a coach dictating, yelling and controlling the players. But missing is something just as important as the ball...and for understanding the game, more important than a coach---the NET.

The net is what makes our game unique, a barrier separating opponents. These well intentioned coaches, who have played, will agree with me that well over half of successful reception – off a serve or an attack, occurs *before* the ball crosses the net. They KNOW it, but the tradition of “teaching the way we were taught” stops them from letting the kids learn that higher importance percentage of learning – the reading before, as and after the ball is hit and on its way toward the net. What makes us good in volleyball for so many skills, is what we see THROUGH the net,

Maybe it is growing up using shoes and socks to make a grass court's boundary “lines”, and just a rope to make a net sometimes. I still carry a rope in my clinic bag, over 100 foot long, and for warm ups and the first part of practice, we train over this “net”, dividing the court right down the middle. We create an over the net station between courts sometimes, running a rope from one court sideline standard to the adjoining standard. And if you can't get a pair of nets up, or a rope, then we still need to teach the athletes to play over the net that is not there – clearing an imaginary barrier 228cm high for females, and 248cm high for males. This can also be reminded by having the setter at the “net” stretch tall and make the hits go over their arms.

A big part of my reason for focusing on this over the net habit development is due to the tradition of pepper and wall spiking. Both of these long taught drills are repetitively teaching the wrong error of hitting down/into the net. We have good mistakes we can make and bad ones, in every skill. For hitting, to hit into the net is the wrong mistake, for the opponents never have to think. To err over the net long, is the right mistake, for there are blockers who might touch it on its way out, and

diggers who might also decide to play it, or who cannot get out of the way of that powerful spike flying along. When we train over a net, imaginary or not, we develop the habit of always clearing the net, in or out as it might end up each time.

The rhythm of our sport is pass-set-hit...one...two...THREE (with a powerful bang finish...One of my favorite t-shirts of all time captures this – “Good Pass, Good Set, Goodbye...” Yet we stay stuck learning the dance of one...one...one... (passing back and forth), or two...two...two, (setting back and forth) while the net is there in the gym as some sort of decoration or wall. We also toss way too many times, developing only a two...three rhythm, and never the whole skill. Long before it became a Covey mantra, I have begun with the end in mind. Kids want to play, and play in our sport is three hits, sending it over the net. To quote Marv Dunphy as seen in the IMPACT manual for many years – *“Since we learn best in training situations that are basically gamelike, we should incorporate three contact drills as often as possible. I am convinced that the best hitting drills are pass, set, hit (P-S-H), the best setting drills are P-S-H and the best passing drills are P-S-H. Likewise, the best defensive drills are dig, set, hit combinations.”*

One of the related traditions in our game is that the coach controls practice. Yet again, if you know what the end is – that the coach simply cannot be on the court during the game – then you will let the players run more of the practice. Coach is the center of the universe...but it is the players’ game. Drills revolve and whirl around the coach, who coordinates things from the center of his/her universe. This is simple, and is well understood by basketball coaches. I can’t imagine Phil Jackson shooting, or Pat Summit inputting all the balls for fast break practice. Hoops coaches get it, they let the players shoot the free throws, no matter how bad they are at shooting, for they know it is the player who must get better at all the skills and tactics being demanded, not the coach.

So here is my personal list of some of the coaching traditions that need be retired and the reasons why, in no particular order:

1. Coach tossing the ball to the setter from the center of the court. – You could calculate a GPS satellite from the way coaches precisely and identically put the ball cart in the same spot and then fling thousands of balls from the same spot to the setter spot – who does not need to move an inch to set it. We need to have the players toss, not the coach, and the ball cart be moved to all the areas of the court, not just the GPS calculation point. The setter needs to move around as does the location of the ball arriving to the setter. Best option here is to ditch the tossing, and have the setter throw the ball to a passer or passer/hitter, who overhead or forearm passes the ball back to the setter.
2. Coaches who slap a ball then toss. They do it on the floor, throwing to setters. The lesser skilled coaches then are turning to find the next ball being handed to them, and not seeing the good and bad of each contact. Not only do you need to keep your eye on the player performing, and never look to find the next ball, we wonder...when in the game does an opponent slap a ball? Pass set hit, ball coming over the net from an easy or harder toss or standing spike.
3. Coaches standing on boxes, slapping away on the ball, frozen in time, and then hitting into blockers who can only figure out the KEY part of blocking --- when and where to jump --- by watching the tossed ball and not the “hitter” as we demand they do in the game. Why do we keep doing it when we have so little time to teach the timing and judgment of blocking real

hitters, who run, jump and swing all over the other side of the net. If your opponent deserves a block, let your athletes learn this by blocking hitters, not a coach standing there.

4. Coaches setting the ball tight to the net, then spend the rest of their career begging the hitters to stay off the net. We simply need to start every training at the 3 meter line, then move the set ball closer to the net as the hitting continues over the course of the games and drills.
5. Coaches who toss/run hitting drills that are only to zone 4. By the time a player gets to college, he/she has likely hit 100 front sets to every back set seen. This means our setters are not as good at backsetting, nor are our hitters. We even go so far as to call zone 2 the “weak side.” It is our own fault, given the overwhelming number of front to back sets fostered in practice. Great beach/doubles volleyball players get yet another advantage here, with half the court being the right side, and players who get tons more training on the right side in all skills.
6. Coaches who toss, rather than self toss and set. While the real solution is that the players set and the coaches toss, if you do feel the urge to give your players every ball to hit....self toss and set it. The kids need to see sets not tosses, to best learn proper timing. The best example is seen when middle hitters can hit off of coach tosses and even throw-and-go to the setter, but who cannot be up early, on time, in the reality of the game. Dig-set-hit or Pass-set-hit off a toss from the setter, or a ball coming over the net. Sound familiar?
7. Coaches who fling balls from the net to the back row, head fakes and all, as if the opponents will ever put balls into the corners or other spots by underhanded flinging from in front of their opponents net. The ball will come OVER the net every time. Those who have played can often get the tip from the team bench, by walking out to get the ball...yet the players who are ON the court, fail to dig it. Again, let them learn to read, anticipate in more real life game play, not in repetitive drills.
8. Coaches who hit balls at the players and expect/demand that the ball then be dug back to them. While there may be a time for the coach to control the drill – warm up before a match perhaps, we still need to learn to make the good error of digging up, not back to the hitter.

So the short of this is....let the players do the skills -- even the tossing if you feel that is what should be happening -- so you can be out of the drill and *coaching*. While you are at it, create nets to hit and receive over, every time they warm up and every time they train. Please. Thank you.