

FOUR STEPS TO DEVELOPING THE IDEAL VOLLEYBALL PLAYER

*By Dave Cross**

The head coach was faced with a problem many of us are all too familiar with: a team blessed with physical ability that couldn't quite put it all together. They needed something more, something that would bring them together and, "put them over the top". The next day a team meeting was called and the group assembled in a classroom. The coach presented a situation for the girls to ponder, "A coach entered the gym on the first day of tryouts and noticed a new face, an incoming freshman he didn't know. As the tryout progressed it became evident to all that this was no ordinary player. The coach was quite impressed and immediately placed his new found freshman on the varsity roster. Within a week it was obvious, this girl had it all, a virtual "coaches dream." She was the "Ideal Volleyball Player". The freshman went on to have a fabulous season. She was named first team all-state and lead her team to their first-ever state championship." "I want you to think about this player," the coach continued, "what is she like? What characteristics does she possess? How would you describe her?" One by one, the players voiced their thoughts, "a good leader", said one. Another offered, "she's a hard worker." The description kept building, "she listens well", "she has a positive attitude and doesn't get frustrated or down on herself", "I think she treats her coach and teammates well", "she probably jumps well", and "always gives 100%", were quickly added to the list. As the team was giving their description, the coach had been writing each quality on the chalkboard. He then turned to his team and asked, "Look at the list we have here, how many of these qualities would you say are mental?" The response was immediate, "almost all of them", replied the group in unison. "That's interesting", continued the coach, a sly smile creeping over his face, "I told you about the ideal volleyball player and asked for a description of her, and from what I see on the board we all feel this player would definitely have an 'excellent mental game'. So I guess there is a lot more to being the ideal volleyball player than simply mastering skill techniques, don't you think?", he coyly asked. The room suddenly fell quiet as the girls shifted in their seats, sneaking glances at each other in the process. One by one, each player nodded in agreement. Some knew what was coming next. "I want each of you to copy down all the characteristics we decided this player possesses on a sheet of paper right now. Then I want you to rate yourself on a scale of 1-10 for each one, with 10 being a perfect score. Be honest", the coach urged, "no one has to see the list except you." When all had finished, the coach asked, "How many feel you could improve on each

of these?" Without exception, every hand in the room went up. "If each of you improved just slightly in half of these areas, would we be a better team?" he continued. "Without a doubt", his captain replied quickly. The rest of the team hastily agreed. "Will we need extra practice time to do this?", he asked. "No", was the immediate reply. "So, what you're telling me is if each player in this room simply dedicates themselves to improving the mental side of their game we can become a much better team, and very soon?" Again, the girls nodded in agreement. Well ladies, then let's get to work on it right now", the coach concluded, "Our best is yet to be!" This scenario could have unfolded in any of a million teams around the world. So many times we as coaches become so enthralled with our teams passing, blocking schemes, or kill efficiency that we lose sight of what is really holding them back from reaching their true potential, the mastery of the mental game. A team can be blessed with an enormous amount of physical size and ability, and still waste their opportunity to achieve all that is possible if they ignore what really matters most, the mental skills that make reaching one's true potential achievable. It is our responsibility as coaches to not only make our players aware of the mental skills needed to succeed in competition, but also to teach them how to develop these skills. Teaching players how to develop mental skills is no easy task. However, if the following steps are adhered to, every player exposed to learning about and improving their mental game will ultimately benefit.

Step One: Realize What Really Motivates Players

To begin, we as coaches must understand the one simple, basic psychological principle that motivates each and everyone of us, including our players. This is the pain and pleasure principle, which simply states that each of us is motivated by a desire to avoid pain and gather pleasure. Our players make all their decisions based on this. They are motivated to work hard, lift weights or seek out additional training in the off-season by the desire to improve their game and achieve more success. Success is an obvious source of pleasure for all of us. Players are also motivated negatively to avoid using skills they are not confident in or to shy away from changing old habits by a very basic, simple emotion: the fear of embarrassment. Or to be more exact, the fear of experiencing the pain of being embarrassed. This "fear of embarrassment" is the number one concern of the average young athlete today. It is the very reason most never scratch the surface of their true potential.

Step Two: Re-Define the Reaction to Errors

How do coaches help their athletes to overcome this fear? The first step is to get them to change how they view the results of their efforts. Players hate making mistakes. Why? Because it's

embarrassing and they despise the inner feeling of pain that is produced by this perceived embarrassment. We must teach our players to redefine their evaluation of a play gone bad. We must all learn to live by the rule, "There are no mistakes, only learning experiences." A bad pass, serve or attack is not a mistake - it is a "learning experience". Teach your players to ask a simple question of themselves after each learning experience, "what must I do differently so that I succeed the next time?" Most experienced players will know the answer to this self imposed question. "I've got to get my elbow up", "I need to get behind the ball" or "I have to toss the ball in front of my serving shoulder" are just a few of the answers they may produce. By thinking about what must be done the next time to succeed a player is essentially learning. Equipped with this goal, the player now focuses on achieving it upon the next opportunity. (If you're working with youth-level players who may not have the answer each time, then simply instruct them to ask for guidance - soon they too will build a mental library of positive answers derived from your feedback). This subtle change in an athlete's view of a situation can be very powerful. Our conscious mind can hold only one thought at a given time. It can jump from this thought to another and back with the quickness of a state-of-the-art computer, but in any instant only one thought can be held. Therefore, by asking this specific question a player immediately focuses themselves on what they need to do to succeed the next time they are called on to perform that same skill. In doing this the mind is kept busy with positive thoughts until the next play demands immediate attention, thus eliminating the opportunity to dwell on the last poor play and the pain of embarrassment that inevitably attaches to it. When this method of positive self-talk is used continually over the course of a match, a much more consistent and higher level of play will be produced, since all those opportunities to feel pain and embarrassment are being ignored in favor a positive focus on the next task ahead. Of course, there is always an exception to any rule. The exception to, "there are no mistakes only learning experiences" is this: it is always a mistake to not give 100% physically or mentally. This may seem like a statement of the obvious, but it is very important to present our training method to your players in this manner. This a very powerful motivational tool in two ways. First, as stated earlier, all players are motivated to avoid the feeling of "pain" experienced after a mistake. Therefore, when taught to believe the only mistake they can make is to not give a 100%, their focus on giving a maximum effort at all times increases dramatically. Your players will develop a very positive inner feeling that as long as they are giving their best effort those feelings of "pain" can be avoided. Secondly, this frees them up emotionally to constantly work to improve playing weaknesses since the fear of a playing error producing negative inner feelings is significantly reduced. The result of this approach then is players consistently focusing on giving maximum effort while at the same time working to improve all of their playing skills, not just the ones they are already confident in. As coaches, what more can

we ask of our players than to constantly give a maximum effort while working to learn and improve their game?

Step Three: Increase the Desire for Pleasure

In order to lead player's through this major change in response to a playing error, it is imperative that all negative feedback be avoided and only positive, technique-specific feedback be given at the beginning. As the learning process progresses, you will find that it will become necessary to provide technical feedback only periodically, as your player's build their own specific, personal list of "troubleshooting instructions" for each skill based on your earlier feedback. Whenever it is obvious that a player understands what is needed technically it is very important that positive feedback is given to reward their efforts to improve. Comments such as, "good effort", great hustle", or "you'll get the next one" combined with a positive tone of voice and body language are extremely valuable in keeping a player focused on the immediate future, and necessary in demonstrating your appreciation of their efforts no matter what the results. Show them you respect, admire, and encourage their efforts to improve by consistently praising even the smallest of successes. By doing this, it will also become evident to your players that the feelings of "pain" produced by an error made while working on a specific playing weakness are nothing in comparison to the "pleasure" gained when positive strides are achieved. This will only lead to an even higher level of desire to continue working to improve.

Step Four: Develop a Sense of Trust

Your player's must develop a three-way sense of trust. First, they must trust in themselves that they are doing their best to improve. Many times, after an error a player will tell themselves, "You've got to try harder!" This leads to a response of making a conscious effort to give a harder physical effort, causing them to "overtly" Facial grimaces, less fluid, robotic movements and ultimately a drop in their level of play is the usual result. Impress upon your player's the belief they must trust in themselves that they are doing their best. A player must believe that giving their all is the most anyone can ask, and in knowing they have done this, be proud of the effort and accept the results. By getting player's to trust themselves you will ultimately lead them to avoid "overtly." Secondly, your player's must trust each other. Each player must believe that their teammates are all giving their best effort. If a player feels that the other players are contributing his/her playing errors to a lack of effort, a sense of resentment and frustration may set in. A feeling of "they don't think I'm trying" comes over the player causing a deep sense of emotional "pain". This again provokes the

"overtrying" response, or causes the athlete to avoid using that skill all together. Instill in your team the belief that they all know each other, and also know how hard everyone is working. Let them know that you will be the sole judge and jury of a player's effort. When the entire team knows the coach will immediately address any questionable physical or mental effort, it ceases to become an issue they have to concern themselves with. Thirdly, your players must trust you. They must believe you know they are giving a maximum effort. Again, if a player feels you are questioning their effort one of two responses will occur: "overtrying" or avoidance. Show your players their effort is known, respected, and admired. When things are going bad or they've had a rough day, reinforce to them you know the effort was there. Many times after a tough loss where my team has not played very well we've sat down and I've expressed my continued belief in their effort. Remember, a maximum effort does not always produce the desired results. However, if your team knows you'll recognize and praise their effort no matter the result, you will find very few times when the effort you desire is not given.

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