

Am I Too Short to Play Volleyball?

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

Good Morning John:

I have a question and a HUGE favor to ask if you are willing. The favor first. My child is playing volleyball for a Jr. Olympic volleyball program this season. My child is (honestly, not a parent talking) the best player they have. He can set, hit, block, serve and pass (consistently) and has wanted his whole life to grow up and try out for the Olympic team. He works every chance he gets on perfecting his skills. Unfortunately, the coaches have decided that his dream is not valid and told him last night that "you don't stand a chance on making the Men's national team because you are not tall enough". He is 6'1" right now and will probably get another 3 inches max. He came home from practice last night and had he been 6 instead of 16 he would have curled up in my lap and cried.

Dear Parent -

The Olympic dream is one we all seek in principle and conduct for our children - Citius, Altius, Fortius is a way to live life, not just play volleyball, always seeking to improve and do your personal best. I am sorry to hear that some coach, who is not with the National team, was so inflated with his/her expertise, to make such a statement. Any coach who says such should consider not coaching, or having kids – for in the desire to be an expert, they are stepping on the spirits and souls of developing quality humans. As Hodding Carter put it so well, we are here to give our children roots, and wings. That coach is wrong, but mistakes are simply opportunities to teach, so let's look into such a thought...

When I first read your note, this quote from Marv Dunphy came to mind....

It is not how tall you are, it is how GOOD you are.
- Marv Dunphy, 1988 Olympic Gold Medal coach

Then my mind was filled with images from other Olympics I have been a part of- on the women's side to start, for your son's dreams are also shared by girls who are under 6 foot tall and sharing the same Olympic dream. Watching 5'4" Debbie Green lead her USA team to a silver medal, behind the great serving, passing and attacking of captain Sue Woodstra, all 5'8" of her. Meche Gonzales, sitting on the bench for Peru as a 13 year old, then four years later leading her Peru team in the 1976 Olympics as a 5'6" middle blocker. Leanne Sato, dominating on defense for the USA team in the 1988 Olympics – all 5'2" of her. The wizardry of setting by 5'8"inch tall Lori Endicott as the women brought home a bronze medal in 1992...and even now, the court leadership by Robyn Ah Mow for this centuries USA Olympic teams, who is 5'7".

When you get to the men's side, the list is also very long...as 5'7" Waldo Kantor leads his Argentina team to an Olympic medal in 1988, 5'9" Korean setter Kim Oh Chul, swing blocking to stuff far taller hitters at the 1984 and 1988 Olympics. Sato sibling Eric, all 5'11" of him jump serving gold medal match point for the USA men, causing an overpass that was killed to win the highest

honor in our sport. These women and men, other than Robyn, are all players who played *before* there was the libero, a position now where talented players of any size, the Dutch men's libero is 6'9", contribute to their team. Most nations have liberos for women who average about 5'7", while on the men's side it is about 6'1".

In a related way, there are those players who are even shorter, such that they cannot block above the net. There are many coaches who say to these athletes, you need to dig and set, you cannot block or hit. While it would only make sense to soft block with a short player – and then only if the opponent's attack deserved it – it is wrong to not let that same player hit. When you cannot put your hands above the net, the rule of back row attacking is moot – for you can attack from anywhere on the court without being at fault. You can serve and then go hit outside at zone four – you just need to be set further off the net so you can have the time and space to clear it. I had a player who was 5'1" who led the team in attacking – as she learned the great lesson from a 1968 Olympic scouting report by Russia on our legendary USA middle player Jon Stanley, the father of current National and Olympic team member Clay Stanley. That report was three lines – "Never hits where he looks. Always hits where you aren't. Unstoppable." So every player on your team should be attacking and learning to not hit just the way they are facing. At the same time, one of the best players on the beach for over a decade was Eileen Clancy, at 5'1". There are dozens of other examples of world class level players in beach who are hardly tall players.

I sent your note to one of the shorter members of the USA 2004 Men's Olympic team, who responded with these additional valuable ideas and words of advice to your athlete. We all want him to know, there is no such thing as being too short to play volleyball at the highest level, for any boy or any girl. It is also not how tall you are, but how tall you play. You have to be a realist, in that at the highest level of the world's stage for volleyball, you will be facing a block of 10 feet off the floor for women, and 11 feet for men. Reid explains this challenge well below.

*From: Reid Priddy
To: John Kessel <john.kessel@usav.org>*

Hi John,

First things first, height is not a deciding factor in and of itself to ever prevent anyone in our sport from reaching the very highest level.

Many players have shattered that myth and it is just old thinking to hold that view. In fact this player is an all around player and good at all the skills that is a great attribute and our sport is in great need of him. As a rule the taller players have an easier time attacking and blocking but the ball control skills usually don't come as easy. Our team needs volleyball players....meaning guys who can play the WHOLE game well. Athletic and physical qualities help but ball control, defense and passing are HUGE for success of any team.

The majority of the best volleyball players in the world right now are 6'4" or very near! Speed is something that a smaller player can bring to help offset any disadvantage there might be. That is what I try to do offensively...hit as fast a ball as possible to maximize my chances of success.

It would be silly to listen to any coach that says you can't do it!

There is some good to being realistic with yourself in relation to others and your goals and dreams but height is NOT a factor in and of itself. Keep in mind that there is a position on the court now that is of EXTREME importance where height is a non-issue; the libero. That position ought never be overlooked and people need to know how much of an impact that player has on the team and the outcome of matches. Also there have been some unbelievable setters who didn't clear 5'7" who have lead their teams to World Championships as well as the Olympics.

Weber from Argentina comes to mind and of course the great DiGeorgi from Italy. Both unbelievable players who played at the highest level, not just for a season or two but probably 3 decades combined! Keep in mind that volleyball players don't peak until their mid-late 20s on the average. Just striving to excel in the arena your in now, and then to college...etc. is a good focus. There have been dozens of very successful 6' outside hitters in college volleyball in America which has served as a feeder to the National Team.

So I say KEEP GOING!! We need you! Keep working hard and keep striving. There are a lot of ways to impact the outcome of a volleyball game besides the flashy stuff. I will never hit over a 7' Russian but that doesn't mean I can't find success against a big guy like that, chip and chisel;)

Blessings dude and good luck. Set goals and GO FOR IT!! The journey towards those goals are what make you a better man so there really is no failing!!

*Sincerely,
Reid*

In closing, watching American Idol, one sees both unknown talent, and those who have none - yet both are given the chance to audition. It is the job of the National Team coach to determine who is too short or whatever to make the USA team – it is not a determination to be made by any other coach.