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# Starting an Elementary School or Youth Program off Right

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

Sitting on bleachers – something school sports parents get to know well, with the deafening cheers of two elementary schools volleyball teams, all levels, in full voice. It is a spirited gathering, filled with intensity, drama, with boys and girls putting their hands to their faces, over their mouths, with each error. A learned trait if I ever saw one...The kids are experiencing their first “interscholastic” sporting chance, to represent their school. I hope they have been taught the important Chinese proverb – *Winning and losing are temporary, but friendships last forever.*

## **Give Them a Love of the Game**

This brief handout will significantly help new coaches AND players of volleyball start off successfully. For this is the level where kids decide –

*“Am I falling in love with this challenging game, or will the coaches and parents drum out my passion for the sport?”*

How you react to the many, many errors found in learning how to rebound a ball off one’s body will largely influence how kids feel about their volleyball skills.

What you do not have to decide, but what you must, no matter what your coaching style, make happen every day, practice or match – is to HAVE FUN. Elementary-age kids want to PLAY sports, volleyball included, not DRILL them, or condition for them. With as short as most seasons are - eight weeks or less, practice time included – you can only teach them so many volleyball skills. What you do not need to teach them, but rather foster and enhance, is their fun in playing and practicing.

In this process, one key coaching “style” wins out – asking them questions every time, rather than telling them what to do. Most coaches like to bark commands, and teach the players to look at them for all the answers. The best coaches guide their young players through the long adventure of learning volleyball, by asking questions and helping the players problem solve. The BEST players are the best problem solvers in the action of the game. Teach them how to teach themselves, and they will learn the sport by solving the problem and then performing the correct action on the court. You only have one set of eyes, and way more players than that – so stop telling them what to do - and having them stand around as well -, and instead let them play the game and guide them to solutions and answers.

## Win with One Hit or Lose with Three?

So what you as the coach must first decide is:

*“Do I need to win all the matches possible, or shall I at some point start them towards real three hit volleyball, the way they will play the game for the rest of their lifetime?”*

This is due to the very unique thing found in volleyball – that at the lowest level, the worst team almost always WINS! What? It is true, unlike other sports, in volleyball at the start, the way to win is NOT use teamwork but rather just ‘get the dang ball back over the net, so the other team screws up. If you work on three hits to do that, and the other team just hits it over on one – the one hit wonders will win every time – as your three-hit team has THREE times the chance to err. Unless you can serve even better than the other team can receive and one-hit the ball back, you will lose, until your experience and skill rises to a level that all three hits are likely successful, from passer to setter, from setter to hitter, and for the hitter to stand or jump and put it over the net.

So another way to ask you the same question is: *Do we have time to teach them and strive towards three-hit volleyball, or shall this level play the game like ping pong?*

If your time is short – and you want to win, you need to train that way – for that is “gamelike” for your team. Train them to get balls coming over the net in various ways, especially served, and then just send it back over with one hit. Do small groups of 4-6, with the kids running the drill, throwing/passing/serving it over the net to 1-2 players covering one side of the court. Do the same on the other side of the court/net, so you have TWO balls and groups in training on the net, not just one. If you only have one ball, just scrimmage then.

If your time is short and you want to play three hit volleyball, know you are likely to lose on the scoreboard - more than a few games – unless your kids came in already knowing the challenges. Those drills mean the receiver does not return the ball, but works at all times at taking a ball coming over the net and delivering it to the SETTER (who stands 1-2 meters off the net, so the pass does not go to the net, and thus half the errors go over the net), who sets to the 3 meter line and lets teammates take a good swing, if not jump and swing at the ball. Again, put two balls and groups in training on one net, setting front sets and back sets (Red and Blue three meter line sets, or “A’s” and “D’s” as they are often called), so the players practice hitting not just front (to the left) sets all the time, but learn to hit from the left AND right sides of the net/court. The court is not a rectangle – it is a square – and this exercise is designed to teach players to be comfortable using the entire surface.

## Teach Them to Serve Great

Either way, your first skill to teach and get the best at is serving. They will get better fastest at this skill as it is the only “closed” motor program (i.e. in one player’s total control) Every week I get a great letter or email from a player who says they just served 25 straight, so where do I sign up for the Olympic Team? They of course see those players often missing...

Shall we serve underhanded, sidearm, or overhead? – as seen below, we suggest roundhouse first, and jump serve second – with the overhead then moving in with power and speed, no matter how small a player they may be. Sure you can teach underhand too, a low contact version of the roundhouse, but it is better to contact the ball higher (at the chest or above) from the start.

KEY focus areas

1. LOW consistent toss. – Most kids fling the ball up high – twice their own height - and to all areas of the compass, making contacting the ball a very challenging physics problem. Teach them to “place” the ball, i.e. toss low and to the SAME area in space every time. They will still have all sorts of timing problems with their armswing, but at least you have minimized one key variable that otherwise causes significant error. One “game” I do it to gently place-toss the ball, then shut their eyes, and see if it lands back in the palm of the placing hand. This game improves consistency in tossing.
2. Fast Torquing armswing – Most kids swing the arm, but do not twist the shoulders/trunk for power. I suggest the roundhouse serve be taught first, not the overhead or even underhand serve, so the kids feel and see the power of this torque. They will most often move towards a normal overhead serve, due to peer pressure, but they will then know and have torque in their overhead serve. After roundhouse, teach the jump serve. This too gets kids to put power into a serve, is fun, and is a natural step towards the overhead contact point.
3. RIGID, consistent contact point. – So much power is lost by kids striking a serve in their finger area – or letting their wrist bend back. They need to see, feel and strike every ball in the flat palm of their hand, never the fingers. They need you to help them make their wrist solid/tight, and not bend – and sometimes using a fist works wonders. A fist is ok to serve with as a developing young player, it gets the fingers out of the way and tightens up the wrist too.
4. Simple, effective footwork. Footwork must be taught in conjunction with the low toss/place, as it is the foundational ‘movement in space’ that all players must learn. Either serve should be performed from a standing position with no stepping, much like a free throw shooter does not step, as this reduces accuracy errors. Little kids should have a staggered stance, so weight shift from back to front can happen as part of the swing.

### Reception for Three or One Hit Play

One thing new coaches get baffled by is how/why the kids cannot figure out where the ball is going. They then talk about skill – when in reality it is the kids did not know where to be and when to be there. There are two key reasons this happens in volleyball. First, every sport the kids play before they step on the volleyball court is “Ball-Comes-To-Me” sports. From playing simple toss-and-catch-the-ball with a family member, to passing in basketball, football, soccer, and so on – kids learn that the ball comes to them. Then, most volleyball coaches pair up their kids in volleyball, and reinforce the same thing by partner passing. If you teach kids partner-passing on the same side of the net, and then you get them in a game situation that where the ball is coming OVER the net, the kids only start learning how to move in ADVANCE of the contact when they play the match – not in any exercise you teach them. So use the net in your learning – and make stations for the skill while still using the net.

The most common pattern, even with the one hit option, is to put one player at the net (a yard off the net, in the middle or right front area of the court – to become the setter in time) and the other five players in a ‘W’ pattern with three players about 3-4 meters off the net, and the other two splitting the difference at 2-3 meters from the end line. You can also go with a U pattern, without the middle player at 3-4 meters, just make sure your kids get used to moving forward. Make sure to keep your endline players 2 meters in from the end line at least. If they are closer to the end line than that, it often leads to errors. Left to their own devices, they often like to stand on the endline, so far back that the ball is out even at ankle-biting height. They should move in until a normal serve would fall out-of-bounds at above waist height, at least, perhaps even more.

In all cases, practicing and learning how to pass balls off to each side is vital. While moving to center the ball for the pass is most preferred, the reality is simple – they will be baffled for many weeks, and the tougher the serve, the more often they will have to pass the ball off to one side. This is no problem, as long as the eyes are looking at the target (either the other side space for the one-hit methods, or the setter on your side for the three-hit method). See below for how to draw the eyes, and then use this to teach them how to rebound the ball off their arms properly to the target.

One key additional concept to give the players is in their errors, they should always be making good mistakes, not bad ones. In passing, too low/into the net is a bad error, while too high/off the net is a good one.

## **Teach Teamwork**

Each day should have some sort of fun team building exercise. A fun cool-down game/exercise. Mind games. Quote and Discussion, etc.

## **Play Monarch of the Court Daily**

This game of “instant winner” can daily take up to a third of your practice, and at this level, it always does great things for the players, their reading, anticipation, judgment and teamwork skills all inclusive. The “match” is played only to one point – and you get hundreds of “matches” in a short time. There is a reason the kids say “NOOOOOOOOOOOO!” when you say you are stopping this competition. They are saying to you – NO, we need:

*More fun*

*More game-like training*

*More chances to touch the ball* (given the smaller team size)

*More opportunities to judge* and see balls coming over the net

*More chances to read* (anticipate) an opponent’s intention to where they are sending the ball on first, second or third ball over (Make two hits on first ball a rule sometimes, and even one hit)

*More times to deliver the toughest third hit* over the net, even if standing or shooting/passing

*More FUN*

*More playing that starts every time with a serve*, like our games do

*More competitive scoring* (every serve is a point, so every time they score a point, serving or on the defending “winners side”, they add that point to their total tally)

*More hustle* (as the serving team must only wait “One Mississippi, Two Mississippi” before they get to serve, forcing the winning team to get ready fast, and sometimes even be moving under the net/to the court as the ball comes over the net, should they not hustle).

*More quality pressure* (by letting the team who gets a “free” or easy volley – not a standing spike -- set the ball on the net. Otherwise you keep the sets at the three meter line)

*MORE FUN*

## **Warmup with Small Groups**

If you have one court and one net, you need to get up more “nets”. Most likely you are in a gym with at least 4-6 basketball hoops – for a reason. Why do most gyms have multiple basketball hoops? To provide more play! You need to do the same, getting the same number of “nets” up as you have hoops. You may need to do this with rope, putting in eyebolts on the walls to make a wall-rope

standard, or some other creative anchor points. Having real nets is better than ropes, but the point is, kids benefit from playing over a fixed-height object, even if it is only a single strand of a rope. This teaches the players the way the game is played – over a barrier that is seven feet high or higher. It is always played that way. Every serve has to go over it, as does every spike, while every pass comes from over that height to the setter (or over it again in one hit). A key is, warming up over the net in teams of one or two per side, so they gain skill while getting warmer.

## Game Playing Questions to Decide on

Who will referee? The answer is ANYONE. Coaches can, or a parent, or even past players. With rally scoring (every play is a point for one team or the other, no 'side-outs'), it is easy to keep track of the score. You should play rally score, no matter what, if only for the simplicity of it (see below).

Then you have to decide – rotate, or play by sets? With 12 or more on the roster, and only six on the court, giving equal playing time in the match can be done either way. Some coaches chose to put the same six out for a game, then a second group of six out for the second game, then – if needed for the deciding game, the team who won (since you are 1-1 in sets to have a deciding game) earns the right to play that game. Other coaches rotate everyone through, putting the sub in at the net, or after the serve is lost, or even first to serve.

You should play rally – it is the way the Olympics are played, the Colleges play, the high schools play, and the Junior Olympics play. The sideout game just can go far too long, as you only score when serving. Some old tournaments would get done well after midnight when there was sideout scoring. You still have to win by two points, but rally scoring typically makes the games shorter and simpler

Will you allow 'server domination' in your games? What happens at the elementary-age level (and often into middle school/junior high age) is that the closed-motor skill of serving improves faster than the open-motor skill of passing. Much better, as serving is a closed motor program – completely in the control of one player – while the pass is an open skill, not in the passer's total control. (For example, Olympic archery at a fixed target is a closed motor program; riding a horse and shooting that same bow and arrow at a moving buffalo is a much more open motor program). The point is, pun intended, is that the best such low-experience programs put in a 'maximum serves' rule. For instance, a player can only serve 5 straight, before the team must then rotate and let their next server perform. Annually, I get endearing letters from kids who say essentially "I have served 25 or more straight points in a row, winning entire matches by myself, I would like information on how I can now tryout for the Olympic Team." This uniqueness to our sport means that we suggest the lower/beginner levels do have a maximum serve rule, so that these one-person serving shows do not happen. By the time players gain enough experience in passing serves – three hits or just one – you can drop that rule modification. Please note this is not about age, but about experience. There are 6<sup>th</sup> grade teams whose program start when they are in kindergarten or 1<sup>st</sup> grade, who can not only serve tough, but pass those tough serves right to the setter, and play three-hit volleyball with long rallies.

You need to know the way to end the game – sportsmanship wise – which in volleyball is to line up along (parallel to) your side the net, then come together to slap hands with the opponent under the net. Decide on the way you want to congratulate each other as a team, and with the opponents, and practice it before your first match. This is part of HAVING FUN.

## Teach Cheers

Let them cheer all they want. It is part of the culture of this game – the skills happen, the ball finally hits the floor, and one side becomes its own cheerleaders. They may even come up with moves more intricate than the varsity cheerleading squad at your local high school, as they celebrate team point after team point. And the kids not playing – both the subs of the team, and the players waiting to play the next match for the same school – should be part of the spirit and not just allowed to, but encouraged to cheer themselves hoarse.

## Other Skill Concerns

The ‘head duck’ – perhaps the most common “error” made by new players, is very common at this level, sometimes making up some 25% of the action. I suggest you teach the reverse pass – hitting it over the net on one if you are a one hit team, or more tapping it to the setter if you are going for three hits. Certainly handling it with the hands is best, but some rules or programs do not allow such a serve receive yet – even though the ‘hand pass’ is not only legal but commonly used at many levels today - so the reverse pass off the “back” of your forearms, is legal anywhere.

Slick floors – many floors are so slick, it is like playing volleyball on ice skates. If cleaning the floor does not really help, just remember what it must be like to learn this sport on ice – and that there will be even more errors in judgment and execution due to the slick floor.

Low ceilings – The US Women’s Olympic Team qualified for the 1980 Games in a gym with a very low ceiling. In many places, churches and schools especially, the ceiling is low, and so you must remind them to keep their arms calmer, quiet arms, tap the ball, ‘bunt not swing’, or whatever other images you can present and create to keep them from swinging their arms with too much power. Keep focusing on what to do, rather than what not to do. Remember, the most effective learning is when correct skill is taught, as opposed to teaching avoidance of incorrect skill. As a coach, always shape your comments in the positive rather than the negative. Say to a player, “Hold your arms like this (while demonstrating correct technique)” rather than “don’t hold your arms like this (while demonstrating incorrect technique)”. Remember, expertise is nothing more than repetition of correct skill – you are giving the players the correct motor program – the mind has no ability to remember incorrect motor programs once the correct one is learned!

Hard Volleyballs - Make balloon balls or get light Volleyballs (which are only 70% of the weight of a ‘normal’ ball) and ultralite balls (great for 4-8 year olds, fabric covered) please, so they LOVE the game more. The pattern to make these balloon shell balls is attached. If you make them from lightweight nylon, they will not roll or move far. If you make them from cordura backpack type nylon, they travel much like a real volleyball, but without any contact pain. If you make them from dad’s unused Hawaiian Aloha shirts, the cotton fabric is about half way between the two nylons mentioned above, and the balls are each unique. Don’t be afraid to be creative here – use blow-up beach balls too. These balls are not very good out-of-doors in any wind, but indoors, they not only remove any physical harm from an overly-hard ball, but it also slows the tempo of the contacts down to where an early player has little or no trouble learning how to anticipate the ball’s path through the air. They also allow for great living room volleyball competition, over the table. All sorts of volleying fun. The newer composite leather balls last a long time and are better on the arms and shoulders of these younger players. The ultralight fabric covered balls are safe in any room and painless to contact. Budget for it next year, if you don’t have them now.

## Teach Volleyball in Class First

One way to get time to do three hits, is to make your PE activity before your volleyball season be volleyball in class. That can greatly increase your time for the kids to touch the ball – which is the most important thing in learning the sport – contacting, not watching – in keeping with the philosophy of contacting the ball in a gamelike way. Let them play in small groups as well, and make rallying with three hits the focus, instead of bashing it over on the first hit. Remember the power of the spike – and teach them daily to pass a throw from the setter, that they pass then get set and hit...every day. Play and have fun.

## Budget/ Materials

One reason to do volleyball is that you can make it happen so inexpensively.

### USA Volleyball Membership

Supporting the National Governing Body, getting insurance, connecting to the National and Olympic team programs, Most Regions have an annual youth membership at \$20 or less. - visit <http://www.usavolleyball.org>

### Court time:

Indoors Free to \$20 hour for court space for 1-4 kids courts  
Outdoors: Free grass, sand or other surface (e.g. tennis courts) space

### Net System

Indoors Usually included in court use  
Adding more nets using wall anchored systems; about \$50 a net to purchase  
Outdoors: \$200 to purchase and use indefinitely.  
To make, from 8 foot poles, guy ropes and nets, about \$75 each, including a good \$50 net.

### Balls:

Balloon balls @\$1  
Beach balls @\$2  
Market balls@ \$3  
Regular composition volleyballs @\$10-15  
Light kid's volleyballs @\$25

Uniforms: optional. If used, silkscreen and numbered T-shirts @\$5, or volleyball uniforms @ \$15-50

### Referees/Scorekeepers:

Refereeing is supplied by players  
Prefer a flip chart (outdoors) or scoreboard set up to run with the help of other players in the program, but score can also simply be kept by the serving team calling out the current score, without written or visible scorekeeping.