



Volleyball ACE™ Power Tips

Sponsored by Dimensional Software

Volume No. 19, Issue No. 6 ~ March 19, 2008

Official Drill Bulletin of the American Volleyball Coaches Association

Training the Middle Blocker

By Lisa Love, current vice president for university athletics at Arizona State University and former head women's volleyball coach at the University of Southern California

Efficiency. Attacking speed. Blocking presence over the net. These key characteristics are all used to describe the middle blocker and her presence on the court. Streamlining the movement of the middle blocker is a significant part of the training in competitive volleyball programs.

The nature of the sport of volleyball requires a considerable amount of talent and energy from the middle blocker. Coaches, when recruiting prototype middles, look for players with Porsche-type talent, but the competitive mentality of a four-wheel drive. The sleeker, faster, quicker and tighter the footwork and arm swing are, the better the player will be on the whole.

When attempting to develop a solid middle blocker, coaches should first lay the foundation. For example, when preparing a high school freshman or sophomore athlete, coaches should begin work immediately on key, basic elements germane to the middle blocking position. Developmental efforts should then become more sophisticated throughout the player's junior and senior years.

The pace of growth for the athletes is unique to each individual, yet the mastery of the foundation work is crucial for the success of great middle blocking. As is so often the case with all great performers, the focus should be on the spectacular accomplishments, rather than on the ease with which they execute the simple things.

Points to Remember

When evaluating the promise of a prospective middle blocker, place a high priority on blocking presence. With blocking in mind, teaching the skill is relatively easy, yet the learning presents unique challenges. The difficulty in learning is that the middle blocker does not get the same feedback for measurement of success as she does when executing other skills. Blockers either stuff the ball and are satisfied or, if they do not stuff the ball, they doubt their execution and effectiveness. Of course, the more court area denied, which is directly related to net penetration, the more effective the player is.

It is difficult to impress upon a player that she is performing a skill admirably when the attack shot is not actually clamped. Due to the relative absence of immediate gratification via stuff blocks, maintaining efficiency discipline can be tricky. The player may simply break rank in an effort to find the stuff block and, as a result, may block fewer shots and, most certainly, distort team defense. With that in mind, coaches must remember that blocking is a

When evaluating the promise of a prospective middle blocker, place a high priority on blocking presence at the net. Photo by Scott Bjornlie.



skill that must be trained as early as day one.

Position-specific training is of high priority and should dominate at least one-third of the practice time commencing at the beginning of the season. Because it is difficult for a player to modify learned habits, quality time spent with a good teacher of the skill is essential.

When coaches teach blocking, they are trying to teach a skill they know is difficult to learn. In order to teach the skill effectively, coaches must give very effective, clear-cut, clean, simple cues. An example of a simple, effective cue is “quiet hands,” which refers to a simple presentation over the net. “Quiet hands” would mean the hands are still, stable and steady. They are not “loud.” The words “very still hands” or “independent hands” could also be used. These phrases are simply different ways to describe similar things.

In addition, it is imperative to use simple cues so a player can self-teach. For a good teacher, the objective should be to help players teach themselves. Using simple cues like “quiet hands,” “load and move,” and “load and burst” is much more effective than being overly verbose. The player is better equipped for quick self-debriefing rather than relying chronically on the coach.

The use of simple cues, in effect, can help players learn and coaches teach. The other important part of teaching blocking (which also applies to passing, setting, digging or any other aspect of the game) is telling the players why what you are teaching works.

For many players it is very helpful for mental processing and the learning curve to understand why. For example, tell the players why “quiet hands” are better than “loud hands” or why being vertical while blocking is better than reaching with the feet, hips and shoulders out of alignment. If a coach teaches the thinking process to young athletes, they are going to learn more and develop problem-solving skills when they are on the court.

Also, as an athlete matures in both tactics and technique, a coach may seek a recommendation from an athlete. As a result, the athlete learns to transfer information, problem solve and exercise logic – and also enjoys some ownership of the process. Ownership is very motivating.

At the beginning of the season, during initial training, coaches should approach blocking in a sequenced progression before moving into the whole product. In other words, they should engage in specific blocking calisthenics involving single-contact repetitions prior to moving into three-contact work, which immediately employs eye sequencing and other whole game-related reading skills. Use the progression technique to get the players in shape to teach the skill the way it needs to be done, and to provide the players with technical overlearning opportunities. As the season progresses, training should become less and less part-oriented.

Part vs. Whole

Early-season training is focused on conditioning, teaching and rehearsing. Much of the conditioning and specific skill teaching is done in a progression format – in parts (“rep” training). For example, while training the middle blockers, you might initially focus on blocking footwork and hand presentation over the net, and progress promptly into transition attack footwork and arm swing before you actually begin scrimmage drills.

Scrimmage drills are examples of training the whole skill of middle blocking. The sooner the players move into training the whole product, the better. Some athletes require more repetition training than others. Identifying an athlete’s rate of progression and developmental needs is certainly part of a coach’s job.

In the program training cycle, great attention is devoted to foundation training through high “rep” work during a player’s first two years on the team. As the athletes employ those les-

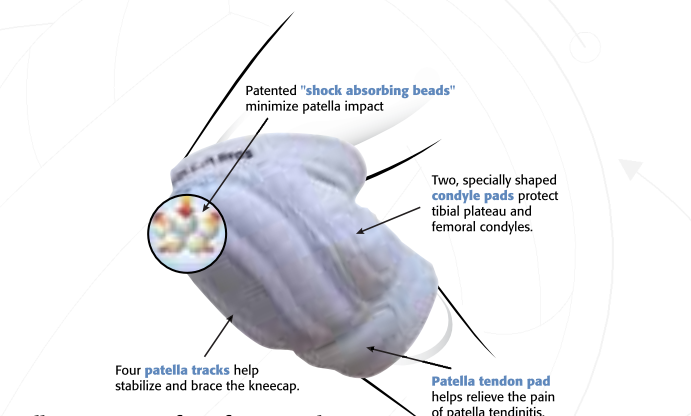
CALENDAR

April 11-12	2008 Molten Division III Men’s Invitational Volleyball Championship Blake Arena, Springfield College, Springfield, Mass.
April 11-13	2008 AVP Crocs Tour Miami, Fla.
April 18-20	2008 AVP Crocs Tour Dallas, Texas
April 20	2008 Collegiate Beach Volleyball Championship A CBS College Sports Network Event San Diego, Calif.
May 1-3	39th Annual National Collegiate Men’s Volleyball Championship Bren Events Center, University of California, Irvine
June 20-21	FIVB World League Intercontinental Round Sears Centre Arena, Hoffman Estates, Ill.
June 27-28	FIVB World League Intercontinental Round Resch Center, Green Bay, Wis.
July 11-12	FIVB World League Intercontinental Round U.S. Cellular Coliseum, Bloomington, Ill.
July 23-27	2008 FIVB World League Final Round Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Aug. 8-24	Olympic Games Beijing, China
Dec. 17-21	AVCA Annual Convention Omaha, Neb.

If your players are wearing kneepads, why do their knees still hurt?

Trainers know that patella instability and patella tracking problems can lead to tendinitis, jumpers knee, patellofemoral syndrome or worse. Of course, repetitive impact doesn’t exactly help their knees either.

\$20.00 foam kneepads can barely cushion against hard impact - and do not provide any patella bracing. So why use sponsored kneepads that barely cushion, and don’t brace?



Call 877.604.9269 for a free sample

Patella Digs Impact Protection Braces are the first to provide four patella stabilizing tracks and superb impact protection.

Two years of testing, and feedback from players, trainers and coaches, say the Patella Digs Impact Protection Brace can help - a lot. Most advanced players will feel and see a difference throughout the long season. Let your players focus on the game; not their knees.



sons, the coach should continue to challenge them with other aspects of improving their personal game. Marv Dunphy (head men's volleyball coach at Pepperdine University) said in a clinic session years ago that he thinks juniors and seniors who have mastered foundation training are great models for the younger players. As mentioned earlier, using simple cues, problem solving skills and logic to teach can be very effective, but probably nothing is as effective as a visual model.

Drill Success

Every drill, whether it is just a “rep” drill or a whole-skill overload drill (two or three attackers vs. one or two blockers), should allow the athlete at least a 50-percent success rate. Successful executions, especially with blocking, help the athlete remain motivated. Of course, the definition of a successful execution could be stuff blocking or simply channeling the attack options to a selected court area.

One of the ways to guarantee a 50-percent success rate when training and teaching blocking is to control the drill yourself. If a coach controls the situation, the players are going to block shots. It is just that simple. For example, from a hitting platform, the coach can hit all angles and work on one specific hand or vice versa. The coach can work speed, style, distance, cardiovascular fitness or whatever specific area they choose to focus on.

The same objective can be dictated to players in a more whole-skill drill. Simply direct the outside attackers to hit a specific court area. As the practices advance, however, it is advantageous to lessen or even eliminate coach-controlled drills. Nothing is more motivating than success.

Break It Down

One of the things that should be done at the very beginning of a player's training – and in concert with a strength coach – is working very hard on first-step movement. It is not necessary to add a second step or even to associate the training specifically with blocking. The focus should be on the players actually moving cor-

rectly. For instance, if they move to the right, they step to the right with their right foot, but many players fail to push off with their opposite leg. They step, but they do not go anywhere, and they certainly do not accelerate as quickly as they could. If you evaluate the slow player kinesthetically, at times you will see problematic events that can be corrected. Slowness then yields somewhat to efficiency.

To ensure that the players are efficient with their first step, set up an alley of lines approximately 3 feet apart and require the athletes to skate-step back and forth across the lines. Eventually, the alley can be widened to ensure an even stronger push and step. If the players step and do not push with their other leg, their center of gravity shifts back. Without the push, the player's shoulders actually trail the movement instead of slightly leading. Displaced center of gravity is a common problem and adversely affects all aspects of the quick movement patterns required of the middle blocker.

The player, at this point, should also be working on how to carry the hands. If the athlete is off-balance, the hands will be all over the place in an effort to regain balance – the opposite of “quiet hands.” The volume is turned way up. While the player is in a ready stance, the elbows and hands should remain within the shoulder line. An in-to-out move with the hands is preferable to an out-to-in move, primarily because of speed.

Most often, the middle blocker is the first line of defense against the opponent's quick attack. In preparation to defend a quick, it is important that the middle blocker start a little coiled, in a position conducive to jumping quickly. When blocking quicks, jumping height is less important than hand speed over the net tape. From the coiled position, the player is in an excellent posture to move quickly right or left, as is necessary. The first-step burst is enhanced because of the slightly coiled base posture. Preparation for stopping quick attacks lends itself to efficient lateral motion for long or short moves.

For shorter moves, teach a basic shuffle (both a single-step and two-step shuffle). With the shuffle, the hips and shoulders face the

net the entire time. Perhaps the most indicative move to determine the quality of a player's first step is the distance and speed with which a player can shuffle. When a middle blocker is on the move laterally with any type of footwork, especially shuffling, utilize the net as a grid to mark the head level. In other words, if a player is rising or bouncing through his move, then obviously the head does not move on a level plane. The grid idea is most beneficial at the end of the blocking move because many players have a tendency to stop in a high or tall body position, followed by a dip in an effort to coil and jump. Stopping "tall" creates balance and speed problems. A better option is a loaded stop, in which applying the brakes and preparing to stop occur simultaneously.

Not Such a Short Trip

Longer moves require a dynamic first step that sets the tone for the evenness of the movement. The following steps should each be at a distance that is comfortable for the athlete to remain both quick and balanced. Frequently, athletes try to accommodate the distance by overstriding. A symptom of overstriding occurs when the shoulders follow, rather than lead, the motion.

The final two-foot contacts are a quick step-close move, thus reorienting the hips to the net. When a middle blocker has a problem passing over the net with her right hand when moving to the right (or vice versa when moving left), you should initially focus on the feet and hips. If they are not facing the net on the step-close, then net penetration problems exist.

Whether an athlete has to utilize a four- or five-step move is relative to that particular player. Therefore, you should teach all moves equitably early on. The athlete will discover what will give her the optimum advantage. Middle blockers should move quietly and get loaded to jump, the object being to leave no seam from pin to pin and to deny as much seam and angle attack option as possible.

It is important to emphasize a properly cushioned landing after executing the block, for two reasons: first, to prevent injury and, second, to set up the initial load step for transition footwork.

Presence Over the Net

A middle blocker's presence over the net is directly related to how vertical she is when jumping. When training the basics, being vertical means that the feet are under the hips and the hips are under the shoulders. To train this vertical concept, require the player to look over the net while blocking. It is difficult for the player to look over the net if the head is ducked, the eyes are closed, and/or the body alignment is not vertical.

The wrists should be flexed with the thumbs pointing at 11 o'clock and the index fingers at 1 o'clock. This style spreads the hands in an effort to take up as much space as possible. Tell the

players that while they are actually in the act of blocking, they should perceive the backs of their hands the entire time. This concept is focused on preventing a player from "swatting" the ball. The press over the net is initiated by simply extending the elbows, flaring the hands and tightening the shoulders and stomach. Players should maintain that position over the net as long as possible. If the player moves in a loaded position, then as the knees straighten to jump, the elbows will straighten into the press. The result is a hand lead over the net tape. As the player rises, net penetration increases.

"Independent hands" is a good cue to use when coaching presence over the net. Too often, players have a tendency to reach toward the ball with both hands, which opens up court area for the attacker. This common problem should be focused on often in high-rep drills. Ideally, the hands are slightly more than ball-width apart, thereby assisting in the seam block and the angle shot.

How to Proceed

The objective is for the middle blocker to be as effective as possible by giving her the tools to do so. Wasting motion is more frustrating to the athlete than to the coach. In an effort to streamline the middle blocker, coaches should train movement in a variety of ways:

- Single "rep" drill structure, where two attacking platforms are moved progressively further apart until they are nearly pin-to-pin. Add a stopwatch to ensure speed and only count successful "reps."
- Whole skill training, which brings into play skills that have not been discussed in this article. It is a priority to do much more whole skill training than single "rep" training. Younger players often experience an inevitable breakdown in execution as soon as they "go live." Old habits reappear. An abundance of rehearsal will cure a lot of ills.
- Pre-practice warm-up that involves rehearsing movement patterns.
- Off-season movement training without a ball. Think of it as "volleyball ballet" and use a dance studio so players can watch themselves in the mirrors.

Conclusion

The intent of streamlining the middle blocker is that each player, although unique in his own way, will have a commanding four-wheel-drive presence and effectiveness for the team.

Reprinted from *Coaching Volleyball: Defensive Fundamentals and Techniques* (2004), Kinda S. Lenberg, ed., pp. 57-64. Monterey, CA: Coaches Choice.



A middle blocker's presence over the net is directly related to how vertical she is when jumping. Photo by Scott Bjornlie.

VOLLEYBALL ACE™ DRILLS

One-Minute Block

From *101 Winning Volleyball Drills From the AVCA, 2000*

Number of Players: 2
Number of Balls: Steady supply

Objective:

To provide multiple blocking opportunities under a controlled situation.

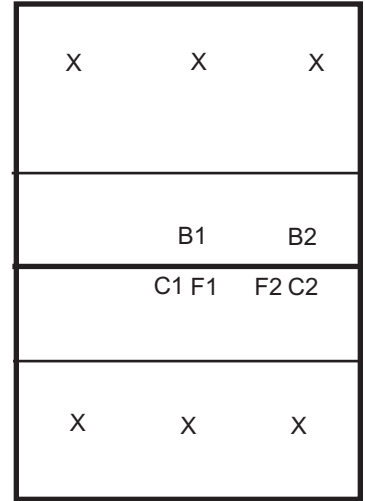
Directions:

1. Establish a time limit of 60 seconds. The coach (C1 or C2) may determine what time is appropriate.
2. The blockers (B1, B2) attempt to block as many balls as possible from C1 and C2, who are on stable platforms.

3. The ball retrievers (X) must get the balls back into the cart and grab all loose balls.
4. Two feeders (F1, F2) are necessary.
5. The person on the platform must hit the same shot each time.

Variation:

1. Establish a time limit of 30 seconds.



Side-to-Side Shuffle

Joel Dearing, Springfield College (from *Volleyball Fundamentals, 2003*)

Number of Players: 8
Number of Balls: 0

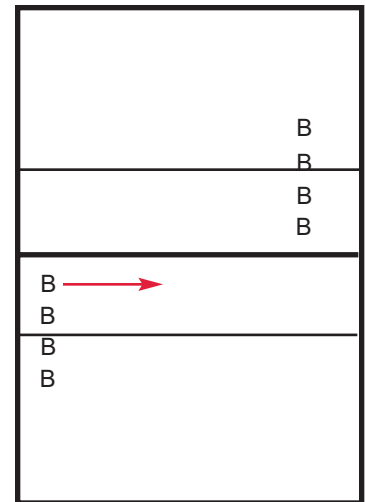
Objective:

To practice using side shuffle steps to the left and right, requiring blockers to move.

Directions:

1. Eight blockers (B) form two lines in court zone 4 on each side of the net.
2. The first player in each line assumes the ready position for blocking and takes a side shuffle and close step to the right, followed by a block.

3. This is repeated two more times as the player travels toward the other sideline and then moves to the back of the line opposite from where she started.
4. The drill continues until each player has taken two complete trips on each side of the net.
5. The drill can be extended by restarting with both lines in court zone 2. All players will then move to the left for two complete trips on each side of the net.



Blocking Progression to Enhance Timing and Hand Position

Don Hardin, University of Illinois

Number of Players: 3-9
Number of Balls: Steady supply

Objective:

To assist blockers in feeling proper hand position and timing against the attack. Blockers learn to glance at the set, make foot adjustments and focus on the attacker.

Directions:

1. Coaches or attackers stand on a platform to attack balls into the blocker.
2. Coaches practice the following sequence

to help blockers feel their proper hand position on hitter contact.

Step A: On platform, a coach tosses a ball to herself and hits it into one of the blocker's hands as the blocker jumps to block the attack. The blocker glances at the toss and times the jump to block the attack. Proper hand position is reinforced.

Step B: The ball is tossed higher and the blocker moves from a base position to the proper setup position before jumping to block. Movement prior to the jump often causes problems for the blocker. Proper hand position must be reinforced with this movement requirement.

Step C: The ball is tossed or set to the coach on the box. Blockers learn to glance at

the set and move from base to read position, moving their hands and arms into optimal blocking position. Keep the toss a short distance from the coach to ensure accuracy.

Step D: Finally, the ball is tossed or set to a line (ideally three) of attackers, who hit into a blocker for about six repetitions.

3. Players may help each other by watching what happens with their teammates' hands on contact by the attacker.

4. Players provide teaching cues to one another as they learn not to "twitch" or "bat" at the ball on hitter contact. Hands may also be videotaped for immediate review.

AVCA/Volleyball ACE™ Power Tips Directory

•Volleyball ACE: 877.223.8225

email: coach@ace4vb.com

•AVCA Headquarters: 866.544.2822

email: members@avca.org

•AVCA Grass Roots (Club) Rep., John Sample 817.545.4551

email: jsample@dibimail.com

•AVCA Grass Roots (HS) Rep., Jodi Manore 734.850.6269

email: manorej@bedford.k12.mi.us

INTENSITY

In the game and in practice!

Bring the same intensity you get in games to practice.

Use the best stat keeping tool, Volleyball ACE, for matches to determine what you need to work on in practice. Then use the TapRecorder during practice to perfect your game. The results will be amazing.



TapRecorder

Version 2

- Now! Works on Pocket PC and Palm Handhelds
- Has Spreadsheet Interface with TapRecording Cells
- Includes Built-In Volleyball PracticeStats Reports
- Can Create Custom Handheld Applications
- Calculates Efficiency % and More

*Tap Tap Tap...
Instant Stat!*

*The
Power
of
Two*

Volleyball

Software for Coaches

Version 6

ACE

- Fast, On-Court Stats
- Pass-Serve Ratings and Charting
- Box Scores, Points Per Rotation and More
- Runs on Palm (Zire, Tungsten) and Pocket PC (iPAQ, Axim)
- Uploads data for NAIA and NCAA stats reporting

Now available
for Pocket PC
and Palm handhelds!

We are
passionate
about
Volleyball!

ORDER YOUR SOFTWARE TODAY!
www.ace4vb.com

Call: Toll free: (877) 223-8225 Web: www.ace4vb.com FAX: (650) 948-2616