

The Fundamental Uniqueness of Volleyball

Many people, including players and coaches, fail to realize what makes volleyball a unique and special sport. Some view the game at a rather simplistic "church league and family re-union" level. The recent and significant growth of the sport in participation and in popularity as a spectator sport appears to indicate that there is much more to the game. Prospective coaches, players, and serious fans need to grasp these nuances of the game. Volleyball can be characterized by the following elements:

It is a rebound sport.

With the exception of the serve, the player may never have complete control of the ball. Therefore, being in the correct position prior to contact is very important. It also makes it a "movement" sport, placing a high premium on movement skills and the ability to anticipate.

It uses intermediate contacts.

Volleyball rules allow three contacts per side, with each contact building toward the attack. This makes controlling the rebound of each contact very critical. There are also very few terminal contacts in volleyball. All of this makes cooperation, interaction and teamwork a must. While it can be debated, volleyball is one of, if not the most team-oriented sport.

It has a congested playing area.

The volleyball court is 60 feet long and 30 feet wide, with each side operating on their half of the court. That means six players operate in only 900 square feet of space. This is another reason why organization and positioning is vital, as well as team dynamics and relationships among team members.

It offers little direct positive feedback.

Some coaches refer to volleyball as a "failure" sport, in that a high percentage of scoring (even at the highest levels) result from mistakes. It is also very hard to reinforce desirable behavior. This is especially true in defensive skills, such as blocking and digging. A blocker can have a "perfect" match yet have no statistical "blocks" to show for it.

It is a game of transition.

In volleyball, the roles of offense and defense can be confusing, and they are not as distinctly separate as other sports. In some cases the roles are reversed from what the casual observer would expect. For example, when your team is serving, in effect (unless you score an ace) you are on defense. The opposite is true when not serving; you are on offense. As the ball rarely stops, this makes the transition from offense to defense difficult.

It has an imbalance of offense and defense.

In volleyball, offense succeeds over defense 60-70% of the time. Some rule changes have been made to try to balance this out, such as rally scoring, the addition of the libero and the liberalization of contact rules.

It is a non-contact sport.

As opposed to other team sports, in volleyball there is no legal contact between opponents. Players are in control of their own game and must play within themselves. Extremely aggressive athletes often find it difficult to find other ways to release aggression. The game still needs aggressive players, but it must be channeled into a more narrow focus.

It has no time constraints.

Although still technically correct, the advent of rally scoring has diminished this to a great extent. However, volleyball is still the only team sport where the winning team must score the final point. Therefore there is a great deal of pressure to score points. This also is probably the primary factor in the huge momentum swings one sees in volleyball.

It is player-dominated.

Communication between coaches and players is very limited, making preparation extremely important. Players need to learn how to adapt on the court without the coach. This makes practice time sacred and also increases the need for on-court team leaders. The coach is limited by rule from having much contact with the team. Want proof? Watch how volleyball coaches you see on TV compare in their behavior during play with those of basketball or football coaches.

It requires similar skills of its players.

While the recent liberalization of substitution rules and the libero have significantly lessened this, there is still little specialization. The rotational rules of volleyball require players to play all six positions on the court, at least until after the serve. This requires players and coaches who understand player movement and positioning. It is quite possible that the "overlap rule" (the rule that dictates this aspect of volleyball) is understood by less than 10% of volleyball fans, including players, coaches, and referees.

It uses unique skills and playing zones.

Volleyball has three distinct playing zones; low, middle and high. The skills used in each of these zones differ. For example, digging the ball can occur in a low zone when the player is required to get on the floor or in a deep squat in order to dig the ball. Setting, serving, and passing are often middle zone activities. Attacking, blocking, and sometimes serving are all high zone skills. To make things more complicated, some skills can be, and often need to be, performed in more than one zone. The player may need to run, jump, dive, shuffle, cross-over, and roll often within a very short burst of time. Add to this the kinesthetic uniqueness of the forearm pass (euphemistically called "bumping"), the most foundational and essential volleyball skill.

It involves a ball moving at varying speeds.

It is easy to watch volleyball and never consider that the ball, while almost always moving, does so at extremely variable speeds. The changes of speed can occur in a blink of an eye. This makes reaction skills a must for the volleyball player.

It is the only sport where a maximum force is applied while the body is unsupported.

Attacking and jump serving are the skills involved here. This makes learning of the skill very difficult. Timing becomes a critical element, making them difficult skills to perform correctly and effectively.

It has a ratio of ball-in-play time of roughly 30%.

The game of volleyball is played with short, high energy bursts followed with very brief periods of rest. This makes anaerobic training a must. Coaches must know that practices need to reflect this, making careful and precise practice planning a must. Time spent on aerobic training can be better spent doing something else.

It is very difficult to practice alone due the high "collective" nature of the game.

Although youth programs and out-of-season play help in this area (but can cause problems), there is very little one can do on their own to improve their volleyball skills. This makes in-season practices and opportunities for out-of-season leisure play (open gyms, etc.) critical for improvement.