

CONSIDERATIONS ON SERVING

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In November of 1998, when the FIVB shocked the volleyball world by announcing the inception of the new rally point scoring system, "experts" around Canada agreed that serving would be the skill affected the most by the rule change. Mostly for psychological (mental) reasons, in the sense that players would have to get used to the fact that a missed serve now results in a point by the opponent. Now that most of us have experienced it for a few months, we can safely say that experts were right. We are witnessing a blatant decrease in overall serving toughness at all levels. Spike servers are "making sure" a lot more than they used to. Interestingly enough though, float serves have followed the opposite direction. As a result, we are seeing a lot more "jump float" serves than we used to. While players feel the need to avoid direct mistakes on serving, they also seem to recognize the importance of placing the opponent under pressure.

At this stage of the season, let's ask ourselves a few questions.

Are we placing too much importance on the fact that the opponent gets a point every time we miss a serve? Keep in mind that an easy serve will probably result in a better chance for the opponent to get a "side-out" (note that this was also true under the old scoring system).

With a lead or a deficit of a few points, are we not better off "going for it" and try to get a direct point? The answer to this question depends on whether or not you have confidence on your "side-out" game (in the event that your server ends up missing) and more importantly if your players can mentally apply such a philosophy when going back to serve.

Are our players getting enough training in the area of serving? In recent years, serving has always been the technical skill which generated the least amount of time in training. Maybe we are paying the price for it now. Serving has become a VERY IMPORTANT skill to work on in practice, maybe to an even greater degree than it ever was.

Are our players getting the right kind of training in the area of serving? Serving for 5 minutes at the beginning of practice when everybody is cold, or at the end of practice when everybody is tired might not be the best way to develop players' abilities to serve.

Speaking of training, the next part of this article will deal with issues coaches are confronted with everyday at practice and will try to address a few training principles pertaining to serving.

PRINCIPLE #1: Practice makes perfect.

We have all heard that one before. No wonder, it's totally true. Your players can only get better at serving if they work at it at practice. The amount of time spent on training the serve at practice will depend on the importance that you as a coach put on the skill of serving. Regardless of whether you want your players to be very good at getting direct points (aces) or at getting the ball in play 100 times out of 100, the more they work at it the better they will become. Ask yourself this: Do your players work on their hitting every practice? I am pretty sure the answer is yes. So, do your players work on their serve every practice? If not: why not??

PRINCIPLE #2:

Players should always have a goal when serving at practice. If your players just serve ball over the net for the sake of it, they will not improve. They need direction from you as to what they should try to achieve. And it doesn't have to be very advanced. Here are a few options:

1. Serve a certain number of balls over the net.
2. Serve a certain number of balls in a row over the net.
3. Serve a certain percentage of balls (10 out of 10, 48 out of 50, etc...)
4. Serve a certain number of balls over the net with the ball not spinning (for float servers obviously, asking spike servers to achieve the opposite).
5. Serve a certain number of balls over the net AND to a specific area of the court.

PRINCIPLE #3:

Servers should spend most of their time working in game like conditions. Although we all recognize that you cannot recreate game conditions to 100%, most drills should TRY to get servers as close to it as possible (unless you are working specifically on technical elements and/or with beginners).

When you serve in a game:

1. You have 8 seconds to serve (Preparation)
2. You always serve with a purpose (Accuracy - Power...)
3. You don't serve with 2 balls in your hands (Preparation - Concentration)
4. You don't talk to your teammates (Preparation - Concentration)
5. You have warmed up before (Physical - Heart rate)
6. You have performed a skill prior to your serve, unless you are the very 1st server of the game (Transition - Preparation)

7. You will perform a skill after your serve, unless your serve is unsuccessful (Transition)
8. If you serve an ace, your team will get a point and you will serve again (Confidence - Aggressiveness)
9. If you serve out or in the net your opponent will get a point (Pressure) (Note: The terms in brackets refer to what could eventually become drill objectives.)

TRAINING CONCEPTS

A) Key questions coaches have to answer:

1. How much time should my players spend on serving at practice? We have already mentioned that this will be based on how important you feel serving is within your team's offense (or defense). It will also be based upon your total training time and the level of your players.
2. When should my players work on serving within practice? If we agree that serving at the beginning and at the end of practice is not what we want, players should serve **IN BETWEEN** or **DURING** drills related to other skills.
3. What type of drills can I use? The key to answering this question lies with establishing your goals and objectives (general and specific) and making up drills accordingly. Refer to the next section.

B) Training objectives

1. Technical. Up to a certain level, players will always need to work on technical aspects of the skill of serving. This could include body position, weight transfer, arm action, ball contact, toss, approach and jump (for spike servers). When working specifically on technical aspects, the type of work needed is a high number of repetitions at a low intensity. "Game drills" or "pressure drills" might not be the best way to achieve such goals, especially at a young age.
2. Tactical. The ability to serve to different areas of the opponent's court, the ability to serve from different areas behind their own court and the ability to figure out "weak" areas of the opponent's court are all elements that can be singled out in drills. The better players will get at varying their serve location the better your team will be.
3. Physical. Speed of the ball and strength of the serve are 2 elements related to physical training mainly but can be improved with technical refinement.

4. Mental. Maybe the most important aspect of serving, it refers to the concepts of confidence, aggressiveness and to the ability to serve under "pressure". Again, specific drills can be designed to isolate such "skills".

C) Type of drills

1. Repetition drills. We mentioned earlier that beginners need to execute a fair number of repetitions in order to acquire and stabilize the technical elements of the serve. We have to be careful though, that we do not overuse this type of drill (where players just serve ball after ball after ball...) to prevent monotony. If your goal is to have players serve 100 balls in a practice, it is better to have them serve 5 times 20 balls than 100 all at once.

2. Serving at targets. All of us have all used drills where servers have to aim at targets. Gymnastics mats, lines on the court, chairs, the possibilities are endless. Used mainly to develop regularity and accuracy, target drills can incorporate the notion of scoring and/or penalties. Here are a few questions that arise.

- a. Should players serve at targets or in between targets? Keeping in mind that in a match, we will most likely ask our players to serve BETWEEN players, the latter answer might be more appropriate.

- b. Is it better to serve at targets or at players? It would make it more game like if your players serve at (or away from) passers, especially if your passers have specific goals to work on. But while they are passing, they are obviously not working on their serve. The right dosage of both types of drill (targets vs passers) is probably the best solution.

3. Scoring drills. In liga.cqusaiTj12 0 0 12 510.39959487252029Tm(aions) isould pncorporat

4. Game like drills. An important aspect of developing players' confidence in serving during a match is to create serving games at practice. The object being to put an emphasis on the "result" aspect of the serve. It can be games where servers play against other servers or contests between passers and servers. The bottom line is to associate the notion of winning (or losing) the game to the quality of the serves.
5. Transition drills. Although the serve is the only volleyball skill not related to an opponent's prior action, it is important to incorporate into your training drills where players have to execute actions after their serve (most frequent in a match situation) or even before their serve. For instance:
 - a. Having players serve after they have hit a few balls at the net. The emphasis can be placed on scoring points with the serve or/and the hitting phase. Hitting can be done from balls tossed by the coach or set by a setter.
 - b. Having players serve and play defense afterwards. The emphasis can be placed on scoring points with the serve or/and the defense. Defense can be from hits by the coach or from real hitters.
 - c. Drills can be done in isolation or can involve other (or all) players. The more players are involved in the drill, the more game-like the drill is. The harder the score to get, the more pressure the players will feel. See below.
6. Pressure drills. Pressure can present itself to players under 2 main forms:
 - a. Mental pressure (from the score, the crowd, from having missed previous serve(s))
 - b. Physical pressure (when players are tired at the end of a match, after having performed many jumps in a row,...) In all cases, players will "feel" the pressure for 1 main reason: the fear of missing and the consequence of the error. And they will get better at handling that pressure if they have been placed in pressure situations at practice. Here are common situations that can be included in serving drills:
 - i. Serving (trying to get to a certain score) while other players are working on defense.
 - ii. Alternating serving and hitting back row sets until a certain score is reached. Points can be obtained from the serve and / or hitting.

SERVING STRATEGIES

How you want your players to serve in a match will dictate what kind of work will be required at practice (and vice-versa). Here are a few possibilities of match

serving strategies your players will have to practice if they are expected to execute them in a match (pressure) situation.

1. Serve from as far back as possible. This will enable your float servers to hit the ball a little harder hoping to make the ball move as much as possible.
2. Serve from just behind the end line. This will take away some of the time passers have to react to the serve.
3. Serve down the line (from left to position 1 or from right to position 5). This will offer the opposing passers the worst angles for playing the ball back to the setter in position 2 ½.
4. Serve short to position 2. Up to a certain level, setters will have difficulty using all their options on offense if they have to look at the pass behind them before they set; therefore the time they have to look at their hitters and the opposing blockers is reduced.
5. Serve short to position 3. Short serve to the middle of the court might create confusion within teams that like to use middle hitters and 2-player combinations.
6. Serve short to the front row passer / hitter. By doing so, you take away some of the time (and area) front row hitters have to prepare for their attack.
7. Serve deep to front row passer / hitter. Opposite purpose as #6. By adding to the distance hitters have to approach the net, you increase the physical demand on particular players, therefore increase chances for errors late in games or matches.
8. Serve in between passers. Used to create confusion and communication problems. Furthermore, some passers are very good when the ball is served right at them and not as good when the ball is served to one side or another.

Keep in mind that establishing a "team strategy" on serving might also be a valuable tool. Ask yourself the following:

- Do I want all my spike servers in a row or do I want to space them out in the rotation?
- Do I want my best (worst) server to serve first?
- Do I want all my servers to have the same assignments (serve short, serve long, serve at the weakest passer, etc...)?

- Where do I want my servers to serve FROM along our end line? Do I want this player to serve from our left side of the court because of serving considerations or because of defensive considerations?

CONCLUSION

CONFIDENCE is the key to effective serving. And confidence can be developed through adequate training. Granted that over the past year, 2 major rule changes have affected the way we look at serving as an offensive tool and have affected players' (and coaches') confidence.

1. 1-toss rule
2. rally point scoring system

The first one seems to have been "accepted" a little better than the second one. Players are still not fully used to the pressure of "giving" a point to their opponent on a missed serve. But time will re-establish players' confidence in serving aggressively.

And to speed up the process, the FIVB has (once more) instituted a new rule which has been in effect at the International Level since November 1999: the LET SERVE. If a player serves into the top of the net and the ball goes over and onto the opponent's court, the ball is IN PLAY. This rule IS going to make the game (yet) more exciting and will allow players to feel more confident about looking for offense when serving. Note that this rule should become effective for domestic competitions in September of 2000.