



FUNdaMENTAL Volleyball

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

The fundamentals of volleyball provide you with a sound foundation from which to create the things that you need to become the best volleyball player you can be. In volleyball the true winners are those players who always put out their best effort, no matter how they feel or what the score turns out to be. You alone cannot control the outcome of a match, but you can control your own performance. The word FUNdaMENTAL hints at two very important factors for all players. First, to have fun. Never lose sight of the fact that it's a game and should be enjoyed, both in training and competition. The best players in any sport LOVE to practice and play, for they honor the game. Secondly, the mental aspects of volleyball are of tremendous importance in the process of becoming a successful player. Most of volleyball, it has been accurately said, is played above the eyebrows.

Once you learn to let your mind work for you, rather than against yourself, it will become the most powerful resource for improving your performance. Your psychological state effects you at a very basic level, and your mind can be either a valuable ally or a destructive enemy. What you are able to accomplish is the result of images, learned responses, and the thoughts you hold about yourself and the world around you. Consider the following variety of quotes about mental processes:

As a man thinketh, so is he
- The Bible

All that we are is the result of what we have thought
- Buddha

Man becomes what he thinks about all day long.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right
-- Henry Ford

Belief creates the actual fact. The greatest discovery of my life was that human beings could alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind
- William James

The only limits you have are the ones you put on yourself
- Anon.

Whatever the mind can conceive and believe, it will achieve
-- Anon.

It is important to recognize the computer-like nature of the human mind. If you practice and learn, becoming the best in the world in how to dig a ball back up to the spiker in a one on one "pepper" drill, chances are you will dig the ball back to the spiker in the game...only they are now on the other side of the net and now your opponents. Your responses need to be as specific as possible to gamelike conditions when you practice. You also must be aware of your actions, as well as your thoughts. Simply practicing will not make you a very good volleyball player. If doing something every day was all that was needed for improvement, everyone's handwriting would be perfect. Practice does not make perfect, you must be intent on improving, and focused on making the changes.

Since the main goal you should have is simply to always do your best to be the best you can be, you need not be worried about how you compare to others. Watch more experienced players for new ideas, but never worry that you are not just like them. Everyone is unique and the secret is to become the best you can be, regardless of how it may compare. Therefore, a "bad" attitude is only one that prevents you from reaching this goal. There will always be fluctuations in performance and mistakes as you learn, for you are human and not perfect. Focus on what you do right, do not waste your time concentrating on your errors, but instead concentrate, recall and remember what you did and continue to do right. You can learn from your defeats and potholes on the road to great volleyball. Indeed, anyone how has not encountered such "problems" has also yet to meet a difficult opponent or challenge.

What is important is ahead, so do not look back unless you want to go that way. Focus on the present, and do your best in any given moment. You see, every problem or challenge has three parts -a past, a present and a future. Can you control the past? No, you clearly cannot, it is done. So one third of the challenge is taken care of. Can you control the future? If you think you can, get out of volleyball and start selling stocks, while in your spare time start controlling health problems and vehicle accidents. You cannot control the future either. So another third of the problem/challenge is gone. You can only control the present, how you think about it and do things. And with two thirds of the problem gone, you will do great.

One's state of mind is a self-fulfilling prophecy. You tend to perform right when you feel right. If you are aware about what you are thinking, and honest and objective about these thoughts, what steps can you take to reach your maximum potential? There are several mental skills that you should be practicing and using. Just like your physical skills, they cannot happen automatically or after only a few attempts. They need to be developed in and out of practice to find out what works best for you. Being strong and ready mentally is not up to the coach or fate or your teammates; you are responsible for all of your actions, including getting ready to perform your best. The core areas to work on mentally are – *Intrinsic coaching, Visualization, Help-full attitudes, and Goal Setting.*

Intrinsic coaching means that you use the self-discipline and self-direction to teach yourself. Your coach can show and tell you the goals, both in mental and physical skills, but only you can DO them. No coach can be helping everyone at one time. Indeed, on a team of 12, in a two hour practice, you will only get an average of 10 minutes of his/her attention. What you are doing during the other 110 minutes per session is what will make you better, through coaching yourself. You must be intent on learning, it is not the coach's job. Intrinsic feedback, where you are aware of what is occurring in your performance and taking steps necessary to improve or change it, is more important than feedback from an external source like your coach. With intrinsic coaching, reinforce yourself for performing the desired behavior, don't wait for someone else to tell you to do it. Likewise, it bears repeating to give your attention to the good actions and successes, as small as they might be, and not to the errors. Success builds confidence; look for the successes in everything you do.

Visualization means to mentally imagine and/or practice the skills. In your mind you can practice many more good responses than you might perform in actual training, and you do not need a gym in which to do it. You can greatly help build your self-image by "playing back" past successes. You can also improve by practicing mentally. The mind, during mental imagery of skills, is actually activating the nerve pathways as in outright physical performance. In addition, your mind at the subconscious level of thinking, is not able to distinguish between vivid imagination and actual experience. Just like actually practiced skills, this imagery will help improve some players more and faster than others. They also should be as specific as possible. Guidelines for successful mental practice are:

1. Attain a state of relaxation. Some researches say that if you are in an "alpha state" (you know that feeling of twitching yourself awake as you react to a ball or something just before you fall asleep at night, now that's relaxation) you are in the best state for mental practice. This state of relaxation is important for actual performance as well; too much tension can interrupt the flow of the mind to the body and back to the mind. A condensed version of this relaxation skill that you should develop into your own personal relaxation readying technique, is:
 - Get comfortable, free of interruptions, body parts uncrossed. Close your eyes, slowly take three deep breaths with full exhalation and tell yourself to relax, imaging tension leaving. Tense your body parts by area, head to feet (face, neck, arms, hands, etc., to finally your feet), holding the tension in each area for a count of five, then telling yourself to relax and actually relaxing the tensed area. When done, mentally scan your body for tight areas to tense and relax. In time, by using the same word over and over when you relax, you can get more relaxed just by using the word and a bit of conscious relaxation.
2. Get your mind ready for the activity. Take yourself through the routines you actually perform before a game or practice, including getting ready and warming up. You need to convince yourself that you are actually there. The sounds, feel of your uniform, or floor -- all can be imagined.
3. Now practice whatever performance you want. Practice one performance (covering the attacker, getting a tip using an extension roll, hitting a playset) many times. Be as specific as possible and only practice successes, never mistakes. Practice as long as you want, but at least 20 minutes a day is suggested. There are many chances in the day to practice mentally, but the more you train, even mentally, with the intent to improve, the better you can be.

Help-full attitudes are generally are the positive ones. In consistent thinking about what you wish to be doing, negative thoughts are harmful and should be eliminated. Negative language (including such body language as grimaces and kicking the ball) is as harmful as negative thinking, and affects both you and teammates around you. No player on the team, including you, is ever purposefully trying to make a mistake. So ignore the errors and direct your attention at the successes you see. Even if you don't feel right, start acting as if you do.

Your attitudes provide the control for playing volleyball. Attitudes of discipline, concentration, aggressiveness, and fun are important to develop. The basis of concentration is learning to "center" your attention on the present, the "here and now," of either the practice or the match. Total concentration for an entire match is impossible, but you can make great strides in learning to attend to what is to be learned and performed for success. Discipline and fun go hand in hand in training and competition, but fun should never interfere with the discipline needed to efficiently perform or learn. An aggressive attitude, striving for successful performance no matter what the drill or who the opponent, is developed mentally, as are all these important attitudes, both in and out of practice, not just in competition.

Five Controllable Things exist in our team game that YOU can control.

Your Serve – So make it good every time, give yourself a consistent toss, and serve the spaces.

Your Attitude – As noted above.

Your Effort – It is all your choice as to how much you hustle in each and every point. Hustle can make up for many a mistake. My favorite last remark to my team before they play is often "I don't care if we win or lose, but NOBODY is going to outhustle us!"

Your Communication – How much you talk or don't, how you talk to teammates, your tone of voice, even your body language is totally up to you. You can talk/cheer well and with spirit no matter what the score is.

Your Conditioning. – I feel conditioning is homework and practice is to learn to PLAY the game. However, good coaches make things gamelike in practice, so you serve, then sprint to your defense spot, never serve and watch in practice. You move from base to 3rd contact position when you pepper, and sprint in every time the coach calls you – so you do get in shape also during practice. The point is, practice is primarily for skill development, and getting in shape you can do at home.

Goal setting allows for reaching success after success, thus realistically building your confidence and helping keep you motivated. Determine your areas to improve, then set realistic, specific goals and determine strategies for their achievement. Set short-term goals as well as some long-term ones. Work mentally, not only physically, on reaching these goals, using your imagination to guide your efforts. The establishment of definite goals is recognized as possibly the strongest of all forces for personal motivation and therefore is the most important phase for any USA Jr. Olympian. The establishment of specific goals is the beginning of your plan for success. What are goals? They are objectives, targets to shoot for, tracks to run on, which will keep you on course towards your target when obstacles and stumbling blocks threaten to slow you down. Goals are not to be confused with day-dreaming nor wishful thinking, Goals are dreams but they are dreams being acted upon!

Gauged – *measurable and dated.*

On paper -- *written and shared with those helping you.*

Attainable – *realistic, yet challenging.*

Looked at – *evaluated, and reset when necessary.*

Specific – *detailed and narrow in focus, so that you can reach many, not just one.*

Finally, a word or two on the mental emotions you have. If attitudes provide the control for volleyball, emotions provide the energy. No emotion is necessarily good or bad, as they all add up to provide the energy needed for successful performance. You will perform your best at a high-middle arousal/energy level, not a high level. Try to get to this middle range, not as high as possible, for your performance is poorer at both high and low states of energy. Play with a maximum of controllable energy.

If all this seems to point at you as an individual, you're right, for you alone are responsible for your own actions. But it does not mean to suggest that a selfish attitude is good. Volleyball is probably the purest team sport around, and a team attitude is implied in all the mental and physical skills you are developing. The team supports and is necessary for your individual performances. Believe in yourself and the team and let your mind work for "both" of you in reaching your potentials. Helen Keller was once asked if there was anything worse than losing one's sight. She responded, "Yes, losing one's vision." So keep your vision and you will reach your goals.

USAV Jr. Olympic Player Goal Setting Agreement

My main goal is to become the best player I can be. Only I am responsible for my own actions. I am fully committed to this team and therefore I will:

Conduct myself in a manner to bring credit, prestige and honor to this team;

Budget my time to meet all my responsibilities in work, learning and other personal area;

Attend every practice, match and team function, being on time or early;

Pursue mental and physical conditioning outside of practice;

Communicate, both on and off the court, for mutual understanding;

Discipline my body for health, including adequate sleep, a healthy diet, and avoiding alcohol and smoking; Recognize the unique challenges of volleyball to learn from my mistakes only, never making excuses; Accept all coaching comments and assignments as ways in which our team and myself might improve; Ignore the errors of my teammates, as I believe no one is making a mistake on purpose;

Support the full effort and the good skills my teammates exhibit;

Concentrate and be focused, not creating distractions nor worrying about worrying;

Perform with full effort and intensity, to the best of my ability, in all training and competition. Furthermore, I have the following SMART goals:

This year's volleyball goals: _____

Lifetime goals in volleyball: _____

Specific Technical Objectives:

To attain them I will do the following by _____ (date)

Specific Personal/Attitude Objectives:

To attain them I will do the following by _____ (date)

Specific Physical Objectives:

To attain them I will do the following by _____ (date)

What are three ways, other than playing, you will help the team be successful this year?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

How can I, as your coach, help you personally reach the objectives contracted for?

Player's Signature _____ Date _____ Witness Signature _____