



Volleyball ACE™ Power Tips

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Mastering Team Defensive Skills

By Julie Backstrom and Mike Schall, former assistant women's volleyball coaches at Penn State University. Edited by Russ Rose, head women's volleyball coach, Penn State University.

Of all the skills and team concepts related to the sport of volleyball, nothing can quite compare to witnessing great defensive players – and ultimately, great defensive teams – battling to keep the ball off the floor.

In today's game, team defense is paramount.

Today's volleyball players – both male and female – are taller, stronger and faster than ever before. As a result, offensive play, and attacking in particular, has exploded into a fast-paced, power-driven, hard-hitting element of the game. At the international level, players are spiking the ball over the net in excess of 90 miles per hour... and someone needs to be on the receiving end of that spike.

A team with players who can dig that ball to transition to a successful attack and ultimately a point of their own is a team that will win matches, tournaments and championships.

In addition, the advent of the libero player (a defensive specialist who plays only in the back row) has shifted the focus somewhat from offense to defense. Sure, fans are still looking for that exciting, powerful attack at the net. But now, the crowds also expect the players on the receiving end to respond with a sensational dig to their own setter to keep the ball in play.

Coaches in nearly every sport exclaim, "Defense wins championships!" Although some might argue that defense is not the only way to win a championship, teaching players and teams to play relentless defense should be an enjoyable part of the coaching job. At the very least, great defense helps a team move in the direction of a championship. For offensive players, there is nothing more gut-wrenching than taking a great swing at the ball, only to have it dug out and returned by a determined opponent on the other side of the net.

In essence, team defense takes the concepts of individual defense and develops them into successful ball control for all players on a team. Only a group of six players working in complete synchronization can transition a hard-driven spike from the opponent into an effective dig to the setter who, in turn, sets the hitter to unleash a similar attack for the players on the other side of the net to respond to.

Mastering team defensive skills begins with proper attitude. Once the attitude is in place, a suitable game plan versus the opponent must be developed. Although the actual rally will vary each time, teams must be prepared for twists and turns. Penultimately, the sequence of events is established as play unravels.

Finally, a team must decide which type of defense to play against an opponent. Depending on the skill level of both teams, that defensive scheme will change during the course of the match.

Developing Defensive Attitude

Volleyball players hear all too frequently of the mentality they must possess to develop into a better defensive team, especially if a solid defensive tradition has been established by those who came before them. In fact, it is safe to say that they hear coaches



According to the authors, the person on the receiving end of a hard-driven spike must not only have the physical ability to keep the ball in play, but must also have the mental capacity to do so, as well. Photo courtesy of USA Volleyball.

speak of the proper defensive “mindset” as much as they hear lectures on the proper defensive position or technique. Different physical techniques have proved effective over the years, so it would be erroneous to suggest that one particular style of teaching defensive technique is superior to another (provided the basic principles are sound). Regardless of the technique that is taught, great defensive teams will be hindered in their development if the “never say die” attitude does not permeate the fiber of the team.

A volleyball program can operate smoothly without a long list of rules and regulations. However, one rule that players do pass on from class to class is the “go for every ball” decree. It is quickly understood that if a ball is traveling toward the floor, a player must go after it. The moment a player feels that he or she can’t get to the ball and so doesn’t make an effort is when he or she starts watching from the sideline. Once this concept is established, players begin to police each other; the older players assist the younger ones in understanding the value of playing every ball with maximum effort. This rule should be enforced during every drill. It’s one of the building blocks of a solid volleyball program. Once all players on the team have embraced the “go for every ball” mentality, you can begin teaching them specific techniques and instructing them on strategic and tactical points.

Physical Positioning of the Defensive Player

Much of the strength training and early-season conditioning should center on solidifying a strong base of support, from the feet to the legs to the lower back. Most players have the ability to make an occasional great defensive play, but outstanding defensive players make great plays consistently. Such players typically have the physical strength, muscular endurance and mental toughness to maintain a solid defensive position for extended periods of time.

The basic posture of a defensive player might change several times during the course of a rally, depending on what is happening on the other side of the net. A team should begin each rally in a “medium position,” in which front- and back-row players are relaxed and ready to move, with eyes watching the opponents and feet slightly wider than shoulder width. Front-row players have their hands high in preparation for blocking and remain in this position unless they retreat from the net to assume a defensive position for an attacked ball that they are not involved in blocking.

Back-row players assume a defensive position each time the opponent has a chance to put the ball on the floor. Back-row players might drop if a setter can dump the ball, then drop again for a quick attack, then drop again if the ball is set high to an outside hitter. The only time a back-row player is back in the medium position is when adjusting his or her position on the floor.

The basic defensive position remains the same across the board, regardless of age level or experience. The major difference between the beginner and advanced player’s ability to demonstrate and maintain the basic position is physical strength and stamina. Following are the mechanics of the basic position:

- The feet are balanced, spread slightly wider than shoulder width.
- Body weight is slightly forward, on the balls of the feet.
- The knees are bent, extending beyond the toes.
- The waist is bent so that the back is as flat as possible.
- The chest is down, and shoulders are in front of the knees.
- The head is up, with eyes focused forward.
- The arms are loose and relaxed, ready to form the platform to dig or to release the hands for an overhead dig.

Oct. 19-20	Volleyball Hall of Fame Women’s Tournament Smith, Mount Holyoke, Holyoke Community and Amherst Colleges
Nov. 2-16	FIVB Women’s World Cup Various Cities, Japan
Nov. 18-Dec. 2	FIVB Men’s World Cup Various Cities, Japan
Dec. 12-15	AVCA Annual Convention Sacramento Convention Center Sacramento, Calif.
Dec. 16	AVCA Talent Showcase Sacramento Convention Center Hall C Sacramento, Calif.
Jan. 10	2008 AVP Hot Winter Nights Tour Ford Center Arena, Oklahoma City, Okla.
Jan. 11	Scottrade Center, St. Louis, Mo.
Jan. 12	Sprint Center, Kansas City, Mo. (For a full schedule, log on to www.avp.com/schedule/winter_tour.jsp)
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The mechanics of the basic defensive position, as outlined by Backstrom and Schall, are shown here. Photo courtesy of USA Volleyball.



From this defensive position, players should be able to move laterally, forward, backward or even into the air.

At the highest levels of play, the goal is to maintain the lowest and most stable defensive position continuously. The harder the ball is hit, the more available reaction time will decrease, which means the player must be low and ready sooner to have a better chance to play the ball successfully.

Defensive Preparation

At the beginning levels of play, coaches and players are justifiably more concerned with learning the proper skills and getting comfortable with the nuances of the game. As skill level increases, however, game tactics and strategies become more relevant.

Many defensive decisions depend on the strengths and weaknesses of your team and your opponent's team. Through hours of watching video and analyzing statistics, coaches and players can formulate a defensive game plan to give their team both the opportunity and ability to score points.

Begin looking at team defense at the origination point (with your team's own serve) and move on to the proper base positions, the responsibilities at the net and in the backcourt, and the subsequent actions affected by each contact of the ball.

To be solid defensively, players must know a number of things

before each rally begins. First, they must acknowledge and make a mental note of how many hitters are in the opponent's front row, who the hitters are, and where the setter is located (front row or back row). Work every day in practice on identifying various offensive patterns by opponents so that proper defensive adjustments at the net and in the back row can be made. Doing this will familiarize your players with several defensive situations so that they are prepared for what is to come. For example, does the opposing setter set the player who has just made a mistake or will the setter avoid that player and give someone else a chance to score? Is the opposing setter an "equal opportunity" setter – one who gives each of the hitters the same number of swings?

Second, understanding general offensive systems and strategy becomes more critical to a team's defensive success as the players progress to more competitive levels of play. At the highest levels, detailed scouting reports are compiled that outline specific tendencies of the opponent's offensive system and individual players. The more information players can digest, the more advanced the coach's teaching approach to blocking and defense can be. For example, you can spend significant time working at particular blocking assignments at the net and consequently the back-row base position in two-hitter versus three-hitter rotations of the opponents. You can also work diligently on defending specific tendencies of the individual players your team will face.

An effective way to teach team defense, especially at the lower levels, is to break the game down into six minigames (one minigame for each rotation). The first minigame, for convenience, will be the opposing setter in the right-back position. If this is the first minigame of a series of six, the coach must ask, "How will our team defend the opponent in this rotation?" One way to answer this question is to serve the "opponents" 10 balls and see what they like to do in this particular rotation. Once your players understand the options available to the opponent in rotation 1, rotate so the opposing setter is in the middle back (rotation 2). Repeat the same process for all six rotations or minigames. At all levels, the serve is critical in helping to dictate what options

the opponent has.

The first priority regarding team defense is to look at how your team's serve also affects the outcome of the rally. Do not attempt to be a team that traditionally goes to the endline and bombs the serve in search of aces. This can result in a serve that is out and, when rally scoring is used, a point for the other team. Rather, look at serving as the first step in limiting the number of options for the opponent. This makes the team defense more efficient and more effective. Some serving strategies you might try are (1) serving the opponent's weakest passer, (2) serving one of the opponent's front-row players, or (3) serving short to test the rhythm and pattern of the opponent's middle hitter. If a serve can successfully limit the options of the opponent, there is a significantly greater chance to form a solid block on the available attacker(s). Thus, your team can cover the floor defensively to dig more balls.

(Reprinted, in part, from "Playing Defense," *Volleyball Skills and Drills* (2006). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics. You can purchase this and other publications by logging on to the AVCA Web site at www.avca.org.)

VOLLEYBALL ACE™ DRILLS

Weave

Russ Rose, Penn State University

Number of Players: Small groups of 3-5

Number of Balls: Steady supply

Objective:

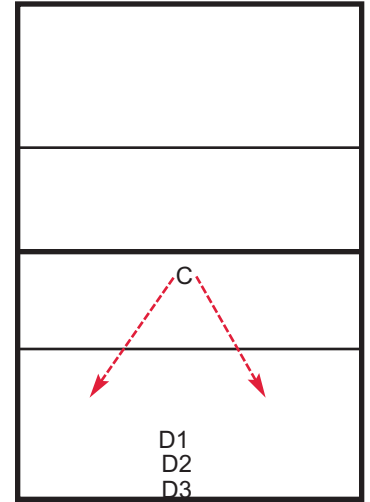
This drill makes players move their feet to get to the ball at all costs.

Directions:

1. A coach (C) stands on the floor on the same side as the diggers (D1, D2, D3).
2. The diggers line up in the middle back area of the court.
3. The coach puts the ball into play with an under-hand, controlled toss to the right-back or left-back

area of the court.

4. The next toss goes to the opposite area, and so on.
5. The toss should force the player to move his or her feet to get to the ball.
6. After the player plays the ball, he or she retreats to the back of the line. It is best to use small groups of three to five players so standing around is minimized.
7. The coach can toss for a set time or for a specified number of tosses.
8. Adjust the degree of difficulty based on the skill level of the players.



Seam Digging Drill

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

Number of Players: 10 to 12

Number of Balls: Steady supply

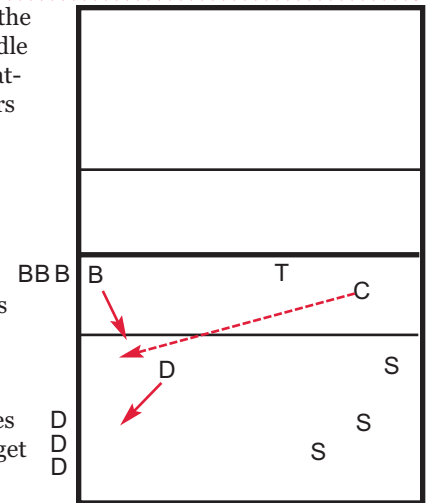
Objective:

In the Seam Digging Drill, adjacent defenders practice moving to cover a ball hit in the seam.

Directions:

1. Four players (B) begin in a blocking line near court zone 4.
2. Four other players (D) form a digging line near court zone 5. The first blocker and defender in line begin in base position.

3. When the coach (C) near court zone 2 tosses the ball in the air, both defenders move to their middle back defensive positions and prepare to dig the attack. The coach aims the ball between the players so they can practice moving to cover the ball.
4. The goal is for the blocker to move inside for the ball while the defender moves behind.
5. The blocker has the first chance to get to the ball. The defender has the second chance to dig the ball to the target.
6. The blocker and defender return to their lines after each attempt.
7. Other players are designated as shaggers (S) and a target (T). After three minutes, blockers move to the digging line, diggers assume the roles of shaggers and target, and the shaggers and target become blockers.



Kamikaze

101 Winning Volleyball Drills From the AVCA (2000)

Number of Players: 3

Number of Balls: Steady supply

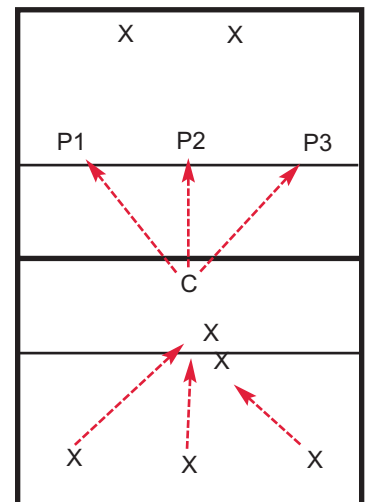
Objective:

This is a good reaction drill that tests players for quickness and timing in terms of defense.

Directions:

1. Three players (P1, P2, P3) set up on one side of the net behind the attack line.
2. The coach (C) stands on a stable platform and hits/tosses all types of balls at the players in rapid succession.

3. Non-participating players (X) retrieve the balls and feed them immediately to the coach.
4. The coach sets the time limit for the drill.



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