



Overcoming Mental Mistakes in Serving

By Mike Voight, Ph.D., sport psychology/performance consultant for the 2002 and 2003 national champion University of Southern California women's volleyball teams.

Players who have high serving percentages are generally those who put a priority on improving their serving. Tough, aggressive servers usually have high levels of serving confidence. They truly believe that every serve released will speed toward a designated zone, are very proficient at blocking out distractions and focusing on each serve, and practice their craft relentlessly.

On the other hand, those servers who are “streaky” may not be completely physically and mentally committed to improving their serving. This lack of overall commitment can take many forms, including:

- Believing that practicing serving is a waste of time.
- Thinking that the tough, aggressive serve will be there in critical situations without practicing
- Going through the motions instead of serving quality, focused reps.
- Not realizing the importance of the mental side of serving.

These inconsistent servers could also be missing their serves before they are ever released because they make too many mental mistakes prior to the serve. The five mental keys to aggressive serving consist of:

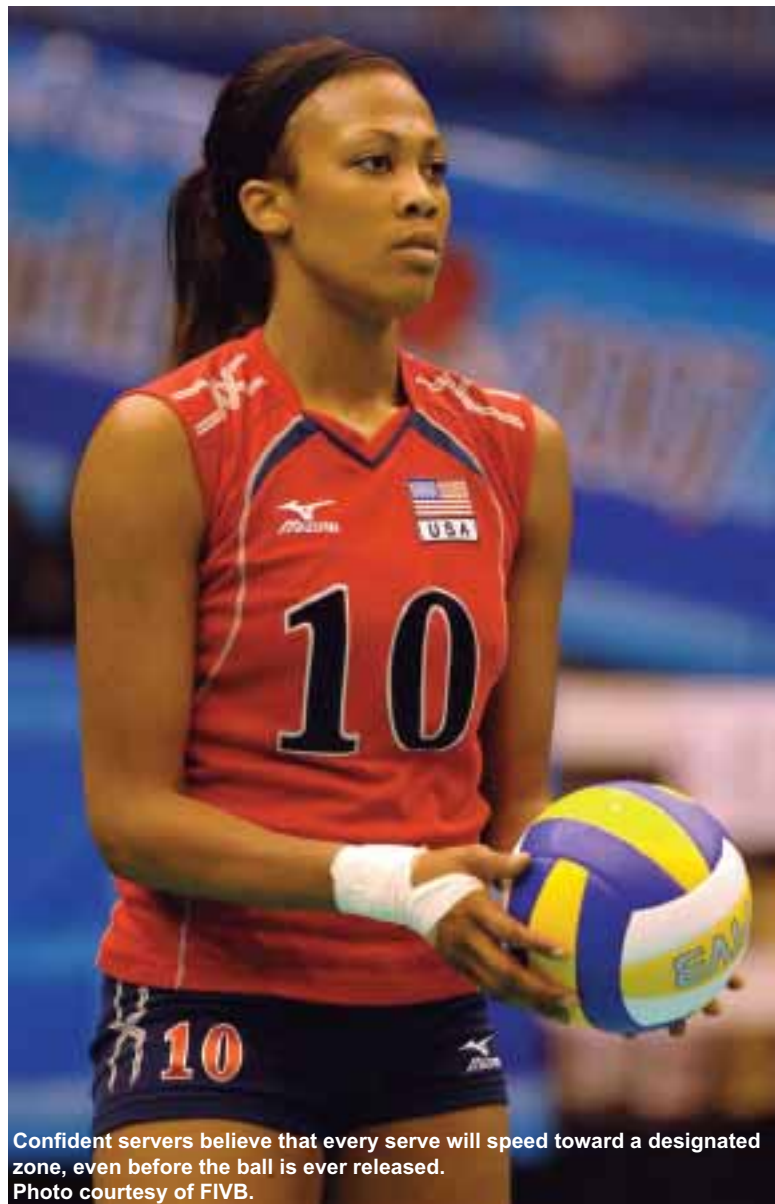
- Confidence (an inner conviction of your abilities).
- Trust (in your preparation and skills)
- Focus (on the important components of the serve, i.e., serve cues).
- Commitment (toward improving one's serving).
- Playing one serve at a time (serving in the present).

Players who have these mental traits serve in a smooth, effortless and automatic fashion.

Players who “mentally miss” their serves before they are executed normally lack one or more of these mental traits. This article will describe the seven typical mental mistakes, as well as ways to correct them. How many of your players are guilty of these mental mistakes?

“Heave and Hope” Server

Once the ball leaves the fingertips on the toss, these servers pray that it goes where it should. These types of servers lack confidence in their ability to hit serves in tough spots and lack trust in their preparation (possibly because they have not prepared adequately enough through focused practice). They hope that luck will be with their serves, almost relying on the “volley-



Confident servers believe that every serve will speed toward a designated zone, even before the ball is ever released. Photo courtesy of FIVB.

ball gods” to deliver their ball over the net to the floor. For “heave and hope” servers to develop into tough, aggressive “point-getters,” they need to do old-fashioned hard work and repetition. They need to realize that only they can change their serving habits, and convince themselves that they can hit the shots in any situation. One way to accomplish this last goal is to incorporate affirmations (“I can serve tough in any situation”),



Most of the pressure servers perceive is self-imposed. Photo courtesy of FIVB.

CALENDAR

- 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)

- April 11-12** **2008 Molten Division III Men's Invitational Volleyball Championship**
 Blake Arena
 Springfield College, Springfield, Mass.

- May 1-3** **39th Annual National Collegiate Men's Volleyball Championship**
 Bren Events Center
 University of California, Irvine

- Aug. 8-24** **Olympic Games**
 Beijing, China

along with positive images of tough serving, into a pre-serve routine.

“Do or Die” Server

Servers whose sole focus is on outcome (ace) can often be distracted enough to miss the shot before it is released. Although most of the pressure that servers perceive is self-imposed, in a few serving situations, such as serving for the win, the pressure is real. “Do or die” servers recognize this pressure and heap even more on themselves by saying, “I need to make this serve to keep the score closer to the win the game” or “If I do not make it, I will get pulled.” This increased pressure due to expected outcome creates more stress that can be translated by the server into excess muscle tension or defeatist thinking. These servers need to learn how to focus more on the process rather than the outcome by using cues, which consist of one or two general aspects of the shot.

The “Fader” Server

Servers who “fade” are those who tend to get distracted easily, either by internal or external distractions. Distracting external cues include the situation, crowd noise and visual distractions. Internal cues include feeling the pressure, thinking about the importance of the serve, and remembering how they served last time. Since attention capacity is limited, servers who focus on too many cues – especially irrelevant ones – are setting themselves up for a missed serve due to jamming.

Jamming occurs when athletes fail to focus only on the most pertinent cues and information necessary for successful execution. Servers who fade need to work on being aware of what they are focusing on prior to and during the serve. Once they

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are aware of where their focus is, the next step is to focus only on the most relevant, necessary cues.

Coaches can be a big help in assisting players with this process. Once these servers continue to practice focusing on these general serving cues prior to serving, the distractions will be blocked out.

The “Flexed” Server

“Flexed” servers are those who tighten and tense up due to their fear of missing the serve. Fear of failure can lead to excessive tension in the shoulders, biceps, triceps and forearms, causing a normally smooth swing to turn into a rigid, stiff motion. This change in technical form, often called pressing, can be reversed by learning how to relax these critical muscle groups via muscle relaxation exercises or relaxed breathing, or by using pre-serve routines that can enhance mental and physical readiness prior to serving.

The “Hot and Cold” Server

“Hot and cold” servers are simply streaky servers who will hit aces and tough serves if they are “hot.” Yet, if any other part of their game is off, these types of players carry this frustration with them to the service line, resulting in cold serving. Thus, serving momentum can be a great benefit if you take advantage of positive momentum and minimize the effect of negative momentum.

Maintaining a consistent level of serving confidence is critical for servers to weather momentum storms (e.g., missed serves leading to a bad serving night that often leads to a serving slump). Ensuring a consistently high level of serving confidence can be accomplished through pre-serve routines, refocus routines after missed serves, positive imagery and affirmations.

The “Mechanical” Server

Mechanical servers allow their left brain to dominate their processing by focusing too much of their attention on the specific mechanics of the serving motion. The serving swing should be so habitual and well-learned that thinking about particular elements right before execution will only create major distractions. Often, mechanical servers will change a portion of their pre-serve routines and serving action due to a lack of confidence and trust in their mechanics (which is the main reason why they are constantly thinking about and tinkering with their serves). Establishing a consistent pre-serve routine and serving stroke is critical, and keeping in mind one to two general serving cues is recommended (e.g., smooth swing, high reach). The use of multiple, specific cues is not recommended because they will internally distract the server.

The “Counter” Server

Servers who get caught up in counting their missed serves – es-



Pre-serve routines often enhance mental and physical readiness prior to serving.
Photo courtesy of FIVB.

pecially missed serves from game to game – are only bringing or keeping themselves down while also heightening pressures and anxiety to hit their next serve. Servers who can tell you exactly how many serves they missed are very outcome-focused and are guilty of being “counters.”

To break the cycle of counting the misses, servers must begin to become process-focused rather than outcome-focused by taking one serve at a time, staying in the present, and utilizing a consistent pre-serve routine that includes the use of one to two general serving cues. Counting missed serves will only lead to more missed serves and more points for the opposition.

(Reprinted from *Coaching Volleyball: Offensive Fundamentals and Techniques*. 2004. Monterey, CA: Coaches Choice.)

VOLLEYBALL ACE™ DRILLS

Hula Hoop Serving

Joel Dearing, Springfield College
(From *Volleyball Fundamentals*, 2003.)

Number of Players: 12
Number of Balls: Steady supply

Objective:

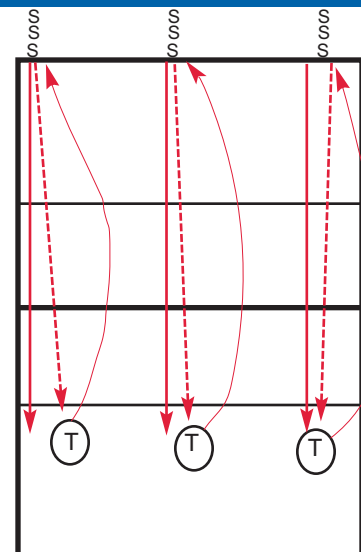
To emphasize control and accuracy when serving.

Directions:

1. Set up three hula hoops near the back of the opponent's court.
2. Begin with three teams of four players. One player on each team is the target (T) and stands inside a hula hoop.
3. The other players on the team, the servers (S),

line up on the opposite endline.

4. One at a time, each server attempts to serve the ball to his/her teammate in the hula hoop.
5. The player in the hula hoop must catch the ball with both feet in the hoop for the team to score a point.
6. If the serve is successful, the target runs to the back of the serving line and the server runs to the hula hoop to become the target for the next serve.
7. If the serve is unsuccessful, the server must chase down the ball and return to the end of the serving line.
8. The first team to score 10 points wins.



Six

Tom Peterson, formerly at BYU

Number of Players: 12
Number of Balls: Steady supply

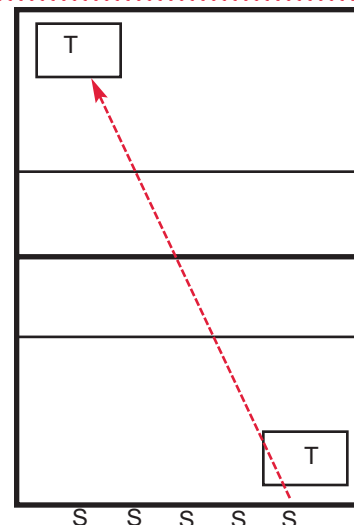
Objective:

To promote controlled serving to target.

Directions:

1. Players divide into two teams.
2. Each team lines up at its respective endline, ready to serve, with the exception of one player from each team.
3. This player (T) goes to the opposite court and sits in area 1. The court has been divided into the typical six designated areas.

4. Both teams start serving, one player (S) at a time, trying to serve to their teammates sitting on the opposite court.
5. If the teammate on the other side can catch the serve while sitting down, the player who served the ball sits in area 2, and the previous sitter goes to the endline to serve.
6. This continues as both teams race to see which team can complete catching the serve in all six areas of the court.
7. A bit of friendly competition is inherent in this drill.



Serve Progressions

101 *Winning Volleyball Drills From the AVCA* (2003).

Number of Players: 2
Number of Balls: 1

Objective:

To develop serving accuracy. The technique focus should be to serve in a straight line to the target with as flat and controlled a serve as possible.

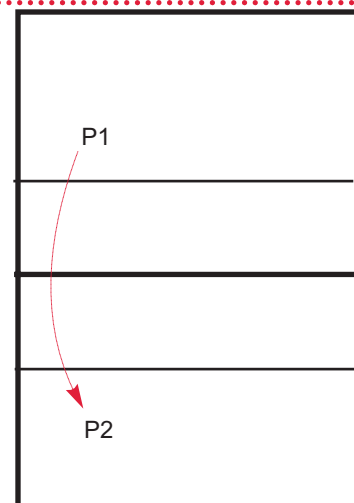
Directions:

1. Choose partners. Servers start on court and move back after they serve in two in a row.
2. Serve to the partner's waist or below.

3. The serve must pass between the net and elastic tied between the tops of the antennae.

Variation:

1. Adjust antennae to a narrower portion of the court.



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