



# Volleyball ACE™ Power Tips

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## Competitive Practices for Starting and Finishing Games

*By Shay Goulding, head women's volleyball coach, Salt Lake Community College. Transcribed from Goulding's presentation at the 2007 AVCA Annual Convention, December 2007, Sacramento, Calif.*

Volleyball is a complex, fast-paced game. In fact, few other team sports require such intricate individual skills to be performed at such a highly reactionary level, all the while forcing six individuals to cooperate within a confining perimeter of 9x9 meters. As a result, volleyball continues to evolve into a game boasting the ultimate combination of speed, coordination, efficiency, teamwork, synergy and simplified complexity.

To be sure, the intricacies of the game of volleyball are not determined in the throes of competition. Rather, they are uncovered while a team is in practice. Over the years, hundreds of coaches have debated how to run a practice and what will prove to work best for each team. Following are my thoughts on practice and how it should be implemented, no matter the level of the players involved.

### Matches Are Won in Practice

Competitive, gamelike practices ensure that matches are not new or unfamiliar situations to the six players working together on the court. Therefore, coaches have the responsibility to create gamelike environments in practice that promote the transfer of skills to the desired outcome. Drills and games in practice should reflect the same high level of competition, along with the myriad stressful situations of a live match, because the more transfer, the more a practice reflects a gamelike situation. Ultimately, a team is better prepared when it is familiar with a particular situation because the players have been exposed to it in practice.

Because competitive volleyball is such a reactionary sport, skills manifest themselves best as a complex series of acquired habits. Coaches need to ensure the habits gained in practice are actually ones that will assist players in the game itself and not prove to be a hindrance.

### Quality Practices

A quality practice is one where players learn something transferable to the game. As coaches, we want practices to facilitate

Drills and games in practice should reflect the same high level of competition found in a match. Photo by Jim Burgess/courtesy of USA Volleyball.





The only true gauge of the efficiency and success of practice sessions is the athlete's performance in a match.

the performance of learned skills in actual match situations. Therefore, the only true gauge of the efficiency and success of practice sessions is the athletes' performances in a match.

There are many players who are "game players" and not practice players. Coaches want to put all of their players in situations where they are enjoying the competitiveness of practice alone and the match is just another opportunity to showcase that competitiveness. Coaches can teach inherent competitiveness via effective skill transfer.

### Motor Learning and Skill Transfer

Skill transfer is generally defined as the influence of a previous experience on performing a skill in a new context or on learning a new skill (Annett & Sparrow, 1985; Magill, 2001). The more similar the component parts of two skills or two performance situations are, the greater the amount of positive transfer expected between them. In fact, a greater amount of transfer of learning occurs from the complex to the simple.

Over the years, two approaches to practicing any sport have emerged: blocked vs. random. In a "blocked practice," coaches and players concentrate on one aspect of a particular skill or technique, practicing it over and over again until they get it right. In a "random practice," several aspects of a particular technique are employed within a session. According to research, blocked practice is useful in the fundamental develop-

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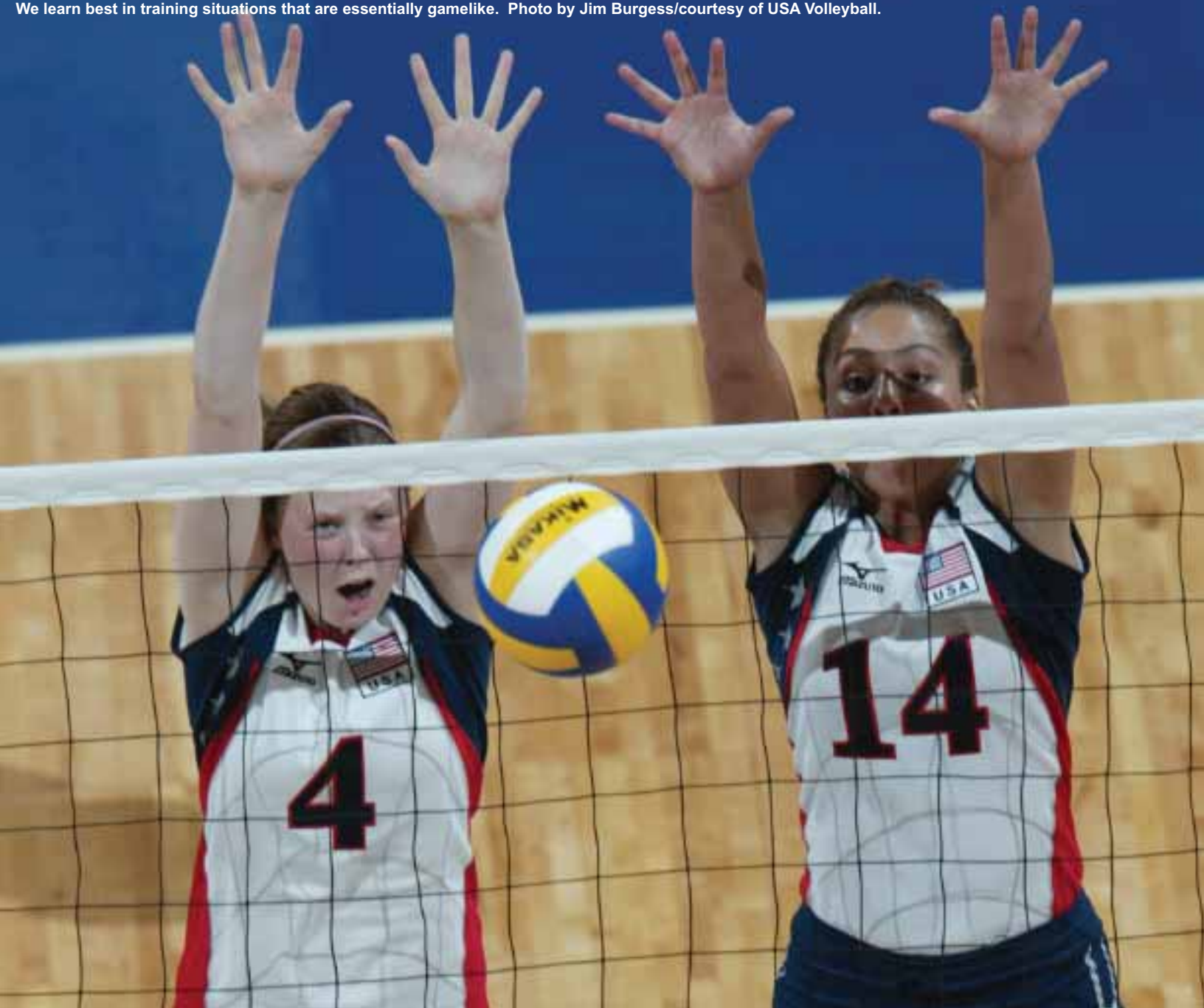
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ment of some skills, yet it produces an artificially high level of performance that gives coaches and players a false sense of accomplishment. Indeed, blocked practice produces effective performance during early stages, but does not create lasting learning.

Therefore, the utilization of random practice is advocated once players have become familiar with the skills. Practice of multiple tasks in a random (high contextual interference) practice schedule results in greater retention and transfer than tasks practiced in a blocked practice schedule (low contextual interference). The real success shows up in retention and ultimately in transfer performance of skills.

How do random practice conditions that initially produce poor performance actually lead to better long-term learning, retention and transfer? The Reconstruction Hypothesis is the answer. If coaches always use combination drills, athletes will constantly have to adjust their rules for appropriate skill execution, rather than receiving the same predictable ball every time. According to Marv Dunphy, 1988 Gold-medal winning USA men's Olympic team coach and men's coach at Pepperdine, "Since we learn best in training situations that are basically gamelike, we should incorporate three-contact drills as often as possible. I am convinced

that the best hitting drills are P-S-H (pass-set-hit), the best setting drills are P-S-H, and the best passing drills are P-S-H."

### A Well-Designed Practice

Since the brief introduction to motor learning and the debate between random vs. blocked practice is complete, it is now time to move on to a few of the "must-haves" for a well-designed practice.

- Have a goal – basically, have a big "why" for everything you do. Design your drills and practice around your whys and make sure you know your outcome. Always ask, "How can we best accomplish the outcome we hope to achieve?"
- Be true to your word, consistent, organized and most of all, be flexible.
- Have something to write on. Keep a chalkboard, white board or paper visible to athletes and keep it detailed.
- Set the example. Convey to your team you came prepared – and so should they!
- Keep talking to a minimum. Reduce the information given and increase the quality contacts. Always give feedback to reinforce desired behaviors.
- Keep score, stats, goals and time.

## Guidelines for Designing Drills

There are several common-sense guidelines for coaches to follow when designing their own drills, or converting existing drills to fit current player personnel.

- Make sure they are fun! Why else do we play?
- Create solutions to problems. What are we trying to improve, emphasize or change?
- Clearly state goals, objectives and/or emphasis.
- Always keep score, have a goal or set a time. Usually, 20-25 minutes will allow for a natural conclusion to any drill. Every drill should also have a goal and a winner.
- Always give a consequence or a reward, thereby creating pressure situations similar to those found during a match. As the coach, you must decide whether to use positive or negative reinforcement. Rarely use punishment.
- Make sure there is a high number of quality, gamelike contacts.

## The Evolution of the Best Drills

Ultimately, there is a tried and true success formula when it comes to the creation of the best volleyball drills. Basically, there are four components to the formula:

1. Know your outcome.
2. Have a big enough “why.”
3. Ask yourself, “Is it working?”
4. Change your approach, if necessary.

Once these four components have been checked, if a drill is still not working to your satisfaction, check yourself as the coach. Sometimes it is not the drill, but the person running it. Check what your attitude, as the coach, is and what dynamics you are contributing to each drill scenario.

Bill Neville, storied men’s and women’s volleyball coach and still one of the most brilliant minds in the game today, says it all when he admonishes, “It is more important to know how to design drills than to be able to copy them.” In other words, there is no “fix-all.” What worked great for last year’s team will not necessarily be the most effective for this year’s group of players. As a coach, you must know your team’s strengths and weaknesses, manipulate drills daily to emphasize different needs, focus on the problems that need to be corrected or the strengths that need to be developed. Do not rely simply on one-size-fits-all, “canned” drills.

Keep in mind, meeting the criteria of a gamelike practice for an elite team is going to differ greatly from that of a non-elite team. For example, a team that is winning 80 to 90 percent of its matches has to be challenged more in practice than by its competition. A team that is winning 50 percent of its matches needs to be challenged as well, but not at the same level as the 90 percent team.

## Considerations for Drill Manipulation

One of the most important aspects of designing a good drill for practice is deciding what to measure. Each of the items below should be included in building the drill:

- Time
- Successful reps (in a row)
- Timed block with successful reps
- Score (standard, wash, bonus points, handicaps, +/-, rotations)
- Stats (errors).

In other words, decide what to emphasize in each drill being performed during a routine practice. For example, in a blocking drill, ask the following questions of the blockers: “Are the blockers closing?” “Are the blockers not reaching over?” “Are the

blockers not stewing?” Then, to add to the intensity of the drill, give bonus points for every stuff block. Reward the big picture. Chances are, if the participants are getting stuff blocks, they are also closing, reaching over and setting a triple block, if it is required. At this point, the motions will come naturally.

Manuel de la Torre, in his book *Understanding the Golf Swing*, explains the concept nicely.

“You do not have to think about keeping your left arm straight, keeping your head down, consciously shifting your weight on the forward swing, keeping your elbow close to your body, pulling down with your left hand to start the forward swing, snapping your wrist to generate power as the club nears the ball. If you produce a true swinging motion with the golf club, body positions so often described and emphasized will happen naturally.”

Indeed, the same can be said for approach, armswing, passing motion, setting, etc.

## Team Set-Up

Team set-up is also crucial in designing good practices. As a coach, you must decide how to keep teams “even” or “competitive.” For example, if you have your starters vs. your non-starters (Team A vs. Team B), modify the scoring or provide a handicap. If the two “teams” in practice are equally matched, then you must do things a bit differently. Ensuring team equality is not in total harmony with the “gamelike” focus, but it is if the focus of the day or week is competing at a high level. The one thing you must do is ensure there is a high consequence or reward.

## Options for Entering the Ball

No matter the drill, its focus or content, the ball needs to be entered into the melee somehow. There are several options for entering the ball, including:

- Serve
- Joust
- FB toss
- FB toss send-over
- Bounce to side
- Toss to back row for an attack
- Assume it is second or third contact.

Once the ball has been entered into the drill, it is up to the players to see it through to the conclusion. If the drill is gamelike, then similar conclusions will be made during the most crucial moments of a match, as well.

## Conclusion

Above all, coaches must be organized in practice, but always flexible and adaptable. Keep goals and objectives clear and allow drills to be as player-centered as possible to promote a sense of ownership and responsibility on the part of the practicing team members. Know your team and its specific needs – be creative in modifying drills to address particular strengths and weaknesses. Keep a white board nearby so players can see the scoring systems and keep goals in focus as they play. Finally, do all you can as a coach to keep a competitive, gamelike atmosphere. If you accomplish this, your players will not only experience a high degree of skill transfer, but will become complete volleyball players, both in practice and, more importantly, in matches – from start to finish!

# VOLLEYBALL ACE™ DRILLS

## Simon Says “Volleyball”

101 Winning Volleyball Drills From the AVCA (2000)

Number of Players: 6

Number of Balls: 0

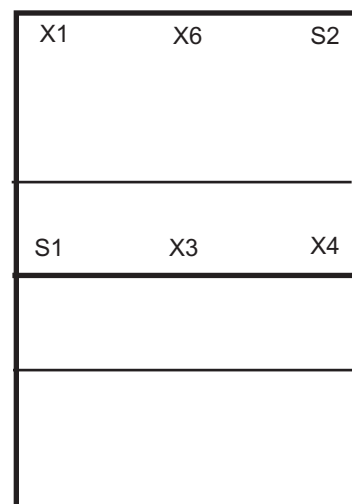
### Objective:

To teach the JV and the varsity the changing positions necessary to compete at a higher level.

### Directions:

1. The six players on the team (X) begin in basic starting positions.
2. The coach (C) yells, “Simon says serve receive,” and the players must run to serve receive and hold basic stances.

3. The coach yells, “Simon says basic defense; right-side defense; middle or left.” The coach can mix it up without saying, “Simon says,” whereby players must stand in the previous position. If someone moves, then the entire team must run, do push-ups, sprint, do sit-ups, etc. (negative reinforcement).



## Game-Like Warm-Up

Peggy Martin, Central Missouri State University (From 101 Volleyball Drills, 1998)

Number of Players: 4-6

Number of Balls: 1

### Objective:

To have the players warm up on the court and, at the same time, improve their skills while progressing from easy to difficult tasks.

### Directions:

1. Four players take the positions of center back (CB), setter (S), left front (LF) and opposing right front (RF).
2. The opposing RF puts the ball in play with a

two-handed, overhead toss to the CB, who underhand passes to S, who sets to LF, who approaches and jumps (simulating an attack) and catches the set.

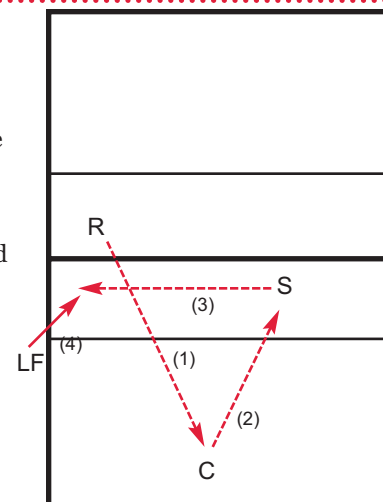
3. LF then proceeds to the opposing RF, as all the other players sprint to replace the person they passed to and the drill continues.

4. After two to three minutes, the RF tosser will put the ball in play by tossing it to him/herself and hitting the ball over to the CB.

5. After another two to three minutes, LF will tip the ball over the net instead of catching it.

### Variation:

1. Run the drill to the right side, utilizing a back set. When running six or more players, put two balls in play.



## Error Correction

Paul Arrington, M.D., Waimea High School, Waimea, Hawai'i (retired)

Number of Players: 12

Number of Balls: Steady supply

### Objective:

To practice handling errors in a controlled scrimmage that fosters focus on perseverance.

### Directions:

1. A coach (C) tosses a ball to either side as a free ball to begin play.
2. Play continues until the ball hits the floor. At this point, the coach immediately directs another ball toward the player who made the error so he or

she can make another attempt.

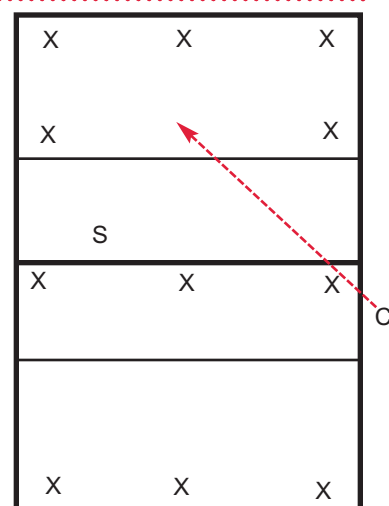
3. This is repeated until the attempt is completed correctly.

4. If the error was a hitting error, a ball is tossed to the setter to set the same hitter again and again until he or she is successful, and then play continues.

5. If the error was a defensive one, the coach hits another ball to the defender in the same manner as the one in which the error occurred.

6. This is repeated until the player is successful, and then play continues.

7. Rotations can be done after a particularly good kill or after a set time.



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