



## Mental Work and Communication Responsibilities During Team Defense

*By Iradge Ahrabi-Fard, Ph.D., former head women's volleyball coach at the University of Northern Iowa, and current professor in the Health, Physical Education and Leisure Services Department at UNI.*

Most athletic performances are the result of the interaction between physical action and a particular mental directive and/or influence. Some sports require greater emphasis on the physical aspects of performance, while others rely more on mental characteristics for optimal outcome. Volleyball is a sport requiring equivalent contribution from both. In fact, without proper mental agility, technical performance is wasted.

Skill performance is the result of technical execution enhanced by physical conditioning. Mental processing is composed of knowledge-based (e.g., reading and response) and emotion-based (e.g., anxiety, excitability, mood swing etc.) factors.

Game performance is the complicated result of technical expertise performed within a particular conditioning capability activated by mental stimulation. As a result, the knowledge about the game is influenced by emotional response. Emotional responses either facilitate or debilitate all other aspects of game performance.

Optimal mental performance can be achieved with the internal knowledge-based mental capability controlling the emotional response. Optimal reaction-based technical performances in volleyball require a training program consisting of developmental drills that contain mental work in their training content.

How does all of this apply to team defense?

Team defense is a reactive effort of volleyball players to the offensive attempts of the opponent. Every successful defensive effort requires three necessary elements:

1. Method of recognizing the intricacies of the opponent's offensive effort.
2. Implementing a designed and practiced defensive plan for every offensive option.
3. A technically correct and conditionally efficient team coordinated effort.

Much of the coaching efforts in planning and implementing team defense are spent on items 2 and 3. The most important element of defense – focusing on the opponent's offensive intention – is often ignored, or at best not strongly emphasized.

Team defense is a reactive effort of volleyball players to the offensive attempts of the opponent. Photo courtesy of USA Volleyball.



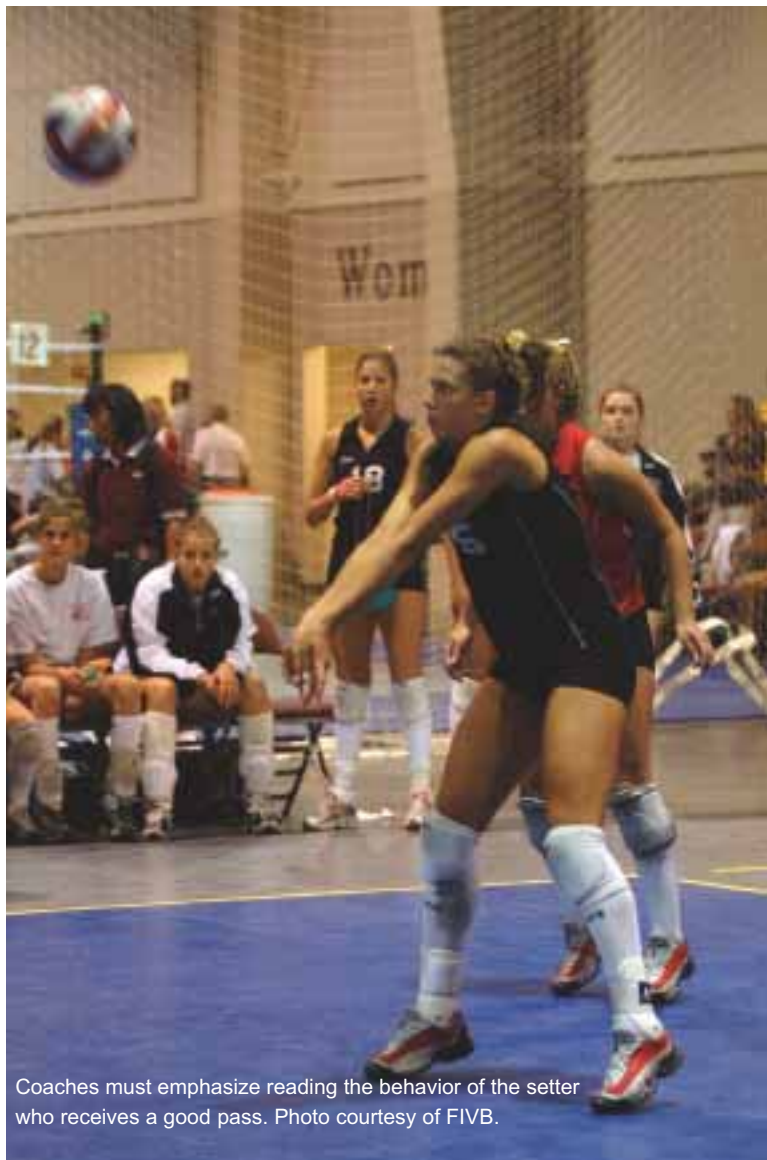
Therefore, trained observation of the opponent's offensive intention and the method of sharing relevant information is a strategy necessary to the accurate collective defensive reactions of team members.

Every team member observes every planned offensive move. Coming to the same conclusion in terms of coordinated team defensive efforts is a horrendous task, often with imprecise results. Identifying the most suitable position for the most effective observation and a method of sharing information with others requires responsible design, training content and numerous practice opportunities to develop a defensively conscious team.

Even though all team members are essentially observing the offense, the best defensive effort is to assign specific players the job of observing specific intricacies and reporting them to the rest for a coordinated defensive effort. Those in the front row are the players closest to the action and can be given specific responsibilities to observe the opponent's intentions and report them to the entire team.

Since a sophisticated offense uses the entire length of the net, with all front-row and several back-row players as attackers, it is necessary for the defensive team to use all front-row players who are close to the action with specific assigned responsibilities to observe particular behaviors and report them clearly. The following recommendations are some suggestions regarding a model that can be fine-tuned to suit various team differences.

- The middle player, who should be involved in defending the crossing of the ball along the entire length of the net, should verbally identify all three front-row players who can attack, including the setter.



Coaches must emphasize reading the behavior of the setter who receives a good pass. Photo courtesy of FIVB.

# CALENDAR

- Feb. 22-23** **2008 Morgan Classic Tournament and Clinic** featuring USC, IPFW-Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, George Mason University and host Springfield College
- 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
- June 13-July 20** **2008 FIVB World League Intercontinental Round**  
Various Cities
- July 23-27** **2008 FIVB World League Final Round**  
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- Aug. 8-24** **Olympic Games**  
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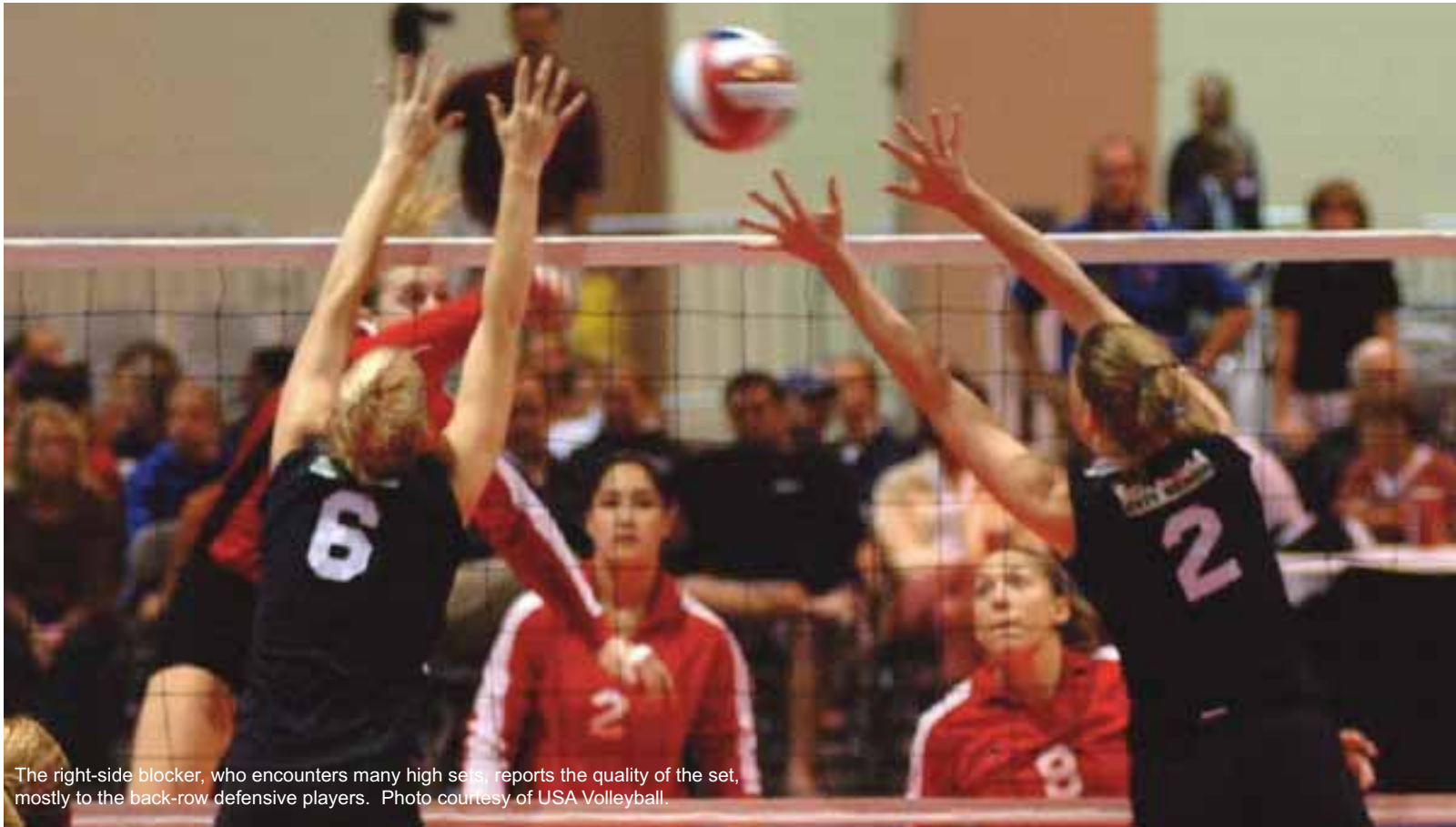
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The right-side blocker, who encounters many high sets, reports the quality of the set, mostly to the back-row defensive players. Photo courtesy of USA Volleyball.

- The left-front defender, whose base position is closer to the setting box (the area that all the opponent's passes are intended to be directed to), is responsible to observe the quality of first passes and communicate by saying "in" for a good pass resulting in an in-system attack, "off" for passes resulting in an out-of-system attack and "over" for passes that cross the net. This player also stays alert for the ball that is close to the net, anticipating the setter's second ball dump. Of course, some coaches do not require the good pass be reported so as not to clutter the process with too many unnecessary calls.

Additionally, coaches must emphasize reading the behavior of the setter who receives a good pass. Uninterrupted attention should only be diverted from observation of the setter when an unplanned performance happens on the other side of the net, such as an overpass or passes resulting in an out-of-system attack.

- During the pass process, the middle player alerts the two side blockers about the intention of the opponent's middle attacker by observing his/her approach. Middle attackers usually move during the flight of the pass. If the middle is coming to the setter, the middle defender calls "quick" to alert the left side for a possible assist block and also warns the back row of a possible quick attack. If the opposition's middle goes for 31, the call is "31" to alert the right-side blocker for a possible block assist. If the middle is going for slide, he/she calls "DD" for the zone behind the setter, as well as defensive alertness of block and defense for this type of attack. The calls can be replaced by coaches according to their own court language.

- When the opposition's setter is in the back row, there are three attackers in the front row. As a result, when the opposition's middle is attempting a slide, the right-side attacker, who is adjusting to the middle area left front, must call "X", alerting the middle and other defenders about their involvement in a possible deceptive X offense.

- The right-side blocker, who encounters many high sets, reports the quality of the set, mostly to the back-row defensive play-

ers. If the set is close to the net, the call is "tight" to encourage the back row to come closer and attend to dinks, wipe-offs or garbage from the block. If the set is outside the court, the call is "outside" for the back row to vacate the dead area of the court and move more inside within the adjustment plan for their defensive effort. If the set is deep from the net or for a back-row player, the call is "deep" for blockers to time a later jump and for back-row players to assume a deeper defense position.

- Side players should not feel obligated to call all the sets constantly. Players should be able to observe and defend on their own when the front-row players remain silent. It is not necessary to attract attention to a call when performance on the other side of the net is normal and nothing out of the ordinary is happening. Developing alert front-row players for anticipated defense is helpful if they only adhere to the specific offensive plans or forced offense and effectively communicate them to the team.

- The verbalization sequence of this process is:

1. Middle front reporting the front-row order.
2. Left front reporting pass quality.
3. Middle front reporting middle offense intention.
4. Left and right front calling for X attacks.
5. Left and right reporting the quality of the set.

## Conclusion

Mental alertness of front-row players during team defense and subsequent team reaction to their communicated information is an advanced skill that has to be developed, with plenty of opportunities to practice in order to acquire team coordination and efficiency. Coaches should find this phase of team defense important, develop content and a plan of action that matches their level of competition, and cultivate team cleverness for coordinated defensive efforts. There are players who are quiet throughout the rallies. This type of responsibility encourages and empowers them to be more visible during the rallies and become more of an extroverted player.

# VOLLEYBALL ACE™ DRILLS

## Four Diggers With a Setter

Jim Stone, The Ohio State University (retired)  
From *Volleyball Drills for Champions*, Mary Wise, ed., 1999

Number of Players: 5  
Number of Balls: 20

### Objective:

To develop team defense and the ability to play next to teammates. This drill is often used in pregame warm-ups

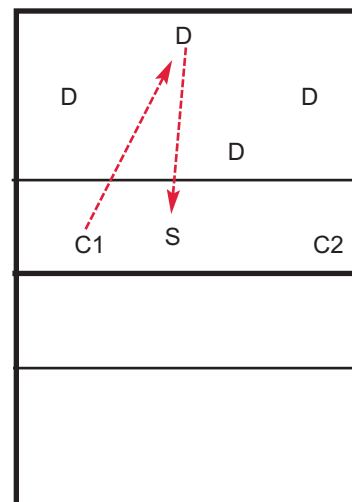
### Directions:

1. One player occupies each of the following positions: right back, middle back, left back, left front and right front (setter).

2. One coach (C1) stands in the right front simulating a left-side attack, while another coach (C2) stands in the left front simulating a right-side attack.
3. The coach in right front (C1) initiates play by attacking a ball to any of the diggers.
4. The setter (S) then sets the dug ball to either coach, and live play continues.
5. When a ball hits the floor, another ball is immediately put in play.
6. All players must stay alive as diggers. Emphasize no-help defense.

### Variation:

1. C1 and C2 alternately initiate play.



## Four-Person

Russ Rose, Penn State University

Number of Players: 5  
Number of Balls: Steady supply

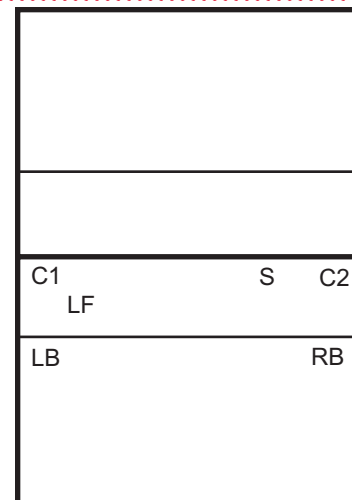
### Objective:

This is a team pepper drill that allows players to get comfortable in their defensive positions while becoming accustomed to playing alongside their teammates. Coaches can observe which players possess the necessary traits of great defenders.

### Directions:

1. Four defensive players take the floor (LB, RB, LF, S).
2. Two coaches hit at the defenders.

3. The ball is put in play by a coach (C1 or C2). The defenders' goal is to keep the ball off the floor, preferably digging it to the setter.
4. If C1 hits, LF goes to the net and S pulls off the net as the right-front digger.
5. The ball is kept alive as long as possible.
6. Players can substitute after a certain amount of time or certain number of digs. Be sure to have a new ball in play immediately after a ball hits the floor.



## "Call For the Ball" Attack

From *101 Winning Volleyball Drills From the AVCA*, 2000

Number of Players: 12  
Number of Balls: 6

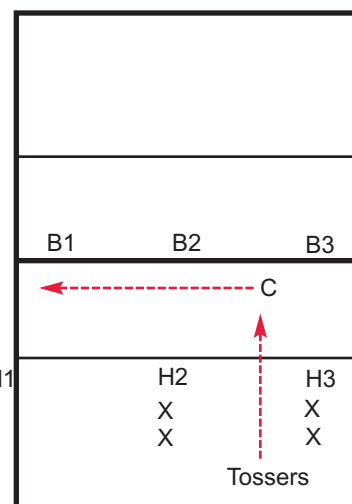
### Objective:

To promote communication within the team while concentrating on a strong offense and effective transition.

### Directions:

1. Set up three lines of hitters (H) vs. three blockers (B).
2. The coach (C) receives balls from the toss line.
3. Whichever hitter (H) communicates will receive

- a tossed ball. Other offensive players (X) cover while blockers block.
4. The offense makes a quick transition and again communicates to C. H retrieves the ball and goes to the end of the tosser line.



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email: [jsample@dibimail.com](mailto:jsample@dibimail.com)

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