

VOLLEYBALL DEVELOPMENT AND THE CHESS METAPHOR

Peter Bristotte - August 26, 2020

In the last few weeks I have been defending that position specialization in volleyball as well the progression of the offensive systems (which is directly related to position specialization) in youth volleyball should be a process of many years.

Yesterday I was at one of our practices and I had the girls warming up and one of the drills had the girls attacking from all three back row positions, but they were to self toss. Some of them looked at me with a facial expression that said “okay, but it is not going to be good, because I am not a hitter”. I tried to find a way to tell those players that even though they were specialized players (they were a varsity level team), they had to practice everything and that by practicing everything they would get better at their own position. But that is something that proved not being easy to explain. Then I came up with the following metaphor.

Imagine a chess board and all chess pieces: the pawns, the bishops, the knights, the rooks, the queen and the king. The metaphor I am trying to build here is that chess board is your volleyball, as an athlete. Now imagine that each piece is a skill or a part of the game: pass, set, attack, serve, block and... maybe reading, strategy, picture whatever you want... you can assign anything that you think it is important in the sport of volleyball.

Now picture this: when you train and develop only the main skills of your position you are neglecting some important pieces of your chess board. So, the chess board is your volleyball, overall, and each piece in that board is a part of your training. For example, if you are a Defensive Specialist, you do not practice any hitting, because you never hit. Now you are to play a match and you don't have your queen, or you do not have your pawns, and your opponent has all their pieces. Even before you start playing, you'll have already lost it, because you neglected part of your training. Now imagine that each piece of your chess game can get stronger or weaker, so there are differences in strength among the pieces and that strength is based on how strong your skills are, how much you develop your skills. So not only can you have all pieces in your board, but you can strengthen or weaken all of them individually in your daily volleyball practice. Each day you modify your “chess roster” by having more or less pieces and stronger or weaker pieces.

As a young athlete, over the years you will be developing your own chess pieces. At some point you and everyone else will have a clear picture of your board: do you have all your pieces? Do you have any pieces that are stronger than other? If so, is that only because you specialized in one position (or even more than one), or simply because you neglected developing and strengthening the other pieces.

If you think you are one of those chess pieces yourself, you are not. You are the one playing the game. You want to bring all your pieces, as strong as possible to your chess game, to your

volleyball. Because if you have all your pieces, even if some might be slightly stronger than others, you will be able to make better moves than your opponent.

Do not skip, do not neglect any part of your training, especially when you are a young athlete, just because this or that piece (meaning this or that skill) are not determinant for the position you think you are an expert. If you want to have greater chances to win the chess game, to become a great player, you want all your pieces on the board, and you want them strong and moving well. Now you may be a specialist, yes. You may be a specialist on queen moves, or bishop moves, but to win the game, you will need, at some point to move your pawns, your rooks, your king. You have to have and to move well all pieces so that you have greater chances to win the game. You have to have all fundamentals and skills well developed, even if you are a specialist, if you want to succeed.

Have this in mind next time you step on the court for your practice.