
Development or Success

by - David Cordes
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I started out writing an explanation to the parents on my 18s team as to why I have their daughters hitting in all three hitting positions in the front row instead of assigning a regular hitting position to each player. I also wanted to explain why we are running a rotation where every girl plays at least one rotation of defense in the back row. Then I saw the blog entry below, and started adding my own comments to it, and once I got it finished I decided to send it to all of the parents in the club.

Development or 'Success'? is the title of a blog posting by one of the bloggers I read very regularly. This blogger/coach has been coaching volleyball at the highest levels in Europe for over 14 years and often has some very insightful ways of looking at or approaching the game of volleyball.

His blog is here if you are interested: <http://markleb1.wordpress.com/>

But I have copied the post that got my attention here:

"At a clinic I recently attended one of the topics ended in a discussion about specialization. The presenter of the clinic maintained that specialization should be avoided as long as possible to facilitate the development of individual athletes. He backed up his position with a story about playing an international junior tournament with players out of the 'normal' positions. Unsurprisingly (at least to me) virtually none of the coaches present supported this position. The tone of room was 'we have to win, so we have to specialize'. When the presenter, and I, attempted to point out that a) you don't have to win, and b) the coach can choose to do whatever he wants, our position was met with real anger. One participant in particular was visibly upset by our contention.

Unfortunately, this mentality is the prevailing mentality everywhere I have gone. And sadly it is based on a completely false premise. The premise is that if you focus on the individual development of players, you CANNOT win. The premise is that it is either one or the other; development or success. This premise is just plain wrong! It is 100% a choice that coaches make, and coaches can just as easily choose to encourage and have both development and success."

This is a topic that has been very close to my heart. I believe very strongly in players, coaches and teams avoiding specialization for as long as possible. Specialization for a player is only learning to play one position. Team specialization is learning to play one offense, or one defense. Coach specialization is a coach who never changes what and how he teaches and coaches every team and player, just like every other team and player, he has ever coached.

Yes, I think that teams and coaches specialize too much also. Too many coaches have a training and competitive system that they like, or understand best, and that is all they teach. They specialize in a certain offense, or defense, or style of play.

I believe that the “this is the best or only way” kind of thinking dramatically limits a coach’s and his team’s effectiveness. It is like the old adage – “If the only tool you have is a hammer – all your problems will look like nails.”

I absolutely agree with the last sentence of that blog posting – that coaches can choose to encourage and have both development and success. But that is tricky, and doesn’t always work for every player, or every team. It is often very difficult to keep focus on player development, especially if the team’s losses start outnumbering the wins.

Striving towards both development AND success you have to be willing to, as a coach, commit yourself to accept losses, in order for your players to continue to develop. You have to choose between a specialized offense designed to capitalize on each girls strengths in order to win and an offense that will challenge your players to play their best in several different positions in order to learn how to become better well rounded volleyball players. Even though you know that offense may not be your strongest, best chance to win.

Focusing on development over winning is a multitude of choices that a coach must make in how he trains and allows his team to compete. Does the coach teach them a method of play that will score lots of points now, or does he teach them to play in a manner that will serve them better later on, even though, in the short term, they may make a lot of mistakes now that will cost them points in games.

The decision to make player development a priority while still trying to teach your players to win involves dozens of small seeming insignificant decisions in every practice. But it also involves some major coaching style choices, many of which will confuse players and parents and some coaches. It is often a commitment to coach a style that is different from what your players and their parents expect, or what other coaches are doing.

A few examples of this coaching differences:

1. A coach who stands on the sidelines and signals to his players where and how to serve, is a coach who is using his knowledge and experience in the game to try and win some points – right now. Verses the coach who spends time in practice talking about serving strategy, having players learn lots of different ways to serve and then trying to teach them when and how to use those serves. Then in the game lets those players decide for themselves, when, where and how to serve. Even though, they will often chose poorly, make mistakes, and often cost their team vital points that may cost them the game.
2. The last few years I have seen many coaches in our local area (and have heard rumbling throughout the volleyball community about many others) adopting the theory that requiring players to dive or sprawl after every ball that falls to the floor during practice, regardless of where the ball is, or if it will even be playable after a player pancakes it.

This requirement to dive is usually accompanied by requiring the entire team to perform some sort of conditioning punishment if no one hits the floor.

In the short term this may appear to work because occasionally a player will make a great dig or save. Not to mention that coaches think it looks good to see players flinging themselves all over the court after every ball. But more often it leads to players putting on a show for the coach, simply to avoid her team being punished. I have seen players sprawl after balls that landed over 20 feet away from where they sprawled. They got up smiling and reassuring their teammates that they had taken the hit (with the floor) to save them from having to run. One day I watched a girl slide face first into a row of folding chairs at the edge of the playing area – trying to pancake a ball that landed 5 feet away (out of play) on the other side of the chairs. She was laying face down on the floor with chairs piled on and around her when the ball was still 6 feet off the floor. I asked her later “why didn’t you jump over the chairs and play the ball?” She replied “I would have been off the playing surface and out of bounds.” When I countered with “then why did you dive and slide into the chairs? Even if you had reached the ball, you would have still been out of bounds.” She shrugged and mumbled “habit.” She was not amused when I responded “Well, it’s a bad habit that you should work harder to change.”

Even worse, in my opinion, is that this leads to girls deciding to dive (because that is what is expected of them) after balls that they could easily play on their feet if they just took one or more steps. The first sign of this happening is a player leaving her feet and sprawling onto the floor with her hand outstretched only to end up lying there waiting for a ball that is still four feet off the floor to fall onto the back of her hand.

Besides the injury risk, the giving up on plays too soon, and the ineffectiveness of most pancake digs, the biggest problem with this system is that the best defensive specialist in the world when she leaves her feet - falls to the floor at the same rate as a bumbling first time middle school player (32.2 ft. per second squared). As these players grow up, and the game gets faster and the ball is hit harder, they aren’t able to get down on the floor any faster than they could last year, or the year before. And if all they know is diving and sprawling they will not be able to get to those faster, harder hit balls.

Coaches who value the development of their players will encourage his players to make a useful play on every ball, battling and fighting against gravity for as long as possible and as fast as they can move in order to make a play on the ball while it is still more than 2 inches off the floor. If you move after every ball as fast as you can, every time – over time, you will get faster, you will make more plays and you will do so without the constant risk of injury from slamming into the floor. In the short term there will be a lot of balls that fall to the floor while a girl runs towards it as fast as she can. But that, to me, is preferable to seeing a player collecting floor burns and bruises while just putting on a show of hustling after a ball.

Sure there will always be times when a player will have to sprawl after a volleyball, but if players are taught to actively pursue every ball from an early age, it will be many years

before the game gets fast enough and the ball is hit hard enough that she has to spend very much time on her belly on the floor.

3. Many young players start playing club volleyball or middle school volleyball when they are 10 -12 years old. Then at 14 years old make their high school freshman team. More often or not, these kids have coaches who tell them “you are our middle (or some other position) this season”, and they spend the rest of their lives thinking they are a middle, training to be a middle, and playing only middle.

Look at the life of a top player in the USA – they start playing volleyball at 10 or 11 years old. They play 3 years of middle school, four years of high school, at the same time that they play 4-6 years of club volleyball, then onto four years of college. After college they qualify for the USA National team, and according to Hugh McCutcheon the former USA Men’s and Women’s National Teams Coach – “it takes 8 years after she makes the national team for a player to truly reach her full potential.” Overall a top player will spend close to 20 years of volleyball in order to reach her full potential. Yet too many players and parents and coaches trust some middle school or high school or club coach to know by looking at an awkward little pre-teen girl what position she is going to grow into her full potential in.

Most coaches will usually play a young player in a position where the team needs her for that season. But how often does that coach make sure that the player knows that her position assignment should not be considered a life long choice. And then continue to train that player in all the skills and to play other positions?

Usually after just one season a player gets comfortable in a position and starts developing positional tunnel vision (a condition where a player can only see themselves playing one position). A coach dedicated to player development will do their best make sure that their players think of themselves as volleyball players and not just positions on the court.

Yes it is easier to coach and easier to win if you specialize your players and your team. If you only teach each girl one position, and only teach your team one offense, one defense and one serve receive strategy. If your only concern is winning – this season, the easiest way to do that is to specialize your team and players. But if you are truly interested in the long term development of your players you will teach them to play many positions, front and back row. You will teach them multiple offenses and defenses. You will teach them to play the whole game. And, you will teach them to play to win while doing so.

So when should a player begin to specialize? Do you have a crystal ball that will tell you what each player’s future is? If you do, will you share it with me? When to specialize will depend on the girl. Some girls will naturally fit into one position, and may specialize earlier than others. But for most players, a good developmental coach will teach her to play the whole game, to understand the whole game, and let her, as she grows and improves slowly settle into one or two spots on the court that she can truly excel at. But even then, will not let her become too specialized – because you never know what her next coach or her next team is going to need her do for them.

Examples:

- Cassidy Lichtman played outside hitter in high school and club and was recruited by Stanford University to be an outside hitter. In her freshman year she played Outside hitter and defensive specialist. Then in her sophomore year led her team to the NCAA championship game- as their setter.
- Laura Dykstra – finished high school as one of the best outside/opposite hitters in California. Recruited by the University of Nebraska where by the middle of her freshman season she took over the start libero spot in the lineup.

There have been countless other players who played one specific position throughout their club and high school careers but were lucky enough to have a coach who continued to require them to develop all their skills so that when they moved on to the next level they were able to adapt to the needs of their new team.

This is why I have always loved being a club coach from a small town and a small club. Because of the small demographic here in Ridgecrest, the chances of us ever having a club team that will be able to compete at the elite levels of our USAV region is small. So I am free to focus on developing volleyball players. Teaching them the best I can to be the best players on the best team they possibly can be. And if I can teach them to do that and we win a lot of games at the same time – that is a great bonus. But my first priority in every season is – did every girl on this team improve her skills and her knowledge as a volleyball player, and did she have fun doing it?

Please don't misunderstand – my coaching is not all about individual development. I firmly believe that volleyball is the ultimate team sport. And in order to be good or great, a player has to be willing to give her all to the welfare of the team. That is what I expect from my players – to set aside their own wants, wishes, and plans and to do what is best for our team at all times. It is my job to make sure that while she is giving her all for the team, that she learns, grows and improves as an individual so that she can succeed and excel on this team, and continue to do so, regardless of what her next team is, or who her next coach is.

I will never coach you to who you are today. I will coach you to where I think you should be someday. - Doc Rivers (Head Coach Boston Celtics)

Good coaching focuses on the process not the end result! – Terry Pettit (former Head Coach – Nebraska Women's Volleyball)

There is teaching and coaching, and if you have a choice, you'd rather be a better teacher than a coach. – Hugh McCutcheon (former Head Coach Men's and Women's National Teams – currently head coach University of Minnesota)

You see systems and programs geared towards creating players and others towards just utilizing players. There are a few teams out there that create players - that bring players in at one level and certainly raise that level over 4 years. Then there are the other programs where you see

players go and they either thrive because they were good players before and because of what the player does so they continue to progress, or they stop improving and sort of fall off the depth chart because there is not a lot of teaching going on in that system. – Kevin Barnett (former Olympian - USA Men's National Team)

It isn't about who wins – it is about constant improvement and loving to play the game.

I don't know that there are enough coaches out there that really emphasize the fact that it is about learning. It's not always about winning. You can have a losing season and you can still win out of it. I think that is one thing they really need to focus on – especially with kids these days. It's not always about them taking the gold – it's about striving for that, and working hard and working together. And whether it's in sports or whether it's after you are done playing sports and you go into the real world and you are working in a job you are always going to have to work with a team. If you can get that basis down, I think you will be set for life. – Heather Bown (2 time Olympian, 12 year middle USA National Team)

Great programs build a culture, they don't just build a team. – Terry Pettit

Finally Hugh McCutcheon when describing the difference between Coaching by Principles vs Rules Based Coaching – “Do you teach attitude and principles or do you just enforce a list of rules?”
