

By Brock Mitchell Originally published in Volleyball USA, Spring 2016

I am a high school math teacher as my full-time profession, and I don't think there has been a year when a student hasn't said, "I understand this topic perfectly where we did it in class, but when I went home to try it on my own, I just didn't know what I was doing."

As a volleyball coach, I sometimes feel athletes think the same thing. They don't feel confident if there isn't a coach in their ear telling them the next step in the approach, which foot should be forward when passing or what zone to serve to. Shouldn't we be preparing our athletes to think for themselves and understand the game, so they can be just as successful if a coach isn't around? My thought is a resounding YES.

Train Players to Understand the Flow

Volleyball is a unique sport in that it requires a full understanding of the flow of the game in order for a team to be completely successful. It is more random than any other sport because there are never two plays that are exactly the same. A coach's job should be training athletes to understand the skills and flow of the game and allowing them to problem-solve for themselves. There is no shortage of ways to accomplish this task. The key is finding a way to connect with those athletes and get them to learn the inner workings of the game.

It has been reported that to master a skill, it takes roughly 10,000 hours of practice. Volleyball is no different. Playing the game allows players to get better. A quote which embodies this philosophy is, "Let the ball be the teacher." Athletes love to play; otherwise, they would choose something else to do. We should let them play more.

Why do kids love "Queen of the Court" so much? They are playing, and there are few rules to govern that play. There is no coach breathing down their necks, no referees stopping the flow and maximum contacts for the time given.

I have heard from some of the best college coaches in the country that during the tryout process, and the first few practice sessions, they just allow their teams to scrimmage. They will sit high in the stands and evaluate but will not interrupt the game play. Players have to know the game without the coach standing by their sides.

How can we get our athletes to play well without us? In my opinion, we are not as important as we all might think. Our athletes want to excel, and giving them more freedom to learn is one great way to increase their confidence and knowledge.

Teach Them To Use Their Experiences as Feedback

Every year when I begin working with my varsity teams, I let them know that I will do everything in my power to help them become the best players they are capable of becoming. I also tell them I cannot do it alone, nor can I give feedback on every contact they have.

I BEGIN BY TEACHING THEM HOW TO GAIN VALUABLE FEEDBACK FROM THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES. IF A PASS WENT A CERTAIN DIRECTION, WHAT MAY HAVE BEEN THE

CAUSE? IF A SERVE HAD A CERTAIN ROTATION, WHAT CAN THAT TELL ME? IF THE ATTACK DIDN'T GO WHERE THEY INTENDED IT TO GO, WHAT CAN BE CHANGED NEXT TIME?

I present many situations to them, and they are responsible for providing me with the answers. This scenario begins the thinking process as to why certain things happen and how players can control those situations. Throughout the season, I will find times to walk up to a player and ask her, "Why did that happen?" She should have an understanding based on the previous result and the feedback she received. If she doesn't know, we discuss the situation and she continues.

I think it is important that the athletes know why plays developed a certain way or why an error was made rather than me just telling them, "You need to do this to improve that last play." More progress is made when they are held accountable and participate in their own learning.

Using Drills for Preparation

Another way that we can prepare our teams is to put them in drills that will emphasize what we want them to work on. If we want to improve passing, we don't run hitting lines. If we want to improve court sense and personal knowledge growth, we can't put athletes in drills where coaches have complete control.

As mentioned above, "Queen/King of the Court" is one of the best drills for this purpose. It allows the athletes the most touches and rewards the one thing everyone loves, winning. Winners stay, losers rotate off and retrieve the ball. Those players who are struggling to win will eventually find ways to improve and will begin to win some games.

Teaching players to play "without a coach" can also be accomplished by implementing "correction drills." Very rarely do players get a second opportunity to repeat a play after an error. Correction drills allow for those players to immediately use the feedback they have gained and try to correct their previous errors by giving them another chance at the same ball.

Correction drills can be created in any game situation, whether it is three-on-three back row or six-on-six full court. This is an effective and engaging process that will quickly lead players to make the needed adjustments.

Game Situations are Key

The most effective way, in my opinion, to prepare athletes to think independently is to put them in a game situation and let them play. I have had some of my best practice days when I come into the gym and tell my players we are playing three out of five. The players go nuts. I assign the two teams "player/coaches," and they are responsible for timeouts and creating lineups. This forces the teams to recognize momentum swings, tactical timeouts, lineup mismatches and other random happenings that coaches usually have to pick out during the matches.

After each game, I will discuss with each side why they did certain things throughout the match and what they could have done better to defeat the other team. I think these situations have prepared my teams for the possible chance they do not have me for a match for one reason or another.

I feel there are too many coaches who prepare their teams to listen for constant feedback or direction. I think we are cheating our athletes if they complete a season without having to self-evaluate and self-teach. There are many situations that teams can be put in that will create those thinking moments and force them to solve the problems without guidance from a coach.

Find a way to engage the athletes, make them make some decisions and become stronger volleyball players both physically and mentally. This should allow you to perform your job at a higher level without having to guide the team play by play.

