

BLUEPRINT



PRE-SERVE ROUTINE

Players have many creative, and sometimes complicated, pre-serve routines. Often these have little to contribute to mental and physical preparation.

If you view the video of the USA versus Brazil Women's National Team's at the London Olympics, you'll observe something very interesting. The vast majority of the players have the exact same pre-serve routine – on both teams! Having watched it multiple times, I believe that this is no coincidence.

“Be more interested in finding the best way, not in having your own way.” – John Wooden

In breaking it down, it was essentially made up of the following 4 components which we will call B4 or “BEFORE you serve”:

B4 - BLOW – BEND – BOUNCE – BREATHE!

BLOW

Wait for the referee to blow the whistle **before you start your routine**. You have a full 8-seconds to serve. If you begin your routine prior to the whistle, your timing is then at the mercy of the ref. They might blow the whistle while you are in the *middle* of your routine, causing you to feel rushed. They might blow the whistle late, well after you are done your routine, causing you to stand and wait. If you begin your routine at the BLOW of the whistle – you are in full control of the timing. The routine is the exact same every time, thus reducing variance in your serve.

BEND

Bend over at the waist and focus entirely on the ball. This action will calm your mind and help slow your breathing.

BOUNCE

With 2-hands, **bounce** the ball under control 4-5 times. Slow your breathing down, and visualize the perfect serve.

BREATHE

As you stand upright, take one last **deep breath in - then exhale!** This will help centre you, and release tension in your body. Now focus on your target and begin your serve.



PRE-CONTACT PHASE: STANDING FLOAT

Starting Position

The ready position or stance for serving should be balanced. Feet are staggered, and approximately shoulder width apart. Knees are slightly bent – not locked – and **weight should be on the back foot** (right-foot for right handed servers).

Present the Ball

Present the ball out **in front of your hitting shoulder** with your opposite hand. This eliminates unnecessary movement of the ball prior to contact. See model on page 1. You are not tossing the ball across your body, but directly upward.

“LIFT” Controlled Toss

Toss the ball at a height that allows for your hitting arm to swing forward smoothly and quickly – no higher. Approximately 2-3 feet in height is generally enough. The ball should not drop down, prior to the toss. Keep the ball in front of your hitting shoulder. As the player lifts the ball, the hitting-hand & elbow are drawn back, which

rotates the hitting shoulder away from the ball. Or, you can eliminate this backward movement of the arm entirely, and start with the hitting arm up and loaded, with the palm of the hand facing out and the elbow back.

CONTACT PHASE: STANDING FLOAT

“SHIFT” Body Weight

During the contact phase, the arm swing should be timed with the **shift of body weight** from the rear foot to the front foot (see model above). Similar to the attack, the hips and shoulders rotate around a tall vertical axis. This weight transfer should be toward your target. Stay strong in your core. The final position is with your feet, hips and shoulders facing your designated target.

Arm Swing

The arm swing is smooth and quick. It is not unlike a throwing or hitting action. Fast fluid body rotation and arm speed create a harder serve.

Contact

Contact is made high and in front of the hitting shoulder. Use a **strong firm hand** to contact the ball. For a float serve the wrist should be rigid and cocked back *slightly* at contact (to keep the fingers away from the ball and creating unwanted top-spin). The server should hit firmly straight through the ball, with the palm to the target.

Follow-Through

The follow-through on the float serve is different than that of a spin serve or an attack. After driving a firm hand through the center of the ball, with the palm continues through toward the target. Once the ball is well on its way, the arm can relax and fall beside the body as you continue into the court for defense.

Deception

Your deep serve and short serve should look the same in virtually every respect. The exception is with the final arm speed and force you apply to the ball. Disguise your serving intentions by making your Pre-Contact and Contact Phases the same.

JUMP FLOAT

The jump float is the same as the standing float serve except there is an approach and jump to make contact with the ball. This type of serve allows the server to contact the ball at a higher point, making the trajectory of the serve flatter over the net and keeping the ball in the air for a shorter period, giving the passer less time to react. If a player is strong enough to throw the ball over the net overhand from the end line, then she can learn how to execute this type of serve. This is the most popular type of serve used in the collegiate and international level.



Starting Position

The player must be far enough behind the end line that she can make her approach and jump without going over the end line and committing a foot fault. Begin with the foot on the non-hitting arm forward and the weight on the back foot. **Similar to the basic float serve posture.** The ball should be held in both hands, about **waist high** and in line with and slightly in front of the serving shoulder.

Approach

For a full three-step approach, the player steps forward with the foot on the non-hitting side, followed by a step onto the hitting-side foot, and then plants the non-hitting-side foot (slightly in front, closer to the net) and jumps up off both feet. **This is the same basic footwork and approach used in attacking the ball at the net.**

With less room on the end-line, an alternative is a two-step approach. From the same starting position, the first step is taken with the hitting-side foot, and then the non-hitting-side foot is planted so the player can jump off both feet.

Controlled Toss - Toward the Net

The ball may be tossed either **with both hands or with the non-hitting hand**, slightly out in front of the hitting shoulder as the server begins to take the second step of the three-step approach. For a two-step approach, the toss is on the first step. The toss should be 3 to 4 feet high and slightly toward the net – contact the ball high.

Jump & Arm Swing

As the player lifts the ball for the toss, the hitting-hand elbow is drawn back, which rotates the hitting shoulder away from the ball. As the server jumps, and at the height of the toss, the hips and shoulders begin rotating around a central axis toward the net, followed by the elbow and the hand to the point of contact.

Contact

Throughout the entire motion, the server should focus on the ball and should see the ball being contacted. The contact is with the palm of the hand. The wrist should be rigid and cocked back slightly to keep the fingers away from the ball. The server should hit straight through the ball, with the palm to the target throughout.

Follow-Through

The follow-through of the hitting hand should be high and into the court, with the palm to the target, while the player lands balanced on both feet. The server's forward momentum should cause her to land inside the end line after contact with the ball. She will then continue to move into her defensive position on the court.

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SERVE RECEPTION

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A team's success relies heavily on their ability to forearm pass consistently. This includes service reception, down-ball, and free-ball passing. The following cues are applicable to all three scenarios.

“That’s good. Now let’s keep practicing until it is truly great.”

Position on Court

As a general rule, players will start $\frac{2}{3}$ back from the net in service reception. Depending upon the age level, and rules (are you able to receive serve with your hands?) this starting position may be adjusted slightly. With approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the court behind the passer, there is only the need for one large step backward on deep serves, otherwise the ball is over your waist and likely out.

PRE-CONTACT PHASE

READY

Athletic Base (Low & Wide)

The successful passer is as skilled in the pre-contact phase as they are in the technical aspects of the contact itself.

We want you in an **athletic balanced position** and ready to move in all directions. This means an even distribution of weight, with feet slightly wider than shoulders, and arms out front (see model on next page). Your body position will be higher than your final passing position, but still in a squat. Don't be locked in. Even if the ball is served right to you – you will still want to do a quick “split-step” to get your base wider and lower. So always be ready to move!

READ

Servers Intention & Actions

Reading is CRITICAL in volleyball. You have faced enough servers in your past to understand some of the critical reading cues. Are they a strong server? Do they float or spin serve? Are they standing back from the end-line? Expect a flatter harder serve. Are they standing close to the end-line? Anticipate a shorter serve. Most importantly, **read the force of contact** and adjust immediately after contact is made.



REACT

Passing Base (Lower & Wider)

The best pass is made from a stationary and stable base. Moving from a temporary “athletic base” to a “passing base” needs to be a constant focus of practice. The majority of the time, a quick hop forward or backward is enough. If the ball is to the side, a quick shuffle step, or one large step to the side is often enough. Take the ball in your **midline** ideally.

If the ball is several feet in front or behind you, it is *not* good form to move one foot forward or back, rather, both feet must move and establish a completely new wider and stable base. If the ball is far to the side, a longer one-leg step in that direction is acceptable (see model to left) as long as the base is wide, low and stable.

One of the most common errors is having the feet moving during contact, and therefore the body not in balance. You will be in a passing base - before the ball arrives. The more moving parts, the more inconsistent the result. This why we refer to the pass as a “quiet activity”. Ready - Read – React – and establish a NEW passing base well before contact. Fine-tuning is done with your passing platform if the ball is outside of your bodies midline.



CONTACT PHASE

The Grip

There are a couple of different methods to use, however the most common is to have one palm face up, and lay the other over top. Bring the thumbs together evenly in the middle. This is the most important part – to create a locked and level grip with the thumbs together firmly. It will keep the arms level and solid upon contact with the ball on the arms.



The Platform

Do not try to time the extension of the arms with the balls arrival. Arms should be extended and pointed down **well before contact** - ideally before the ball crosses the net. A major cause of “shanks” is when the passer tries to time the extension of the arms with the balls arrival.



The Shrug

A shrugging of the shoulders will help lock the elbows further, and create a unified surface or “platform”.



Platform Adjustments

A tilting of the platform is often necessary for balls contacted outside of the players midline. Do not point your grip at the target (ie: setter), rather, **point your grip at the ball and tilt the platform to your target**. This is done with a dip of the inside shoulder. The entire platform must tilt together. Pointing your grip toward the target is also a major cause of poor passing results. Drive your thumbs down toward the floor which will help straighten your elbows and lock in your platform.

Area of Contact on Arms

Most players do not see the ball within the last few feet before contact. Therefore we must train ourselves to contact the ball above the wrists. **Early platform presentation** is crucial in learning to do this consistently. If you are swinging your arms at the ball late, contact location will vary and results will suffer.

The ball should be contacted in the centre of the forearm ideally – in the natural hollow formed by the arms radius bones.

Level of Arms at Contact

The ball should be contacted at approximately hip level ideally. The further the arms get from the body, or tighter into the body, the more challenging it is to control the ball.

Rebound Trajectory

Learn to pass the ball both high and low. Angling the arms appropriately will control the trajectory of the ball. The closer you get to the front of the court, the arms need to be more parallel to the floor. When the ball is contacted deeper in the court, the arms need to be more angled toward the net. You also need to be aware of the setters situation, and adjust your tempo of the pass accordingly.

The lower the ball to the ground, the more parallel the arms to the floor

TARGET

The location of the setter as the target needs changing from tradition. When you put the setter, as most do since the net is the only real reference point seen above the floor level, at the net, you are setting yourself up for a lot of overpasses. These overpassed balls may be crushed on you, at the higher levels, or even score points at the lowest level as the ball falls untouched. In any case, with the variance of the serve reception/setter target, it is important to put the target at least a meter off the net. At the international level, given the speed and level of jump serves seen, the target is over a meter off. For less experienced players, whose serve reception variance levels are quite wide, I would suggest a target that is at least a meter off the net.



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All players need to be able to execute the basic set. Throughout the match, out-of-system scenarios (not ideal pass-set-attack sequence) demand that someone *other* than the setter – set up the attack.

A separate **Setters Session** document is available - with more detail on the technical, tactical and mental aspects required of the actual setter's position.

“If they are not doing it . . . I have not taught it.
– John Wooden

ESSENTIAL TECHNICAL ELEMENTS

Here are the key technical elements, or CUES, to be able to set the ball consistently and accurately.

Quick to the Ball

As with virtually every skill, setting success starts with anticipating or **reading** the play early, and moving quickly into an optimal position. Getting underneath the ball with plenty of time to set your body position and hands will lead to more consistent results.

Read the pass or dig trajectory early, and **move** quickly.

Square & Stable

You should be square to your target, and stable when you contact the ball. Ideally, the feet, hips and shoulders all face the direction of the set. An athletic stance with feet shoulder width apart and slightly staggered, with knees bent or “loaded” is preferred. On longer sets, the set should be made with a weight transfer off the back foot and onto the front - pushing through the ball to maintain an effective line of force from the floor, through the body, to the point of release.

If the ball is not going where you want it to, drifting or coming up short, it is likely you are either not square, or still moving at contact. Eliminate as many moving parts (variables) as possible, by having a stable base.

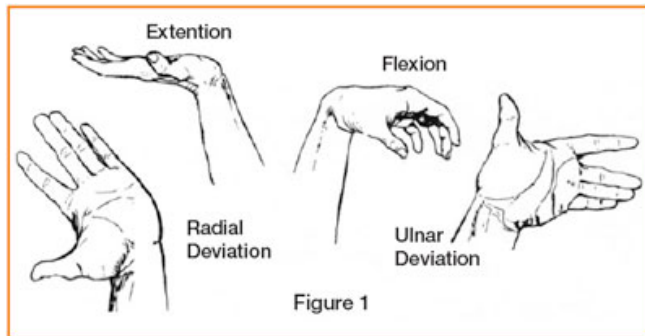


Hands Up Early & Shape the Ball

Simply, your hands must be **shaped like a volleyball** before contact. Wrists are “extended” back with slight radial deviation (tilt toward thumb/radial side).

One of the best ways to practice this shaping of the hands is to pick a ball up off the ground with this position. It forces the hands to fully surround the ball and maximizes the web space between the index fingers and thumbs.

All fingers and thumbs should make contact with the ball. This creates a larger pocket and more control. The outside fingers can help control any spin on the ball.



The “Soft Set?”

Don’t think about absorption at the wrists for the “soft set”, or worry about the “sound” of the set. The wrists should be extended back **before** contact. Slight wrist and finger absorption will happen **naturally** as the ball hits the pocket. You want strong, firm hands – not stiff - with a slight amount of natural absorption. The ball should rebound quickly out of the pocket.

Consistent Contact Point

A contact point 10-15cm above the forehead (hairline) is preferred. It is important that you take the ball from a consistent position to allow the hitters to accurately judge the speed of release. It also ensures you have adequate elbow extension and power.

Elbows should point out comfortably at an angle of approximately 45 degrees. This should be a natural position if you are “shaping the ball” properly with your hands. A common error is having the elbows pointing straight out to the sides – which (1) tends to pull your pinkies off of the ball, and (2) make full extension and follow-through more difficult. **Try it and see.** Pointing your thumbs down more toward the bridge of your nose also will help bring your elbows into a better position.

Contact the ball too far in front of the face or nose, and it is difficult to back-set without extending your back & neck excessively, thus telegraphing the back-set.

Finally, getting your **hands up early** will help avoid “poking” at the ball. Sight the ball **through your hands** – as if to be looking through a viewfinder - as it lands in the pocket.



Midline Release

The primary cause of a double hit in setting, is taking the ball outside of your midline. Reaching for the ball to the right or left, causes the shoulders, and therefore hands, to become uneven.

Early movement of your body, directly under the ball, will help ensure you are making contact in your midline.



Follow-Through to Target

Follow-through is critical in virtually all athletic skills, and you should extend completely with your arms on virtually every set. This full extension will greatly increase power and accuracy. Hands, arms and legs extend through the ball. Depending on force needed, particularly on long cross-court sets, a forward step may be used to transfer more weight and power behind the ball.

Palms face target on finish.



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ATTACKING

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The goal of the hitter is to **terminate** the play. This may be done with various types of attacks. By definition, the attack is: a strategic hit by a player with the intent of scoring a point. The three outcomes of an attack are a (1) kill, (2) attack error, or (3) continuation (ball remains in play).

Hitting Percentage

What is a hitting percentage, and how is it calculated? Similar to a baseball hitting average, the attack efficiency in volleyball is calculated with a simple formula:

Kills – Errors / Total Attacks (K-E/TA)

So if you have 20 kills, 5 errors and 60 attempts = $20-5=15/60 = .250$

“Never get rattled. Answer a big play, with a Big Play.” – Bill Self

The summary below outlines the technical cues of the attack.

READY - TRANSITION

As emphasized with other skills like passing, serving and setting, the attack is highly dependent on what you do with your body before contact. **How you get ready to attack**, with quickness and anticipation are critical in transitioning from defensive mode to attack mode.

Transition is the movement from a defensive position to an attack position. We must move quickly and efficiently to get our bodies in ideal approach lane to attack the ball. This is a skill that is often overlooked, and causes hitters to have a poor approach to the set, or to be late. Coaches should train transition movement constantly.

READ

It is important to read the position of the setter, and trajectory of the set quickly. The attacker must position themselves to be open to the oncoming set and create the proper angle of attack. As the setter is pulled further from the net, the angle of attack approach must be adjusted accordingly.

REACT

APPROACH

The number of steps in the attack approach will vary – depending on the time allowed for transition, the attacker’s pattern, and tempo of the set. In general, outside hitters will use a 4-Step or 3-Step approach. Middle hitters on quick tempo sets may only have time to get off the net a few feet, and thus a simple 2-Step approach may be required. We will highlight the basic 3-Step approach for this article.

3-Step Approach

L(1) – R(2)/L(3) – the third and fourth steps are almost simultaneous.

Left (1) – Left step onto ball of foot (not heel) with the knee bent. This first step will set the DIRECTION of your approach toward the ball. If the ball is set inside, this first step should be inside. Arms should be relaxed at your side – similar to starting to run. The body begins to lean forward in the direction of the set (see photo/model below).

Right (2) – Longer and powerful step landing on heel. Swing both arms back fully with the palms facing upward. This step is toward the ball with your hitting shoulder, **opening your shoulder and hips** up to the setter and ball.

Left (3) – The close or “break-step” is more **parallel to the net** – it checks the forward momentum, and transfers the energy vertically! The arms are thrust upward – with the **LEFT arm leading**, as if to reach toward the ball (more on arm-swing later).



Timing

Observe (above model) how the two outside hitters are in a **forward leaning position**, and already into their first step while the ball is still in the setter's hands. Their arms are arm down by their sides almost in a running position (right arm forward/left leg forward). The middle attacker is in his 2nd step of his approach, and thus, his arms are extending backwards.

How to Jump Higher

Here are a few keys to maximizing your jump:

Smooth build-up of speed during approach:

- No "stutter step"
- No sporadic speed change
- No deceleration

Slow to fast! Last two steps are more explosive and quicker.
Feet plant in dorsi-flexed position – don't jump off your toes.
Stay tall. There should be no excessive forward lean of the body.
Load the legs but keep body relatively upright.
Strong full arm-swing upward.



ARM SWING

Elbow high or low? Hit with your shoulder or by rotating your hips? Focus on internal and external rotation, or elbow extension? When do I get my elbow up? The volleyball arm swing is a lot more complicated than it seems – there is way more to it than meets the eye. So . . . lots of photos/models provided here.

Open-Up!

For right-handed hitters, the left shoulder is to the net initially, with the right shoulder back – **“opening up to the setter”**. This is why a correct L-R-L approach is so critical to learn at an early age, as it **opens up both the hips and shoulders** to the ball.

As you leave the ground, and swing your arms upward, the non-hitting arm reaches up toward the ball, while the **hitting shoulder, elbow and hand draw back lower**. This creates a tilting posture in the air. Think of your hitting hand as “pulling water”-with the palm facing the ground. By keeping your hitting elbow low in the “draw-back”, the scapula and shoulder muscles are put in a more stable position.

Think of the mechanics of throwing a football:

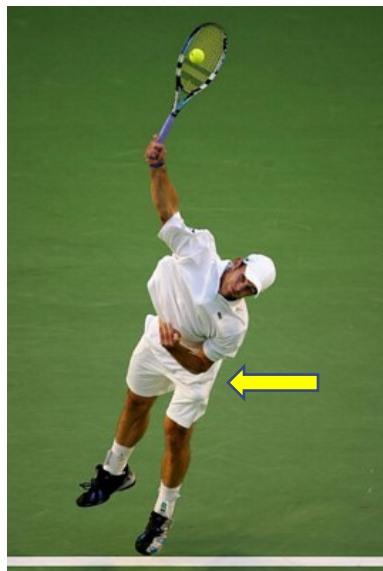
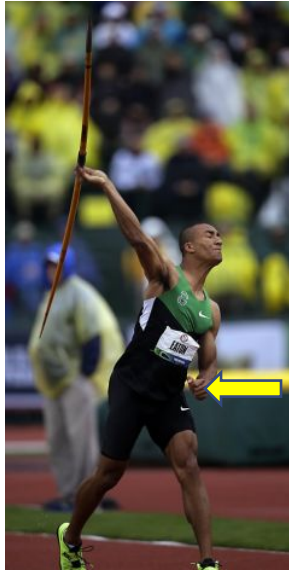


Rotation & Power Generation

The volleyball arm swing is an “**ipsilateral rotation**” of the body - or rotation of one side over a fixed point. Right handed volleyball players rotate their bodies around an axis/fixed point that is their left side. Think of your left scapula and left hip being the hinges on a door, and the rest of your body being the door.

A volleyball arm swing is only slightly different from a javelin throw, a tennis serve, or a baseball throw. They are all ipsilateral rotations. Only **volleyball players have to do this all while in the air!**

Have a look for yourself:



Ashton Eaton recently won the 2012 Olympic decathlon by setting a new world record. Andy Roddick, one of the best tennis servers in the world. His mechanics are considered biomechanically phenomenal. Greg Maddux, one of the best pitchers to ever play. Not to mention he played 22 seasons without ANY serious arm injuries.

Youtube: “Serena Williams Serve Slow Motion”

Have you noticed any similarities? First, look at their left arm. The position is nearly the same in every photo. Look at their left legs. All of them are in some amount of hip flexion, those who are further along in the rotation have more hip flexion.

All are slightly side bent to the left, which creates a mechanical advantage and thus improves their performance. It is one of the few deviations from a perfect ipsilateral rotation. This deviation will create more power. Why? Fixed points and muscle slings –but this is beyond the scope of this attacking summary. Suffice to say, the left arm and hip are acting as a fixed point, like the base of a crane. The base doesn't move and brings its load closer to it.

Stay Tall

It is **not a piking action**. Stay tall as your hitting arm extends and reaches high for the ball, while the left arm pulls in to the stomach, or left hip area.



Contact & Follow-Through

Notice the model to the right. Clay Stanley is widely considered the best opposite in the world, also one of the best servers in the world (the serve and attack arm swings are the same)

His hitting shoulder rises up, as the non-hitting shoulder pulls down. Again, his left hip is the HINGE point. The right side (for right-handed hitters) stays “tall” and extended to get maximum reach. Contact is made with a straight arm, slightly in front of hitting shoulder

Hit the ball with a **strong open hand**. Contact should be made on the top ½ of the ball (see photo) to create top-spin. Keep the wrist loose and **snap it over the top of the ball**.

Hit through the ball. Let the arm go **through in the direction of the hit!**



The image below is one of the best I could find of a technically perfect attack:

Frame 1: Left arm reaching up, hitting elbow stays low, and hitting hand relaxed (“pulling water”). The hitting shoulder and right hip are **back**, while the left side of the body is towards the net.

Frame 2: Right hip is first to start rotation toward the net - loading the torso (notice how the shoulders are almost perpendicular to the net). As the left arm pulls down, rotation follows in a muscular chain reaction: hips > torso > shoulder > elbow > wrist > fingers.

Frame 3: Left arm continues to pull down into stomach, as the hitting shoulder now rotates forward, and the hitting elbow rises up! So the elbow pulls back low, and finishes high.

Frame 4: Hips and shoulders now rotated through, as full power and extension force are delivered to the ball! The right side is reaching and staying tall, while the left hip acts as the stationary hinge point. Look at the maximum reach at the point of contact.



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BLOCKING

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BLOCKING

This is the first line of defence in Volleyball. The objective of the "block" is to stop the ball from crossing the net or to channel the attack to defenders. The three front-court players share blocking.

If the block is not formed properly, the defensive players cannot properly position themselves around the block and areas of the court become exposed.

In my opinion, too little time is spent on teaching this important individual and team skill. Players must learn both the individual technique of blocking, as well as how block in unison with one or more players.

The summary below outlines the technical cues of the block.

READY

As with every skill a successful block starts with a consistent and correct ready position. Blockers need a similar ready position when their team is serving, and when the ball is on the opponent's side of the net. Often, the blockers do not get set in proper ready position early enough, especially when a teammate is serving. They need to be ready for an "over-pass".

Before the serve is made:

1. Identify the attacker's location and likely patterns of attack.
2. Communicate with your teammates – call out number of attackers, who's taking whom, and whether it is a front row or back row setter.
3. Move into a ready position that will minimize the amount of lateral movement needed.
4. Athletic stance – knees slightly bent and ready to jump, hands up at head level or slightly higher, with your body approximately 1-2 feet off the net.



READ

THE CUES

Blockers must focus on the hitter and read their body language and positioning cues to know where to set the block.

BSBH = Ball – Setter – Ball – Hitter

The blocker watches the path of the ball to determine the best initial position to start the block. The eyes follow the ball to the setter. The setter will give clues as to where they will set the ball – how far off the net, what angle they are approaching the ball at, if they arch their back on a back set, and so on.

As the ball leaves the setters hands, and the path of the ball is determined, the eyes then focus on the hitters approach path and cues.

Similar to taking a “charge” in basketball, your body should be placed in the direction the attacker is moving so that if they came through the net you would hit them squarely.

REACT

Footwork

Depending on the distance needed to travel, different types of footwork can be used. The preferred method is a simple shuffle-step. For covering larger distances a 3 step turn and run.

Middles – The first step of 3-step turn and run is a JAB STEP in the direction of the set. If moving to your RIGHT (toward the opponent’s power hitter) the first step should with the right foot, and ideally it should cover some distance. When you move along the net to block, plant your break foot perpendicular to the net, so that you jump straight up and down. Always try to land in the same place from where you jump.

Seal & Penetrate

When moving along the net and when jumping, carry the hands at shoulder height. As your hands clear the tape of the net, begin to penetrate immediately over the net. “Seal” the net with your hands, thumbs pointing to the ceiling a balls width apart, and arms locked. Whenever possible extend your arms across the net (penetration).

Hand Position

The fingers should be spread out so that each hand is as large as possible. Thumbs should point upward. This will bring the arms together – approximately half the width of the ball.

Blocking Discipline

Blockers must be disciplined to ensure the block meets four specific criteria:

1. Hands positioned to take away a specific space from the hitter.
2. Block held solid in place so that coverage does not change.
3. Do not reach for the ball since this moves the block and risks tools.
4. Hands should be positioned to direct the ball towards position 6



Bunch & Read

In higher levels of volleyball, front row players can start from a bunch and read position. All three front row players start nearer the center of the net and read the opposition to determine where the attack will be made. Players should be close enough to high-five while they read the play.

Triple Block

A proper bunch and read will make it possible to triple block against most 3rd tempo (higher) attacks. This requires all three front row players to move quickly and aggressively to place the block. The player furthest from the ball must be disciplined about taking part in the block.



Block Shadow & Court Coverage

Both blockers and passers need to be aware of the area covered by the block and the area of the court that is exposed to the hitter. **Blockers need to be disciplined about holding the block in place** so that coverage behind the block does not change during the attack. Passers need to position themselves outside of the shadow of the block in order to cover the exposed areas of the court.

Blocker needs to move and set the block in the hitter's angle of approach – as early as possible!

DON'T REACH!

Don't reach out to the ball/hitter. Make sure that as the **right front** blocker you are never reaching outside of your right shoulder when blocking. On the left side you need to make sure you do not reach outside your left shoulder. If you reach toward the sideline at the last second, the likelihood of the hitter "tooling" or "wiping" the ball off your hands goes way up.

If blocking the cross-court attack - you need to line up with your outside hand on the ball. If you want to block their line shot you need to have your inside hand on the ball.



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DIGGING

While the “dig” can also be used to describe the forearm pass in service reception, down-balls and free balls, we will focus this segment on digging the hard driven attack, as well as recovery skills used to dig the ball UP.

“Will” & “Skill”

Defense is an attitude, or the “will” to get to the ball, as much as a skill. The player with the mindset that the ball simply will not hit the hardwood has the best chance of success.

READY

Base

Each player should have a Base position on the court that he or she uses as a starting point within the team’s defensive system - “I have to get to this base position quickly, and then read and react accordingly”. Coaches should try to eliminate any unnecessary movement in their players base defensive positioning.

Body Position

It is important to keep your knees bent and remain in a low stance. You should be lower than you are to receive serve. Keep your weight balanced on your toes so you can spring forward or to the side to get the ball. Bend at the waist to put your shoulders over your knees and keep your arms out to the side just slightly wider than your knees. You need to be able to move longer distances if the opponent tips the ball.

READ

Reading is CRITICAL in becoming a great defender. Much of this comes from hours on the court, and simply playing the game, but there are also several Cues one can use to read and anticipate the play. Watch the hitter to glean any clues about where the ball might be hit:

- What is the hitter’s angle of approach?
- Where are the shoulders facing?
- Where is the hitter's body in relation to the ball?
- What are the hitter's placement options?
- How well is the block set up?
- Are they taking or giving the line?
- Is there a hole in the block?

You Must See the Ball

Get in front of the hitter's shoulder and make sure you can see the hitter and the ball. Don't hide behind the block. If the block is solid, and you cannot see the ball, you may want to move up for the tip, or get outside of the shadow of the block.

Make the ball hit you!

The goal is to make the ball hit you! Get your body in the hole and get in its path! If this is all you did as a defender, you would be great.

REACT

With the ball going 60-100 miles per hour, and recalling average human reaction time of .2s – there is simply **no time** to move a large distance! All you can hope for is to react slightly with your body & platform, to get in as stable position as possible with your passing platform out, to intercept the ball so it goes UP (not over the net back to where it came from).

You need to beat the ball to the spot. The successful defender is as skilled in the **reading and pre-contact movement** as they are in the technical aspects of the contact itself.

CONTACT

Early Platform

If presenting a flat stable surface is important to service reception, it is even more critical in digging a hard driven attack. The arms must be out in front and ready to intercept the ball. The less distance between you and the ball, the closer to your final digging posture you need to be.

When digging a hit down the line for instance, players must simply put out an early platform in the right vicinity, and hope they have read it correctly.

Posture

The goal is to dig the ball with both arms, so once you see where the ball is headed, bring your arms together, connect your hands and create your flat platform. Do not swing your arms. If the ball is hit to your right, bring your left arm to meet your right on the right side of your body. Do not connect your hands in the center of your body and swing your arms out to the ball. The momentum will carry the ball in that direction more times than not.

Sometimes, it is impossible to get to the ball with two hands. In that case, it is more important to get the ball UP than to use perfect form. For balls to the side, outside of the platform range – separate your platform and reach out with one arm if you have to and get the ball up – using one half of your platform.



Go Through the Ball

One of the common errors in digging is when players put out maximum effort to reach the ball, but fail to continue to move through the ball. By trying to stop their body's momentum, the player ends up poking at the ball, or the ball is simply deflected but keeps going in the same general direction. It is better to dig the ball up and into the court, by taking yourself out of the play temporarily by sprawling or diving or rolling "through" the ball.

Scoop or J-Stroke

Often with a ball that is low and far in front of the defender, they will need to do everything possible to get there platform under a ball that is very close to the floor. In this case the player will break their passing platform at the elbows and perform a scooping motion in an effort to jack the ball up high.



MANAGE RISK

Dig It UP, or "Dig to the X"

The USA Women's National team calls this 20-10. 20 feet in the air, and 10 feet off the net. For me, the ideal is to dig to what we call the X. On a hard driven ball, the teams digging target should be in the middle of the court – 3-4 meters off the net, 3-4 meters from each sideline – so that you can make a mistake of over 3-4 meters and the ball is still on your side. More importantly, high enough and in a good position for your setter to create an attack out of the dig. This height and location factors in the need for the setter to also stay and dig first, and then move in to make the set.