Nearly a decade ago, the libero position was introduced on the international volleyball stage. By 2002, this specialized, back-row defensive position was launched in NCAA competition. During the 2006-07 season, the libero found a permanent home on the high school court.

Since that time, the libero, as the defensive specialist, has garnered considerable attention. As high school and club coaches, how do you train the libero to receive the serve well and make the spectacular digs? More importantly, how much attention to proper passing technique do you give to the other five players on the court?

Indeed, volleyball is an incredibly complex game of somewhat “simple” skills. Essentially, “the ball is hit from up to 60 cm above the height of a basketball hoop – that’s about 3.65m – and takes 0.3 seconds to get from the spiker to the baseline receiver. That means the receiver must assess incoming angle, decide where to pass the ball and then control the pass in the blink of an eye. A purely rebound sport, volleyball is a game of constant motion” (FIVB, 2007).

Often times, it is that “constant motion” concept that gets some passers – and teams – in trouble.

In fact, one of the biggest mistakes that players make when playing the game, especially at the lower levels, is that they are simply not ready to receive the ball at all times. It does not matter whether you are the setter, libero, middle blocker or outside hitter, when you are not the person engaged in the set, dig, block or attack, you should be prepared to receive the ball.

Of course, there are many different ways to teach players to get ready to receive the ball.

Here we will concentrate on the ideas of three of the game’s great passing instructors: Toshi Yoshida (2004 U.S. Women’s Olympic Volleyball Team head coach), Sally Kus (1996 Volleyball Hall of Fame Mintonette Medallion of Merit winner and USAV-CAP Cadre member) and Terry McLaughlin, head women’s volleyball coach at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Ore.

In his book Inside Out of Passing (2004), Yoshida reveals that his experience has taught him that volleyball players in the United States are seriously lagging behind those of players in other countries, especially China, Japan, Korea, Russia and Brazil.

“Honestly speaking, from my experience, in comparison to other countries, I would have to say that the basic ball control levels of USA youth-age players is a little bit behind. A little? Okay, if I go a little further, I might have to say that there is a huge gap between USA players and players from foreign countries. This may be due to the lack of training time or insufficient ball control drills being used. We all know that good ball control technique is needed to play quality volleyball” (Yoshida, p. i).

Yoshida goes on to explain that in the United States, volleyball coaches are blessed with very good athletes, but many are incredibly inexperienced when it comes to ball control. According to Yoshida, passing is absolutely one of the most important skills in the game.

“Passing includes, but is not limited to, basic ball control skills such as the fundamentals of forearm passing,” Yoshida explains. “Passing is one of the most sensitive skills among all individual volleyball skills. It is related so much to the player’s mentality. Passing performance is affected by a player’s emotion because there is time...
between a referee's whistle. Time creates thought in a player's mind and temporarily distracts him or her” (p. ii).

As a result, according to Yoshida, there are five “coaching philosophies” to keep in mind when teaching the art of passing, and there are eight “teaching keys” to passing a ball correctly.

**Yoshida’s Coaching Philosophies for the Perfect Pass**
1. “You have to teach your players something that you can believe in, which may not be an easy thing to do because you often don’t know what to believe. Coaching is the process of believing yourself. Once you find something that might work for you and your players, you’ve got to stick with it” (p. ii). Otherwise, your players will never experience enough repetition in order to elicit “automatic execution” of a particular skill.

2. “Unlike the way everyone wears different sizes in their clothes, coaches must have a uniform way to correct problems” (p. iii). In other words, you may have players with different heights, muscle strength, limb length, etc., but it is your job as the coach to have a plethora of information and knowledge on teaching in order to get your point across to each individual player.

3. “Don’t be afraid of making mistakes. Let’s make a good miss!” (p. iii). According to Yoshida, players must not be wary of making mistakes, and they should keep doing what they are doing without hesitation or doubt.

4. A coach must “train players to pass well under pressure. If you train them well, they will not feel any pressure and will deliver the ball to your target with pinpoint accuracy when it matters” (p. iv). Only repeated instruction on the court gives the players the confidence they need to pass well in all situations.

5. “Preparation is everything. If players are trained well, they can pass well. It is as simple as that” (p. iv).

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**CALENDAR**

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Notice the back-row player is in the ready position and is prepared to dig the ball. Photo courtesy of FIVB.
Yoshida’s Teaching Keys for Passing

1. Readiness
2. Focus on the server and the ball
3. Get the right rhythm and “GO”
4. Move your feet first
5. Incidental angle and reflex angle
6. Contact the ball in front of your “Tanden”
7. Touch the ball as low as you can
8. Bring the platform back to the initial position.

Readiness

Essentially, Yoshida’s readiness key focuses on an initial posture that allows the body to move anywhere prior to contact with the ball. Basically, a player should remain in a posture that will not promote fatigue, with all joints and muscles ready to move. A good way to ensure all muscles are engaged is to sway.

Focus on the Server and the Ball

Yoshida advocates watching the server’s face and body to determine the type of serve he or she will use and in what direction the serve will end up. Once the ball has left the server’s hands, the passer must concentrate solely on the ball. According to Yoshida, “Watch the middle or the bottom of the ball to keep your chin down as you pass” (p. 15).

Get the Right Rhythm and “GO”

According to Yoshida, “If you have good passing form but no rhythm, you will not pass well. Rhythm is the timing you use to move and put your platform to the ball. This timing comes from within” (p. 16). The basic timing to pass is 1-2-3.

1. Wait: as the server contacts the ball.
2. Wait more: as the passer locks on and moves to the ball.
3. Contact: as the passer contacts the ball.

Yoshida states, “No matter what the velocity of the serve, the passers must wait for the ball to come to them with “2” timing. This is the most important key to get the right timing” (p. 19).

Move Your Feet First

Move your feet first, and then the arms. Yoshida reminds players to keep in mind that energy for passing comes from the ground. Therefore, you must pass with your entire body. He states, “Watch baseball and softball players. When they catch an outfield fly ball they run and stop under the ball and then put out their glove just before catching the ball. That is the way to pass the volleyball. Move your feet first and put your arms out just before passing” (p. 20).

Incidental Angle and Reflex Angle

Yoshida borrows a principle from physics for this key element of passing. Essentially, when an object flies and hits into a wall with A°, the object then bounces off the wall with the equal amount of B° (see Figure 1, right). In this case, the wall is the two forearms (platform) and the object is the ball. According to Yoshida, “The reflex angle is automatically determined by the incidental angle. Players need to create the correct platform angle to pass the ball to a certain spot. According to this principle, the player does not even have to move his/her platform to the target. The player would only need to put the platform in line with the incoming ball” (p. 33.)

Control the Ball in Front of Your “Tanden”

The Tanden is a Japanese word that describes an area 3 to 5 cm below the belly button. Yoshida states, “It is the center of the body and all energy comes from Tanden. Tanden is actually a spot inside our bodies and is where our energy (‘Chi’ in Chinese or ‘Ki’ in Japanese) begins. The energy is displaced within the Tanden zone” (p. 35).

Touch the Ball as Low as You Can

For volleyball players, “the best passers wait for the ball, sit under the ball and pass the ball as low to the floor as they can. The velocity of the serve decreases as it gets closer to the floor, which makes it much easier to control a ball with less velocity than one with more velocity at a higher contact point” (p. 38).

Bring the Platform Back to the Initial Position

According to Yoshida, there are three factors to consider when bringing your arms back to the starting position after contact with the ball. Factor 1) No arm swing! “Arm swing is when a passer’s center of gravity is moving away from the ball and his/her hands are moving forward, leaving a space under the arms. If you use arm swing movement when you pass, you can only control the ball if the serve has no velocity. No arm swing technique occurs when you keep your upper arms close to your body (no space under your arms) and move your Tanden toward the target” (p. 41). Factor 2) Attack the ball! Punch it! Contact the ball hard! “Do not let the served ball contact you.

Toshi Yoshida, 2004 U.S. Women’s Olympic Team head coach, suggests that the served ball should not contact the passer. Rather, the passer should contact the ball. Photo courtesy of FIVB.
You contact the ball first with the right timing” (p. 41). Factor 3) Bring the arms back to your starting position. According to Yoshida, “The principle of the pendulum swing is that the pendulum returns to the starting spot. Movement should start and end in the same position for quick reaction to the next play. This is a basic human movement” (p. 42).

In her book, Coaching Volleyball Successfully (2004), Sally Kus also emphasizes the importance of a proper preparatory stance for passing the ball. For Kus, posture plays a major role in efficient movement on the court. According to Kus, “There are three primary postures used when playing volleyball: low, medium and high. Some skills start in one posture and finish in another” (p. 83). Passing is one of the skills that should always be executed in the low posture.

Kus goes on to explain, “Basic ready posture should contain anticipated energy. Anticipated energy means that the player is ready for a quick start and stop. This is the stable staggered ready position and it is broken down like this:

1. The feet are slightly wider than the shoulders, with the knees inside the line of the feet.
2. The knees are bent deep enough to be able to spring in any direction, but not low enough to disable agility.
3. The weight is on the inside of the feet centered near the balls of the feet and big toes. It is catlike ... ready to pounce.
4. The waist, knees and ankles are at equal angles.
5. The right foot is ahead of the left in a balanced stance leaning forward” (p. 83).

Terry McLaughlin, in her chapter titled, “Individual Defense: Body Posture and Movement,” found in Coaching Volleyball: Defensive Fundamentals and Techniques (2004), echoes the sentiments outlined earlier by Yoshida and Kus. In fact, McLaughlin cites Yoshida in her chapter when discussing ball control. “Ball control is another benefit of [a low posture], as was pointed out by Toshi Yoshida. Ball control is enhanced when the ball is dug in front of the body of the athlete. The [low] posture may help eliminate some of the swinging arms and swivel movements seen as athletes’ bodies rotate to dig balls that are even with or behind their bodies” (p. 107).

McLaughlin goes on to explain how the player’s “First Motion” and “Shoulder Rotation to Present Proper ‘Rebound Platform’” can easily be trained.

**First Motion**

McLaughlin advises that coaches watch their passers closely to see what happens when an opponent hits the ball at them. The first motion many athletes make is to take the hips and/or the shoulders up, bringing them to a higher position. McLaughlin then says there are two body mechanics that can help a coach correct these first motions. “A ‘shoulder-up’ motion takes the athletes further away from the floor. They get further away from the ground and into a higher base position than is optimal. The second body mechanic that takes athletes higher than their base posture occurs if the hips are elevated, as happens when athletes straighten their legs. They are actually raising their shoulders and/or extending their legs, thereby raising their hips” (p. 107).

According to McLaughlin, there are a couple of things you can train the athlete to do in order to elicit proper movements. To begin, make sure that the very first thing that moves on the athlete is the foot. “The athlete should move the foot in a direction to cut off the angle of the ball, while at the same time maintaining an equal, parallel distance from the floor with the hips and shoulders. Stress that athletes drive the foot toward the angle of the ball rather than lifting up at the moment of contact” (p. 108).

**Shoulder Rotation to Present Proper “Rebound Platform”**

McLaughlin advises, “If the ball is exactly where the athlete is looking, the next movement would be to drop the right shoulder slightly to ‘block’ the direction of the ball. This platform would ensure a better rebound angle toward the target. You can train your entire team on this technique with a simple point drill: point left, point right, point back, point forward.”

**Conclusion**

Undeniably, this is just a quick introduction to the intricacies of effective passing. Entire books have been written about this incredibly important volleyball skill. Yoshida sums it up nicely when he states, “Perfection of passing does not only come from knowledge. Don’t be afraid of making mistakes. Players must not be afraid of making mistakes, but they must be ‘good misses.’ As long as my players are trying to use the right techniques and the ball goes in a playable direction, we are okay. The most important thing to remember is to keep on doing it without hesitation or doubt” (p. iv).

**References**


1-2-3 Passing
Toshi Yoshida, 2004 U.S. Women’s Olympic Volleyball Team
Number of Players: 1 at a time
Number of Balls: Steady supply

Objective:
To instill in passers the concept of 1-2-3 timing when passing the ball.

Directions:
1. Set up a line of passers (P) with the coach (C) serving the ball.
2. Coaches and/or players should call 1-2-3.
3. The serve should be medium height and medium velocity.
4. The passers should focus on the server.
5. The serve is hit on 1.
6. The down movement while bringing the platform down is completed by 2.
7. Contact and up movement is completed by 3.
8. Do the drill for a couple of minutes until the passers pick up the timing.

Amoeba
Sally Kus, from Coaching Volleyball Successfully (2004)
Number of Players: 12 per side
Number of Balls: 0

Objective:
A nonball drill that allows players to work on positioning, posture and total court movement.

Directions:
1. Twelve players set up on two teams on opposite sides of the court in base position.
2. The setter (S) runs the drill on each side.
3. Team A’s setter calls out “transition.”
4. The setter runs to target, the front row transitions off the net, and the back row balances the court.
5. The setter calls out a set or play and his/her team runs the play with no ball (pass, set, approach/jump/swing and cover).
6. At the same time, Team B runs its defense to defend the attack (block and dig).
7. Team A returns from cover to base one defense.
8. Team B’s setter now runs a no-ball offensive play.
9. The setters may call a dump, free ball, down ball, specific set or offensive play to run.

Pass on One Knee
Joel Dearing, Springfield College
Number of Players: 12
Number of Balls: 6

Objective:
Passing on one knee forces the player to focus on making a perfect platform and contacting the ball without moving the feet.

Directions:
1. Divide into six groups of two players each.
2. One player in each group (the tosser, T) stands at the net with a ball facing his/her partner (the passer, P).
3. Each passer kneels with one knee on the ground and forms a platform with the arms.
4. The tosser provides an easy toss to the passer, keeping the ball near the passer’s platform.
5. The passer directs a forearm pass back to the tosser.
6. Repeat 10 times.
7. Players then switch positions and roles.
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