Chapter V

CHARACTERISTICS IN TRAINING WOMEN VOLLEYBALL PLAYERS

by Yuan Weimin

A coach should do everything possible to tap his players’ potential in training, whose ultimate aim is to win in competition. A volleyball coach should follow the laws governing this particular game. If his trainees are females, he should also take the females’ physiological and psychological characteristics into account.

1. The Leading Role

A coach in all sports should play the leading role in his team. This is particularly true with women’s volleyball. Psychologically, girls do not show so much initiative as boys. They are more dependent on the coach, who should therefore win their trust as a prerequisite for his leading role. In the process of training, he has to spend much time as the girls’ playing partners - now serving the ball to the receiver, now passing the ball to the setter, now setting the ball to the spiker, now smashing the ball against the blocker. That is why a coach exerts a greater influence on a women’s team than on a men’s in the playing methods and styles.

Then we should not forget that girls are usually more sentimental but less sociable than boys. Very often there are some small cliques within a women’s volleyball team, each consisting of two or three bosom friends keeping close together, sometimes to the point of exclusiveness, which may weaken the coherence of the whole team. The coach must see that his players always place the collective interest above everything else.

Volleyball is a sport in which six players play one ball and must be united as one man - or “as one woman” in the case of a female team - a sport in which unity plays the decisive factor for victory. The coach is not only an instructor of playing skills, but first of all an educator of the players, the unifier of the team.

2. Starting from Defensive Skills

In a volleyball game, almost all attacks start from defense. There is no offense without defense. Statistics show that the ball in spiking flies at a speed of 88m/sec for a women’s team and 33m/sec for a men’s. Since they play on a court of the same size, there are more defensable shots in a women’s game.
According to statistics of Chinese teams, a woman player’s raised hands reach an average of 5.77 cm above the net, while a man’s can only reach 2.97 cm above the net, which is 19 cm higher than that in women’s volleyball. As a result of this difference of 2.80 cm in the reach above the net, the contention in service and service reception is more intense in a women’s game than in a man’s, and much time should be given to the training of related skills. With service reception the receiving side enters a rally and starts its basic playing pattern. A poor performance in the initial stage will make it difficult to organise an attack or may even end in the loss of a point.

Service is done by a single player, without any obstruction by the opposite side. A good serve may win a point. Service has thus become increasingly aggressive. The women’s game stands more chances for service winners because of the player’s higher reach over the net. Every player should learn a few serving methods and know how to use them in different situations as a scoring means and a tactical weapon.

With more defensible attacks, a women’s game usually has longer rallies than a men’s and more chances of launching counter-attacks.

Blocking is the first line of defense. But the rate of effective blocking is only 20% even in high-level matches.

There are three cases of effective blocking: 1) The blocked shot kills the attacking side, which may be termed “a killing block”, 2) The blocked shot is received by the attacking side, which may be termed “a received block”, and 3) The blocked shot rebounds to the blocker’s side and is retrieved easily by one of the team-mates, which may be termed “a saved block”.

Among the small portion of effective blocking in the women’s game, the “saved blocks” account for only 30 per cent. But when this is added to the high percentage of unsuccessful blocks, we can see that the backline players have to bear the brunt of attacks. As a matter of fact, the female backline players on top-notch teams are capable of receiving 60% of the unblocked attacks, as against 40% for the opposite sex. Consequently, the importance of defense training for female volleyballers can never be overestimated.

A counter-attack consists of blocking, covering, digging, setting and spiking, which must be well linked up. Any miss in the linking may mess up the whole thing or even lead to a failure to make a good return. But the connecting skills are often neglected, because they are not used in direct confrontation and seem to be easier than blocking and defense. The fact is that they are all the more important for women’s volleyball in which rallies are longer than those in the men’s.

Volleyball is a game in which the ball is allowed to touch the player’s hand for but a fraction of a second. For most of the time, she is engaged in movements without the ball such as starting, running and jumping. Statistics show that of all the technical movements in a women’s game, those with the ball account only for 20.75% for the main spiker, 21.72% for the supplementary spiker and 25.55% for the setter, while those without the ball amount to 75-80%. These two kinds of technical movements are inter-connected with each other. In technical training, therefore, the coach should pay sufficient attention to the movements without the ball and connecting skills, without which no counter-attacks can be spoken of.
3. Setting

Setting is the key link for switchover from defense to counter-attack. As the kernel of the whole team, a setter should know how to direct the play, set the rhythm, change the formation, find out the vulnerable spot in opposition and mobilise all forces in an effective attack. In modern volleyball for women, all the players should have a good command of setting skills, so that every pass may be turned into an effective attack through effective setting.

A setter has an active role to play in almost all counter-attacks. Her movements with and without the ball are the most numerous of the team, and among these 90% are positional movements, which again account for 64.7% of her movements with the ball. In view of this, the training of a setter must be carried out in close combination with positional movements.

Here we must stress the vital role played by the setter when her side receives the service, not only because, as mentioned before, the contention in service and service reception is more intense in the women’s game than in the men’s, but because the first setting in a rally will determine whether her team’s tactical idea will be realised. So it is necessary to train her in many “serve-pass-set” drills.

Our statistics show that a men’s game totals an average of 71.1-72.5 rallies while a women’s game only totals 44.5-52.5 rallies. But within each rally, the female setter has more technical movements to perform - four in 12% and 5-10 in 25.6% of the rallies in a game, as against 8.8% and 12.5% respectively in comparison with a male setter. In other words, a rally contains more counter-attacks in the women’s volleyball than in the men’s. This necessitates a greater intensity in the training of setting in counter-attacks, which is often more difficult than the setting in service reception and in which the setter is required to cooperate well with her teammates in passing the oncoming shot and organizing the counter-attack, which involves many connecting skills.

In training a setter, the coach should make strict demands on her not only in basic skills, but also in the acquisition of a broad periphery of vision, quick reflexes, a sound sense of judgement and the ability to carry out the coach’s tactical intentions. Special drills should be arranged for her as an important part of ordinary and pre-competition training.

4. Smashing and Blocking

Smashing and blocking are the two chief scoring means in volleyball, accounting for two-thirds of the points won. With the player’s increased body height and springing ability, the contention over the net has become more and more intense. According to Chinese statistics, the average number of spikes in a men’s game surpasses that in a women’s game by 26.2%, while the number of rallies surpasses by 20.4%. In other words, spikes in counter-attacks
occupy a greater proportion in the women’s game than in the men’s. There is also a marked
difference between the two in regard to the role played by the main and supplementary spikers
in various technical movements, as can be seen from their different percentages of the
individual’s total of technical movements with the ball in a game:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spiking %</th>
<th>Blocking %</th>
<th>First Pass in Counter-attack %</th>
<th>First Pass in Service reception %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main Spiker</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary Spiker</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From this table we can see that spiking and blocking training should be conducted in
combination not only with service reception, but what is more important, with counter-attacks.
As indicated by the table, a female main spiker has a higher percentage in spiking than her male
counterpart and should therefore receive a greater volume of intensive spiking training. The
coach may pit a main spiker against a supplementary spiker, so that the former will have more
practice in spiking and the latter more practice in blocking to meet the needs of actual combat.

Although the percentage of blocking comes third in the total of the main spiker’s technical
movements with the ball, it comes first in the supplementary spiker’s total. It should be pointed
out that blocking has become more important than ever as a scoring means in women’s
volleyball and the coach should attach more attention to it, so that all his players will be good
blockers.

5. Physical Training

Physical training lays the groundwork for the whole training programme. Without good
physical attributes, it would be impossible for a volleyballer to develop her individual skills
- no matter how refined - to the full. This is especially true at the present time when competition
has become more heated than ever and a team has often to play a series of gruelling matches
at short intervals in a major tournament. When the two sides are on a par technically, it is
always the physically stronger that wins.

In training a women’s team, the coach must always take women’s physiological characteristics
into consideration. Their musculature is more flexible and plastic than the men’s. On the basis
of increased strength and sensitivity of joint tissues, we must pay particular attention to
improving the muscular strength and explosive power of those parts constantly exercised in
the game, such as the loin and abdomen, the thighs and calves, the ankles and arches, and the
shoulders, forearms, wrists and fingers.
Considering that women have a higher rate of body fat, a lower vital capacity and a smaller amount of blood supply from each heart beat than the opposite sex, we must pay great attention to improving their staying power, starting from general stamina to specific endurance as required by the game of Volleyball. Since women have a lower content of haemoglobin in their red blood cells, we must take proper measures to ensure its supply in the process of endurance training, giving them high-calorie soft drinks so as to strengthen their cardiac and pulmonary functions and to prevent over-fatigue, anemia or hypertension.

Then there is the special problem of menstruation, to which reaction may vary from person to person. It is necessary for the coach and trainer to cooperate closely with the team doctor and establish specific documents for medical supervision in this regard. The load of exercises should be properly reduced when the girls are in periods, without doing such intensive exercises as high-load jumps and weightlifting, full squats and other exercises that bring a great pressure to bear on the abdominal or pelvic cavity. For serious cases, training should be cut to the minimum or stopped altogether during the period or even for some time afterwards.

6. The Arrangements of Training

To a large extent, how a volleyball team will behave in competition depends on what sort of training it has received and how the training has been arranged by the coach.

As everybody knows, nothing can be perfect. Even the world's best team displays defects of
one kind or another in matches with far inferior adversaries. An able coach should keep an observant eye over his team in all the matches it plays, whether the rivals are weak or strong, to find out its shortcomings. He should make necessary adjustments in his training programme to overcome his team’s main defects through such drills as continuous defense, different attacking patterns, fast positional movements and endurance running. Then he should examine the training effects in competition and make corresponding changes in his training programme again. This process goes on indefinitely, each time at a higher level of performance and a step nearer the high aims set for the team. Thus each training stage may have different contents, with emphasis on some key points yet without neglecting the minor ones.

We often say that we should give the players a large amount of high-load training. But this does not mean that the larger and the higher, the better. We must tap a trainee’s potential to the fullest extent. But there is always a limit to his functional potential, of which he can only mobilize 90 per cent at the maximum in athletic performances, keeping the remnant 10 per cent as reserves. It would be harmful to his health if he should try to exhaust his potential completely. We should tackle the complicated problem of intensity of load carefully, bearing in mind the following general principles:

1) The total amount of training for women players should be greater than that for men.

2) The intensity of load in training should usually be higher than that in competition.

3) Increase the intensity of load gradually, which, as far as technical training is concerned, is manifested mainly in the number of touches with the ball.
4) Physical training should be carried out in combination with technical training.

5) In physical training, emphasis should be shifted gradually from the general to the specific by increasing the proportion of the latter.

6) Increase the amount of chain drills - such as “serve-receive-set” and “strike-block-save” series.

7) As the season approaches, reduce the amount of training while giving prominence to the intensity of load to meet the needs of competition. Give the girls a proper amount of medium- and small-load training to improve their speed and strength needed for intense competition.

8) Cooperate with the trainer and team doctor in medical supervision - recovery from fatigue, treatment of injuries and illnesses and menstrual hygiene.

As for the intensity of mental load, this has something to do with psychological training, which should be discussed in a separate article.