Chapter XVII

PRACTICE AND DRILLS DESIGN

by Bill Neville

Introduction

The standing cliches in sports focus on the theme that the success of any team in a contest is built in the practice gym. So obvious. So true. Most coaches feel they do not have enough practice time, space, or adequate facilities. There is a danger in investing too much time on things one cannot control. (Limited space, limited time slots, league or association restrictions or length of practice seasons, paltry budgets, etc.)

Coaches, as well as players, must focus on what they can control. A coach, of course, must continue pursuing improvement in his training conditions. But concern over what is wrong with a situation should never premeate the positive elements of what a coach is trying to create.

The word “practice” can cover every element of a team’s development. It is not just an organization of drills. It is an on-going opportunity to develop attitude, behavior patterns, cooperation, commitment, discipline, physical condition, techniques and tactics. These elements are intertwined. Blended together, these ingredients make up the final product that is commonly called a “team”.

The following offering will look at these elements of the athletic recipe known as “practice”.

Attitude

The team attitude begins with the coach. A great advantage for any coach is to be able to look into a mirror and see the same person others see. This is not as easy as it sounds. We all have difficulty seeing the person others see. We are biased about ourselves. Either we are too self-critical or not critical enough. Adolph Rupp, the late “Baron” of Kentucky basketball, once said, “We’re never as good as we think we are nor as bad as we think we are.”
The coach initiates how a team is going to feel about itself, how it is going to believe itself, how it will view situations. If the coach blames the officials, a low budget, or pitiful facilities, then the team will follow suit. If the coach is enthusiastic, believes in himself, sees an opportunity for growth even in the most dire situation, then so will the team.

Look in the mirror. Do you see the person others see? Because the coach is the person who will have the most significant influence - positive or negative - over the team, good practices, good matches, and a good program will depend upon the daily attitude exhibited by the coach.

A COACH IS HIS OWN BEST TOOL IN DEALING WITH HIS TEAM. HE SHOULD THOROUGHLY KNOW THAT TOOL AND ITS BEST USES.

**Behavior Patterns**

Practice is the forum for developing the behavior patterns the coach wants his team to follow. All functions of practice should have a design. The disciplines and routines of practice should be consistent. If specific behavior patterns are implanted in practice, they will carry over to traveling habits and, of course, match behavior. The coach’s behavior is the vanguard of team behavior.

The coaching staff should:

- Always start practice on time — every time. (this means the coach should be at practice early to ensure everything is ready).
- Always be dressed in clean, neat coaching apparel.
- Always be well groomed.
- Always have practice outlined in a journal or notebook.

The players should:

- Always be ready to start practice on time — every time.
- Set up the practice gym.
- Always fold up personal equipment (sweats, towels, etc.) and neatly store them in a designated area.
- Prepare mentally for each practice, focusing on areas they need to concentrate on.
- Be in neat, clean practice gear representing the organization for which they play.

The practice area should be neat, clean and organized. It should represent the attitudes and
positive behavior of a team by its preparedness. It is the place the players become the team. It should reflect the team personality and the behavior that makes up that personality.

The behavior patterns—the life style—of the team is molded in the practice gym. On a daily basis the routines of the preparation as well as actual training activities must be consistent in terms of expectations.

**BE CONSISTENT, DEMAND BEHAVIOR FROM YOURSELF AND THE PLAYERS THAT REFLECTS A WINNING ATTITUDE AND PRIDE IN EVERYTHING THE TEAM DOES.**

The “cumulative effect” should be the foundation for any coaching philosophy. How a coach treats any individual situation does not stand alone as witness to his total make up. One bad practice does not cast a permanent pall over a team. No one knows the exact time when he becomes a good player. We get to where we are going by stringing together a long series of experiences. This is especially obvious in goal-oriented activities found in competitive sports.

There is a natural “cumulative effect”. The team and what it represents is an accumulation of its experiences. As coaches, we want a series of experiences to be productive and positive so the result is a quality program.

Everything that is done contributes to the cumulative effect. It can be positive or negative. If a coach is shoddy, inconsistent, and undisciplined, the accumulation of negative experiences will be reflected in the team’s lack of pride, poor self-image and lack-luster performance. On the other hand, if a coach requires high standards, then the accumulation of good experiences will be reflected in the team.

The cumulative effect is easily seen in practice. A team should never waste a day, an hour or a minute. If a team maximizes every opportunity to improve, the result will be first class. Wasted time, low expectations and inconsistency will have the opposite effect.

**DEVELOP AND PUT INTO EFFECT ON A DAILY BASIS, A PLAN WHICH REINFORCES DESIRABLE BEHAVIOR ALL THE TIME.**

**Physical Conditions**

It is a well known fact that a human being who is in great physical condition performs all human functions better. However, a coach needs to be aware of the physical conditioning principles relative to volleyball.

Dr. Carl McGown, a world-known authority on volleyball, has done research on the components of teaching physical skills relative to sport. Many of his findings have been controversial and have affected traditional thinking about training.

Dr. McGown notes:

A participant must be well conditioned to obtain the benefits of a warm up.
Warm up and physical conditioning should be **specific** to the activity to be performed.

Warm up should last at least ten minutes (muscle temperature will stabilize) but no longer than 15 minutes (glycogen stores will begin to deplete).

If specific physical conditioning takes place before technical skills practice begins or the warm up is so intense or long, the quality of skill development will be limited.

Without question, the volleyball athlete must be highly physically conditioned, prepared for explosive, anaerobic function, as well as for the prolonged jumping of a three-hour match. Physical conditioning should be planned and specific to the demands put on the body to perform volleyball skills.

There will be residual benefits from a physically difficult skills practice. The coach must be careful to balance focus on skills development, yet physically train the athlete without obliterating his ability to effectively perform.

**BE SPECIFIC IN PHYSICAL CONDITIONING. DO NOT CONFUSE WARM UP WITH PHYSICAL CONDITIONING. DO NOT CONFUSE PHYSICAL CONDITIONING WITH SKILLS DEVELOPMENT.**

McGown's analysis emphasizes the critical importance of being very specific in every aspect of athletic training. There is virtually no transfer of skills or training effect from one activity to another. Hence, if someone trains for marathon swimming, he cannot emerge from the water and run a marathon without feeling serious pain. Even though the cardiovascular system is in great shape, the muscle usage and body rhythm are completely different.

We must repeatedly train the muscles in the same movements (motor programs) and velocities required in the skill activity.

This concept of specificity shatters many schools of thought in lead up games, transfer of skills from one activity to another, and drills not game related. Part-whole methods of teaching progressions are not efficient.

**RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT THE MOST EFFICIENT WAY TO TRAIN A SKILL IS TO PRACTICE IT AS SPECIFICALLY AS POSSIBLE IN THE EXACT ACTIVITY IN WHICH IT WILL BE USED.**

**Definitions**

**Movements:**

The body mechanics required to execute a physical skill.

**Skill:**

A series of gross movements, postures and series of related finer movements to effectively perform a required physical task.
Repetition: One successful execution of a skill.

Set: A series of required number of repetitions.

Drill: A measured series of sets closely monitored by a coach and designed to blend individual skills into an orchestration of team skills to gain a desired unified effect.

Practice: A block of time scheduled to include a series of drills organized in a logical progression based on predetermined performance goals.

Season: A calendared block of time scheduled to include competitions and practices designed for mutual influence.

**Ingredients For a Good Practice**

In order for a drill and a practice to be effective and efficient, certain elements are required:

**Coach’s Skills**

1. A sound knowledge of the movements and skills.
2. A developed list of principles for teaching techniques.
3. A sound knowledge of the tactical applications of technical skills.
4. A sound knowledge of physical conditioning and training principles.
5. Creativity.
6. Organizational skills.
7. Communication skills.

**Facilities & Equipment**

8. Minimum 2 balls for every player.
9. One net and court per 6 players.
10. No more than 30 feet beyond side lines or end lines and no less than 20 feet to walls.
11. FIVB approved standards.
12. Nets must have unbreakable poles.
13. A basket or cart on wheels to contain at least 24 balls.
14. Ability to set up area, center court.
15. Ceiling of 25 to 40 feet in height.
16. Good lighting.
17. Minimum of stored equipment, sharp wall attachments, etc.
18. Good training equipment (jumping, physical, technical).
Players & Staff Responsibilities

19. Players taught to practice (rules, communication, specific practice skills).
20. All warm up and other players’ articles neatly stored.
22. Coaches in coaching uniforms.

NEVER TEACH TACTICALLY WHAT YOUR PLAYERS CANNOT EXECUTE TECHNICALLY

Each practice should have a theme (i.e., offensive, defensive, fundamentals, game plan review, “heart” development, etc.).
Each practice should have a tempo (i.e., intense game speed, slow learning, etc.).
Each practice should contain a logical progression (i.e., individual skills and movement to application at competition (tactical) level).

Drills are designed accordingly.

Drill Design

1. Teaching

2. Rapid Fire
   Fast tempo, many contacts in short time. Closely supervised—time measurement.

3. Frenzy or Crisis
   Very fast tempo. Focus on intestinal fortitude combined with skills under stressful conditions. X number of repetitions in total or in a row terminates drill.

4. Flow of Play
   All team drills and some singles to triads. Blending of two or more skills. Fast- moderate-slow tempo. Close scrutiny. Successful repetitions in a row. A total successful repetitions.

Drill Measurement

Timed
Successful reps goal
Successful reps in a row
Timed block with required successful reps
Successful reps goal with certain number in a row
Successful reps goal with minuses for unforced errors
Athlete termination

Drill Questionnaire

1. Is it efficient?
   Number of ball contacts to allotted time segment.
   Organizational flow.

2. Does it demand quality of performance?
   How is it measured?
   Are production goals challenging?

3. Does it keep everyone involved?
   What are the roles of the players?

4. Is it game related?

5. What is the work-rest ratio?

6. Is it interesting?

7. Is it measurable?

Other Drill Considerations

Each drill should have a nickname so explanation should be kept to a minimum.

There Are Residual Benefits to Practice

Team building (cohesiveness, common spirit or mental power, discipline)
Cumulative effect
Increased physical condition
“Team personality”
General Phases of Practice

1. **Warm up**
   - Raise body temperature
   - Range of motion
   - Cardiovascular (jumping)
   - Technical

2. **Foundation work**
   - Individual fundamentals progression

3. **Combination work**
   - Drills using individual fundamentals with 2 or more players

4. **Team work**
   - Full team drills applying techniques and skills used in phases 2 and 3

5. **Stress work**
   - Crisis or frenzy drills for individuals or total team

6. **Physical conditioning**
   - Jump training

7. **Cool down**
Players need perfect skill to set up from any position

Blocking Action by One Single Player