TECHNICAL SURVEY

World Championship U23

Men
Brazil 2013
TECHNICAL IMPRESSION
For All Teams

The inaugural and historical Men’s U23 Volleyball World Championship delivered an authentic spectacle with fair play, emotion and aesthetics. The final match symbolized the quality of performance of all technical and tactical aspects of the game. The final phase provided outstanding performances on serving, blocking and defense. It was evident that one day rest at the fifth day of the competition positively influenced all teams allowing a well-deserved rest and recovery.

During the world championship in Uberlandia two new rules were implemented and tested. The first rule was the 21 cap scoring system. The second rule related to the ten-second period to perform a serve after the end of the previous rally. All teams adapted to the new rules. After a rally players often positioned themselves efficiently in order to prepare for their pre-serving routines. Apparently, this rule facilitated the flow of the match and elicited effective time-management in between rallies. The game was also fluid and properly counter-balanced by the technical time-outs. The first rule (cap to 21 points) made the game shorter. In fact, this new rule changed the way players initiate the matches. Most teams were more focused and dedicated to high level of performances from the beginning of each set. It was noticeable the high level of expectations demonstrated by all coaches in this competition.

SERVING

Overall, serving continued to be aggressive with jump serves such as float and spike serves being the most commons serves utilized by most teams. The jump floater was the most dominant style. Serves were performed from all positions along the end line. Players’ technical abilities depicted proficiency and accuracy.

For the most part, top teams demonstrated a fine tuned connection between serving, blocking and transition plays. Interestingly, a major number of players served from the middle (P6) straight forward as opposed to cross court. Moreover, servers’ aggressiveness was indistinct regarding if the serve was targeted into a defense specialist or towards regular hitter-passers players. Several top servers aimed at weaker passers and the tactical jump floater (either short or long) was widely adopted by the top four teams. Jump serves dominated the U23 Men’s World Championship. Short jump floater serves and off-speed spike serves were adopted as tactical alternatives as opposed to ground floater serves.

After closely analyzing serves tendencies (speed, paths and trajectories) it became evident that serves were in sync with court players in order to serve towards crowded areas of the court. As a matter of fact, there was a distinct use of screening as a tactical-technical strategy. At the time of serve, court players shifted across the net adjusting front row and back row players in order to block the view of passers from the opposing team.

For the jump floater, servers tossed the ball with one or two hands. The tosses were performed both before and after take-off. For the spike jump serves many athletes tossed the ball very high and smashed the ball in an attempt to score a point. During the pool play phase as well as the final phases of the championship ground floaters were rarely used. Those whom performed the power spike serve were able to extract huge cheers from the crowds while let serves offered sighs from both serving and receiving sides of the court. Searching for aces has not been an easy task primarily because passers were well informed regarding who was serving where and how. Except for the best two top servers, most players have had more mistakes than aces while trying to be aggressive. The tactical approach into serving aggressively changed from team to team. On the one hand, even though the game
was shorter (cap 21 points per set), many top teams opted for serving with caution at critical points of the match in order to gain and to maintain momentum. On the other hand, in spite of the risk of making mistakes, other teams served very aggressively from the first to the fifth set (in the case of all 3-2 matches across the competition). Servers also executed their approaches perpendicular to the baseline at the correspondent position of their base defense in complex II.

PASSING

Passing among top teams in the U23 men’s championship was a critical factor for catch ups and momentum changes. Both the overhead and underhand passing forms had a specific intention to pass the ball to center areas of the court. Passes performed from short serves had a distinct change in outcomes regarding placement and reference. It was observed that short serves resulted in overpasses. Passers struggled to keep the same standard of passing trajectory (straight and flat passes) as oppose to high passes observed from power jump serves (spike) and jump floaters performed deep court.

Liberos were clearly in charge of larger areas of passing responsibilities in comparison to their counterparts. After systematic observation, many teams adopted a two-man serve receive for passing jump floater and adopted a modified three-men serve receive to pass against power spiking serves. In rotation 2, setters in P6 and in rotation 3 (setter in P5), teams utilized a modified three-man serve receive but quite often presented four men facing the toughest serves. When teams had their setters in the front row, most passing formations pushed the correspondent front row outside hitter (OS) to the left of the court (stack-left). There were few variations from this formation.

SETTING

Setting performances at the U23 World Championship determined the outcome of games and matches throughout the semi and finals phases of the U23 World Championship. Among the top teams, the utilization of fast sets was the most common characteristics of setting when performed by specialized setters. In emergency situations outside hitters and middles executed high sets to the most available back row and front row hitters. When setters defended the first ball, passers were directed towards liberos who then performed high sets either to the opposite player (right side) or towards hitters at position four.

The top four setters in this competition were very efficient, consistent and resourceful technically. Setters utilized overhead, underhand, jumping and one hand sets with a high level of proficiency. The dexterity and manipulative skills demonstrated by the top four setters in this tournament indicates that long-term preparation of setters is certainly a challenge but the key to success.

From a long-term athletes development this U23 World Championship represents a unique opportunity for new talented setters to play and perform at the highest levels possible. Setters have demonstrated a unique level of excellence being able to deliver the ball with passes in system (good passes) or out of systems. Most quick sets happened in front of the setter whom performed jump sets in order to speed up the offense or in an attempt to fake the opponents’ blockers by setting pin attackers. Moreover, when passers pushed the setter into P3-P4, the set was inverted effectively towards the right side hitter (P2) or a quick back set was performed to the middle back. The level of setting (as an overall skill) has been satisfactory. Many players other than the setter and the libero (middles and outside hitters) were able to perform high sets very successfully.
ATTACKING

Attacking systems have been very standardized among the main teams at the U23 World Championship. Most teams utilized the 5 x 1 system. The top four teams utilized fast sets both in the middles as well as at the pins. Serving had a major role in determining the quality of pass as well as the speed of the sets, thus directly affecting the attacking options. High speed serves led to poor passes, leading into an execution of high balls to the outside (p4) plus the utilization of the back row (P6 and P1) as second tempo attacks. Most hitters demonstrated a huge array of hitting abilities in regard to executing cut shots cross (diagonal), line (parallel the side line) and often tooling the block (top and off external blocking hand). Specifically to outsides (OS), attacking shifted drastically from fast swings to slow depending upon the quality of the pass.

However, hitters were always trying to reach as high as possible for both fast and high sets. From a serve receive situation, middles were available and jumping at quick tempo, cutting back to P1 and to P5. Attacks in the middle from a quick back row demonstrated to be a common tendency among top four teams. Opposite players performed slightly higher attacks from P2. Attacking is responsible for majority of the points scored in a match. The hitters in this competition demonstrated a consistent approach for sets more inside the court as well as closer to the antennas. Moreover, their arm swings distinctively intended to extend and reach as high as possible. The top four teams utilized almost no combination plays and cross pattern attacks. The standard was to utilize fast attacks across the whole length of the net and fast back row attacks in the middle back, from position (P6). Most teams are relying heavily on opposite players to score. The top four teams have assigned more responsibilities on the offense towards outside hitters whom have passing, transitioning and defensive functions in addition to running relatively fast attack patterns. It was evident that all teams were utilizing the multi-offensive system in which back row players are an integral part of the offense, thus out numbering the defense.

Interestingly, middles had distinct patterns to approaching. On free ball situations middle players were transitioning towards the center court and finalizing their quick attacks close to the setter. After blocking an attack from P4 (opponents’ OS), middles were transitioning perpendicular to the net and counter-attacking a quick back. When blocking an opposite player, middles were also retrieving perpendicular from the net and attacking a quick set away from the setter, like a shoot in the middle.

Spiking individual gestures were proficient and accurate. Players were reaching the ball very high and attacking the ball accurately at the seams of the block, sharp angle, line and cross. Most attacking formations were simple, but leaned towards tempo attacks when passes were excellent.

BLOCKING

Blocking has maintained a high expectation as being an effective system to neutralize the opponents’ attack. While offensive systems have evolved tremendously, blocking systems have also developed and increased in regard to effectiveness and efficiency. Technically blocking has become a more sophisticated ability and more of a team skill than ever. It is important to highlight how blockers have strived to stuff blocks as much as rebound and adsorb balls so the defense can make a play.

Solo blocks, assist blocks and triple blocks in the middle have also caught spectators attention as spectacular plays in both complex I and II of the game. Many stuff blocks, plenty of rebounds (soft blocks) but also lots of faulty blocks led to a low average of blocking efficacy. The average block per set was 1.04 for top blockers even though the total attempts were high. This proves that the technical execution of blocking is still rare and tough to
achieve. For the most part, three players position themselves closer to the middle as a tactical disposition to assist middles and to easily compose triple blocks (bunch blocking).

Top teams aimed to compose double and often triple blocks across the whole length of the net. When passes were in system solo and double blocks were most common technical standards. Blocking the back row players was another emphasis by blockers of the top four final teams. Reading the sets and finding out setters tendencies was a clear challenge for blockers. Top middle blockers were engaged in following and trying to read setters’ decision making processes in order to neutralize opponents’ offensive system. It was evident that the outside-hitter has been assigned more of the responsibility to assist the middle blocker, primarily when the opponents’ setter was in front row.

**DEFENSE**

Top four teams have demonstrated high levels of ability as well. First, players have demonstrated a keen ability to position themselves where the ball was being hit. Second, players were technically proficient to execute outstanding defensive moves in clear shots (no blocking situations). Spectacular defenses happened throughout all matches and all phases of this tournament.

During the final phase, defense facilitated transition plays and the management of winning long-rallies that eventually led into momentum change. Liberos have demonstrated strength, courage and athleticism when digging balls with no blocks. It is also important to highlight the role of the opposite players, for the most part, responsible for playing defense behind the setters whom sometimes were not necessarily top blockers at all.

Close analyses revealed that middle players performed great digs when they were on court. Overall, their body posture, positioning and control of the hard driven spikes were satisfactory in regard to digging the ball with a subsequent continuity of the game. When on backcourt, middles played in P6 and P5.

**USE OF LIBERO**

Most top four teams used the libero in identical way. On a three-man passing format liberos stayed in the center of the court, sometimes one meter off the front row line in a high stance in order to perform an overhead pass.

On serve-receive liberos played in all back row positions, however, in complex II most liberos played at the left back (P5) with the exception of Brazil that in two rotations placed the libero in P6.

In a four-man passing format liberos were responsible for a larger area of passing responsibility. Moreover, when setters receive the first ball, passes were directed towards middle back (between P5 and P6) so liberos could execute the set.

In addition to being the leader of defense, the liberos are also responsible for covering the attack and passing most free balls (so back row players can transition into their hitting lines).

Liberos organized the serve-receive formation. They were also in charge of making adjustments to free a back row player to perform a back row attack or to cover a specific area/weaker passer. No teams utilized the libero in P1 on defense.

In specific rotations, Serbia, Russia, Bulgaria and Brazil passed with four players when faced powerful spike serves. The libero, as mentioned before, was still in responsible for a larger passing area.
TRENDS

Serving is still a critical skill in determining the outcome of the match. The high stakes serves continue to be a strong trend in Men’s volleyball. However; the adoption of the jump floater has become a strong tactical alternative. Consistency, accuracy and spot serving represents the perfect mix for a faster and now (with a 21 cap per set) shorter game.

The game is faster than ever and yet, the balance of all skills means that ball control and consistent play lead into a new concept that in a close game, not making a mistake can be the difference between winning and losing. Furthermore, ball control in defensive situations shows the importance of practicing as close as possible to the game (reality, speed and context). The combination of serving, blocking and defense was noticeable. A concept explored by the top teams to achieve success. The ball control and basic skills of all players was satisfactory. Defenders were able to dig hard driven balls, to recover shanked balls and to quickly react from balls deflected from the blocks.

In each position, players are expected to perform with expertise. Volleyball is becoming a game of highly skilled players (generalists’ specialists). Both liberos and setters have demonstrated highly specialized sets of skills that epitomize expertise of performance. The same is true for both outside hitters and right sides (universal players) whom must be outstanding passers and blockers respectively while being in charge of hitting effectively both in the front and back row.

All four finalists did not utilize ground serves. In the U23 Men’s World Championship there were very few players executing ground floaters. Moreover, while running the offense, teams did not utilize cross combination plays among front row players. However, most second tempo sets were to the pipe (middle back attacker (P6).

Excellence is a habit. Exceptional levels of performances were based upon players’ abilities to execute simple things well consistently as well as under pressure. Players’ expertise was tested to its limits but the motor performances were never disconnected from the decision-making process or from players’ critical thinking abilities.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

As volleyball evolves, the search for an offense versus defense balance requires an in-depth analysis of screening during the time of the serve. Considering that the server is in full control of the ball, screening is giving the serving team an unfair advantage that corroborates bias in favor of the first offensive action of the rally, serving.

Ball control, finesse and accuracy will continue to be a priority for training and for technical development at the elite level. The balance between offense and defense is still present. It seems that most teams adopted a multi-offense system thus; there are more offensive players than blockers.

Considering that offensive players are out numbering the defense, one way to counter balance it could be adopting a scoring system that recognizes spectacular defensive actions. The spectacular defensive plays (to be determined) should be rewarded. For instance, a solo block, a long-rally point and a defense without a block that ended in a point for the team that defended the ball should be, somehow, rewarded.

If consolidated, the new rules will have an impact on the time of play as well as in the duration of a match. Such change needs a close examination regarding technical, tactical and physical implications for practice both at the adult as well as the developmental ages (stages) of performance.
Volleyball is the ultimate team sport. As such, this competition proves that the most cohesive teams were successful. Considering how tight this competition was, it is possible to say that the mechanics, proficiency and finesse in which both offense and defense skills were masterfully executed.