

The Toughest Position in Volleyball

The Art of Coaching Volleyball

I have often wondered which position is the most difficult in volleyball. I'm sure each person has a different answer, and for different reasons. "Middles have to jump on every rally." "Outsides have to pass, play defense, block, and serve." "Setters have to touch the ball every rally and run an offense." While all of those are good points about the physical strain a position puts on a player, I don't think any of them come close to being the toughest position. As coaches, we sometimes overlook the mental aspect of the game because we are so focused on the physical tasks a player must perform to be successful. And while being a setter and running an offense, being a middle and jumping every play, or being an outside and having to be a well-rounded player, are difficult, but in my opinion being a libero is by far the most mentally taxing position in the game and therefore the toughest.

Let's compare the goal keeper in soccer or hockey and the libero. Both are defensive positions. Both are essential to a team's success but can be instrumental in a team's failure. Both, though having the ability to score rarely do. Both must rely on the success of their team to gauge whether or not they were successful on the day.

While the Libero position is not the most physically taxing position, it requires the most mental fortitude. How many times, as coaches, have we gotten upset with a libero shanking a pass, flubbing a free ball, or missing an easy dig? I'm sure it's quite a bit.

The libero has two statistical categories by which they can judge their performance: Digs, and 4-point passing scale. So, a libero has the ability to tell how well they are playing, but only in those two categories. However, neither of these categories translate to the points column on a stat sheet and seeing as the number of points a team scores directly correlates with their win-loss record, that column could be considered most important.

So, your libero passes a 2.3 and has 4.00 digs per set in one match. These are both very good numbers. But let's say your team loses the match. In the first game, your team is down 23-24. The other team serves, and your libero shanks the ball ending the set. Because of the serve receive error, your libero is now in negative points for the match, and you probably had a few choice words for her too. In the second game, your libero over passes a ball that starts a run of points for the other team. So now your libero has made two mistakes that directly result in a point for the other team, not mentioning the disappointment from the coach.

Yes, every player on the team makes mistakes. They miss serves, hit balls out of bounds, get tangled in the net, etc.. But every other player has the ability to make up for those mistakes by getting a kill or a block, setting a hitter for an assist. Liberos do not have this luxury (excluding

serving from the equation). Liberos can only end up neutral, or negative on the match in the points column (again, excluding overpass kills and serving). If they make a mistake, the only way to make up for it is by not making another one - digging or passing. This puts an immense amount of mental strain on them.

There is also another angle to consider. The libero is almost an afterthought in many coaches minds. When selecting a team at the junior's level, coaches will undoubtedly look at the hitters and the setters first. The libero is a player selected with little analysis of whether they can truly control a ball. We all want our front lines to be dominating but think about the flow of a game. To allow our front court to hit, teams must pass well, or the threat of domination is neutralized. Once we choose our Liberos, it is often hard to settle on one, so a rotation of sorts may be worked out. This rotation can cause questions of doubt to creep into a libero's head, especially if they have a great match only to be rewarded with a spot on the bench in the same color jersey next set. It is not only in junior's where this position is an afterthought. Most of the best programs in the NCAA do no scholarship back court players. But if you take a look at the stat sheet, Liberos are one of the players that consistently play in every set every year. They are seeing more court time than some scholarship attackers, but are not rewarded monetarily for it.

So, I ask you to consider, in a culture that glorifies the point scorer, how mentally difficult the libero position is. Are we, as coaches, clearly defining what success for our libero means? Can we change the way we coach these players to make them better equipped to handle the mental stresses of the position? Are we holding them to a standard of excellence without putting unneeded mental stress upon them?

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