

Thoughts for Setters

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These thoughts on setting come from one of the most knowledgeable volleyball personalities in the world, Doug Beal, coach of the 1984 U.S. Olympic Men's Team. Since 1970, he has studied, played and taught setting on the international level as both a player and coach.

Volleyball is among the purest, if not the purest of all team sports. It is virtually impossible for one player to dominate the game as a great running back in football or a tremendous shooter in basketball can. Yet because of the nature of the sport and the number of contacts afforded the setter, they carry a dramatically over-weighted value. Few teams in football reach their potential or any measure of success without a great quarterback and likewise few volleyball teams can perform to their abilities without a great setter or setters.

Setters come close to making one-third of all the ball contacts by a team. But what is even more important is that they are usually directing the middle contact of the normal sequence in volleyball events. Between the pass and the attack, the setter is in control. The setter makes or breaks the hitters, builds or destroys confidence in the passers, establishes the tempo for a team's play, develops the rhythm for the offense and generally runs the show. Yes, the setter is the most critical person on the team and more thought and time is demanded of them in training than for other players.

After the coach, the setter is the next in line to influence the emotional and psychological characteristics of her/his team. The setter should have and develop the following traits:

Intelligence

The ability to interpret the coach's wishes on the floor; the ability to make quick and rapid decisions; the ability to assimilate information from the sidelines and translate it into effective action; the ability to perceive the game in total.

Self-confidence

Total belief that she/he has the best "hands" in the business and simply can't make a ball-handling error. They must know they can deliver the required set, that they can and will get to every ball, that they can lead the team to victory, etc.

The "sponge" characteristic

This means that the setter will accept responsibility for all hitting mistakes. They should constantly seek feedback from the hitters in trying to give them exactly what they want. A setter can never get into a confrontation situation with the hitter. Remember, all sets a hitter successfully kills are "great sets" and all hitting errors and blocks the result of poor sets.

Emotional stability

A setter must be very stable and not exhibit dramatic highs and lows, which could easily affect the team. A setter must look for the good things in every play, whether the point ends up for or against them. A leader avoids depression when things aren't going great.

Whatever their size and physical traits, setters must understand their role on the team and work with their coach on how to make the appropriate setting choices and selections. Their primary role is always to deliver a "good" set. The good set implies several qualities. This is a truly hittable set for each attacker, i.e. what the hitter thinks they can best handle in any situation. The good set will give the attacker optimum possibilities to succeed. It is truly "hittable."

If a setter can always accomplish the “good” set, then their role expands next to be a “smart” setter. The smart set will match their teammates strengths to the opponent's weaknesses; will feed the “hot” attacker; will take advantage of what their offense does best and will effectively carry out the thoughts and plans of the coach. Being a smart setter is the second role once a setter has mastered the technical side of delivering the ball accurately and effectively.

The final stage in a setter's development is for her/him to assume the burden for defeating the block. The setter's objectives can now include deception in an effort to allow the hitters to be working against a disorganized two- or even three-player block. This is far and away the last priority for a setter. A tricky set that fools the block but is not hittable is worthless. The offense must always live within the skills and abilities of its players and especially those of the setter. Setters must discipline themselves not to perform skills or tactics beyond their abilities in the match. They should use practices to build upon existing skills and add new ones with the help of their team and coach.

Setting is very much a percentage skill that, with practice, can lead to a minimum number of errors in the offense. Remember to be good (technically perfect) first, smart (perceptive) second and then occasionally tricky. Setters should go for every ball they can, learn to extend their limits and put up a ball that their hitters can hit every time.

It is impossible to go over all the technical aspects of setting, but here are several crucial ones:

1. You should be stopped when you contact the ball. If the ball is never going where you want it to, drifting or coming up short, it is likely you are moving during the set. Certainly it is unavoidable at times, but it usually isn't. Get to your setter slot before the ball is passed and move from there, reading and beating the ball to the spot.
2. You must face the target, especially with the upper body (shoulders). If the ball is consistently off in one direction, you should check your alignment. The feet dictate motion and form a stable platform while the shoulders are more critical for good direction.
3. The ball must be contacted at a high point. This "neutral" position is critical for a consistent release and creates the ability to go in every possible direction with the ball. A high point means in front of the face above the eyebrows. It is critical that you take the ball from a consistently high position to allow the hitters to judge accurately the speed of release for good timing. Inconsistent contact points mean different trajectories to the same sets and poor timing for the hitters.
4. The ball must be released from your midline. This is of concern especially when the ball is passed close to the net. It is common to reach out to set such a ball and contact it before it arrives at your midline, causing a jerking of the ball across the body and a set too tight or across the net. Part of this goal of a “neutral” position includes a ball contacted at your midline.
5. The set should be made off the back foot, actually pushing through the ball to maintain an effective line of force from the floor, through the body, to the point of ball release. Since you should always try to get to the ball facing the left side, your right foot leads, keeping you open to your passers. The left foot will help cause the ball to drift slightly towards the net. You must become comfortable and consistent with this foot position so you wind up with correctly planted feet every time.
6. You should extend completely with your arms on virtually every set. If the ball is released with your arms still bent, you have partially “jabbed” at the ball and not effectively followed through. The full extension will greatly increase accuracy and help you look the same no matter where the ball is headed.

7. Your hands must be in the shape of the ball. Everyone has a different body but all setters must “cup” the same ball. Your hands must simply be shaped like a volleyball consistently before contact.

There is a zone of success for each set. The setter and attacker must work together to understand the concepts for each specific play and set that the coach runs in the offense. Most errors in setting, and therefore the offense, occur when a setter tries to pinpoint the set. The general concepts that a setter should have include:

1. Never pinpoint a set. Always give the hitters a range in which to expect to receive the ball, which includes a width along the net, height variations and some speed changes.
2. Never under-set the ball or set it too short. It is almost always better to over-set, go too high, allowing the hitter a good swing at the ball.
3. Usually the set should be too slow, rather than too fast. This is of special concern with the fast center-sets. With high sideline sets, there is a zone that starts on the sideline and extends into the court for several feet. This set should never travel outside the antenna, over the net or too low. It must stay off the net a couple of feet to allow the hitters a chance to take a full swing at the ball and reduce the size of the block's court coverage. Unfortunately, we often picture the high outside set landing on the sideline, rather close to the net. If this is your goal, you are likely to rake lots of errors by pushing it to wide or over the net. Thus on this set you can “safely” err by setting it too high, too far inside, or too deep as these are situations that a hitter can compensate for. With the faster sets, the basic rules still apply. It should never cross the net without passing the hitter's outside shoulder, must be high enough to allow the hitter to reach and made in front of the hitter's midline of the body. If the set is too low, crosses the net in front of the hitter, or is set across the hitter's body before it is hittable, lots of errors will occur. All sets, fast or not, can become reasonably high-percentage plays as long as you work within your skills and offensive play range. Since you control more of the game than anyone else, you will be getting more attention from the coach and must work harder.

There is no key to success like game-like repetition. Setters must touch many balls per practice and set, more than anything else. Setters must learn to react instinctively to almost any situation in the game; they can't train by merely setting from a stationary position. Setters must learn to set from a variety of game-possible positions. Setters should never catch a ball in practice when setting; they should always try to set it. Their spatial awareness and orientation abilities must cover the whole court and beyond so they can always set it to the correct spot on the court. Setting an offense is a joint project with the coach who helps with the tactics and attackers who are awaiting the sets.

A team rarely can exceed that abilities of its setters; strive to always play and train to become the best setter you can be.