

INSIGHTS & ON PRACTICE PLANNING & ORGANIZATION

By Alfred Agcaoili: Assistant Men's and Women's Volleyball Coach, Lindenwood University

Introduction

Successful coaches recognize the importance of well planned practices. Preparing your team to compete at its highest possible level can be achieved through effective practice planning and organization. There is a direct relationship between practice and learning. Research shows that motor skill development and peak performance are enhanced through practice. In all of my coaching assignments, whether in the role of a Club Head Coach or College Assistant Coach, I have organized and planned effective practices to fit the needs of that particular team.

When I started coaching, my mentor Tony Crabb, the former USA men's national team assistant coach, made me understand that the most important part of the job takes place in practice, not necessarily during the game. He reasoned that after a certain point players learn to have faith in themselves and translate into action what has been learned in practice.

I enjoyed practices more than the game for two main reasons. First, the rapid development that occurred in practice sessions allowed me to watch players literally grow before my eyes. The second was being fully engaged in the process involved to bring a group of individuals together to compete, work together towards a common goal, and achieve success by facilitating skill learning. There is no question that time devoted to planning your practices will ultimately result in success relative to your team's goals. A comprehensive and systematic way of practicing aids in the development of your athletes.

Role of Practice

The role of practice is three-fold: develop physical skills; shape behavior and psychological readiness; and forge the skills of each individual to perform within the framework of a team. Depending on the season, my team is placed in a position to face every possible logical situation that might occur in a volleyball match. This is presented by compartmentalizing a specific area—such as transition work off of a back row attack tight towards our right side line between the right back and middle back defenders—then training our team to perform based on criteria to enhance learning and encourage competition. Skills, then, should be presented and developed logically. Volleyball is a game of angles and sequences from one rebound point to the next. So rather than have a coach hit off of a box, which does not teach eye sequence to look for appropriate visual cues, a 4-on-4 situational drill is used and assigned with a specific criteria. This teaches players to read and anticipate rather than react to situations that the player may encounter in a match.

Practices should be enjoyable. With this said, I never believed that practices should be laid back to the point where balls are tossed over the net or things are made up as you go along. This haphazard approach only sets you up to fail. It may seem difficult to simulate certain aspects of a match in practice; for example, the ebb and flow



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of a match by arbitrarily beginning a drill with a random score. A team can achieve competitive performances by planning around specific skill areas such as a weak serve-receive rotation. In order to maximize the full benefits of practice, time should be devoted to assess strengths and weaknesses of your team and devise a plan to work on deficiencies.

A former Chicago Bulls player observed his practice experience when he first joined the team by saying, “The difference with the Bulls from every other place that I’ve been—every coach I’ve been with in the NBA has been very well organized—the difference in Chicago was the focus on fundamentals every single day. We started every day with basic drills, footwork, passing, ball handling, every single day,” (Lazenby 360). No matter what level you coach, it is critical to invest time to map out your season and plan accordingly. Planning, then, becomes a vital component to the long-term success of your team and program.

Importance of Practice Planning

The most significant factor when planning practice sessions is to set time aside—a minimum of two hours of planning for a two hour practice session—to plan in an otherwise busy day. Part of how I plan practice depends on video analysis of our matches, practice and match statistics, and feedback from fellow staff coaches (and sometimes the players themselves) based on post-practice evaluation meetings. The players may provide insight on a favorite drill. This promotes ownership of the team among its members. But practice also depends on other key factors. These include available courts and equipment; members of the coaching staff; and the athletes themselves.

Practices are planned with the basic philosophy that success is not achieved arbitrarily. At Lindenwood University, we believe that success is directly related to each team member’s commitment to practice, pride, selflessness, preparation, relationships—all these things and more. In my current coaching assignment at LU, endless hours among staff are spent in tedious preparation, with specific areas of focus included on each practice plan. Every aspect of our practice sessions is monitored by our coaching staff to ensure the implementation and execution of a specific game tactic or the utilization of a newly developed skill. We attempt to incorporate sound educational learning theory coupled with accountability to encourage each player to be an active participant in his or her own development. Short of this, the player fails to reach his or her full potential. So once a new skill, game tactic or strategy is introduced, it is approached logically with drills that enhance the learning process and reinforces proficiency of a desired behavior. As stated perfectly by Sharon Peterson, legendary University of Hawai`i at Hilo women’s volleyball head coach: “If you haven’t used it, you haven’t learned it.”

*“If you haven’t used it,
you haven’t learned it.”*

Sharon Peterson

Practice Philosophy

Our philosophy of developing highly competitive men and women’s volleyball teams at Lindenwood University is based on the belief that our teams play the way we practice. Our women’s teams have made strides as conference champions and have earned national recognition in the NAIA polls. Our nationally-ranked men’s teams have appeared in three NAIA Invitational national championship finals in the past six years. We maintain this success through our commitment to a challenging and positive practice environment.

Practices are planned so that they are harder than the actual match. We push our players to go beyond their self-imposed physical and mental limitations. We achieve this by maintaining drill pace and game tempo in our drills.

The foundation of sound technical skills and efficient movement are the focal point of our training. Developing technical (individual) skills is a top priority. Tactical (game strategy and applications) skills are our next area of focus once we feel comfortable with the development of individual skills. We work daily to eliminate excessive movement, otherwise known as “false moves,” and aim for proficiency. We believe that there is a greater chance of making an error with extraneous motions. This prevents our teams from achieving court flow. All skills are developed logically in accordance to the philosophy we believe skills should be executed and how it leads into a particular drill. Game management is practiced in our score and situation drills. These drills focus on performance and, ultimately, execution.

An increase in the execution of individual and team skills is incorporated into our master calendar. For example, during pre-season practice, we assign criteria to execute three-out-of-five free balls for a margin of error of two (two errors allowed in one sequence) followed by one down-ball, which must be terminated. We call the final ball the “money ball.” A consequence is given to the team short of accomplishing this goal. Several weeks later as we enter into the early phase of our regular season, the performance goal is increased to execute four-out-of-five free balls (allowed one error) followed by two down balls. As the season progresses to post-season, the criteria increases to five-out-of-five free ball executions (no margin of error) followed by four down balls and, finally, three stops (prevent opposing team from scoring in two consecutive rallies). This approach increases focus, promotes a highly competitive environment, and motivates players to perform. The practice emphasis will vary each session and every week. A concerted effort is made to maximize time in the gym so that precious minutes are not wasted.

Decide Where You Want to Be

One of the first steps to organize your season is to start with a goal, then plan backwards. At Lindenwood, we start with a calendar and count the amount of days that are available for us to practice, then consider days leading up to our first series of pre-season scrimmages and tournaments. Decide where you want to be whether it is top-four in league competition or to be national champions. Whatever your goal is, it is important that

“Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.”

John Wooden

everything done in practice is consistent with those goals. John Wooden (legendary UCLA basketball coach) said it perfectly, “Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.” It is noteworthy that under Wooden, UCLA won an unprecedented 10 NCAA championships, including seven consecutive (1966-73). Included in the string is one of the most amazing win streaks in all of sports, 38 straight NCAA tournament victories. Coach Wooden attributes a large part of this extraordinary success to his firm commitment to practice planning and organization. In short, they were active, organized, efficient, and purposeful.

Make a Road Map Clear

My sister was chosen as the Bride’s Maid of Honor for our cousin’s wedding a few years ago. She set a weight loss goal of 20 pounds in one week. While this goal was do-able, it certainly was not going to be achieved in

the time frame she gave herself. When she shared this goal with me, I told her, “There is no such thing as unrealistic goals, just unrealistic timeframes.” She got the point. My sister assessed her timeframe, made appropriate adjustments to her goal, scheduled action steps, took action, and ultimately achieved her goal just in time for the wedding. And, she looked absolutely terrific in that dress. This same process can be applied to planning your season. Set appropriate benchmarks and celebrate your success along the way.

Goals give you purpose, direction, and power. When setting goals, first determine the amount of time you have. Next, draft a clear action plan coupled with a timeline and consequences. I often say that the difference between dreams and goals is a timeline and consequences. Make adjustments to your goals where necessary.

Two things that I have learned about goal setting are that goals are measurable and involve time. A great way to measure goals is to take statistics in practice. These statistics should be analyzed and used to provide objective feedback to players. Score your games in practices and keep records of the statistics taken to monitor progress. At LU, we incorporate performance goals with assigned criteria to our drills to communicate to players precisely what is expected of them.

Goal setting is a powerful method for achieving your desires. Plan your long-term and short-term goals, and do your daily ones. Remember, goals only work if you work. Consider the following guidelines as you decide upon your goals:

1. Set goals only for which you have a **strong desire** or **passion** to attain.
2. Make goals **short, clear, specific** and **measurable** whenever possible.
3. **Set a deadline** for your goal.
4. On big goals, **identify smaller goals** that must be reached in order to make the big goals.
5. Upon setting your goals, **get to work on them immediately**.
6. **Evaluate** your efforts regularly to see if they are working.
7. **Celebrate** reaching even the smallest of goals.
8. **Be flexible** enough to change your efforts or approach in reaching your goals.

Develop Written & Detailed Plans

Practice Plan Evolution

My practice plans have evolved since I began coaching 14 years ago at the club and high school levels prior to my involvement in collegiate volleyball. The utilization of a meticulous, thorough, long-range plan in my approach to coaching is credited to Dr. Terry Liskevych, former USA women’s national team head coach – a valuable resource, mentor, and friend. He impressed upon me the importance of mapping out a season and to conduct pre-season, mid-season and post-season evaluation of practice sessions.

Practice planning for a season can be divided into four segments: yearly, monthly, weekly, and daily. Practice plans can be as simple as listing a time, activity, and coaching point on a sheet of paper or as intricate to include daily goals, emphasis, training blocks, allotted time, and a thought of the day. Include specific information on a practice plan to save time when communicating to your athletes. This will encourage focus and promote togetherness.

When preparing for practice, my plans 14 years ago were written on 3x5 index cards. Years later, this evolved into a full sheet of paper from a yellow legal pad, then a typewriter and, finally, a word processor. All

MOVEMENT AND BALL CONTROL	ZERO OUT-TARGET-MONEY BALL A. NON PASS TO ATTACK VS 2 BLOCKERS B. PASS TO ATTACK VS SPLIT BLOCK---PIN TO PIN		
SERVE	SITUATION & SCORE --- LIFT STEP EMPHASIS --- HAND LEAD FOOT CONNECTED	6:00 MIN	706P
CORE AND WATER	10/10/10 --- BUILD HOUSE --- WATER RECOVERY	*	
COMBO	PARTNER BALL HANDLING SERIES --- FOREARM PASS --- OVERHEAD A. MAINTAIN HIPS TO SERVER B. LOSE HIPS TEN FEET PLUS	18:00 MIN	712P
SERVE	OVER NET SERVES --- 6 FT TARGET --- EMPHASIS LOOK UP	9:00 MIN	730P
CORE AND WATER	10/10/10 --- BUILD HOUSE --- WATER RECOVERY	*	
WARM DOWN	MOVEMENT PATTERNS AND GROUP STRETCH	11:00 MIN	739P
CLOSURE	NET BREAKDOWN --- SECURE EQUIPMENT ANNOUNCEMENTS // FINAL COMMENTS	10:00 MIN	750P
GO HOME			800P
LBK	MBK	RBK	ANNOUNCEMENTS
FLIERL	SHIROMA	DUNN	1 SCHEDULE VIDEO SESSIONS BY APPT
EMERICK	HOCK	DE SENESPLEDA	2 GOAL SETTING WORKSHOP, SUN, JAN 7
NICHOLSON	DEIMEKE	KREIENKAMP	3 VARSITY/JV TEAMS POSTED, TBD

Novice coaches fail to realize that practice planning is a process that will reward them for their efforts. A systematic way of planning your season and practices is to prepare a master schedule, monthly plan, weekly plan and, finally, a daily practice plan. Dr. Liskevych introduced me to dividing the season into training cycles, also referred to as periodization. Periodization is a process of dividing the annual training plan into smaller phases in order to allow a program to be set into more manageable segments and to ensure a correct peaking for the main competition(s) of the year (Bompa 1985).

Planning for Success

The first step to develop a plan for the upcoming season begins with a coaching staff meeting. The following four areas below should be discussed at this meeting:

- (1) How to teach individual skills and the execution of sound fundamentals;
- (2) Installing new tactics based on personnel (returnees, incoming recruits);
- (3) Team performance;
- (4) Executing in specific game situations.

Four types of practice formats are utilized with the appropriate level of intensity assigned to specific drills to provide the best type of learning environment for the individual and team from a very physically taxing and mentally demanding practice to a light one-hour practice the night before or the day of a match. Physically hard practices are never scheduled back-to-back as this promotes injury and does not keep athletes physically and mentally fresh.

Drills are logically introduced in our practice sessions to maximize the effects of training. For example, during warm ups, middle blockers do footwork patterns relative to how they move along the net, where they will block, and what they will see in the actual match. A logical approach implies that if a team does a 3-person serve-receive drill, lead up drills that precede this primary focus drill should incorporate training to include a serve with a specific assignment (i.e. disrupt the setter's path), individual passing technique (i.e. specific contact on forearms just above the wrist), relationship drills between two passers (i.e. short and high responsibilities) and eye

sequence/reading (i.e. keep your head even and level; follow ball with eyes). Performance goals (i.e. 15 perfect passes off of a free ball to target area to terminate sequence) are assigned to the drill. Skills learned in practice will result in “carry over” to a performance situation through effective practices as determined by noted sports psychology authors Bryant J. Cratty and Miroslav Vanek. They reason that coaches should design practices to replicate similar or exact conditions an athlete will face in competition.

Luxury of an Assistant Coach

If you have the luxury of having an assistant coach, take advantage of your coach’s strengths and determine how you can best utilize that person’s skills to help train your athletes. An assistant coach can free the head coach to perform primary responsibilities within the framework of a program. At LU, I teach all teams (two junior varsity men’s teams, two junior varsity women’s teams, and the varsity men and women’s teams) technical skills along with a fellow assistant allowing our varsity head coach to focus primarily on coaching the varsity team and on tactical applications during practice sessions. You may want to delegate to your assistant coach to train your setter’s game management skills based on specific game-related actions such as the placement of sets to the outlet hitter on broken plays. One way we do this is to help our setter identify action steps during “dead ball” time and assess several items in the span of 10-seconds - an average time between the end of a rally and prior to when the referee beckons the serve. In those 10-seconds, we specifically want our setter to (1) assess the score and situation (ahead or behind; end game); (2) assess his or her hitters (primary, secondary, outlet); (3) assess the opposing block (tall, short, weak); then (4) signal plays to his or her hitters. The assistant coach can be an invaluable resource in a practice setting performing simple tasks to major practice responsibilities.

Make a Road Map Clear

A sound guide to planning practices helps a coach to make the best use of practice and office time. A staple in my practice planning routine is the master schedule. The purpose of the master schedule is to serve as an outline for advanced planning and doubles as a reference guide. It takes the form of a detailed chart with corresponding topic headings coupled with a twelve-month weekly season calendar. Each week and day is accounted for. Some headings on my master schedule include off-season conditioning, off-season scrimmages, pre and regular season matches, scouting, recruiting, conference coach meetings, classroom/video sessions, coaching staff meetings, and weight training, to name a few. For example, the master schedule is used to coordinate practice court time with other programs in the athletics department that share our practice facility. An enlarged master schedule is posted onto a wall and may be referenced from time to time. A printed copy of the master schedule is placed in a three-ring binder and updated after information to the larger displayed master schedule is amended. I may deviate from the master schedule, but its main use is to serve as a reference point for advance planning purposes.

Monthly plans are designed based on information taken from the master schedule. They are posted in two month increments—present and following month—on the wall next to an enlarged master schedule. The monthly plan centers on specific training focus that depends on our team’s previous week accomplishments. This is an opportunity to review, adjust and set new goals along the way.

The weekly plan is prepared to give us a forecast of upcoming practices, competition, and player-coach conferences. Specific information included—but not limited to—on a weekly plan includes practice and match times, conditioning and team meetings, administrative tasks, opponent scouting, and goal setting sessions. This plan changes from week to week depending on our team’s progress and the phase of the season.

The daily practice plan is prepared by referencing the weekly plan. It includes upcoming team goals, a thought of the day, and emphasis of the day. Consequently, drills are established in which groups work together. It is vitally important that our athletes leave knowing that they improved in at least one skill or concept area, with specific areas of focus shared in pre-practice discussions or feedback from video sessions.

Success is in the Details

At Lindenwood University, we share one facility, the Robert F. Hyland Performance Arena, with other programs in our athletics and performing arts departments. Maximizing the use of practice time is a top priority because of this. Our facility houses three volleyball courts that can be divided by drop-down ceiling curtain partitions.

We compete under the auspices of the NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics). There are two junior varsity and one varsity team each in our men and women’s volleyball programs with approximately 12 players per team. We have two junior varsity teams that serve as feeders to our respective varsity teams. The junior varsity program acts as a farm system where players are given valuable court time and attention to develop individual skills to prepare for college varsity-level competition.

Our varsity men and women’s head coach, Ron Young, empowers his coaching staff by allowing us the freedom to create within specific guidelines based on the needs of the men and women’s varsity teams. Junior varsity players are moved up and down throughout the duration of the regular season based on team needs. Ineligibility, injuries and performance are three considerations when moving players. Practices are planned by the most experienced coaches among all teams to ensure that all athletes receive quality training. In our program, our head coach encourages a collaborative effort among staff coaches with the varsity and junior varsity teams. A daily inventory of personnel, equipment, and available court space is conducted with these specific questions to help plan effective practices:

- Are there any conflicts?
- How many players will practice?
- How many at each position?
- Any limits physically to what they must do? (i.e. no overhead skills)
- Any late or leaving early?
- How many coaches, managers, assistant coaches, trainers, etc. available?
- How many courts, nets, volleyballs and carts available? (I recommend to push for at least two nets minimum).

Our conference matches are usually one weeknight—either Tuesday or Thursday—and one weekend match, which is usually on Saturday. This leaves us with three to four days during the week to practice. Practice time is maximized through an on-going evaluation process that monitors the health of our players, the progress of

the team relative to the regular season results, and the goals that we set relative to the phase of our season. An example of a typical week during the early phase of our volleyball season is shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Typical early season weekly training schedule

DAY	ACTIVITY	TIME BLOCK	NOTEWORTHY
Monday	Practice	2 hours	Physically the hardest: overload jumping and defense emphasizing conditioning.
Tuesday	Practice	2 hours	Individual skill or tactical refinement. Engage in mental practice.
Wednesday	Practice	2 hours	Recovery day emphasizing rest and technique improvement. Less jumping and defensive pursuits. Mental practice.
Thursday	Compete	---	Competition.
Friday	Practice	2 hours	Monitor jumping.
Saturday	Compete	---	Competition.
Sunday	Day Off	---	Complete rest.

Pre-season practices may go for as long as three hours. During two-a-day workouts, sessions are limited to one-and-one half to two hours each with jumping and floor defense closely monitored. Once the season begins, a typical practice will be two hours in length as shown in Table 1. Players must be in shape when the season begins due to the higher level of competition and to endure the physical demands that govern our training.

As the season progresses, practice time is gradually decreased in thirty-minute increments. Prior to the playoffs, usually we do a “Back to Basics” week where basic fundamentals are revisited with the goal of mastery. All practices prior to the playoffs are reduced to one hour sessions—which includes time allocated for net set-up and breakdown—to allow appropriate levels of rest and recovery, and to monitor our team so we do not peak too early.

Writing the Practice Plan

Start Writing

The first step to writing a practice plan is to do just that: start writing. As writing occurs, make notes along the right margin of your paper. Be sure to include the groups written or select the groups at practice based on turn out. I wanted my practice plans to reflect the care and details it took to prepare our team to compete and to present information in a manner that demonstrated professionalism. Also, I wanted to impress upon the players that with the amount of time invested into planning for a session that practices were taken seriously. There was a certain flow I wanted in order to maintain drill pace.

Develop a list of tasks based on the time allotted for each practice session. This may include securing necessary equipment, pre-practice staff meeting time change, or specific items to communicate to your players at the beginning or end of a practice session. From there, plug-in areas of focus and drills that teach and develop skills into the practice plan and prioritize what is most important. This may include swing blocking with an emphasis on driving the elbows back on the first directional step. Select drills that are appropriate to skill level and experience of your team helping them to focus by monitoring their development and raising the bar to motivate your players to reach their full potential individually and as a team.

Use a consistent format for a final draft whether or not you decide to post it for your players to review. One of my assignments prior to a match is to write on the white board the game plan in the locker room. Information is written legibly, with no more than two different colors (red and black or blue and black), with as much white space so that information can be processed easily by the players. This same approach is done when writing on a white board at practice. Regardless of whether a practice plan is written, typed, or written onto a white board and displayed for your players and coaching staff to see, be sure that the format is consistent and easy to follow so that information is communicated effectively.

Skill Development

Build on a Strong Foundation

Current research has not been helpful in defining the length of practice periods or absolute amount of rest needed between practices in volleyball. There are some generally accepted and proven principles that guide the coach when planning the practice session. Practices planned with the idea of spaced or distributed practice is more effective than a massed practice. A challenge for coaches is to assess the maturity of the learner and nature of the present task when considering how to distribute practice for maximum learning benefits.

During the pre-season practice at Lindenwood University, our coaching staff spends a great deal of time working on refining and reinforcing skills the way we want them performed. One day we present and work on three skills such as forearm passing, overhead passing and footwork. The next day, we focus on three other skills. Once individual skills are developed, game tactics are prioritized as the next most important area to strengthen leading up to 6-on-6 work and full team scrimmages to work on all competition skills.

If two or more courts are available, we may incorporate multiple stations where specialty position skill work is done. For example, on one court, we may focus on middle blocker footwork patterns; on the second court, hand-shaping skills for outside blockers. A minimum of one coach is assigned per court to train a specific focus per the practice plan that day. We do not have players go to consecutive jump stations. An example of effective planning is on one court we may work with middle hitter transition footwork with a jump, and the second court may feature floor defensive pursuit skill work. We would never have a player go from a block jump station to a station with a jump and spike.

To enhance motor skill learning and skill development, our practices are planned to introduce or reinforce skills in sections, or blocks. When teaching technical and tactical skills, the Whole-Part Method teaching concept is used, where a skill or concept is taught as a whole, then compartmentalized into small sections, then put back together again and repeated until it is a learned skill.

An effective way to develop skill and build community among athletes is the buddy-system, a concept used by Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski, where an experienced player is paired with a player of lesser skill ability with each given the responsibility to teach each other based on directives presented by the coach.

Multiple learning styles of athletes (auditory: learn best by hearing; visual: learn best by seeing; kinesthetic: learn best by doing/feeling) govern your approach to teaching. When introducing a new skill or concept, it is explained and demonstrated. Then, in small groups or pairs, the skill is practiced. Feedback is given to correct or reinforce desired behavior, then athletes return to skill work. This process is repeated until the skill is learned and

executed without thought. Small group work progresses to 6-on-6 tactical training leading up to full team scrimmages.

The work-rest ratio is largely determined by the coach and should be a primary consideration to maintain the long-term health of your athletes. Water breaks are given after every 12 to 15 minute block to incorporate the strengthening of core muscles. We call this activity 10-10-10: ten partner push ups, ten crunches and ten back arches. This segment is done prior to all water breaks, which are two minutes in length.

Flow of Practice

Practice begins with a general warm up about 15 to 20 minutes. This practice phase focuses on prescribed footwork patterns for position skills that will be used during a match, ball handling and ball control work followed by group stretching. The goal is to develop team rhythm prior to moving into block steps, where the focus shifts to solid feet and hand shaping skills. Communication is required in all phases of practice with the exception of stretching. We believe that communication is essential to a team to perform consistently at a high level. One way we measure effort is by volume (how loud a player calls for a ball). Players are held accountable if they fall short of our communication standard and expectations. Individual skills are developed through position specific small group work. We almost always do a 20 to 40 minute scrimmage depending on the time of year. The warm down segment of practice feature small group drills or drill work without the ball and light aerobic activity followed by stretching to help with muscle recovery. This warm down, which is at the tail end of a session, focuses on tapering off from physically hard work. The intensity decreases to very mild activity to help facilitate recovery during the warm down from physically taxing activity.

We do the same drills every day, with little variance, and typically may not do all drills as planned. A single item or two may be added to change the focus of a drill, but for the most part, we stick to a core drill of five or six and add on these if necessary. Score and situation drills with assigned criteria (performance goals) are commonplace in our practices. Practice intensity is required and should be a part of your daily training standard. We often say that hard work is not a choice in practice, it is a requirement. The intensity of each session is determined by the drill pace you wish to conduct practice. For example, when introducing a new skill or tactic, it is recommended that a slower tempo pace would be appropriate to allow the athlete to learn through trial and error. Intensity is increased to “game speed” where the ball is entered into the drill immediately once a rally is terminated as the skills of your players develop and the phase of your season.

Evaluation

The evaluation process at the end of your practice can be a simple or complex process. Whatever you decide, make sure that you evaluate your sessions immediately following practice. The purpose of evaluating a practice session is to help plan better practices. Sometimes you will have to omit a drill or do it later. Perhaps there was a drill that worked very well and you may want to use it again. Maybe there was a drill that did not work well. Make adjustments as necessary.

Below is a simple criterion I use to effectively evaluate practice sessions:

- Always evaluate how practice was physically.

- Get an idea from players.
- Be careful not to overwork players.
- How challenging was it mentally? (Fast-paced practices work on mental focus)
- What drills are working particularly well? (Feel free to change)
- What would I do to change practice to make it be more challenging, fast-paced?
- What have I learned from my team at this practice?
- What do you want to accomplish? (i.e. 75 digs in 5 minutes can measure progress)

Commit, Prepare, Succeed

Organizing and planning effective practice sessions is critical to the success of a team. All sessions should be active, challenging, and satisfying to the learner. There are two reasons why teams practice: (1) to improve playing skills facilitated by a comprehensive approach to teaching, learning abilities, and styles; and (2) to prepare for the next opponent. A comprehensive plan—yearly, monthly, weekly, and daily—brings clarity and focus to a team’s mission and assists an entire coaching staff to carry out its goals and objectives to develop individual and team skills. The time spent to create a written practice plan and how it is presented demonstrates your level of care and professionalism to your athletes. Effective practice planning and organization involves attention to detail, time, patience, foresight, and hard work.

Skill development should be approached logically as it would in an actual match. Conducting effective practice sessions can be directly attributed to a high standard of performance and expectations to all for “peaking” for the best time of the year: playoffs.

Precious practice time is wasted on unproductive routine such as running laps around the court in a circle for warm-ups. Drills should be relevant to the actual match and level of competition your team will encounter during the season. It is vital that players communicate in all phases of practice with the exception of stretching. Information on specific game situations should be exchanged during interaction in practice sessions with the expectation that there will be carry-over into the actual match. Communication should be clear and concise.

It is noteworthy that all areas of volleyball—such as points scored and lost by rotations—should be emphasized in your practice sessions to compete with the best. Utilize the talent and skills of a capable assistant coach. Athletes and assistant coaches should never be remotely detached from activity. All coaches with a firm commitment to being successful have the ability, and responsibility, to create a practice environment that is challenging and rewarding. Your investment to shape and develop strong practice planning and organizational skills to your coaching repertoire will pay huge dividends to your team and volleyball program’s long-term success.

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