



# The Uniqueness of Volleyball

**USA Volleyball**

[www.usavolleyball.org](http://www.usavolleyball.org)

**- John Kessel, USA Volleyball Director, Membership Development & Disabled Programs**

This article should be explained to (and understood by) all parents in your program, as volleyball is known as a sport that is not a “parent-pleaser.”

In volleyball, the game is so unique because, first and foremost, players must rebound the ball. All other major American sports allow the player either to hold or pause with the ball during the game action. Look at the balls skills of a football player – when someone drops the ball, people flop and flail all over the field trying to...just land on top of the ball. In basketball if you are confused or the play breaks down, you just hold on to the ball to collect your thoughts before passing it along. Imagine volleyball hitters, confronted by a big block, being able to say to themselves, “Whoa!, way too big a block,” and then tip it back to their own team to try again, for hits number 4,5,6 or whatever it takes...Volleyball players have no option, but learn to “better the ball,” improving on the preceding teammate’s contact, without complaining about it. No matter what happens on the second contact, the third one has to get over the net and into the opponents court, no chance to reload and try again if things are not perfect.

Nearly all other rebound sports give the player an implement to rebound the ball accurately. My mom has a new tennis racquet. It is about twice as big as her older one and she is “playing lots better...” What can you buy to be a better passer, new passing arms? To be a better setter, some of those new model setting hands? To be a better blocker, can you go out and get the extended model, since you are short, of the National Team blocking arms? Nope, the only thing you can “buy” to get better is time contacting the ball, playing over the net.

Another unique element to be aware of is that the game at the lower level will often be won by the lesser-skilled team! Yep, at this level, the worst team wins...You should be working on three contacts per side, not one, as part of the process. Beginners who strive for three touches will lose on the scoreboard to teams who seek only to get the ball back over. Patience, therefore, is paramount.

It is the world’s biggest court...as once the ball is put into play with the act of service, the court boundaries extend beyond the actual court lines, limited only by walls or other off-court interferences. Most other sports confine the players to an area. We are expected to pursue and save an errant ball for yards and yards off the court, and then hustle back to keep playing. At the same time, players must learn to adapt to lower ceilings and bright lights, which may not interfere with any other gym game but volleyball. We volleyball players are the only ones who know where the lost badminton birdies and prom balloons are...

Meanwhile, the one item that keeps opponents apart, the high physical barrier called a net, can never be touched while the ball is in play. To make sure you don't touch it not one, but TWO people stare at the net watching you and your teammates...On this court, which is smaller than any other team sport, you have the highest density of players, making volleyball the most crowded in sport. Well, maybe chess is more crowded with all those "men..." but with 12 players on 162 square meter court, things are tight. So you need to get along...Imagine our game if we had fouls...oh, nice stuff block by you, WHAP, and you hit the blocker in frustration, then get to say...foul #1, I can do that 4 more times...

It can be played on virtually any surface—sand, grass, asphalt, wood and even mud or snow! Of course, at the same time, the ball can never touch the floor, something that is legal in every other sport played! What to get a funny perspective on how gravity works to bring the ball to the floor every second you are playing? Watch a game upside down...you can see from this new perspective how the ball keeps rushing to hit the floor.

The range of contact by each player, from just off the floor to the top of an individual's jump, is exceeded only by the range of play of the ball, which may go as high as the playing area allows. You are expected to be able to dig a ball just off the floor, then just a couple of seconds later, jump as high as you can and hit the ball at the top of your reach. Meanwhile, the speed of the ball between contacts also ranges from very slowly to more than 100 kilometers an hour for international players. Yet, volleyball players wear only optional protection, such as kneepads, to protect themselves from the floor. How many volleyballs hit you in the kneepads?

One of the neatest things about our sport is that you must do TWO consecutive maximum efforts in row, to be a good spiker. You must jump as HIGH as you can, and while up there, unsupported, you are expected to hit the ball as HARD as you can. Imagine a pro baseball/softball player having to jump as high as they could, then bat at the ball...that is what you are expected to do every third hit!

What about the great challenge of serve reception...compare it again to baseball/softball. There stands a pitcher (the server) sending curve balls and knuckleballs and fastballs at you, the batter (passer) is seen as a great success if he or she hits .300 percent. Would you make the team if you did not succeed in passing 2/3rds the serve coming at you? Now, imagine this...in serve reception and digging, we get to add – balls and strikes!..."wow, great serve, strike one...dang, that one is too far away, ball one....." It would make us all more successful, but the reality, it will never happen. Even if the ball hits the net on the way to you, you are expected to get your arms to a place and time to send the ball to the setter. And oh, by the way, don't be sending the ball over the net (to the outfield), or straight up (to the infield), as everyone expects it to go right to the setter (the shortstop).

Having a limited number of contacts (a maximum of three) often forces beginners and skilled players alike to return the ball to the opponents in a less-than-ideal form. At the same time, every single contact is judged by the referee. Most of the contacts are intermediate, not terminated, so "ball control" is very important. Imagine basketball players having to shoot, no matter where they are on the court, after the second pass is received.

The number of different skills required is also large, no matter what the court position of a player, with players having to rotate to new positions after the change of possession of the ball (sideout in previous scoring methods). Think about what would happen in baseball/softball..."OK that is an

out, now everyone rotate,” and the pitcher goes to catcher, the catcher to outfield...or after a touchdown, the center rotates to running back, the quarterback moves to tight end...Volleyball makes you be a player who can play all over the court, doing different positions...and the best players spend time playing and getting good everywhere.

While the ball is fighting gravity, the players get very limited positive feedback. Only service aces and spiking kills are seen as “rewards.” You must help keep the focus clear, especially on defense, when a desired contact is made. There is one skill, blocking, where you can be doing a GREAT job, and yet never touch the ball! Instead you channel the ball to your teammates, or intimidate the hitter to make errors of hitting out or into the net. Feedback here in this skill is vital from a coach – yes, you jumped at the right place and time, the hitter just hit out!

The game is played currently with no time limit. You just cannot win by one point, like other American sports, you must win the game by two points, or if really close, by just one! In other sports, when the coach gets a huge lead and the clock is near run out, everyone can come in, even the lowest skilled player. In our sport, I have seen teams lose a lead of 20 points, after subbing in some bench players, and the team loses. At the most recent Olympics, one of the top 12 players in the USA (as a player must be that good to make the final roster), played one point total. That was done to allow her to officially be an Olympian by “playing.” Yet it was only for one point, after years of training and playing.

In addition to the six key skills you need to teach, there come the complications caused by rotation. One of the strengths of learning fundamentals through two, three and four person youth volleyball teams is that there are only about half the number of rotation positions to learn, as compared to regular six-person volleyball. Most importantly is that these smaller team sizes give you the chance to contact the ball, for THAT is how you learn, not by watching. So with all these skills, you have to play on the defensive and offensive team, with the time to switch between those to sides of the sport, taking less than a second, and often shifting back and forth multiple times in a few seconds. Wouldn't the game be funny to watch if you had 6 players on offense, and 6 on defense, and each team ran off and on the court after a spike (ok Defense, run on!) and a Dig (OK offense, we dug it, you run on and attack it!).

Then there is scoring. Every time the ball is put into play, it starts with the same skill, serving. Not many coaches understand that concept, that no matter what happens within the rally, you ALWAYS return to being good at serving to get the next point. Plus, in our sport, virtually every time the ball is put into play, a point is scored. However, in other sports, you win if you get a lead of one point...surprise, not in volleyball, you must win by TWO!

When you add the demands placed on any volleyball player to the fact that the ball must rebound, the sport becomes a complex challenge for any beginner of any age. The ball never comes perfectly to a player, even in the teammate-to-teammate skills. Reading and anticipation skills are THE most important skills, not the six skills we know so well. Proper reading must be incorporated into every drill, for even cooperative actions will not place the ball in the perfect spot for skill execution. Ninety-nine percent of the game is spent not touching the ball; rather, it is spent moving to be in a better place and to touch the ball better.