

Chapter 1

Teaching Volleyball to Children

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Congratulations on making the decision to coach a youth volleyball team this season. Regardless of whether you stepped forward because of your love for the game and kids, or because the friendly woman at the registration desk persuaded you when you went to sign your child up for the program, you're about to begin something truly special. Few experiences are more rewarding than coaching a group of children in the exciting and action-packed sport of volleyball. You'll see what I mean as you help them not only learn and develop skills but also grow as individuals.

Before you take the court with your team, please be aware of the important role you've assumed. How you approach your position and how you interact with your players during practices and matches will have life-shaping implications for all your players. How you choose to address the lengthy list of responsibilities that come with your job as coach can help your players become passionate about the sport and also ignite their interest in playing it for years to come, or it can push them away from ever participating again.

We know you're capable of doing an outstanding job — all you need is some quality information to help you get started. In this chapter, we give you a quick overview of what you need to do to navigate your team to a safe, fun, and memorable season that your players will remember for the right reasons. Use this chapter as a jumping-off point to the world of coaching youth volleyball.

Recognizing Your Behind-the-Scenes Responsibilities

Before you drape that whistle around your neck and your players slide on their knee pads to take the court, you need to tend to several behind-the-scenes tasks to get the season headed in the right direction. Whether you volunteered to coach because your son or daughter is playing on the team or you simply love the game and want to share that passion with others doesn't matter. What does matter is that you're fully aware of the huge responsibility you've accepted — a responsibility you can't afford to take lightly. This section delves into two important aspects of coaching youth volleyball that you need to grasp before stepping on the court.

Working with children and parents

Whenever you volunteer to coach a youth volleyball team, or any organized children's sport for that matter, not only do you have to work closely with all different types of children, but you have to communicate effectively with their parents, too. Most of the parents you come in contact with are wonderful, supportive, caring people who naturally want the best for their kids; they may even turn out to be great assets to you as assistant coaches. (Check out Chapter 4 for details on how to choose assistant coaches.) However, some of the parents you meet may not be as pleasant to work with. For example, they may demand that their children deserve more playing time, or they may disrupt matches with their inappropriate behaviors.



Anytime you bring a group of parents together in an organized sports setting, some may become sources of aggravation for you and the kids when they misbehave during matches or cause other distractions throughout the season. If you're not prepared to handle these situations quickly and efficiently, they can take away from the kids' enjoyment. Plus, if you don't address the problems at the outset, they can snowball into something much more serious and maybe even ruin the season for everyone. For tips on dealing with problem parents, head to Chapter 18.



You can avoid a lot of problems — and save yourself a lot of grief — by meeting with all the parents before you take the floor with their kids. This initial parents meeting is crucial for laying the ground rules on what you expect in terms of behavior during matches, as well as outlining what the parents' responsibilities are to their children and their children's teammates. Check out Chapter 4 for all the details on how to conduct a preseason parents meeting.

Parents play important roles in youth volleyball programs, and they can be real assets to providing a fun-filled season when everyone — the parents, the players, and you — works together. Keep the following tips in mind to help make the season go smoothly for both you and the parents:

- ✓ **Explain expectations.** Prior to your first practice session, let parents know what you expect — of both them and their kids. Go over your coaching methods and your plans for handling those all-important issues of distributing playing time and positioning players. Chapter 2 helps you craft your coaching philosophy and develop an understanding of your league's policies and rules so that you can clearly communicate this information to parents. Providing a clear picture of what's in store for everyone leaves little room for those dreaded misunderstandings that can derail a season and squash the fun.
- ✓ **Involve parents.** Parents invest a lot of time in your season by getting their kids to practice on time (hopefully), spending money on league registration fees, and often even springing for postmatch treats and drinks for all the players. They will find the season much more satisfying if you find ways to include them in the team's season-long journey. Get parents involved at practices, for example, and recruit the right ones to assist with your matches. See Chapter 6 for some fun ways to get your parents involved.
- ✓ **Communicate constantly.** Although conducting a preseason parents meeting is the first step toward establishing a strong foundation with your players' parents, you have to make sure you keep those communication lines open all season long. Find time at different junctures during the season to talk to the parents about their children's progress. Parents enjoy hearing about the areas of the game in which their children are really excelling and appreciate your efforts to keep them fully informed.



You should make a habit of checking in with parents from time to time by having a quick casual chat before or after practice just to make sure that everything is going well and that their children are having fun playing for you. Including parents in all facets of the season is one of the smartest coaching moves you can make, and doing so can also be one of the most effective tools for ensuring that children have a positive experience playing for you. If the parent has an important issue to discuss with you, make arrangements to speak in private — perhaps over the phone later that day or in private prior to your next practice.

Understanding rules and terms

The more you know and understand about the sport of volleyball, including all the rules, terms, and — at the advanced levels — strategies, and the better you can explain these concepts to your team, the more enjoyable the

experience will be for everyone involved. Although getting a firm grasp on everything isn't too difficult, it does require some time and effort on your part. So be ready to put some energy into learning all the rules of the game and then teaching them to your players. In Chapter 3, we dive into the rule book and describe everything from common volleyball terms to what officials whistle as violations during matches.



Many programs adjust the rules based on the age and experience levels of the kids, so make sure you check out your league's rule book and alert your players to any differences between your league's rules and general volleyball rules. Everything from the size of the court to which rules the officials enforce changes from league to league. Knowing these rules — and sharing them with your team — makes a tremendous difference in whether you and your players enjoy the season.

Taking the Court

Being on the court with the kids during practices and watching them have fun and excel during matches make all the time and energy you put into coaching worthwhile. To make everyone's experience an enjoyable one, spend some time before practices and matches preparing for them. Be aware that everything you say to your players — and how you say it — significantly impacts their experience. How much thought you put into your practice planning and how prepared you are for juggling all your responsibilities during matches set the tone for your season. This section gives you some pointers on how to start off on the right foot.

Planning and executing practices

One of the qualities that all good volleyball coaches possess is the ability to help kids grasp and develop skills in a way that lets them have fun at the same time. Of course, kids naturally look forward to participating in matches more than participating in weekly practices. But you want to strive to generate similar game day excitement toward attending your practices. To do so, you want to put together a practice plan that pays big dividends in your players' development while also being enjoyable. (Check out Chapter 6 for how to set a practice plan.)

To maximize your time with the kids during each of your practice sessions, keep the following tips in mind when establishing and carrying out your practice plan:



- ✓ **Count on creativity.** Put some real thought into interesting ways you can enhance the fun during your practices. You want the kids to be smiling as they learn. Put yourself in their shoes, and ask yourself what can make a particular drill more interesting. If you can conduct practices that the kids can't wait to get to, their skill development will skyrocket. Practices that you throw together minutes before the team takes the court aren't likely to be very effective. Plus, they're unfair to your players, who came to develop their skills and have fun.

When designing your practices, go with the drills that keep the kids on the move and that match their skill levels. Drills that force kids to stand in line or spend more time watching their teammates than actually participating kill energy levels and bring learning, development, and that all-important fun factor to a grinding halt. We provide an array of high-energy drills that cover all areas of the game for beginning level players in Chapter 10 and advanced level players in Chapter 12.

- ✓ **Focus on fun.** The most effective practices are the ones that you conduct in an enjoyable atmosphere in which you emphasize fun and deemphasize mistakes. Before the season gets underway, kids need to know that making mistakes is all part of learning to play volleyball. So, be sure to point out that players at all levels miss serves, get whistled for violations, and misplay balls. As long as kids are listening to your instructions, hustling on the court, and giving their best effort, you can't ask anything else of them. After players know that they can make mistakes on the court without hearing you yell at them or seeing you take them out of the game, they can relax and have a much more enjoyable time.

- ✓ **Be a positive influence.** Although your main role is to teach your players volleyball skills, you're also in a great position to impact the kids' lives in many other areas, and you should take full advantage of this opportunity. During practices, devote some time to discussing the importance of staying away from tobacco, alcohol, and drugs and the ways these substances can harm the body. Stress the importance of working hard in school and how their hard work can lead to success in adulthood. You can also talk about the importance of getting exercise and eating healthy food to help prevent future health issues or physical injuries. (Chapter 17 discusses proper nutrition and stretching techniques.) Be sure to include the importance of playing hard and showing good sportsmanship no matter the outcome of the match.



While the kids are stretching at the beginning of practice is a great time to interact with them on a more personal level. Show them that you're interested in their lives outside of volleyball by discussing how they're enjoying school.

Handling game day duties

Being a good volleyball coach during matches has nothing to do with what the scoreboard reads after the final point has been played. Rather, being a good volleyball coach depends on how you handle your different game day duties, such as encouraging and motivating the kids and — at the more advanced levels of play — adjusting your strategy to account for how the opposition is attacking and defending. Just as your players have to make quick decisions during the course of the action, you also have to make important decisions at crunch time. You have pregame and postgame talks to deliver; playing time to monitor; substitutions to make; and strategies to employ. Yes, when your matches roll around, a lengthy list of responsibilities accompanies them, but don't worry because you're fully capable of handling all of them. In Chapter 7, you find all the information you need to help your matches go smoothly so that you don't have to reach for the aspirin bottle.



Your team's matches give your players the chance to put everything they've learned from you to use. Hopefully, what they've learned includes more than simply how to hit a particular type of serve or how to dig an attack. You also want teamwork, good sportsmanship, and adherence to the rules to be on full display.

Juggling the Dual Parent-Coach Role

Running a marathon, climbing a mountain, and winning a Nobel Prize are all goals that are difficult to achieve, and managing the role of both parent and coach of your child's team can rank right up there with them — if you aren't prepared. Handling this dual role can present some pretty unique challenges, some of which may not have even crossed your mind. When you and your child step onto the court together, all sorts of new issues have the potential to pop up. The key to handling these issues effectively is to prepare yourself beforehand, because if you're ready to handle them, you and your child are on your way to an enormously rewarding and memorable season.

If you and your child agree that becoming the team's coach is a good idea, keep the following tips in mind to help you maximize the fun and minimize the problems:

- ✓ **Remember that your number one job is parenting.** Regardless of how great a volleyball coach you are, you're a parent first and foremost. After the practice or game is over, you must transition out of coaching mode and into parenting mode, which means that you need to leave your negative thoughts on the court if your child didn't play as well as you had

hoped or if the team didn't perform like you expected. Don't use the ride home to dissect every detail of the match. Instead, concentrate on being a supportive, caring parent.

- ✓ **Open the lines of communication.** Making sure that your child understands that he can come to you with a problem at anytime is extremely important. You want all your other players to understand that you're there to help, and your child is no different. Just because you've taken on the coaching role doesn't mean that you can't help your own child deal with problems or concerns, whether they involve volleyball or not.
- ✓ **Refrain from extra repetitions.** Sometimes during the season, your child may encounter some difficulty getting a handle on a particular skill. Your natural tendency is to push extra practice time on him at home. However, giving any kid extra practice plans is dangerous territory to navigate, so always proceed cautiously. Casually asking whether your child would like to spend a little extra time working on a particular skill at home is the best approach. If he wants to, great; if not, let it go. You run the risk of making him feel inferior to some of his teammates if you push him too hard.
- ✓ **Silence sibling comparisons.** One of the worst moves you can make — as parent or coach — is comparing a child's skills to those of a brother or sister who plays volleyball or making the child feel unwanted pressure to perform to his sibling's level. When you bring unfair comparisons into the picture, you just suffocate the fun the child can have, and you may even chase the youngster away from participating in the future. Allow all your players, including your child, to develop at their own rates without placing performance demands on their young shoulders. Anytime you start comparing kids, you create problems, such as crushed confidence, low self-esteem, and lack of interest in future participation, all of which can be mighty difficult to repair.
- ✓ **Master the balancing act.** Arguably your biggest challenge is making sure that your behavior falls somewhere in between providing preferential treatment to your child and overcompensating to avert the perception that you're giving your child special treatment. Of course, all eyes are on you to see whether you give your child extra playing time during matches, so you want to be sure that you're treating everyone equally in terms of playing time and positions. But, at the same time, you want to make sure you don't go to unfair lengths to *reduce* your child's playing time or give him *less* attention or instruction during practices because you don't want other parents to think you're favoring him.



For a lot of kids, having to share their moms or dads with a group of other kids can be quite an adjustment, so be sure to let your child know how proud you are of him for understanding that coaching requires that you distribute your attention to everyone during practices and games. When children understand that you're aware of the situation and that you're doing your best to meet everyone's needs, fewer misunderstandings are likely to occur.



Like all parents, of course you want to see your child play well and enjoy a lot of success during matches. But, don't allow yourself to use your coaching position to control your child's destiny. For starters, erase any thoughts of using coaching as a way to help him secure a college scholarship. Entering the season with those types of thoughts can lead you to put unwanted pressure on the child and push him harder than you do the other kids. If you allow yourself to lose sight of what youth volleyball is all about — having fun and developing skills — chances are good that you'll create an avalanche of problems that you'll have a hard time fixing.

Preparing for All Kinds of Obstacles

As a volleyball coach, you may face many types of obstacles during the season, ranging from frustrated players to injuries. Yet, you don't need to worry about these potential issues. Preparation is the key to disarming problems before they sweep over the entire team. Two of the greatest coaching challenges you need to be aware of before the start of the season are

- ✓ **Making a positive impact on every child:** As a youth volleyball coach, you most likely have a diverse cast of kids to oversee. You likely have kids who have a lot of athletic talent and those who are just plain clumsy; you probably have kids who are nonstop talkers and those who are super shy. Your job as coach is to connect with each child, regardless of whether he's the team's best attacker or weakest defender. Sure, this job is a big undertaking, but it's one you're equipped to handle. Check out Chapter 5 for details on the different types of kids who are likely to show up on the court and Chapter 11 for info on how to make adjustments to your coaching strategy midway through the season after you get to know the kids better.
- ✓ **Keeping everyone safe:** Regardless of which skill you're teaching or which drill you're running, you never want to lose sight of the importance of maintaining a safe playing environment at all times. Although you can't throw a suit of armor on the kids to eliminate the chances that injuries will occur, you can take some steps to significantly reduce the risk. For example, you need to teach only proper and safe techniques, make sure your players stretch adequately before each practice and match, and know how to handle any emergencies that may take place. Chapter 17 provides tips and advice for keeping kids safe. **Note:** Anytime you take the court for a practice or game, make sure you have a properly stocked first-aid kit on hand (check out Chapter 17 for what you need to have in your first-aid kit).