

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Meeting the two volleyballs, indoor and beach
- » Getting into offense
- » Defending to win matches
- » Making sure you enjoy yourself

Chapter **1**

The Lowdown on Volleyball, Just the Basics

Volleyball is the sleeping giant of American sports. Indoor or outdoor, hardwood or beach — it doesn't matter.

For more than a decade, high school girls have played volleyball more than any other sport. Since 2016, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) beach volleyball has been the fastest-growing sport in the history of the NCAA, an institution that's been around for more than 120 years. At the time we're writing this book, television viewership is exploding at astonishing rates. Professional leagues are popping up quicker than you can say "side out."

The sport has come a long way from a dusty gym in Springfield, Massachusetts — where indoor volleyball was invented, right alongside basketball.

This chapter serves as your roadmap to the world of volleyball. Here, we share some of the basics and help you launch into this exciting world.

Comparing Indoor and Beach Volleyball

The foundations of both indoor and beach volleyball are the same:

- » Each rally starts with a *serve*, when a player hits the ball from behind the end line over the net into the opponent's court.
- » The receiving team follows with a *pass*, using their forearms to control the ball with a bump, *set* (placing the ball to their teammate for the third contact), and *hit*, where a player strikes the ball toward the opponent's court to try to score a point.
- » Both sports use the same terminology.
- » Most of the skills share the same principles.



REMEMBER

But indoor and beach volleyball are quite different, as well — as different from one another as a beach is from a gym.

The following sections preview indoor and beach volleyball, showing you how they're similar and different, with a focus on rules, court, and equipment. Chapter 2 explores the similarities and differences in much more detail.

Progress of play

The progress of play is basically the same between indoor and beach volleyball (Chapter 2 discusses a few exceptions). Here's what happens:

- 1. A rally begins with a member of one team serving the ball.**
- 2. A player on the opposing team passes the serve with either their forearms or hands.**
- 3. The setter on the same team then sets that pass.**
- 4. An offensive player hits the set back to the serving team's side of the net.**
- 5. The serving team attempts to either block or dig the hit.**

Blocking is when the opposing team attempts to stop the attack before it crosses the net, and *digging* is when the opposing team passes the attack before it can hit the floor for a point.
- 6. That team has up to three contacts of their own to counterattack.**
- 7. When the ball hits the floor, the rally is over.**

The team on the opposite side of the net from where the ball hits the floor *inbounds* (within the court's boundaries) gets the point. If the ball lands *out of*

bounds (outside the court's boundaries), then the team on defense wins the point.

8. The team that won the point serves the ball to start the next rally.

The teams repeat Steps 1 through 8 until one team scores enough points to win the set.

Indoor

These sections look at the rules and specifications for indoor volleyball.

Indoor rules of play

Here are the basic rules of indoor volleyball:

- » **Number of players:** Each team has six players on the court.
- » **Number of sets:** Matches are decided in a best-of-five format, with the first four sets going to 25 points, in which you must win by 2 points. If you have to go to a decisive fifth set, that set goes to 15 (but you also need to win by 2).

Indoor court specifications

An indoor volleyball court measures 59 feet (18 meters [m]) long by 30 feet (9m) wide, divided into two halves, which are separated by the net (see Figure 1-1).

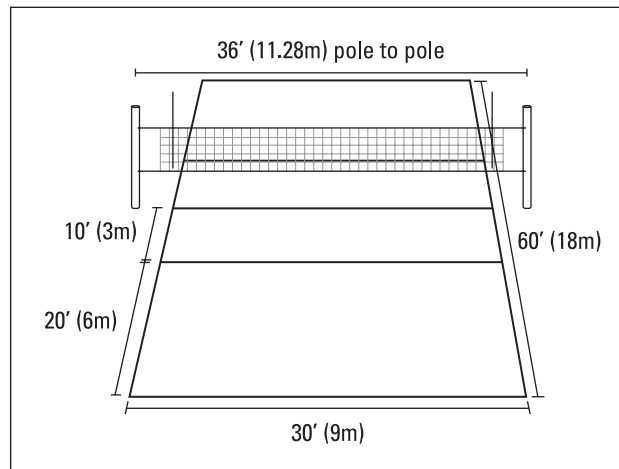


FIGURE 1-1:
An indoor court's
dimensions.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

A women's net measures 7 feet $4\frac{1}{8}$ inches (2.24m) in height, and a men's net measures 7 feet $11\frac{5}{8}$ inches (2.43m) tall.

Indoor equipment

To play indoor volleyball, you need:

- » Twelve people (six on each side)
- » A gym or court
- » A net
- » A ball
- » Two *antennas* on either side of the net marking the outer boundaries of the court
- » Volleyball shoes and socks
- » (Optional) Knee and elbow pads

We get into the nitty-gritty specifics of everything that you need for a game of volleyball in Chapter 4.

Beach

Although similar to indoor in many aspects, beach volleyball is also an entirely different sport with entirely different rules. This section explains the similarities and differences.

Beach rules

Here are the basic rules of beach volleyball:

- » **Number of players:** Each team has two players on the court.
- » **Number of sets:** Matches are decided in a best-of-three format, in which the first two sets are played to 21 points (and you must win by 2 points). If the match needs a decisive third set, teams play to 15 points (again, needing to win by 2 points).
- » **Switching sides:** Teams switch sides of the court every seven points in the first two sets to ensure neither team has an advantage with the wind and sun. In the final set, they switch sides every five points.



REMEMBER

Beach volleyball has only two players per team, unlike indoor's six players (see the section "Indoor rules of play," earlier in this chapter, for how indoor is set up).

Beach court specs

A standard beach volleyball court measures 52 feet (16m) long by 26 feet (8m) wide, divided into two halves separated by the net. The net heights are the same as the indoor net (flip back to the section "Indoor court specifications," earlier in this chapter, for those numbers). Figure 1-2 shows a beach court's specs.

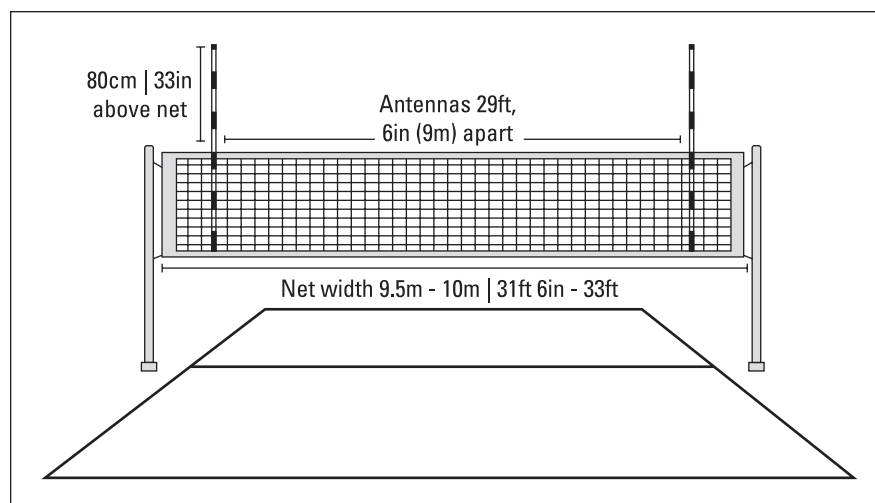


FIGURE 1-2:
Beach volleyball
court dimensions.

Beach equipment

To play beach volleyball, you need the following:

- » Four people (two per team)
- » A beach or beach volleyball facility
- » A net
- » *Lines* to mark the outer boundaries of the court
- » At least one ball, although preferably many so that you don't have to *shag* (to chase after) down the beach
- » Two antennas
- » (Optional) Sunscreen, sunglasses, and a towel

Chapter 4 addresses what you need when playing beach volleyball in detail.

Exploring the Offensive Skills That You Need to Play Volleyball

If defense is said to win championships, offense, by definition, is what allows you to play defense in volleyball. When you score on offense, you then become the defensive team. Without offense, then, there's no defense — and no championships to win. We want you to win championships.

That begins on offense.

The following sections focus on three offensive skills.

Hitting



TIP

Hitting is the fun skill, the one that gets you both acclaim on the scoreboard and on social media highlights everywhere.

Here are a couple of important techniques that you need to master for hitting:

» **Proper approach:** Although you might think we'd begin with the arm swing, that is, in actuality, the last element of the hit that we talk about. Without a proper approach, and proper footwork, the arm swing doesn't matter at all. Hitting a volleyball begins with a pass — on the beach, it's your own pass that your teammate *sets* back to you; indoors, the outside hitters, libero or defensive specialist, pass to a setter, who then sets it to you as the hitter. And your approach to that set determines how well you will put yourself in a position to hit the ball.

Your *approach* is the footwork sequence you take as you prepare to hit.

» **Arm swing:** Your arm swing is the upper body process that goes into hitting the ball, from drawing your arm back to actually striking the ball. The basic premise is this: To hit a ball with full power, you need an arm swing that maximizes your capabilities as a hitter.



REMEMBER

Chapter 6 looks at the many nuanced differences between hitting indoors versus hitting on the beach, and we — ahem — hit the basic principles that apply to both surfaces. That chapter doesn't just focus on glorious swings that bounce into the heavens or rafters of your gym. It talks about smarts — “hitting it where they ain't,” as 1996 Olympic gold medalist Kent Steffes is fond of saying. It's about

technique, finding the open space, and scoring in manners both powerful and genius. Hitting a volleyball is far more than thunderous power and physical dominance.

In other words, you can find out how to hit a volleyball and score, no matter your height or physical disposition.

Setting

Do you want to be the most popular person on any volleyball court, be it indoors or on the beach? If so, then master the art of *setting*. Set with your hands and set with your *platform* (the surface you make with your forearms to bump the ball). Set *in-system passes* (perfect passes exactly where you'd want them) and set from the *end line* (the back edge of the court).



TIP

Setting is the most philanthropic skill in the game, the one that allows those around you to shine — and if the crowd is paying attention, you shine just as bright. To riff on motivational speaker Zig Ziglar's famous maxim "You will get all you want in life, if you help enough other people get what they want," a volleyball team can win anything it wants, as long as the setter helps the team's hitters get what they want.

And those hitters want perfect sets, exactly where they prefer them. Perfect setting isn't easy, of course. No skill that demands the type of control that setting does is easy. Setters are like the football quarterbacks, the basketball point guards — the individual through whom the offense flows. A setter needs to be both a cerebral mastermind and a physical talent, making quick decisions and then executing upon those decisions. That brain-and-body challenge is where setters find the fun. Setting is arguably the most dynamic skill in the game of volleyball, and if you appreciate helping others and allowing your teammates — and, therefore, your team — thrive, flip to Chapter 7 to find out how to do exactly that.

Serving

Serving is the boom-or-bust, feast-or-famine, rags-or-riches skill in the sport of volleyball.



REMEMBER

Serving is the only *closed-loop skill* in the game, the one where you control all aspects of it, from the toss to the approach to the final contact. This control makes serving both less complex than any other skill because you control literally everything, and also immensely frustrating — because you control literally everything and therefore can blame only yourself when something goes amiss.

If you play golf and know both the joy and misery of navigating 18 holes against an opponent that doesn't move, you understand the mindset of the server.

You can make the serve, like the drive in golf, an incredible weapon, a virtual non-factor, or your greatest liability. Chapter 8 covers the feast-or-famine nature of serving, where a gigantic Brazilian named Evandro has made his career on serving — and where the 2019 UCLA men's indoor team built a sizable lead and watched it dissolve, almost all because of serving.

Every rally begins with a serve. And whether you hit a float, jump, hybrid, short, or deep serve, you can make it your ally.

Passing

Is passing an offensive or defensive skill? The answer is yes.

When you *pass*, you defend the serve, ensuring the other team doesn't get an *ace* (when they hit a serve that isn't passed), while setting up your offense in the first contact that ideally passes the ball directly into your setter's hands, who then sets the ball to the hitter. (We talk about the pass-set-hit process in the section "Progress of play" earlier in this chapter.)

Passing is the unsung hero of the volleyball world, the gritty, unsexy skill that receives little or no acclaim but is as important as any other. Want to hit a ball on the beach? Better make a pass that your partner can set. Want to stay on the court indoors? You better make sure that you can pass a ball to the setter — otherwise, you have a displeased setter, even angrier hitters, and a scoreboard that you don't much want to look at.

Passing is the very foundation upon which you build a volleyball offense and defense. Chapter 9 explores in plain English the ins and outs of passing and provides tips to help you be a better passer.

Focusing on Defensive Skills

Now you get to the part where you can win those proverbial championships! Defense is a complex process, one that involves both passing and blocking, as well as setting after you've made a dig and hitting those sets in transition — when you're transitioning from defense back into offense after you've made a dig.

Blocking

Rich Lambourne, the 2008 gold medal-winning *libero* (a player who only plays defense) for the United States men's national team, summed up blocking as well as anyone we've heard. He told the viewers on Volleyball TV while commentating a match, "Blocking is about frustration management."

You might think that you should get a *block* on every other point, particularly if you're playing a team or individual who hits the ball a lot as opposed to using more off-speed attacks. But, in truth, blockers actually block very few balls — around two per set for the best men in the world on the beach, one and a half per set for the best women, and about five per match indoors. So, your opponents get a lot more attacks over, around, off, and through your blocks than attacks that go into your block.



WARNING

Frustrating indeed. It's a fickle beast, blocking — full of nuance, timing, and something volleyball players call *hand shape* (how they form their hands when blocking). We dive deep into blocking in Chapter 10.

Playing defense

If you like chess, or a sport that requires thinking on your feet while also reacting quicker than you can blink, then you'll love volleyball defense.

Well, maybe. Because you also have to love getting hit by volleyballs. A lot of volleyballs.

Playing defense is, simply, keeping the other team's attacks from hitting your side of the court, in any way, shape, or form you can. You're doing nothing more than getting hit by the ball, ideally in a manner that controls it to your setter.

That's how Erik Shoji, one of the best *liberos* to ever play the game, rose to the top of the volleyball world. Chapter 11 provides numerous tips for you to become an elite defensive player. If you want to be a great defensive player, you have to accept the fact that your job is, put simply, to get in the way of a volleyball.



TIP

Reverse dodgeball is how Lambourne affectionately dubbed it because, for all intents and purposes, in defense, you want the ball to hit you. Defense requires smarts, determining your opponent's tendencies and making it difficult for them to follow those tendencies. It requires flexibility and a reaction time that would rival any Major League Baseball hitter. It requires angles — both forming them and taking them away.

THE FLOW AND FUN OF VOLLEYBALL

When I (co-author Gabby Reece) think back to volleyball and all that it's given me, it fills me with real gratitude. When I look at my life and anything I've accomplished, so much of it has been built on the shoulders of my early relationship with volleyball.

As a young person, volleyball gave me a place to be big. I was tall early — 6 feet tall at 12, 6 feet 3 inches at 15 — and during a difficult time in my life, the game gave that size a purpose. I was late to it. I didn't grow up dreaming of it. I only started taking it seriously my junior year of high school. I didn't suddenly get good — I got serious. And somehow, that seriousness led me to an athletic scholarship at Florida State University. I never really thought about going to college before that scholarship offer, and volleyball afforded me that opportunity.

At Florida State, I met my coach, Dr. Cecile Reynaud, who became a true mentor. At a time when I was navigating a lot, she taught me accountability and what hard work actually looks like. And the women I played with — both in college and later in the pros — set a standard. They showed me, every day, what commitment and effort feel like in real time.

Being on a team also taught me how to work with people who don't always see things the way that you do and how to celebrate other women's greatness. You realize quickly that together, you can do more. That lesson has stayed with me in every part of my life.

Volleyball also taught me something very simple but very powerful: If I put in the work, I respect myself more. You can't fake it. You can't phone it in. That connection between effort and self-esteem is something I've carried into everything — my training, my work, even how I manage my emotions.

People talk a lot about discipline, but for me, it became a tool. I've used it in sport, in business, and in structuring my life so that I have more time for my family and friends. It also taught me not to feel overwhelmed — to break things down, to stay with the process and the plan.

The game showed me how to set a goal and build a plan to get there. It taught me how to win and, maybe more importantly, how to lose. It gave me the understanding that if I take a risk — personally or professionally — and it doesn't work out, I'll be okay. I'll survive.

And finally, to experience those moments of precision and execution as an athlete is a rare opportunity — to hit a kind of note that you don't often find in day-to-day life. The simplest way to describe this feeling is: to be in flow, not forgetting how fun the game is.

Enjoying the Sport

When Delaney Knudsen — now Delaney Mewhirter, the wife of co-author Travis — first appeared on the popular beach volleyball podcast *SANDCAST*, she mentioned her unofficial mission statement as a beach volleyball player: “If you aren’t having fun, then why are you doing it?”

Let this idea be the theme of your volleyball journey, on whatever surface you may be playing it.

Volleyball is fun. It’s so fun that writing this book about how fun it is was fun. You can play it:

- » Inside and out
- » In tiny gyms or beaches that stretch for as far as the eye can see
- » In huge arenas or the local park by your house
- » With every even-numbered combination, from 12 people to 4 (and even only 2 — Delaney’s favorite game in the world is one-on-one volleyball, but she’s a masochist in that weird way athletes can be)

Because playing volleyball is so much fun, no place in the world doesn’t embrace this sport:

- » **The tundra of Nebraska:** Ask the 92,000 fans who showed up to a 2023 women’s volleyball match in the University of Nebraska–Lincoln football stadium to watch the Huskers take on the University of Nebraska at Omaha Mavericks.
- » **The Swiss Alps:** Ask the sold-out crowd that packs the annual Gstaad tournament on the Beach Pro Tour since 2001.
- » **Rio de Janeiro, Brazil:** Chat with the locals there, who line up for hours to watch their favorite teams play both indoors and on the beach.

Have fun with the sport, whether by improving your game, no matter your skill level, or becoming a knowledgeable fan who follows indoor volleyball, beach, or both. Chapter 5 can help. By picking up this book, you just opened up an entirely new realm of fun to have. You can’t find a more joyful sport in the world.

THE UNEXPECTED AND WONDROUSLY SANDY LIFE

The winter of 2013–2014 was a brutal one in Maryland, where I (co-author Travis Mewhirter) was raised and where I was living at the time, writing for the *Washington Post*, covering high school sports in the D.C., Maryland, and Virginia area.

My memory has snowfall somewhere around 80 to 90 inches (203–229 centimeters [cm]) that winter, but who knows if that's accurate or me exaggerating (which I'm prone to do). As fate would have it, I got snowed in at my buddy Jason Wheatley's house, and I'd had enough. I decided to apply for every sportswriting job south of Virginia. I grabbed my laptop right then, headed to SportsJournalists.com, and began sending out resumes and cover letters.

After a few interviews, I narrowed it down to two opportunities: ACCsports.com in Raleigh, North Carolina, or the *Northwest Florida Daily News* in Fort Walton Beach, Florida. I took the latter, location unseen.

After the 18-hour drive from Baltimore to the Panhandle, my parents and I walked to a restaurant called Rocco's Italian Bistro. Our waitress (whom I'd later find out was named Deborah Jewells) noticed I was tall and of a decently athletic build and asked whether I played volleyball. Being from Baltimore, where volleyball is a girls' sport, I gave an easy no. I played it in gym class, but not since. If she knew of any basketball leagues or pickup, I was in.

She didn't know about the hoops scene, but mentioned if I was ever bored, a bar/restaurant down the street named Juana's had six beach volleyball courts and hosted leagues and tournaments pretty much daily. Good scene. Good people. Lotta fun. I should give it a try.

A few months later, I did. I was reading a book, drinking a beer, minding my own business at Juana's, when Ms. Jewells recognized me and asked if I wanted to play on her co-ed fours team that day. I figured, "Why not?"

I can't remember a single day over the next year and a half in which I didn't play beach volleyball.

A man named Judd Smith, whom I call my volleyball dad, noticed me playing one day, saw I was terrible but had potential, and asked if he could work with me. He'd played in AVP qualifiers and won tournaments up and down Florida, and he loved teaching the game. I was awful, hated being awful, and wanted to change the fact that I was awful, so it was an easy yes. After recording a morning radio show in Destin, Florida from six to nine o'clock in the morning, I'd drive back to Navarre, hit the gym, then meet Judd at a bar called Lagerheads on the Gulf, where he had a few courts set up, named Bulldog Beach (after his unbelievably fat bulldog, Tonka).

He'd bring out a bag of those old black and white Spalding volleyballs and set up a trashcan where you wanted me to hit, working on hitting line, angle, and cut shots. Then I'd hit shots into those trashcans until it was time to shower and head into the *Daily News*. There, I worked until 10 or 11 at night — and then headed straight to Juana's, changing in the downstairs restrooms out of my work clothes and into board shorts, and played whatever league, tournament, or pickup was happening that night.

I did this routine for a year and a half, meeting people I'm still close with to this day. Other saints recognized my drive to improve and offered to coach me for free. Scott Allen, Meaghan Allen, Dan Labrador, Matt Rivest, and a host of others all built the foundations of my skillset.

Everyone I met at Bulldog Beach — Judd, Shaun, J.M. Plummer, Matt Blanke, J.D. Hamilton, a blue-nosed kid named Evan Cory, and all the rest — have such a fond place in my heart, and it's not wrong or hyperbole to say that I love them like family.

In 2016, I moved to California, and my life launched at warp speed:

- **2016:** Within six months, I began writing for *Volleyball Magazine* and *DiG Magazine*, covering the sport no differently than I would, say, NCAA basketball's March Madness.
- **2017:** Tri Bourne, one of the best players in the world and a future Olympian, and I launched our podcast, *SANDCAST*, which has since become the most-downloaded volleyball podcast on Earth.
- **2018:** I qualified for my first professional main draw — meeting my eventual wife, Delaney Knudsen, in the process. Five months later, I won my first international medal, a silver on a postcard of an island called Martinique (see the nearby photo of Travis Mewhirter and Tim Brewster winning a silver medal in Cuba).

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- **2021:** I flew more than 100,000 miles, traveling the world, circumnavigating it once — Los Angeles to China to Israel to Moscow to Los Angeles — playing the game.
- **2022:** I jetted home early from a tournament in Mexico to commentate my first match on Volleyball TV, a side quest that would eventually become something of a career.
- **2024:** I coached my first professional teams, Tri Bourne and Chaim Schalk, and Betsi Flint and Julia Scoles. That summer, I signed to coach at Florida State University.

Along the way, I wrote four books (five now, including this one), begat two children, and built a life and family on a foundation of volleyball. A life I could have never imagined. A sandy life I wouldn't change in the least.