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COACHES' CLIPBOARD

A NEWSLETTER FOR OVR JUNIORS COACHES

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TO PART PRACTICE OR NOT TO PART PRACTICE (PART 1)

One of the most controversial topics in the field of motor learning is the debate between whole and part practice. Whole practice is practicing a skill in its entirety and part practice is breaking a skill into teachable parts. A large body of scientific research exists supporting the benefits of whole practice, which many practitioners have misconstrued to mean it is 100% superior to part practice for all activities, that breaking down a skill for novice learners does them a grave disservice. In this issue of the *OVR Coaches' Clipboard*, I will share with you what current verifiable scientific research says about the topic of part practice and its practical and appropriate application within your teaching/coaching strategy.

To begin, the point of any practice strategy should be to prepare the learner for optimal performance in a given target environment. If I want to prepare students for a particular assessment, then I need to teach the content—and it needs to be learned—in such a way that the learning is meaningful to the student so as to give them the best chance of success. Along with all of the systems of play we use with our teams, there are also the techniques that we teach to our players that give them the best chances for success.

Motor learning texts commonly address skills that are the general common physical movements of running, jumping, catching, throwing and kicking. Combinations of these common physical skills and/or their playing-rule-regulated or preferred movement patterns are the technical skills in our game. For example, in volleyball, one of the more complicated techniques is the attack, which is a particular combination of the actions of running, jumping and throwing (remember to also teach proper landing!).

Some technical skills are so complex for novice (inexperienced) athletes that they may need to be broken down into teachable units for them to understand. The problem is deciding on how many pieces, which most likely will be different for each player. Do you want them trying to put together a 15,000-piece Eiffel Tower puzzle or a 4-piece Kermit the Frog puzzle? My money is on the frog as being a faster completion time! Remember: the more pieces you break a skill into, the more pieces the learner has to put back together to form the picture of the skill.

The first question you should ask yourself as the coach is whether the skill is actually too complex for the player to practice all at once. In most cases the answer is no; we simply can attend to a particular movement during execution of the technique while practicing it in its entirety. The second

question would be to address which parts of the technical skill can be isolated and practiced by themselves and which ones must be kept together to preserve the relative timing pattern required for proper execution. For example, try practicing only half of a vertical jump or, instead of a complete arm swing, go only half way. Not a good idea.

With this in mind, it makes sense to practice technical skills as a whole, especially for those skills that require rapid, discrete actions such as volleyball-specific running, jumping, swinging, landing and passing. However, when there are errors in the technical execution of the skill or a need for skill refinement, part practice can be useful.

If you as the coach have determined that some form of part practice is necessary for a player, there are 3 common methods explained in most motor learning texts. The first is a teaching technique called *fractionalization*. This is the process of practicing the puzzle pieces of a skill individually, by themselves. One drawback of fractionalization is that learners find it difficult to figure out how the pieces fit together. *Segmentation* is another technique also known as progressive part practice. Here the first component of the skill is practiced and then the next one is added to it; the process continues until the technique is practiced in its entirety. *Simplification* is the third part practice strategy wherein the technique's complexity is simplified by modifying some aspect of the skill; be careful to not simplify so far that the modified skill is no longer similar to the target skill. This is not the same as the appropriate teaching of simplified versions of skills to beginners and eventually teaching more complex versions to more experienced athletes.

One of the obvious drawbacks to part practice is that, for team sports, it takes away the game or performance decision making processes of when and how to execute the practiced skill. For beginners, reducing considerable variables may be necessary to maximize the initial learning process and motivation. To help counteract this problem, most motor learning collegiate textbooks recommend the *whole-part-whole method*. Here, the whole technique is practiced first, then focused practice on the primary parts and lastly putting them together again as a whole in context.

What techniques are not strong candidates for part practice? Any discrete (obvious beginning and ending) rapid techniques and those that require bimanual coordination (2 limbs performing sequenced actions such as the toss and contact of serve) are not suited well to part practice. By separating these into parts, we may inadvertently create a negative transfer situation inhibiting the optimal performance of the skill in match situations.

ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING IN SPORT

As we are reaching the end of yet another long club volleyball season, it's time to review and evaluate progress achieved, goals reached and miles driven. Giving evaluations to players and parents in our programs can provide us coaches with valuable data regarding our interactions. But is there anything we can use apart from season records, medals and plaques to determine if our players really learned anything and achieved any measurable improvement? The answer is "yes" and lies in the correlation between what happens in practice and what happens in matches.

As a coach for the past 21 years and teacher for 18 years, I have learned the importance of being intentional about my words and actions and how they affect player/student learning at any given moment. My personal experience has been that my pedagogical teaching practice has been more positively influenced by the strategies I've learned over the years from great coaches in our sport. Many of these same ideas are only in recent years making their way into the classroom, yet it is education research that is now verifying the importance of the practice/learning situation on the performance environment.

I like phrases or saying that have powerful meaning. As I attend clinics or seminars, my notes are usually filled with one or two line summaries that have powerful meaning to me. One of these personal epiphanies came several years ago as I was looking for a way to summarize my philosophy of what I wanted to achieve in practice and match performance. I ended up with this: If you want "it" to happen in the match, you have to train "it" in practice.

I used to be one of those coaches who would say at weekend tournaments, "Where's the team I had in practice this week? They were great! Now I've got a team who can't do anything I want them to in the match!" It took me a while to realize that the problem was never the match. Coach, if you see a drop in performance from practice to the match, understand this and please don't be offended (it was a real slap in the face when I realized this for myself): The problem is never the match, the problem is practice. Who controls the learning in practice? The coach.

Most coaches work incredibly hard in practice and honestly want their teams to be successful in matches. However, those same coaches tend to use match performance as a measure of their ability to coach rather than a measure of learning the players have achieved. Early in my coaching career, I used to blame players for their lack of performance in matches lost. Maturity and experience taught me the truth; they were performing the way they were taught in my practices. I desperately needed to change my training strategies if I was ever to help the players improve. Here's how I learned the importance of what educational research now calls "formative

and summative assessment".

A key philosophical point of cultivating the proper learning environment for the players was for me to realize that I have to stop blaming players for things that were honestly my fault. "Why can't you do this?" was a question answered by me finally understanding how important my role of coach was in helping the players succeed. I'm not trying to over-inflate my perceived role as team leader, but rather learning to take my job as teacher/coach more seriously than ever before.

Matches reveal learning that has taken place in training and statistics itemize specific performance indicators. These important items tell me the result of what was learned in practice sessions. Now I see matches as a great place to evaluate what occurred in practice before the match and what needs to be taught, reviewed and/or reinforced in training sessions after the match. These notes, coupled with stats and video analysis provide the tools for guiding and developing upcoming practice plans.

Now that I've got my match data, I need to prioritize the learning needs of individual players and the team as a whole. I have to keep in mind that one good or bad match does not a player/team make or break. In USAV IMPACT clinics we talk

about the concept of "coaching the averages". In this case, I need to look at trend data for our players and team to discover if past match performance was a singularity event or a confirmation of the need for remediation. Reviewing past practice plans reveals training that was positive or negative that may not reveal

itself until the preceding matches. By combining your practice plan notes with your subsequent match notes, coaches create and incredibly powerful tool for learning assessment. It's a real shame that the education community has negatively called this practice "teaching to the test" when the best of coaches call it simply "good coaching".

So, what now? Classroom teachers design their own tests in their classroom; we can't do that as a coach. We can't force the match to bend to our will. We can, however, watch game film, scout opponents and take notes of how great coaches in our clubs and regions are getting the job done. We can train our teams to simply repeat patterns in drills learned in practice, or we can train them to flexibly adapt to any situation they face against whomever their next opponent may be. We can train players in different positions and in different systems of play so that if and when adjustments need to be made in the match, they can do so fluidly and without hesitation. We can make our practices more competitive (research the topic of the *competitive cauldron*), teaching players to not only press on when they have the lead and refuse to concede when they are behind. We can coach our players because they deserve someone who dares to have vision enough to see them reach their goals.

**IF YOU WANT "IT" TO
HAPPEN IN THE
MATCH, YOU HAVE
TO TRAIN "IT" IN
PRACTICE.**

THINGS OFFICIALS WISH

COACHES KNEW

- When they make the comment "call it the same both ways" it implies that I am cheating
- Bad attitudes are contagious
- Every member of the working team needs to be at the pre-match briefing
- Officials are human too and can make mistakes
- Officials see things from a completely different angle than the coach on the sideline
- It's not a lift—it's a caught or thrown ball
- We are firm because we want to be professional, not because we have a god complex
- We love this game and its participants too!
- You get what you tolerate
- During the match, there are only a couple of very specific things that the captain (coach for younger teams) can ask the official. Ball handling is never one of those items!
- The rules! Too many coaches follow the wrong set of rules or have little clue about the signals or procedures we use
- Care more about the kids on their team during the match than their cell phones or the score board
- Use timeouts to improve team play not as a 30-second yelling session that makes no one feel better but you
- Libero rules
- Ugly contact does not always mean illegal contact
- Calling things both ways does not mean the same number of calls for/against both teams
- Yelling at players/team after every mistake will NOT make them play any better
- How to submit their starting lineup correctly—it's by rotation order, not who's serving!
- Stop assuming officials are all bad until proven otherwise
- How to fill out the score sheet and down ref
- How much the team's performance is affected by the coach's positive/negative attitude.
- Stop answering player questions with "...because I said so."
- There's a difference between coaching in practice and coaching in matches
- How to prepare their teams for the duties of a work team for a match
- Yelling "sub" or waiving your arms means nothing

THINGS COACHES WISH OFFICIALS KNEW

- The game is not about them controlling the game, but the kids playing the game
- It's wrong to care more about match protocol than simply calling a good, fair game
- That officials are teachers too and kids recognize this
- There can be more than one player in a single rotation
- It is legal to overlap the server
- We coaches are not your adversaries
- Their work crew may be physically exhausted from the previous match—cut them some slack if they're not perfect
- Coaches do appreciate the officials

- You get what you tolerate
- A call made at the beginning of a match should also be made at the end of the match
- Do a better job of dealing with poor sportsmanship from players and coaches during the match
- Just letting teams play and making no calls hurts their overall development
- Making up calls to cover a mistake hurts the game and the official's credibility
- How frustrating it is when refs call nothing at the beginning of a match and nothing at the end
- Trying to gain control over a situation that was allowed to get out of control is futile.

FOLLOW-UP TO OFFICIALS/ COACHES WISHES

The previous two articles and the tremendous amount of emails that I received regarding these two topics show that there are many officials and coaches who care deeply about our game and its participants.

Several of both groups however have taken the stance, as illustrated in their responses to me, that most of the problems we see in matches are the other's responsibility. Much of the "blame game" as it were seems to stem from a lack of understanding of the other's role in the match and the importance both have to the game.

I would like to make the following recommendation to those who hold themselves so highly as to think they are without fault or responsibility. To those coaches, I would recommend attending a regional officials' clinic and even go through the process—if you dare—of becoming a USAV official. In this way you can first-hand see the rigorous process of training and evaluation that Brian Hemelgarn (OVR Referee's Chair) has brought to the OVR. The quality of feedback from our region's top officials cannot be ignored. To those officials, I would recommend attending a regional or online IMPACT webinar wherein you can learn what every coach in the country does in their first coaching clinic for juniors volleyball. The information and content presented is only the beginning of what can be learned by continuing through the USAV CAP program. You might also even consider being an assistant coach for a local club program or ask to audit their practice sessions.

SUMMER CLINIC OPPORTUNITIES

This summer again promises to provide a plethora of opportunities for you to sharpen and improve your coaching knowledge, not only here in the OVR but also across the country.

- OHSVCA Annual Clinic July 28-29 (www.ohsvca.org)
- NFHS Online Clinic (www.nfhslearn.org)
- USAV CAP Schedule (usavolleyball.org/events/tag/3197)
- MVCA Annual Clinic July 29,30 (www.mivca.net)
- KVCA Annual Clinic July 29 (www.kvca.org)