



# Volleyball ACE™ Power Tips

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## Passing: An Essential - But Difficult - Skill to Teach

*By Iradje Ahrabi-Fard, Ph.D., former head women's volleyball coach at the University of Northern Iowa. He remains at the university as a professor of health, physical education and leisure services.*

Although passing is not an easy skill to teach or master, it is recognized as the key ingredient to producing a successful offense. Passing the serve is complex, especially when facing two particular challenges: 1) the variety of innovative serves preventing the use of a single passing skill for all types of serves, and 2) the coaching challenge regarding the development of an attention skill to read a variety of directions, spins, speeds and a passer's responsibility within a team formation.

Accuracy of reading and coordinating this skill with the technical performance should be the coach's emphasis to develop passers who will produce offensive opportunities. Unfortunately, the number of drills allocated to them puts emphasis on technical development over the reading and recognizing skill. The purpose of this article is to examine the valid available information to formulate the best sequential approach in training a passer.

Coordination of reading and skill output is the key to successful passing. In the long history of passing the serve with the forearms, prominent coaches have promoted a variety of approaches to obtain a successful result. If players are forced to follow a certain method and adhere to a high volume of repetition, they will improve and produce successful attempts. Over the next three pages, an attempt will be made to justify a better approach and develop uniformity in a correct coaching method of passing a serve. Coaches who indulge the major portion of their coaching to improving the contact technique are not going to be as successful as coaches who spend adequate time developing the pre-contact phase of the skill.

For the sake of discussing the serve receive complexity in detail, the information is presented in steps. However, these steps are merely for understanding the process of passing a serve and not a sequential approach for performing them. In fact, during



Coordination of reading and skill output is the key to successful passing. Photo courtesy of the FIVB.

passing, several of these steps may be performed together as one. It is important that coaches comprehend the passing process in detail with all its attention skills and technical skills so that they can implement them in their coaching efforts.

## Step 1: Passer Position in the Court and Ready Stances

Based on individual differences, each passer has to learn the best position on the court for him/her. Generally, it is best to position a passer so that two-thirds of the distance of responsibility is in front, one-third is backward movement, and side-to-side positioning is centered. This positioning changes for the following reasons:

- Passers in the middle and the left side of the court should cheat a little to the right so that they expose their left sides (a good passing angle to the setter's box) more than their right sides.
- Whenever a server has an angle to the passer, the passer should adjust position with at least half a step in the direction of the server since an angled arm can cover more in the far side.
- If most of the serves land in the back third of the court, then getting position farther back in the court is preferred.

Passers should have a starting stance like an 800-meter runner. The only difference is that the feet are not as far front and back because a runner is moving in a forward direction only, whereas the passer is required to move in every direction. It is important to coach the passer to assume a temporary, ready-to-move base position rather than a wide and low position for stability. In a temporary base, ready-to-move position, the base is slightly wider than shoulder width and the body position is relatively high. A wide base and low body position may be good for the passing phase, but is not suitable for producing a quick move to the area for ball contact.

## Step 2: Reading the Server's Intention

There is not a constant and exact position to begin for reading. Passers should observe the server and adjust position if the situation requires an adjustment. A server who stays far from the end line is going to put a lot of energy on the ball. Unlike common perception, these serves do not always reach the depth of the court. The adjustment should protect a short drop trajectory, but also prepare for backpedaling if the trajectory is deep. A server who is staying closer to the end line could serve short as well as deep. The starting position should be protecting the short area, as well as the deep portion of the court. Whenever a server is receiving instruction for position serving, the stance and directional behavior may indicate the general area of the serve. When the target on the court is recognized, passers should take a small adjusting step in that direction.

## Step 3: Reading the Server's Behavior

This pre-contact phase is an important reading that begins by getting information from the server's behavior and recognizing the ball trajectory as early as possible – preferably before the ball crosses the net. This step is important because a passer would like to dictate the terms of the pass and not let the serve get ahead and cause an emergency performance. The following are the passing terms that a passer would like to control in his/her performance:

- The area of the pass should be known and reached before the arrival of the ball.
- The ball should be contacted in front of the body, regardless of whether it is a linear or non-linear pass.
- The arms should be presented early and angled properly to the target while the serve is crossing over the net.
- Control the meeting of the ball around the hip level.
- Control the area of the ball contact on the arms.
- If poor reading does not initiate early and proper movement does not follow soon enough, the success of a pass can be jeopardized with the speed, spin and direction of the ball, dictating an emergency performance.

# CALENDAR

## USA Beach Junior Tour

- July 21** Long Island, N.Y.  
**July 25-27** Junior Beach Camp East, Virginia Beach, Va.  
**July 28** Virginia Beach Oceanfront, Virginia Beach, Va.  
**Aug. 2-4** Junior Beach Camp West, Long Beach, Calif.  
**Aug. 3-4** **OHSVCA Clinic, Westerville, Ohio**  
Ohio High School Volleyball Coaches Association, Westerville Central High School  
**Aug. 10-11** **MIVCA Clinic, Battle Creek, Mich.**  
Michigan Interscholastic Coaches Association, Kellogg Arena  
**Dec. 12-15** **AVCA Annual Convention**  
Sacramento Convention Center  
Sacramento, Calif.

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#### **Step 4: Base Establishment**

The best pass is performed from a stationary and stable base. Changing from a temporary reading base to a performance base is an important technical instruction. If the ball is slightly away to the side, one leg step in that direction, dragging the trail leg and stabilizing while passing may be acceptable. If the ball is short in front or deep in back, it is not a good technique to move one foot forward or backward to pass. In those cases, both feet should move at the same time and a new base must be established. Teaching passers to move with short and fast steps with both feet and establishing a good performance base is a coaching challenge, especially when working with passers with a poor habit of taking a lingering and timing step with one leg only.

#### **Step 5: Early Arms Presentation as a Passing Platform**

The worst passing habit is keeping the arms in and timing the extension of the arms right before the ball's arrival. As the ball crosses the net, the passer needs to point at the ball with his/her grip and extended arms. Even if the feet are still moving, the arms should be extended as a part of the final movement so that the presentation of arms is not timed with the arrival of the serve. Remember that foot movement and arm extension are not sequential. In other words, a passer does not have to stop mobility and establish base before extending the arms. The grip follows the trajectory of the ball to either side of the body with extended arms.

A passing mistake is to change the direction of the grip and point it toward the target, which exposes the arm platform to the ball with poor tilt toward the target. A linear pass where the body, arms and the grip are facing the target, and the ball is received in front of the body, is rare and acceptable. Even when a coach insists on getting into the line of a linear passing position, passers have to learn to keep the grip toward the ball and not the target in the case of a non-linear situation. Therefore, passers must learn to point their grip to the ball and follow that until the actual passing phase. Turning the grip and pointing it to the target while the ball moves outside the body causes many shanked passes.

#### **Step 6: Passing Level**

If the ball is contacted close to the hip level, there is better body position behind the arms. The farther the arms get away from the body, the more difficult it is to control the ball. If the ball is around chest level, using a little dip, the overhand pass is preferred. If the ball gets close to the floor, it is more difficult to keep the arms angled and extended with the proper body support, especially when the ball floats. A float serve has an adverse effect on the passer when it is handled closer to the floor. The topspin serve also dips noticeably closer to the floor.

#### **Step 7: Area of Ball Contact on the Arm**

Most research indicates that players do not see the ball within the last few feet before contacting it. Through general observation, the arms have to be trained to extend and touch the ball right above the wrist, and not on the wrist or on the fist. This emphasis becomes habit with repeated attempts, feedback and instruction.

#### **Step 8: Rebound Trajectory**

A passer has to learn to pass a low and high rebound trajectory. Angling the arms appropriately will facilitate a more accurate effort. Forwarding the arms under the ball to create a backspin stabilizes the trajectory path and softens the flight of the ball. As the ball is contacted closer to the front of the court, the arms are more parallel to the floor. As the ball is contacted deeper in the court, there is more of an angular position of the arms to the floor. A passer should also be aware of the setter's position at the net or urgent mobility to



As the ball is contacted closer to the front of the court, the arms are more parallel to the floor. Photo by Steve Markos/Courtesy of USAV.

get there, and adjust the height of the pass accordingly to cooperate with the situation at hand.

#### **Step 9: Accuracy of the Pass**

The pass must be delivered to the target. Sometimes the body is crowded and the arms are unable to keep the correct angle of delivery to the target. In this case, more of an arm follow-through sends the ball higher and farther toward the target. If the ball is coming fast, a stiff arm can produce an overpass. It is important to be early against the fast serve, and induce a little give and backspin, rather than extending the arms late and having the rebound dictated by the speed of an incoming serve. Accuracy of passing is the function of the inner narrow attention (internal narrow focus). Training a passer to pass accurately requires an understanding of all attention demands and technical requirements that are performed. Accurate delivery is the function of the release stage of contact. This stage must be recognized and included in the teaching and training process.

#### **Step 10: Emergency Passing**

Emergency passing is the result of not reading the server or the serve correctly and promptly leading to a late action or reaction. In this case, the speed, direction or spin of the ball dictate's the passer's reaction. The most important reaction is the prompt extension of the arms opposing the direction of the serve, and not paying attention to the base formation of the recovery performance. During ball contact, inner focus and accurately delivery from an awkward position is a challenge to the passer.

#### **Conclusion**

The 10 steps are guidelines for coaches to help organize their instruction and training approaches. Even though these 10 steps are not performed separately, it is a coaching challenge to design drills and activities whereby every single step is included in the instruction and training process of passers. Passing is one of the most frequent contacts. It deserves adequate time, proper instruction and extensive training so that consistent, accurate passing can enhance the team offense – the most effective method of obtaining a point.

(Reprinted from *Coaching Volleyball: Offensive Fundamentals and Techniques*, 2004, Kinda S. Lenberg, Ed., Coaches Choice. Available on the AVCA Web site at [www.avca.org/products.asp](http://www.avca.org/products.asp).)

# VOLLEYBALL ACE™ DRILLS

## Second Contact by Non-Setters

From *101 Winning Volleyball Drills From the AVCA*, 2000, Kinda S. Lenberg, Ed.

Number of Players: 12  
Number of Balls: Steady supply

### Objective:

This is a multi-purpose drill initiated with a focus on non-setters setting high, outside sets. The ability to get a good swing at the ball is a team goal and everyone should be accountable for its outcome. The coach is able to isolate one overhead passer, one hitter, etc., and provide response opportunities that are random and sequential.

### Directions:

1. The coach (C) sets up two teams of six players each (P, X).

### Dig Hit

Andy Banachowski, UCLA

Number of Players: 4  
Number of Balls: Steady supply

### Objective:

To practice defense to offense transition.

### Directions:

1. A front-court digger (e.g., LF [P1]) must dig a ball hit by the coach (C) from above the net on the opposite side.
2. The player (P1) must dig the ball to a setter (S), who will then set the ball.
3. The digger must then become an attacker and get into position to hit the ball being set. This drill

### Receive Serve, Attack and Cover

Joe Sagula, University of North Carolina

Number of Players: 12  
Number of Balls: 1

### Objective:

To work on basic serve receive, preparing to attack after receiving serve and coverage of hitters.

### Directions:

1. From one side of the court, players serve to the opposite side.
2. The non-serving side begins in its serve receive pattern (two-, three- or four-person receive).
3. The setter penetrates into the target area after the serve.

2. C tosses the ball to one side, representing the first contact. The ball is played until its termination and a point is awarded. The next toss is to the opposing team, alternating to even out the opportunities to score a point.

3. The first team to score 15 (and is ahead by two points) wins.

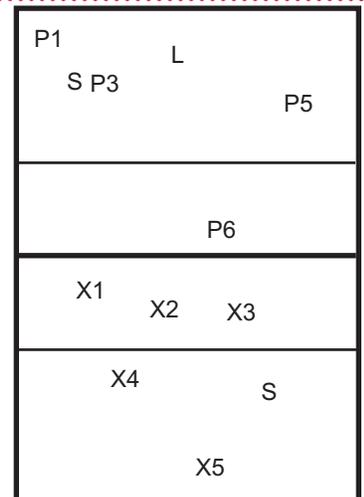
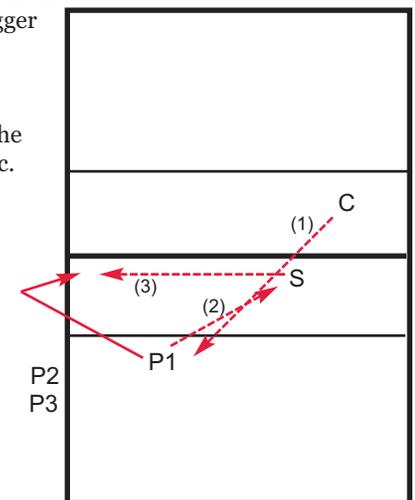
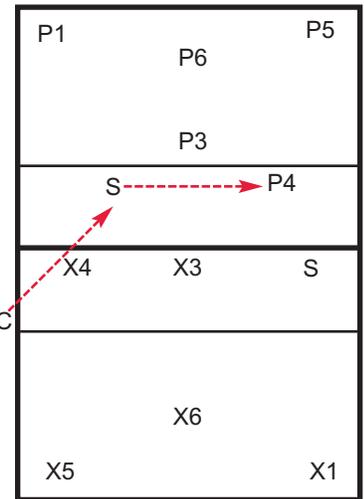
### Variations:

1. Design your own scoring system.
2. Play the starters against the rest of the team or the varsity vs. the junior varsity. If it is a "first team/second team" drill, make sure the first team focuses on repetitions of high, outside sets from setters and non-setters. Use a scrimmage situation with feedback on the specific skill of overhead passing and its possible effect on play.

works best when a second (P2) or third (P3) digger is included and the players alternate.

### Variation:

1. One or two blockers can be added to make the hitting more difficult and the drill more realistic.



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