

Volleyball: The Ultimate Life Sport

Curt Larkin, Johnston VBC

For many individuals, the search for the “ultimate” sport is one that involves trial and error, success and failure, planning and chance. Volleyball has been, and continues to be all of those for me and as such, is truly the ultimate “life” sport. It transcends the normal paradigm of what sport is into the realm of what life is through every facet.

Having extensive personal experiences as both a multi-sport athlete in high school and college, as well as coaching seven different sports over decades, I’ve been granted the rare opportunity to see how each sport impacts not only the athletes, but the fans, parents and coaches in a multitude of ways. Gender, socio-economic status, regional demographics and even personality types all dictate to some extent how we are affected by everything, but volleyball can and does transcend those differences and barriers. This sport can emulate life in many ways, and as a result, can enhance the lives of everyone involved.

In life, we must grow as a person every day. Sometimes, we are not able to accurately judge that growth immediately. Volleyball can mirror that with every tournament, match, set and practice multiple times. Thus, allowing the individual the opportunity to become better at “life”. Training for volleyball IS training for life, IF you make it a conscious reflection of what you want to do. Then, you can apply those principles in a consistent manner in everything you do to achieve your goals.

Setbacks are frequent throughout life, yet must be overcome if you are to move forward in a positive manner. Every point in volleyball is the result of a failure by someone. How we

respond to that failure will determine where our next potential success can come. The athlete must find personal strength to not carry the negative emotional baggage toward their next opportunity. Teammates/friends can learn to support, encourage and love unconditionally those that have failed. This will allow everyone to bring positive opportunities in the future. The coach/employer can learn to share failures with those he/she is responsible for and aid in minimizing or preventing them in the future. The parent/family can gain pride and understanding of each individual's growth as they support their efforts, whether successes or failures because it is LOVE which is the driving force for all actions.

When I first started my involvement in volleyball, some unique differences were readily evident. First, the emotional component is fluid and the type of emotion has a specific and consistent effect upon the resulting success. In volleyball, as is in life, those with positive emotions and attitudes ALWAYS have greater success long term. The inclusion of negative emotions such as fear, anger, doubt and resentment will ultimately result in being defeated both personally and as a group. The human psyche will always revert to its most basic functioning in times of stress. Most people act in a manner most basic to you as a person. If you are a pessimist, you will expect bad things to happen. If you are timid, fearful, doubting, selfish, or any other negative approach to life, you will enact a self-fulfilling prophecy of defeat. Conversely, if you are supportive, understanding, resilient, giving, determined, loving or generally a positive person of character, you will experience success – even in defeat. Many other sports not only have negative emotions as a part of its “culture”, but often encourage them to the point of eliminating positive ones. To “get mad”, whether at yourself or others, to be successful does not work in volleyball or life. This negative “motivation” contradicts the

person's ability to develop for the future and is reactive vs proactive. Irrational people believe that others can make them feel happy or sad. A rational, healthy person knows that only they are responsible for how they feel. They determine if their approach to the next event, in life or in volleyball, will be positive or negative in scope. The "training" of volleyball, through practice and competition, reinforces the ability of individuals, teams and supporters to face life with a positive outlook to the future regardless of the type of hurdle, setback, or even success they experience. Each play, each point, each ball contact, is an opportunity for everyone to examine how they respond. How a person responds, will then determine the potential next outcome and how can they make the preparation for the next event more positive and more successful.

Nothing exemplifies this more than the relationships that grow through this process. The positive emotional bonds, between teammates, coaches, parents, fans and even opponents may last years, decades and even lifetimes. Those relationships form through shared experiences and empathetic ties not only within those specific groups, but across them as well. I have such positive ties to former players, parents, other coaches and even referees from volleyball that I've never equaled in other sports. I, personally, relate those bonds to emotional understanding of what the sport allows in the growth of individuals.

Too often, we equate a sport to the competitive event and its outcome. We establish a connection to success or failure via numbers on a scoreboard or in the won/loss column. We forget what we've been taught as a society since the Greeks first organized competitive games. That the competition of sport allows for the shared development of the skills, experiences, cooperation and personal respect. Society has used sport throughout the last two centuries as

examples of how individuals can develop discipline, cooperation, teamwork, sacrifice and a sense of respect. While sport competition in general does this in a wide array of styles and situations, volleyball is able to achieve all this and more. The instantaneous feedback and application of growth, with repeated opportunities constantly presented, over time and in multiple avenues is unique to our sport. It is because of this that I call volleyball the “Ultimate Life Sport”. A true microcosm of what we experience every day, a truly great avenue to grow as individuals and make not only our lives more positive, but to make our society a more positive one as well.

With this in mind, I encourage every coach to include at least one “life lesson” or “personal growth opportunity” into each practice and tournament. To allow the athletes, coaches and parents to concretely connect this great experience of volleyball to their everyday lives will enrich and expand not only their experiences, but our sport as well. I know that because of this belief, my life, as well as my family’s and friends’ lives have all grown and for that, I am forever thankful to all associated with volleyball: The Ultimate Life Sport.