

Parent Goals, Outlooks and Reality for Volleyball, the GAME Curt Larkin

As I look back, and forward, to my experience with volleyball, I do so with reverence, joy and deep gratitude to having chosen this sport to be a part of my life. Being an athlete all my life, continuing beyond college into adult hood, and yes the “old timer” stage, I have never been able to achieve the sense of completeness and contentment that my experiences in volleyball have provided.

As a coach/player, I am in awe of the game itself. It provides the participants an opportunity to grow as individuals, regardless of skill level, because of the nature of the game. All involved, must learn to cooperate; celebrate successes, loses, differences and similarities; communicate in methods and manners that require truly giving of themselves for complete understanding; and be able to move forward in life instantaneously, within the next few seconds because “life” in volleyball starts anew with each successive serve. ☺

As I’ve been blessed to experience more and more of this game, at a wide variety of levels of play, I’ve noticed a couple of distinct aspects lacking:

1. Parents forget that it’s a GAME and *their* playing days are OVER!
2. Winning isn’t nearly as important or memorable as the lessons and memories.

Remember, no matter what, there is only one winner and many losers. Whether it’s a dual match, conference tourney, Junior Olympic Championships, Collegiate Championships, or Olympics – there is only one winner and hundreds, or thousands of losers. What we learn on the path toward our goals is what is MOST important. The journey on that path, the practices, the conversations, the experiences on and OFF the court: those are what make this sport special.

JHS had the great accomplishment of winning the Class 4A State Title in 2008. Yet, many of those girls will also remember the great year last year in which those relationships that were the foundation of this year were formed and developed. EVERY time someone talked of this year, their response, from coach, player, parent or fan, spoke of the relationships on the team. The “chemistry”, the activities, the interactions. How many can recite the scores of the matches? Who CARES?? How many can picture, in their minds now, the girls, coaches, fans, reactions to the final moments of EACH match, not just the championship? Those are the foundations of what can be built each and every day.

When I coach, watch or play this game, I look into the eyes of everyone. The eyes are the window to the soul and they tell everything you need to understand what is happening. The game of volleyball is truly, in my opinion, 10% skill and technical capability. 90% of it is embedded in the emotional aspect of not only each athlete, but the entire team and every fan watching. It is in times of strife that the human being reverts to it’s most primitive self, the worst of ourselves is revealed. THIS is when the most important teaching can occur and volleyball has them continuously. Mistakes cause the end of the rally, there is a mistake on EVERY point. Each point means a failure occurred. How we respond to this, how we move forward, dictates how successful we are. That doesn’t mean we have to win the next point to be successful, but rather, how we improve. Maybe we execute more successfully, maybe we learn to encourage more positively, maybe we applaud the effort and growth. It can mean any number of ways, but when we are revealed at our weakest, we can grow the greatest.

As John Kessel, USAVB Director of Education, Grassroots, Beach and Sitting VB has said: We need to teach the journey. There are too many in the sport who are whining, blaming everyone but themselves, sulking, crying., even threatening to sue...This is just a GAME, and thus, supposed to be FUN. We are so blessed with the chance to compete, in good gyms, great volleyballs, well organized events. I have in my office a ball made by kids in Africa made from the leaves of a banana tree. Those kids compete (half winning and half losing) on dirt courts over a rope. The boisterous joy of their play, and the good nature seen by both their winners and losers is a lesson all in many other nations would benefit from.

One of the most common errors is when people making mountains out of molehills, over reacting to the little errors in the game as if they all are gold medal points. Chill. Ignore the errors. Celebrate the successful plays. Look long range and at the bigger picture. Focus on the performance and process, not the outcome. Learn to control what you can control, simply just yourself, and not even your spouse or team parents, let alone the field of play. Every play and match simply cheer on your child. It is a game of fun for your child, not a dream of college scholarships or pro sports for you. If you find yourself thinking that winning is a relief that you/the team did not lose, rather than a thrill, take time to refocus and rethink the program. The game is not about you. It is about your child's learning a great lifetime sport and the lessons therein. There should be no shame if one loses having done your best. And for those learning the game, you may not do your best, for you are still learning. The late Flo Hyman once aptly said, "We did not lose the gold medal, we won the silver," as she knew she had given her all.

When the parents stop being supportive, no longer looking at and pointing out what was good – they become part of the opponent's strength. When a coach starts yelling and angry and unsupportive - and changes the numbers from seven vs. seven - six players and the coach, to eight vs. six. Unsupportive parents might even throw the balance towards the opponents even more. Remember, this is a team thing. In the Olympic sport of beach volleyball it is more clear when one of the two teammates is playing below par. On a six person team, the blend means each player will be part of the successes as well as the setbacks. Those players who err, in serving, or counter attacking or in any way that results in the game or match being awarded to the opponent, oft feel the scapegoat.

USA Volleyball has set forth the following as guide lines for those times:

1. Focus on what you can control, - your own actions, not that of others.
2. Do your best to be the best you can be, and focus on that task.
3. Congratulate the winners sincerely - respect for your opponents by all in a program, parents included, and the effort they bring to the game, is what makes each player better.
4. No despair, blaming, excuses, or whining
5. Remember, it is a GAME, teaching lessons of life, and life after the loss starts as soon as the final whistle blows.
6. The Chinese proverb says so much – Winning and losing are temporary; friendships last forever.

The bottom line is that your daughter will look back on this time as a Jr. Olympian, and cherish most, the experiences OFF the court. The travel adventures, new places and faces, the meals that were horrible in some funny way - and the times both parents and coaches gave them support and recognition even when they were playing poorly or losing. The unique way you teach a skill/drill or even some fun team building that they will forever request to do!! Even YOU, the parent, will love Lycra.....come to a practice and find out!!

Sometimes we win games just because we are the better team, or we have the better players. Feel good about those wins, but realize they probably came easy. Cherish the experiences when you weren't the better team and you did your best, created opportunities to be successful and were able to pull out a positive result, even if it was a loss.