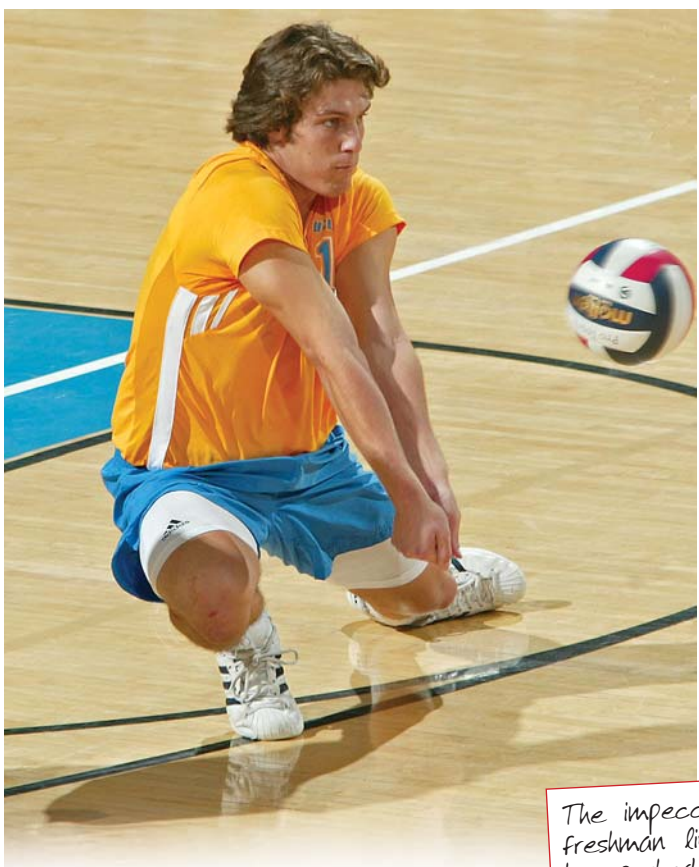


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Libero logic

Winning liberos are great passers first

by Carl McGown

with passing and digging, it may just be that one player has a personality or passion or something that causes her teammates to play great and so her team usually wins. Or it may be that the winning libero is a little bit better in the combination of passing and digging (maybe she is not such a good passer, but she is a lot better digger, or vice versa).

Of course, with this system we have not really answered the basic question, what is the more important trait of a

libero, and so we will have to use another method to determine the answer. It seems that what we need to know is which skill is more important to winning?

The impeccable passing of freshman libero Tony Ker has pushed the UCLA Bruins to the No. 1 ranking.

In our Gold Medal Squared coaching clinics one of our basic premises (that every coach agrees with) is that coaching is very complex. The two main factors that make it so complex are: (1) coaches have to be good at so many different things, and (2) coaches must make thousands of decisions in the course of organizing their programs.

One way we try to simplify coaching is to classify most of the decisions into five major categories: (1) what methods will I use in practice, (2) what mechanics will my players use, (3) how will I motivate, (4) what offensive and defensive systems and tactics will I use and what will be the placement of my players in those systems, and (5) what should we practice today (and why)?

In this article we would like to discuss a question that falls into category (4): what defensive system will we use and what will be the placement of my players in that system? The question is this: what is the more important trait of a libero — great passer or great digger? Just trying to answer this one question shows how complex coaching can be.

If we are lucky enough to have two liberos, one who can really pass and one who can really dig, which player should be on the court most of the time?

There are probably two ways to determine the answer. One way that I like would be to run an extensive libero tournament. One day in practice form two teams and play volleyball for a number of games and see which team scores the most points. Then switch liberos (keep everything else the same) and play volleyball and see which team scores the most points. Do this libero tournament for a number of practices and the libero who scores the most points will probably be the player who should be on the court. However, this decision may have little to do

Last year, in preparation for the Olympics, the USA men's team commissioned a study by Dr. Gil Fellingham, a professor of biostatistics at Brigham Young University, to try to determine the relative importance of the various skills. He developed a list of what he called "Productive Skills" and he found some very interesting things that really helped in our preparation. For example, he found that the most productive skill in men's international volleyball was a kill by the left front attacker. The second most productive skill was a kill by the middle attacker. Then, in answer to our question, he found that the third most productive skill was a perfect pass, and three of the eight most productive skills involved passing (all the other productive skills involved hitting). Digging finally showed up as the 15th most productive skill.

That was men's volleyball. What about women's volleyball?

Unfortunately Dr. Fellingham did not study our women's Olympic team and so we don't have comparable data, but we do have this interesting chart from the 2002 Big 12 season (courtesy of Jason Watson when he was an assistant at Kansas State).

| | Eff | OppEff | Blk/G | Aces/G | SE/G | RE/G | Digs/G |
|-------------|------|--------|-------|--------|------|------|--------|
| Correlation | .930 | .856 | .804 | .805 | .302 | .776 | .232 |

What the chart shows is the correlation between the various skills and winning and losing. The skill that most influenced winning was hitting efficiency (Eff) with a correlation of

.930, and opponents hitting efficiency (OppEff) at .856 was right behind. Aces/game (Aces/G) at .805 and receiving errors/game (RE/G) at .776 all correlated very highly with winning. However, digs/game (Digs/G) correlated only .232 with winning, indicating that passing was quite a bit more important than digging.

Finally, we have this data from the 2004 Pac 10 (courtesy of Washington coach Jim McLaughlin).

| | Eff | OppEff | Blk/G | Aces/G | SE/G | RE/G | Digs/G |
|-------------|------|--------|-------|--------|------|------|--------|
| Correlation | .943 | .943 | .735 | .235 | .089 | .856 | .725 |

This Pac 10 chart shows some similarities with the Big 12 chart. The skills that most influenced winning were hitting efficiency (.943), and opponents hitting efficiency (.943). However, aces/game at .805 (Big 12) and .235 (Pac 10) were very different as were digs per game at .232 (Big 12) and .725 (Pac 10). Even though there are differences, receiving at (.856) was more highly correlated with winning than digging (.725). However, both of these correlations are pretty high and if you wanted to do well in the Pac 10 in 2004 you needed to be able to pass and to dig.

So what can we conclude? In all the data that we have examined, both for Olympic men and for college women, every indication is that passing contributes more to winning volleyball matches than digging.

What about club volleyball and high school volleyball? We

don't have sufficient data to form a definite answer but anecdotal trends seem to support the same conclusion at this level — better passing wins more games than better digging.

Even though we don't know as much as we would like, in our gym we are prepared to say that passing is more important than digging and, therefore, the more important trait of a libero is to be a great passer.

Wouldn't it be nice if your libero could be great at both? [vb](#)

Dr. Carl McGown, who coached BYU to two NCAA Men's National Championships, is the founder of Gold Medal Squared and has coached in the last six Olympic Games with the USA Men's National Team. For more information, visit www.goldmedalsquared.com.



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"One of the best volleyball coaching clinics I have ever attended in my 30 years of coaching. Attended my first Gold Medal the summer of 2002 in Baltimore and then hosted both a coaches' and players' clinic summer 2003. Had three other coaches from our school also attend which really helped us develop a common thread through our total volleyball program (7th grade, 8th grade, Junior Varsity and Varsity). This is my third year at Charlotte Latin School. I strongly recommend that other coaches attend this clinic! Our varsity team went from 13-16 in 2001 to 21-9 in 2002 with an appearance in the NCISAA State Semi-finals and 24-3 in 2003 and played in the NCISAA State Finals. In 2004 we were the NCISAA State Champions!

Carl is truly an amazing coach. Everything he teaches is based on principle. His philosophy that you learn how to play volleyball by playing volleyball really works. At Charlotte Latin volleyball practice is something that our players always look forward to. The clinic taught us how to design our practice sessions so that they were competitive and fun at the same time. Our players' focus and intensity definitely increased in practice which carried over into our match play."

Suzie Pignetti - Charlotte Latin HS, North Carolina State Champs

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