

Volleyball PowerTips

ACE

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Blocking from a Catcher's Point of View

By Theresa M. Beeckman, Assistant Women's Volleyball Coach Ferris State University; CAP I Accredited, NCAA Women's Coaching Academy Graduate

As a collegiate softball catcher, my favorite part of the game was always sizing up the hitters, getting into their heads to figure out what they thought I was going to have the pitcher throw and then calling the opposite pitch. In breaking down blocking in the collegiate game, the same thinking can be utilized.

It is the goal of this article to discuss blocking and team defensive strategy in the same way a catcher would discuss how to game plan pitch-call strategy for a line up. The discussion here will focus only on block play calling against the opponent's sideout offense. In other words, these schemes or plays will be enacted as your team is getting ready to serve the ball.

Making every match a poker game-

Teams generally line up with very specific blocking bases. For instance, there is a spread or external base where the middle blocker starts lined up in their 4 or 5 zone, while the perimeter blockers are both spread wide so they are either an arm's length or half an arm's length from the antennas.

In a pinched or internal blocking base, the perimeter blockers are lined up so they are in their 2 or 3 zone on the left and their 7 or 8 zone on the right. Of course, there are also variations for the left side blocking base relative to the opposing setter being either in the front or back row. The left front blocking base might be wide if the setter is in the back row, in order to be in an easier start position to defend the opposing right side hitter, or inside and in front of the setter's target area. (By in front of the setter's target area, we mean shifted to the right of the target area in order to defend a swing from a setter.)

There are various reasons teams choose to employ internal and external blocking bases. An internally based team, for example, might be a swing blocking team. They position the blockers



Photo courtesy of FIVB

inside so there is room for these swing or attack blockers to use 'approach-type' blocking techniques against the perimeter hitters on the other team.

For externally based teams, they might feel they have dynamic middles that can track the opposing middles offensive variations and find it important to have a solid stable block versus all opposing perimeter players. They might also feel they move better from the outside in.

For the purpose of this discussion, let's get used to using both blocking bases separately and a combination of the two when needed. In order to highlight strengths and minimize weaknesses in blocking, put players in a base position that will do one of three things: help the player, deceive opponents, or get the best match-up possible.

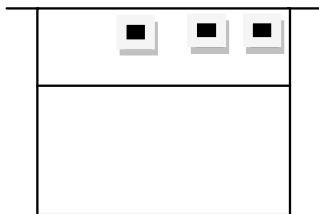
As far as reading the offensive patterns and making reads versus committing to a particular player on the other team, this strategy calls for a mixture of both, with some risk/reward decisions and creativity mixed in. The trick, and this is where the poker game

comes in, is to know your opponents well enough to make educated guesses on where the ball is going to go if there is a good pass. and set up your blocking scheme so that your best personnel are matched up to defend the most likely attacker. The key is to know that the strategy is voided if the pass will not allow the setter to run a complete offense.

In scouting, you should come to a pretty firm conclusion of how far off the net the setter will get pulled and still run her offense. For example, does she bail to the perimeter hitters at 4 feet off or 6 feet or even 8 feet? Your middle blocker must be made aware of the opposing setter's breaking point so she understands when to call off the blocking scheme that was called.

Minimizing Weaknesses, Maximizing Strengths

Here are some general things done to minimize weaknesses and maximize strengths.



- 1) Shift the blockers' bases to various zones
 - a. Right Front in the opponent's 1 zone
 - b. Middle Front in the opponent's 3 zone
 - c. Left Front in the opponent's 6 zone.
- 2) Stagger the depths of your blockers so they can make switches after the serve goes over the net. Perhaps have your left back pull away from the net just enough to allow the middle front to pass by her to stay with the back slide while she slips towards the middle to front the setter or double block the opponents outside hitter.
- 3) Commit your blockers to their best hitter in groups of 2 or 3.
- 4) Start your blocker in one zone, but commit them to the opposite end of the net. For example: the middle blocker sets her base up in her opponent's zone 3, then moves to the left to block the back slide as soon as the ball is served.

Depending on the opposing setter, we have even gotten away with leaving hitters who hardly get set completely alone on various points. Those are the times the defense really needs a heads up. When given the responsibility of making a dig to "get someone's back," all defenders will bust down a concrete door to show how dependable they are!

Now you're thinking these scenarios, switches and commit schemes go out the window when the opponents start to catch on and make adjustments. The truth is that's when the real fun begins! Talking in reverse, switching signals with code words and some other things that will be left unmentioned, go a long way in making a team's defensive attitude one of savoir-faire.

Having a middle blocker start lined up in your opponent's zone 3 and then commit a double block to the back slide really makes the setter think twice. Having your middle blocker talk like crazy to your left-side blocker, about how she is going to leave the setter to stay with the back slide so the left side better hurry to front the setter, and then stays herself to block the setter's attack – that will rattle some very good setters.

You can call these signs in like a softball coach on third-base coach calls in strategy with their hitters and base runners. There are also options for a coach to do things like give a sign and verbally say the opposite. Sometimes the defense listens to a coach's verbal cues and sometimes they only do what the physical signs are telling them to do. This can be changed play to play if need be by having one simple key word that dictates which set of commands is live.

This system of blocking can be as simple or complex as you choose it to be, but there are two very important components involved in making it successful.

- 1) There must be sound communication between everyone.
 - a. It's important that the players taking the risk know they will be okay if they commit one way and the ball gets set the opposite way.
 - b. It's also important that the total team buys in to it so if a risk is taken with the scheme that is called and the call was wrong, there is no one fighting harder to make the dig than the backcourt defenders. I can't tell you how many times a defensive specialist has saved us with a great dig, and you have never seen a team more excited for a dig than the ones they've gotten behind no block!
- 2) It is extremely important that everyone knows the exact criteria required with the first pass from your opponent to determine whether the blocking scheme stays on, or whether you revert back into your basic read blocking scheme.
 - a. If the ball is a 3 or a good 2, the team should stay in whatever scheme called. If it's off or behind, everyone knows it's off. It takes time and a lot of feedback to get it exact, but with time the entire team does get it.
 - b. It is very important that the coaches make judging the first pass a point of emphasis when using these schemes.

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Real-Time, Game-Like Scenario

In the following scenario: Team A is the offensive team, Team B is the serving team.

Team A		<p>In this scenario you can see that the setter (#2, circled) is in the back row. Also, #13 is an outside hitter, #3 is the middle hitter and #4 is the right side.</p>
Team B		<p>The following play is likely to happen:</p> <p>#13: High outside/outlet set or high set in the 5 zone</p> <p>#3: Back Slide (91) or (71)</p> <p>#4: Front Slide (51) or high outside ball if #13 gets a 5</p> <p>For the sake of the play calling, the following conditions exist: #13 is the just average, #3 is studly and #4 is above average to good, but her front slides are predictably placed with average velocity. Team B's left side is good size with just average blocking ability, she's also better moving to her right. The right side block is a good blocker, huge hands and she takes up a lot of space. The middle is a very good blocker, especially tracking middles on slides</p>

This scenario is a bad match up for Team B since the hitter running in the 9 zone is Team A's best attacker and she will be hitting against Team B's weakest blocker. However, the match up can be made to be better if you switch your middle and left-side blockers. You could even start your right-side blocker in either the 3 or 4 zone, making it easier for her to double block the front slide. This will allow your right side to help your weak left-side blocker, while still giving her an opportunity to get back outside to block the high set to #13.

Another consideration that must be made when setting up your blocking schemes is your transition offense. For instance, if the setter is in the front row and thus, your right side blocker, she cannot very well switch to the left side of your court to block the back slide and then effectively run the offense. In that situation, commit blocking to help a weaker blocker is sometimes the best that can be done. If moving to the location of the block is the weakness, starting the blocker in a zone closer to the block is also helpful and puts her in a better position to be successful. For situations that switches will be made, it is important to prepare those hitters to attack out of position. Determine what sets they will have the option of running and give them reps in practice working on them. *(Continued bottom of next page)*

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Volleyball Drills

Read the Hitter

from *Volleyball Drills for Champions*,
Mary Wise, editor

Number of Players: All hitters and blockers
Number of Balls: 6-8

Purpose:

To teach blockers to look at the hitter after the set is made. This drill encourages the blocker to block without ever seeing the ball.

Instructions:

1. The coach (C) is positioned directly behind the blocker (B) on the same side of the net and near the 3-meter line.
2. A spiker (OH) is positioned across the net and opposite the blocker near the opposite 3-meter line.
3. The coach throws a ball over the net directly over the blocker's head (like an "overpass") so the spiker can hit the ball back into the blocker's side of the court.

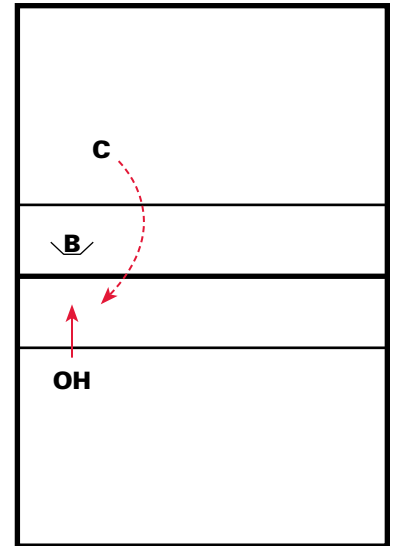
4. The blocker must "read" the actions of the hitter and attempt to block the ball.

Coaching Points:

Restrict the area that the spiker can hit into. Remember, this is a blocking drill and you want the blocker to touch lots of balls. If the blocker misses a block the coach might want to protect her face – the coach is in artillery range.

Variations:

1. The coach can add additional movement for the blocker by tossing the ball more to the left or right of the spiker. For the blocker, this further emphasizes fronting the spiker's angle of approach.
2. A middle blocker can be added near the outside blocker, but not right next to the outside blocker. The middle blocker should allow the outside blocker to "set up the block," and then close the block by reading the position that the outside blocker has established.



5-Ball Blocking

By *Tim Horsmon (Univ. of Maryland head coach), Tami Ores and Jason Oliver (Univ. of Maryland assistant coach); written while at University of Dayton*

Number of Players: All blockers on your team
Number of Balls: Steady supply.

Purpose:

To work on proper footwork and hand placement on the block. The drill is designed for each position along the net. The blocker must get five blocks that are terminated inside the 10-foot line or it is not considered a good block.

Instructions:

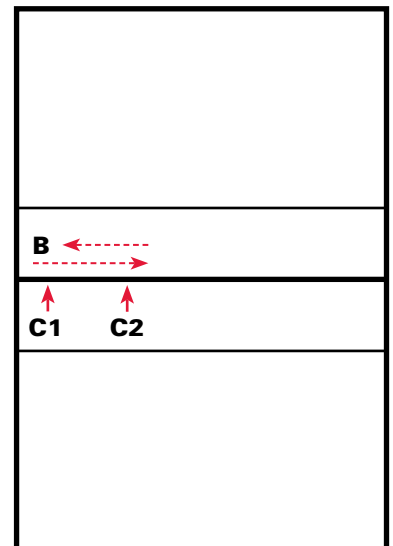
1. Coach 1 (C1) attacks the ball into the blocker (B) to initiate the drill.
2. The blocker blocks the ball, lands and shuffles to the other coach (C2) on the court. Coach 2 attacks the ball. The blocker blocks it, lands, and shuffles back to the first coach.

3. Continue to do this until the blocker has successfully terminated five balls in front of the 10-foot line. Then, bring in the next blocker and begin.

Note: This drill should be done for all positions along the net and should be done to work on all different types of footwork.

Variations:

You can add different attacks for the players to block with multiple coaches. For example, the right-side blocker must block the 1 ball at the pin, then move in and block a 4-ball from another coach. This will force this blocker to cover more ground in a balanced position and still execute the block to a specific (terminal) area on the floor



(Continued from previous page)

This system is one that keeps evolving with each year that passes. It first evolved from trying to solve the problem of defending an extremely fast offense that features many double slides. As time has gone on, it has adapted to defending various team offensive situations. This is an extremely creative process and a fun one to involve the players in, especially the middle blockers.

As previously mentioned, this process of setting up blocking schemes for each match can be compared to a catcher calling a game or a coach calling a game by relaying the signs in to the

catcher. It involves a mix of signal calling, switching, committing, faking and reverse talk by your team and/or coaches.

As our team's system developed, the blocking assignments have been called in by a coach. Hopefully, over time, blockers, especially middle blockers, will embrace the concepts and gain an understanding of how to call their own games, just like a veteran catcher with a strong understanding of her team's game would in softball.

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