## Decision Making

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I've uploaded a new video to YouTube highlighting good out of system decisions for outside hitters : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oi_0sbJJeTE>

In recent years, I have become obsessed with the science (and art) of decision-making in volleyball. Our athletes are bombarded with visual and auditory stimuli throughout the course of a match. A substantial portion of the time, the speed of the game forces them to react without consciously thinking about what they are doing. There are numerous times however, when the art of choice is given time to make a big impact on the actions of our players.

In 2011, our team’s three outside hitters took 502, 443, and 401 swings in our 16 conference games. Of those 1346 swings, 345 or roughly a quarter (25.6%) of those swings came in “out of system situations”. For our purpose, an out of system swing is defined as a high left or high right side set (1) From a non-setter or (2) A serve receive minus pass [1 pass]or (3) A setter bump set.

As we know statistically and empirically, killing an out of system high ball set is the most difficult skills for a hitter. Your athlete may not possess the physical tools or skill level to deliver a powerful attack against a defense that is prepared; but this does not mean they cannot be an effective attacker.

Attacks that will increase your team’s ability to win the point on defense include:

1) Make an opposing team’s setter play the first contact: If your hitter is not going to challenge the block, or take an aggressive swing at the ball; they should be expected to know where the opposing team’s setter is playing defense and make a reasonable effort to make them play the first contact. You as the coach should be helping your hitters know where the opposing team’s setter is playing defense in an out of system situation.

2) Make an off blocker play a first contact: Front row hitters want to hit in transition. Often times they will neglect their responsibilities as a defender in return for an easier approach to attack the ball. When a front row attacker is forced to play a first contact before attacking; they will often a) Deliver a poor contact and/or b) Take a poor or no approach after making their first contact.

3) Give the ball to a previously identified weak defender: The easiest example would be attacking a ball at an opposing middle blocker who has not demonstrated defensive ability.

4) Consciously choose which blocker to challenge with your attack: In the video for example, an outside hitter chooses to challenge a smaller right front blocker versus a taller stronger middle blocker.

I am strongly against mandating or controlling the choices your players make. We need to teach our athletes how to think; not think for them. Here are some ideas on how we can help our players:

a) Give your athlete solutions before they are put in tough situations. Let them know their best options for success in out of system situations before the match especially when you are familiar with your opponent.

b) Give positive feedback to your players when they make good decisions, especially when your team loses the rally despite the good choice. I often talk about the situation “trade” our outside hitter makes when they make their decisions. For example, if our outside hitter is put in an out of system attack situation and in turn makes our opponent’s setter play a first contact; they have in essence “traded” an out of system swing for an out of system defensive opportunity. That is a “trade” we like. If our player is put in the same situation and simply delivers a weak attack to the opposing team’s libero; she has made a situation “trade” that hurts our team.

c) Pose questions that make your athletes think and evaluate their choices. Some of these questions include:

1)What was your goal with that swing? 2)Are you satisfied with that result? 3)What other options did you have there? 4)Did you have time to make a conscious choice on that set? 5)Did you like the trade you made for our team?

As always, please share your questions, comments, thoughts and stories!

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