

## **HOW CAN I MAKE MY PRACTICES MORE EFFECTIVE?**

### **Making your athletes perform well, stay focused and engaged the whole practice**

Peter Bristotte – December 10, 2018

In the last few years, a few coaches have come to me asking for advice on how to make their practices more effective. In particular how to keep their athletes engaged and focused, how to fix and/or improve technique, and most importantly how to help their athletes perform with proper form in a competitive and unpredictable environment that is the game. If there were easy answers to all those questions, we would all be coaching national teams, winning world championships and taking the gold at the Olympic Games!

In the last fifteen years of coaching youth volleyball, I have been trying to answer those very questions in order to improve my own practices. I would like to share this knowledge with like-minded individuals such as yourself. I hope you enjoy it!

Why do classes in high school only last between forty-five to ninety minutes? Have you ever thought about it? There must be a reason, right? And there is. In the beginning of the 20th century, the Psychological Sciences and the Education Sciences developed numerous studies to determine how long children and teenagers could focus their attention and retain information. The answer was between forty-five to ninety minutes. Additionally, throughout the 20th century, younger generations grew up in a world of impatience, expecting quick results with a mindset of “I want it and I want it now”. This is due to the incredibly fast development of technology and the quick distribution and access to information. Humans are losing the capacity to work hard and put forth effort in order to accomplish their goals. The expectation of “if I don’t have it now, I don’t want it anymore” is becoming more and more frequent. Unfortunately, as adults we are also expecting the fast physical and mental development of our kids and not just in school settings. Many parents come to me asking for private lessons for their twelve-year-old daughters: “Coach, would you work with my daughter to develop her float jump serve? She must have it otherwise she won’t make the open one school team”. I bet if you are a youth coach, you might have faced a similar situation. What do you do? Do you “sell” your coaching saying “sure, let’s work on that”? But what happens if that child does not learn the float jump serve? Either you think “meh, at least I made a few bucks” or you will lose the opportunity to educate an athlete on their current possibilities (maybe their parents too) because they will never come back: “that coach is not good”.

There are numerous scenarios to illustrate this. Let us come back to the length of school classes. The same group of scientists did the same study in the beginning of the 21st century to determine if anything had changed. Could the kids still focus for forty five to ninety minutes? The answer was absolutely not. The new number is now much lower, lasting approximately only six to twenty minutes. How crazy is that?! Do you know the famous TED talk videos? Have you ever noticed how long those amazing lectures are? They are never longer than twenty minutes because people will start losing focus and therefore, will miss the main message of the lecture which is often life changing.

This is point number one: **your athletes will stay focused in your drills for no longer than twenty minutes (if so). If you can get their focus and attention for twenty minutes, meaning having them perform well for twenty minutes in practice, in the same drill, consider yourself an outstanding coach. If you have no idea on how to track the quality of your drills, you should be looking into that first.**

With that being pointed out, let's talk about making your athletes perform with good form in a competitive and unpredictable environment.

In the beginning of my career as a coach, I was super excited to try the numerous teaching techniques, both the old school ones and the newest ones. In college you learn that humans are unique individuals, they learn through different teaching techniques and at various paces (it is the teacher's/coach's job to identify which technique works better for each student/athlete and the pace at which they learn). In the human movement sciences known as Kinesiology, you discover that the process of learning a new movement pattern involves both neurological changes in the central level – the neurons in the brain literally change: they make new connections and arrange themselves in new ways – and in the peripheral level – the communication between the neuron and the muscles change: the neuromotor plate could get bigger. It will activate the muscles in different intensities and times thus making the muscles flex in a specific way that will result in the desired movement. All of that according to the individual's will. That means that when you are learning a new movement you have to think about how you want the various parts of your body to move. That requires a lot of attention and energy expenditure. But that is not enough, right? During the game, you do not want your athlete to think about moving their body. Instead their focus should be on how to achieve the desired goal: to read or to execute a play or a plan. You want all the techniques to be executed without thinking so your athlete can focus on the “important part” of the game, right? You as a coach want the correct technique to be executed automatically and you are right! Quick question though, how many hours do your athletes spend on making the correct technique to become automatic in your practices?

For a movement pattern to become automatic (right or wrong), it requires thousands of repetitions and hundreds of hours of practice. For your athlete to automatize a correct movement, they cannot focus on the outcome, it should not matter if they attack line or cross, but if they approach the ball and execute the attack with correct form. It requires thousands of repetitions executed all the exact same way. It is a herculean job! In addition, the human body will only repeat the exact same movement while the individual is not tired. When the central nervous system starts to get exhausted it will not activate the neurons properly, thus leading to a poor movement pattern. If the individual keeps repeating a poor movement pattern, that is the movement the brain will automatize. Long story short, this is point number two: **work on technique development at the beginning of your practice, or while your athletes are not tired (physically or mentally), without focusing on the outcome, for a short period of time.**

You may ask: “To develop correct techniques within my athletes I should control the environment, ensure my athletes are not fatigued to optimize their learning ability, and I should not focus on outcomes, I get it! So, the next question is how can we make them execute correct technique in a competitive and unpredictable environment that is the game?”

First, I'd like to discuss how to push my athletes to perform with good technique. There are numerous exercises and drills but the technique that I find most effective is having a goal. For example, in an attack approach I could ask my athlete to perform twenty perfect attack approaches within a five-minute time cap. I will give feedback to that athlete while he/she attempts to follow my advice. We will not focus on the outcome (not for now). This is an example of technique automatization drill. I will repeat that drill and take notes on how long my athlete takes to perform those twenty good approaches so I can track their development. Now, what you really want to see is that athlete performing that good technique in a drill where there is competition and/or unpredictability. Here is a simple example with passing in a serve receive drill: we call this drill "thirty points". In this drill, each serve receive attempt is graded from zero to three based on the quality of the attempt. Athletes will compete in this serve receive drill until they score thirty points. When an athlete/team scores thirty points, the coach will track how many attempts they needed to achieve that goal. Whichever athlete/team needed the least number of attempts, wins the drill and will be declared the best passer. In this case, we adapt the drill and increase it to fifty points with the athletes/teams scoring an extra point every time they hold their platform after contact (if this is the technique you want to emphasize). Athletes will be pushed not just to score based on good passes but also based on good form. It is a competitive environment where we emphasized a correct execution. It is also possible to increase unpredictability by having different athletes serve during the drill, so the serves are constantly varied.

Think about this: who enjoys going to work knowing that no matter how hard or how long you work, you will never be rewarded? You just work to work, that is so discouraging! Now picture this: you go to work, you have a goal and a due date to meet that goal, but you know that you will not get a reward when you get the job done. You can however, get a reward if you complete the job before the due date: the earlier you get the job done (well done, of course), the better the reward. Are you or are you not excited to get that reward? Now, can you imagine how this works in a child's/teenager's head? It is incredibly effective! Humans are driven by the reward system, science has already proven that so why not use it in your practices?!

This is point number three: **emphasize the correct execution of a certain technique in a competitive drill by rewarding athletes when they perform the technique correctly.** You can maximize this approach by running cooperative drills (in this case the environment will only be unpredictable and not competitive) and rewarding athletes that perform the desired technique correctly. Another approach is a cooperative-competitive like drill. The whole group has a goal to meet (say a certain number of positive defenses) within a certain time cap (no longer than twenty minutes, remember?). They will only accumulate reps when they execute the technique correctly. This is an outstanding approach to develop not just the technique in a cooperative-competitive environment, but also to develop team bonding – everyone has to work together against the clock.

It is important to point out in regard to the three points listed above, that I am not telling you that you should not work on a serve / reception drill for half an hour. That is not the point. What I am saying is that once you determine a goal for your drills, you should have a short time cap for your athletes to meet that goal. That goal should also be met with a technique correctly executed and within a short time cap (between six and twenty minutes, depending on the drill: the more

game-like, the longer the time cap). You can still work on serve and serve receive after that (for a whole practice, actually), but be smart to determine different goals in an environment that is as competitive and as unpredictable as possible. This will keep your athletes engaged and focused while performing with proper technique.

The last point I would like to discuss in this article is: a coach must know when to stop a drill or when to change it. If you give a task to your athletes and they meet the goal easily, that is ok. Tell them they are going to repeat that challenge but next time it will be harder – remember that you want them to perform well with proper technique. On the other hand, there will be times you give your athletes a challenge and after a few minutes, you know they will not achieve the desired outcome. That is the hardest part, how to encourage your athletes after a failed drill? Do you stop the drill and change it, or do you let your athletes continue to try? Trust me, your athletes are smart! If you stop the drill, they will know you did so because they could not perform the assigned task and depending on the group, this could be very discouraging. You could lose their focus for the rest of the practice and if that happens consistently, you can discourage the whole group for the rest of the season. What I have experienced in the last fifteen years is when the goal of a drill is too difficult to meet, coaches should let their athletes try. At the end of the drill (remember you are going to determine a time cap) emphasize first the good things that happened such as the effort put forth by the athletes to perform correct technique, their determination to achieve the goal, their work ethic, etc. Then discuss with the group what is needed to be done so that next time, they can meet the goal. Of course, when the coach evaluates the practice (yes, coaches should evaluate the quality of every practice: did the group meet all their goals? If not, why not? Should they invest more on technique development before moving into drills with competitiveness/unpredictability?) they will need to reevaluate and adjust the goal, so it is challenging but still achievable for their athletes.

This is point number four: **evaluate your practices, know when a goal is too easy or too hard by letting your athletes try to meet the goal of the drill. Then adjust the drill (either the goal or the time cap) so next time it will still be challenging but doable.**

**To summarize:**

- **The current generation can keep their focus and attention in a single task for no longer than twenty minutes: make your drills short.**
- **Technique should be developed to a point where it becomes automatic (the athlete does not need to think about it to execute it correctly) and that work should be done based on quality repetitions while the athlete is fresh and not fatigued. This allows the central nervous system to memorize a correct and automatic movement pattern. Do not make your athlete repeat a technique when tired (unless they already have a correct and automatic technique and the goal is to perform well while tired – that is a different scenario and it does not apply to movement learning);**
- **Make your practices challenging: make your drills short and determine a goal to be met with proper technique in an environment as competitive and as unpredictable as possible. Reward an athlete that performs with correct technique (instead of punishing the wrong technique – positive reinforcement is always more effective) in that environment. Cooperative drills with a goal to be met against the clock are great for team bonding.**

- **A good coach gives challenges that are hard enough and demand great effort at the same time they have a goal that is doable (zone of proximal development). A better coach adjusts the drills, the goal and the time cap so athletes feel challenged every practice and expand their limits.**

These are the points I have been discussing with fellow coaches that have come to talk to me about how to make sports practices more effective for their young athletes. If you would like to discuss it more, please send me a message at **coachpetervb@gmail.com**.

Hope you have a great season!