

“Jordan Larson and “Lonely Practice”



Terry Pettit *September 16, 2021*

Recently in our podcast, “Inside the Coaching Mind with Terry Pettit,” Jordan Larson, the MVP of the Tokyo Olympics said something that jolted me. I had asked Jordan why she thought Justine Wong-Orantes had played so consistently well as the libero on the gold medal-winning USA women’s volleyball team in Tokyo.

Jordan responded that she thought there were two reasons. Justine had played professionally for a team in Germany where she had taken a leadership role that sometimes meant taking half the court in serve receive and at other times mentoring her less experienced teammates. This had allowed Justine the opportunity to develop confidence in her own play while developing some verbal leadership skills.

I found that interesting but it was the second reason that really resonated with me. Jordan said, “**Justine also put in a lot of lonely practice.**” It was a phrase that I had not heard before and I thought it was a beautiful description of a player taking responsibility for their own development.

Lonely practice is when a golfer spends hours working on a bunker shot by themselves.

Lonely practice is when I watched Christine Latham, a three-time soccer All-American at Nebraska, practice kicking goals from different angles into a net by herself behind the coach’s office for several days in a row. She was doing this after her eligibility was up to help prepare herself for professional play. That same year, Latham became the WUSA rookie of the year and scored three goals for Canada in the World Cup.

Lonely practice is when Christy Johnson would corral a co-ed into tossing her balls in the rec-center so she could practice her setting technique. She wouldn’t become the starting setter until her fourth year in the program but then lead Nebraska to a national championship and a 65-2 record.

Lonely practice is when Becky Bolli, a 5’7” high school player from Burwell, Nebraska practiced a jump serve for hours each day so that she can walk-on to the university team, enter a match with her team down to a formidable opponent on the road, and scatter enough receivers to change the dynamics of the match. She would become a team captain.

Lonely practice is when a player persuades a student manager or an assistant coach to serve them tough balls to their weakest side so they can master a drop step. **Lonely practice** is initiated by the player in her desire to get better **and consists of thousands of perfect repetitions.** She may be trying to make the team. She may be trying to earn a significant role. She may be trying to make the team better.

Lonely practice leads not only to the mastery of a skill, but also leads to a type of confidence that is much different than a coach or parent-directed practice. When I was recruiting, I would look for the usual talents of size, arm speed, quickness, and vertical jump. But when I look back on the players who developed the most, the players that I enjoyed coaching the most, they were young women who had already embraced the concept of “**lonely practice**” or were on the cusp of doing so.

I didn’t ask Jordan how much lonely practice she had initiated, but I didn’t have to. When Jordan was twelve years old her mother asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up and Jordan replied, “An Olympian.” Jordan Larson didn’t lead her team to an Olympic gold medal **without a lifetime of lonely practice.**

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