



Create a Championship Atmosphere with Focus, Motivation, and Fun in Practice

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A championship atmosphere includes a high level of focus, motivation, accountability, daily improvement, competitive attitude, confidence, and fun in training sessions. Four areas key in training include creating games in place of drills, building confidence through intensity and challenges, increasing the level of verbal and non-verbal communication, and focusing on the little details in practice.

Games versus Drills

The first key in developing a championship atmosphere is to convert as many drills as possible into games. The mentality of team members working through drills is to get it over with or just finish it. The athletes' outlook is quite different when playing games. When playing games, the athletes play to win, which inherently creates an atmosphere of strong work ethic, a high level of focus, motivation, competitiveness, and fun.

Turning drills into games create fun and effective practices. Even simple hitting lines can be turned into a game. Put hitting lines on both sides of net. The first team to successfully hit five hard-driven balls in a target area without the ball contacting the net tape wins. To add some additional game related details, have the second person in line call off a hitting shot ("hit line") and cover the hitter, while the setter also covers the hitter, despite the absence of a block.

A coach can create games that are either cooperative or competitive in nature. Cooperative games are designed to have all teammates work towards a common goal together, even if they are on opposite sides of the net. Any type of pepper game where the goal is to keep the ball in play is cooperative. Competitive games put at least two groups against each other and result with a winning and losing team. Each group can affect the outcome by earning points or defending against potential points.

Most games have a scoring system that makes a team focus on specific goals. Scoring offers accountability, a method to gauge competition, and a way to direct focus. *Simple scoring* awards a point whenever an objective is reached. *Plus/minus scoring* can be used in simple scoring games, with a point being taken away if an error occurs. *Wash scoring* rewards a team for earning a specific amount of points consecutively. Teams earn a predetermined amount of *little points* in a row to earn a *big point*. Games are played to a specified amount of big points. *Ratio scoring* evens the playing field between teams with different functions or levels. The team that reaches their goal of little points first, earns a big point. An example would be a game designed so the serve receive team needs to score 3 little points before the serving team scores 2 little points, and in result, the winner gets a big

point. *Bonus points* can be awarded as an emphasis for successfully achieving an objective within a game or drill. It is an easy and effective way to highlight a specific skill or play within a game. Award a bonus point for quick attack kills, perfect passes, or 3 bonus points for stuff blocks during a game. *Progressive scoring* emphasizes streaks of points. Winning one rally is worth one point, the second consecutive rally is worth two points, the third rally is worth three points, and etc. (Welch, 1993).

Build Confidence through Intensity and Challenges

Champions like to work hard. They thrive on it. Create a fast paced intense environment during training. The athletes enjoy leaving a training session feeling like they gave all the physical and mental energy they could. The cumulative effect of their daily investment into the team adds up to a commitment that insures being the best they can be.

Another great way to build confidence in a team is to give them a *handicap* in practice, and make them overcome it to win. If you play games starting at 21-22 in practice, they will learn how to play at crunch time. It is a confidence builder to be in a real match down 21-22, call a time out, and tell the team only four points are needed to win the game. They just did it yesterday in practice! Add an extra *winning of points burden*, especially late in practice. Place the players in situations where in order to win the game, they will need to win three rallies in a row (Neville, 1990). For another example, to earn their way out of practice, the team needs 4 serves in a row in zone 1. Facing adversity in practice successfully builds confidence in games. The players learn a champion's perspective.

Communication

When a team is playing well, a team is usually celebrating with each other, and communicating effectively. When the performance level drops, teams have a tendency to shut down the communication lines. To negate some of the roller coaster effect in the ebb and flow of the game, enhance team communication through practice. Develop practice plans that have players practice loud gym voices whenever possible. A team can line up in order by any creative means (uniform number, hair color, birth date, alphabetical by middle name...), and count off 1-2-1-2 to make teams. Players must yell their number (1 or 2) as loud as possible. Get players used to being vocal in front of teammates. Tell team 1 to go to one side of the net, and team 2 to the other side. Make sure the newly formed teams celebrate, give each other high fives, group together to make a game plan, and do a team cheer. After every game or drill, we make sure all teammates go to each other and give positive feedback and high fives to each member of the team before shagging balls. Whenever possible, we create opportunities for the teammates to talk and make contact before, during and after every game. Verbal and non-verbal communication has to be built into your training program, as it will not happen automatically at first. Improving communication, positive comments by teammates, celebration, and contact increases the smiles and positive feelings about teammates.

Little Details

The *little details* in practice must be done consistently throughout all phases of practice. A coach should be very objective oriented and train for very specific results to improve the little details. As an example, run a simple game such as two on two cross net pepper. The players pass, set, and then tip the ball over the net, while switching positions from front row to back row as the ball is on the other side of the net. The group should be given a goal that the ball must cross the net 30 times, or start over if ball hits the floor. This is a great time to reinforce the little details. The players must vocalize "mine" or "yours", give a passing target with the setter's hand, call shots "tip line", cover the hitter

position as ball is being tipped, be in base defense posture or blocking base posture, and any other emphasis a coach may have. The team continues to go back to zero if they do not exhibit all the traits you have required of them. An example would be if player X did not cover the hitter, the score goes back to zero.

Segment training is a great way to focus on the little details of the game through effective feedback and adjustments in a game situation, while focusing on a smaller portion of the game. A left side cross court game is one type of segment training that focuses on defending the outside hitter cross court attack, which is a hit that occurs a high percentage of the time. The game can be played either cooperatively like a across-the-net pepper game, or competitively. An imaginary (or taped) line goes down the center of the court perpendicular to the net. Each team consists of a left front, left back, middle back, and a right front setter. The left front hitter must hit the ball angle into the diagonal court to be inbounds (like serving in tennis). Little details such as off-blocker movement to defense, approach patterns for the hitter, left back base-to-wide movement (defend setter dump, then release out to sideline defense), defensive movement patterns, and other aspects of the game can easily be monitored, given live feedback, and corrected during play.

The four areas key to developing a championship atmosphere in our training improve the level of focus, motivation, and fun in training sessions. By incorporating these four objectives into your routine practices, the behaviors will become routine in actual games.

Mike Welch bio

Mike Welch was a college head coach for 17 years, leading teams to 6 nationally ranked seasons, 4 NCAA Tournaments, and 5 conference championships. Additionally, he was the Head Coach for the A1 USA Girls Youth National Team and other USA appointments. He resides in the Lake Tahoe area, and leads volleyball camps throughout the nation. Mike's programs can be seen at www.PeakVolleyballCamps.com, and he can be contacted at Mike@PeakVolleyball.com.