

10 Essential Volleyball Drills for Every Coach



From
John Forman

Welcome coach!

In this ebook you'll find 10 of my go-to drills and games. They are ones I use with just about every team I coach. That's because they challenge and engage players in a variety of ways, and most of them are quite adaptable and flexible.

Note that I haven't included any basic drills in here. I'm talking about things like Server-Passer-Target or Hitting Lines. No doubt, you have plenty of those sorts of things in your tool kit.

Instead, you'll find here more complex activities. They all involve the ball going over the net (it's there, we should use it), mainly in a game-like context. Most of them also put players in situations that require coordination with each other. That's the core of the game, so we need to train it just as much as (if not more than) the technical skills.

That said, you'll find in most cases I've included a variety of ways you can adjust these drills and games. So even if you know any of the exercises already, you might find new ways of using them. By playing around with different elements, you should be able to calibrate them to your own group of players, from a team of 13 year olds up to college and pro athletes.

Hopefully, you get as much use out of them all as I do.

All the best in your coaching,

John Forman
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#1: Progressive Triples

a.k.a. Pro Trips

I'm a big fan of using intensity progression as a way to warm the body up, especially when it's in a situation where the players get game perception reps. By that I mean they get the sorts of reads they'll get in a match. This is a drill that serves exactly that purpose.



The Basic Structure

Play a series of 3v3 games to 8. Each game has a requirement for the three contacts as follows:

Game 1: Pass-Set-Down Ball

Game 2: Pass-Set-Roll Shot

Game 3: Pass-Set-Back Row Hit

Players should rotate each time they send the ball over the net.

The idea here is that players get a live hitting warm-up where they start with ground-based controlled swings (Down Ball), add an easy jump, then finally get close to full speed.

Variations

You can adjust the 3-contacts to suit your group. Maybe you never get beyond Down Ball for third contact. Or maybe you go the other way and get up to full front row attacks. Get a higher or lower number of reps by adjusting the score as needed.

This can easily be done on a half court, or even 1/3 of a court to have multiple games going. And you can have players sub in and out when they rotate if your numbers don't quite fit.

#2: Amoeba Serving

a.k.a. Hit your teammate to go over

There is a game you might know of as Dead Fish where if you miss a serve you go sit on the court on the other side of the net until a teammate hits you with their serve. I'm not a big fan as it tends to mean the players most in need of work on their serving are the ones doing the least serving. This game flips that around.

How you play

Each team designates a first server. On the coach's signal those first servers serve. If they get the ball in, they go sit or lay down where the ball landed. If not, they re-serve until they get it in.

As soon as a first server is over on the other side, their teammates start serving at them. Anyone managing to hit that first server goes over to join them - touching to make an expanded target. This continues until one team has all their players on the other side.

For more advanced teams you can set specific target zones (e.g. short).

The players really get competitive with this! It also tends to see the better servers - who likely get over to the other side first - supporting and encouraging their less strong teammates. Plus, those weaker servers have bigger targets to aim at.



#3: Brazilian

a.k.a. 2v2 2-ball Volleytennis

There are lots of variations of volleytennis, which are basically 1-touch games. This is my favorite version because not only does it get the players competing, moving, and reading the opposition, it also adds communication and strategy.

This video shows how it's played. It's from a college team I coached, but I've used it with a variety of ages. It takes a few goes for the players to really get it, but once they do, as you can see, they really get into it!



You'll see each rally starts with both sides tossing a ball over the net (above the height of the antennae). I generally run games to 10. A team must win both balls to get a point, otherwise it's a wash. Each side has enough players for at least 2 teams, so after each rally a new pair steps in for the next one.

I have seen a variation where the rally stops after just one ball goes dead. That would obviously make for a faster game.

#4: Winners

a.k.a. King/Queen/Monarch of the court

You're probably thinking, "I know this one already," and I'm sure you do. But have you thought about all the ways you can use it beyond just giving the players a bit of fun game play?

For those who don't know Winners, it's your basic "winners stay on game". The standard way to run it is to have at least 3 teams. One starts on the Winners side, with the rest on the Challenge side. One of the challenge teams serves to start a rally. When the rally ends, if the team on the Winner side won, they get to stay there. If the Challenge team wins, the former Winners go off, the Challengers take their play, and the next Challenge team up starts the process over again.

Winners is a super flexible game structure, though. You can do all sorts of different things within it.

Play with court dimensions to challenge players' accuracy, and increase rallies by having players cover less court area.

Require players play in a certain configuration to put the focus where you want it. For example, play 3s with 2 players in the front row is likely to increase blocking.

Fix player positions for specialized work and/or to be able to balance out teams. Say you have 11 players, 2 of whom are setters. Have the two be fixed (or flip based on who wins each rally). Then you have 9 to make three teams from the rest.

Set conditional requirements to force players to work on your intended focus. For example, if you want to work on quick attacks, and you're using 3s with a fixed setter, say the non-passer must go for the quick on a good pass.

#4: Winners (cont.)

a.k.a. King/Queen/Monarch of the court

Mix up rally initiation to put the focus on what you want.

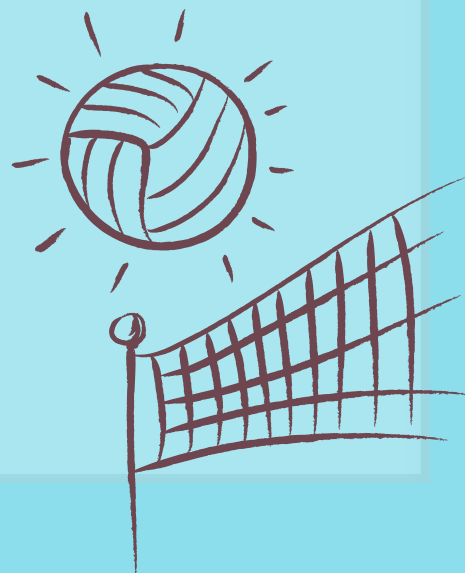
Standard practice is to have serve to start each rally, but if you use a more controlled ball to the Winners side you can encourage or force something specific - like a quick attack or an out-of-system play.

Define the teams so you can have specific player combinations working through the game. For example, if you feel like one of your MBs needs a bit more time with the starting setter to work on their connection, put them together.

The point is that you can work on soooo many different things in a Winners structure. All you have to do is play around with how you structure the game.

And since the players are very familiar with that structure, explanations are easy. All you have to do is say “We’re playing Winners, but this time I’m going to start each rally with a down ball to the setter and you have to do an out-of-system attack. After that, it’s a normal rally.” They’ll immediately know what’s going on.

So have fun with it!



#5: Flip-Switch

a.k.a. Switch & Slide

Here's a drill I really like to use to work on **Serving and Passing**.

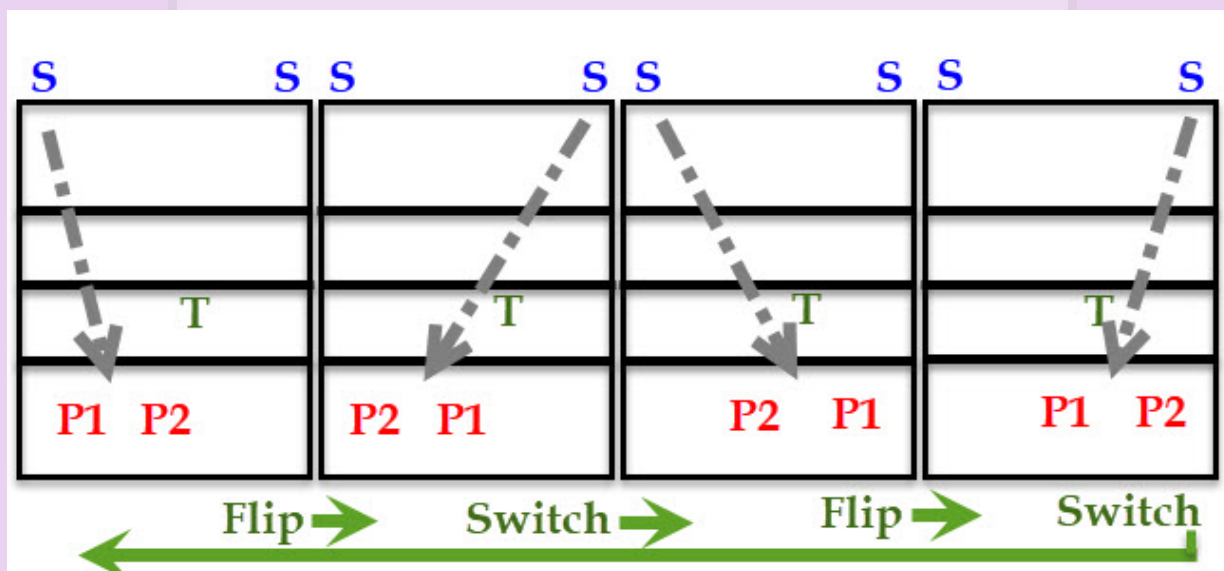
Setting it Up: You need a minimum of 4 players - 2 passers, and 2 servers. A target is also required. That could be another player, a coach, a manager, or whatever.

Put one server each behind Position 1 and Position 5 on one side of the net. Put one Passer in Position 5 (P1) and one in Position 6 (P2) on the other side, with the target at the net.

Running it

1. The Server in 1 serves. After the pass, P1 and P2 change positions.
2. The Server in 5 serves. After the pass, the passers slide across so that P2 is in 6 and P1 is in 1.
3. The Server in 1 serves. After the pass, P1 and P2 change positions again.
4. The Server in 5 serves. After the pass, the passers slide across so they are back to their starting position.

Servers repeat if they miss



#5: Flip-Switch (cont.)

a.k.a. Switch & Slide

Central Themes

I like this drill because both passers and servers have specific things to work on, and those things are important to both. That's seams. The servers want to attack them. The passers need to coordinate who's taking them.

Every ball represents a different challenge. Passers are in different positions relative to each other. Servers have to serve different angles with passers in varying positions. From a skill acquisition perspective - repetition without repetition - it's a real winner!

Variations

- Go for a certain number of full rotations, or for time
- If you have more players, you can have a second server in each location (or 1 covering both) to immediately serve the same seam if the initial serve is a miss.
- Your Target can be a setter, who then sets to a target.
- If you use a setter, you could add in an attack - either someone separate or one of the passers.
- You can score it based on seam serves and good passes (I'd do both rather than just one) to make it competitive.

You can easily run 2 versions of this on 1 court to get 8-10 (or more) players working. Do 5-minute rotations and in 20-25 minutes you'll have gotten a bunch of high quality passing and serving reps.

And with the ability to incorporate setting and hitting, you have the potential to work on a lot of different offensive elements!

#6: The Hard Drill

a.k.a. Cooperative Back Row 3s

Set-up right, this is one of the most mentally challenging activities you can put in a practice plan. It involves decision-making, strategy, communication, and performing under pressure. It often also challenges players to deal with frustration - at both the player and team levels.

The Basic Idea

Put three players on each side of the net in the back row. Initiate a ball to one of the players to start a rally. The goal of that rally is for the players to get 10 consecutive dig-set-hit sequences between the two teams. If at any point they fail to properly dig-set-hit, the rally ends and you put in a new ball to start over again from 0.

This might not sound super hard, but it's all in the requirements.

There are several elements you can modify to either reduce or increase the challenge level. That makes this a super flexible exercise.



How picky do you want to be?

When using this drill you have to decide how picky do you want to be. Do you care about minor 3m line violations? Will you accept bump sets? How hard do the hits need to be? The pickier you are, the harder it will be to finish.

#6: The Hard Drill (cont.)

a.k.a. Cooperative Back Row 3s

Adapting to your players and situation

Here are some of the ways you can adjust this drill so to make it work for your team.

- **Change the count** to the right level of challenge
- **Allow “washes”**. This is where the players can’t execute a dig-set-hit, but still get the ball over to continue the rally. It doesn’t add to the count, but they also don’t go back to zero. This option is good for getting hitters, especially, thinking about when it’s a good idea to swing hard to make it count vs. take something off to keep the rally going.
- **Include a setter at the net on each side**. This means it’s 4s instead of 3s. It makes things easier in terms of who takes 2nd ball, and sees higher quality sets if it’s a fixed setter.
- **Have the players rotate**. Forcing the players to rotate positions each time they send the ball over the net adds a layer of organization and communication.
- **Make subs on the fly**. As with rotating, having players sub in and out each time the ball goes over - perhaps linked with a rotation - makes things that little bit more complex.

The trick with this one, particularly with a new group, is finding the right challenge point. You want it hard, but doable. Best to start with something too easy rather than too difficult. If they go too fast, you can always do it again with more challenge.

It’s best to let them work out how to beat this drill themselves. Sometimes, though, a little coaching nudge to encourage some new ways of thinking is a good idea.

#7: Side v Side

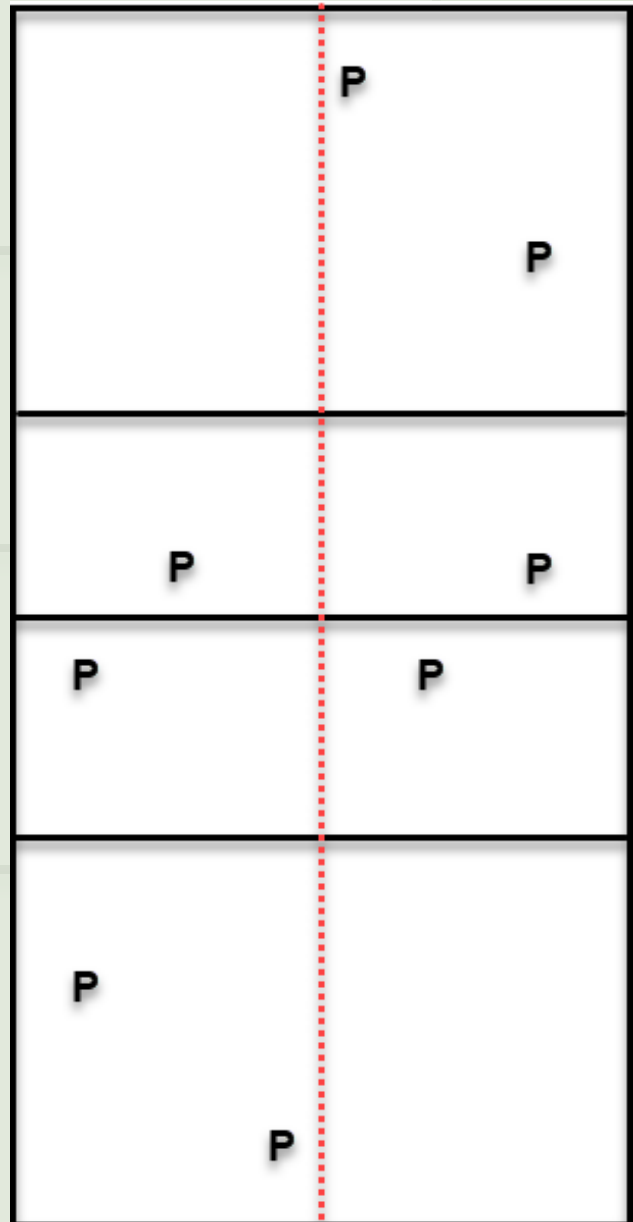
a.k.a. Cross-Court 4s

Here's a conceptual variation on The Hard Drill in that it too is a cooperative exercise (though see the variations). The difference is that it's front row attack focuses, specifically around outside hitting through Position 4.

How it works

Split the court in half and on each side of the net put players in positions 2, 4, 5, and 6. Initiate a ball to one of the players to begin a rally. The objective is for the players to collectively get 10 dig-set-hit combinations in a row. If that breaks down at any point before 10, the rally stops and a new ball is entered.

As with The Hard Drill, the degree of challenge comes in how picky you are with the set and hit. Also whether you require the group to get 10 in a row without allowing for "wash" plays.



Or make it competitive

There's a competitive version of this as well. I generally go with earned points only (kills and blocks), but you don't have to.

#7: Side v Side (cont.)

a.k.a. Cross-Court 4s

Variations

There are a few different ways you can modify things to suit your level, number of available players, etc.

- **Change the count** to make it easier or harder.
- **Rotate the players** each time they send the ball over the net so everyone has to perform all the roles. Or potentially have a fixed Setter in 2 and/or Libero in 5 or 6 (depending where you play yours) and have the others rotate around.
- **Substitute on the fly** when a team is doing its rotation to be able to work more than 8 players into the drill.
- **Add a blocker** in Position 2 (basically pushing the Setter player into Position 3) in the competitive version of the game so the hitter has to face a double block (at least sometimes). That blocker can then be part of the larger rotation and/or substitution pattern.
- **Change the orientation** so that instead of playing left vs. left, you're playing right vs. right (players in 6, 1, 2, and 4). Having them play left vs. right and vice versa is also an option. I often have the team run through all four of the potential configurations to balance out the challenge.

I would also note you have a lot of options with how each rally begins. Alternating free balls or down balls is a common choice. If you have spare players you can have a served ball (also an option for the competitive version). You could even toss in a ball for one side to attack.

And if you're using the competitive version, you can choose to give the next ball to either the winning or losing side from the previous rally.

#8: 22 vs. 22

a.k.a. Wash Game to 3

This is a game structure I use a lot because it's flexible in terms of focus and the games tend to be fairly short, so you can play a bunch of them.

The Setup

The name of the game comes from where you start the scoreboard. That's at 22-22, with the intention to play to 25. You could just as easily start at 0-0 and play to 3, though.

You set up a 6v6 game, but the teams stay in the same rotation the whole time. One team is the serving team, and they serve to start each rally.

What's a Wash Drill/Game?

A wash drill is one where in order for a team to score a point (often called a "big point") they have to do multiple things in a row - usually winning rallies in a game. For example, you could say a team that wins a point on serve gets two free balls. They have to win both extra rallies to earn a point. That would be a wash drill because if a team wins the first rally, but not the second and third, it's a wash.

Points are won in a wash structure. Whichever team wins the first rally receives a second ball. They then need to win that rally as well to get the big point. If they don't it's a wash and things start over again from serve. After one team wins, you play a second game with the other team doing the serving.

Scoring Variations

My favorite variation is to set up something that allows a team to win the big point on the first ball. For example, if a team either gets a first ball sideout (FBSO) or a first ball transition kill, they get the big point and there's no 2nd ball. I've done the same for aces, blocks, and certain offensive elements that we're working on to encourage their use

#8: 22 vs. 22 (cont.)

a.k.a. Wash Game to 3

Initiation Variations

The base way I work is to initiate a defensive ball via down ball as the wash ball. You could also toss a ball to the opposing team either for them to free ball over or to attack. And, of course, you could do something other than start the initial rally with a serve. Depends on your level of players and what you're trying to focus on for the game.



Other Variations

The great thing about 22 v 22 is that it's a scoring system. That means you can use it in just about any game configuration you like. That could be with fewer players. I've played it many times 5v5, 4v5, 4v4, and more.

You can also use different court configurations. Want to narrow the court, or shorten it? Not a problem. Want to play full court, but with part of the court considered out of bounds (perhaps Zone 6 to get hitters swinging more line and cross)? Go for it!

Working on rotations and/or player combinations

I use this game structure a lot because the short games lets me work on rotations and or different combinations of players to see how they do. The fact that the games are short (especially if you cap the score) allows you to get through a bunch. And it helps you recognize problems (e.g. the receiving team never wins in a given rotation).

#9: 25 or Reset

a.k.a. Slip & Slide

One of the challenges we have as coaches is creating real pressure situations in practice. Here's a scoring system you can use to create some of that pressure.

How to use it

Start a game at 18-18. Play as usual until one of the teams gets set point. On the next rally, if that team fails to win the point their score resets back to 18 and the game continues.

Variations

For faster games, start with higher scores. Also, consider whether at your level the serving or the receiving team has the advantage. If it's serving, you can make it more challenging by having them receive game point. Or use something other than serve to start that rally (or even all the rallies).



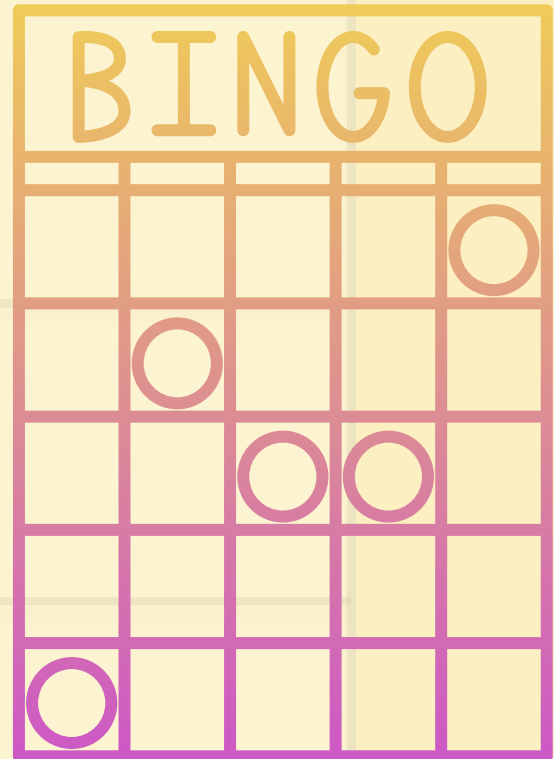
#10: “Card” Games

a.k.a. Bingo, Yahtzee, etc.

These are games where instead of a score you’re playing to complete a set of predefined objectives. Here are a couple of examples:

Bingo: Each team has a card with a grid of tasks to complete (best if they’re in different configurations). The first to get a line of them completed wins.

Yahtzee: Set up a card with a several objectives, each requiring a different number of reps (e.g. 1 block, 2 aces, 3 MB kills, etc.). The first team to complete them wins. Alternately, each objective can have a value and the team with the most Yahtzee points at the end wins.



You can also just have a list of objectives on a whiteboard and the team that completes them all (or the most) wins. It doesn’t need to be something complicated.

The important thing is to make the objectives relevant. What have you been working on lately? Include things related to that. Got a match coming up? Put on the list things you think you need to do to succeed - ideally linked to the scouting report you share with the team so they can make the link.

These games are great for getting the players to collaborate to achieve objectives - and to try to stymie the other team.

Thank you for exploring these drills and games. I hope they bring your coaching sessions to a new level of effectiveness, productivity, and even fun.

Do you a copy of have my book *The Perfect Drill*?

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