



PRACTICAL GUIDE

6 Steps to Better Volleyball Practices

A practical guide for planning clearer, more purposeful training sessions.

PROMISE

Get more from limited gym time by making better decisions before, during, and after practice.

INSIDE

- practice priorities
- session flow
- better warm-ups
- game-like training
- ball circulation
- focused feedback

How to Use This Guide

Better practices usually do not come from finding one more drill. They come from making better coaching decisions.

This guide gives you six practical decisions that can improve how you plan and run training. It is designed for school and club volleyball coaches who want more purposeful practices, better player engagement, and stronger carryover into matches.

You do not need to apply all six steps at once. Start with one. Use it in your next practice. Then build from there.

CORE IDEA

Better practices come from better coaching decisions, not just better drills.

Use the guide in two passes

Five-minute pass

Skim the six coach decisions and choose the one that would most improve your next practice.

Planning pass

Use the final checklist before and after practice to tighten priorities, flow, reps, and feedback.

The goal is not to make practice more complicated. The goal is to make it clearer: clearer priorities, clearer activities, clearer feedback, and clearer carryover into the next session.

Two decisions before you build the session

Start by deciding what matters most today. Then define what that priority should look like in the game. Those two choices make the rest of the plan cleaner.

STEP 1

Set Your Priority

Every practice needs a clear main priority.

A good practice plan is not a list of activities. It is a set of choices around what matters most today. One practice cannot give useful attention to everything, so choose the priority that should shape the session.

Example: serving pressure may matter more today than serving volume. Defensive transition may matter more than another isolated digging drill.

COACH DECISION

What is the one thing this practice must improve?

TRY THIS NEXT PRACTICE

Before choosing drills, write: By the end of this practice, we need to be better at _____. Then remove or revise anything that does not support it.

WATCH-OUT

Do not stack cool drills and call it a plan. The test is whether each activity supports today's priority.

STEP 2

Start With the End in Mind

Define the game behavior you want players to reach by the end.

Once you know the priority, define the endpoint. If the priority is serve-receive offense, the endpoint is not just passing 20 balls. It is holding shape, communicating early, making a playable first contact, and transitioning into the intended first-ball attack.

Example: if the priority is out-of-system play, the endpoint may be attackers making better choices from imperfect sets under live defensive pressure.

COACH DECISION

What should this look like in a game?

TRY THIS NEXT PRACTICE

Choose your final activity first. Then ask what players need before it, what simpler version prepares them, and what pressure or decision must be added.

WATCH-OUT

Do not end with a game that is disconnected from the rest of the session.

STEP 3

Use Warm-Up Time Better

Warm-up should prepare players physically and mentally for the day's training priority.

Many teams treat warm-up as separate from practice. Players move, touch the ball, and get loose, but the work does not connect to the main training theme. That is a missed opportunity. Warm-up time is still practice time. Use it to point players toward the movement, communication, rhythm, or decision-making they will need later in the session.

COACH DECISION

Can the warm-up start training today's theme?

TRY THIS NEXT PRACTICE

Take your normal warm-up and add one connection to the day's priority.

Useful warm-up connections

- Use a pepper variation that includes today's first contact or transition.
- Use partner serving that progresses from short distance to full court.
- Use a low-intensity game-like activity that requires reading, moving, and communicating.

COMMON MISTAKE

Letting warm-up become automatic. A routine can be useful, but if it never changes it may stop preparing players for the specific demands of the day.

STEP 4

Make Training More Game-Like

Players need to train the perception, decisions, movement, and execution they will need in matches.

Simple reps can help early in learning. A player may need a low-pressure version of a skill to understand the basic movement or contact. The problem is staying there too long. Volleyball skills do not happen in isolation during matches. Players see what is happening, move, decide, execute, and prepare for the next action.

Game-like does not mean every activity must be full 6v6. It means activities should include more of the real demands of the game whenever players are ready for them.

COACH DECISION

What part of the real game is missing from this activity?

Examples of one-step upgrades

- A passer passes, then attacks.
- A middle blocks, lands, transitions, and attacks from a realistic tempo.
- Serve receive includes adjacent passers, not just one isolated passer.
- Hitting work includes a block, defender, target, or scoring consequence.
- Transition work begins from a dig, cover, or block touch instead of a perfect tossed ball.

TRY THIS NEXT PRACTICE

Choose one drill you already use and make it one step more game-like. Add something before the skill, something after it, a realistic cue, a decision, or a scoring consequence.

WATCH-OUT

Game-like does not mean chaotic. Choose the right amount of realism for the players' current level.

STEP 5

Get Ball Circulation Right

A good activity can fail if balls are not where they need to be.

Practice flow depends on ball flow. When balls are in the wrong place, the activity slows down. When balls roll into dangerous areas, the activity has to stop. When a coach or feeder runs out of balls, the tempo disappears.

This is not just an organizational detail. It affects the quality and safety of the training, especially in small gyms, with limited balls, shared courts, or high-tempo activities.

COACH DECISION

Where do balls go after each contact?

Plan the flow before the drill starts

- where the live balls begin
- where dead balls go
- who collects them
- when collection happens
- where players should not roll or toss balls

Sometimes you want continuous flow. Sometimes you want a planned break. In a serve-receive scoring game, for example, servers may need a ball source on one sideline while missed serves and dead balls go to a specific corner. For hitter work, ball collection can create a natural rest interval after a set number of swings.

TRY THIS NEXT PRACTICE

Before each activity, identify the ball path and say it clearly before the first rep.

WATCH-OUT

Do not assume players will figure it out. If they guess wrong, practice flow and safety both suffer.

STEP 6

Focus Your Feedback

Feedback should match the purpose of the activity.

Coaches see a lot. That does not mean they should correct everything. If the activity is designed to improve serve receive, but the passer later attacks and makes a poor swing, it is tempting to correct the attack. Often, that distracts from the point of the activity. Cleaner feedback starts with deciding what you are actually coaching in that rep.

Players need to know what matters right now. Focused feedback helps them direct their attention and helps the coach avoid turning every rep into a running list of corrections.

COACH DECISION

What feedback matters most in this activity?

Feedback can come from more than coach talk

- the score or scoring constraint
- the result of the rally
- the target or outcome standard
- a teammate's response
- a repeat of the same situation

TRY THIS NEXT PRACTICE

Before each activity, choose one main feedback lane. In a pass-to-attack activity, for example, you might only coach the passer's start position and platform angle, even if the attack is imperfect.

WATCH-OUT

Not every mistake needs immediate correction. If it is not connected to the activity's purpose, make a note and come back to it later.

Practice Planning Checklist

Use this as a quick pre-practice and post-practice review.

Before practice

- ☐ What is today's main priority?
- ☐ What should players be doing better by the end?
- ☐ How does warm-up connect to the priority?
- ☐ Which activities are most game-like?
- ☐ How will balls circulate?
- ☐ What feedback will I focus on?

After practice

- ☐ Did the priority get enough attention?
- ☐ Did the activities build logically?
- ☐ Did players get enough useful reps?
- ☐ Was feedback focused?
- ☐ What carries into the next practice?

SIMPLE NEXT ACTION

Pick one step from this guide and apply it to your next practice. Do not redesign everything. Make one better coaching decision and watch what changes.

FOR MORE PRACTICE-DESIGN SUPPORT

Better practices come from making better coaching decisions over time. If you want ongoing help thinking through practice design, training priorities, player development, and coaching problems, explore the Coaching Volleyball Community.

Visit: <https://community.coachingvb.com/>

You can also find more articles, guides, and coach-development resources at [CoachingVB.com](https://coachingvb.com).

About John Forman

John Forman is a volleyball coach, coaching educator, author, and founder of CoachingVB. His work focuses on helping coaches think more clearly about practice design, player development, and coaching decision-making.