

# 10 Tips for Developing a Serving Strategy

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## 1. Develop a serving philosophy

The serve, at the high school level, can be a major offensive weapon. However, it can also be an Achilles heel for many teams. Therefore, your serving philosophy should complement the competitive level and the skill level of the team you are coaching. This will be a major part of how you teach the volleyball serve, as you will reference the philosophy behind the skill frequently.

When adopting a serving philosophy, I would envision a scale of one to ten; with conservative serving being a “one” and aggressive serving being a “ten.”

## 2. Components of an accurate serving philosophy

An accurate serving philosophy should consider several key points about your players, your opponent and your overall serving strategy. Here are some items to keep in mind:

### Weak serve receiver

- Scouting or previous knowledge
- Do not assume a good defensive player is a good serve receiver

### Serve receivers who just committed an error of any kind

- Be relentless

### Substitute

- Particularly a late-game entry

### Short of deep serve

- Based on serve receive alignment

### Seams

- Requires decision, communication & movement from the passers
- A problem for most teams

### The zone that Setter is transitioning from

- Causes distraction and confusion

### Zone 1

- Creates a tougher pass for the setter to handle

## 3. Know your competition level

There are three main levels of competition in youth volleyball and each carries a different degree of player expectations and coaching priorities.

### ADVANCED LEVEL - High-level high school or collegiate volleyball

At the advanced level, an accurate and aggressive volleyball serve is a must. You can measure the effectiveness of a serve using the Ace to Error Ratio. Generally speaking, an Ace to Error ratio of 1:1 or better is what you should aim for.

Try to eliminate or reduce missed serves in the net. It would be better to miss long since that puts the other team in a position to choose whether to play it and your team can still end up with the point. Conversely, missing a serve in the net automatically awards the other team a point.

Lastly, advanced level teams need to be accurate and have a high success rate of hitting the target.

### **INTERMEDIATE LEVEL**

At the intermediate level, accuracy is also an essential skill. The opposing team is less likely to have competent serve-receivers and they will generally be less experienced. Working on accuracy with your volleyball players ensures they have a leg up in this area.

At this level, players will probably not be as competent with aggressive serves, although it is important to stress good pace.

### **EARLY DEVELOPMENT LEVEL**

If you coach youth volleyball or players in the early development level, your teaching should emphasize the reduction of errors and on making opponents pass the ball.

- Accurate = In the court
- Stats = Percentage of successful serves

## **4. Keep your serving philosophy top of mind**

Before a match, take some time to remind your team of your serving philosophy. This helps focus the gameplay strategy and keep your overarching goals at the forefront of their efforts.

Our serving philosophy, for example, is to serve aggressively and find a weakness to attack. Before we break the huddle prior to a match, I usually remind my players to concentrate on getting into their serving and passing game. It seems that when we are doing that, our offense takes care of itself.

By serving tough and aggressively, we:

1. Keep our opponent out of serve receive offense
2. Allow fewer sideouts
3. Create opportunities for our team to get a ball that we can convert in our transition offense for a point

The team must adopt an attitude that good aggressive serving will ultimately win out if they stick with the plan and execute. A good, aggressive missed serve cannot be perceived as a letdown, only as a missed opportunity that will be corrected with a sideout and the next serve.

## **5. Define your idea of a good aggressive serve**

Always lay the groundwork for terms you use frequently to make sure everyone is on the same page. If you're asking your players to use an aggressive serve, make sure you clearly define what that looks like, how it should feel and what the expected result should be.

Most importantly, you should be consistent. Because of the nature of this type of serve, a coach cannot express displeasure in a missed serve if you are asking for aggressiveness.

Here are some more key points to keep in mind when defining a good aggressive serve to your team:

- Eliminate net errors as much as possible
- Force the opponent to make a decision
- Don't try to improve a perfect serve
- Establish a rhythm. Back one off if necessary
- Mix up serve selection: for example, alternate between deep and hard to short serves
- Understand when to abandon aggressive serves and move towards conservative ones
- Understand good aggressive serving situations
  - The beginning of the game
  - When way ahead or behind
  - When behind in a match, the first thing I do is analyze our serving aggressiveness. It can change momentum immediately

## 6. Know the important serving situations

During a game, you'll have numerous opportunities to apply your serving strategy and modify it according to the situation. These are some of the most important serving situations you'll want to pay attention to since they can be used to your team's advantage:

- Match or game point
- After timeout
- After a substitution
- Following missed serves by teammates
- After winning a long rally or great play - momentum
- First serve of the match or game

## 7. Help your players with serving signals

Another crucial element of serving is hand signals. These are great to go over with your team and have numerous advantages. For one, it encourages the server to concentrate and really pay attention to the layout of players on the court. Furthermore, it helps establish a strategy between the server and the rest of the team. Without signals, the server must decide.

As you help your players with serving zones, bear the following in mind:

- Can players hit zones?
- Reduce the # of zones if having trouble (deep or short)

## 8. Look for these tendencies

These are some important items to bring to your players' attention. Sometimes they do not realize they have created a mental barrier and may gloss over or forget to look for these tendencies in the opposing team.

- Server missing the 1st serve
- Server hitting the 1st or 2nd serve but missing consistently after that

If you find that there is a mental barrier causing a player to miss these key items, set a goal to help them move past it.

## 9. Consider game strategy and lineup

Do you consider service strength when developing a starting lineup of rotation? If you aren't currently doing this, now is a good time to start.

The weaker the skill level on your team, the more important it is to get good servers early in a rotation. Serving may be 70% of your offense, so plan ahead and take into account the individual skill level of each player.

## 10. Use statistics

Numbers help inform your serving philosophy just as well as they inform your overall coaching strategy. Use the following to guide the “how” and “why” of your approach to serving:

### Point system

- 5 = Serve an ace
- 4 = If serve causes opponent to overpass
- 3 = If opponent's setter has one setting option
- 2 = If opponent's setter has two setting options
- 1 = If opponent's setter has three setting options
- 0 = Service error

### Percentage system

- Percentage of successful serves versus the number of attempts
- Ace to error ratio