



# Top Ten Serving Secrets

*By John Kessel, USA Volleyball Managing Director, Region Services Programs*

I just spent four nights in Hartford, Connecticut. Snowfall of a greater amount in the storm than any other time in recorded history. Temperatures lower than any time in the last six years. So the aptly named Winterfest Tournament took place on over 20 courts in the Convention Center, and Tom Tait, Joel Dearing, Steve Colpus and I ran wave format CAP 1 and 2 courses for over 50 coaches who wanted to learn to be better teachers – including over 15 from John Raza's Maine Juniors. Great tourney to see, Boys playing on several courts each day, and thousands of girls and their parents competing and watching each other on courts all under one roof.

My last morning a coach from CAP said his girls were serving at about a 33 percent success rate and what could he do to help them. My thoughts shared with him seemed to be of value to share here with all players and coaches, so here are what we talked about...

1. **The most important skill in serving is giving yourself a consistent ball to strike.** The vast majority of errors made by all levels of servers are due to the server given themselves a toss that is not the same – resulting in having to change the swing, contact and ball flight. Indeed, just the word “toss” makes players too often put the ball too high – so I often say “place the ball” to get the desired ball arc – which is to put the ball to the height where when it starts to fall back down, it is struck. So placement should go up and down at a VERY low height, so consistently it would fall back into your tossing hand should you not contact it.
2. **Get your contact hand back behind your head before starting to serve.** A core principle in being a great player is to simplify the movement you make in each skill. For serving, this means you should simply TOSS-STRIKE, with the toss being low and consistent, and the arm swinging to strike the ball with a fast arm. There is no step – would you teach free throw shooting with a step? I doubt it, and many volleyball coaches are surprised when I note in the gyms of the world how there is a nail or large dot in the middle of the free throw line, placed to allow the hoopsters to shoot from the same spot that is lined up to the center of the basket.
3. **Show the skill with your program's best and meanest server.** Your players will learn faster when they see a peer or near their age player who can do the serve (or any skill) you want all to emulate. For my team, we watch Erin, state volleyball champion whose serve is one that nobody likes to receive. She is simple in motion and strikes a ball that floats every time. This float, by the way is NOT due to “punching” or stopping your arm when you swing. It is learned by each individual determining where on the sphere he or she need to hit the ball on the true center of the sphere including the intended ball flight. If you see it spin at all left to right, for example, you need to strike it a few millimeters more to the right, still in line with your ball flight. This deliberate practice reading of the ball spin should be done on every serve, as the player also moves into

the court to play, or simulate getting to base. Too often coaches have the players just serve and watch, not serve and run to base, thus they are not teaching the whole skill.

4. **Strike the ball with a RIGID, CONSISTENT contact point.** When your players pre-strike the ball in their hand, most players cup their hand, wrapping it around the ball. Get your players to strike/tap the ball in this preparation habit with the same open palm and rigid contact you want them to actually serve the ball with. This very rigid hand/palm contact needs to be learned and done every time you strike a served ball. The wrist angle can change slightly to make for a short serve, or serving to the right or left, but it must be a rigid wrist/palm/contact every time.
5. **Serve the ball from corner to corner. 1 to 1 or 5 to 5.** We want to get the ball to go as fast as possible, yet stay in, so the best way to first do it, and get great at it, is to give yourself as much court to serve into as possible. This comes from serving from one corner to the opposite catty-corner area. Since setters dislike the ball coming in from zones 1 and 2 the most, we focus on this serve primarily. When kids are nervous before their first match or anytime, getting them to aim corner to corner also gives them more room for their adrenaline charged body to strike the serve, and keep it in, until things calm down a bit.
6. **Relax with a Big Breath – using a simple 1 – 2 - 3 count.** So the people who should be nervous are the passers, not the server. The first part of the count, done after your arm is already back and ready to swing fast forward, is a deep breath. Watch free throw shooters do the same thing. Then the next count 2 is the placement/low toss of the ball, followed by last count 3 of the fast arm/torque swing. While this 1.Exhale 2. Place 3. Swing can also be cue worded to 1. Relax 2. You're 3. Toast, as that is the attitude a great server has with every ball sent over the net, burning the passers on the other side of the net with each tough serve.
7. **Serve the ball hard and flat.** Too often players loop their serve or aim quite high to get the ball in. I spend a bit of money buying string/twine, and tie two strands from antenna to antenna (get up on the ref stand to tie it up). One is tied about 6 inches above the top of the net, and the other below the top of the antenna. The players when they serve want to send their serves through this gap, unless they are serving a short, inside the 3 meter line serve.
8. **Stand Back and Blast.** When you have players who “serve it too hard” or serve it “always long” you are close to having a great server. Take advantage of the space behind the service endline and them step to the end of the court surface – two or three meters behind the endline for many gyms, and up to nine meters back when playing in international or one court stadium matches. Then aim more into the center of the court and hit the ball even faster, still with float, and watch the ball dance. If there is no space to step back, you will need to guide these players to “swing a tiny bit slower,” while still hitting it over the net. I have seen international servers rack up 10 or more aces in a row by serving from 8-9 meters behind the endline, and blasting floaters which are very challenging to read and adapt to, with all the extra float that occurs. A key reason players jump float serve is that you can send the ball into the court at a higher speed, and thus get more float effect on the ball.
9. **Serve into heaven first and always, never hell.** There is the 7' 4 ¼” of “hell” where the ball is struck into the net (or even under it) and there is usually two to three times that space of “heaven” – from above the net to the ceiling. So players need to ensure every ball goes into heaven, never into hell. This is in no small part

because when you hit into the net (serving or spiking) nothing is really learned at practice by your teammates, but when you hit over and out, still an error, your teammates are learning a key read – that ball is out. Remember, passers determine 80 percent or more of the pass BEFORE the ball crosses the net. The out serve is determined not as it goes by, but about at the net as it is flying in. So out serves are ok in practice as each time they teach your teammates what an OUT serve looks like. One gimmick I use is to stand with a player at the endline and show them where a ball needs to be hit into “heaven” by showing them how to always strike the ball while it is above the top of the net. Hold the ball so they see it above the net, and then below the net, and then back to above the net, a sort of constructive error sandwich of see... “hit it here/not here/hit it here”...see?

10. **Buy a Radar Gun.** The only tool I spent a bit of money on (but not THAT much!) which I use nearly every practice, is a speed radar gun. While there are apps for it on Smartphone, the radar gun itself is so accurate and easy to use; it is worth the purchase for a program to have. The main reason is you can specifically and objectively give feedforward information to each server as you get them to max out their serve to the fastest they can swing and still keep the ball in. For each player keep track of their highest speed of served ball in, challenging them to be the fastest server while still keeping it in. You’ll use this gun for spiking too, and determining who dug up the fastest spike as well. These guns, like the Bushnell II, are right around 100 dollars, battery operated and an important tool in your coaching toolbox.

So there is what we spoke about and maybe a bit more. I really believe we can teach every player to be a great, never miss server, even while serving very tough. Look at what other closed motor program based athletes can do in gymnastics on a balance beam, or in shooting free throws for example. Go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z72Q4FBfLuM> to see one fun and very visual closed motor program loop example. I often tell two other stories to get my point across about never-miss-yet-tough serving. My first is about comparing free throw shooters to servers. Great free throw shooters are not only simple in motion, but from a distance of 15 feet can put in 90% or more shots into a target that is about two square feet, using a larger ball. Volleyball servers stand TWICE as far away....but....how big is our target? Yep, about 450 times larger. You could land a helicopter over there. And we miss?

Which brings me to my final tale from the 1984 Olympics, where Craig Buck and Karch Kiraly combined for 14 of the 24 USA men’s Gold medal winning team service aces. They each served about 130 serves total. How many did they miss, in this Olympic charged stressful situation? One serve. Each. You can be a really tough server, and yet never miss. All it takes is deliberate practice, focus, and repeatability. So go put up a line on your garage door at home at 7’4 ¼” and stand back nine meters and practice away....you will get better at this closed motor programmed, completely-in-my-control skill, and make opponents really hate to see you step up to the serving endline....and give your team points that will make a difference.