

Turtle Lake Resort Volleyball Tips

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WHAT DOES 4-2, 6-2 OR 5-1 MEAN?

In volleyball 4-2, 5-1 or 6-2 offenses are some of the basic offenses used. In pick up or recreational games, a 4-2 offense is often used. Two setters will switch to the front middle position and set when each is in the front row. That means the other 4 players are hitters.

A more advanced offense is a 5-1. There is one setter who will always set from the right front side. When the setter is in the front row, he or she can also block and hit. If they are moving to the front from the back row, they can't do either.

A 6-2 offense means that there are 2 setters who will always come out of the back row to set. They cannot hit or block when they are setters, but they do both when they are in the front row. Hence there are 2 setters and six hitters. The advantage is that there are always three hitters in the front row making it more difficult for the other team to block.

To run a 5-1 or 6-2 offense, the passing has to be very good. Since two players cover the back row most of the time, everyone has to be able to pass well.

When playing a team using a 6-2 or 5-1, it is important to identify who the setters are and in the case of a 5-1, know when the setter is front row and when they are in the back. When they are in the back row there are three choices they can set to. If they are front row, they can hit or block.

WHO YA GONNA BLOCK?

Like the catch line in Ghost Busters, "who ya gonna call" know who your going to block before the ball is served. Look across the net from you and decide if you need to block or not. Make this decision before the ball is put into play.

The two most important things about blocking are setting up in front of the ball, and **KEEPING YOUR EYES OPEN!** Stand at the net with your hands shoulder high. As the ball is being set, watch it all the way to the hitter. Just before you jump, set up in front of the ball with your outside hand on the ball. By setting up this way, your outside hand will keep the hitter from hitting line and your inside hand will cover the crosscourt hit. Then, with your eyes open, turn your attention to the hitters shoulder position and move your hands to where the hitter's shoulders are pointing. Finally, if you are tall or can jump, turn your hands toward the middle of the court so that you block the ball into the court, not out of bounds.

If you cannot get your hands above the net you can still block. Stand about a foot off the net. Line up as instructed above, with your outside hand on the ball. Then as the ball is being hit, jump and turn the palms of your hands to the sky. If the ball is hit down, it will bounce straight up off the palms of your hands, giving one of your teammates time to get under the ball and play it. Ask Rachel's brother Scott how this works. During the Memorial Day tournament he blocked Beer Can doing exactly what I outlined above.

The difference between an average player and a good player is the good player knows what they are going to do before the ball is put into play. Before the ball is served, know who you're gonna block!

PASSING

Passing is the most important part of the game and the most difficult part of the game. Almost all of our clinics begin with passing. Most of the time spent on drills in the clinics is spent on passing. Yet, it's still something few of us can do well.

There are many things that must be done to pass the ball correctly. The ball must hit the platform formed between your wrist and elbow. Your elbows must be locked. Your knees need to be bent, almost in a sitting position. You should be facing your target. There should be very little arm swing at the time of contact. The hands should be together in a relaxed form.

All of this and more NEEDS to be done just to pass the ball. To become a good passer, one has to do three more things:

- 1) Be setup before the ball comes over the net. Lindsey does this the best. Before the ball gets to the net, she has her arms extended and a platform formed. This is the easiest of the three to do.
- 2) Position yourself so that at the moment of contact with the ball, your hands are directly in front of your belly button. Not an easy thing to do but not impossible either.
- 3) Follow the ball, with your eyes, all the way to the moment of contact. See the ball hit your arms.

The above three tips require concentration. You must know what you are going to do before you do it. The difference between an average passer and a good passer, is the good passer knows what they are going to do before the ball crosses the net.

AGGRESSIVE PLAY

Instead of saying aggressive play let's say TOURNAMENT PLAY. MSA is a couple of weeks away. This is the second biggest tournament most of us play in each summer. Last year Turtle Lake came real close to sweeping all four volleyball divisions at MSA. With a little more aggressive play we may have succeeded.

The whole idea behind the game is to make the ball hit the ground on your opponent's side of the net. Conversely your opponent is trying to make the ball hit the ground on your side of the net. Therefore, EVERY effort should be made to keep the ball from hitting the ground on your side of the court. This demands aggressive play, especially in a tournament. The more aggressively teams play, the longer they play. There are two parts of our game where we all could be a little more aggressive.

First, there is no rule that says the setter HAS to get the second ball. There are a lot of times a setter will call for help. There are also a lot of times a setter needs help but does not call for it. There are also times another player has a better play on the ball than the setter. Before the ball is served know who the setter is, what his/her range is, who the two outside hitters are, and where the setter is starting from. If the setter is coming from one side of the court and the pass is to the other side of the court, the setter probably needs help. So help the setter.

How many times have I said this? Most importantly though, if you do help the setter be sure to let everyone on the court know you are helping the setter. All of this should be done with no eye contact! Once you see where the ball is going make up your mind and play the ball. Be aggressive!

Second, anticipate and expect. Expect the ball to come to you, pray the ball comes to you. How many times in a day do you find yourself saying “I didn’t expect that”? I know I said it this last Sunday when Chris dropped a ball in front of me. Try to never have to say that. Look for every ball to be hit to you.

Finally, when you have made up your mind and you’ve called the ball, play it no matter what! If someone else calls it, yell NO and play the ball! When two players go for the ball more often than not both end up backing off. Be aggressive, play the ball.

Some may say “this is too serious for me”. Tournaments are serious, and fun. Think about it. I have the most fun when the ball is in play. When the ball hits the ground, especially on my side of the court, the fun ends. The best way to keep the ball in play is with smart, aggressive play. Watch the teams that win. Everyone is constantly moving and everyone is constantly talking. Almost every (if not every) player on those teams is aggressive. The difference between a good player and an average player is aggressiveness.

HITTING, YOU NEED AN APPROACH

After you go up to block and the ball either goes around you or over your head, what is the next thing you do. If you’re like most Turtle Lake players you stand at the net and wait for the setter to set you. What you should do is turn, find the ball and then retreat to the ten foot line to set up for your attack approach. Turtle Lake Dark Side Dan (MSA MVP) does this perfectly. Dan moved more in one volley at MSA than most of us do in a weekend. He went up to block three times and retreated each time to set up for his approach (yes, his approach is much longer than yours or mine).

So how does one properly approach the ball to attack it. Most hitters use a three step approach. Stand at the ten foot line and take one step back.

With your right foot slightly behind your left, the approach is right, left, right, leap. As your second right foot touches the ground, plant your left foot right beside your right foot and with both feet, leap into the air. Along with the footwork you also need to swing your arms and lift with your upper body. To do this, as you plant both feet, swing both arms back behind you with your palms facing the sky. Then as you leap, swing both arms forward and up, thus lifting with your upper body.

Having done both of these tasks, all you have to do now is contact the ball. But where is the ball? Ideally it should be one ball length in front of you. It should not be directly above you and it definitely should not be behind you. So what do I do if the ball is above me? Only you can fix this and the only way you can fix this is to RECOGNIZE that the ball you just hit was above you and not in front of you. If you do not recognize this you will never fix it. Once you are aware of the fact the ball is above you when you are hitting it, you can adjust your approach and consciously leave the ground before you get to the ball.

Ok so I tried everything you said and I tripped and fell. Have you heard the term, muscle memory? My body just does this, I no longer think about what I'm doing. Until you've done this a couple of thousand times (seriously!!) you may feel a little awkward. The best place I've found to practice is the doorway in my kitchen (when my wife is not around). I stand back from the doorway, take my three step approach, leap and hit the top of the doorway (if there is a door, make sure its open).

Do all this, give it some time, and by next seas on at the very least you will be doing roll shots over the net.

THE SWING

Did you read the last tip "THE APPROACH"? Did you attend th e clinic and work on your approach? Did you realize that not only do you have to get to the ball but you have to hit it t oo? To learn how to swing and to perfect the swing once you've learned it, you have to hit a few balls into the net. This is one of my favorite drills. I probably hit close to two hundred balls into the net each weekend (this is not counting the ones when I'm playing).

Stand about eight feet from the net. With your left hand hold the ball in front of your face. Toss the ball straight up about six feet into the air. If the ball is tossed straight up it should be in front of you. As you toss the ball leave your left hand above your head. With your right hand near your ear, reach as high as you can and contact the ball. Contact the ball with your hand right below the finger line. Now the most important thing! The swing is now only half complete it does not stop when you contact the ball. Drive your hand through the ball and continue your arm swing so that you finish with your arm and hand on the right side of your body and your fingers pointing to the ground. Pick the ball up and repeat. Repeat this a lot of t imes!

By repeating this drill you will build arm strength and coordination. This will enable you to hit the ball to where you want.

Give this some thought. At High School and College volleyball camps they teach the approach and swing with two tennis balls. The hitter holds a tennis ball in each hand. As the hitter leaps into the air, they reach over the net with their left hand and drop the tennis ball in their left hand. Then they toss the ball in their right hand over the net. This is the same motion de scribed above:

Tossing the ball with your left hand and leaving it raised, is just like dropping the tennis ball over the net. Reaching as high as you can with your right hand and contacting the ball is just like tossing the tennis ball over the net.

Finally, as experienced by ALL at this last weekend's clinic, this IS NOT EASY! It takes time and effort on your part. The more effort one puts into it, the less time it will take to perfect. This last tip should help the most! During the learning process (th is summer and next) have the setter set you about five to six feet off the net. This should take the net out of the process. You will not have to concern yourself with hitting the net or going under the net. You can just focus on hitting the ball over the net to open area of the court.

PASSING, IT DOESN'T WORK

Ok, I'm a novice player; I read your tip on passing and did everything you said. It didn't work!

First let me begin with an exercise I do at the first practice of each season. I have all the players serve the ball with their left hand. I then explain we could work on this all season and at best, only get half our serves in by the end of the season. When you try something new it almost never works the first time.

Is the ball hitting your forearms or your hands? Are you in front of the ball? Did you swing? I find these are the three most difficult things for beginning passers. Your arms need to form a platform between your wrist and elbow and the ball must make contact on this platform. If the ball is hitting your hands you will never be able to pass. You must be in front of the ball. When the ball is served, you are a long way from the server. You should have plenty of time to get in front of the ball. Finally and most importantly, which direction and by how much did your platform move when the ball made contact. At most you are only ten feet from the setter. The ball does not need to travel far after you pass it. If your arms move as much as a quarter of an inch toward the net, the ball will go over the net. Try not swinging your arms at all. After you get in front of the ball just be a wall (walls don't move). Just let the ball hit your arms and see how far the ball goes. It has been my experience that beginning players get excited and over swing their arms when passing. Some beginners even jump when they are passing. The more relaxed one is the better one will pass.

I always tell players not to interlock their fingers when they are passing. Most passers rest one hand inside the other. I have noticed that the better passers just hold their hands side by side. Once I had a novice player tell me he interlocked his fingers so his hands would not come apart. For first year players this made sense. When just beginning, a number of players will just slap the ball up with the palms of their hands. These being a 'lift', play stops immediately. By locking ones fingers together, one cannot lift the ball. If this helps you get out of the habit of lifting, great. However, once you break the lifting habit, stop interlocking your fingers.

The first letter written on passing mentioned a good passer needs to be setup before the ball arrives (have your platform formed and be waiting for the ball), be in front of the ball and watch the ball all the way into your arms. I notice a number of players getting set up before they get in front of the ball. They then move with their arms in an awkward position. This may be my fault because of the order I listed the above requirements. As you are moving to get in front of the ball, have your hands in front of you with your elbows bent, as if you were carrying a lunch tray. When you get in front of the ball, lock your elbows and form your platform. Remember, nothing mentioned above will work if your elbows are BENT! Your elbows must be locked.

Finally a great little drill you can do indoors by your self all winter to develop and improve your passing skills. In your basement, place a chair about three feet from a brick wall. Sit on the edge of the chair with your knees wide apart and pass the ball into the wall. Pass the ball so that it comes right back to you and pass it again and again. If you get tired of passing, you can practice your setting the same way. When I practice my setting I like to sit on the floor not a chair.

DEFENSE - IT'S A CHESS MATCH

The best hitters in volleyball are always trying to hit the ball around the block, down the line, hard angle across court or drop one short in front of the defense. The best defensive players are always trying to figure out where the hitter is going to hit the ball and then be in that spot. Basically there are two types of defense, 'middle up' and 'middle back'. Both describe the position of the middle back row player. In middle up the middle player in the back row plays right behind the blockers and the other two back row players play deeper. In middle back the middle player in the back is deep and the other two back row players play up behind the blocker in front of them. Generally when just starting to play volleyball most teams play middle up. The better more experienced teams play middle back. Almost all high school, club and higher level teams play middle back or some version of middle back. I prefer middle back and will be explaining the middle back defense.

Give this a try. Stand on the left side of the court about five feet from the net. Toss a ball up and hit it over the net. Do this a number of times. Most, if not all, of your hits will go to the middle back position of the court. It just makes sense to put a player in that position. I will be writing a series of papers on the various responsibilities of the positions in the middle back defense. Before I begin breaking down what is required of each position it is very important that I explain a couple of things.

First, all the court positions are numbered in service order. The server is position one. The next server will be position two. This position is the player in the last front row position before one rotates to the back row and serves (this position is also referred to as the 'weak side hitter'). The middle front position is position three. This is the position most teams set from. Position four is the front row player on the left side of the court (also referred to as the 'strong side hitter'). The last back row position before rotating to the front row is position five and position six is the middle back position. This player will be the last player on the team to serve therefore this is position six. It is important that everyone understand the position numbers for I will be referring to them when explaining responsibilities.

Second, as the title of this tip indicates it IS a chess match out there. Great defensive players are always trying to figure out where the ball is going. If one pays attention to the game one can learn to 'read' the offense. Start with the serve. Some servers can barely get the ball over the net. Others will serve short and long. What did this server do the last time they served? All these thoughts should be going through your head before the ball is served. Then line up accordingly. Now look at the hitters. Can they both hit? Where do they usually hit the ball, down the line, across court? Have they ever dinked? Now focus on the setter. Can the setter back set? Does the setter ever take the second ball over the net? Finally watch the pass and the set. The pass may tell you where the setter is going to set. With a bad pass the setter may only be able to set to just one position. Is the set close to the net or far off the net? A tall hitter will tap a close set straight down. A small hitter will poke a close set to the back row.

If the set is off the net and the hitter has to reach back, they will not be able to get as much on the hit and it will probably drop short. I could go on and on and on. There are so many things that a good player sees that help them GUESS and ANTICIPATE. There is a lot of guessing going on, on the court. There is also a lot of anticipation. I tell the young players I coach there are four phases of defense:

Was that ball mine?

That ball was mine.

That won't happen again.

NOT WHEN I'M BACK ROW!

Which phase are you in?

Finally I will end each section with the same short offensive tip. **THERE IS NO RULE THAT SAYS THE SETTER GETS THE SECOND HIT.** Every now and then a pass is shanked and the setter may not be able to get to the ball. Or if the setter can get to the ball they may not be able to make as good a set as you can from your position. Anticipate what you would do if a pass came to you from one of your teammates. Can you make a better set than the setter? If so don't be afraid to set the ball. It's a team effort. Everyone should have the same goal, making the best possible play for the team. But, most importantly, remember the setter is not looking at you. The setter is looking only at the ball. You need to tell the setter and everyone else that you are going to set. So yell "I'LL SET".

VOLLEYBALL IS BIG AT TURTLE LAKE

WOW! 2006 had to be the best year ever for volleyball at Turtle Lake. Hope you didn't miss it but if you did 2007 promises to be even better. We had volleyball clinics almost every weekend. We almost always had a challenge team waiting to play and there were a number of times we had play on two courts. On Saturday evenings we played until dark. Our three holiday mini tournaments were a big success. We had six teams of five on all three courts. Then there were our two 'BIG' tournaments, the best ever. We had 57 players at King of the Grass and 72 at the August tournament. Both of the tournaments were played on our new tournament courts. We now have four new grass courts that are used for tournament play only. Plus we have room for four more if needed.

For King of the Grass we had ten AA players. They played with everyone on Saturday and then on Sunday played their own separate King of the Grass. It was the best 'fours' volleyball imaginable. They put on quite a demonstration. Did you see SnoBird Mikie's slide? To get to a ball in the back row, he ran 15 feet, dove eight feet and slid six. He was three inches short of a pancake save. It took four guys and a pay loader over an hour to back-fill the trench he dug with his slid. Besides the AA, we also did the normal A and B eight person elimination on Sunday to once again (for the third year in a row) crown Steve the King of the Grass.

Our August tournament was just as exciting. This tournament is a great opportunity for players of all levels to compete together on Saturday. Then on Sunday we separate the different levels of play into AA, A-B and C. On Saturday we had twelve teams of six playing on six courts. Everyone played eleven games with NO waiting. You can't get that anywhere else. Then on Sunday everyone got six games on teams of either four or five, again with no waiting. For both tournaments you come as an individual and are placed on a team. Some knowledge of the game is required and all skill levels are welcome. Also for both tournaments on Saturday night there was all the pizza, beer and pop you could consume. A great time was had by all!

This year at MSA Turtle Lake repeated last year's success with two championship trophies. The men's AA won an exciting five game match and this year our women's team won in four games. Last year our men's A team won and this year they finished third. Our men's B team also finished third. It was another great performance by Turtle Lake volleyball players. At Super Bowl this year we had four teams of Turtle Lake players and Turtle Lake players on another three teams. Gary's Novice Plus team won their division! I saved the best part for last. At MSA this year Turtle Lake Dan again won men's MVP but even better Turtle Lake Betsy won the woman's MVP!

There are many reasons to come out to Turtle Lake and play volleyball with us. We spend the first hour and half most non- tournament Saturdays doing volleyball clinics. Everyone is encouraged to attend these clinics. There are two instructors so after some group warm -ups we divide up into experienced and non -experienced players. Generally we have fifteen to twenty at the clinics. After the clinic is over we play all afternoon. We take a short break for dinner and then play again all evening. On holiday weekends we have mini tournaments on Sunday afternoon. Just sign up and we will put you on a team. Finally, there's the people. It's a great group and we have a lot of fun together. Next year in 2007 be sure and join us. July 7 -8 is the 11th Annual King of the Grass and August 18 -19 the third annual Different Kind Of Volleyball Tournament. If for no other reason come so you can say you played volleyball with the 2006 woman's MSA MVP.

This winter be sure and read Bruce and Keith's volleyball tips. Starting soon there will be a whole series on defense.

MIDDLE BACK DEFENSE - POSITION 1 (SERVER)

This tip defines the defensive responsibility of 'position one' in the middle back defense. Position one is the server's position. The general area of responsibility for position one is the whole right side of the court as you are facing the net. The primary responsibility of position one is to get the short hits just over your weak side blocker and the cross -court hits of the other teams weak side hitter. Position one can achieve both of these goals with very little movement. This position and position five are sometimes referred to as the 'wings'.

All defensive players must move with the ball. So for position one, as the ball is being passed to the setter, position one should line up about twelve feet off the net, and six to ten feet from the right side line. If the setter happens to take the ball over on the second hit you should be right where the ball goes. Next if the setter sets his/her strong side hitter you need to move to your right (with the ball) and put your right foot on the line, about twelve to fifteen feet back from the net. Most players play this position on the ten foot line, directly behind the blocker. The ten foot line is too close and one should never stand directly behind a blocker. The purpose of the blocker is to prevent the hitter from hitting the court behind the block. So there is no need to stand behind the block. You should line up so you can see the hitter. A good blocker will take away the cross - court hit and allow the hitter to hit down the line. The hitter now has three options, hit hard down the line, drop one over the top of the block and in front of you, or try and roll one over your head behind you. Now comes the anticipation part. What kind of hitter is across the net from you and what kind of set did they get? Is the hitter a good hitter who can hit the ball down, a hitter who dinks a lot, a short hitter who always hits deep? Was it a good set, a set close to the net or a set off the net?

Was the set way out side the antenna or did the set bring the hitter to the middle of the court? All of this could factor into where the ball goes. So you must be ready for all possibilities. Stand with your hands out in front as if you were holding a tray. With your hands in this position, if the hitter hits the ball hard at you, you can quickly get your hands up in front of your face if the ball is hit high, or just as quickly drop your hands and dig the ball if the ball is hit down. If the ball is dinked over the top of the block you should be close enough to get to it. Do not stand too close to the block (about ten feet or closer is too close). The hitter will just dink the ball past you. If the hitter try's to roll the ball over the top of you, you should be able to poke the ball high into the air so that one of your teammates can get to it.

Wow! All of that results if the setter sets the strong side hitter. Now what do you do if the setter sets the weak side hitter. If the setter sets the weak side hitter, you are looking for the cross - court hit. Your blocker blocking the weak side hitter should line up to take away most of the hitters ability to hit cross-court. Again you should be about twelve feet back from the net and six to ten feet from the right side line. Where you go from here again depends on the hitter and the set. If the hitter is a good hitter you should line up to the right side of the blocker so that you can see the hitter. Then when the hitter hits around the block, they will be hitting right at you. If the hitter is an average hitter, drop back a couple of feet and cover the right back corner. An average hitter is more likely to hit over the top of a block rather than around it. If you are in the back corner you will be able to pick up the hit over the top of the block. If the set is close to the net (tight) a good hitter will tap the ball straight down, so charge the net. If the set is off the net and the hitter has to lean back, they will not get as much on the hit, so take a couple of steps toward the hitter and get the short hit. In general the cross -court hit is difficult to pick up. It can be either short or long and you have to be prepared to cover both.

Finally where do you play if the ball is set to a middle hitter? Simply take a step or two to your right so that you are closer (but not on) the side line. A middle hitter will hit the ball around the middle blocker and straight down. So you do not need to move up or back, just a step or two to the right.

Simply put, the defensive player should NEVER stand directly behind the block and should NEVER be inside the ten foot line to cover dinks.

A word about offense from this position ; in position one you are in the perfect position to set your strong side hitter. You are not that far from your strong side hitter and you are looking right at them. If the pass comes to you, you may be able to make a better set than the setter. So if you are in a better position to make a play and help the team, be prepared to do so. But again, be sure and tell the setter and everyone else on the team "I'LL SET!"

MIDDLE BACK DEFENSE - POSITION 2 (WEAK SIDE HITTER)

Position two is the right front row hitter as you face the net. This player will be the second player to serve after the game starts. This positions main responsibility is to block the other teams strong side hitter. There are at least five blocking scenarios this hitter will face:

There is a hitter on the other side of the net and you can block

There is no hitter on the other side of the net and you can block

There is a hitter on the other side of the net and you can't block

There is no hitter on the other side of the net and you can't block

The other side of the net is using a middle hitter as well as outside hitters

When I say there is no hitter on the other side of the net I mean the player across the net from you is too small or too inconsistent to hit. When I say you can't block it means you are too small to block. Before the ball is served decide which scenario you are faced with then plan accordingly.

In scenario one above, position yourself with your outside hand (right hand) on the ball itself (see the tip on blocking). With your eyes open, jump and block the ball, as the hitter hits the ball. Consciously turn your hands to the middle of the court so that the ball is blocked back to the middle and not blocked out of bounds. **THIS IS SOMETHING YOU HAVE TO THINK ABOUT OTHERWISE YOU WILL NOT DO IT!!** The next three scenarios are all played the same way. These scenarios will require you and the player in position one to work together. There is no need for you to block in these three scenarios. Tell the player in position one you are not going to block. Have the player in position one play deeper than they would normally play and you play about ten to twelve feet back from the net. For scenarios 2 and 4 you can get any short shots the other team's hitter hits over the net and the player in position one can get any long shots. If you are faced with scenario two, you had better have your hands in front of your face because without a block, the other team's hitter is going to hit it right at you and you will be in point blank range! If you are faced with scenario five determine which hitter can hurt you the most, their middle hitter or their outside hitter which is across the net from you. If their middle hitter is the best hitter of the two, let your middle blocker know that you are going to help him block middle and line up right beside him. If the ball is set to the other team's middle hitter, both of you will be in position to block middle. If it is set outside to the hitter you are responsible for, you can take two cross steps and block them.

NOTICE THE TWO THEMES HERE!! First is anticipation, planning what you are going to do. Second is teamwork. Communicate with your teammates on how you will work together.

That covers blocking if the ball is set to your side of the court. Now what do you do if the ball is set to the other side of the net. Here there are two scenarios:

You have a good blocker on that side of the court and the other team has a good hitter
Your blocker is average and the other team's hitter is either good, average or too small to hit

In scenario one the most likely event to happen which will require your participation is the ball will carom off your blocker's arm and head your way. In this scenario you should place yourself about five feet off the net and face the other team's hitter. This will also put you in perfect position if the hitter decides to push the ball to the front corner of the court on your side. In the second scenario if your blocker is average and the other team's hitter is good, the hitter will either hit over the block or try and drive the hit through the block.

If the hitter is average they may try and hit around the block and if the hitter can't hit they may try and place the ball. In the middle back defense the most venerable spot on the court is the 'hole' in the middle of the court.

With the three front row players at the net and the two wing players (positions one and five) near the side lines and the middle back player playing deep, this leaves a hole in the middle of the court.

Most offensive players know this and will try and dump the ball there if the set isn't good enough to hit OR they have just been blocked. The player in position two should look for this hit and position themselves about eight to ten feet off the net near the middle of the court. Now if the ball is rolled to the middle of the court you are in perfect position to get it. Having positioned yourself here it is very important to keep one thing in mind. What could this be???? Look at the big hole in the court where you WERE. A good hitter may see this and try and push the ball to this hole. You will need to watch the hitter closely and try and figure out what they will do. Remember, it's a chess match out there.

Finally there is one more thing you can do from this position to help your team out. If the other team is either hitting middle or blocking middle you should position yourself to get the ball if it caroms off your block or is blocked back at you. If your front middle player (position three) goes up to block a middle hit, the ball may bounce off their arm and come in your direction. If this were to happen you should be about five feet off the net and about five feet from your blocker. You should be facing them. If your middle hitter is going up to hit the ball, the other teams player may block the ball back to your side of the net. If this were to happen you should again face your hitter and place yourself about five feet off the net and five feet from your hitter. You should also be in a crouching position so you can pop the ball up.

Now a word about offence from this position ; on serve receive your setter may be switching with your strong side hitter. If this is the case your setter will be coming from the other side of the court. If one of your passers passes the ball in your direction, that will be a LONG way for your setter to go to get to the ball. You may be in better position to set the ball than your setter is. If you are in a better position go ahead and set the ball. BUT REMEMBER!! You need to yell out "I'll set" that way your setter and everyone else will know you are setting.

MIDDLE BACK DEFENSE - POSITION 3 (SETTER: MIDDLE HITTER/BLOCKER)

Traditionally on a normal weekend of volleyball, the middle front position (position three) is the setters' position. Most weekend recreational games play what's known as a "four -two" offense. This means there are two setters on the court and four hitters. The setters are generally positioned opposite of each other and when they rotate to the front row, the setter will switch to the middle position (position three) once the ball is served. So for a "four -two" offense, position three is the setters' position. For the more experienced players in the more competitive games, offenses may be either a "five-one" or "six-two". A "five-one" offense has only one setter on the court and when the setter is back row, they will come up to the front row and set. This way there are three hitters on the front row that can hit. When the "five one" setter is in the front row, they usually switch to position two and set from there. For the "six -two" offense, both setters are opposite from each other and both setters set when they are in the back row. Again this is done so that all three front row hitters can hit.

So for the more advanced offenses, position three is a blockers position. I wanted to explain all of this because position three is played very differently depending on what skill level you are playing at.

Sadly during recreational play the front row setter rarely does much on defense. In defense, from this position, there are two things one can do. The first would be to block. If you are tall enough to block you should help the outside hitters (positions 2 and 4) block. If you are blocking, there are two things you should do before the ball is served. First, look across the net and determine which hitter on the other team can hurt your team the most. Second, determine if the other teams setter can back set. If the other teams setter can back set, then 'cheat' to the side of the court with the best hitter. They will most likely get the set. If the other teams setter cannot back set, then wait to see which direction the setter is facing and (before the ball is set) move so that you are in front of the hitter the setter is facing. If you are not tall enough to block you can still help out your team. Simply drop straight back from the net about ten feet. Now you can get any roll shots to the middle of the court. Two very important tips here. This first one is the most important. Do not drop back if the other team has a middle hitter and your blockers do not collapse on the middle and block. Given this scenario, if you were to drop back your face would be right in the path of the ball. Secondly, from this position do not reach for anything other than a roll shot. Your teammates should be lining up in the "hitting lanes" and will get any hard driven hits. If you were to reach for one of these hits you would most likely shank the ball so that no one could get it.

So what does the more experienced middle player do?? The MOST important thing a middle blocker does is CIRCLE! If you are blocking middle, it is likely that your setter will be coming from the back row. If this is the case you HAVE TO GET OUT OF THE WAY. To get out of the setters way and to position yourself to hit, you must circle. Here's how to circle. Once you land on the ground after blocking, turn to your left. Look for the ball. It is very important to look for the ball at this point. If the other team's hitter hit the ball hard past you, one of your teammates may have dug the ball and the ball may be rapidly headed in your direction right now. If this is the case, your setter will not be able to get to the ball and you will have to do something with the ball. If at this point the ball is not coming at you and is being played by one of your players, while watching the ball, circle back to the ten foot line. From here you can start your approach for a hit as you are watching the ball head for the setter. Circling is more important than blocking. If you do not circle and you get in the setters way, you will disrupt your whole offense. Plus if you do not circle, YOU will not be set up to hit. The outside blockers should also circle after they block. However, if they do not, they will not be in the setters' way as you would be. They need to circle to set up to hit. Circling is IMPORTANT! Once you've mastered circling all you do is block.

You block the other team's strong side hitter, their middle hitter and their weak side hitter. A middle blocker is in every play. It IS the most demanding position on the court. The higher the level you play at the more difficult it is to block. Most teams will set the ball short in the middle to freeze you. Once they have you respecting their middle they will set the ball way outside so that you don't have time to get there. The double A teams you see at Super Bowl will pass the ball to the right side of the court and set from there. If that is the case, a middle hitter has to position himself in front of the setter, so that they can block the other teams middle and weak side hitter. Once you position yourself to your left side of middle that leaves their strong side hitter hitting against a single block. The double A teams will also come at you with tandem hitters and crossing patterns so that you don't know who is going to be set. The majority of middle hitters will never reach this level.

I included these scenarios so that everyone would get a sense of what is required of the middle and may gain a little more respect for the middle.

Most middle hitters will simply help double block the other teams outside hitters. But all middle hitters **MUST CIRCLE** (you knew that was coming again didn't you)!

One final thing position three can do. This covers both the experienced and inexperienced players playing position three. At the point that one of your outside hitters goes up and hits the ball, you are now on defense. The other team will be blocking your outside hitter. There is a chance the block will come right back to your position. You should **EXPECT** this and be ready for this. This is known as "covering your hitter". So face your hitter next to you, crouch down a little and extend your arms so that you are in position to dig a blocked ball.

Finally did you notice the number of times I once again pointed out the thought process a volleyball player goes through before the ball is served. You have to be thinking all the time if you want to improve your game and help out your team.

MIDDLE BACK DEFENSE - POSITION 4 (STRONG SIDE HITTER)

After reading the tips on positions four and five I hope everyone will recognize the true beauty of the 'middle back' defense. The middle back defense is symmetrical. One side of the court is the mirror image of the other. To explain position four I have simply copied what was written about position two and changed a few words. The defense you played in position two is the exact same defense you will play in position four. Even though this is all review please continue reading for it will not hurt to read this and the rest of the tips several times and even refer back to them after a weekend of play.

Position four is the left front row hitter as you face the net. This player will be the fourth player to serve after the game starts. This position's main responsibility is to block the other team's weak side hitter. There are at least five blocking scenarios this hitter will face:

The hitter on the other side of the net can hit and you can block;

The hitter on the other side of the net can not hit and you can block;

The hitter on the other side of the net can hit and you can't block;

The hitter on the other side of the net can not hit and you can't block;

The other side of the net is using a middle hitter as well as outside hitters;

When I say the hitter on the other side of the net can not hit, I mean the player across the net from you is too small or too inconsistent to hit. When I say you can't block it means you are too small to block. Before the ball is served decide which scenario you are faced with then plan accordingly.

In scenario one above, position yourself with your outside hand (left hand) on the ball itself (see the tip on blocking). With your eyes open, jump and block the ball, as the hitter hits the ball.

Consciously turn your hands to the middle of the court so that the ball is blocked back to the middle and not blocked out of bounds.

THIS IS SOMETHING YOU HAVE TO THINK ABOUT OTHERWISE YOU WILL NOT DO IT!! Scenarios 2, 3 and 4 are all played the same way. These scenarios will require you and the player in position five to work together. There is no need for you to block in these three scenarios. Tell the player in position five you are not going to block. Have the player in position five play deeper than they would normally play and you play about ten to twelve feet back from the net. For scenarios 2 and 4 you can get any short shots the other team's hitter hits over the net and the player in position five can get any long shots. If you are faced with scenario three, you had better have your hands in front of your face because without a block, the other team's hitter is going to hit it right at you and you will be in point blank range! If you are faced with scenario five, determine which hitter can hurt you the most, their middle hitter or their outside hitter which is across the net from you. If their middle hitter is the best hitter of the two, let your middle blocker know that you are going to help him block middle and line up right beside him. If the ball is set to the other team's middle hitter, both you and your middle hitter will be in position to block. If the ball is set to the outside hitter you are responsible for, you can take two cross steps and block them.

NOTICE THE TWO THEMES HERE!! First is anticipation, planning what you are going to do. Second is teamwork. Communicate with your teammates on how you will work together.

That covers blocking if the ball is set to your side of the court. Now what do you do if the ball is set to the other side of the net. Here there are two scenarios:

You have a good blocker on that side of the court and the other team has a good hitter
Your blocker is average and the other team's hitter is either good, average or too small to hit

In scenario one the most likely event to happen which will require your participation, is the ball will carom off your blockers arm and head your way. In this scenario you should place yourself about five feet off the net and face the other team's hitter. This will also put you in perfect position if the hitter decides to push the ball to the front corner of the court on your side. In the second scenario, if your blocker is average and the other team's hitter is good, the hitter will either hit over the block or try and drive the hit through the block. If the hitter is average they may try and hit around the block and if the hitter can't hit, they may try and place the ball. In the middle back defense the most vulnerable spot on the court is the 'hole' in the middle of the court. With the three front row players at the net and the two wing players (positions one and five) near the side lines and the middle back player playing deep, this leaves a hole in the middle of the court. Most offensive players know this and will try and dump the ball there if the set isn't good enough to hit OR they have just been blocked. The player in position four should look for this hit and position themselves about eight to ten feet off the net near the middle of the court. Now if the ball is rolled to the middle of the court you are in perfect position to get it. Having positioned yourself here it is very important to keep one thing in mind. What could this be???? Look at the big hole in the court where you WERE. A good hitter may see this and try and push the ball to this hole. You will need to watch the hitter closely and try and figure out what they will do. Remember, it's a chess match out there.

Finally there is one more thing you can do from this position to help your team out. If the other team is either hitting middle or blocking middle you should position yourself to get the ball if it caroms off your block or is blocked back at you. If your front middle player (position three) goes up to block a middle hit, the ball may bounce off your blockers arms and come in your direction. If this were to happen you should be about five feet off the net and about five feet from your blocker. You should be facing them. If your middle hitter is going up to hit the ball, the other team's players may block the ball back to your side of the net. If this were to happen you should again face your hitter and place your self about five feet off the net and five feet from your hitter. You should also be in a crouching position so you can pop the ball up.

MIDDLE BACK DEFENSE - POSITION 5

As I mentioned in the defensive tip on POSITION FOUR: I hope everyone does recognize the true beauty of the 'middle back' defense. The middle back defense is symmetrical. One side of the court is the mirror image of the other. Just like with position four, to explain position five I have simply copied what was written about position one and changed a few words. The defense you played in position one is the exact same defense you will play in position five. Again even though this is all review please continue reading for it will not hurt to read this and the rest of the tips several times and even refer back to them after a weekend of play.

This tip defines the defensive responsibility of 'position five' in the middle back defense. Position five is the fifth person to serve. The general area of responsibility for position five is the whole left side of the court as you are facing the net. The primary responsibility of position five is to get the short hits just over your strong side blocker and the cross-court hits of the other teams strong side hitter. Position five can achieve both of these goals with very little movement. This position and position one are sometimes referred to as the 'wings' or wing positions. All defensive players must move with the ball. So for position five, as the ball is being passed to the setter, position five should line up about twelve feet off the net, and six to ten feet from the left side line. If the setter happens to take the ball over on the second hit you should be right where the ball goes. In an offense where the setter is back row (playing position one) the player in position five has to be more aggressive than the setter in getting balls that are taken over on the second hit. You are competing against the player in position one to get this ball. It is the responsibility of both position one and five to get this ball. Your setter (position one) should get the second hit (not the first). If you do not get this first ball over and your setter does than who is going to set (this will be answered in a later tip). So position five should make every effort to get this ball before position one does.

Next, if the setter sets his/her weak side hitter you need to move to your left (with the ball) and put your left foot on the line, about twelve to fifteen feet back from the net. Most players play this position on the ten-foot line, directly behind the blocker. The ten-foot line is too close and one should never stand directly behind a blocker. The purpose of the blocker is to prevent the hitter from hitting the court behind the block. So there is no need to stand behind the block. You should line up so you can see the hitter. A good blocker will take away the cross-court hit and allow the hitter to hit down the line. With your blocker blocking the cross-court hit that leaves the hitter three options, hit hard down the line, drop one over the top of the block and in front of you, or try and roll one over your head behind you. Now comes the anticipation part. What kind of hitter is across the net from you and what kind of set did they get? Is the hitter a good hitter who can hit the ball down, a hitter who dinks a lot, a short hitter who always hits deep? Was it a good set, a set close to the net or a set off the net?

Was the set way out side the antenna or did the set bring the hitter to the middle of the court? All of this could factor into where the ball goes. So you must be ready for all possibilities. Stand with your hands out in front as if you were holding a tray.

With your hands in this position, if the hitter hits the ball hard at you, you can quickly get your hands up in front of your face if the ball is hit high, or just as quickly drop your hands and dig the ball if the ball is hit down. If the ball is dinked over the top of the block you should be close enough to get to it. Do not stand too close to the block (about ten feet or closer is too close). The hitter will just dink the ball past you. If the hitter try's to roll the ball over the top of you, you should be able to poke the ball high into the air so that one of your teammates (most likely the middle back player) can get to it.

MIDDLE BACK DEFENSE - POSITION 6 (MIDDLE BACK)

The most difficult part of learning and playing the middle back position is 'staying back'! The other defensive tips all began by explaining the relationship of the position to the server. Middle back is the sixth person to serve. This defensive tip began by stressing the most difficult part of learning this position. When first learning the middle back defense, most (if not all) players playing the middle back position are not far enough back. You must stay deep in the court, no more than five feet from the back line.

The responsibility of the middle back player is simple; you get everything that goes over the heads of the five players in front of you. The other two players in the back row are responsible for all the short hits, and the middle back player is responsible for all the deep hits. Why are there two players getting all the short hits and only one player getting all the deep hits? The deeper in the court the ball goes the longer it is in the air and the more time a single player has to get to the ball.

So where does the middle back player position themselves? The middle back player should be about three to five feet from the back line equal distance from either side line. When the ball is set to either hitter on the other side of the net, the middle back player should take one to two steps to the side of the court being set. The best option for all hitters is to hit the ball before the double block sets up. So if your middle blocker is late getting to the block, the other teams hitter will hit the ball just past your outside blocker to the position you (the middle back player) are covering. If the hitter rolls the ball down the line over the top of the dink coverage you have a shorter distance to cover to get the 'short' roll shot. If the hitter rolls the ball cross -court to the far corner you have just enough time to get the 'long' roll shot. If your middle blocker gets to the hitter in time and the ball goes high off the top of the block, you should be deep enough to get to the ball. **ALL OF THIS IS POSSIBLE IF YOU ARE DEEP ENOUGH!** If you are ten feet or more from the back line you are NOT deep enough!

That's where to play if the ball is set to either outside hitter. Now where do you play if the ball is set to the middle hitter? Here I can only make suggestions. In all of the tournaments that 'we' play in, there are very few true middle hitters. A true middle hitter will most likely hit the ball around the block and straight down, right at one of the wing positions. Or they may hit the ball to the deep left back corner of the court (position five).

More than likely this is where the ball will go if the ball is hit from the middle by a true middle hitter. If this is the case than the middle back player should move two to three steps to their left and cover the left back corner.

Since 'we' generally do not play against true middle hitters, it is best to remain where you are (equal distance from either side line) and look for the deep corner roll shot to either corner. However there is one more scenario that exposes the greatest weakness of the middle back defense. When the other team is hitting from the middle, both of the wing positions on your team should play about three feet from the sideline, twelve to fifteen feet off the net. With the wing positions close to the sidelines and the middle back player three feet from the back line there is a HUGH hole in the middle of the court. The other team's middle hitter will then dink the ball right over the top of your middle blocker into the middle of your court. It is every ones' responsibility to get this ball ; however, the middle back player is the one in the best position to make the play.

Finally let me say something about 'free' balls. I have not mentioned free balls in any of the other tips. A free ball is one that is not exactly spiked over the net. Maybe the set wasn't very good or there was no set at all and the ball sails back over the net. A free ball can go anywhere. It is the responsibility of the middle back player to get most free balls or to direct the other players to them. Remember, you have the best view of the WHOLE court. Your teammates are all in front of you and the court is much shorted for them. You can clearly see the ball coming over, where it is going and MOST IMPORTANTLY, if a teammate is attempting to play the ball. If you do not see your teammates immediately moving toward the ball, you must play the ball or direct one of your teammates to get it because it is out of reach of everyone else.