



USA Volleyball
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The Best Gifts for a Volleyball Player

- John Kessel, USA Volleyball Director of Membership Development and Disabled Programs

Around the world, not just in America, parents ask me what gifts they can give their child to help them improve in volleyball. Some of them want take their child to the next level, while others want to help their child who was disappointingly cut from their first or next level of a volleyball program. I think the best gifts for a volleyball player are these: (1) the gift of Play, (2) the gift of Struggle, (3) the gift of a Lifetime sport, and (4) the gift of Unconditional Support. At USA Volleyball we hope all are given to your son or daughter as they learn this challenging, but totally team sport.

The Gift of Play

Put a net up, most boys will play. Too many girls will sit and wait until someone comes along to tell them what to do, drill or otherwise. When you are an athlete, there is no gender specificity to that term – no “atheteos” and “athleteas” Athletes love to play, so help create a new tradition of playing without coaching, spontaneous play. The BEST way to do this, install a net in your backyard and let the kids come over and play. No back yard? Get a portable net and take it to the park to play, with your child, or watching the kids play. Misty May played coed with her dad for years as a youngster, as did Karch Kiraly and his father. Those gold medals began with the gift of play. There is a “learning faster” bonus within this gift – in that playing doubles teaches you the game faster than the 6 person game, and playing against the speed of older/more experienced players teaches you to read and react faster, along with some “slimey” shots.

Anson Dorrance, is a soccer coach who has won nearly 20 NCAA National Championships over the last 30 years. His book, The Vision of a Champion, is the best book I have ever read for a team player who wants to know how to be a better individual team member. The inspiration for his book’s title came when he saw a player practicing in the rain, alone on a field. He writes “The vision of a champion is an athlete, training alone, drenched in sweat, when nobody is watching.” That player was Mia Hamm.

The Van Zweiten family understands what we are saying. They live in West Palm Beach, just off the sand, but built a lighted beach court, in their back yard. Three FIVB level beach players came from their family including Mark, who was the 2005 World 19 and under silver medalist and Mr. Florida Volleyball indoors. AVP star Phil Dalhuasser and other AVP talent got their start on this court. They just turn on the lights if needed and just let them play. Then there is a state champion volleyball team up in Nebraska, where the coach has kids from any high school come over and play on a dozen grass courts he has set up in a backyard field. The kids play 2-4 person games in summer evenings, no coaching, just players playing and the parents having lemonade or iced tea on the back porch if they stick around, building the volleyball community even more. We need to give the gift of play – without coaching – spontaneous and guided by the kids.

Another example is here in Colorado Springs, hometown to USA Volleyball, where School District 11's program sees schools where ninety kids try out, and 24 make the A and B squad. Parents come forward and help create and coach once a week the "C," "D," and "E" teams, playing against other schools' "cut kids" teams on Saturday mornings in cooperation with the Park and Rec department. The next year, the "cut" kids make the A team, as they had been given the chance to play.

John Cook knows the gift of play, and at the University of Nebraska, a perennial top ten NCAA women's volleyball program, he built an international standard beach court, so the kids could play for fun in their off season.

In large part it comes down to the number of "Gamelike Contacts per Hour" your child gets in practice – and in gifting thousands more of those key contacts per season through the chance to just play with other volleyball loving athletes.

Many parents discuss the techniques their child is learning, or the lack of skill they might be showing. What they fail to realize is that the techniques of our sport are pretty simple and easily understood and learned. The key challenge is to learn the most important skill in volleyball – reading. The vast majority of errors you will see your child make in this game, come from their being in the wrong place at the wrong time. They can chose to look good technically, but miss the ball, or look out of position and actually play the ball. I have played hundreds of One vs. Six games and won all but one, even while giving my opponents a 10 point lead to start. It is not because I am six times taller, stronger, or technically skilled that I win, for I am not. I win as I have the needed reading and anticipation skills, learned by playing the game, to know what the kids are going to do. There is a man who makes his living at challenging schools to play him one vs. any. He wins every match then speaks to the student body on the power of one.

The Gift of Struggle

Sport is one of the few places that your child will get a chance to struggle – and by choosing a unique rebound sport, the struggles will be amplified. If you do not like to see your child struggle – you have two simple choices – keep them out of the sport, or don't go to their practices or games. Otherwise, please realize that if you go to watch either, you will see your child struggle. Tied into this are the wonderful differences of gender – summarized so well by Kathy DeBoer in that "women bond to battle, and men battle to bond."

By letting your child struggle, you let them learn to problem solve on their own. What we want to see are kids who, after an error, do not twist their head to the bench for the solution, but instead confidently look for the next ball to come their way. In the beach game, coaches are not even allowed on the court, so 45 minutes before the game, the players enter the field of play area, and the coaches go sit in the stands. It may be a surprise to realize that fully 50 percent of all matches and games played will have a losing team. The gift is this competition and struggle, as the players learn from each other.

What percent of the game is mental do you think? Given the large percentage that it is, help your child with this core skill of being skilled in the mental side of the game. Help them focus on their successes. Reward and focus on helping your child in the two areas of the game he or she CAN control – that of attitude and of effort.

The Gift of a Lifetime Sport

Some facts you might not be aware of regarding volleyball. It is played in 219 nations in the world, far more than there are member nations of the United Nations. Travel this ever flattening and marvelous globe, and you can jump in on hard court or beach courts, and play the game with the locals. You may not speak their language, but you speak the universal language of volleyball with your competition-acquired skills.

USA Volleyball offers National Championships starting at the 12 and under level, progressing thru 18 and unders, then adult divisions of Open, AA, A, BB, B and finally Masters divisions which start at 30 and over and in 5 year intervals, “finishing” at the 75 and over division age group. Truly a lifetime sport.

The Gift of Support

Your support – in patience, in passion, and in praise, is vital. You must give your child full support, regardless of the outcome of the games. For if YOU are not confident in your child, how do you expect them to be confident in themselves? This comes in words and action, as body language speaks volumes without words. Volleyball is a game that is not a parent pleaser. There are no better tools to buy to help your child, and as it is a rebound sport, being in the right place at the right time so one looks correct in technique, takes a long time to learn. Mistakes are going to happen. A lot. An awful lot. Relax and focus on what is going right, for those are the things to remember.

Volleyball is your season to be the unconditionally loving parent you want to be. If your child's coach is coaching on the court **and** you are coaching your child in the car then kids doesn't have a safe place to go and eventually tunes both out of you out. But, if you are unconditionally supportive win or lose, success or failure, then your child not only digs your relationship more, but you help them build confidence and give them more personal strength. Thus, the coaches can better guide each athlete to new personal bests – Citius, Altius, Fortius as the Olympic and thus Junior Olympic motto reads. You and the coach work in concert to help your child to be swifter, higher, and stronger each day, both on and off the court, as parents as partners with the coach.