

Why We Play Volleyball

by Cassidy Lichtman

4/14/2005

Cassidy played four years of prep volleyball for Francis Parker School in San Diego, Calif. She started playing club volleyball for San Diego Volleyball Club when she was 12. She attended Stanford University from 2007 - 2010 where she was a two-time first team All American. She is with the US National Team now. She was a junior in high school when she wrote this.

Some days we wake up at the crack of dawn, drive for hours, and spend the whole day in the gym. Some days we go to practice after a long, stressful day when we still have piles of work to do. We spend countless hours working with coaches, and running drills until we are not able to take another step. Then we get up the next day and do it all over again. And our parents are there every time to drive, to feed, and to cheer.

Why? Why do we play this game?

We play for the feeling you get when you hit the ball. You soar through the air, two pairs of hands go up before your eyes as two girls strive to block your ball. But you see the one spot they left open. Your arm comes through like a whip and you contact the ball. The ball hurtles through the air and bounces off your opponent's shoulder, missing her arms and bodies flying trying to retrieve it. Your team cheers and a feeling of victory and strength rushes over you.

We play for the challenge of digging a ball. The hitter and the ground try to play a game of keep-away. Your continuous struggle is to never let them win. The opponent uses all of her strength and the ground pulls the ball towards it. But suddenly you fly through, seemingly out of nowhere, and the ball pops up, a great dig. Whether it is the hard-hit ball, the diving up, or the pancake, you triumphed in the one-on-one battle. The glory of the play may go to your teammate that pounded it down after your great dig, but the secret victory is yours because you answered your opponent's challenge.

We play for the magic of a setter's hands. The ball is passed and shanks off of the girl's arms spinning and twisting high in the air. It finally comes down and up goes the setter's hands. The ball goes into her hand for a split second then emerges gracefully and floats across the court. The setter can be on your knees, jumping to save a ball from crossing the net, or trying to clear a fallen player, but soaring through the air or sliding across the ground, the ball is set. She thinks a million things a minute: the size of the block, the strengths of your hitters, the speed of the ball. No matter how many thoughts race through her head, though, the ball reaches her hands and she sets it. Not only does the ball come out clean, but it also goes to the right spot at the right time. How many games are there where she has to send a ball through the air to a precise point by barely contacting it? OMG, setters have magical hands.

We play for the moment that the opponent hits the ball and she THINKS that it's going straight down on our side. She starts to celebrate, but at the last second you cover the hole that the hitter thought she had. You crush her team's hope of winning that point. The most satisfying

thing is the energy transfer that this simple action causes. The block causes more excitement than almost any other play. Just as important, though, is that it causes anxiety to the hitter. They lost the point and they lost their confidence. By stuffing them, you stole their glory and their energy.

We play for the strategy of the game. Volleyball is not only a physical sport, but a mental one. When both teams are too exhausted to jump, too tired to run, and drained of all energy, the team who can play smart will win. The team who can push themselves past the barrier of exhaustion will win. Every part of the game requires thought. The defense reads the hitter, remembering her tendencies. The setter analyzes the success her hitters will have against the block. The hitter watches the other side and sees where the defense lines up. The server sees holes and serves to them. There is no greater pleasure than seeing an opponent get taken out after you beat them with not only the strength of your serve, but the location. The best part, though, is that when you have played long enough all this thought becomes natural, and you can just play.

We play for the purity of the game. Volleyball is the essence of a team sport. No one person triumphs, and no one person fails. One player does not win a game. It is all the players who come to practice every day and push themselves, and each other, to get better. When you are up, your teammates are there to cheer you on. When you are down, your teammates are there to lean on. You have five other girls on the court that you can depend on to fight with you every step of the way. This requires a trust that is not seen very often. Unlike some other sports, one player down may hurt the team, so each player must play her role. The burden cannot be placed on one star player because she cannot win on her own. The best volleyball player in the world without a team is nothing.

We don't play for the scholarship possibilities. We don't play just for the exercise. We play because every minute that we are on the court is a minute where all of our problems disappear. We play for the miracle points. We play for the huge comebacks. We play for that one game when all the hours of practicing come together and our play is flawless. We play because we were born to play. We play because we love the game. So remind yourself why you play.