

THE IMPACT OF THE NEW RULES

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As we get ready to start a new competition season in Canada, all of us are wondering how the new rules will affect the game we love so much and the training of the athletes who play it. Everybody has their own opinion on how to "cope" with the changes, but very few have pinpointed the exact ramifications of the New scoring system and of the Libero position. And understandably so. Domestically, no one has played under these new rules yet, except for Provincial Teams at last summer's National Team Challenge Cup in Montreal. The only data we have at this point comes from the International level, where the rule changes have been in effect for around 1 year. Luckily, Canada hosted a few International events this summer (World League, Pan Am Games, World Junior Championships for Women). Here are the tendencies that seem to emerge from these competitions.

GENERAL TENDENCIES

- The new scoring system has made the game more exiting, at least from a spectator standpoint. This is obviously a very subjective assessment, but those of us who have seen any international match this past summer will probably agree (Canada - Brazil in Ottawa, Canada - Argentina at Pan-Am Games...).
- The new scoring system has decreased, on average, the duration of volleyball matches (which was the intent in the first place). In the 1999 World League, the average length of all matches played was 1h46 (with the average playing time being 1h30) while the average length of games was 23 minutes. At the NTCC, the average length of all matches played on the Women's side (all matches were best of 5) was 1h38 (no data on actual playing time) with the average duration of games being 24 minutes. On the Men's side, best of 5 matches averaged 1h29 while games were 24 minutes long on average. But the decrease in length should be less significant for lower levels. Up to a point where bantam and midget teams might actually play longer with the rally-point system.
- The new scoring system has bridged the gap between the top teams and the teams below, at any given level. Now that most of the points are being scored from the serve receive phase, teams with a weaker defense will not be disadvantaged as much, therefore games will be closer. In the World League, the percentage of matches ending 3-0 has decreased from 48 % (between 1990 and 1998) to 34 % in 1999. Furthermore, the final score for 76 % of all games played (297) this past summer (in the World League) ranged between 25-18 and 26-24.



- The libero rule has not yet made a big difference on the total number of balls dug by a team or on the serve receive efficiencies. Furthermore, liberos do not seem to dig more balls than other players on the team (the real question might be: "Is the libero digging more balls than the player he/she replaced would have?"). This could be attributed to the fact that since this is a new position, most of the players playing it are not significantly better than the regular players (which might not be the case in 2 or 3 years). Although at this point coaches are using the libero almost exclusively in replacement of middle players, variations (and uncertainties) exist from team to team as to how to use the libero. The most common scenario has the libero replacing both middle players after they serve and staying in for 3 full rotations (2 ½ to be more precise). Some teams have done it for only 1 of the 2 middle players (Russian Junior National Team, for example). As a result, the libero only plays "half the match". Some teams have used the 1st scenario with the middle players returning to the back row once in a while throughout the game to increase back-row attack possibilities (Team Canada Men). And then some teams have chosen not to use the libero at all (Cuba Women, Mexico Junior Women, Yugoslavia Men...). It will be interesting to see how the use of the libero will develop domestically. Time will tell....

SERVING

The first reaction from a lot of people was that serving was going to become less aggressive with the new scoring system because a missed serve is now a point for the opponent. Although an easy serve will probably result in a serve receive point by the opponent, it seems that serving HAS become less aggressive, in general (It is however a tendency that should fade away as teams become more familiar and more comfortable with the rally point game). Teams seem to "make sure" a lot more than they used to, especially if the score is close (2-point difference or less). With a 3-point lead or more, the risk taking grows dramatically. We should see an increase of time spent on serving in training, to improve consistency, accuracy and control, especially at the grass root level. Keep also in mind that since players are now only allowed one toss (as opposed to 2), this toss becomes more important (especially for spike servers) as does the training of it.

SERVE RECEIVE

Because of the fact that teams can now score points from their serve receive phase, and given the percentages, most of the points are (and will be) scored from that phase. We will see an increase in the amount of time spent on training serve receive to attack and a decrease in time spent on training defense to attack. Keep in mind that now, to win a game, only a few points coming from the defensive phase are needed by a team, or at least a few more (2 to be precise) than the opposing team is going to score on theirs.



TRAINING

At the same time as we discover all the implications the New rules have on the game, we will realize that these implications also affect our training.

- Physical training. Since the matches are now shorter on average, the physical demands on the players are different. We should see a decrease in practice length. The 2 ½ - 3 hour practice should become obsolete unless it includes a lot of individual work on technical and tactical skills.
- Mental. The hardest aspect for players to adjust to will be the notion that every error results in a point for the opponent. Players should constantly be put in that situation in training, directly or indirectly. Drills with running score (as opposed to, let's say, drills with time limits) will become a lot more important. "Competition" drills should be used a lot more if we want our players to feel comfortable with taking risks and challenging the opponent.
- Technical / Tactical. From what we saw earlier, emphasis will have to be placed on the 2 main "first contacts": serving and serve receiving, elements that will now be the main weapons for scoring points. A good serving team will increase its chances of scoring points off their serving phase. That hasn't changed from the old scoring system. But what has is the extra reason why you would want to spend extra time working on serving at practice: the consequences of a missed serve.
- Libero. Logic dictates that since a libero can only serve receive and play defense, she/he should be restricted to these skills at practice. Instead of having free hitting with the hitters tossing their ball to the setter, have the libero pass to the setter instead. Have the libero dig a certain area of the court during hitting drills. Force hitters to hit to a specific zone (let's say, the one where the libero is defending...). In the process, our hitters will get better at controlling their attacks. Keep in mind that coaches will have to make sure that the selected libero is arguably better at performing the back-row skills (and weaker at performing the front-row skills) than the rest of the players. If not, you might not really have the leisure to use a "specialized" libero!!!

SCOUTING

Up to now, coaches (and scouting "tools") have put the emphasis on observing eventual opponents in their attacking phase (from serve receive mostly, but also from defense) . Most of the statistical data coaches gather on opposing teams relates to attack tendencies of individual hitters, on percentages of utilization of such and such hitter, opposing hitters' efficiency in such and such position and / or such and such situation (score, bad sets, perfect sets, etc...) and the list goes on. Logically, this emphasis should now switch towards observing the opposing team's defensive tendencies and how to design our own offense against it.

CONCLUSION

A team's success now (temporarily) depends on an additional factor: the ability to adjust to these recent rule changes. Players and coaches will be able to perform under greater pressure, brought on by the increase of rhythm during a match. At least until the next changes...