

The Lost Art of Shot-Making

Giving Hitters Additional Tools for Terminating the Ball

By Chris Larson

It's tough to find that player who has mastered the lost art of "tooling" or "shot-making." We see the big bombers at every tournament and in every warm-up, but when it comes to game time, these players are often the easiest to shut down or take out of their comfort zone.

The truth is that the ball is crossing the net within 12 inches from the top of the tape over 80 percent of the time and most blockers can, with a little bit of timing, reach high enough to stop the ball. Yet, we rarely see a coach working with players on shots to the back of the court or sharp cross court. Even rarer is teaching them to think of the line, antenna and hands as their best friends.

Our team recently had the pleasure of being schooled in the art of shot-making when we ran into a shorter team that was struggling in warm-up to bang the ball but obviously had good players and experience. We started strong with a couple of our own bombs but quickly found ourselves in a deficit on the scoreboard with balls flying off our big blockers, rolling into the corners of the court and slithering down the backside of the front line. It was a thing of beauty - for the other team. We struggled to stay within 10 points each game and left the match much wiser for the experience.

The mindset of a shot-maker is one of great vision and control of both the ball and his or her body. These hitters must be able to approach with the same footwork and beginning of the arm swing to sell the shot.

Learning these skills takes tremendous diligence and patience on the part of both coach and player. During the learning phase of each shot, coaches will need to allow for mistakes and the players being frustrated with a higher error ratio.

Some of the pitfalls while in the learning mode will be:

- Slowing down the approach to time the shots

- Squaring to the net too soon

- Partial arm swings with low elbows

- Not getting their feet to the ball

There is also a mindset that comes with using shots as a weapon as opposed to a bail-out move. This attitude must be one of sheer joy watching the frustration of the blockers and diggers grow to the point of total collapse and the opposing coaches throwing up their arms without any answer for the onslaught (much like we did in the match I just described).

When asked: "What age should you start teaching shots?" the answer is: "The younger, the better."

There are some basics that you need to have in place (like a good arm swing and footwork to really sell the shot), but as soon as these skills are in place, it is never too soon. Younger players are less likely to be successful in crushing the ball until they are of a certain height, but anyone can use shots to get points on the board regardless of age or height. The other advantage is that, by the time they are able to swing away at the 3-meter line, you will have created wily, creative, smart hitters.

Shot definitions include:

Tipping – open hand movement of the ball directed above or around the blockers usually landing short in the court. This can be expanded into deep court tips and power tipping.

Chipping – open hand soft topspin or side spin shots directed over or around the block landing in the open court short or behind the defense.

Hitting Line – full swing with either shoulder's squared to the line shot or swinging across the hitter's body towards the line.

Soft into the Block – hitting the ball softly off the block to avoid being stuffed and allowing your coverage to play the ball up for another attempt at an attack.

Tooling – hitting, chipping or tipping off the hands of the blockers.

Sharp Cross Court – hitting inside the block and closer to the net than the cross court digger, as close to or inside the 3 meter line as possible.

Roll Shot – same as chipping but could be top spin or side spin to put direction on the ball into areas with more pace than a chip.

There are many ways to teach these shots but one of the best methods is to let the players try them in traditional hitting drills. By modifying the drill to reward the shots and placement rather than the ball's hitting the floor at a high rate of speed; you will see steady progress in your players' skills. Here are a few examples:

Tool the Fool - Place a couple of players on a box to simulate a double block. Let the hitter tool, wipe, throw, tip the ball in all directions and positions on the court. This will teach creativity, technique and vision.

Short Court - Run a power tipping drill with 6 vs. 6, inside the 3 meter line. The goals are to work on transition, coverage and shots. Start with a cooperative roll over the net and score it just like any short court game. You can also double the points anytime they execute a particular shot or successfully cover and dig up a shot. Again, this will work on the player's vision as well as reading the hitter, the block and the defense.

Simon Says - Another drill that gets the hitter to think later in the approach. Have the covering setter or back row player call the shot for the hitter at the last minute. This addresses several pieces of the game at once (setting, hitting, coverage, communication, etc.) and will transfer from the practice

sessions to the match by getting your hitters and coverage used to calling out and listening to the available or potential shots.

Hitter Wars - Traditional or short scoring drills to 25. Hitters get additional points for a tool, chip, wipe, etc. and/or the defense gets a transition point out of the play for picking those balls up.

Queen or Monarch of the Court – This wave game can be played so that only a certain type of shot or shots will be considered the winning point, again creating a premium on the skill you are trying to reward.

Setters can also benefit from shot-making. By adding shots to their arsenal of weapons for dumping the ball, they can wreak havoc with the other team's blockers and diggers as they chip, spin and tip to various positions on the court.

As your players get better at controlling the ball while hitting, you will find their control will also improve when they're serving. Several speeds, cuts, and spins that can be considered deadly serves are nothing more than shot-making from the end line.

The bottom line is that your hitters will become much more proficient and increase their volleyball IQ by learning shot-making. A significant added benefit is that your team will become better at reading the hitters on the other side of the court by having learned to deal with their own hitters using shots in practice. Maybe the best part of all is that your players will have a great time using shot-making to confuse and frustrate their opponents!

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