



# ABOVE THE CUT: RUNNING A QUALITY TRYOUT

by Kyle Mashima  
Woodside High School (Menlo Park, Calif.)



Tryouts can be difficult for coaches and players. The question, naturally, is what can we do to improve the process? From season to season, the number of returning players vs. incoming players always varies considerably. As a result, coaches are not always sure what they want—or expect—from the tryout process. To keep things simple, especially at the high school JV and varsity levels, there are six things to remember to ensure a successful tryout:

- Understand what you need
- Focus on the “program”
- Define a process
- Use stats
- Communicate clearly
- Be respectful

## Understand Your Needs

It is really important not to confuse “need” with “want.” As coaches, we all want a fast 6-4 middle who can crush the quick. The reality is, however, that we all need good passing and serving because without these fundamentals, the team simply cannot stay in the game. You also must be clear on how many players you need for each position and the qualities you are looking for:

- Unselfish attitude
- Enthusiasm
- Skill contribution
- Athletic ability

While you have a plan in mind for what your program needs, don’t plan too far ahead before you are clear on the quality of your personnel. You want to be as open-minded as possible until you truly finalize the team. Then, perhaps, your needs will cover your wants.

## Focus on the Program

Having been both a JV and now a varsity coach, I have watched others with a lack of focus on the overall program. The key is to be careful not to short-change your future by thinking too much about the current season. For example, as a coach, you bring up a promising freshman to varsity and it turns out she really is not good enough to start at that level. However, the player could have really matured as a JV player and been one of the best players on the JV team. As a leader, that person would have gained valuable game experience and become an important varsity contributor in future years. Instead, the freshman on the varsity squad earned little game experience, and certainly did not gain confidence. The JV team also suffered from lacking one very skilled player.

## Define a Process

List what kinds of players you need. Ask yourself questions like, “How long will I review new players?” “How will I decide?” “What drills will I use?” Then set expectations on the level of effort and difficulty, which is particularly important for freshmen with little experience.

## Use Stats

USA Volleyball, the AVCA and Gold Medal Squared all recommend using stats to drive coaching decisions, and I think tryouts are a good place to start. Using stats will cut through the guesswork for you and the players. The core phrase to remember is “The eyes

lie.” You can really be deceived by a super-athletic looking player and subsequently ignore someone who looks much less athletic. Indeed, the stats will lead you to see the facts.

Interestingly enough, when you use stats, the girls will hate it—until they understand the benefits of it (and then they will still hate it). It’s just reality: numbers are cold and not friendly. However, stats provide an objective ranking rather than fueling the “coach likes her more than he likes me” syndrome. Stats make it clear what the player is doing well and what she needs to improve. The nice thing is, particularly at lower levels, you can see the incremental improvements literally happening from practice to practice. You can take a player with minimal volleyball experience but some athletic prowess and by mid-season, she will be good enough to pass at a level that is actually earning points for you, not losing them. Finally, I think a really important part is using stats to clarify the situation for parents. It is not a personality contest any more. Good, clear stats really make the parents your counterpart and co-operative helper rather than an adversary.

However, there are still a couple of important considerations when it comes to using stats. You don’t want to get in the habit of using stats in a competitive way—they need to be used in a positive, supportive way. Sure, players are going to be compared with each other, but you need to take time to make sure that it is an avenue for an individual to get better at specific skills and see progress. The other important thing is that “errors” are just data—the player is not a bad person if she makes an error.

### Communicate Clearly

At the beginning of the tryout, write down what you will present to your team —don’t just wing it. Otherwise, you may miss key points. Also, it is acceptable to over-communicate. Use a white board with an outline, handouts, emails and the school website. Do as much as you can to communicate and repeat your message so people are very clear about what you are going to do throughout the course of the tryout. Of course, it is very important not to forget to reach out to the parents. An informed parent is a supportive one.

### Be Respectful

Finally, be kind to your players, particularly the new folks who are coming in. My suggestion is not to post notices of cuts; rather, talk to the players individually as much as you can.

### Clarifying the Needs

Now that you have the six things to remember for your tryout, you can determine how to satisfy those team needs that you established at the beginning of the tryout process. I always like to start from the floor up because that is where the game starts. If you don’t establish the passing floor, it doesn’t matter how good your hitters are. To begin, try to find four to five good passers. You will always hope that a couple of those passers are also your outside hitters. It doesn’t always happen, but frankly in high school ball with 18 substitutions and a libero, it is possible to run a lot of people through the court. Next, look at the setters and have one to three on hand. Depending on the offensive system you are running, you will always need a backup. Then look for four to five hitters (counting your opposites) and two to three middles. At this point,

it is good to have an idea of the system you will run, but don’t get too far ahead. Use a player ranking table to clarify the skills you have and the deficits you need to fill.

Personally, I have found 12 players to be ideal because you can have six on a side. Of course, if you have fewer, you don’t need to cut people! I have tried to carry 14 for a couple of seasons and found it difficult. It is difficult to work the last two players into the mix and give them enough time on the court to know their positions well. In addition, it takes away touches from the other players, as well as court time.

### Player Ranking Table Example

Here is an example of the Player Ranking Table:

Player Ranking Table - Example 13

Player	Role	Serve	Pass	Hit	Set	Block	Dig	Other
Alice		A	B+	A	C	A	B+	
Cass		A-	B+	B	B+	B	B+	
Meg		B	B-	B	C	B+	B-	
Beth		B+	C	B+	C	A	C	Lefty
Sally		B+	C	B+	C	A	C	Tall
Sue		C	C	B+	C	A	C	Tall
Liz		A	B	C	A	C+	B+	
Linda		B+	A	C	B+	C	A+	
Cindy		B+	A-	C	B	C	A	

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### How to Rate Players

Grade players on a “curve”—the player with the best skills gets an A. The person who has the best setting ability gets an A, regardless of the fact that on your club team they might never be a setter.

- Know who is best at each skill so that you can understand your options.
- Pre-rank your returning players.
- Initially guess who’s good and how good they are, but as time goes on it is best to gather data and adjust your rankings. That way, you can make much more accurate decisions.
- Each day, gather data and make adjustments to your ratings.

### Roles and Basic Attributes per Player Position

- **Libero:** best serve receiver on the team and one of the best diggers. The libero will take 60-70% of your passes. It is not actually critical that your libero is the best defender on the team. Starting the game with a good pass is much more important than digging.
- **Setter:** must have good hands and fast feet. On my team, I have consistently found that I have a person with good hands and slow feet and a person with fast feet and not-so-great hands. Hopefully you can get both attributes in the same player.
- **Outside hitter:** you need someone with a good arm swing and hand contact, the ability to time high sets, and good ball





handling skills. Your outside hitters are typically your next best passers besides the libero.

- **Middle blocker:** can get above and (preferably) across the net. If they can't get their hands across the net, they won't be very successful at blocking. They have good depth perception and can judge the location of a high ball as it comes to the net, and have decent lateral mobility.

## Two Case Studies

The first case study is a JV team with a large turnout at the tryout. All told, there are seven returning players and 20 new players. The second one is a varsity team with a moderate turnout (seven returning players and 10 new players who must play varsity due to age but have experience).

## JV Team Tryout - Large Turnout

### Phase I: Introduction

In this first phase, set the expectations for the team. In your presentation, you want to make it very clear what you are looking for from the athletes. First you want to introduce yourself, talk about the league and set the context, then you want to discuss logistics (paperwork that must be completed, practice times, etc.) Make sure the paperwork is completed so that there is adequate insurance and proper contact information. Remember liability is a big issue, so don't be cavalier about it or you can put yourself and the school in jeopardy.

Then, talk about what you are looking for: what positions you are looking to fill, the skill level and attitude it takes to be a member of your team. Describe the process you will have the players go through. Clarify the level of your program, especially for a JV or freshman program.

I like to use a questionnaire, asking about

1. Prior playing experience (club volleyball)
2. Other sports experience
3. Why are you trying out? Talk about their focus and motivation for playing volleyball.
4. Take height, reach and jump reach measurements.

You can get a lot from this questionnaire that you cannot see on the court.

## JV Team Tryout - Large Turnout

### Phase I: Drills

Set the tone for the tryout with aggressive defensive drills. This will quickly weed out the "recreational" players and challenge the athletically-oriented ones. It also allows the players to get used to hitting the floor.

Now let's think about the 20 new players you really don't know anything about and separate them out and do simple drills (pepper, shuttles, butterfly) just to see what their skill level looks like. Start to determine what their athletic ability is if they bring any volleyball skills to the court. It is usually pretty easy to tell the first round of keepers; however, while you could cut people immediately, consider going two days, simply for the principle of giving people a chance. Talk to the players on the bubble immediately so they know where they stand. Many will choose not to return, while others will try harder. This is a great way to filter through the players to start to understand people's real motivations and how enthusiastic they are about playing volleyball.

## JV Team Tryout - Large Turnout

### Phase I: Tall Players

One note about tall players: it is very tempting just to take that tall player and say she is tall, so she can do this. I suggest doing at least one test of eye-hand coordination. My favorite test is to place a player at the middle of the net and stand on the other side of the net, toss the ball high toward the net and see if she can judge the ball. Can she jump and tip/hit/block the ball back? Move the toss a little to the left and a little to the right to see how quickly the player can move laterally and get to the toss. Usually, if the player does not have great depth perception, you've got a lot of work ahead.

Another thing to consider, as well, is that blocking is the least critical skill from bottom to top in juniors' volleyball and does not contribute many points. It is difficult to block well and easy to cause deflections, so on your list of time investments, teaching blocking should be last on the list.

## JV Team Tryout - Large Turnout

### Phase II

After you process the players in Phase I and have gotten through the recreational folks who are no longer interested and are gone from the gym, you are at the midpoint of the process, probably with 17 to 18 players left. Assume seven are definite keepers and now you need to look at the next 10 to 11 players to figure out where they are ranked. At this point, you have to go back and determine your needs, one of which is determining who are your best receivers. Determine your

passers and defenders (you will find your best servers, as well) and then begin the process of stat-ing them. Typically, you can't have enough decent passers. The novice passers will get a lot better with each week of practice, and the stats will help to show their daily progress.

### Simple Serve and Receive Stat Drill

These are the two most critical stats you need. The serves will control your opponent and the serve receive starts your offense. You cannot pass, sideout and basically won't stay in the game without a great serve receive.

### Simple Serve and Receive Stat Drill - Scoring

SERVE

- 0 – Error
- 1 – Opponent Perfect Pass – can run middle quick
- 2 – Opponent can set outsides
- 3 – Free ball return
- 4 – Ace, no return

RECEIVE

- 3 – Perfect Pass – can run middle quick
- 2 – Can set outside hitters
- 1 – Free ball return
- 0 – no return

Scoring the Serve and Receive Stat Drill

Basically, if you serve into the net or out of bounds, it is an error worth 0 points

Then, if you serve where the opponent makes a perfect pass (can run a middle quick), you receive 1 point for serve and the opponent receives 3 for a perfect pass.

If you serve and the opponent can set the outsides, it is worth 2 points for serve and 2 points for receive.

If you serve and there is a free ball return, it is worth 3 points on serve and 1 point on receive for a free ball return.

Finally, for an ace (no return), the server receives 4 points and the passer receives 0 points.

### Serve and Receive Stat Drill

•After serve, Coach signals serve and pass rating with fingers  
 •Passer and Server write their scores on white board  
 •They stay on the same side

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In the drill, the servers stay on one side and the passers stay on the other. Set up a white board on the side of the court and a coach stands next to it at the middle of the net. When server 1 serves and the passer receives, the coach will hold up in each hand the points given and then the players will run to the board and mark in their column their score. Once the players are done tallying their scores, they will go back to the end of the line and do it again. Each side floats through. You need a good buffer for targets so there is plenty of time for players to stat themselves and then get back in line without slowing down the drill.

### White Board

Player	Receive				Serve				
	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3	4
Sally									
Beth			<del>   </del>						
Meg									
Jane									
Jill									
Sam									



## Calculating the Rating

To calculate the scores, use what is called a “weighted average” system. The best a player can do is serve all aces, so the maximum score is 4). If a player made all perfect serve receives, the max score is 3. At this point, you are just ranking the players on your team and trying to find out who is the best one ranked 1-12. Surely, 1.60 is pretty good for a JV team and probably not enough for a varsity team, but again, it all depends on your league.

### Calculating the Rating

- “Weighted Average”
- Serve Max = 4.00
- Receive Max = 3.00
- What’s a good number? It depends.
- Example below for Receive Rating

Quality	0	1	2	3	Total
Number of Passes	2	2	4	2	10
Quality x Number	0	2	8	6	16
Rating = 16/10					1.60

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## Stat Process

It takes about 20 data points per person to start seeing a pattern, so a ranking will start to emerge. By 50 data points, the players’ rankings will lock in and become very consistent data. By about 100 data points, it is very well locked in and while the team as a whole may go up and down in its numbers, typically the ordering of the players will stay the same. Many times, the ones that will fluctuate the most are lower down on the list. Usually your first, second and third best passers are probably separated from everyone else. Normally on a team if you have one really good passer you are very fortunate. If you get two, it is an incredible gift. If you get three good passers, it is fantastic. You want to try to find your top 5 passers and then look at the spread. If they are close together, then it is okay. If they are spread out, the players ranked 4, 5, 6 or 7 may need a lot of work. By watching them, you can start to get a feel for who you think will improve faster. When you get to the passers who are less skilled and actually hacking the ball, watch from behind them to see how quickly they move in the right direction. Get a feel for who gets to the ball first rather than who makes the best pass—passing technique will improve with reps but reading the trajectory takes much longer.

## Stat - Real Data

*Typical distribution*

Sally: 1.82  
Beth: 1.77  
Jean: 1.59  
Alice: 1.50  
Meg: 1.44  
Joan: 1.37

While Sally and Beth will be easy to spot, it is very difficult to eyeball the differences among Jean, Alice, Meg and Joan. When it is time to make cuts, this data makes it much easier for everyone. Post the results for each day and encourage the players on the bubble to work harder. Athletic players who can “read the ball” will improve each day. Also, the intensity level of the drill itself goes up dramatically when you stat the players because results are being posted live. All of a sudden, servers are serving harder and maybe even smarter (away from good passers), and passers are being much more aggressive to make sure that instead of just going through the motions they are making a good play. But without the stats, you won’t see the change.

## Setters

In addition to the core attributes of quick feet, the ability to judge the ball trajectory accurately, and good hands, it is nice for a setter to have additional attributes like being loud, showing good leadership, the ability to block, and being a good server. One test you can run is to have players set from a passed ball rather than a coach toss. Have them set to a target, like a hoop, and count good sets to total sets. That way, it simulates game-like conditions better. You can then run a setter contest with two teams, and one setter on each side will play a game to a specified number (e.g., 15 points). Switch the setters and keep the rest of the teams the same. Do enough games to see a pattern (good setters will help any team be better). Although one setter may not be as good technically, she may actually encourage the other players to play better, so they may consistently win more games.

## Setter Stats

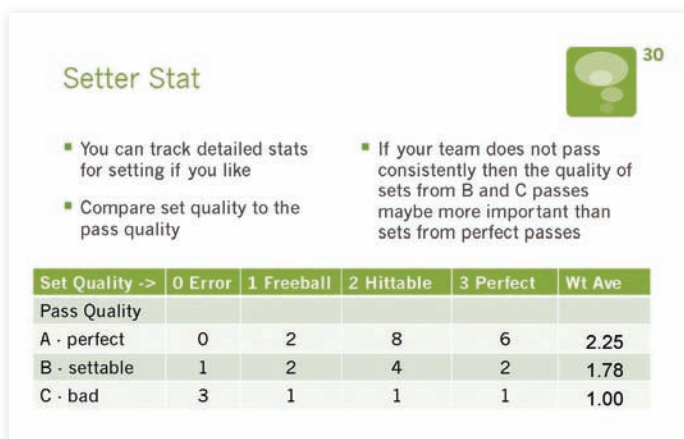


Figure 30, above, shows one possible way of tracking stats. Just like the serving and receiving statistics, you rank them 0, 1, 2, 3. The one factor that is different is the variability in the passing, so you want to look at how setters work with a perfect pass vs. a settable pass vs. a not-so-great pass, and then see what the stats look like. You also need to think a little bit about how this team passes. At least for my team, the number of perfect passes is pretty low, so I would rather look at the B and C quality passes and see what the setter does there because the perfect pass situation just doesn’t happen that often. Can the setter turn a not-great play into something better? That is something you can stat pretty accurately by using the system.

## Hitters



In addition to the core attributes found in all good hitters, including a strong arm, consistent hand contact to the ball and topspin, quick feet and the ability to judge the ball trajectory on the set, additional attributes to look for are hitting height above the net, aggressiveness, thoughtfulness about hit selection and overall power. To track the hitters, you can run a contest. Form a hitting line, ensuring the hitters are making good contact on the ball, using adequate power regardless of whether the ball is in or out. Have two teams and two





hitters stay in the same rotation. Play to 10 hits each and score the game. Compare the kills vs. efficiency (kills-errors/total attempts). Is the power hitter making too many errors and can she be corrected? You really want to make sure the hitter you think is good is really hitting the positive numbers. The hitter stat table is very similar to the setting one except now you are only concerned about the errors, being dug by the other side or if it is a kill. You can have the hitters hit against another team and track the results. Also, you can compare the hit quality to the set quality. In fact, think about the typical set the hitter will get at game time. Hitters will mostly see B quality sets at this level, so you want to think about the hitters in terms of what they can do with not-so-great sets.

### Middle Blocker

The core attributes you are looking for in a middle blocker are the ability to jump and reach across the net with both hands, the ability to judge the ball landing near the net, and determining if the blocker has decent lateral speed. There are three additional attributes you should also take into consideration: arm speed, overall speed and hitting ability. Those last three attributes are actually much more teachable than depth perception, so it is important to make sure they can actually see where the ball is going early.

In terms of testing the middle blockers, you can conduct a contest like you did for the hitters, where you flip flop the middle between two teams. Basically, score the two teams on 10 sets to the middle players and then swap sides.

### Varsity Team - Moderate Turnout

#### Phase I

The varsity team is the same situation as the JV case, whereby you make your detailed presentation to the players, hand out the

questionnaire and begin with basic drills. Then you want to be able to review any new players that you have never seen and decide whether or not they will continue. Typically at the varsity level, if players don't have a fair amount of experience, they just won't be able to catch up. Gather stats on the passing and serving. Especially for the returning players, the off-season can play a major part in changing the ranking of players from the prior season. As a result, you need to establish new rankings at this time.

### Varsity Team Tryout - Moderate Turnout

#### Phase 2

At this phase, you are going to need to see more data, because you would like to see some consistency in your setters. In order to gather the data, have the setters do large numbers of sets to the outside at a target (hoop) from a passed ball. This setter consistency testing will help you determine who is the most consistent. Setters need to accumulate 100 data points. Use liberos or the best defensive specialists as passers and have the setters rotate to down ball hits from the other side. Make sure each setter sees the same number of passes from the same passers.

This test consolidates foot speed, ball judgment, hands and consistency into one result. Use the score sheet from Figure 30. You can use this to score the passer as well for downball and freeball pass ratings.

### Hitter Efficiency

At the JV level, if someone can actually hit the ball well, then she is already potentially a candidate to move up to varsity. At the varsity level, it gets a little bit trickier as you get multiple players who can hit well. You really need to see what each player's hitting efficiency looks like; otherwise, you will be overly impressed by their power and kills without looking at the number of errors.

In this contest, each hitter gets the same number of sets and tries to score a kill, while the opposing team will be trying to do the same. Test two to four hitters, hitting against a block and a full team. One hits after the next. The score is posted on a whiteboard and the standard hitter efficiency is recorded (kills-error/attempts). In this drill, you can simultaneously track your middle blocker effectiveness by using the same hitting but with middle sets to test the MB hitting efficiency.

The coach should watch the middle blocker from the opposite side of the net. On thing in particular to look for is “low eyes”—is the middle blocker staring high at the ball or looking down and tracking the hitter, as well? This is a really advanced skill and you want to see if the player has that type of ability. Rather than just blocks, how many sets does she get to?

### Value of Stats and Scoring

By designing the drills and contests that are scored, the players will become very clear about where they stand without you having to tell them. This is a competitive sport and you want players who will try harder to improve their standing. This is also a team sport, so you want to watch for players who help and encourage each other while they are competing.

### The Final Call

When you make your final decisions, of course, it is not all in the numbers—they won't paint the entire picture. You also need

to look at attitude and chemistry with teammates, concentrating on how some players make other players better. It is great to play team games and position contests because they are better at revealing more of the whole picture. However, passing and serving stat data is very valuable in determining the differences between your players. You can be surprised by what you learn from these stats!

### The Cut

For making cuts, consider it a two-stage process.

- Let players who are on the bubble know ahead of time, if possible. Tell them why they are on the edge and find out what they are thinking. At this point, differentiate those who really want to play volleyball from those who are just trying out for a fall sport. This is the first day.
- Then on the second day—the cut day—talk to each person individually. Let them know that you appreciated them coming to the tryouts and provide recommendations regarding how to improve if they are interested. Be encouraging because you are the marketing person for your program so you want to have as many people as possible walk away from the team and say I didn't make it, but the coach was really helpful. ☺

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