

What College Coaches Look For

[Editor's note: Gregg Whitis is one of the best recruiting coordinators in the country. The former Tennessee, Michigan and Clemson assistant writes about what he looks for when evaluating prospective student athletes]

Recently, John Tawa asked me to list the characteristics I looked for in a prospective volleyball recruit. After more than a decade of collegiate coaching at every level except NCAA Division III, I thought I had a good idea of the qualities needed for each position on the volleyball court. After some consideration, however, I found that while I could easily produce a positional list of desired attributes, a few things were common to all good prospects.

This is not meant to be an offer of how all college coaches recruit prospective student-athletes; rather, it is one former coach's view of how he evaluated prospects.

Prospects

“Playing Up”—It is first important to understand that all high school/club volleyball players are “prospects,” and are playing at a level significantly lower than what they will encounter in a collegiate program. So while they are often carrying the load or even dominating at the high school or club level, they are still simply prospects for us. I often told recruits, parents, and high school or club coaches just that—“Sally is a good prospect. When she comes to college, she will be competing with/against players who are significantly older, stronger and more experienced than she is. And since most players play in their age group, or at the most, only see opponents who are seniors when they are sophomores, this will be the most difficult transition she confronts when coming into our program.” Consequently, I often looked first for prospects that “played up” in club competition. Playing against older players gave me a look at how a prospect would be able to handle entering a college program as a freshman. Seeing a 16 or 17 playing with the 18s always attracted my attention.

Coaches—The other important initial indicator for me was who they played for. There are some excellent coaches doing legitimate player construction at the high school and club level. I always searched the programs of coaches whose training I trusted—coaches who have spent time at the collegiate level and who intimately understand the challenges that face college coaches, such as limited scholarship opportunities in each class, time constraints, etc. Playing for a coach that can train you in your position, one who will push you past your current level of skill and will increase your volleyball intellect really counted with me.

Exceptions—Another question guiding my search was, “Is this prospect capable of being better than what we currently have in our gym?” Much more often than not, that meant you had to have the “measurables” that college coaches crave. There are always exceptions—the occasional stud who can enter a program and make an immediate impact despite not having ideal height or body type. High school/club coaches, or more frequently parents, would often bring up the exceptions in recruiting conversations; they had done some homework and paid attention to who was having success in spite of the same limitations their player or daughter also fought. However, head college coaches aren't looking for exceptions because it will not often enhance their programs continually trying to find and sign the next Angie Pressey. There are countless other examples of players who went on to outstanding college careers who didn't possess the “measurables” college coaches seek out when looking for prospects. So, if you are an attacker who is under 6'0 and plays lower than 10', or a setter who blocks with your wrists on the tape with below average first-step quickness and oven-mitts on your hands, or a middle blocker who can only attack in front of the setter and is slow laterally, you need to understand your limitations and look for opportunities where you can achieve collegiate success.

Athletic Ability—Athletic ability is a surprisingly ambiguous term when speaking with those within the profession. I loved asking coaches for their definition and loved even more some of their answers, or lack thereof. Many simply couldn't explain what the term meant for them. I define athletic ability as first-step (or first move) quickness, leaping ability, hand-eye coordination, and strength (which really means balance or body

control). It is also important to note that athletic ability has nothing to do with volleyball skill level. They are totally and completely unrelated.

First-step quickness—Initial movement from a static or still position includes movement both laterally and vertically. Volleyball is a game of constant stops and starts within a rally. How quick is the initial move to the ball? Is the first move directly to the “get point,” is a pre-hop necessary to get moving, or are false steps taken? How quickly does the player get off the floor? How quickly is she on the ball once she has left the floor?

Leaping ability—How high does the prospect play? The first head coach I ever worked for told me to look for players who, when attacking, have the top of their head above the net tape. That standard served me well at every level—junior college; high DI; or low, mid, or elite DI volleyball. Additionally, I began looking at whether a prospect could jump equally well off one or two feet, especially when evaluating middle and right-side prospects. Often, the difference can be quite dramatic. Although a middle blocker may be able to chase and attack the slide, leaping off one foot, she will have to close the block and jump off both feet far more often during a match. The ability to close big was a huge factor for me when evaluating those prospects.

Strength—Unlike other sports where strength is defined by the ability to bench, squat, run for an hour, or do pull-ups, I relate strength more to a player’s ability to control her body so that when she reaches the “get point,” she is balanced and prepared to make a play on the ball. The ability to do that requires strength and flexibility. Can prospects jump from a standing position and move their hands independently of each other? Can they move laterally and reposition themselves square to the net and get their hands over and across at a high point? Does an outside attacker carry speed through her approach, jump fast, and then unload while in mid-air attacking with range? Can a setter run off the net, turn, square-up, and move the ball from one sideline to the other? Is a player able to push her platform under and through a ball inches off the floor and then within seconds get up and drive into her approach? Can a blocker flip her hips allowing her to transition off the net and turn into an attacker? More telling is whether she is able to be balanced when doing this, or does she look like she is on ice skates? Ultimately, the evaluation of a prospect’s strength requires the most projection on the part of the recruiter. I was always trying to imagine how the 15- or 16-year-old would look when she was 20 after being in the program for a couple of lifting cycles. Strength projection has become more relevant since prospects are often making recruiting decisions in the first half of their high school careers. Again, flexibility and balance coupled with a physical frame often lead to prospects thriving once they enter a collegiate program where strength and conditioning programs enhance the prospect’s physical tools.

Hand-eye coordination—This crucial attribute can cover shortcomings in any of the aforementioned areas. I have coached players who were slow, grounded, and generally a mess physically, but their superior hand-eye coordination allowed them to make plays consistently. Does a player center the ball on her platform while passing, or do an inordinate number of balls come off one arm? Does a prospect possess overhand contact control, meaning can a prospect put her hand on the ball and make it go where she intends with the desired spin or lack thereof? There is much discussion of passing and digging technique and of how to teach first-contact control, of whether or not good passers are born or can be made in the gym through training. As a recruiter, I was always watching players while receiving serve to see if they could center the ball on their platform. I never cared whether they were using linear, non-linear, or tandem passing technique. Remember, most college head coaches are going to make changes once a prospect arrives in their gym. If a player could center the ball on the first contact, she usually could learn individual coaching techniques. Third contact control is something talked about much less often, but something I believe translates to attacking success more than anything—even leaping ability. A prospect’s ability to put her hand on the ball and maneuver the ball to an intended area was huge for me. Often, I would watch gifted jumpers rise fast and high with a perfectly constructed arm-swing and repeatedly mis-hit the ball, either paint-brushing the bottom causing the attack to flutter harmlessly at the opposition or cuffing the top of the ball resulting in a 10’ attacker consistently wearing out the tape. Not a good sign.

Volleyball Skill—As I mentioned earlier, volleyball skill is totally different from athletic ability, and generally, it was not difficult to judge prospects’ volleyball acumen. Coaches spend their careers talking about offensive and

defensive execution, but volleyball always has been and always will be a game of error—not of execution. As it relates to skill level, it is important to remember two of the oldest adages in sport—size counts and speed kills. With the advent of rally scoring, volleyball has become a race to 25. The ability to score is only done in one of three ways—serving aces, blocking balls to the floor, and finding kills. Size is obviously a distinct advantage in both blocking and attacking. While coaches can help develop both blocking and attacking skills, they can't teach players to be taller. Speed is truly the most difficult aspect of the game to defend; however, playing fast increases risk, and increased risk produces a greater number of errors. That means the team that makes fewer mistakes wins regardless of how tall or physical they are or how skilled or fast they play.

Passing—Can they pass to the target? It's not enough to simply pass to the target consistently. Recruiters are looking for players who can not only hold up in serve receive, but also help others by handling a larger part of the court. Players must have passing and defensive range.

Digging—Can they consistently bring the ball up above the playing surface? Are they fearless? The defenders I noticed were unafraid and released around the block consistently lining up the attacker. This gave them the ability to dig hard shots toward the target with control.

Setting—Can they make all the sets with consistent tempo and location? Do setters understand that it is their job to locate (which often means help create) and continue to set the hot hitter? I have seen setters who are completely capable of setting forward but who have to contort their body like they have entered a limbo contest in order to produce any type of back-set.

Attacking—Can they attack with proper footwork and with a fundamentally sound arm swing? Can they swing fast and hit hard? How many high school and club attackers can see the block? Not many. Shake any tree, and attackers who have flawless footwork, a healthy jump, and an arm swing that consistently produces the same shot over and over will fall out. The truest test of an outside (either left or right) hitter is the ability to attack high-line consistently/effectively.

Blocking—Can they penetrate across the net with their hands? Can pin blockers pick good spots to set the block? Are they able to move their hands independently? Middle blockers must be able to recognize and defend the first tempo attack and read and react to everything else. Middles that need help from pin blockers to stop the quick attack fell off the list...quickly.

Serving—Can they serve tough? More importantly, do they seek to control the point from the service line? Players who mindlessly approach their turn at the service line and lob volleyballs over the net at their opponent resulting in momentum-shifting, quick middle attacking opportunities are commonplace. I was always looking for players who used their serve as a weapon. And that doesn't mean they simply bombed jumpers over the net. I loved watching a skilled server put the "yo-yo" on a front row attacker driving her deep to pass a ball on the end line, making her sprint to the net in order to be a part of the offense, and then with the next opportunity making that same pass/hitter have to peel a short serve off her shoe tops. I watched for servers who knew they could affect the slide attacker by jamming balls into the opponents' right-side of the court making the setter turn her back completely to the net/blockers to face the pass and then still have to execute one of those dreaded back-sets.

Finally, it is important to remember that college coaches, when evaluating, are building a recruiting list. Remember, evaluation is not recruiting. Hopefully, this article has provided some insight into how the evaluation process works. It is not an offering on how college programs recruit prospective student-athletes. That is an individual program/coach process and often reflects the personality and commitment of the head coach of a respective college team.

Remember, when coaches are evaluating they are building their recruiting board and those recruiting lists can be substantial. We had established a list "of prospects that we could win with and started recruiting." Although the prospect in question was ranked 4th or 5th (I really can't remember exactly), she was certainly capable of helping our program--she was more than capable of "being better than what we currently had in our gym/on our roster."

This is where evaluation ends and recruiting begins...I had identified several other setters who were on the board. I thought they were all "good enough." They were all sophomores. Specifically, I remember the top prospect had taken an unofficial visit to our program in the fall. We offered her, but she told us that she would be waiting to hear from her top choice. We were in her top 5, but realistically she wasn't going to fall to us. The second and third players on the list were close in ability, but they had only just started the recruiting process. The player that you ask about was interested and communicated that interest. She was active earlier. She also lived within a few hours of campus and was able to visit unofficially much sooner. Often a prospect's consistent correspondence with a coaching staff (I don't mean constant emails, rather invited phone calls), willingness to make an unofficial visit, or desire to commit early will push them up the board.

Again, I really liked the kid. We had spoken on the phone several times. I believed in her. I didn't want to lose her to another program...and there were others. I made an argument. I always thought that as a recruiting coordinator I should be able to "make an argument" for every prospect on the recruiting board that I created. Head coaches don't have time to evaluate all the prospects that write/send video...that falls on the assistants. I felt like I always needed to be able to explain why a prospect appeared on the board and the answer, "she wrote to us" was never the response I wanted falling out of my mouth when I could have been advocating for a prospect. However, in this instance, the head coach decided that we would wait and focus our attention on the prospects we had ranked higher even though they were just beginning their respective recruitments.

That is why I said we "slow-played" the prospect. We tried to stretch it out; to watch for continued development between her sophomore and junior year (which is very telling as several studs at 16 are not as effective when they are 18). The ability to have a commitment from her early wasn't enough for the head coach. It proved to be a good and right decision. It worked out for everyone in the end. We got the setter that the head coach wanted and all the others on our list ended up in good programs with good coaches. The prospect that we all agreed had "it" continued to do great things on, and most especially, off the court. She has all my respect...always will.

Recruiting is a business and everyone handles their business differently but know this...it is a business. So before I get questions about "slow-playing" a prospect think about how many kids/families demand a scholarship offer before considering an unofficial visit or whether kids/families collect scholarship offers like Halloween candy before making an initial cut on their college list. I will say this--a scholarship offer is the most valuable commodity that a collegiate program possesses and once that offer has been made, a program relinquishes control of the recruiting process to the prospect. This is why some coaches will place conditions or a time-frame on their offer--to keep a measure of control. No college program can or should have their scholarship offer collected and used against them to entice/influence other college programs to make a decision. And that stuff happens...believe me. Head coaches are charged with winning. Good experiences and lofty graduation rates will not keep you employed if losing happens.