

Defensive System

Developing and Communicating about Defenses

Traditionally in volleyball we have the terms "perimeter" or "white", "middle up" or "red", and "rotational" or "blue" to describe various defenses. Blocking action is described as taking "line", or "angle", "zone" or "splitting the ball." The question is, do these terms completely describe the varied defenses we use during a game. More importantly, are these terms adequately descriptive to direct the actions of players during a game.

The development of offensive options such as swing hitters, one-leg takeoffs and back row attacks has elicited new defensive approaches used by various coaches. While there were once three basic defensive formations with small variants, there are now multiple defensive formations with major variations. As each team creates its own defensive system, it is helpful to be able to describe any idiosyncrasies or options concisely. Furthermore, the days when a team could use the same basic defense against every opponent are long past at higher levels of play where varying offensive approaches virtually force opponents to adapt. Reliance on players instinctively free-lancing within a broad general system also seems risky given the against-the-flow shots generated by swing and one-leg attackers. As the need to play multiple defenses increases, so does the need for a workable, efficient method of communicating about those defensive choices.

Phases of Defense

Defensive positioning in volleyball occurs in three phases. Different coaches use varying titles to refer to these phases, but they are generally in agreement over the order of occurrence. First, players assume "starting positions", "home", or "base" positions prior to the opponents' first contact of the ball. These starting positions serve two purposes:

1. as functional digging positions for attacks which do not allow time for adjustments to other positions, that is, setter dumps, over passes, and quick hits.
2. as convenient central positions which allow efficient movement to actual digging positions for higher sets.

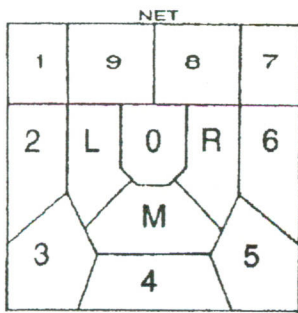
Following the set, players move to "read positions" based on the team system being used to defend against the given set. Generally, teams will have separate read positions dictated for left-side, right-side, and second-tempo middle sets, as well as systems to defend against downballs

and freeballs.

Once a player has moved from starting position to read position, she will make small adjustments based on the hitter's actions and her own blocker's positioning before assuming an "adjust position" just before the attacker contacts the ball.

The Defensive Zone Grid

For purposes of referring to the areas to which defenders are deployed and areas "shadowed" by the block, this defensive system divides the court into 13 zones, with each zone having a distinct numeric label.



These zone reference codes remain the same for all phases of defense and all types of sets being defended against. The dividing lines between zones are clearly marked for diagramming purposes only. Players must recognize the purpose intended in digging or blocking certain areas and strive to achieve that purpose without getting caught up in "who has responsibility for a particular zone." Every defensive player has to remember the number one rule for defense is "NO BALL DROPS TO THE FLOOR."

Starting Position Codes

Each of the six players on the court assumes a starting position within the teams's system whenever the ball passes over the net to the opponent's side. Using this defensive system, the starting positions of the three backcourt players are listed from left to right as three numeric labels. Thus, LMR would be a typical interior triangle formation. This and additional formations are depicted in Figure 2, along with their codes.

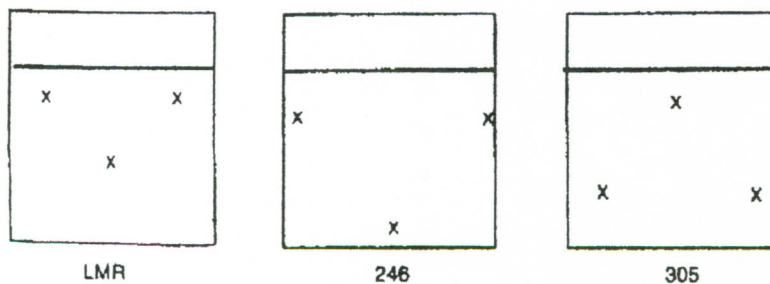
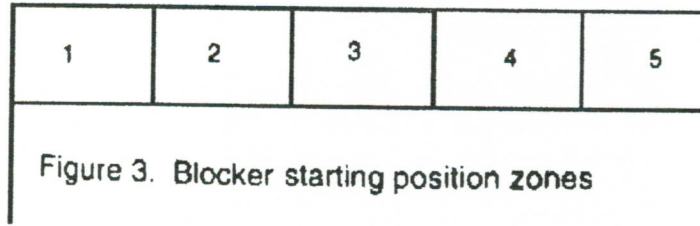
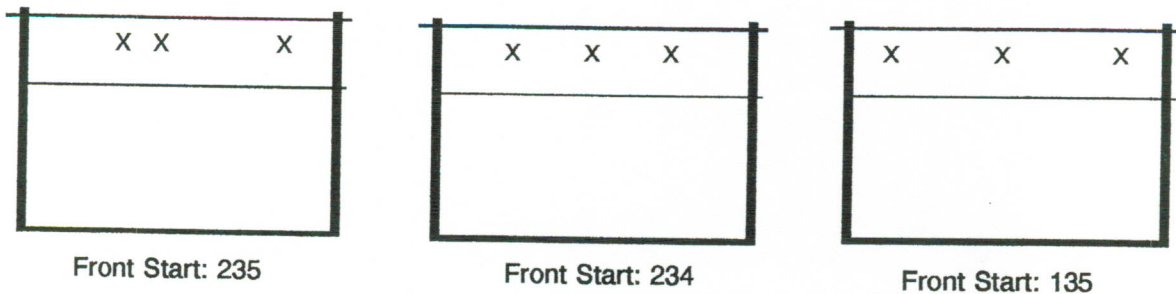


Figure 2. Typical backcourt starting positions with codes.

Because the positioning of blockers is not determined by defensive areas covered but by the opponent's potential points of attack, blocker starting positions are designated using the 5 net zones previously described in the offensive system.



For simplicity, starting positions of the three blocking players are listed from left to right as three numeric labels. As is the case with the backcourt defenders, the alignment of the three blockers in starting positions is listed beginning with the left blocker and ending with the right blocker. If the positions are listed 235, then the blockers are positioned so that the left and middle blockers are side-by-side fronting a likely "one" attack while the right blocker is outside to block against a "regular" or "shoot" set. This and other possible blocker starting positions are displayed below, along with their codes.

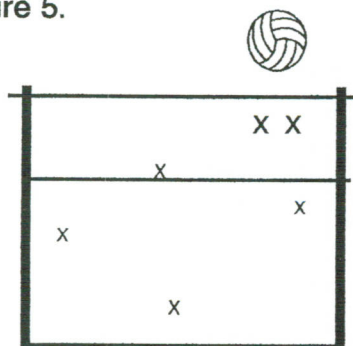


Read Position Codes

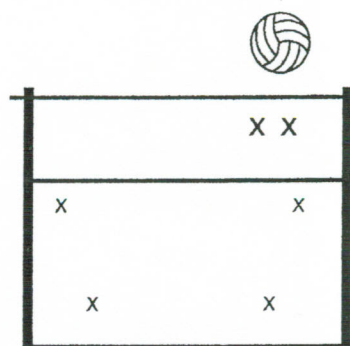
To specify where defenders deploy against specific sets, the 13-zone system is again applied. Because defenses are built around the block, the first application is to define how the block will be aligned. A two-digit number is used to refer to the zones (1, 2, 3, 4, and 5), which are protected by two blockers in a double block situation. For example, against an opponent's left side attack (blockers' right) a line block is referred to as a "55". Both the middle and right blockers are in the "5" zone. A standard block that seeks to prevent the power angle attack would be called a "45". The middle blocker would lineup to the outside of the "4" zone and the right blocker would lineup to the inside the "5" zone. If all three players are to block, then the block call becomes a three-digit number. If only one player is to block then the block call is a single zone number.

Once the block is designated, the deployment of the remaining players in digging positions is described by listing the numeric positions beginning with the front row blocker's (who is not blocking) zone followed by the left back's, middle back's and ending with the right back's position. Using this system, a standard perimeter defense against an opponent's left-side attack (blocker's right) with a power angle approach would be "Front: Block right 45, Dig 9; Back: Dig 2-4-6". This same blocking system using a rotational defense would be "Front: Block right 45, Dig 2; Back: Dig 3-5-6. See Figure 5.

Figure 5.



Front: Block 45, Dig 9
Back: Dig 2-4-6



Front: Block 45, Dig 2
Back: Dig 3-5-6

Adjust Positioning

Once educated in the system, players will understand that the alignment of the block will dictate the purpose and adjust-positioning of back court defenders. For example, if the defensive code is a "Front: Block right 45, Dig 9; Back: Dig 2-4-6" against an opponent's left side attack (blocker's right), then the middle back defender will know that her purpose is to align in the 4 zone behind the seam created by the middle blocker's right arm and the right blocker's left arm and defend over the top of the block. The left back, in the 2 zone, will realize that she should read off the left shoulder of the middle blocker to dig the power angle. Meanwhile, the right back, in the 6 zone, reads off the right shoulder of the right blocker to defend the true line hit and any offspeed hits or tips over the top. The left blocker, who is not involved in blocking, watches for tight angle attacks and inside offspeed hits or tips in the 9 zone.

Using the System to Create a Team's Defense

The first and most obvious use for this defensive code system is to deploy a team's defense. However, players and coaches should realize that

this coding system allows for the creation of numerous options which can be employed to stop the opponent's most notable tendencies.

Priorities which should be considered in the formation of a defensive system are:

1. stopping the best shots of a particular hitter or groups of hitters
2. choosing the most effective role for the block (stop the attack or channel the ball to the best defenders.
3. placing the best defenders where the most balls will go
4. placing each defender where she is at her best (close to point of attack, versus far; digging offspeed or tips versus digging hard shots)
5. limiting travel distance between starting position and read positions for each player within the system
6. minimizing setter penetration from the digging position to target position
- 7 facilitating effective transition offense from the assigned defensive positions

There are several factors that should be considered as automatic triggers for changes in defensive deployment. The rotation of the setter from front to back row might influence starting positions; the rotation of outside attackers may dictate different read positions against left side sets; the rotation of middle attackers may call for different starting positions, specific sets or quick sets or attack combinations might cause changes in starting and read positions; and known and anticipated opponent's strategies or tendencies such as going offspeed or tips at crunch time might call for planned defensive variations.

Methods for Calling the Defense

With the use of multiple numeric codes, calling of defenses could obviously get confusing unless a clear system is devised and practiced. Blocker starting positions are preceded with the words "front start" and back row starting positions are preceded with the words "back start".

The terms "front" or "back" refer to the front and back row of defenders. Blocking alignment codes are started with the word "block". The words "right", "left" or "middle" are used to determine where the block will occur. Defensive read positions are assigned by starting with the word "dig".

During the course of the match, the middle blocker can change blocking alignments and the middle back can change the digging positions. They make changes whenever they desire and communicate those changes to the

other players on the court. Of course, the two must check their calls with each other to avoid non-coordinated blocking and digging.

In summary, this defensive system was devised as a teaching and learning tool to help players understand defensive systems and their defensive responsibilities. Also, this system was devised to allow coaches and players to communicate with each other either during practice or a game without any misunderstandings.

However players and coaches must understand that systems do not dig balls, players do. A defensive system can get players in their correct zones of responsibility, but only great individual effort from within the team structure can prevent the other team from scoring. Every player must remember that playing the ball is more important than any number or letter. Players must have the intelligence to read the offensive play, react to the set, get to their zones, adjust to the hitter's approach and then dig the ball if it comes her way. Players must also realize that defensive choices need to be made and must react spontaneously to what is happening on the court. Many times what should occur doesn't. The bottom line is ***"GET TO THE BALL! NO BALL DROPS TO THE FLOOR!!"***