



Referenced from photos by Kieran Stevens. Illustration by Killian Goodale-Porter.

# A guide to a strong volleyball swing

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Jump, swing and boom. In volleyball, a spike is strategically crucial to scoring points and getting past defensive schemes, according to Volleyball World.

So how then does an attacker spike the ball? What are the important aspects of a spike? How do great attackers spike a ball with so much power? The answers are down below:

## ATTITUDE

An attacker must have an attacking mentality, according to VCU women's volleyball head coach Tim Doyle. They need to be aggressive no matter who they're up against.

"A great attacker is somebody who's willing to go for it, somebody who's willing to be aggressive," Doyle said.

Doyle described it as "the dog mentality" — a total focus and drive to attack whatever is in front of them with a relentless hunger for victory. Doyle said all the team's hitters are great because they carry this mentality onto the court every game. They block out all the chatter and noise in the arena only focusing their attention on the game.

## APPROACH AND TIMING

It all begins with footwork and correctly timing the approach. The most common technique is the three-step approach, which for right-handed people is left-right-

left and reversed for left-handed people, according to AVP.

After positioning themselves correctly on the court, the attacker sets their right foot slightly in front of their left with their knees bent and arms relaxed, according to AVP.

While in this stance the attacker uses their spatial awareness to gauge where they are relative to the setter. This crucial element helps them find the right timing and trajectory of the ball and helps them adapt if needed, according to Doyle.

"They have great spatial awareness, you know, they can sense when the ball is in the setter's hands, how they need to adapt their approach, the trajectory of the set and the tempo of the set, or how fast the set is going from the setter's hands to their body," Doyle said.

Once the attacker is ready, they approach the ball using the three-step approach.

They first take a long and powerful step with their left foot, then quickly take the final two steps, squaring their feet shoulder-width apart and bending their legs ready to jump, according to AVP. As they take their first step their arms swing backward, then swing back down and forward with the last two steps.

VCU women's volleyball graduate student middle blocker Jasmine Knight and third-year outside hitter Julia Rienks said that learning this sequence of steps is very difficult especially when you're young. Early on they also struggled to learn them.

"It was really hard for me to learn that just because it had to be left, right, left. It couldn't be little steps in between," Knight said.

Once they learned the steps it made everything else much easier, they said. Knight and Rienks both emphasize footwork as the most important part of a great hit.

"I feel like it's the most important thing because you have to get your feet to the ball to get power behind it," Rienks said.

## VERTICAL LEAP

After the approach and timing, the attacker must leap into the air. The goal is to jump up as high as possible. The momentum generated by swinging their arms forward in their approach helps them jump higher, according to USAVolleyball.

Strong legs are key but stability is also very important and the best way to build this in players is through lifting, said Tim Kontos, VCU's associate athletic director.

"We use a movement called a power clean, which is a mill movement that goes from the floor to the shoulders in one very explosive, fast movement," Kontos said. "That's great for vertical leap."

He also has the athletes do front and back squats, hops and jumping exercises to build strength in the lower body and prevent injury, Kontos said.

## SWING AND KILL

Once in the air, the hitter's arms go into a bow and arrow stance, cocking their right arm back and reaching their arm out to track the ball, according to AVP. When the ball is high enough for them to reach it, they swing their right arm through the ball.

The torque generated by an attacker opening up their body and then quickly closing it by swinging through the ball is key for a powerful swing, according to USAVolleyball.

Doyle said some of the hardest spikes he's seen were the result of hitters opening up by rotating their bodies back as far as possible to create and store energy, comparing this motion to a golf swing.

"Think about a golfer, they're here, and there's that moment of tension, then everything comes through that strike zone," Doyle said.

However, when someone is swinging at a ball their arm tries to come out of the socket, which is why he thinks it's important to strengthen the shoulder and back muscles that support the arm, Kontos said.

Chin-ups are one of the exercises he does with athletes because they are a great exercise to strengthen those muscles and prevent injury, according to Kontos.

A volleyball spike is a complex motion involving the whole body. From the approach to the jump, and finally swinging the ball, an attacker's body is asked to do a lot, which is why it's important to build strength and stability to not only generate more power but also prevent injury, according to Kontos.

"One doing your sport is going to help the most, but to build stability and control lifting weights is probably the best way to do it," Kontos said.

So by having great footwork, high vertical leaps, a quick swing and a dog mentality, great hitters are able to spike a volleyball with maximum power, according to Jasmine Knight, VCU women's volleyball graduate student middle blocker.

"Volleyball is a skill. You have to keep practicing, practicing and practicing," Knight said. "Julia and I now are still learning things as the days go on, so I just feel like reps is important and not giving up."



Illustration by Joseph Walker.

## PRESS BOX

# THE MIND MATTERS

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Although it may not seem obvious, sports exceed beyond just the physical elements; the psychological factors are just as crucial.

As spectators, we tend only to see the physical activity that goes into sports, leading us to overlook the intellectual side. The mental standpoint of an athlete can surpass one's athleticism.

Yes, physical skill allows a player to excel, however, a player's mentality provides the composure, resilience and discipline needed to succeed.

Although training and practice are key aspects of improving performance, you can't do so to the best of your ability if you are not mentally dialed in.

To perform at your best, your mentality needs to be aligned with your physical goals. When it comes to execution, the mind can be more significant than the body and athleticism.

Taking care of your body consists of

a variety of steps involving warming up, taking the right nutrition and getting enough rest.

While these physical foundations are a core part of an athlete's routine, taking care of your mind is just as indispensable.

"You have to take care of your brain just like you take care of your body," Philadelphia Eagles wide receiver A.J. Brown said in an interview with ESPN.

Mental stamina, perseverance and strength allow athletes to meet their desired results. Though equally as important, this can hold them back as well. Anyone can say they want to improve, however, being able to hold yourself accountable and take action is what will set you apart.

Whether it be a tied game, penalty kick, free throw or championship event, being able to make a clutch play or decision can not happen if you are not mentally ready.

From Micheal Jordan's versatility, Derek Jeter's batting, Tom Brady's passing, Serena Williams' power and Stephen Curry's threes, we are shown how a mentally sharp

athlete can lead to individual and team accomplishments.

Sports offer many opportunities to easily test aggression, patience and control. A key characteristic of being a mentally reliable athlete is having the strength to separate these off-the-field emotions from the game.

Not letting distractions such as trash-talking or playing dirty get under your skin is a major hurdle for athletes as well.

If you can mentally channel your performance rather than discourages it, you can both establish and improve your physical and mental stability.

As beneficial — yet uncommon as it is — training your mind is just as important as training your body. Physical training goes beyond just practicing, it takes a multitude of pieces. The same idea applies to training your mind, it is not a single or simple task.

Training your mind means you must be able to overcome adversity and dedicate the time needed to build composure.

Staying calm under pressure, maintaining positive thoughts and believing in yourself are some of life's greatest hardships, making it even more difficult when it intersects with sports and physical activity.

Many athletes constantly struggle with letting impulses or feelings overpower their performance. If this is the case, it can affect not only your long-term play but also the respect you have earned from teammates, coaches and fans.

Mental challenges in sports can quickly become a cycle of discouragement that affects the body and execution.

Getting in your head has a major effect on your self-confidence, resulting in tactical, technical and physical errors. This is another reason why mental components are just as vital as physical ones in order to keep your performance at its best.

Keeping a clear and motivated headspace is not as easy as it seems for an athlete, but it is essential for being the athlete you strive to be.



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