



## Training Without a Net or Friends

- John Kessel, USA Volleyball Director of Membership Development and Disabled Programs

*Volleyball is a game to play with friends, same gender or coed – even reverse coed...It does not matter if those you train with are only 7 years old, or your grandmother, as long as they can provide you with the unique angles of the game, you'll be learning fine. The other essential key for learning the right habits for game play, is a net. Even if it is a rope, or an imaginary net above a line on the ground, you will ALWAYS be PLAYING with a net, to hit over, set along, pass from a served ball over, etc. The more you use a net, the better you'll get, so create one...*

### What if you have no friends or net?

When this situation occurs, you need not take up solitaire, but you need to watch out that you do not teach yourself "bad", non-gamelike habits or reactions. Sure you can bump the ball to yourself but would you ever do that in a game? Not a likely desired action, as you most often send the ball to a teammate or an opponent. So what can you do?

1. **Serve against the wall.** Mark a line at the height you play and stand back 9 meters or more and go through your routine, serving over the line. It is most important that you have the skill of always serving over the net, even if you sometimes serve out. Go through your whole routine, and imagine each time that you are in a pressure situation and visualize your successful, tough serve. Remember to serve, even against a wall, from all areas of the endline, not just the traditional zone one/right back area.
2. **Serve and dash.** Most people forget that the whole skill of serving really includes dashing to their backline defensive area. For those defending left back, and choosing to serve from right back, that is a good 8 meter or more sprint. As you run you should be watching the ball - run and watch, not watch then run - to determine what small adjustment you should make on the next contact to better float, or topspin powerfully, the serve.
3. **Pass into a corner.** With the corner in front of you and to your right, throw a ball off the wall in front of you so it rebounds back as if it were being served near or at you. Move to the ball, and pass it with "settable" ball flight into the corner, as if to the setter. Get the ball and do it again.
4. **Front set into a corner.** Throw the ball off the wall to your left side, 90 degrees or so, so that it rebounds back at you as if it were coming in from a passer. You can work on low passes that you need to scoot under, higher passes that you could even jump set, or angled standard ball flight passes that you might need to move to. Get in position and set any kind of set you want to the front. Gather in the ball off the front wall and throw it again, and again.
5. **Backset into a corner.** Same as in front setting, but stand with the wall behind you and to your left, and backset the ball behind you. Turn and gather the ball up and throw it off the wall to your left again, and again. For setting lower sets, like a meter ball, stand with you back closer to the back wall, any distance from the wall to your left. The farther from the left wall, the more time you'll have to react to the incoming pass.
6. **Spike against the FAR AWAY wall.** Most players all already good at hitting overpasses into the net, that same skill developed in pepper where the ball comes at you and you blast it down in a rhythm. STOP! Stand 9 or more meters from a wall and set the ball up to yourself and hit it with a gamelike ball flight over the "net" (that is not there), not into it or into the feet of the blockers. You can't really get into the Kaboom, Kaboom rhythm found in the non-gamelike ball flight wall

hitting, but you can learn an armswing that will be of value. If there is no block, you will zing into pounding the ball down, but that is a rare situation. You need to learn to hit AROUND the block and OVER the net and OVER the block. Set yourself 1 meter sets and high balls. Hit cross court, cut, and line shots to the wall. If you can hit the floor/wall corner, you can hit the back line “coffin corner,” a tough shot to defend.

**7. Tip or Spiker Coverage.** – Every garage seems to have a basketball hoop. What every slanted roof, above a garage or not, can be is a fun training device to practice digging the ball UP, off of a tip or “blocked spike.” Alone, you just throw the ball up on the roof, then run to near the roofline and when the ball rolls off, you play it up, as if it were a tip – or even as if you were in spiker coverage. Play it up high, so the setter would have time to move in, or so the hitter is given the time needed to back up and hit again. You can play it into a trash can – the setter, and give yourself points for each ball canned. (This is a good partner game)

**9. Pepper.** – Hit the ball against the wall above the mark or line that is net height. When it rebounds, dig the ball to yourself. Then set it and hit it against the wall again. If you get to be great at this drill, you will always make good things happen, by hitting over the net and digging the ball up on your side, and not know how to hit into the net or dig over to the hitter.

**8. Juggle.** – Like a soccer or hacky sack player, learn to rebound the volleyball off your head, thighs or knees - legal worldwide since the end of the 1992 Olympics, shoulder, bent elbow or “J” stroked arms. Learn to hit the ball cleanly, not with a lift.

While you’re at it, *compete*. See how many in row you can do without an error - and you define what an “error” is. How many seconds or minutes can you train without a mistake. Another option is to see how long you can go without making TWO errors in a row. Most of us will make mistakes. The best players bounce back and correct their errors on the next contact, or better the ball that comes to them from the prior contact.

### ***Well, Do I Have One Friend?***

Congratulations. Now, let’s see if we can convince you to change what most partners will want to do with you – traditional “pepper” Why? Well, first let’s look at what traditional “pepper” does teach you. Let’s say you and your partner train SO hard, you become the “World’s Best” at this drill that so many do around the world. So what are you two the world’s best at?...

Saying “sorry” when you do not hit right at a player – (*You want to be the world’s best at celebrating a kill, hitting the space, not right at a player - How often after hitting do you lean under the net and say “Sorry” to the opponents?*)

Stopping your armswing, so you do not blast the ball at your teammate. – (*You want to be the world’s best at hitting fast and hard, by letting your arm swing fully, not stopping it above you head or almost “serving” it?*)

Digging back to the attacker who spiked at you – so they can hit at you again. (*You want to be the best in the world at digging IN FRONT of the attacker, never skilled at digging back to them.*)

Digging straight back – (*You want to be the best in the world at digging the angle needed to the setter, not straight back like some wall drill.*)

Hitting down at an angle that would go into the net or blockers – (*You want to be the world’s best at the habit of making good misses – over the net, rather than bad misses, into the net/block.*)

Hitting everything the way you are facing – *(You want to be the world’s best at hitting all the many angles of the game, especially the more deceptive cut and line shots – take this quote about 1968 great Olympian Jon Stanley to heart, from a Russian scouting report – “Never hits where he looks; always hits where you aren’t; unstoppable”.)*

Hitting balls coming at you – *(You want to be the world’s best at hitting sets that fall from the sky/side, to one side or the other as they come in, not overpasses, which are so rare.)*

Moving less and less – becoming one of the best at not even having to move – as you see in those who have peppered for years, you could nail their feet to the floor! *(You want to be the best in the world at moving, more and more, extending your range, moving with ball control further and further, moving forward and backwards, covering tips, dumps and all shots from the optimum position at the time.)*

Hitting short distances – *(You want to be the best at the world at having hitting skill and control at the distances of down the line – about 9 meters, and diagonal – over 12 meters as these are the distances you really hit in the game.)*

Hitting with no block confronting you – *(You want to be the best in the world at hitting over, around, off and even through a block – as there will be one there 99% of the time you spike.)*

Reading balls coming from someone standing in front of the net. – *(You want to be the world’s best at reading a hitter from approach, to jump, to spiking over the net against a block.)*

Sometimes I think that 2-person pepper teaches players to simply move very little, while hitting over-passes straight down into the net and digging back to the opponent– not a great skill to be good at...

In any case, one of the first things you MUST do is spread out your pepper. Do NOT go net to endline, if you are with just one pal (you have the whole court or courtlike space right?). Go CORNER TO CORNER so you are hitting longer, more gamelike ball flight. This is especially true for those of you wise enough to be playing doubles any time you can - you warm up with your partner corner to corner.

**1. Dig to yourself pepper.** Every great defender digs the ball right up to the setter. What you need to do is give yourself a cushion, an area of imperfection that still helps your teammates. I call this a good” mistake, rather than a “bad” one. While it is not as gamelike as digging to a setter, you are training with only one friend. If he or she is the bad guy, the hitter, you CAN’T DIG RIGHT BACK TO HIM/HER! You certainly should not dig over the net. What would make you known as a real great digger, would be to simply dig every ball you can touch—STRAIGHT UP! You should start about 4-5 meters from your teammate, and move back to 7-9 meters away after you set the ball. This lets your hitter spike a more gamelike ball flight, and gives you more time to react to the hit. It also teaches you better to move forward and backward, something good defenders do well.

**2. Alternating pepper.** Similar to dig to yourself, but the goal is to dig back towards, but NEVER ALL THE WAY BACK TO the hitter, who sets to the digger, who then becomes the hitter. Both players thus are moving forward after hitting to set the dug ball, and then scooting back after setting a high ball that gives them enough time to distance themselves for the dig from the hitter. You thus hit, then set, and then dig, before the cycle starts again. How many in a row can you and your friend do? You can even do this OVER a net or rope...

3. **Setting corner off of passes.** As in the corner games to do alone shown above, with a teammate, you can have that person pass to you from all over an imaginary court, while you move to the ball and set it to the front or behind you. You start it, so that your teammate must move and pass it to you for your set, not throw it. How many times do you get to throw the ball in the game to the setter. Since the answer is never, practice passing to the setter, not throwing. Then get the set ball and throw for a pass to react to again and again.

4. **Play one-on-one over a net/rope.** You do not need a net, but you do need to play OVER some obstacle at about net height. I had a friend who had a shortage of nets in a small nation, who successfully played over the soccer goal crossbars. Shrink the court down, make it 3 meters deep by any width and play. While it is not perfectly gamelike, as you do not get to hit it to yourself in the game, hey, you are a one person team! Go for three hits. Learn to use the net as a teammate to recover certain tough digs and give you time to get to the ball to set yourself. Be sneaky, and hit any way BUT the way you are facing. In these games, the loser buys the winner ice cream. Serve with a roll shot or an openhanded tip, do not toss it in. Serve anywhere along the backline of your mini-court.

### ***Actually, Two Friends Works***

1. **Play triple pepper.** This can be played without a net, or over a net. If you have no net, make sure you are hitting the ball to the digger with a ball flight that would have cleared the net if it was there! The setter stands halfway between the two digger/hitters, to one or both sides. By both sides I mean that the setter moves back and forth so that both diggers are digging to the same angle. If the setter/digging target stands only to one side, in the example to the right of one hitter/digger, the other hitter/digger will thus be practicing digging to the left. The hitters need to hit the full 9-15 meters to the digger. You can have one person do all the digging and the other all the hitting, or you can randomize more by having them alternate. With a net, the setter should duck back and forth under the net, so the diggers never dig over the net. Watch to make sure the hitters stay 9-15 meters apart, as time goes on in this one, you'll find the distance shrinks to about 5-6 meters, the classic pair pepper hitting distance everyone is comfortable with!

2. **Set in a triangle.** Work on backsetting with the ball moving around clockwise and one of the three of you backsetting while the other two overhead pass. If the ball is going counter clockwise, all three of you should be frontsetting.

3. **Receive serves over a net.** Pass them to your third friend that catches the ball at the setter target zone. Score yourself for accuracy, by giving the server a point if the setter target has to move more than one step, and giving the passer the point for a serving error or if the setter moves one step or less.

4. **Hit vs. a block** – Your partner throws to you, so you must pass, then he/she sets you, always against a block. Too few kids know how to hit around a block.

### ***WOULD YOU BELIEVE THREE FRIENDS?***

Now you can really train.., just **DOUBLES**, indoors or outdoors, on hard court, on Wallyball courts (great, as you need not chase the ball as much!) sand, grass or whatever. Work on your weaknesses, not the things you are already good at. Keep track of who wins as you change partners, and know that that person is likely the best player overall. Challenge yourself and **HAVE FUN!**