The Golden Era of Volleyball Coach Education

Mike Hebert

Editor’s Introduction

I am pleased to share with ISCJ readers the following Insights article written by Mike Hebert. Coach Hebert is a legendary high-performance volleyball coach in the United States. In 2006 he was inducted into the Hall of Fame by the American Volleyball Coaches Association. In addition to coaching for 35 years in college, he has served on the coaching staff for the USA National Women’s Volleyball team at numerous high profile international competitions. Coach Hebert graciously accepted our invitation to share his insights on coaching and coach education. In this article he focuses his attention on the evolution and current status of volleyball coach education in the United States, with particular focus on the sometimes controversial approach advocated by Gold Medal Squared.

Coach Hebert’s Insights article represents an important step for ISCJ. The editorial team at ISCJ envisions ISCJ as a global meeting space for sharing stimulating dialogue on coaching and coach education. Traditionally the dialogue has been separated along ‘academic’ and ‘practical’ lines, with nowhere for academics and practitioners to meet in the gap. We believe that by publishing insightful commentaries on important coaching and coach education issues—like the one written by Coach Hebert—right alongside world-class research articles—one written by Coach Hebert—right alongside world-class research articles—we are helping to bridge the research-practice gap that has long plagued sport coaching. As you read Coach Hebert’s article I encourage you to reflect on the status of coaching and coach education in your own sport context. Perhaps the article will inspire you and your sport coaching colleagues to similarly share your wisdom with the global sport coaching community by submitting an Insights paper to ISCJ.

Wade Gilbert, Editor-in-Chief, ISCJ

I chose volleyball as my primary sport and honed my skills as a student athlete while attending the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB) where there were plenty of role models to learn from. Later in life I moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to accept a position as an Assistant Professor of Education at Chatham College. During my time there I played at a high level for a variety of teams. Word had spread that I knew a little bit about volleyball and within a year I was offered the head women’s volleyball coaching job at the University of Pittsburgh. When the whirlwind of the first few months of coaching had begun to wind down I was left with the profound realization that I was not yet equipped to create drills, run a gym, manage assistants, or engage in long range planning. It was time for me to learn my craft.

Volleyball in the US suffered a significant lack of accessible and useable information throughout the 1970s and into the early 80s. It was during this period when collegiate coaches in the US came together to form the Collegiate Volleyball Coaches Association (CVCA). For the first time coaches were provided a forum from which they could share information. In the late 1980s the CVCA was replaced by the American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA), resulting in an even larger volleyball coaching community that would now include high school and club coaches. One outcome of this growth period was the rapid acceleration of written and video-based material produced and written by and for coaches. Where there was once a virtually empty bookshelf in every coach’s office, there now was enough volleyball-related material to fill that shelf and more.

Another important event during this era was the decision by the USAV to beef up its own Coaching Accreditation Program (CAP). Each Olympic sport is responsible for establishing its own National Governing Body (NGB). NGB’s are responsible for governing all that impacts its sport. They hire and fire coaches, oversee the sport’s budget, create playing schedules for their teams, and, among other things, they must create a

In 35 years of coaching men’s and women’s collegiate volleyball in the United States, Mike Hebert earned a career record of 952-392 and led teams to the Division 1 Final Four on five occasions. He was named American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA) National Coach of the Year in 1985 and is a member of both the AVCA and University of Minnesota halls of fame. He has also served as a member of the coaching staff for the USA Women’s National Volleyball Team at numerous international events, and is the author of Thinking Volleyball (2014). Address author correspondence to Mike Hebert at heber012@gmail.com.
program for educating and training their coaches. They were the first agency to declare its intention to provide a program of volleyball education.

Then the 1980s arrived and ushered in a collection of volleyball-related clinics, coaching manuals, videos, books, camps, increased access to international volleyball, and an entire generation of coaches who suddenly were being paid a living wage and were motivated to take their jobs seriously. This created fertile ground for the growth of more sophisticated ways to coach and learn the game. No matter how successful the Copy-the-Greats system had been during our youth, it became clear that it was not sufficient as a comprehensive volleyball education program suitable for elite level coaches and athletes. The table was now set. The overly simplistic strategy of mimicking the sport’s best players had been judged by most of us to be inadequate. The decks were now relatively clear of future obstacles. Several agencies stepped into the void, each promoting their own version of volleyball coaching education. But there was one agency in particular that attracted the lion’s share of attention among volleyball coaches. It is called Gold Medal Squared (GMS).

I chose to focus on GMS because, more than any other agency, it has become a lightning rod for debate. By exposing their beliefs and recommendations to the public at large GMS has willingly placed themselves in a vulnerable position. In addition, they may be the only agency that expects their advocates to live up to specific guidelines. Although not a formal requirement, it would seem to me that GMS authorities would not confirm that someone is a GMS coach unless all or most of the key GMS principles are met. For example, I can’t conceive of a GMS coach not teaching swing blocking, not playing a 6-up (what they call middle-middle) defense, not taking stats, not using some form of the cauldron, and not using a white board. I do not wish to judge this aspect of the GMS program. But it is worth noting.

GMS was founded in 1985 by Carl McGown, Marv Dunphy and Doug Beal. Dunphy and Beal both coached the USA Men to Gold Medals in the Olympic Games, and McGown was on staff as a consultant for six World Championships and seven Olympics. All three are still on board and active in determining the philosophical direction of the organization. During these early years GMS operated like most of the fledgling agencies that supplied camps, clinics and videos to those interested in purchasing these products. But by the mid to late 90s they hit their stride. They made an internal decision to up and become great competitors.

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The following is their mission statement and can be found on their website Goldmedalsquared.com: To seek