

Serving Keys

Serving is one of the two most important skills to learn in volleyball. If you can pass a ball and serve a ball, you can play *the game* of volleyball. Additionally, serving is the only skill in volleyball that is individual with no external variability. Once you learn how to master the mechanics of serving, you can serve the same way every time with confidence. All other skills in volleyball involve constant adjustment to a play made by another player.

When introducing or reviewing any skill in volleyball, it helps to break the skill down into small chunks, introduce the various parts with as much simplicity as possible, then start honing each facet of the whole as the player starts getting the hang of it. We suggest providing 1-3 keyword phrases for each chunk to make it easy to remember, reference, and correct.

It also helps to reduce the number of keys or chunks to 3 in any one lesson, even though the entire skill has many more. You can customize the lesson and keys based on the level of your players.

Here are the key phrases we use when introducing or reviewing the serving skill:

1. Place (alternate key words: Setup, Presentation, Stance)
2. Breathe (alternate key word: Relax)
3. Toss
4. Step
5. Swing
6. Contact
7. See and Connect
8. Ready Position

We recommend stepping through all of the Keys lightly, so you can get the kids playing faster, then go back through the Keys again (probably several iterations) to add, correct and reinforce. Remember to limit yourself to 1-3 Keys in any lesson for best retention.

1. **Place.** The initial setup is more complicated than one might think, so you might start with the first 3 pointers and then add the next two as your players get the hang of it.

1. Weight should be on the back, dominant foot with the non-dominant foot forward, both knees soft.
2. The dominant elbow should be pulled back behind and above the shoulder with the dominant hand open.
3. The non-dominant arm should be held out in front of the body with the ball resting in the palm. The player should hold the ball in front of the dominant shoulder.
4. The player's body should be at a 45 degree angle to the net (facing the antennae).
5. The toe of the front foot should be pointed toward the opposite court.



Prior to pulling the dominant arm back, players will sometimes place their dominant hand on top of the ball to make sure it is lined up in front of that shoulder, then pull the elbow back.



2. **Breathe.** Immediately following Step 1, take a deep breath in and exhale fully, relaxing your muscles and focusing on your ball. Now toss (Step 3).

Many coaches never teach breathing at all, regardless of level, but teaching your player how to relax and focus before the actual serve will help them to be more consistent in the remaining mechanics of the serve, and it will help them to block out environmental distractions that often affect players in a game.

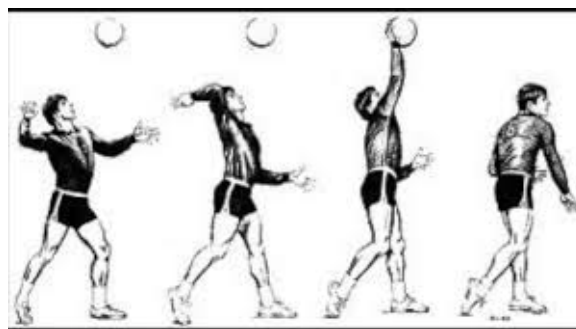
3. **Toss.** The Toss and Step (Step 4) happen almost simultaneously, but the Toss is the most critical component of a good serve and needs special attention. The Toss should go straight up or up and forward with no spin (unless you are teaching a Spin Serve). Spin is caused by the player pulling their fingers in on the toss and “flipping” the ball backward. This results in a toss that is above the player’s head, which is harder to hit with any power. In order to contact the ball with power, the ball has to be tossed (or “lifted”) to a spot out in front of the player’s dominant shoulder that is reachable with a step forward and a fully extended arm/hand.



4. **Step.** As the player tosses (or lifts) the ball in the air, they should step forward with the non-dominant foot that is *already* forward. This can be non-intuitive for new players because they want to step with the foot that is behind. However, the step forward with the non-dominant (front) foot allows the player to shift their body weight from that back foot to the front foot, giving them the combined force of forward body motion and torque from bringing their dominant shoulder around and forward on the swing.



4. **Swing.** The swing should be simple, starting from the pulled-back position in Step 1. The motion starts with the body stepping forward, then the shoulder is pulled around and forward, followed by the elbow and finally the hand, arm extending fully to swing through the ball. The swing should not stop at the ball, but continue to swing all the way down.



5. **Contact.** Unless the player is performing a Spin Serve, the wrist should remain locked throughout the swing and contact. Contact should be made with a flat, open hand with the heel of the hand hitting the ball dead-center. If done properly, this will result in a “float” on the serve, which is difficult to pass. For younger players who don’t have all the parts down for a powerful swing and contact, they can contact the ball slightly underneath to give the ball some lift.

6. **See and Connect.** Players should be present and focused for the entirety of the serve. During setup, they should look at the other side of the court to determine where they will serve. They need to see that serve in their mind. Once they setup for the serve, they should shift their eyes and focus to the ball, maintaining focus on the ball through the toss, swing and contact. They should then follow the path of the ball with their eyes to determine if the ball went where they intended. If not, a quick mental adjustment should be made for next time as they run onto the court to play.

7. **Ready Position.** Although the player is fully focused on their serve and observing the outcome of that serve, they must also be ready to play. Sometimes a server can get caught standing behind the serving line and then get burned with a volley back over the net right to the spot on the court they should be covering. As soon as that serve connects on the other side of the court, the player needs to quickly move onto the court and get in the Ready Position (see Passing Keys).