



THOUGHTS ON DEFENSE IN VOLLEYBALL

“There are days when you can’t get the ball to hit the floor, no matter how hard you try,” my volleyball coach once told me, “But there is no excuse for not playing good defense.”

I’ve known those days when every attack is a fight. Every idea manufactured. Days when invention and smoothness and originality disappear. When nothing is new or bright or wonderful. The air is the same. In those days I start to press and everything gets that much more difficult. The feel of offense is gone. And with it, the power, the ease, the brilliance that play brings.

The offense, you see, is play. The defense is work. When I attack I create my own world. I act out the drama the setter has begun. Offense is exuberant, freewheeling, multifaceted deception, played high in the air, often unrehearsed. Offense is an excitement which provides its own excitement. Its own compulsion. Its own driving force. From the hardest straight down spike to the slow falling tip shot, it generates its own energy.

Offense then, is an art. It cannot be forced. It is the spontaneous joyful unification of body and mind and the team. There are days it won’t happen. The circuits of the brain won’t open. The playful right hemisphere remains inaccessible. The jump seems less or mistimed.

Defense needs none of this. It is plodding attention to duty — grit and determination and perseverance. It requires an act of will and risk. All you need is the decision to put out. To give 100 percent.

On defense I am another person, the real person. Offense is a showplace for talent and even genius. What defense discloses is character. There effort and energy are a matter of will. There I am asked. “Will I or won’t I have it so?”

So defense is a matter of pride. The determination to be the person I am. The decision to give my word of honor to take an oath that what has to be done will be done.

I try not to be proud of my offense. My attack with the setter is a gift freely given and perhaps just as readily taken away. How many poets have turned to drink in an effort to restore that childlike way of looking at things? One has to be superstitious of such feats.

I enjoy my play — enjoy attacking the ball, but I know my talent is something I carry. The real test comes when that is absent. When I am filled with fatigue and boredom and the desire to be off on a vacation. We all know this and react differently. In an Army survey, sixty-four males 22 years of age rode exercise bicycles at 55% of their maximum oxygen capacity. They were told to ride until it became so discomforting that they felt it necessary to stop. They stopped at times varying from one and a half to ninety-eight minutes.

Defense therefore narrows down to character, the ability to persist in the direction of greatest resistance. There are teams, and successful ones, that no longer look solely on talent. They recruit on character. It is a long season. Expecting every play to keep the ball off the floor no matter what it takes can be fatiguing.

There are days on end of giving yourself and talent is not enough. Only character can fix my will to the idea that anything less than my best is unworthy of me and the game and the people I play with. Only character can take defense and make it worth every iota of my mental and physical energy. Only character can make me function when my existence seems to be, as Emerson said, a defensive war.

I know all that, as I suspect you do. But I still play defense like almost everyone else. Knowing that eventually there will be a dig and I will get the ball. And I dream suddenly of seeing that new idea plain, like being in the air with no block. Knowing that when the ball leaves the setter’s hands, like an idea not yet written, it will hit nothing by floor.

But dreams are not the stuff defense is made of. Nor are the athletes for that matter.

— Adapted from an article by George Sheenan