

Jumps by Terry Schroeder, Head Coach, Men's National Team

The USA team was recently in Serbia training with one of the best teams in the world. We trained at the Partizan club in Belgrade, which is where the national team trains. I have been amazed at what I have seen here. This is a water polo factory here. Kids start playing and training in water polo when they are 8 or 9 years old. The pool here is used all day long. We had practice last night from 7 – 9 pm and immediately after we were done another water polo team (it looked like the 16 year old team) was coming in to use the pool from 9 – 11 pm. We have gone over to the pool at all times during the day and have seen teams in there all day. In talking with Igor Milanovich who was one of the all-time great players for Yugoslavia back when I played and is now the club president of Partizan, he told me that they have about 400 kids of all ages in their club. **In Igor's words they "run a water polo camp here 365 days a year." Wow!**

I have sat and watched and this is what I have noticed above all else. **All the age groups are practicing good fundamental skills.** The youngest kids (8-9) year old were doing a simple passing drill for 45 minutes. The kids were line up into two groups. On one side the kids had the ball. On the coaches first command the kids would pick the ball up from underneath, cradle the ball and turn their left shoulder (if they were right handed) and turn their heads towards the person they were about to pass to. On the second command the kids would pick the ball up behind their heads and get their arm into the ready to pass or shoot position with their balance slightly forward. On the third command the kids would elevate while staying on balance and then make an accurate pass to their partner as they followed through perfectly. Even though I could not understand the language, I could tell by the coach's actions that he was stressing balance in the water and strong leg support to the kids. **He was carefully watching each kid while they passed and correcting bad form at this young age. The young kids were building good habits and it was obvious that the simplest of skills (passing) – one we often take for granted by letting our teams talk and socialize during passing drills – was of the utmost of importance.** As I watched many of the older teams come in it was quite obvious that each one of these kids had gone through this school and had been taught the fundamentals of passing. I have watched these younger teams practice for the last three days and I have not seen each of these teams focus on the fundamentals of legs, balance and body control.

The beauty of most of the drills I watched was in there simplicity. For example, out of a two man passing drill the 16 year olds did a shot blocking drill. This drill consisted of one player shooting the ball at the second player. The "shot" was controlled and aimed directly at the opposing players arm. The player that was shot blocking started the drill with his shot blocking arm/hand up and in front of his body. . He was in balance with one leg slightly behind the other but with his upper body squared up to the shooter. As the shooter shot the ball into his hand he knocked down the ball and controlled the shot. After about 15 rounds of this the shooter began to move the ball around a little more so that the shot blocker had to react and still try to control the shot as much as possible. The last phase of the drill had the shooter attacking and the shot blocker engaged in moving at the shooter (using a big breaststroke kick) and still trying to

maintain his balance and control the shot. They were teaching the skill of shot blocking which is one of the areas that our USA team is trying to improve on. **This is an essential skill and how much time do we as coaches devote to it? I would say that most of us have not broken it down this simple.** Most of us have not spent enough time just working on the mechanics of the skill.

Shot blocking is incredibly important. In order to be good shot blockers we need to understand our responsibilities. Do I have strong side or cross cage? Normally teams will try to funnel the ball to the middle of the cage to help the goalie out. So if I am playing at the X2 position (guarding the 2 man on the perimeter) then my responsibility is to try to take away the near side or strong side shot. I want the shooter to shoot the ball cross cage. The center defender is responsible to help with a cross cage shot from this position and the goalie is left with the center of the cage. **Even if I fully understand my shot blocking responsibility I still must have good balance and body position to make a successful field block.**