

The Language of Volleyball

By Ingrid Yao

“Mine Mine Mine Mine MINE!!” The ball shoots across the court, arriving right in front of the spiker’s hand, and before you know it, the ball hits the ground, with everyone around it stunned in place. Cheers surround the gym, clapping fills the air, and high-fives are received by each player. However, this does not last for long; after a few seconds, the coldness of the gym returns, and each player’s eyes become clearer and darker, their arms out with their knees bent in ready position, and the next play begins as the referee blows their whistle. Volleyball, the only all-season sport I have been playing for eight years, still has me in awe of the depth and complexity of its literacy. As an extremely strategic sport, jargon, signals, physical movement, or even a player’s mental state are all counted in its language. Like any spoken language, there are infinite ways to express a player’s thoughts or ideas. But in volleyball, the valued form of communication, whether it being verbal or nonverbal, depends on the context it is used in.

People often wonder what counts as success in volleyball; personally, success is like three beautiful touches of a ball before the attack onto the opposing side, a great recovery with nearly everyone on the ground, or a strong serve that shows the court who is in charge. When we see these instances, it is the result of strong chemistry that lies within the team, and trust between each member so that everyone can perform at their maximum potential. How does a team get into such a state of trust and supportiveness? It all depends on communication.

Remember the calling of “MINE!” at the beginning? That was me, calling the phrase most frequently used in volleyball, or you may have heard it as “GOT IT!”, “I GOT!”, or “ME ME ME!” in previous experiences. All these phrases refer to the action of “calling for the ball” and fall in the category of verbal language in volleyball’s literacy. Verbal language is what I call the “surface level” type of communication in volleyball. Similar to calling for the possession of

the ball, shouting the name of a teammate, encouraging each other through compliments and excitement, the coach yelling orders at us on the side, or even some intimidating conversations with the opponent through the net, all count as the surface language of volleyball. Both the competitor and the audience will be able to understand you without looking at you directly or intentionally communicating with you. When I yelled “MINE!” getting the ball, everyone knew I was going for it, it not only meant “get out of the way” for my teammates, but it also meant “Hey! Look at me! I’m going to set now” for the opposing team and the audience. Because verbal communication is accessible and recognizable for everyone on or off the court, it becomes less valued when trying to convey confidential information.

Before the game continues, try to watch out for the second form of communication on the “underground level” and notice what is being done that is not verbal. Now, the server is ready for an ace. I signal a five then a four with my fingers, and as the whistle blows, the ball flies straight across the court, landing on the ground between the front and back row players. Step, step, clap, and... “Ace!” a powerful serve to an open spot on the opposing team’s court earns our team a point.

The key play at that point was the five and four signals indicating the open spot or weak spot in the other team’s positions. The number four refers to the front-row outside hitter position, while the number five refers to the position behind the outside hitter, signaling a five and a four would then tell the server that a weak point is shown between the fourth and fifth positions. Knowing where to look and having the skills to aim their serve, the server successfully obtains an ace for the team. Hand signaling would be a form of physical gesture in volleyball literature, and since signals are hidden from the opposing team, I call it an “underground” level of communication. Physical gestures, although less used, are the main type of communication to convey a type of play to perform during the game. Aside from serving signals, when a play

begins, orders are given from the setter to show which hitter gets to spike, and what type of set it will be, giving both the receiver and hitter instructions on how to act during the game. However, although physical gestures are hard for the opponent to notice, at the same time, only those who can access the underground tunnels will be able to navigate their way through the hundreds or thousands of pathways. Therefore, most gestures seen on the court contribute nothing to strategy, but to the concept of being a team.

As the most-performed action on court, the high-five is the best way to encourage, compliment, and reassure each other whenever challenges are faced, or doubts appear. The clear, bright sound when the hands meet evokes an emotional uplifting of all the support and companionship that lies within a team. With this gesture, teams will be able to surpass any challenges that come their way, that is, if they can persevere and become the “reading” team in a game.

Reading in volleyball is the “invisible” level of communication. It refers to observing both the surface and underground levels, trying to understand the patterns and behaviors of your own teammates and the other team. Personally, reading has never been my thing, but the reading in the language of volleyball never fails to draw me in; with every text I read, I see new patterns and skills that I could use in future experiences. When you lay out other people’s actions and behaviors, you obtain the power to control how they perform. Let’s look closer at how I made the judgment of signaling four and five for the server. Player number four, the outside, is tall and strong, but whenever she makes a mistake, she blames it on others or becomes frustrated and lets it out on her teammates. Player number five is a talented receiver, but when you see her positioning, she is too far back in fear of a powerful serve and the rage of the player up front in the fourth position. When the net divides us physically, we are forced to look at mentalities and the state of each player, leading to a fight of perseverance, confidence, and trust. Reading the

other team's mentality is necessary to see the flaws in their teamwork, who makes mistakes easily, or who feels annoyingly cocky about their previous successes and needs something to bring them down a notch. Observing the player in number four for a couple of points, I could tell that she is dominant, competitive, and easily affected by a bad temper. Understanding what the verbal and physical gestures meant on the other team, I was able to "read" their behavior and adjust our tactics accordingly. On the other hand, reading my teammates' mentality is also important to understand who feels confident, can perform well, or needs more encouragement and attention during the game. Sounds like a lot of thinking and planning, right? Well, that is probably because of my position as a setter.

There is a saying in volleyball that goes, "the setter runs the court." Being a setter myself, it is my responsibility to understand the language of volleyball so that I can control the court and tempo of the plays. You might have also heard the rule that "the setter always gets the second touch," which means that the setter can place the ball anywhere on the court for the third touch to perform smoothly and land on the other side. To do so, setters need to understand how to communicate effectively with their teammates, adjust to their spiking habits, and consider the status on the other side of the net, which ties back to all the forms of communication I have mentioned. Being a setter, "MINE!" will always be my go-to form of possessing the ball, numbers will always be my way of indicating a serve position or types of sets, and being able to read others will always be crucial to the decisions I make, as for anyone else, these methods of communication will differ. I am not capable of explaining how the other positions think or communicate in detail as I am not yet fluent in my own position, but I can assure you that there is always more to volleyball's literacy than you think there is. After all, with eight years of learning, I am just a beginner compared to the professionals who have been practicing this literacy on their journey to the championships.