

“We Do What We Do.”

Interview with USA Women’s National Team Coach Hugh McCutcheon

What are you guys doing to gain that little advantage in these last 60-90 days before the Olympics?



We’re trying to get better and we’re working hard. That’s all there is to it, there’s no magic. We know based on our performance over the last three years what are our strengths and what are some of our weaknesses. WE also know what skills correlate to winning and losing points so we’re working on things that we think are going to help us to score more points and trying to get better at those things.

It is technical things? Player psychology? A little of both?

Yea, all of the above. There are a lot of little things that at the end of the day, there are no little things. There’s obviously some stuff in terms of team culture. There’s some stuff about how the players are dealing with the moment of competition but mostly it’s just refining ourselves technically and tactically.

Your gym culture is unique; everybody on board to make the program better. Other than a magic wand, how do you go about doing that? How do you get the buy in?

It’s all magic wand. That’s all I’ve got in my coaching tool kit. (Chuckles) You hit it right on the head with that one.

Let’s see, what is it? It’s just really a function of the vision you have for the program, the goals that you set as the leader or the decision maker. It’s your ability to be consistent and perform in an action relative to those goals. That’s how you sell it, I guess; 1. Create the vision. 2. Invest in it and be passionate about it and 3. Live it.

Could it work at a club or school level with outside influences like parents and recruiting?

Of course. I think it’s possible at any level. Maybe the presentation of the information is different, maybe the way you get the buy in is different but at the end of the day, we all know what it feels like to be part of a functional team and we all know what it feels like to be a part of one that isn’t functional. We’ve experienced those at all different levels in our careers so clearly when things click, we know it and as a coach to help facilitate that with whatever age group you’re working with.

What do our collegiate players need to have to play at the international level?

There are a couple of things to consider. First of all, the best college volleyball players are wonderful college volleyball players in that they’re great in the environment that they have to survive in. When you get to the

international level, the rules are different and therefore the demands on the players are different. With the number of substitutions you have in women's college volleyball, you end up with players that are really good at some parts of the game but seldom do you get someone that is good at the whole game.

Internationally of course, you don't get the luxury of that many substitutions. You have six so all of a sudden the ability to develop a generalized specialist becomes a big premium.

I guess the other thing is at this level everyone jumps high and hits hard. In college you could probably get away with being more physical than other people but here you can't really. The difference is not what you bring to it as an athlete, it's what you bring to it as a volleyball player; your technical foundation, your ability to play the game, to make the right choice at the right time, to execute the fundamental skills, all of those things become a much higher priority.

Do you go into the Olympics coaching any differently that you would World League or Grand Prix?

No, we just do what we do. If we start acting differently at the Olympics then that's not an appropriate coaching strategy I don't think. I think it's pretty obvious why but if you need me to elaborate I'm happy to.

I was asking more along the lines of tactically and or technically.

In terms of how we go about doing our day to day, no. We've agreed this is a hammer, not a switch. You don't just show up at the Olympics and expect all of a sudden to turn it on. You've lived it every day for four years and hopefully you've done the work, you've put enough hay in the barn to play your best in London. As far as tactically and all those things obviously we know our opponents, we're trying to exploit some weaknesses so maybe at the beginning of the year we aren't showing all of our cards but for us the goal is London and how we prepare for that so all of our focus will be there with the intention of being the best we can be and obviously hoping to win some hardware but we're not going to do too much differently special for the Olympics. We might make some systemic changes based on what our opponents are doing and maybe we've gotten better at some things so we can do a few different things but it's not like systemically we're going to change for that tournament.

One of my favorite quotes from you is, 'As head coaches, we are perpetually dissatisfied.'

That's part of our job, yea.

So a gold medal wrapped around your teams necks in London and you'll still be dissatisfied?

(Chuckles) Well, it's more of a mindset I think. It's not talking about the fact that I'm a crusty old man or something. My job is for me to find ways for us to be better and it's that commitment to pursuing mastery that I have to, and as a staff that we have to, abide by or try to uphold because as soon as we think we're good enough we just kind of ease off. I think that's probably a huge problem.

Bu does that mindset to the girls, you being perpetually unsatisfied, help the buy in to your gym culture about just getting better every day.

Oh yea, because then they're working on stuff, they aren't resting on their laurels.

When I look at the guys and I see the way we played in Beijing, which I've watched a little bit; I was too busy right after and then just putting this whole thing together it's been pretty consuming but over the Christmas break I got to watch a little bit. We played some wonderful volleyball and I thought it was really impressive the way we played the game and I just remember at the time thinking geez, we've got to work on this and this and this. But I also remember that we were working on things the day before we played Brazil in the

Olympic gold medal final that helped us beat Brazil. So it's that idea of we can always get a little bit better and that we shouldn't waste a second in the gym. That's the thing that that's about. It's not about being busy just for the sake of being busy. It's about, hey look, no one's ever played the perfect game of volleyball here, so here is all these things we can get better at and we never know which one of those things can be the difference between winning a point and losing a point and when that is going to occur.

How do you help a player through a slump?

Ultimately as an athlete, this stuff is your responsibility, at least at this level. You know, we're dealing with professionals, we're dealing with adults and while we understand that you're not going to feel great being in the gym every day true champions, people that get it done at the highest levels are able to get it done in spite what's going on outside the gym or in spite of what ever they're feeling that particular moment. Somehow we can't let ourselves fall prey to being victims of our circumstance. We have a job to do although that sounds a bit pragmatic, but we have a job to do and we have a responsibility to ourselves and our teammates and our country and that's what we've got to do. So in some ways, while we're prepared to do anything we can to help but we're not going to be willing to deal with a lot of substandard performance just because you're having a bad day.

How do you deal with the emotional side of the job? You are going to have to cut more than half that gym. How do you prepare for that? How do you deal with it?

First of all, you know when you take the job that's going to happen so if you can't deal with it, don't take the job. Second of all, they all know it's part of what's going to happen so they have to understand that those choices need to be made and we understand also that people are going to be disappointed and sad and all of the things that go with not getting your dreams fulfilled. However, as staff and certainly from our responsibility is to put the best team together for our country to have the greatest possible chance of success in London. And so with that as your motive and that's your responsibility you just have to pick the team and when you've got the group that feels like it's the best possible group you go on with the rest of your job which is that this is the decision you've come to. It's not easy but it's not something you can back away from, it's just a part of what you do. So when you sign up for it you better be sure you're ready to have the tough talks.