

## **“Serving Aggressive is Your First Line of Defense”**

*Gary White, Assistant Coach - University of Wisconsin*

“We won the serve-pass battle.” “We lost the serve-pass battle.” Sound familiar? These two statements are usually the first things you hear from a coach’s postgame interview when their team won or lost. Most of the time, the statistics will confirm that this is a strong indicator of why that team won or lost. For this reason, spending time with your players to help them take ownership of their first contact can greatly influence the results of your team.

Ownership is a word we constantly use within our program. We want our players to have complete ownership of and confidence in their development. When we talk to them about serving and passing, we give them the elements to focus on so they are in the driver’s seat of their development. Specifically, with serving, getting your opponent out of system should be the key priority for each and every server that steps behind the service line. Emphasizing the process that leads to our desired result is where we want to spend our time. In our program, a successful result oriented serve is one that forces your opponent to start a rally out of system. For our evaluations, we determine out-of-system to be where our opponent is forced to have only one predictable option for their setter. We rarely talk about serving for aces with our players. For the majority of servers, an ace is usually a by-product of a passer’s error rather than a great serve.

The easiest way to describe our serving philosophy at the University of Wisconsin is “aggressively accurate.” We want our players to have the confidence to view their serve as an offensive weapon rather than just an initiation of the rally. We want our float servers to exhibit 3 fundamental aspects: Flat, Float, and Fast. We want the ball to cross the net within 6-12 inches of the top of the tape. From the point of contact to the net, we want the ball to stay on a FLAT trajectory. The ball should have no spin on it allow the ball to work with the air currents to move and FLOAT. And lastly we want it to be FAST (something that puts a lot of pressure on a passer to force a quick reaction). Whether that’s having to move their feet fast, communicate fast, or having them go to the ground or play a ball deep, we want the ball to get on them quickly. The speed range we ask our servers to be in is from 38-42 MPH. This range is where we have found that most balls will be able to hit all of those factors while also holding to a high level of consistency. As long as our servers are focusing on these three process-driven fundamentals, Flat, Float, and Fast in that range, we believe that to be a successful serve.

After focusing on those three fundamentals, we start to add serving strategies for our players to execute. Our servers look for ways to try to disrupt the opponent by using weaknesses in

their serve-receive patterns. For teams we are unfamiliar with, we focus on serving into gaps and seams (in between two passers or in between a sideline and passer). As we learn more about each of our opponents throughout a match and/or in our scouting preparations, we start to elaborate on how we want to serve the seams on a team. For some teams, this may be the deep seam of a given passer (or two passers), the sideline seam, or even the seam in front of the back row passers. We ask our players to focus on getting their serves out of the initial plane of the passer; serves that do not land right in the lap of a given passer. One of the serves we've begun working on with our players is the short-flat serve that crosses the net at the same height as their normal float serve, but when it hits the 3-meter line, the ball "drops off the table" in front of the passer. These serves are usually on the lower end of our 38-42 MPH range, but for a passer, it looks very similar to the deep float serve.

### **The Importance of Best First Contact Team**

Over the past few seasons, we have noticed that the teams who are routinely competing at the end of the year are usually the best first contact teams in the country. These contacts include Serve, Serve-Receive, and at times, their defensive control. For this article, let's focus on just the first two.

When we are the serving team, we want to have the best first contact of the rally (our serve). Our goal is to be the one that creates the pressure on our opponent. We want our players to take a lot of pride in their serving. When we are the receiving team, we want to have the best first contact that our team is capable of having in the initiation of a rally (our serve receive). A Great Serve and Pass Team = Great First Contact Team (the ability to control the rally). During our spring coaches clinic we held at Wisconsin, we had a session that focused on Statistics that Matter. Two of the slides we presented focused on the Serve-Receive battle. In our study, we charted and evaluated every serve and reception that occurred during the 2014 BIG 10 season. We wanted to see where the top teams and players in our conference ranked and where we needed to continue to improve as a program.

The first slide of our presentation focused on the first contact for the receiving team and how a quality serve can greatly affect the outcome of a rally. When studying all of the teams in our conference, when a team had a three option reception to start the rally, their odds of winning that particular rally was 64%. In essence, if my opponent is in system off of my serve, the odds of my team winning that rally is 36%. As a program, we use a few different metrics to see where we are as a serve-receive team. In the chart below you can see all of the metrics we value. During that season, Wisconsin and Penn State were the top two teams in the conference standings and across all seven categories that we evaluate ourselves on, those two programs were in the Top 3 in each of those categories.

# OFFENSIVE STATISTICS

**WIN THE SERVE-PASS BATTLE!**

**WISC and PSU: Top 3 in BIG TEN in all passing statistics**

**CHAMPIONSHIP GOALS:**

<b>Pass Avg:</b>	<b>2.40 (Team: 2.25, 2<sup>nd</sup> in Conf)</b>
<b>Err%:</b>	<b>2% (Team: 4%, 1 or less per match)</b>
<b>PerfPass%:</b>	<b>60% (Team: 52%, 2<sup>nd</sup> in Conf)</b>
<b>+Pass%:</b>	<b>80% (Team: 78%, 1<sup>st</sup> in Conf)</b>
<b>FBSO%:</b>	<b>40% (Team: 39%, 2<sup>nd</sup> in Conf)</b>
<b>SO%:</b>	<b>63% (Team: 65%)</b>
<b>ESO%:</b>	<b>60% (Team: 62%)</b>

**3 Opt SR = 64% chance of winning the rally**

**WISCONSIN: #1, #5, and #9 passers in conference**  
**PENN STATE: #2 and #6 in conference**

\*Only two schools with multiple in Top 10; Only two players in BIG TEN with greater than a 2.40.

The second slide focuses directly on our conference’s serving first contact. When a team was able to force a team out of system from their serve, they won the rally 58.3% of the time. If we were to include the reception errors with that number, so if our opponent was out of system or aced, we won the rally 64.7% of the time. This is a huge advantage for the serving team. On the chart, you can see the metrics we use to see where our team’s goals are and where we continue to look to improve.

# DEFENSIVE STATISTICS

**SERVING AGGRESSIVE IS YOUR FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE**

**OPP OoS =**  
58.3% Winning Rally

**OPP OoS + RE =**  
64.7% Winning Rally

- **What we Value in Serving: Aggressively accurate servers. Serving more aggressive does not mean we will have more service errors.**

**CHAMPIONSHIP GOALS:**

<b>Serving Avg:</b>	<b>1.80 (Team: 1.82, 3<sup>rd</sup> in Conf)</b>
<b>Err%:</b>	<b>5% (Team: 6%, 1<sup>st</sup> in Conf)</b>
<b>OppRec:</b>	<b>2.00 (Team: 2.06, 6<sup>th</sup> in Conf)</b>
<b>PS%:</b>	<b>50% (Team: 48%, 2<sup>nd</sup> in Conf)</b>
<b>OppFB%:</b>	<b>30% (Team: 31%, 2<sup>nd</sup> in Conf)</b>

## **Using Radar to Improve Our Serve Game**

Having spent the previous five years as an assistant (Volunteer assistant at Dayton University for two years) under head coach Kelly Sheffield at the University of Wisconsin, most of my time has been spent on the analytical side. One of the great parts about being an assistant coach is that there is always a continual learning process. There is always something new you can learn and always something new you can try or research. Our staff has enjoyed working together, and whether training, recruiting, or scouting, each one of us on the coaching staff has a hand in every aspect of our program.

When I first joined the coaching staff, it was assistant coach Brittany Dildine, who introduced me to the value of using radar in practice. I had traditionally viewed radar guns as big and bulky and meant for the baseball diamond, so I was intrigued to hear about a new device Brittany had been working with. This was Pocket Radar's first generation speed measurement device (we have since upgraded to their Ball Coach radar, which was designed specifically for ball sports). By getting accurate assessments of our players' performance, we are able to relay instant feedback on what they need to do to improve.

Radar has become an integral tool during our serving practice for "Flat, Float, and Fast." We want our players to go up with a mindset of being aggressive rather than passive. We want you to get up there with confidence and strength to be able to put a ball where you want it to go. I like to use the analogy of a pitcher in baseball. They're trying to hit the edge of the strike zone (up/down or inside/outside), so we want our servers to think about what is the weakness of that passing pattern and how can they exploit it.

I have also noticed a real uptick in radar's use across multiple levels of the men's and women's game. Recently I was at a men's practice where they had the radar out focusing on their serving speed. They had a challenge going where if you get 58 MPH and above you get 4 points, 56-57 MPH 3 points etc. for their jump top spinners. When I asked the coach their serving philosophy, he focused on getting teams out of system. With the jump top-spin in their game, if the ball isn't traveling fast enough, they are just initiating a downball to their opponent. At the men's level with how powerful it is at the net with attacking and blocking, you have to be good on your first serve. If you go back and watch the Men's Final from this year you will see how Ohio State's serving neutralized the attacking ability of BYU. The coach mentioned that they will take a couple more errors, but we have to make sure we are taking teams out of system.

## **Serve & Chase Drill**

During practice we like to incorporate radar into a drill we call "Serve and Chase." This drill focuses on making sure our players have proper technique for their serves and making sure

they are accountable to themselves for the elements that we value: Flat, Float, and Fast. The more pressure we can add to them in practice, the greater ability they will have in transferring their numbers to game speed.

This drill is to help our servers focus on serving for speed and accuracy. As a program we believe that serving tougher does not necessarily correlate to having more service errors. We want our players to be accurate while also increasing the pace in which they serve. Each player will serve 10 balls in this drill. During each serve, a coach is at the net with the pocket radar to determine the speed of their serve. The players are given a 4' x 6' area on the court to serve to inside one of the six zones on the court. After each serve, the player will run and chase the ball that they served. As they chase the ball that they served, the coach will tell them their serving speed. On the player's way back to serve, they will record their serving information on a whiteboard. The evaluation criteria for our servers are as follows: MPH, Location (did they hit the Target/Zone/In/Out/Net), Float/No Float. For the target portion, they will record +2 for hitting the target, +1 for in the zone, 0 for just in, -1 for out, -2 for in the net. For the float portion, they will record a / mark for having the ball float and a ~ for a ball with spin.

An example of three serves for one of our servers would be 40 +2 ~, 38 +1 /, 42 0 /. After serving all 10 balls, our players then calculate their totals on the whiteboard looking at speed, accuracy, and the ability to consistency make the ball float. For our given example, this player would have averaged a speed of 40mph with 100% balls in, 33% to the target area, 66% to the target zone, and 66% for getting the ball to float. Each season we set metrics for what we want our players to shoot for. After a few practices, we are able to see where our players are at consistently and are able to determine what their best speed is for their serve. We look for all of our float servers to serve at a speed between 38-42 mph.

## Serve & Chase

Gary White

Assistant Coach, University of Wisconsin Women's Volleyball

**Number of Players:** Servers

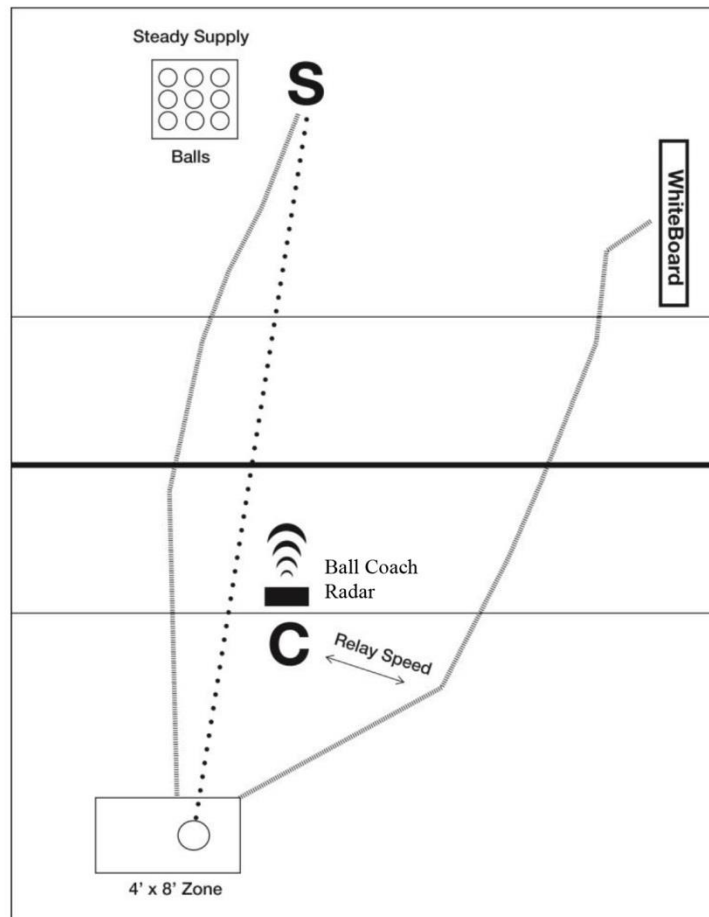
**Number of Balls:** Steady Supply

**Objective:** This drill is to help our servers focus on serving for speed and accuracy. As a program we believe that serving tougher does not necessarily correlate to serving more service errors.

### Directions:

**Important Guidelines:** The evaluation criteria for our servers is as follows: MPH, Target/Zone/In/Out/Net, Float/NoFloat. For the target portion they will record +2 for hitting the target, +1 for in the zone, 0 for in, -1 for out, -2 for in the net. For the float portion they will record a / mark for having the ball float and a ~ for not having the ball float. The Ball Coach radar is the device we use to measure the serve speeds.

1. Each player will serve 10 balls in this drill. Labeled as **S**
2. During each serve, a coach is at the net with the Ball Coach radar to determine the speed of their serve. Labeled as **C**
3. The players are given a 4' x 8' area on the court to serve to inside one of the six zones on the court.
4. After each serve, the player will run and chase the ball that they served.
5. As they chase the ball that they served, the coach will tell them their serving speed.
6. On the player's way back to serve, they will record their serving information on a whiteboard.



### Example of Scoring

	MPH	Target	Zone	In/Out	Float	No Float
Serve 1	41	+2	+1	0	/	
Serve 2	45	0	0	-1		~
Serve 3	39	+2	+1	0	/	
Serve 4	43	0	0	-1		~
Serve 5	38	+2	+1	0	/	