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Barry L. Seiller, M.D.
Medical Director, Visual Performance Center
Georgia Tech Athletic Association
Visual Fitness Institute

It has long been taken for granted that an athlete's visual skills will directly (positively or negatively) impact his or her athletic performance. Great athletes are said to possess superior visual skills. Basketball players have said that when they are in the zone, they can "see" everything that happens on the court. Exceptional baseball hitters can pick up the seams on the baseball as it leaves the pitchers hand. Football quarterbacks can pick out their receivers and accurately deliver the ball downfield. However, while many athletes will try to improve their performance through strength training and conditioning, they will often do little to improve their visual performance. Caring for or improving their visual skills often begins and ends with a trip to their team or local eye care professional to be fit with glasses or contact lenses. They ignore an aspect of their athletic skills which can be trained and improved like any other. The same holds true in the sport of volleyball.

Like other athletes, volleyball players are often unaware that visual skills can be evaluated, trained, practiced, and improved: These visual skills include:

- Visual Acuity - Good eyesight is the foundation for all the visual abilities. Every athlete should strive for optimal vision; 20/20 or better with or without correction.
- Eye alignment - The aiming of the two eyes is the skill which allows the player to "watch the ball". Inaccurate aiming of the two eyes impacts the perception of the position of the ball. Deficiencies in eye alignment can cause errors in the timing of attacks, tips, kills and serve reception.
- Depth Perception - This skill requires the efficient use of the two eyes together. It enables a player to correctly perceive where the ball is in free space as well as other players.
- Eye Flexibility - Binocular eye movements shifting from near to far quickly and

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One of the critical differences between athletes is their visual skills and visual abilities.

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- accurately will influence decision making and execution of receiving a serve.
- Visual Recognition - An athlete uses the skill of processing visual information to determine angles, speed and rotation of the ball, position of players on court, and position of service lines and distance of the net.
- Visual Memory - This skill makes up a player's ability to implement strategy of the game based on the visual information and call upon previous visual experiences on court. The skills of recognition and memory are used by the athlete to gain a sense of court awareness and initiate offensive and defensive movements.
- Visual Tracking - The eye movements used to scan the playing area and follow the ball in flight.
- Hand-eye-body coordination -The motor movements made by an athlete is a result of the quality of input visual information. The eyes lead the body.

At The Homer Rice Center and The Visual Fitness Institute, we have demonstrated that these visual skills like all physical skills can be taught, trained, practiced and improved. We're not talking just 20/20 eyesight, which is essential, but how athletes use the information transferred from their eyes to actions on the court. Most players are similar in size, speed, and conditioning and all have learned the basic techniques, but we have found one of the critical differences between athletes is their visual skills and visual abilities. Chances are that every athlete can improve in one or more of these visual skill areas, i.e. visual acuity, visual recognition skills, depth perception, tracking or focusing abilities or even eyesight. These skills are interrelated and when utilized together, refine hand eye-body coordination and help a player "see and process everything that is occurring on the court". Good visual skills are important in all aspects of volleyball, but are especially crucial in the following volleyball skills:

SERVING

In the overhand serve being able to arm toss the ball precisely so it falls to the spot just inside of the lead foot and in line with the hitting shoulder. Guiding the hand so that it follows the ball to the target. Finishing with the hand along side or within the body line.

SETTING

- Being able to place the hands directly in front of the face close to the forehead.
- Facing where the ball is coming from.
- Anticipating the correct contact point.
- Keeping the hands the same distance apart upon completion as they were during contact and follow through.

HITTING/SPIKING

- Being in the draw position.
- Determining speed, rotation, trajectory, and direction of the ball.
- Being able to ascertain the correct contact point which is usually slightly in front of and as high as possible above the hitting shoulder.
- Contacting the ball at the peak of the jump with a straight arm leading with the elbow.
- Landing balanced in the correct spot which should be no more than one foot past the contact point.

BLOCKING

- Watching the setter's hands before the ball is set.
- Moving correctly into the hitter's angle of approach.
- Watching the hitter's attacking shoulder and line of swing
- Watching the blockers hands press into the line of attack.

GENERAL

- Quickly processing visual information to assist in correct decision making.
- Correctly perceiving the position of teammates and opponents.
- Knowing your position in relation to sidelines, baseline, and service line (court

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awareness).

DEFENSE/COVERAGE

- Eye hand coordination to contact deflection off the block
- Tracking ball as it is contacted with spin and the hitter's angle of approach
- Shooting platform for a dig to contact and place ball

Georgia Tech Yellow Jacket Volleyball players, along with other student athletes, have the opportunity to improve their athletic skills at Georgia Tech's Homer Rice Center. There they can take advantage of the first of its kind Visual Performance Center to sharpen their visual skills with the expectation of improvement on the court or on the field. The visual performance program is one of the most utilized voluntary programs at the Homer Rice. This program, which is directed by the Visual Fitness Institute, has now become an integral part of each student athlete's testing and training program. Athletes using the program have noticed an improvement, not only in their visual and athletic performance, but also in their academic performance as well.

A recent improvement to the vision program has been the development of the Visual Edge Performance Trainer™ (VEPT). This CD-Rom, is cutting edge technology currently used by individual athletes, as well as by Olympic and professional teams. One of its advantages is that it can be utilized by athletes on personal computers from the comfort of their home, dorm room, or on the road. It is designed to evaluate and train visual skills, creates scoring profiles, is user friendly and interactive. Additional information about the Visual Edge Performance Trainer can be found at www.vizualedge.com. Additional information about visual skills or information in this article contact Dr. Seiller through www.vizualfitness.com.



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