

Texts and Conventions of Volleyball

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In this article, Millie Dunbar explores the texts and conventions of the game of volleyball. Her use of a variety of strategies including ethnography, interviews, and secondary research illustrates the ways writing researchers can dig into the specifics of a complex activity system.

As a long-time player and fan of volleyball, I started to wonder what texts and conventions relate to the sport I am so familiar with. In order to really dig into an exploration of volleyball and the different genres involved with the game, I decided to look at volleyball as an activity system. The activity system of volleyball involves all the people, texts, tools, and rules that work together in the course of a volleyball game. So, in my research, I looked at the culture of volleyball, including features of the sport such as the supportive talk of the players and the uniforms they wear. As I explored the volleyball activity system, I came to realize just how big of a role power plays in relation to the actors involved in the activity system (both human and nonhuman). In this article, I describe the research I conducted, what I discovered about the volleyball activity system, how power comes into play, and some of the key aspects of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) that I found connections to along the way.

My Research

A major part of my knowledge of the rules of volleyball is based off of my prior experience with coaching, playing, and refereeing volleyball games. In other words, when I started this study, I brought quite a bit of **antecedent genre knowledge** with me to the project. However, for the purpose of this article, I also researched the history of the sport and the rules of volleyball to ensure the information in this article was credible. To find information on volleyball rules, for instance, I conducted a Google search for “official volleyball rules.” Out of the 2,820,000 results, I chose to use a PDF file of official volleyball rules from the Fédération Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB) to fact-check what I already knew about the sport. I chose this source because FIVB is the international governing body for volleyball. In addition, I conducted a search for “history of volleyball” on Google. At first the 83,700,000 results that came up seemed overwhelming, but I began by browsing the websites that appeared at the top of the search engine. One of the websites that seemed most reliable was *Volleyball.org*, because it was hosted by an organization called Volleyball World Wide, which has more than 23,000 members.

Beyond my secondary research—that is, the research I conducted online—I also decided my project would benefit from some primary research methods. These included conducting an ethnography, in which I took detailed notes on a key NCAA volleyball game from 2013 that I watched on YouTube. This allowed me to observe the activity actually taking place during a specific volleyball game. I also interviewed two people with whom I played intramural volleyball. One of them has played volleyball for seven years, and the other has played for eight. They both have experience playing volleyball in both club and high school settings. I thought this experience gave them credibility as sources for my research, so I asked them a variety of questions about volleyball, including what positions they played, how they saw the setup of the court affecting their activity in those positions, how jersey colors influenced their perception of both their own and other teams, and more. Their responses contributed to the information presented here.

A Bit of History

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) provides a means of studying an activity system while also considering how the objects, ideas, and genres used are closely tied to certain cultural values and certain points in history. For my research project, I knew I wanted to start out by learning more about the history of the sport I was studying. From *Volleyball.org*, I learned that the game of volleyball was created by William G. Morgan in 1895 at a YMCA in Massachusetts by combining basketball, tennis, baseball, and handball. Morgan created the game

“for his classes of businessmen which would demand less physical contact than basketball. Morgan borrowed the net from tennis, and raised it 6 feet 6 inches above the floor, just above the average man’s head” (“History of Volleyball”).

Learning about the history of volleyball provides us with an idea of when the sport was invented and what sports it was derived from. If people are not familiar with volleyball, knowing about the other sports involved in its creation may help them better visualize what volleyball is like. For example, when someone wants to serve, they might dribble the ball before they throw it up in the air to serve it. Dribbling is a key component of basketball, and often basketball players have a routine in which they dribble prior to shooting a free throw as well. Volleyball also has many similarities to tennis with regard to how the two courts are set up.

The Volleyball Court

The volleyball court is a particularly important component of the game. There are many different rules that go along with playing volleyball that influence the actors and activity that takes place on the court. The lines on the volleyball court (Figure 1) are designed to provide certain players with certain privileges that other players might not have. Many key rules revolve around the ten-foot line, which is the white line between the net and the end line that separates the back row from the front row. The ten-foot line is the most important line in volleyball. Front row players are allowed to hit from wherever they want to on the court, while back row players who hit the ball over the net can only jump in the back row behind the ten-foot line.

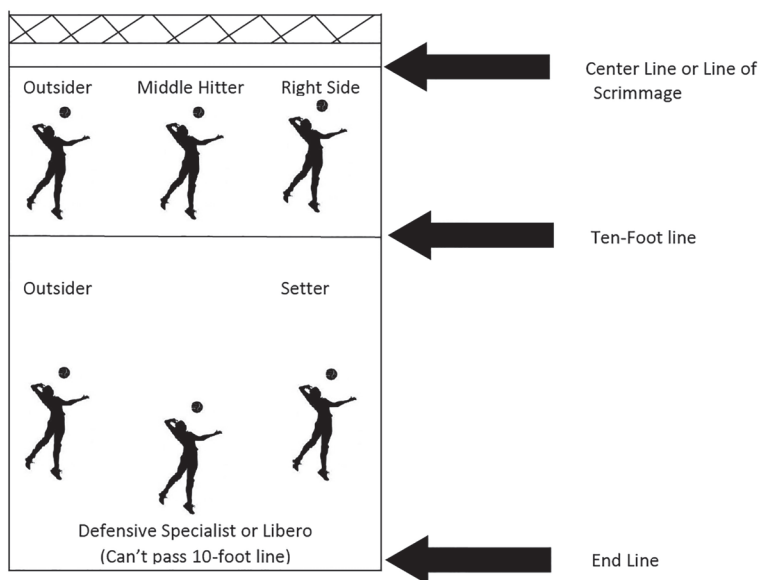


Figure 1: The lines on one half of the volleyball court in relation to where players are positioned. Diagram created by author. Volleyball player from Clipart Panda.¹

Another important line is the line of scrimmage, which is located at the center of the court underneath the net. This line, along with the net, separates the two teams from one another. The players are allowed to cross the line, but not with their entire body or a limb. For example, players are allowed to put their toes over the line, but not their entire foot. Players are also not allowed to touch the white tape along the top of the volleyball net (Figure 2). Two antennas are attached to the volleyball net. One of the antennas is lined up with the out-of-bounds line on one side of the court and the other one is lined up with the out-of-bounds line on the other side of the court. If the ball goes outside of the antenna, it is out.

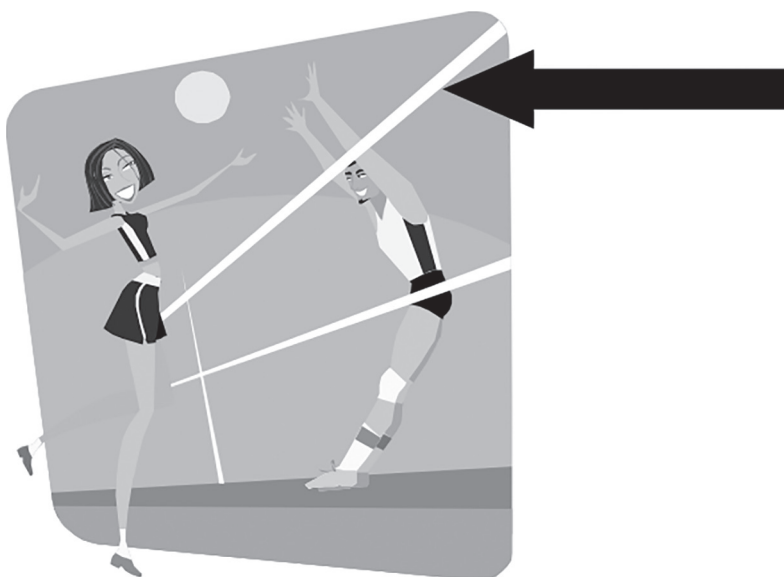


Figure 2: Notice the white tape along the top of the volleyball net. Players can't touch this tape. Diagram created by author. Volleyball clipart and arrow from Microsoft Word.

In addition to the ten-foot line and the line of scrimmage, the end line also influences the activity that occurs on the court. Players have to serve from behind the end line. Touching the end line when serving results in a foot fault, which means it is automatically the other team's serve, unless the player does a jump serve. With a jump serve, players have to jump before the white line but are allowed to land inside the court ("Official Volleyball Rules 2013–2016").

These particular details of the court are important because they help signify to the players what they can or can't do during a game. If the players who are on the court during the game do not follow the rules associated with these different lines, their team could potentially lose. Yet the overall dimensions of the court—fifty-nine feet by six inches—also influence the activity that takes place on the court. To gain a point, the players have to keep the ball inbounds, which means they have to use hand-eye coordination

and the right amount of force to hit the ball in the correct spot. If they use too much power, they could hit the ball out of play on the other side of the court. However, if the ball is on their side of the court, then as long as they stay on their side of the net, and the ball doesn't hit a wall or leave the sport court, they can use all the physical space they need to keep the ball in play, even if they go outside the lines of the court.

Although the six players on each side of the net are the key actors in the activity of the volleyball game, other actors are also influenced by the setup of the court. The coaches as well as the players who are not currently in the game have to stand just outside of the court on one side of the out-of-bounds line. Referees also have very specific positions on the court (Figure 3). The “up referee” is the head referee who oversees the entire game, while the “down referee” makes net calls (“Official Volleyball Rules 2013–2016”). The line judges, as the name implies, watch for whether people serving step over the line and determine whether the ball is inside or outside the parameters of the court when it hits the ground.

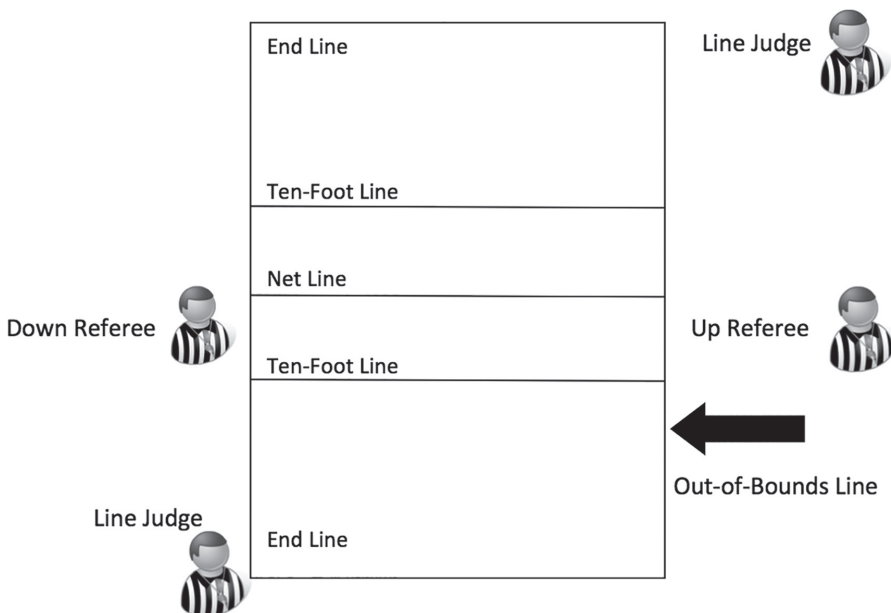


Figure 3: Diagram of the different lines on the court and the positions of the referees. The down referee is located on the floor. The up referee is located on a stand positioned next to the net. Diagram created by author. Referee image from Microsoft Word.

The rules the players on the court have to follow and the referees have to enforce can seem really complicated, but these rules are necessary, partly because of the many different positions on the court. It might be complex, but the net, the lines on the court, and the rules all work together to ensure everything proceeds as it should during a volleyball game.

The Volleyball Players

The players on the court were central to my research into the volleyball activity system, as illustrated in Figure 4. All the other actors involved in a volleyball game—including the bookkeeper, the court, the scoreboard, the uniforms, the coaches, and the referees—can be connected together through the player. Each volleyball player on the court has a specific position he or she is assigned to play. Certain players are assigned certain positions so there is organization on the court rather than the chaos of everyone aggressively running for the ball at the same time.

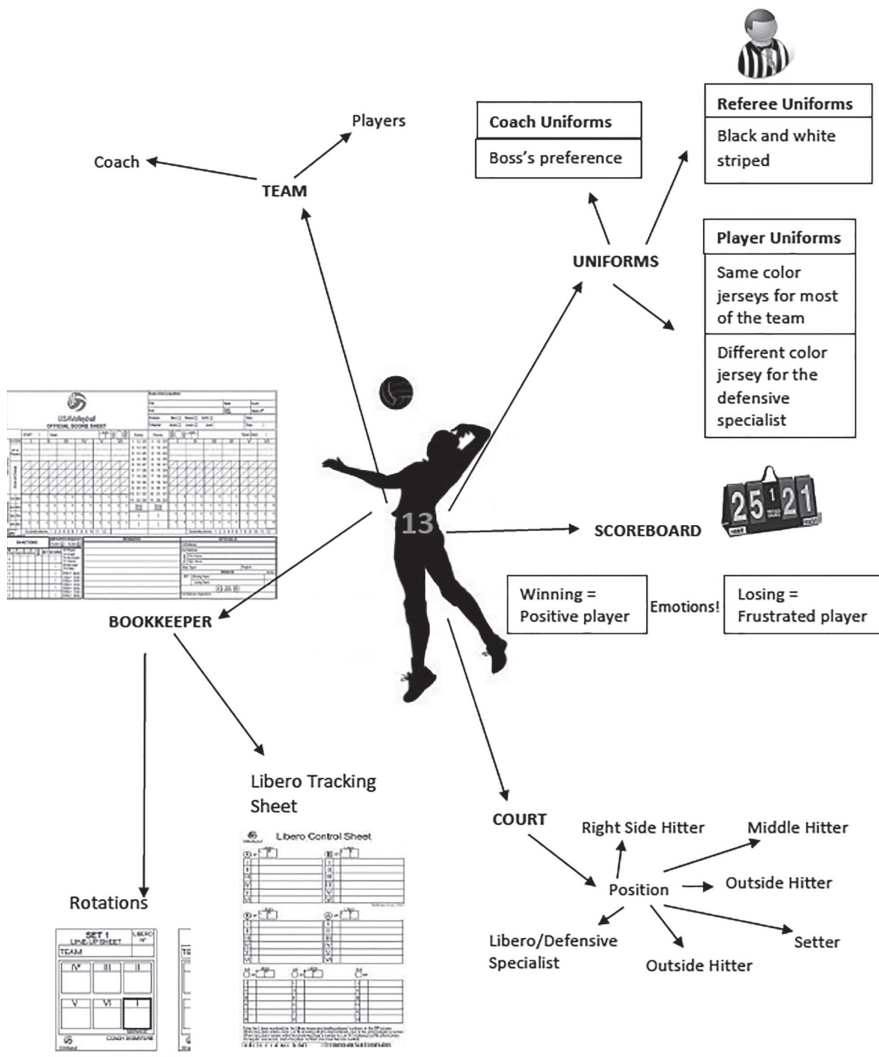


Figure 4: The volleyball player is the central component of the activity system. Diagram created by author. Volleyball score sheet and libero tracking sheet from Strength and Power for Volleyball.² Volleyball line-up sheet from CoachRey.com.³

At any given time, six players on the court will fill the following roles: two outside hitters, one middle hitter, one right-side hitter, one setter (optional to have two setters), and one libero, or defensive specialist. The outside hitters are supposed to be some of the strongest people on the court, with diverse ball-hitting skills and the ability to pass extremely well. The middle hitter is the tallest player on the court and also one of the strongest players. Middle hitters have to hit the ball straight down on the other side of the court so it stays in, often around the opposing team's blocker. This means that the physical space or allowance for movement around middle hitters is much smaller than for other players. Right-side hitters are normally left-handed players, which gives them the same ability the outside hitter has. The libero is considered the best passer on the court and stays in the back row to hit balls being spiked over the net. The setters usually get the second hit so they can set up their teammates for a hit over the net.

The Uniforms

Uniforms are a huge part of volleyball culture. The players, coaches, and referees all wear different uniforms that distinguish them from one another. The players on a team all have the same color jersey except the libero, who wears a different color jersey. The different color jersey signifies to the referee that the libero can move around differently than the rest of the players. The libero can enter and leave the court in the back row whenever they want without having to worry about an official substitution into the game. Often, the libero comes in to replace a middle or outside hitter whose passing skills aren't as good ("Official Volleyball Rules 2013–2016").

Uniform color combinations can influence perceptions about a certain team. For example, my club's colors were blue, green, and white, which weren't nearly as intimidating uniform colors as the combination of red, black, and white that other teams wore. The red, white, and black were more intimidating because they look sharper as a uniform and made the girls look tougher than those who had on the lighter colors.

Yet there also are a number of key components besides jersey color that are important when it comes to players' uniforms. Players' numbers, for instance, help to identify them on the court and make it easier for bookkeepers and team managers to keep track of statistics during the game. When it comes to club volleyball, uniforms can say a lot about how well a certain club is funded. For instance, certain clubs with sponsorships may have matching knee pads or shoes for all players on the team. Although matching uniforms don't necessarily mean a team is better, they can create the impression that certain teams are more prepared.

Other actors involved in volleyball wear certain clothes for certain reasons as well. For instance, coaches may be expected to dress up or dress more casually in team colors. Referees always have to wear black-and-white striped shirts with black pants. The exception to this is when the down referee is actually a player from the game, who will be in a team uniform. During a tournament, club teams may be required to supply people to keep score, keep track of the libero, serve as a line judge, keep track of the score book, or serve as a down referee. In these instances, they will not wear the black-and-white uniforms the up referees have to wear.

The Mental Game

Volleyball isn't just about the physical act of hitting the ball. It's also a mind sport. If a player makes one mistake, she has to shake it off and try to get the next point. Some players let their mistakes get the better of them and that makes them frustrated, which the majority of the time makes their playing worse rather than benefitting them. One way that players try to overcome "head games" is by working as a team to cheer each other up. This is called "supportive talk." Supportive talk can include saying things like "good job," "good try," or "shake it off, you will get the next point." The scoreboard can also mess with players' emotions, as shown in the previous diagram (Figure 4). If the team is winning, a player may be positive, but if the team is losing, they are more likely to become negative or frustrated, which can then lead the activity on the court to break down if a player's teammates do not utilize supportive talk or other means to help their teammate stay focused.

Communication is a huge component of volleyball. If there isn't communication, then mistakes are made and games are lost. The necessity of communication in volleyball isn't something that is easy to see from reading rulebooks or finding sources online, however. So, in order to better understand what team communication looks like on the court, I conducted an ethnographic report. An ethnography is a study of people and a culture that involves taking detailed, in-depth notes of everyday life and practices in that culture. In this case, I watched a recording of the Wisconsin versus Texas 2013 NCAA National Women's Volleyball Semifinals game on YouTube and closely observed and took notes on the activity happening during the game. As I watched the game, I noticed that whenever someone made a mistake, the teammates on the floor would all group together in the middle and tell each other to shake it off and offer encouragement. If someone got a point for their team, then the same thing would happen, except they would all cheer for each other.

I also realized just how important it was for the main actors on the court—the players—to work together. For example, if one of the girls made a bad pass and the ball went the opposite way of where it was supposed to go, every player on the team would then chase after the ball to try to save it. No one would give up on a ball or let it drop without attempting to dive for it. As the saying goes, “There is no ‘I’ in team.” Although each player had her own individual position and job on the court, they all knew that their actions had to come together in order for the team to succeed.

As I took notes on the semifinal game, I also noticed another group of actors I had not previously considered: the crowd. The crowd’s support can have an effect on the team. When a player made an awesome play, or the team earned a point, the crowd supporting that team would cheer. However, sometimes the crowd would not be supportive, particularly of a referee’s call or a coach’s decision. This may result in the crowd yelling at one another or at the other actors because they are so invested in the game.

Power

During the course of my research regarding the activity system of volleyball, I realized just how much power comes into play. There are multiple actors who have power throughout the game. As discussed previously, different players on the court have power in different situations—for instance, the setter generally has control over the second hit for his or her team, and the libero has a level of power other players don’t because of his or her ability to go in and out of the game with more flexibility. Coaches also possess power in regard to determining who is allowed into or taken out of the game. In addition, the bookkeepers who keep track of statistics for the game have the power to identify whether someone is out of rotation.

Yet of all the actors on the court, perhaps those with the most power are the referees. The referees are certified and are hired to take charge of the game and enforce the rules. Certification varies depending on whether a referee is working for club organizations, high school or college teams, or the pro circuit. When I researched volleyball referee certifications, I came across information on becoming a referee with USA Volleyball, which is a club organization at the high school level. In order to be certified, referees need to attend multiple trainings or complete certification online. Referees must choose which level they want to be a referee for; whether they want to be trained for indoor, outdoor, or beach volleyball; and which position they wish

to hold. Once referees are certified and begin working at games, they wear uniforms as a signal of their authority. Another object that affects referees' power is the rulebook. The rulebook has been around since volleyball has started, but it evolves from year to year, and referees are the actors in the activity system who are most up-to-date on what all of the rules are because they are charged with enforcing them.

Through my research, I have learned that all the actors who are involved with the game of volleyball have power at some point, but the overall outcome of the game depends on how the actors use their knowledge of that power to help them succeed during a game.

For the Win

My study of the activity system of volleyball explored the history of the game and the actors involved, ranging from the players on the court and the uniforms they wear to nonhuman actors such as the rulebook and net. In order to conduct this research, I drew on my own knowledge as a volleyball player, online secondary research, and interviews with two former volleyball players, and conducted an ethnographic report of a specific NCAA volleyball game. From researching and writing this article, I discovered just how much we can learn about a topic that already seems familiar to us if we are willing to explore it in greater detail, particularly by delving into a specific activity system. I grew up with the game of volleyball and, once I started playing, it became second nature to me. However, through my research for this article, I came to realize just how complex volleyball really is.

Endnotes

¹Volleyball player silhouette image used here and in Figure 4 found at <http://www.clipartpanda.com/categories/volleyball-player-silhouette-clipart>.

²Score card image found at <http://www.strength-and-power-for-volleyball.com/images/scorekeeping-volleyball-scoresheet.jpg>. Libero tracking sheet image found at <http://www.strength-and-power-for-volleyball.com/libero-tracker.html>.

³Volleyball line-up sheet image found at <http://coachrey.com/resources/volleyball-coach-resources/>.

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