



## **HOW CAN I SPIKE HARDER?**

First off, you should understand to hit the ball harder, you just need to swing your arm faster. Stop working so hard on hitting the ball harder, and instead focus on swinging your arm faster. When players go for hitting harder, they tighten up the muscles in the shoulder girdle and cannot unleash as fast an armswing as they might have. Swing fast, swing faster. The quandary is, when you first start to swing faster, or as fast as you can, you are not as accurate.

*Speed first, accuracy second.* You should swing away while you are young, even if you lose, as you will stay fast and be more accurate as time goes on. Andre Agassi said it best when he was young – “I hit the ball as hard as I could, I found the court later.” Tiger Woods said the same thing when he said, “I hit the ball as hard as I could and found the fairway later.” Be patient. Accuracy should be sought, WITH speed, not at the sacrifice of speed.

*See how fast you can really swing.* Swing your arm at the ball against a wall where anything from floor to ceiling is “accurate enough” while seeing how fast you can swing your arm. The idea here is to get a feeling of how fast you can really swing, if accuracy is not a worry. That is the swing wanted, when in the air spiking.

*Open the door. Slam the door.* Much of the power in serving and hitting comes from torque...that same twist baseball pitchers use to fall off the mound. Only we spikers have to do it in the air! You need to develop powerful torque by opening up, sometimes called “bow and arrow.” The key is to open up after takeoff (open the door) then as you swing that fast arm, close off (slam the door) with as much power and speed as you can. Like the armswing, timing is just as vital and takes a long period to learn for most players.

*Jump so the ball is “neutral.”* You want to jump so the ball is in line with your hitting shoulder. Often you’ll jump and the ball ends up falling to the right or left of your shoulder forcing you to only hit line or a cross court shot with no other choice. If you jump so the ball is falling directly in front of your shoulder, you can *choose* to hit line, cross court, or cut.

*Jump so the ball is in front of your hitting shoulder.* Hitting the ball with power requires the ball be in FRONT of your shoulder. If you jump and the ball is too far in front, you will have power but likely not be able to hit the ball over the net. If you jump so the ball is too far behind you, you will be able to get the ball over the net but lose a large amount of power. Some players compensate by arching their back to get the ball back in front of their hitting shoulder but then develop injuries or soreness in their lower back.

*Hit 3 meter line first and every practice.* Coaches spend their lives begging the hitter (and setters) to stay off the net. That is due in large part to the tradition of hitting tight sets right on the net. Not only are



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these sets easier to block for any sized player, it also makes for more ankle sprains and injuries. The BEST way to learn to spike (or spike harder) is to first hit balls from behind the 3 meter attack line. You will want your sets to be about 12-15 feet high (see the impact of higher sets elsewhere in this article).

*Always follow-through.* What kind of a tennis serve would a player have if they stopped at full reach after striking the ball? How many home runs will you hit if you stop your bat after you swing for the seats? Too many young players slow or stop their arms after hitting the ball. Let your arm whip through the ball, and slow naturally down by your waist area.

*Remember how hard this is.* The volleyball spike is the ONLY action in sport where maximum effort is done unsupported every time. Basketball players do not take jump shots from full court every time, nor do baseball batters have to jump and swing to hit homeruns. Volleyball is also the only sport where the maximum effort, jumping, is followed immediately by another max effort, spiking the ball. It takes a LOT of repetitions and good timing to hit that sweet spot in time.

*Timing is core to the success of hitting hard.* The best way to learn timing is to hit real set balls so you can time them. They can be random in pattern after learning the basics from a same set ball. Random training is better for superior learning/remembering.

*High sets are the hardest to time and learn from.* Yet, that is the ball most kids start with, supposedly to get more time to figure out where the ball is falling and gives them time to get there. The lower the set, the slower the ball falls through the sweet spot hitting zone. High sets come down ripping through this sweet spot strike zone and players most often hit them into the net as they swing a tiny bit too late and thus make contact too low. Basically, the higher the set compared to what you are used to, the sooner/faster you need to swing your arm to still hit it at full extension.

*Why is it so hard to hit at full extension?* Timing, timing, timing. You've all heard the coach say, "Reach!" / "Get on top of the ball!" / "Don't drop your elbow!" and variations on those technique comments. It's not that you don't understand you need to reach and hit the ball, it's that you don't understand the timing yet. Keep at it and you'll get it!

*Jump Serve.* This lets you set yourself, develop an over the net armswing, and unleash a lot of power. It is a closed motor program so you time things better than when someone is "surprising you" with their set variations. You control the set, the height, distance, etc. You likely will get better faster with the jump serve than your spike. Even if young, jump serving lets you crank on the ball, so never give up, just keep swinging.

**I hope this helps you see the many parts and ways to become a more powerful spiker. Good luck and have fun as a better terminator!**

- John Kessel, USA Volleyball Educator

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