

THE EVOLUTION OF OFFENSE IN MEN'S VOL

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Throughout the history of volleyball there have been teams that have paved the way for many of the offensive systems today. If we look at the many types of offensive systems that have been successful, it is interesting to find that they vary greatly in styles. The key to the success was the level that the teams were able to execute their systems.

One of the most challenging offensive systems was introduced by Japan during their run for the Gold Medal in 1972. In this offense their setter was the primary key to the system. The incomparable, *Nekoda*, ran the system. He had a very deceptive release of

the ball with his back to the net and his hands in varying po-

sitions. This technique was used in order to keep blockers from reading his release.

In the Japanese system it was not uncommon for the setter to reverse the order of the hitters in a play from one rotation to the next. The player that was the quick hitter the first time through the rotation, might hit the combination or left side the next. Often there were two quick hitters and these players might vary from rotation to rotation.

In this offensive system with their exceptional setter, the Japanese team was able to mount a successful bid for the 1972 Olympic Gold Medal.

One of the sport's most successful teams was the Soviet Union. A primary set in their offensive system was the 3-1 or wide quick. By running very talented and athletic middle hitters, like *Alexander Savin*, in to this wide zone the Soviet team was able to put pressure on the opponent's middle blockers. The opponent was required to make several deci-

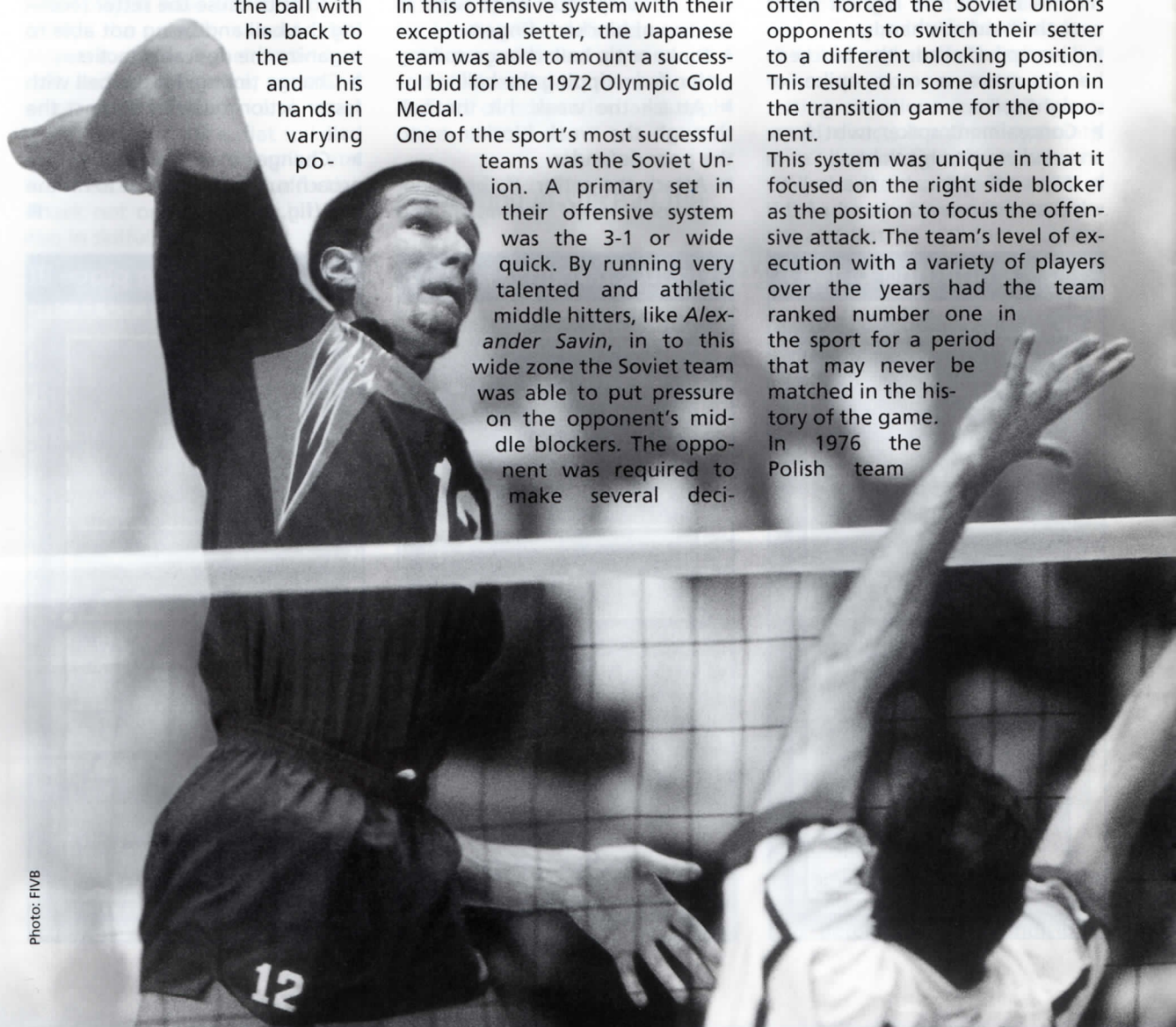
sions. Would they try and stop the 3-1 and give the Soviet's right side hitter a one on one block situation or try and stop the middle hitter with the right front blocker? To further complicate the decision process the Soviet team also ran a series of combination plays around the 3-1 hitter. By bringing the outside hitter in the left front to a position behind the 3-1 hitter, that player could hit combination plays around the middle hitter. This offense kept the blockers from being able to make a single adjustment to counter attack the 3-1 set.

Often smaller setters were blocking on the right side. This offense often forced the Soviet Union's opponents to switch their setter to a different blocking position. This resulted in some disruption in the transition game for the opponent.

This system was unique in that it focused on the right side blocker as the position to focus the offensive attack. The team's level of execution with a variety of players over the years had the team ranked number one in the sport for a period that may never be matched in the history of the game. In 1976 the Polish team



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stopped the Soviet's dominance with a significant win at the Olympic Games using a completely different offensive system.

This system utilized the right side combination as a primary focus in the 6-2 rotations and the use of a hitter out of the back row in position one in the 4-2 rotations.

The combination series included as many as 5 or more different sets. The playset option could be called verbally by the combination hitter after the ball was in play. The very talented, *Stan Goscinia*k keyed the offense. He was required to make the correct read on the block while listening for the option called by the combination hitter. While extremely effective, it was a very difficult system to learn and execute.

The Most Valuable Player of the 1976 Olympics was *Thomas Wojtowicz*. While a very good hitter and blocker at the net, much of Poland's success was based on his ability to hit out of the back row. Other teams had used the back row option before but this was the first time that back row hitting had made such a tremendous impact on the game in a major event.

The next major innovation in offense came when USA Coach *Doug Beal* introduced a revolutionary new concept called the swing hitter. In this offensive system the two outside hitters received all serves. Previously teams had received with 3 or 4 passers. By placing these two hitters deeper into the court they were now in a position to move laterally to attack anywhere along the net.

This system allowed the two best passers on the team to handle almost every serve. The only exception being when the opponent was jump serving. On the jump serve, a designated third passer would step in to cover a very small area and the two primary passers handled the remainder of the court.

The rules up to 1984 allowed for blocking of the serve. When the opponent had an effective jump server the USA would put at least one and sometimes two blockers to force the jump serve into a specific area of the court. This would allow for the passers to have a much smaller area to cover. By using this tactic in the Gold Medal match at the 1984 Olympics, the USA was able to defeat a very strong Brazilian team that had previously beaten the Americans in a match earlier in the tournament.

By 1988 the USA had furthered the system under head coach *Marv Dunphy* to include double quick options that utilized the swing hitter running combinations around the two quick hitters. An additional back row option was available from both the right and left back row positions. With this system, the block was consistently dealing with four hitters. They could not simply focus on trying to keep track of the swing hitter. If block followed the swing hitter there would be a back row option attacking from the area that the swing hitter had just vacated.

By creating movement and four hitter patterns the USA was able to win every major event from the 1984 to the 1988 Olympics including the World Championships, the World Cup and the Super Four. Since the development of the swing system there have been different variations that have been developed into many of the offensive systems that we see today. Successful teams like Brazil, Netherlands, and Italy have adapted this system to fit their teams with much success.

Because the jump serve has developed into such a powerful weapon, the offenses today are designed to counter attack off of the jump serve. The emphasis is in trying to attack from antennae to antennae as quickly as possible.

The quick hitter must be able to adapt since there are a high number of 2 point passes because of the jump serving. Middle hitters must have the ability to change their patterns after the ball has been passed in order to make themselves an available option for the setters. This is usually through the use of verbal options as the play develops.

The back row attack is now being hit extensively from position six at front row combination tempo. This set forces the defense to keep the blockers from releasing to the outsides even on poor passes. The back row attack from any position is being hit at speeds and tempos equivalent to that of the front row attack.

While today's offenses may be less complicated than others in the past, the speed and dynamic ability of today's hitters allows for the offense to continue to dominate the defense statistically.

With the addition of the libero rule, the options for the offense become even more complicated. Do teams give up a potential hitter to try and increase the passing efficiency? Or is it better to keep all the players on the court available to hit? These questions and many more will need to be answered before we see the next innovation in offensive systems.

As we can see in this brief analysis, there have been many different styles and offensive systems used successfully by teams in the past. In most cases, they were unique and innovative in their approach to the game. By developing a "new" style and executing their system to a high level these teams were able to distinguish themselves.

The development of the next innovative offensive system is yet to be determined. Which team will be creative and evolve a new system with today's rules and set the offensive standards for the future?