How to play volleyball

The game on one sheet: the goal, one rally, the scoring and the five skills to learn first. By Ryan Walker

The game in five lines

- **The goal.** Make the ball land on the other side of the net before it lands on yours.
- **Teams.** Six players a side indoors, on an 18 x 9 m court (59 x 29.5 ft). Beach is two a side on 16 x 8 m.
- **Three touches.** Each side gets up to three touches to send the ball back, usually pass, set, attack. A block touch does not count.
- **No player touches it twice in a row,** and nobody catches, holds or throws the ball. Any body part is legal, feet included.
- **Every rally scores a point.** Sets go to 25, win by 2. A deciding set goes to 15. Win the serve back and you rotate one spot clockwise.

One rally, step by step

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Serve	**Pass**	**Set**	**Attack**	**Block**	**Dig**	**Point**
from behind the end line	touch 1: forearms to the setter	touch 2: fingertips to a hitter	touch 3: hit it down over the net	their front row at the net; not a touch	their touch 1 off the attack	ball lands or a fault: someone scores

The five skills, in the order to learn them

- **1. Forearm pass (bump).** Flat platform, thumbs together, arms straight. Angle the platform to the target; don't swing.
- **2. Serve.** Start underhand from a few steps inside the end line, then move back. Learn overhand once 8 of 10 go in.
- **3. Set.** Hands up early in a window above your forehead, catch-shape fingers, push with the legs and arms together.
- **4. Attack.** Learn the approach (for a right-hander: left, right, left) before the arm swing. Contact the ball in front of your hitting shoulder.
- **5. Block.** Hands up and over the net, thumbs up, eyes on the hitter. Don't swing at the ball and don't touch the net.

Faults that cost beginners the most points

- **Missed serves.** Into the net or out. A slower serve that goes in beats a hard one that doesn't.
- **The ball nobody called.** It drops between two players. Call "mine" early and loudly.
- **Lifts and double hits.** The ball has to bounce off the hands, not rest in them.
- **Net touches** while playing the ball, and stepping fully across the centre line.

Your first game

Where to stand, what to say, and how indoor, beach and grass differ.

Before the first serve

- **Know your spot.** Front row is zones 4, 3, 2 (left to right), back row is 5, 6, 1. Zone 1 serves.
- **Know your neighbours.** Until the ball is served, stay in order with the teammates beside you and in front of or behind you.
- **Ready position.** Feet wider than shoulders, knees bent, weight forward, arms out in front. Move your feet before your arms.
- **Shoes and pads.** Court shoes with gum soles grip a gym floor; running shoes slide. Knee pads help once you start diving.

During the rally

- **Talk.** "Mine" to claim it, "help" when you need someone to take the next touch, "out" to let a ball go.
- **Pass high and to the middle.** A high pass to the middle of your court gives a teammate time, even if it is not perfect.
- **Third touch goes over.** If your team has used two touches, the third player's only job is to get it over.
- **After the serve,** move to where you play. Front-row players get ready to block or hit; back-row players defend.

Indoor, beach and grass at a glance

	Indoor	Beach	Grass (rec)
Players a side	6	2 (also 4 or 6 in rec)	2, 4 or 6
Court	18 x 9 m	16 x 8 m	Varies
Set length	25 (deciding set 15)	21 (third set 15)	League rules
Block counts as a touch?	No	Yes	League rules
Rotation	Six spots, clockwise	Serving order only	League rules

Your first month of practice

- **Week 1:** pass to yourself, then to a partner. Count how many in a row you can keep up.
- **Week 2:** underhand serves at a target zone. Then serve and pass with a partner.
- **Week 3:** pass, set, catch. Add a third player who catches the set where a hitter would be.
- **Week 4:** play 3 v 3 or 4 v 4 on a short court. Small games give everyone more touches than 6 v 6.

Coach's tip: learn to pass before anything else. Every good rally starts with the first touch.
Rules differ by level. Check your league's rules sheet for set length, subs and net height.