

# A Tale of Two Worlds (Championships)

by Erik Shoji / September 16, 2009

Hi, my name is Erik Shoji and I am from Honolulu, Hawaii. I am currently a sophomore at Stanford University, and have played libero for the USA Youth and Junior National Team the past four years. I have participated in two NORCECA Championships in Bayaguana, Dominican Republic and San Salvador, El Salvador, and two FIVB World Championships in Baja, Mexico and Pune, India.

Over the four years of my USA Volleyball experience I have been asked countless times why I would choose to play over the summer when all I did was play during the rest of the year? Every time I answer the same way: "I play with USA Volleyball over the summer to have the chance to compete against the best players in the country and from around the world. Also, when you have the chance to compete in any competition for your country you do it." You see, deciding to play for USA Volleyball, which would mean being away from family and friends for about a month, offered the unique opportunity to play with some of the best players and coaches in the country while living in Olympic Training Center.

Playing for USA Volleyball has been instrumental in my development as a player. Being forced to play with several other players from around the country that you just met presents both its challenges and advantages that every player must adjust to. It is impossible for every player to get along from the get go, which allows each and every one of us to see how we can overcome our differences. Having to do this has helped teach me some great lessons in patience, perseverance, toughness, and appreciation, all of which have helped me in my progression as a player. Also, playing under different coaches than you are used to challenges you to make adjustments to your overall game and attitude on and off the court. It has been so beneficial having to learn how to adjust to other people in such a short amount of time in order to achieve a common goal.

Along with what I said above, competing for USA Volleyball at international tournaments has helped me develop physically, mentally, and emotionally. Below are my experiences that have helped develop each aspect of my game

## Physically

Playing against international competition showed me how well skilled other players were from around the world. While the hitting of the other teams was astonishing, it was not that that caught my eyes. It was their skills in every aspect of game that amazed me. They were pure, precise, learned, and very fundamental, and unlike I had ever seen before. Their ability to control the ball on every touch was eye opening for me, and I realized that teams like Brazil, Cuba and Argentina weren't winning because of hard hitting, they were winning because they could do every part of the game well, including passing and defense. Yes, these teams had some amazing attackers, but even these attackers were able to control the ball unlike player I had ever seen in the US. Even as a libero I was being "out ball-controlled" by international hitters, and I realized that I needed to make adjustments to my game to try and compete at the level they were. Also, the speed of the other teams' offense was something I had never seen before. Many times, the ball was passed me before I was ready to defend, or a back row attack was coming where I didn't see a back row hitter. From these teams I have learned that I need to improve my over all ball-control, and that my passing and defense need improvement every day. Also, my ability to make adjustments during the course of the game was exposed as a weakness. I often found myself so caught up in the game and being where I thought I should be that I failed to adjust to what the other team was doing. With servers, setters and hitters all

changing up their tendencies, I learned that I need to do the same, and that has helped me in my evolution as a player.

## **Mentally**

Before USA Volleyball, I never thought playing volleyball could be very mentally challenging. However, I was very wrong. Traveling long hours to a foreign country along with playing in a different environment can be very difficult. Often times, I found myself working to be focused, rather than just playing the game already focused. Whether it was the travel, food, hotel, or just the distraction of the country, it was tough to mentally compete like I was used to doing. I was not being very tough, and did not have the perseverance to strive for better. However, with these last four year, I have come to learn to mentally prepare for each and every match, and to focus on the task at hand, which is to compete your best and hopefully win the match. It was not easy learning this lesson for me for bad individual matches and bad results were a consequence for my lack of focus. However, I believe I am now mentally stronger and have the will to stay focused throughout my matches.

## **Emotionally**

Two summers ago, in Mexico, I had the high and low of my volleyball career. We had just lost to a tough Argentina team, and had a must win match against China, a team that had just swept defending champions Russia. Against China, we came out firing on all cylinders. Everything was working, and even better, everything was going our way. Emotionally, I was higher than ever before, and after sweeping the later determined second place China team I was, along with the rest of the team, ecstatic. All we needed to do was beat Russia the next night, or hope that Argentina would beat China.

The next night we started off the same way we did against China, taking the first two sets. But, about as fast as you can say "tough serving and blocking", we had lost the next three sets. Coupled with an Argentina loss we had been eliminated from medal contention. I was devastated, almost to the point of tears. How could I have been so happy just a few hours before, and now felt as if the tournament was over? This feeling of heartbreak and loss continued for sometime, and carried over to the next few matches we had in the tournament. From this match, I have learned that I should be more even keeled because wins and losses like this were a part of sports, and that I had to deal with it. What I learned is that I should take them in stride and get something out of them. While I continue to emotionally invest myself 100 percent in every game, it is how I react after the fact that shows my true colors as an athlete. Am I going to just quit after a difficult loss, or am I going to use it as motivation for my next match? After my experience in Mexico I can now say I use my losses as motivation for the next one, and that has helped so much as a volleyball player.

My journey the last four years with USA Volleyball has been so worth it for so many reasons. Not only has it been so beneficial for my development as a player, it has also helped grow as a teammate, friend, and person. Also, traveling as a part of USA Volleyball has created so many memories that I will always cherish, and that I will always look back on. They are memories like having the privilege of winning five awards. They are memories like learning how to bargain on the street of a foreign country. They are memories like dealing with an insect infested, 6-person room where you are forced to sleep only a foot away from the next person. And they are memories like eating a final dinner with the whole team that will stay in my mind forever. I only hope and pray that I will be able to form new memories in the future with USA Volleyball.

Editor's Note: One of Erik's most famous volleyball plays from earlier this year:  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0gZQq\\_tyLE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0gZQq_tyLE). The same play made ESPN's Top 10 Plays of the Week on April 8, 2009.