



Phenomenological Study of Game Tactics in Male and Female Volleyball Athletes

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Keywords

Tactical Ability; Volleyball; Boys and Girls

Abstract

This study aimed to understand the tactical playing ability of male and female volleyball athletes at O2C Ciparay Volleyball Academy. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the research explored athletes' interpretations of game reading, decision-making, communication, and strategic adjustment. Eight participants—three male athletes, three female athletes, and two coaches—were selected through purposive sampling based on active training participation, minimum three years of experience, involvement in official competitions, and willingness as informants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation, then analyzed using NVivo. Findings indicate that tactical ability is influenced by decision-making, game pattern reading, psychological factors, team communication, mastery of basic techniques, positioning, covering, ball anticipation, training experience, and gender differences in playing characteristics. Athletes who effectively read game situations, communicate, and master basic techniques tend to make quicker, more appropriate decisions in attacking and defensive situations. Differences between male and female athletes are influenced by physical aspects, anthropometry, power, endurance, and training approaches. This study concludes that tactical ability is essential for volleyball performance and requires development through technical training, game-situation training, mental strengthening, communication, and teamwork. Coaches should design integrated, contextual, and gender-responsive training programs to optimize tactical development across competition levels.

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INTRODUCTION

Tactical ability in volleyball is one of the important aspects that determines athletes' success in dealing with match situations. In male and female adolescent volleyball athletes, tactical ability is influenced by playing experience, training intensity, and understanding of game situations that occur on the court. According to Mesquita et al. (2014), tactical ability is closely related to the decision-making process and the understanding of game situations during a match. This opinion is in line with García-López et al. (2019), who stated that a good tactical understanding can help young athletes improve game effectiveness and adaptability to changes in opponents' strategies. Therefore, tactical ability is considered an essential aspect of a volleyball match.

In practice, male and female volleyball athletes still encounter obstacles in implementing strategies effectively on the court. These obstacles include limited ability to read opponents' game patterns, make quick decisions, and understand team strategies (Koh et al., 2022; Matsuo et al., 2021). Teams also experience difficulties in dynamically changing tactical plans during matches, including adjustments in tempo, service patterns, or blocking focus against opponents' attacks. In addition, differences in characteristics between male and female athletes also influence the application of tactics on the court (Kelly, 2024).

The tactical playing skills of male and female volleyball athletes are becoming more and more important in the development of modern volleyball. Modern volleyball requires athletes to have the ability to think quickly and make decisions quickly during the match. The skills include understanding the game, anticipating the opponents' moves, determining the right attack and defense strategies, and being able to adapt to changing situations in the match. The technical skills, as well as the quality of the tactical decision-making that allows the players to make the most effective choices according to the game context (Conejero et al., 2021), determine the success of a volleyball team. Tactical ability is becoming more and more important in male and female athletes as the characteristics of play, physical demands of the game, and the patterns of attack and defense are different and specific strategy adaptations are needed. Games that have tactical abilities that tend to have game efficiency.

Previous studies on tactical ability in volleyball have generally focused on improving game performance, decision-making, and the effectiveness of athletes' strategies during competition. Mesquita et al. (2014) explained that a tactical-based training approach can improve decision-making ability and game quality. Furthermore, García-López et al. (2019) found that tactical understanding among adolescent athletes influences adaptation and teamwork during matches. Meanwhile, research conducted by González-Víllora et al. (2015) showed that tactical ability is closely related to rapid thinking skills in competitive game situations. However, these studies mainly used quantitative approaches and assessed general game performance outcomes. In contrast, the present study emphasizes athletes' subjective experiences in understanding, implementing, and interpreting game strategies through a phenomenological approach.

The focus of this study is to understand the tactical abilities of male and female volleyball athletes based on their direct experiences during training and competition. This research focuses on athletes' ability to read game situations, make decisions, implement strategies, and adjust playing patterns to dynamic match conditions. In addition, this study also examines factors influencing athletes' tactical abilities, such as competition experience, team communication, coaches' instructions, and the ability to understand opponents' strategies. Through a phenomenological approach, this study aims to obtain a deeper understanding of the meanings and experiences of athletes in applying tactical abilities while playing volleyball.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aimed to deeply understand the perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of male and female volleyball athletes regarding tactical playing ability. According to Creswell & Poth (2018), qualitative research is an approach used to explore and understand meanings derived from individuals or groups concerning a social issue or a particular phenomenon. In the context of this study, the phenomenon examined was how athletes understand tactical ability, make decisions during matches, and interpret their playing experiences in competitive situations.

The type of research used in this study was phenomenology. Phenomenological research aims to understand individuals' lived experiences regarding a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This approach was applied because the researcher sought to explore the subjective experiences of athletes related to tactical ability in volleyball, both among male and female athletes. According to Sparkes & Smith (2014), phenomenology focuses on how individuals assign meaning to experiences they directly encounter. Therefore, this approach was considered relevant for understanding athletes' thought processes, tactical awareness, decision-making, and match experiences.

This study was conducted at the O2C Ciparay Academy, which serves as a training and competition venue for male and female volleyball athletes. The research was carried out over a period of five months, starting from data collection until the completion of data analysis. The subjects of this study consisted of male and female volleyball athletes who actively participated in training sessions and competitions. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. According to Sugiyono (2022), purposive sampling is a data source sampling technique based on specific considerations, namely individuals who are considered to have the best understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The criteria for informants in this study included: 1) male and female athletes actively participating in training and competitions, 2) having at least three years of playing experience, 3) having participated in official competitions, and 4) being willing to become research informants.

Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were used to explore athletes' experiences, views, and understanding regarding tactical playing ability. The type of interview used was a semi-structured interview, allowing the researcher flexibility in obtaining more in-depth information. According to Sugiyono (2019), semi-structured interviews are interviews that are more flexible than structured interviews, in which the questions can be further developed based on respondents' answers.

The next data collection technique was observation. Observations were conducted during training sessions and matches to directly examine athletes' tactical behavior, such as team communication, decision-making, positioning, and responses to game situations. According to Marshall & Rossman (2016), observation in qualitative research is used to understand individuals' behavior and activities within their natural context. In addition, documentation was also used as supporting data in the form of activity photographs, match videos, training programs, and coaches' notes related to athletes' tactical abilities. Data analysis employed the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The validity of the data was tested through technique triangulation by comparing interview, observation, and documentation results to ensure the consistency and credibility of the research findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to identify tactical playing abilities between male and female players at the O2C Ciparay Volleyball Academy, involving a total of eight participants consisting of three male players, three female players, and two coaches, using a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using NVivo, the following are the results of the data analysis, including:



Figure 1. data analysis results using NVivo.

Based on the results of the data analysis, several main themes were identified that describe the tactical abilities of male and female athletes, including tactical decision-making, game-reading ability, psychological factors in the game, the role of team communication, mastery of techniques as the foundation of tactics, cover and ball anticipation, positioning in the game, the role of training in tactical development, and differences in the playing styles.

Tactical Decision-Making Perspective

Decision-making in volleyball is strongly influenced by ball conditions and game situations. Athletes tend to perform a smash when the set is in a good condition, while tips or passing are used when the ball is not ideal for a smash. This finding is in line with Nakagawa (1984), who stated that decision-making in sports is the process of determining what actions should be taken during the game. This process includes recognizing game situations, anticipating gameplay, and deciding on the appropriate action to perform. Such decision-making is more operational in nature and directly related to ongoing game situations, differing from strategic-level decisions, which are more oriented toward long-term planning (Körpe, 2021; Pehlivan & Öz, 2020).

Game-Reading Ability

The ability to read game patterns is an important factor in determining the successful implementation of tactics. Conditions that need to be considered during the game include block positioning, opponents' movements, attack patterns, and defensive patterns before making decisions. According to Larkin et al. (2020), game-reading ability is closely related to the concept of game intelligence, which includes the ability to read and predict the flow of the game. This ability involves a series of interconnected cognitive processes such as perception, knowledge, and decision-making (Rodrigues et al., 2021).

In the context of team sports such as volleyball, players with strong game-reading abilities are not only capable of making good decisions, but are also able to transform those decisions into effective actions and determine the right timing for implementing them (Rodrigues et al., 2021). This is consistent with the findings of Silva et al. (2020), who reported that high-level and highly talented players demonstrate greater accuracy in cognitive and executive processes during gameplay and adapt more easily to complex situations.

Psychological Factors in the Game

Most athletes revealed that they had experienced hesitation in making decisions, especially under pressure situations such as being behind in points, facing critical points, or competing against stronger opponents. In addition, athletes reported differences in performance between training sessions and actual competitions. In competitive situations, psychological factors become crucial components influencing game performance. A study showed that psychological factors such as motivation, self-confidence, anxiety control, mental preparation, team pressure, concentration, and cognition are all associated with game performance (Abdullah et al., 2016).

Psychological factors have also been shown to affect match outcomes, particularly in critical situations such as overtime, where increased mental and physical effort can improve the chances of victory (Gómez et al., 2025). Therefore, psychological factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and concentration have a strong influence on athletes' performance (Abdullah et al., 2016; Gómez et al., 2025; Jia-jun et al., 2019).

The Role of Communication in the Game

Communication is an essential element that cannot be separated from the context of gameplay. Communication is not merely an exchange of information, but also serves as the foundation supporting the entire dynamics of the game, ranging from tactical coordination on the court and the development of team cohesiveness to the enhancement of players' social skills (Lumba & Rajagukguk, 2022). Effective communication is a prerequisite for achieving harmony and unity within a team, especially in volleyball, which is characterized as a fast and dynamic team sport (Kurniawan et al., 2020). Therefore, fast and accurate communication becomes increasingly crucial in such dynamic game situations.

In addition, team cohesiveness is one of the psychological constructs most closely related to communication in volleyball. Research has shown that there are many positive consequences associated with cohesiveness in team sports such as volleyball, including the influence of cohesiveness training on performance, the contribution of collective success to team performance, and its use in team building (Lumba & Rajagukguk, 2022). Cohesiveness cannot be formed without effective communication among team members, as it helps athletes recognize the importance of teamwork and understand their respective responsibilities in achieving the common goal of victory (Lumba & Rajagukguk, 2022).

Relationship Between Technique and Tactics

Basic techniques serve as the primary foundation for the implementation of tactics, and good technical mastery facilitates the application of tactics. Technique refers to motor skills in the game that are performed as efficiently as possible (Machado et al., 2021). The fundamental techniques that must be mastered in volleyball include underhand passing, overhand passing, serving, smashing, and blocking (Pratama et al., 2023; Yulianti et al., 2024). Mastery of basic techniques is a major factor contributing to overall player performance, in addition to physical, tactical, and mental conditions (Yulianti et al., 2024).

Positioning and Anticipation in the Game

Positioning is an important aspect of volleyball because it influences players' ability to anticipate the ball. Proper positioning allows players to be more prepared for both attacking and defending. According to Sujarwo (2021), each player in volleyball has a specific role and position, and specialization in individual abilities helps the team implement strategies more effectively. These specialized positions include middle blocker, libero, setter, opposite hitter, and outside hitter (Sujarwo, 2021). Anticipation in volleyball is closely related to the ability to read the direction of opponents' attacks and prepare appropriate responses to anticipate them (Aprilian et al., 2022).

The Role of Training in Tactical Development

Basic technical training serves as the main foundation for developing tactical skills. Training methods used to improve basic techniques include drills such as passing, spiking, and blocking exercises. According to Jiao (2023), solid fundamental training is a prerequisite for tactical development. Without good mastery of basic techniques, such as service and passing accuracy, the implementation of tactics in volleyball will be ineffective (Batez et al., 2021; Jiao, 2023b). Meanwhile, tactical abilities can be developed through game-situation training, which helps athletes understand the role of strategies in real conditions. One effective approach is the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) model, which has demonstrated effectiveness in developing volleyball skills. This model emphasizes tactical understanding of the game rather than merely repetitive mechanical technical practice (Batez et al., 2021).

Gender Differences in the Game

Differences between male and female athletes lie in anthropometric aspects, body composition, physical abilities, and performance, all of which influence playing ability. The most fundamental differences are found in anthropometric characteristics such as body mass, standing height, and sitting height (Fauzi et al., 2023). Players with greater height, standing reach, and leg length generally have advantages in volleyball, particularly in attacking and blocking (Beldman et al., 2025). In addition, levels of strength, power, and endurance physiologically differ between males and females, so training programs need to be adjusted accordingly (Azzahra et al., 2024). Training approaches for female athletes tend to focus more on improving endurance and mental aspects (Miswarizal et al., 2023), whereas training for male athletes generally emphasizes the development of power and strength (Nugroho et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Differences between male and female athletes lie in anthropometric aspects, body composition, physical abilities, and performance, all of which influence playing ability. The most fundamental differences are found in anthropometric characteristics such as body mass, standing height, and sitting height. Players with greater height, standing reach, and leg length generally have advantages in volleyball, particularly in attacking and blocking. In addition, levels of strength, power, and endurance physiologically differ between males and females, so training programs need to be adjusted accordingly. Training approaches for female athletes tend to focus more on improving endurance and mental aspects, whereas training for male athletes generally emphasizes the development of power and strength.

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