



Dear Prospective Player and Parents;

I hope you will take a few minutes to read this letter and the attached information about the Virginia Elite 14s Team, so that you can determine if we are a good fit for you. We seek excellent athletes who have the desire and determination to play college volleyball, so we hope you will consider joining the Virginia Elite Volleyball Club. Our mission is to provide the highest quality volleyball experience through a program of individual development that produces players capable of competing successfully at the collegiate level. I want to emphasize that we seek the best athletes. The best athletes may not be the best volleyball players on the court today, because they may have started playing volleyball only recently. We believe that our program will make great athletes into great volleyball players who can play at the collegiate level.

In order to help you determine if VA Elite is the best club for you, let me provide you with some information to consider:

- VA Elite is not for everyone. Our club is focused on players who seek to play in college and we specialize in creating opportunities to do so by providing the most intense volleyball program in the region and the best exposure to college recruiters.
- While we don't expect 14 year old players to know exactly what they want to do five years from now, we seek those players who have the dream to play at the collegiate level and are willing to try to get there.
- If you only want to play high school volleyball, you do not need to play for VA Elite. While playing for VA Elite may help you be a better high school player (8 of 10 players from last year's 14s team are playing varsity volleyball this Fall), I am confident that you will be good enough to make a high school team at some point, regardless of what club you play for.

We seek to offer the most intense volleyball program at the 14s level in the region, for those players who want more:

- **More Practice:** We practice 3 times per week. Currently we are scheduled to practice Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays 6:30-9:00pm. Mondays and Fridays at Madeira School, a secure, high quality facility, and Wednesdays at HoopMagic off Rte 50, west of Rte 28. I am negotiating with Galilee Methodist Church at Rte 28 and Rt 7 for one night a week, if we have a lot of Loudoun players. I will solicit preferences from parents on whether to move one practice a week there.
- **More playing time:** We limit team to 10 players, and publish a playing time policy (below) so you know what to expect.
- **More touches:** Our practices last 2.5 hours (including 30 minutes of conditioning). We focus on practices on skill development and conditioning (see practice principles below).

- **More Volleyball Conditioning:** We spend 30 minutes per practice (2x per week) on volleyball specific conditioning and each player is expected to follow the at-home conditioning program (see attached sample).
- **More Tournaments:** Last season the VA Elite 14s team played more than 80 matches (More than 4 high school seasons!) This year we will play 10 tournaments, seven of them multi-day: Monument City (Richmond, VA); Capital Hill Classic (Washington DC); NE Qualifier (Baltimore, MD); four Mid-Atlantic Power League Tournaments, Nationals or Volleyball Festival (Phoenix, AZ); We will only play 2 regional 14s tournaments (including the regional championships), and one regional 15s tournament.
- In order to enhance the quality of play, we only seek to enter two regional tournaments in the Chesapeake Region, the minimum required to qualify for the open division at the Regional Championships.
- To culminate the season, our team will go to Nationals if we qualify or to the Volleyball Festival.. While we seek to go to Nationals, because we have to be willing to accept the bid if we compete for the regional championship in the Open Division, I believe that the Volleyball Festival is the best tournament in the country for 14s. It is the largest female sporting event in the world, attracting over 10,000 players. We played 18 matches in 8 days (an entire high school season) against teams from the West Coast, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and Canada. IN 2008, we finished 22<sup>nd</sup> out of 146 teams. It was a great exposure to high level volleyball!
- **More Coaching:** We currently have three coaches who will be coaching the 14s team, enabling us to provide more individualized instruction: Tom Leney, Paul Bennett, and Betsy Schroeder. We make use of video to diagnose and correct skill errors. Because we are a small club with a strong technical director, and an extensive coaching development program (We sponsor the USAV CAP I Coaching certification for all of our coaches), we offer a progressive program in which each year builds on the previous year's foundation. The 15s coach does not tell you to disregard what you learned at the 14s level.
- **More focus on individual skill development:** At 14s we focus on developing a solid foundation of individual skills and well rounded players, so that they have options in later years.
- **More Season:** Our season runs from November 15 to July 7.
- **More expensive:** Yes, it is an expensive program. The cost for 14s this year will be \$3,921. The program cost is driven in large measure by the cost of tournaments. Our program includes the cost of Nationals/Volleyball Festival so there are no additional costs to be borne at the end of the season. The only cost not included is hotels for players because for the last three years parents have preferred to have their daughters stay with them rather than with other players. This has worked out quite well, as it eases young players into the tournament environment. While all parents do not attend all tournaments, most do and it makes the overall lodging costs cheaper for the families.

Why such an intense program? We want players and parents to determine early in their club careers whether they have the ability and desire to play at the college level. Joining Virginia Elite is a big commitment to being the best volleyball player you can be. We appreciate that and are equally committed to helping our players to attain that objective. If that is not your goal, we want you to realize it at 14, not 18. This kind of program requires more effort from players, parents, and coaches, but we think you will find that it is worth all that you put into it. I encourage you to talk to parents and players who have had the experience.

To help you determine if VA Elite is the right club for you, I attach the following, below:

- Coaching philosophy
- Playing time policy
- Practice principles
- At Home Conditioning Card
- Player Assessment Form

I publish these before you try out so that you will not be surprised by anything after you make the team. **You should ask for these items from any team you are considering.** If you have any questions or concerns, please call me at 703-286-9308 or email me at [tom.leney@vaelite.com](mailto:tom.leney@vaelite.com).

Sincerely,

Tom Leney  
Head Coach, Virginia Elite 14s

**Coaching Philosophy**  
**Virginia Elite 14s**  
**October 20, 2009**

The central tenet of my coaching philosophy is, “**hard work pays off.**” I believe that this is true in life and in volleyball. Players should be given the opportunity to play to the limit of their physical ability and coaches should assist the player in improving skills to the limits of the player’s desire, effort, and physical talents. My goal is for each player to do the best with what they have and to discover that they have more than they think they do.

To this end we follow these principles:

- **Sportsmanship matters.** In the end, life lessons learned on the team will be more important than technique lessons. We seek to develop players into leaders and good people. We want them to think of the team, not just themselves. To be humble in victory, and gracious in defeat. To represent themselves, their family, their club in a positive manner.
- **Develop competitors.** One of the biggest benefits your daughter can gain from their VA Elite experience is to develop a competitive, winning spirit. By working hard and playing to our limits, we will win matches – but not every match. We seek to develop competitors and if excellence is our goal, success will follow. To me the real win is not how many tournament medals we collect, it is seeing players become women I can be proud to have coached.
- **Everyone gets an opportunity to play.** We presume that every player wants to play volleyball or they would not be on the team. Every player that demonstrates they want to play will play in every match during pool play. The amount of playing time will be based on performance and effort. If a person works hard, then they will perform better and will play more (See playing time policy attached).
- **Players play like they practice.** If practices are not challenging then players will not be ready to respond to challenging matches. We will work to ensure players touch the ball a lot because the more repetitions a player receives the more likely they are to perfect the skills required to excel. Practices are for improving volleyball skills not social skills. We will have some team building opportunities, but we build a team at practice by working hard together. If a player’s technique is poor they will not get better by playing more. There are variations in specific techniques but principles don’t vary and we will teach and expect players to use solid technique.
- **Players Don’t Try to Lose.** We have never seen a player actually try to hit the ball out-of-bounds or serve into the net, but for some reason We see coaches scream at players, to “hit the ball in,” or “don’t make a service fault.” Players will make errors; that is why we practice. Coaches are there to identify and help correct errors, and to prevent them by demanding rigorous execution of skills. You can expect coaches to correct errors during matches. I tell players what they need to do to succeed so that they focus on how to improve, rather than the error they just made. You will hear coaches use our key terms (e.g., feet to ball, square up to target) to focus players on the correction rather than yell, “hit it in”.

- **Aggressive play develops winners.** We want players to want the ball and to push their limits. Mistakes will happen. Players won't get pulled for a mistake but I put players on the court who don't let the ball hit the floor. We want players to learn to attack the ball from all positions on the court. We will seek to minimize free balls, by practicing back row attacks and out of system attacks.
- **Have a goal.** You must have a goal and a plan to attain your goal. We will set team and individual goals and measure ourselves as we go. My goal for every practice is for players to work hard so they become more fit, learn something so they become more skilled, and enjoy the sport so they come back. My metric for success is that more than 50% of the team plays varsity as freshmen (in 2009, 9 of 10 players are playing on their HS varsity teams).
- **Excellence requires extra effort.** Players will be expected to train outside of practice. Each player will receive a conditioning program and will be assessed on progress. Basic skills such as service tosses and approach footwork should be drilled outside of practice as they do not require a gym or a coach and provide great benefits.
- **Focus on the fundamentals.** The primary focus of player development at this level is to ensure that players have master the fundamentals of serving, passing, hitting, and digging. We will work on advanced techniques such as jump serves and slides, but we want to ensure that each player can do the basics well so that in later years they will not have to unlearn bad habits. Because I was not a player, I do not bring my personal preferences into the skill discussion. I have studied the work of some of the nation's best coaches and I teach their techniques.
- **Explore position capabilities.** We do not expect to isolate a player into one position at this age. Generally players will be hitters or setter/defensive specialists, based on physical characteristics, but we will work players as both outside and middle hitters. Hitters will pass and passers will hit, but if a player is 5'2" and parents are 5'6", it does not make sense to focus the player on being a hitter, because unless they can touch 9'6", they will not be a hitter later on. We will lose some matches because we play more than six players, and use more than one setter, and have hitters hit from more than one position, but by the end of the season this approach will better prepare players for the future, and result in a better team. Setters should be the most athletic player on the team, but they have to want to set to be successful. Yes, I still dream of a 6'3" left handed setter who is as quick as a cat...but my job is to train setters to be the best in the region.
- **Conditioning matters.** Fitness is an important life attribute and is vital to success on the court. Players will be expected to condition outside of practice and performance will be measured. We will use the court for skills training because net time is precious, but players should expect to condition for 30 minutes at the end of practice after we leave the net. As a result, practices normally will be 150 minutes

## **Playing Time Philosophy Virginia Elite 14s**

Playing time issues often have a major impact on a player's volleyball experience. I take the issue very seriously and therefore lay out my policy in writing, in detail, before you tryout so that it does not become a problem during the season.

### **Balanced Approach**

I presume that players want to play volleyball. Playing is the payoff for hard work at practice and at home. Parents don't come to tournaments and pay club fees to watch their daughter sit on the bench. At the same time everyone wants to be on a winning team and I seek to develop girls into winners. Our playing time philosophy attempts to balance these interests.

### **Every player plays**

Every player will play in every match if they have demonstrated that they have a desire to play through hard work at practice. I adjust playing time philosophy according to phase of the season, as follows:

**Phase 1:** December –15 February. I will seek to provide balanced playing time during pool play, i.e., players can expect to play a relatively equal number of sets during pool play over the course of a tournament. Because all players will not play "all the way around" in every case, I seek to equalize the number of rows (front row, back row) played. While we may use a "Liberero", hitters will also play in the back row so that they get passing experience. All players will play at least two positions (e.g., Outside/Middle; Setter/Right Side; Libero/DS; Setter/DS).

**Phase 2:** 15 Feb-15 April. Each player who has demonstrated a desire to play can expect to play an entire set (in front or back row) in each match (1 of 2 or 1 of 3). Note that this does not mean that playing time is equal as some players will play more than one set per match. As in Phase 1: since we are focused on developing players for the future, we will may use players in back row only or front row positions, which means a player could play back or front row only for an entire game.

**Phase 3:** 15 April -June: To be determined by coaches and players in consultation. I expect to make some adjustments to the Phase II approach, but will discuss with players how they want to address particular tournament scenarios. The fundamental principle will remain: every player plays in every match.

**Performance Pays:** I make playing time decisions based on performance, as outlined above. I do not play someone because they ask, because I know they want to play or they would not be on the team. I do not play someone because they cry, because they can't see the ball adequately through their tears. I do not play someone because they whine because I do not want to reinforce that behavior. I do not play someone because they are nice to me.

I focus on performance. I make extensive use of statistics to inform my decisions about which players start matches and playing time. While statistics are not perfect reflections of ability and desire, over time I find they correlate highly. We have all heard players say, "I am not playing because the coach does not like me." I may like some players more than others, but statistics, help me prevent my likes and dislikes from influencing playing time. I seek to play those who

demonstrate they want to play in the only ways that matter: effort and performance. Great effort leads to great performance.

I am solely responsible for playing time decisions. We may add assistant coaches with daughters on the team. Some will wonder if they influence playing time. They do not. I will not allow them to put themselves into a conflict of interest. To prevent that, I do not discuss line-ups with anyone who might have a conflict of interest. I avoid discussing playing time of their daughters with them in their capacity as assistant coach and I request that their spouse address those issues with me. A parent-coach may be utilized because they are a qualified coach who can add value to your player's experience. I do not want to lose that value because they are a parent. These coaches add enormously to the quality of each player's experience and to fail to take advantage of their experience and skill would harm your player.

**Bottom Line:** I want every player to play and I assume that every player wants to play. So I will do my best to enable players who demonstrate desire, to play. Each player selected for the team deserves to be on the team and deserves to play. In the 2008 season, the overall difference in playing time in pool play, from most to least was approximately 20%.

**Special cases:**

**Floor Balls:** I do not pull players out of a match for making a mistake. We will see lots of mistakes because they happen when players push themselves to their limit, and I want them to do that. I do pull players out if they do not make an effort to play the ball. If a player allows a ball to hit the floor then I will conclude that they are tired or uninterested, and will substitute a player for them until they are ready to play.

**Post-Pool Play/Playoffs:** In my experience, when we get to playoffs or into deciding sets of a match (if we are in match play), the players really want to win. If the team advances to the playoffs in a tournament, or we are in a deciding set, I will play the players that have performed the best on the court that day, to give us the best chance to win. I will endeavor to get every player in the match so they can contribute, but the focus in play-offs will be on team success.

**Serving:** We put a great deal of emphasis at the beginning of the season on serving. It is the one skill a player totally controls. Each player must pass the serving qualification in order to serve in a match. Any player that does not serve at least 80% in a tournament must re-qualify in order to serve in the next tournament. This approach has been very successful in developing very strong servers (A player on the 2007 team had to re-qualify for every tournament into March, but she worked at it and over 18 matches at the Volleyball Festival she served 92.5%).

**NEQ and Regional Championships:** I reserve the right to organize the team and playing time so as to offer us the best chance to win, as these tournaments are qualifiers for Nationals. I will try to ensure that each player will play in every match, but not necessarily a whole game.

## **Practice Principles**

### **Purpose**

As much as possible, everything we do at practice should contribute to development of volleyball skills and ability. We seek to maximize the number of correct touches on the ball at each practice. A correct touch makes improves our game, an incorrect touch sets us back. In order to achieve this goal we will need to make best possible use of the very limited time that we have at practice.

Everything we do at practice has a purpose and is designed to improve players' skills, motivation, and competitiveness. If you as a player or parent do not understand why we are doing something or anything at practice, ASK me about it. Your questions cause me to evaluate what we are doing and if I cannot articulate its purpose, then we should , and will change the activity.

### **Practice Preparation**

An important component of what we do is to teach players personal responsibility. Players are expected to bring the following items to every practice and tournament.

- Kneepads: Players may not scrimmage without kneepads
- Water Bottle w/ water (at least 24 oz)
- Towel
- Notebook and Pen
- Dress in athletic clothing for a hard workout (T-Shirt, spandex, kneepads, socks and court shoes. No running shoes, as they lack lateral stability).
- No jewelry. We practice like we play. Coaches do not hold jewelry for players. If you value it, leave it at home.
- Tournaments: Bring all game jerseys as we may change colors during a long tournament.
- Volleyball (having your own ball means that whatever happens, you can get a good workout)
- Jump rope: A very useful warm-up and conditioning tool. (To fit a jump rope, stand on middle of rope with both feet and pull handles to arm pits. Handles should reach your arm pits.)

What to do when you arrive:

- Line bags up against wall out of the way of play. Put warm-ups in bag.
- Put water bottles full of water at the end of court for easy access.
- Be in proper attire, with knee pads on, hair tied back, when practice starts. No jewelry.
- Conduct standard warm-ups and wall drills. At the beginning of the season, we will provide each player a warm-up sheet of basic warm-ups and wall drills and teach them how to do them. Once this is done we expect each player to warm themselves up and stretch. Top athletes do not rely on coaches to warm them up. We will conduct some advanced warm-ups as a team, but expect players to come on the court warmed up and ready to play.

## Practice Activities

You will play like you practice. If you practice with intensity and focus, and you push yourself at each practice, you will play with intensity and focus, and you will improve more quickly.

Practices are designed to push players hard. We seek to stretch players mentally and physically.

- **Hustle:** When you step on the court you need to hustle. This means you don't walk on the volleyball court. You shuffle or run.
- **If you do not understand something, ask:** There are dumb questions (like asking what you are supposed to be doing because you were not paying attention to instructions) but it is better to ask even a dumb question rather than be unable to perform a drill or benefit from an activity because you do not know what to do or how to do it. When players have problems in execution coaches will take them aside for additional instruction, so the drill can continue. This is not a punishment. It is intended to give additional help where needed. You will all need it at one time or another, and should seek it out. We will also pull players out in rotation for individual instruction. Having three coaches at a practice enable us to give this kind of individual attention.
- **“Corner up”:** Team lines up at the corner of the service line and sideline facing in to the court. If told to have a ball, each player will hold a ball in the correct setting position at waist level. Eyes on the coach and mouths closed to hear instruction..
- **Water Breaks:** When water break is called, run immediately to your water and drink. Water breaks are short. At the end of a water break, execute the water break exercise established at the beginning of each practice. Then we will normally “corner up” to start a new drill. If you need water during a drill, go get it and return immediately so as not to disrupt the drill. You don't need to ask permission to run and get some water. We will sweat. You will need to drink water during practice. Drink some before practice but don't fill your stomach with a lot of water just before practice because you will be carrying extra weight and could become ill.
- **Call the Ball:** The volleyball court is a crowded place. Good communication is vital to good teamwork. Whenever you touch the ball on the court yell “mine” as soon as you see that it is coming to you, well before you touch it. All players will call the ball before touching, to include setters.
- **Coaches Coach, Players Play:** Players should communicate, but it is not the players' role to correct teammates on their form, players can correct court positioning if a teammate is out of rotation. Feel free to encourage, but players don't criticize their fellow players on the court (or off it). You can rely on coaches to correct a player's problems.
- **Focus:** When you are on the court your eyes should always be on the ball in play or the ball about to be played. After a point, or contact, keep your eyes and head in the game. When you are told to move off the court you run off the court so you don't clog the drill or the play. We will use focus exercises to re-focus players during practice. We will pick the exercise at the beginning of each practice. When you get told to “focus,” immediately perform the exercise and get back in play. These exercises are not a punishment, they are reminders to keep your head in game.
- **Drills:** Everyone has a role in a drill, not just the player touching the ball. You are handling the ball, shagging, watching and learning, handing ball to coach, or serving as target. Seek to use every role to get better. When you are target, call the ball and catch the ball with proper passing or setting technique. When you shag, call the ball and seek

to use proper technique to catch it. When shagging, run after the ball and bounce pass the ball to the ball cart player or coach. When you are watching, you are trying to learn from others' successes and mistakes. Therefore you are not discussing school, boys, or your favorite music group.

- **When you call the ball, you take it:** If you call the ball first, you own it, so play the ball. So don't call balls you can't play. You will make mistakes by being too aggressive but you will get better faster by pushing yourself. When you call the ball do it loudly so your teammates can hear you. ABOVE ALL, don't let a ball hit the floor.
- **Nothing hits the floor:** To be successful in volleyball we have to play the ball aggressively. A ball should never touch the floor without someone getting a hand, a foot, or some other body part on the ball. Obviously we seek to play the ball, not just touch it, but that can't happen if we are not getting to the ball. There may be some times that a ball is "shanked" so badly that no one can get a body part on it but that will be the exception. If a ball hits the floor in a drill all players who had any chance to play the ball will "hit the wall" (immediately runs and touch the back wall) or perform some other remedial exercise, and players not in the drill take their place. Message: Nothing hits the floor!
- **Challenges:** We seek to make each player a strong competitor. If you want to play at the highest level you must learn to compete. At most practices we will conduct challenges (groups competing against each other, e.g., servers vs. receivers. The goal is to promote competition and have some fun. We will determine what the challenge exercise is and the winners will drink water while the losers perform the challenge exercise. Message: It pays to win!