



Optimizing Your AVCA Convention Experience

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I attended my first AVCA Convention in 1997 when I was still playing volleyball in college. I noticed that the NCAA Division I Championship was just a five-hour drive from my campus and made plans with a teammate to take a road trip. I later realized that there was a coaching convention running concurrently with the tournament.

I was coaching an 8th grade team at the time and was interested in a possible career in coaching. My college coach did not regularly attend the convention, so I petitioned my athletic department to send me as its representative. They contributed \$100 and the AVCA graciously gave me a discount on the registration fees.

On a cold, December Wednesday morning, my teammate and I packed up my Hyundai and drove to Cleveland for one of the most powerful weekends of my life.

It is my goal in this article to share with you some of my experiences as a convention attendee and provide some advice about maximizing your convention experience. Take all of these suggestions understanding that they come from a college coach that needs to make the same mistake 3-4 times to learn her lesson, but has become much stronger and more confident because of my convention attendance.

Logistics

From a logistical standpoint, I have learned it is always better to register early. I find that you get better seats at the NCAA Championships, and a better chance at staying in the host hotel, not to mention taking advantage of less expensive registration fee. While the host hotel might be slightly more expensive than some others in the vicinity, I have found that it is worth the added expense to be “closer to the action.” Being able to run back to your room between sessions or after visiting the exhibit hall is a valuable luxury and the hotel lobby is a great place to run into coaching friends.

Pack a variety of clothes from business casual (required at banquets) to volleyball playing attire (Spalding Coaches Tournament and sand court pick-up games) to “night on the town” apparel (if that’s your style). Often times presenters will ask for demonstrators for their drills, and if you are brave enough to model your volleyball skills in front of 300 evaluative experts, you don’t want to be wearing flip-flops. Also be sure to leave some room in your bag for all of the swag that you will pick up from the marketplace. I have seen more than few coaches checking in at the airport on Sunday morning with a neon green volleyball under their arm and a suitcase packed to the brim.

Regardless of what you pack or where your hotel is, make sure to do some preparation. Download the convention schedule and pencil-in a plan so that you are sure to get to the sessions that you want to attend. Think about the topics and anticipate questions that you would like to hear answered. Ask around your league or other coaches that you know to find out who else will be attending the convention and plan a time to get together. While the NCAA Championship matches are exciting enough already, read-up on the participating teams so that you can understand the context of the tournament and what those teams went through to get there – it will be a huge topic of conversation amongst coaches.

Educational Sessions

The AVCA Convention offers on-court and classroom educational sessions for every level of coach. When deciding which sessions to attend, make sure you read more than just the title. The AVCA, and presenters in particular, work hard to ensure that the session’s description matches the content and gives at least a hint as to the intended audience’s coaching level.

Regardless of whether or not you are at a session for novice or experienced coaches, a good educational session can do three things: teach you something completely new, spark your own imagination to do something a little differently, or reinforce that you are already doing things the right way.

All of these are valuable outcomes, so don’t expect to go into a session and be bottle-fed the magical formula that will help your team win a conference championship. Be an active learner by asking questions, taking notes, thinking critically, and being open-minded. Compare and contrast the speakers’ ideas with what you do in your gym, and remember that if you learned something new, were inspired to think of something new yourself or had your current practices validated by some of the most successful coaches in the country, then the session was worthwhile.

Committee Meetings

The AVCA has a host of committees serving the membership in many different capacities, and most of those committees take some time to meet at the convention. If you are looking for ways to get involved, meet new people, and have an impact on how the game is played at your level, then look into serving on an AVCA committee. The AVCA Web site lists all of the committees and help is often needed. It is a great way to meet many other coaches and give back to the game of volleyball.

Networking

The AVCA convention provides the opportunity to reconnect with old coaching friends you haven’t seen in a long time, spend more time with other coaching friends you only see in passing at a tournament, hang out with colleagues at opponent schools under less contentious circumstances than matches, and meet new people that share your love for the game of volleyball.

Remember to pay attention to all of these groups of people. Plan an evening to get together with your conference coaches that are in attendance and try to learn more about them than what recruits they have lined up for the coming years. Invite some old friends from camp to join your new friends from club for dinner.

If you are naturally shy, anticipate that there will probably be some awkward moments. In those situations, participate in the Spalding Coaches Tournament and Molten Opening Night Reception featuring casino night parties, as they are easy, non-threatening ways to meet a lot of people. I still talk to many of my past partners from the volleyball tournament.

On the practical side, remember to bring business cards and develop a strategy for remembering names because you will meet a lot of people. Having the internet on your phone makes it easy to look up those that you have forgotten. Also, you may want to increase your allotment of text messages for the weekend, since it is the preferred method of social planning and have your cell phone with you at all times.

If you are seeking or posting a new job, take advantage of the Career Center. The AVCA staff will post your announcement for you. I also recommend that you share your intentions with others, and don’t be shy about it. Word of mouth is a great resource, but does leave a lot to chance. If you are serious about looking for a new position, come to the convention prepared. Have an ample supply of resumes, try to set up as many interviews as you can before the convention begins, and when you do get an opportunity to meet with a potential employer, do your research.



At a convention a few years back, Russ Rose, the head coach of national champion Penn State University, said, "It is NOT who you know. It is what you know about who you know." That means that if you are interviewing for a position on Jim McLaughlin's staff at the University of Washington, then you should know something about Gold Medal Squared philosophy.

Banquets

During the Coach of the Year Banquet at the 1997 convention in Cleveland, I sat down at a table with a number of total strangers. I was star-struck when the man sitting next to me, Wilfred Navalta, was honored as the NAIA National Coach of the Year! (I think after that convention, planners started putting "reserved" signs on the tables designated for the honorees.)

However, just as exciting as it was to share a meal with a coach of the year, I find the banquets to be inspirational, regardless of the table company. Hearing coaches and student-athletes share a little of their experience and what they are most thankful for hits home with any coach who is trying to balance the benefits and price of success. Even when the speeches are not inspirational, they are usually entertaining. You never know when another Ogona Namani or Courtney Thompson will come along.

I have one piece of advice for the banquet. While you can always choose to share a table with friends, engage those that you don't know in conversation as well. I have included a few conversation starters (see Figure X) for those who are "extroverted-ly challenged." While you won't always get a chance to sit next to a Coach of the Year, we all have insights and experiences to share that are valuable.

Volleyball Marketplace

Some coaches wander through the aisles of vendors not really knowing what to look for, while some have a plan going in and only talk to those vendors offering the right products. I recommend a little of both.

It is extremely helpful to have an idea as to what you are going to need in the upcoming season, as well as the budget you will have available. Bring that information with you so the vendor can be as helpful as possible in showing you their products.

It is also a great place to be open-minded and think outside the box. Just because you have a conference ball contract, doesn't mean that you can't use a cheaper competitor for your camp balls. Even if you are not in the market for new equipment or services, talk to the vendors for the products you are already using and discuss their benefits and drawbacks. They want people standing in front of their booths and talking to their sales representatives because it helps them look popular.

Top Five Questions Asked at the Convention

Have answers planned to these five questions, you will hear them a lot:

- Who are you picking for the finals?
- What hotel are you staying at?
- Are you going to the (insert sponsor's name here) party tonight?
- How was your season?



- Did you hear about the assistant coach for State University and the Director of Operations for Tech College last night? (*Keep in mind that what happens at the convention DOES NOT necessarily STAY at the convention.*)

Five Convention Conversation Starters

These are questions I would feel comfortable ask a coaching idol, mentor, rival, or stranger:

- How have you managed to find a balance between coaching and family/social life/full-time job?
- Have you developed a good way to teach (insert volleyball skill here) ?
- How did you get to the position you are in right now?
- Where is the game going in the next 10 years?
- What have you taken away so far from this year's convention?

Best Advice

My best advice is to *actively engage* in your convention experience. Be prepared by reading the summary of each seminar topic you think looks interesting, and consider some questions you would like answered. If they are not answered, then ask the question.

Think about whom you would like to see or meet at the convention and plan a time to do so. Treat everything, from an educational session to the exhibit show, as a potential spark of a new idea – something that you can tweak and implement into your program. Don't just wait to be spoon-fed new ideas and techniques, but actively participate in the learning process in order to get the most out of Omaha.

Conclusion

At that first convention in Cleveland, my eyes were opened wide to the world of coaching. I learned more about middle blocking in Jerritt Elliot's 45-minute session than I had in my entire playing career – and I was a middle blocker!

My eyes have stayed wide open to the joys and challenges of coaching, in large part, because of what I have learned from other coaches during educational sessions and from conversations with colleagues and friends over dinner. I believe my eyes will continue to be opened because there is always another great idea right around the corner and an old idea waiting to be reapplied.

Have fun at the convention and don't hesitate to say hello!

Be sure to see Becky Schmidt's presentation about leadership skills at the AVCA Convention. Check the convention schedule for time and location.