

## VolleyBiz Interview with Ron Hoffman...

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### More Clubs, More Opportunities



When you first walk into *The Courts Volleyball Training Facility* in Omaha, Neb., it looks like any other club volleyball facility located throughout the country. Two renovated adjoining warehouses, with 13 available training courts, a concession stand and brand-new office space, make you believe you could be in just about any city in the United States.

What's not so typical about *The Courts* is that, upon further investigation, they house four different clubs in just one facility.

"*The Courts*, in our opinion, is uniquely designed," said Ron Hoffman, director of operations. "We are a joint facility where we have multiple clubs who partner to use the facility for the betterment of all kids. The nice thing we offer is choice. Quality training, but we offer parents a choice."

An avid Husker fan, Hoffman agreed to talk with me prior to first serve of the championship match at the 2007 AVCA College Volleyball Showcase in Omaha.

**We came to the conclusion when looking at facilities that a one-club facility was too risky.** We started off with *The Courts 1*, which is a seven-court facility with three clubs: Premier Volleyball, River City Juniors and Omaha Wave. Those three clubs made the initial commitment to us, and in all totaled about 38 teams, from 10-under through 18-under club teams. By their commitments, we were using all seven courts Monday through Thursday, for four hours each night with team practices, and with different clubs practicing next to one another. Doing that eventually created a little apprehension, but by the end of the season, the different clubs would be scrimmaging one another at the end of practice, which was beneficial to the clubs.

Six months later, we had decided to add *Courts 2*, which added six more courts for a total of 13 courts, creating room for at least one more club. This upcoming club season, we will have four clubs, with an estimated 50-55 teams trying to practice twice a week, two hours apiece. We have a 13-court capability for training, and an eight-court capability for competition.

**We knew that cooperation between the clubs was needed.** I came in to facilitate cooperation between club directors for the benefit of the kids and the program. My daughter started playing club when she was 10 years old and played eight years of club volleyball. I then started coaching club when she left for college and coached for three or four years. Because she played for some of the clubs who are now at our facility, I've always maintained a lot of respect for the club directors who have been here for years and the commitment they've made to the young athletes. I gave up club coaching, because I knew I would have to be the facilitator between all of the club directors, making sure everybody got along and remained focused on our goal, which is doing what is in the best interests of the athletes that we work with.

**It's very difficult to find warehouse space with high enough ceilings, and where the roof supports were wide enough for us to put volleyball courts.** There were two groups of people looking for warehouse space here in the Omaha area. We finally found the place where we are currently located, and it fits perfectly. Each of the two bays is 24,000 square feet, and total court space is 35,000-40,000 feet of the 48,000 total square feet. One of the major challenges was having to replace the old warehouse lights with regular volleyball lights to meet and exceed the minimum requirements. We also had to construct a lot of the walls because there's so much training that goes on against the walls. The concession area was very important for tournament play (a revenue generator we count on for tournaments), and the office area as well.

We needed to find the right place and make sure it was big enough to meet our needs with the total number of courts, because we knew we needed more than one club. The rate of growth for club volleyball in Nebraska is so large, we knew we were going to expand and wanted room to be able to do that.

**There's been talk about wanting to build a facility for more than 15 years in the Omaha metro area, but it is a risky business venture.** In this situation, we had a couple of people who had the same vision of what they wanted to see, and they knew this was needed. With volleyball, if you're relying on school gyms, community centers, etc, you're never the first priority. These folks were tired of being kicked out of gyms or for various reasons not having access in order to train, and we felt strongly that was putting our club programs behind other club programs around the country. We felt it was important that if we were going to take the next step to compete nationally, we were going to have to make this leap of faith. Fortunately, we ran across a couple of gentlemen who have daughters playing in a one of the clubs that is now in our facility. Both gentlemen have been successful in the businesses they run, and they had the financial resources personally to make the investment here. We did a lot of research and tried to model our plan in such a way that we hope it will be successful; we hope it will pay back their investment as well as be able to upgrade the facility for the betterment of the kids.

**We have no full-time employees.** Actually, that's the beauty of this, because of the cooperation we've had with the club directors; each of the directors is given a key to the facility on an honor system. It's getting to the point where we might have to start thinking about hiring because of our expansion, but currently we have no full-time employees. I have been at Mutual of Omaha for 30 years, but my partners have outfitted me with a BlackBerry and other tools by which I can respond during the day to different requests regarding the facility. Both partners pull in some of their personal business resources to loan me to help with the administration of the facility. That works out well, because I can handle the relationships between the clubs and the scheduling of the courts, but when it gets down to administration, invoices, collecting, etc., I'm getting support from their existing business staffs.

**My passion is working with the younger kids, and giving those kids who seem to be left behind an opportunity to learn the game and get the confidence to compete with the star athletes.** The Courts Volleyball Club, which is the club I started when we opened the facility, we felt it was important that to compete with softball, soccer, etc. We felt like we needed to develop a program that would teach the 7-10 age group the FUNdamentals, emphasizing the "Fun" part, so that they get a really good start in the game. The response to that has been tremendous. We have been overwhelmed with our 10-and-under athletes who are interested in learning the sport, learning the fundamentals of the sport, and playing the sport competitively. This past December through March, we had over 30 players 10-under in our training.

When we opened up the facility, one of my goals was to offer training for kids who had gone to club tryout and for some reason didn't make a club team. Historically, those kids have nowhere else to go if they want to play competitive volleyball. So The Courts Volleyball Club created a "safety net" where we offer club-like training for those athletes so they can continue to work on their fundamental skills. The hope is that not only from a skill perspective, but also from a confidence perspective, they can go into their future school or club tryouts and stand a good chance of making those teams. This year I received e-mails from at least five kids who a year ago, before they went to our training, would not have made their school teams, but did, in fact make their schools teams this year and have plans to play club once their school season is over. These were kids who took the initiative to e-mail us back and thank the coaching staff for working with them.

**When club season winds down, The Volleyball Academy runs a number of camps/clinics in the summertime.** Deb Grafentin, director of *The Volleyball Academy*, has seen tremendous growth in her camps, watching them grow from having enough participants for only using one or two courts, to now recently over 100 participants using 10 or 11 courts for eight hours of the day. Also, *Premier Volleyball* has started the goal of offering training, camps, clinics, etc., so there is enough business around there to keep the facility busy year-round.

**Our model is unique in terms of the cooperative venture, but it is definitely possible for everyone to cooperate.** There is so much competition among clubs, it is not easy; but, for the sake of the kids, and the sake of the growth of the sport, we make it happen. There were so

many good things that happened this year as a result of all of the clubs working together and cooperating. The nice thing we offer at *The Courts* is we offer choice. Quality training, but we offer parents a choice. They have multiple choices for clubs, multiple choices for training, multiple choices for just about everything, and I think that's important to give the parents and the kids more than just one opportunity to get involved in this sport.

*For more information on The Courts Volleyball Training Facility, visit them on the world wide web at [www.the-courts.com](http://www.the-courts.com).*