

# **The Community "Looking Across the Net": The Mechanism of Collective Memory Formation and Cultural Construction in University Volleyball Teaching**

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**Abstract:** Volleyball is a sport governed by a net—a six-meter-long barrier that delineates distinct relational dynamics between teammates and opponents on either side. This "net" not only cultivates a team spirit of "never abandoning or giving up" through defensive saves and comeback strategies during training, but also serves as an identity boundary separating "self" from "others" in teaching and competitive settings, directly giving rise to cyclical tournament structures like round-robin matches and championships. Drawing on Habwach's collective memory theory and Asman's cultural memory theory, this paper systematically analyzes the mechanisms of collective memory formation in college volleyball instruction, revealing its internal logic of evolving from shared experiences to cultural construction. The study demonstrates that college volleyball communities develop collective memory through three pathways: shared physical practices, ritualized activities, and narrative transmission, with spatial symbolism, symbolic cohesion, and identity formation providing the cultural framework. Symbolic elements of campus culture—such as competition arenas, consecutive championship records, and slogans—serve as core bonds maintaining community unity.

**Keywords:** University Volleyball; Collective Memory; Community; Generative Mechanism; Cultural Construction

## **1. Introduction**

Volleyball possesses a distinctive structural feature: the net. On either side of the net, teammates form a dense network of coordination through positioning, passing, and screening, while opponents engage in intense competitive tension through spiking and blocking, serving and receiving[1]. What truly merits reflection, however, is that this net not only defines the

spatial boundaries of the game but also embodies a profound sociological metaphor—a community "looked upon across the net."

The original meaning of "through the net" refers to a technical distinction between oneself and the opponent, or teammates and rivals, but it also denotes a mode of interaction characterized by "eye contact" rather than physical collision. Unlike the physical collisions in basketball or the intense tackling in football, volleyball uses the net as a medium to minimize physical contact between players, yet facilitates dense information exchange during each transition between offense and defense—through gestures, eye contact, positional anticipation, and tactical signals[2]. This "cross-net confrontation" dynamic clearly separates "us" from "them" while simultaneously fostering a collective sense of "who we are" amidst high-intensity competition.

Jan Assmann posits that cultural memory constructs a sense of belonging and identity through its normative and narrative functions. This theory provides a crucial analytical framework for understanding the phenomenon of group cohesion in college volleyball instruction. How does this collective consciousness emerge on college volleyball courts? Why can a volleyball team unite dozens of unfamiliar students into a community that shares both glory and adversity? What role does collective memory play in this process? These questions concern not only physical education but also touch upon a fundamental issue in the sociology of education: how school sports serve as a practical vehicle for cultural education[3].

This paper adopts the perspective of collective memory theory to systematically analyze the mechanisms of collective memory formation and its cultural construction logic in college volleyball instruction, revealing how volleyball teaching transcends mere physical training to become a unique arena for fostering community consciousness[4].

## **2. Theoretical Foundations: Collective Memory, Cultural Memory, and Bodily Practice**

### **2.1 The Theoretical Genealogy of Collective Memory**

French sociologist Hubert Habermas is the founder of collective memory theory. Drawing inspiration from Durkheim's "collective consciousness" theory, he explicitly stated that memory is never merely a purely individual psychological phenomenon but rather a collective social behavior. He argued that events from the past of human interest can only be properly situated within the framework of collective memory; individual memories must be activated, confirmed, and sustained through interactions with group members, thus asserting that "the individual can only remember within the collective; without it, the individual cannot engage in memory." This assertion extended the study of memory beyond psychology into sociology, laying the theoretical foundation for understanding the mechanisms underlying the formation of group identity[5].

Habermas distinguishes three levels of memory-personal memory, collective memory, and tradition. As the intermediate level, collective memory consists of the shared memories of individuals who have experienced the same events, along with the objective traces left by those events (such as spatial records, institutional documents, written texts, and oral archives). Each collective memory corresponds to a specific social group, which confirms its existence and continuity precisely through these shared memories[6].

The German scholars Jan Assmann and his wife further developed the theory of cultural memory building upon Habermas's framework. Jan Assmann particularly emphasized that cultural memory serves as an index for identity formation, especially in constructing collective identity. Cultural memory gives rise to a "cohesive structure" that fosters a sense of belonging and identity through its normative and narrative functions. Cultural memory transcends mere daily recollections at the individual level; rather, it constitutes "cohesive knowledge" institutionalized and ritualized over time. This knowledge systematically weaves together the group's temporal axis-meaning to past events, provides a framework for present actions, and

points toward a shared future vision[7].

### **2.2 The Internal Relationship Between Physical Practice and Memory Formation**

From Habwach to Asman, the shared premise of collective memory theory is that memory requires a medium. While writing, rituals, and monuments serve as the material carriers of cultural memory, bodily practice constitutes the most fundamental and direct arena for the formation of collective memory[8].

The reason physical practice possesses the function of memory generation lies in its simultaneous engagement of three dimensions: cognition, emotion, and action. When students execute a successful teamwork move on the volleyball court, they not only retain the tactical sequence cognitively but also experience the joy of collaboration emotionally and develop reflexive coordination through action. This integrated three-dimensional experience is far more impactful than mere verbal narration and more effectively fosters lasting shared memory within the group.

### **2.3 The Community Nature of Volleyball**

As a team sport, volleyball inherently fosters a sense of community. The ideological and political education practice in volleyball courses at Northwest A&F University clearly illustrates this principle: Volleyball is a highly collaborative team sport where the division of labor and coordination among first passes, second passes, spikes, and blocks cultivate a team spirit characterized by mutual support, encouragement, and unity. Through training in defensive saves and comeback plays against adverse conditions, players develop a resilient mindset of "never giving up" and embody a spirit of daring to fight and strive for excellence. These six points outline the complete process of building a volleyball community: Division of labor creates cooperative experiences; challenging situations strengthen emotional bonds; and teacher-student interaction facilitates the transmission of values.

The distinction from sports like basketball and soccer lies in volleyball's net barrier structure, which endows the game with a unique team-oriented character. The net not only reduces physical injury risks during play but also shifts the game's rhythm toward anticipation and coordination rather than individual prowess. On the volleyball court, the sense of "us" is not

forged through external comparisons against "them," but rather reinforced and validated through meticulous teamwork during each offensive and defensive transition. The university women's volleyball team's remarkable achievement of ten consecutive provincial championships serves as a concrete teaching example for cultivating team spirit-the number "ten championships" itself stands as a highly condensed symbol of cultural memory, serving as a tangible testament that every new player must confront upon joining the team.

#### **2.4 Generation Mechanism: How Shared Experiences Are Transformed into Collective Memory**

The formation of collective memory in college volleyball instruction is not spontaneous but rather the result of the synergistic interaction of three interwoven mechanisms: shared bodily practice, institutionalized ritualized activities, and narrative transmission. These three mechanisms operate at distinct levels of memory and collectively constitute the complete chain of collective memory formation.

##### **(1) Shared Bodily Practice: Direct Generation of Collaborative Experience**

"The mastery of each volleyball technique signifies a team achieving seamless coordination through shared physical rhythm." This statement precisely captures the fundamental mechanism underlying collective memory formation in volleyball instruction. On the court, the tight interdependence among the three technical elements-first pass, second pass, and spike-means no tactical sequence can be executed independently by any single player. A successful attack requires the setter to deliver the ball to the optimal height at the precise moment, and the spiker to execute the precise arm swing at the right take-off point. These two "optimal moments" are refined only through repeated practice and mutual physical adaptation. Such "cooperative experience" cannot be taught through words; it emerges solely from genuine physical interaction and becomes ingrained as "procedural memory" deep within each participant's body.

Polanyi proposed the concept of "tacit knowledge" -what we know far exceeds what we can articulate. The unspoken understanding on a volleyball court-when to run, when to stop, and what a teammate's glance signifies-is a prime example of tacit knowledge. Once universally

acquired within a group, this knowledge becomes its "implicit boundary," distinguishing it from others and silently shaping our collective bodily awareness of being together.

##### **(2) The Institutionalization of Ritualized Activities: Identity Reinforcement Through Repetition**

If bodily practice serves as the "raw material" for collective memory, then ritualized activities are the critical process that transforms this raw material into enduring memories. Both formal and informal ritualized events-such as periodic competitions, team induction ceremonies, inheritance rituals, and award ceremonies-collectively form the institutional framework for preserving and reinforcing collective memory.

The men's volleyball team of Southwest University of Political Science and Law's "42 consecutive championships" stands as the most compelling testament to their excellence. Since 1995, they have dominated the city's university men's volleyball tournaments for 42 straight years-a milestone that transcends mere statistical achievement, symbolizing a seamless generational legacy within the team. When new players join, they encounter not an abstract notion like "this team is strong," but concrete examples repeatedly highlighted and immortalized in their team's history. As the university's coach notes, "Integrity and competence have become the guiding principles for all players; their resilient playing style and rigorous discipline have earned the team a stellar reputation nationwide, establishing it as a flagship example of the university's integration of sports and education." Every touch of the ball on the podium, every moment of trophy celebration, becomes ritualized and elevated, ultimately becoming woven into the team's cultural DNA. Meanwhile, during pre-match pep talks, the School of Physical Education Emphasizes inheritance the university's motto-"Scholarship and Practice, Virtue and Law" -encouraging players to infuse their relentless dedication into every game. This elevated ritualistic narrative bridges sporting triumphs with the university's overarching ethos, forging a profound connection between the women's volleyball spirit and students' identity.

##### **(3) Narrative Transmission: Stories as the Medium for Memory Transmission**

Every community requires "storytelling." Narration serves as a crucial mechanism for

collective memory to spread from a closed, shared group to a broader audience, thereby continuously welcoming new members. In college volleyball instruction, narrative transmission unfolds along two main pathways: one is the micro-level integration of stories embedded in daily teaching practices, and the other is the macro-level legendary narratives spanning generations.

At the micro level, the practices of the Volleyball Teaching and Research Office at Shangqiu Normal University serve as a typical example. They imbue the setter's role-"willing to play a supporting role and make precise adjustments"-with the collaborative spirit of "dedication, service to the collective, and helping others succeed," viewing volleyball classes as a "grand classroom" for shaping students' character, conduct, and taste. The imagery of the "supporting leaf" itself constitutes a condensed cultural narrative-it conveys a set of values through metaphor, resonating more deeply with students than any abstract moral preaching.

At the macro level, the intergenerational transmission of the women's volleyball spirit forms a more profound narrative system of collective memory. The School of Marxism at Minnan Normal University and the Zhangzhou China Women's Volleyball Spirit Exhibition Hall jointly established a practical teaching base for "Comprehensive Ideological and Political Education," allowing the century-long history of the Communist Party and the spirit of the times to resonate deeply within young students. In an "Education Through Sports" course at East China Normal University, a volleyball lecture delivered by former national team players was described by enrolled students as "akin to a comprehensive ideological and political education session," noting that "behind every volleyball player and the spirit of the women's volleyball team lie countless stories filled with positive energy." Through repeated intergenerational storytelling, such moving narratives are continually refined and idealized, ultimately becoming integral components of the collective spiritual identity-this exemplifies the constructive nature of cultural memory.

### **3. Cultural Construction: The Logical Transition from Memory to Identity**

The formation of collective memory serves as the prerequisite, yet memory itself does not automatically equate to identity. "What we have

experienced together in the past" does not mean "who we are as a result." The transition from the former to the latter requires the interplay of three cultural construction mechanisms-spatial symbolism, symbolic coalescence, and identity formation-which elevate fragmented individual memories into a collectively shared identity force.

#### **3.1 Spatial Symbolism: The Volleyball Court as an Anchorage of Memory**

In the theory of collective memory, space serves a unique anchoring function. Habermas once noted that collective memory relies on spatial support-physical venues such as temples, memorials, and cemeteries are significant not only because they preserve tangible traces, but also because they embody the rituals, narratives, and emotions evoked and sustained by these material remnants. Similarly, a volleyball court functions in this manner for a university volleyball team. It is not merely a physical training ground; it is a "memory field" imbued with countless moments of sweat, cheers, celebration, and tears-every inch of its surface may bear witness to numerous saves, and standing on this court is akin to reuniting with past experiences.

"We are all part of that same community" -this sense of belonging is not conferred by administrative decree, but rather cultivated through daily physical experiences. When students step onto the volleyball court, they enter not merely a sports facility, but a vessel of time. The champion photos on the walls, training notes left by predecessors, jersey numbers passed down through team captain transitions-whether an honor wall, a trophy display case, or a dedicated training area-all subtly convey "the spiritual lineage of our team." The integrated practice of Yangming Jiaotong University's women's volleyball team provides an intriguing example: to meet training demands across both campuses, the team implemented a "cross-campus rotation training" system. While the spatial separation between the campuses was intended to weaken cohesion, it instead fostered unique memories steeped in each institution's cultural heritage-the team transcended physical venue differences and forged an emotional bond that unifies both campuses.

#### **3.2 Symbolic Condensation: The "Mythologization" Programming of Repeated**

### **Numerals and Slogans**

If space serves as the narrative framework of collective memory, then symbols are the lifeblood that sustains its vitality. In the context of physical education instruction at vocational colleges, the volleyball curriculum integrates ideological and political elements into its teaching process through a comprehensive framework of

"teaching–practice–competition–evaluation," embodying values such as teamwork, perseverance, and collective spirit, thereby achieving a seamless integration of skill acquisition and moral guidance.

The symbolic construction of university volleyball teams is particularly distinctive. Once a team achieves a certain milestone, a series of "mythologized" rituals are automatically activated. Take the Southwest University of Political Science and Law men's volleyball team's "42 consecutive championships" as an example: the first championship may simply be a tournament result, while the 42nd championship signifies that this achievement itself has been elevated to the soul of an entire discourse system. Every new player must confront the collective assumption that "we are a champion team" -this is less pressure than a cultural memory that instills a sense of mission and belonging in each new member.

In the process of symbolization, slogans play an indispensable unifying role. From their first championship in 1998 to achieving 30 consecutive titles, each generation of the Chongqing Technology and Business University women's volleyball team embodied the spirit of "perseverance and pioneering courage" through their youth and dedication. In 2025, they further accomplished 31 consecutive titles, sweeping all opponents with a perfect record, solidifying the "unity, perseverance, and resilience" spirit as a consistently recognized hallmark of campus culture. At this juncture, slogans and numbers form an organic whole: the consecutive titles represent the tangible achievements materialized by the slogans, while the slogans themselves embody the spiritual essence distilled from those victories, creating a mutually reinforcing dynamic.

### **3.3 Identity Formation: The Pivotal Point Where Collective Memory Transforms into a Community**

The ultimate goal of collective memory

construction is identity formation. Once the aggregation of spatial symbols and signs has been completed, the true test lies in whether these external memory carriers have been internalized as an individual's self-awareness-"I am a member of this group because I identify with its memories."

Research has clearly demonstrated that cultivating the concept of fair competition in college physical education should involve integrating rule awareness into the training process at the cognitive level, thereby continuously narrowing the gap between rule understanding and actual on-court behavior. The self-correction following each coordination error in volleyball drills, the cheers after decisive points, and the collective silence of the entire team after a loss-all share a common characteristic: participants' emotions become focused as they engage in a highly personal interpretation of the game itself. When these individual meanings are discussed and validated within a communal framework, the scattered fragments coalesce into a unified collective narrative-"We are inseparable," "We exist and work together."

From a broader perspective of aesthetics and body theory, Shusterman's body aesthetics reveals a profound proposition: the body is not merely the material vehicle of movement, but also a crucial dimension of aesthetic perception and identity. In college volleyball instruction, students gain not only technical proficiency through repeated training and competition, but also undergo an identification process with bodily aesthetics. The collective memory internalized through bodily practice carries ethical implications that align with the value of "fair competition" -when volleyball courses integrate the patriotic ethos and collectivist values of the Chinese women's volleyball team, they redefine the relationship between individual and collective, ultimately embodying the grand narrative of "bringing glory to the nation."

However, if the integration of this grand narrative with individual practices fails to maintain balance under intense communal pressures, those who feel disappointed or marginalized may be excluded from mainstream memory. It is noteworthy that the formation of collective memory itself constitutes a power distribution mechanism-determining whose stories are heard, whose mistakes are forgiven, and whose glories are celebrated. This dynamic

process inherently shapes the selective preservation and forgetting of collective memory. The "selection-forgetting" function of collective memory similarly operates in college volleyball instruction: stories of "victory" are repeatedly celebrated, while lessons from "defeats" are silently filtered out. Such a purification mechanism may, over time, lead to a "unidimensionalization" of communal memory, effectively obscuring and suppressing its inherent complexity and diversity. From a more prudent educational perspective, a healthy volleyball community should not seal its memory system within a framework of accumulated glory but rather reserve sufficient space for diverse narratives. Just as the seamless collaboration between the first and second passers stems from listening to and trusting differences, a resilient community must inherently embrace heterogeneity as a prerequisite for its survival.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Collective memory in college volleyball instruction is not a naturally occurring psychological phenomenon, but rather a cultural product systematically constructed through three mechanisms: shared bodily practice, ritualized solidification, and narrative transmission. The unique "net-separated" structure of volleyball means that community formation occurs not through physical collision-based confrontation, but through the most subtle collaborative experiences in each play and the shared temporal axis of symbolic cohesion. The convergence of narrative elements—such as spatial symbolism, consecutive championship numbers, and slogans—serves as the core resource sustaining the community's emotional bonds. The transition from collective memory to collective identity ultimately manifests in the fulfillment of college students' sense of belonging and the reconstruction of their personal identity. College volleyball is not merely a venue for technical training; it is also a cultural laboratory for life aesthetics education and character development. However, no conception of community can entirely escape the selective shadows cast by memory. The "champion narrative" repeatedly recounted on volleyball courts, while conveying glory, may inadvertently marginalize the value of failure and the significance of adversity. Therefore, for future college volleyball

education to fully realize its potential in fostering aesthetic education within daily life, it must maintain a cautious self-reflexive approach while fostering collective identity—ensuring that the construction of collective memory involves not only the repeated embodiment of symbols of glory but also the preservation of memories tied to the complete life experiences behind every ball touch.

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