



The Effect of Using Small-Sided Games on Developing Learning of the 4–2 Playing System with the Setter in Position 2 among Physical Education and Sports Sciences Students

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Abstract

Physical education and sports science majors' ability to master the 4-2 formation with the setter positioned at position 2 was tested in a series of small sided game. The study employed a quasi-experimental design with both groups being measured before and after the intervention. A total of 44 undergraduates from Baghdad's College of Physical Education and Sports Sciences made up the sample. Each of the two groups of students (22 total) served as an experimental and control group. For six weeks the experimental group trained using only two on two games. Maintaining the status quo was the strategy used by the control group. Strategic decision-making, setter positioning and tactical performance were the three factors examined. An analysis was conducted on the data using SPSS version 26. On every measure that was considered the experimental group outperformed the control group statistically. Results from the follow up tests likewise favoured the experimental group. The findings suggest that playing in smaller teams can aid in the acquisition of the 4-2 system of play and the development of the setter's tactical function in position 2. Colleges of Physical Education and Sports Sciences should prioritise implementing structured small sided game into their volleyball curricula according to the study .

Keywords: small sided games, volleyball, 4–2 playing system, setter positioning, tactical performance.

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Introduction

Volleyball is not only a team sport but also a game of technical skills and tactical thinking carried out simultaneously by the individual players. The game is played in such a way that the players need to take decision on the fly, as the playing circle continuously keeps changing throughout. In volleyball there are not only individual skills like passing, setting or attacking to perform well. It is also conditional on the utilization of these skills within a defined playing system that organizes attacking and defending actions. The high match volume and players training circuit in the current study render this finding even less surprising as studies on volleyball match analysis report how technical-tactical actions are closely related to performance outcomes during play (Silva et al., 2016; Hassan & Abdulkareem, 2025).

Be Critical Students in Physical Education and Sports Sciences programs are trained in the initial stage with basic skills as well as tactical playing systems. These systems tell players where they are situated on the field, how they should move while playing and whether or not their position plays well with teammates. There are several models that exist for classifying the various playing systems existent in education, one of which includes the 4–2 playing system. It is little to no wrangling which works well for untrained learners, gets kids clear on basic offensive positions and team concepts (Hassan & Abdulkareem, 2026; Abdulhussein et al., 2026).

The 4–2 playing system incorporates a pivotal tactical position with the setter. The setter runs the offensive attack as well as how and where the ball will be passed or set. If you have the setter in position 2, however, this is where it gets a little tougher! Setter needs to work with front-row players, read opponent passing and make swift decisions in midplay. Previous studies show that setters must make critical offensive decisions in volleyball and that setting efficacy seems to be associated with a number of game-related variables such as reception quality, setting technique and setting tempo (Denardi et al., 2017; González-Silva et al., 2016).

More than half of the students noted that they struggled with applying the 4–2 in true game situations, due to the position numbered 2 being occupied by the setter. In isolated practice some students can execute volleyball skills, however, they run into problems when performing them in a game context. Traditional methods of teaching the sport often emphasize technical drills that are repeated more than tactical understanding and decision making (Shaker et al., 2025; Abdel Salam, 2025).

The role of game-based methods in the teaching of team sports. This is how students can learn in situations that bring them close to real competition. This form of learning aligns with pedagogies that develop performance, participation, and decision making through varying game situations (Light, 2012; Renshaw et al., 2010). One of these are more the small sided game. They minimize player count + change the field or



rules of play. These changes will decrease the amount of players, which in turn increases their involvement and provides more realistic conditions for learners to develop movement and decision-making skills (Davids et al., 2013; Halouani et al., 2014). This provides players with more opportunities to receive the ball move make decisions and learn tactical concepts while playing. There is a recent findings this evidence the usefulness of game based approaches for decision making in sport learning (Abad Robles et al., 2020; González-Valero et al., 2024).

This rounded approach focuses on both technical and tactical roles which likely will serve volleyball playing systems, therefore small sided game may be useful in teaching those. Playing the game repeatedly gives students an opportunity to practice positioning, decision making and team organization. In a systematic review on small sided games in volleyball, de Oliveira Castro et al. (2022) reported that this strategy could function as a pedagogical and training tool for the educational and training contexts. Moreover, the same design with volleyball small sided game refers to how court spatial dimensions impact tactical-technical behaviour among novice volleyball players (Jorge Rodrigues et al., 2022) It is worth mentioning that further research needs to be conducted regarding the small sided game implementations of competencies in a particular volleyball system (4–2) such as when focusing on the setter at position 2.

This research investigates the impact of small sided game on mastering the 4–2 playing system with the setter positioned at 2 specifically among students in Physical Education and Sports Sciences. The research centers on three primary factors: tactical performance, decision-making and setter positioning during gameplay. The objective is to ascertain if small sided game facilitate students in implementing the 4–2 method more proficiently during actual volleyball scenarios. The objective is to juxtapose the outcomes of students educated via small sided game against those instructed using conventional teaching methods .

The research operates under the premise that small sided game could enhance the understanding of the 4–2 playing system. It is postulated that there will be notable statistical discrepancies between the pre-test and post-test outcomes of the experimental group for tactical performance, decision-making, and setter positioning favouring the post-test findings. It is posited that the control group might exhibit progress from the pre-test to the post-test albeit this enhancement will be less significant than that of the experimental group. It is ultimately posited that there will be statistically significant disparities between the experimental and control groups in the post-test outcomes favouring the experimental group.

By concentrating on a particular tactical position inside an organised playing framework this study could yield valuable insights for enhancing volleyball instruction in institutions of Physical Education and Sports Sciences .



Methodology

Research Design

The research employed a quasi-experimental framework featuring pre-test and post-test assessments for two comparable groups. This design was employed to investigate the impact of small sided game on mastering the 4–2 playing system with the setter positioned at 2 among students in Physical Education and Sports Sciences. It is appropriate for educational and training research as it facilitates a comparison between the experimental and control groups both pre- and post-training accounting for the initial levels of both groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) .

Population and Sample

The study cohort comprised fourth-year students from the College of Physical Education and Sports Sciences at the University of Baghdad in the 2025/2026 academic year. Students in their fourth year were chosen as they had already acquired fundamental volleyball abilities and commenced the study of tactical elements of the game, as per the curriculum. Consequently they were better equipped to implement a training regimen pertaining to the 4–2 formation and the setter's responsibilities in position 2.

The sample comprised 44 students chosen by purposive sampling in accordance with the study's criteria. The criteria for selection encompassed being a fourth-year student consistently attending practical volleyball sessions, possessing fundamental volleyball skills and being devoid of ailments or medical issues that would hinder participation. Fundamental volleyball competencies were evaluated by instructor observation and an initial practical assessment before to commencing the experiment.

Following the selection of the sample the students were arbitrarily partitioned into two equal factions. The experimental cohort comprised 22 students and participated in the small sided game training regimen. The control group had 22 students and persisted with the conventional training approach.

To ensure equivalence between the two groups basic variables including age height and weight were measured. An independent-samples t test was used to compare these variables between the groups. The results showed no significant differences which indicates that the two groups were homogeneous before starting the experiment as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Baseline Characteristics and Group Homogeneity between the Experimental and Control Groups

Variable	Experimental Group Mean ± SD	Control Group Mean ± SD	t-value	p-value
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Age (years)	22.4 ± 0.7	22.3 ± 0.6	0.38	0.71
Height (cm)	171.6 ± 5.4	172.1 ± 5.2	0.31	0.76
Weight (kg)	69.4 ± 5.8	70.1 ± 5.6	0.41	0.68

Research Instruments

The study used an observation checklist to assess students performance in the 4–2 playing system with a focus on the setter in position 2. The checklist was designed to measure three main variables ; tactical performance decision making and positioning during game situations.

Tactical performance was assessed through the students ability to apply the 4–2 system organize offensive play and cooperate with teammates. Decision making was assessed through the setter’s ability to choose the suitable direction of the ball respond to the positions of teammates and opponents and make decisions at the correct time. Positioning was assessed through the setters movement readiness and ability to take the correct position during offensive organization.

The assessment was conducted during practical volleyball situations Each variable was evaluated using clear performance criteria prepared according to the objectives of the study. The observation checklist was reviewed by volleyball specialists to check its validity and suitability for measuring the study variables. Their comments were considered before using the final version of the checklist.

Reliability was tested using Cronbach’s alpha, which reached 0.87. This value indicates an acceptable level of reliability for the assessment tool.

Small Sided Game Training Program

A six week training program was prepared based on small sided games. The aim of the program was to improve students learning of the 4–2 playing system with a focus on the setter in position 2. The program included one session per week and each session lasted 60 minutes. The difficulty of the activities increased gradually from week to week.

Each session was divided into three parts : a 10-minute warm-up a 45 minute main part and a 5 minute cool down. The warm up included general and volleyball specific exercises. The main part included 3×3 and 4×4 small sided games modified court dimensions and specific tasks for the setter. These tasks focused on organizing the attack distributing the ball, cooperating with front row players and making tactical decisions during play.

The training activities were arranged from simple to more complex situations. In the first weeks, the focus was on understanding the 4–2 system and the setters basic movement. In the following weeks the activities focused more on decision making attack organization and applying the system in game like situations.

Table 2. *Weekly Small Sided Game Training Program*

Week	Session Goal	Warm-up (10 min)	Main Part (45 min)	Cool-down (5 min)
1	Introducing the 4–2 system and the setter's role	General warm-up and passing drills	3×3 games with required setter participation	Stretching and feedback
2	Improving setter movement and attack organization	Volleyball-specific warm-up	3×3 and 4×4 games with adjusted court dimensions	Stretching
3	Developing decision making under pressure	Dynamic warm-up	Competitive mini-games with limited decision-making time	Cool-down exercises
4	Linking the setter with front-row players	Ball warm-up	4×4 games simulating match situations	Performance discussion
5	Integrating technical skills with tactical duties	Specific warm-up	Combined small sided game with increased playing pace	Stretching
6	Applying and evaluating the full 4–2 system	Full warm-up	4×4 mini-matches applying the 4–2 system	Summary and feedback

The control group followed the traditional teaching method during the same six-week period. This method included explanation by the instructor, isolated technical drills, repeated passing and setting exercises, and general volleyball practice. The students practiced the skills separately, without using small sided game or modified game situations.

Research Procedures

The preliminary assessment was administered prior to the commencement of the training program. It was utilised to assess the efficacy of both teams inside the 4–2 formation emphasising the setter at position 2. Subsequently the experimental cohort engaged in the small sided games regimen for a duration of six weeks whereas the control cohort persisted with the conventional training approach. Upon conclusion of the training duration the post-assessment was administered utilising same evaluative tools.

Statistical Analysis

The data was analyze using SPSS version 26. Means and standard deviations was calculated for the study variables. Paired samples t-tests were used to compare the pre test and post test results within each group while independent samples t tests were used to compare the post test results between the experimental and control groups. Cohen's d was calculate to determine the effect size. The level of significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$ (Cohen, 2013; Field, 2024).

Results

Table 3. Experimental Group Pre- and Post-Test

Variable	Pre-test Mean $\pm$ SD	Post-test Mean $\pm$ SD	Paired t- value	p-value	Cohen's d
Tactical Performance (Setter in Position 2)	56.8 $\pm$ 5.2	68.9 $\pm$ 6.1	7.24	$p < 0.001$	1.55
Decision Making	58.1 $\pm$ 4.9	70.2 $\pm$ 6.0	7.58	$p < 0.001$	1.62
Positioning	57.6 $\pm$ 5.5	69.1 $\pm$ 6.2	6.91	$p < 0.001$	1.47

Table 4. Control Group Pre- and Post-Test Results

Variable	Pre-test Mean $\pm$ SD	Post-test Mean $\pm$ SD	Paired t- value	p-value	Cohen's d
Tactical Performance (Setter in Position 2)	57.0 $\pm$ 5.3	60.5 $\pm$ 5.7	2.82	0.01	0.65
Decision Making	58.0 $\pm$ 4.8	61.2 $\pm$ 5.4	2.67	0.01	0.64
Positioning	57.5 $\pm$ 5.6	60.8 $\pm$ 5.8	2.55	0.02	0.61

Table 5. Post-Test Group Comparison

Variable	Experimental Group Mean $\pm$ SD	Control Group Mean $\pm$ SD	t- value	p-value	Cohen's d
Tactical Performance (Setter in Position 2)	68.9 $\pm$ 6.1	60.5 $\pm$ 5.7	4.71	$p < 0.001$	1.42
Decision Making	70.2 $\pm$ 6.0	61.2 $\pm$ 5.4	5.23	$p < 0.001$	1.58
Positioning	69.1 $\pm$ 6.2	60.8 $\pm$ 5.8	4.58	$p < 0.001$	1.38

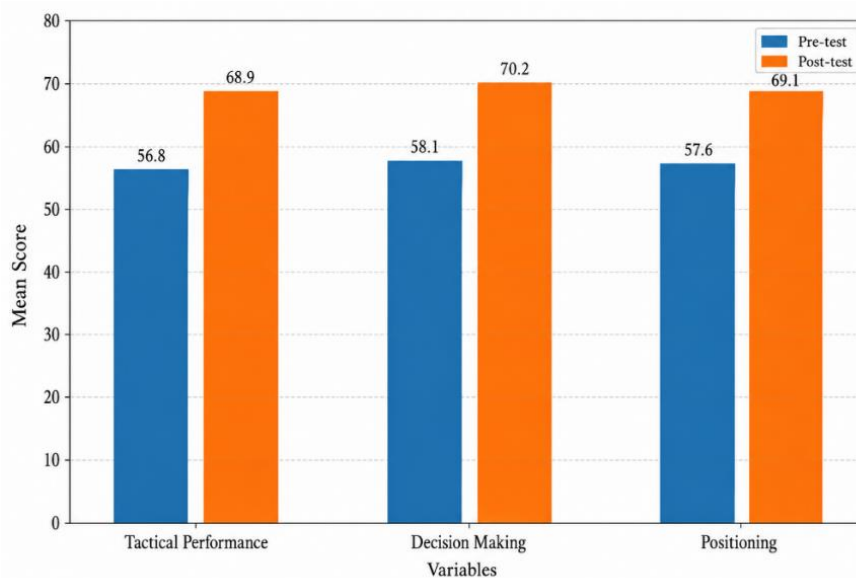


Figure 1. Pre-test vs Post-test Mean Scores for the Experimental Group on Tactical Performance, Decision Making, and Positioning ($n = 22$)

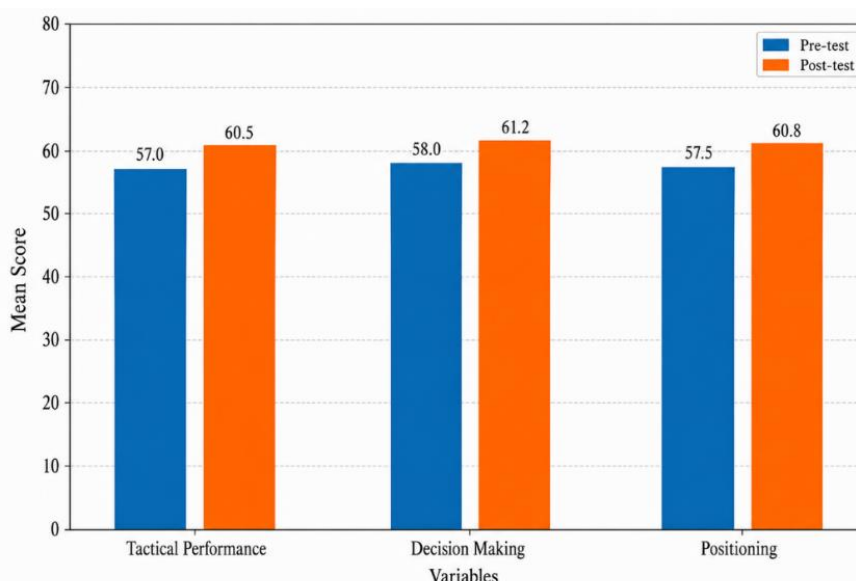


Figure 2. Pre-test vs Post-test Mean Scores for the Control Group on Tactical Performance, Decision Making, and Positioning ($n = 22$)

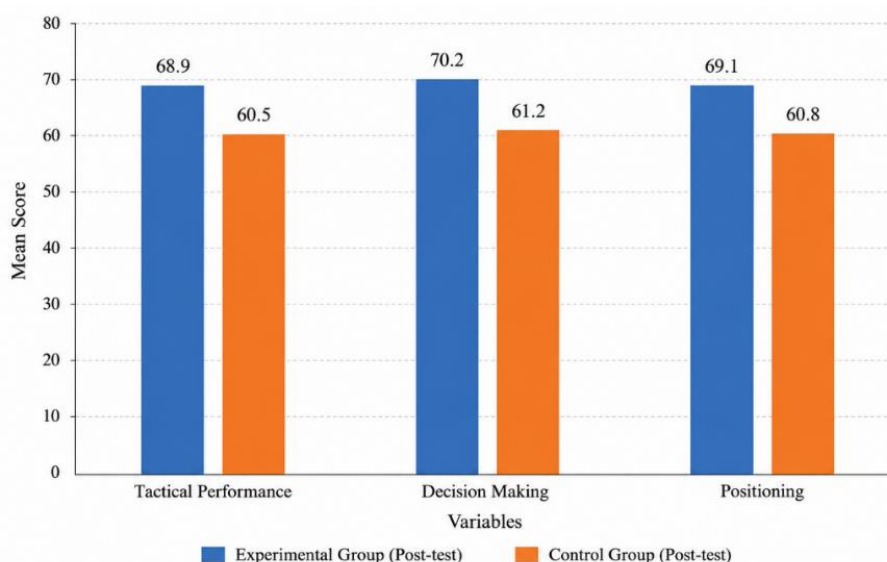


Figure 3. *Post-test Comparison of Mean Scores between Experimental and Control Groups on Tactical Performance, Decision Making, and Positioning (n = 22 per group).*

Discussion

The results in Table 3 showed clear improvement in the experimental group between the pre-test and post test. This improvement appeared in tactical performance decision making, and positioning. It may be related to the nature of small sided games. These games placed students in situations close to real volleyball play This supports previous findings that small sided games in volleyball can contribute to learning participation and tactical technical development within educational and training environments (de Oliveira Castro et al., 2022; Yousif, 2023). The idea of small sided and conditioned games facilitating the development of movement and decision making skills in team sports is indeed consistent with (Davids et al., 2013; Halouani et al., 2014).

The improvement in tactical performance suggest that students became better at applying the 4–2 playing system. The use of 3×3 and 4×4 games made the learning situation easier and more active. It helped students understand their roles inside the system. For the setter in position 2 this was important because the role requires organizing the attack, cooperating with front-row players and choosing the suitable direction of play. This is consistent with studies showing that setting performance in volleyball is affected by game related variables and by the quality of tactical organization during play (González-Silva et al., 2016) It is also supported by research showing that changing court dimensions in volleyball small sided games can influence



tactical technical behavior among beginner players (Jorge Rodrigues et al., 2022; Alhayali & Khalif, 2022).

The results also show improvement in decision making. During the training program the setter had to observe teammates and opponents before distributing the ball. Repeating this situations may have helped students read the game more clearly It also gave them practice in making decisions under changing conditions. This result is supported by research on the setters decision making in volleyball which shows that the setters choices are influenced by interactions between players and by the game environment (Denardi et al., 2017). Recent evidence also indicates that the setters decision making can be affected by interpersonal coordination and changing game conditions (Denardi et al., 2024).

The improvement in positioning can be explained in a similar way Positioning does not only mean standing in the correct place. It also depends on movement timing and understanding the development of play. Through small sided games students practiced these points in active game situations. This may have improved their awareness of where the setter should move during offensive organization This interpretation is consistent with game based learning approaches which emphasize learning through representative and changing game situation (Light, 2012; Renshaw et al., 2010).

The results at Table 4 show that the control group also improved between the pre test and post test. However this improvement was smaller than that of the experimental group. This may be due to regular practice and repetition of basic volleyball skills. The traditional method helped students practice skills but it gave fewer chances to apply the 4–2 system in realistic game situations This may explain why the improvement was limited compared with the experimental group as tactical and game based teaching approaches usually provide more opportunities for decision making and contextual skill use (Abad Robles et al., 2020).

The post test comparison in Table 5 showed differences in favor of the experimental group. This means that the small sided games program was more effective than the traditional method in improving the study variables. The reason may be that the program allowed students to practice technical skills and tactical roles together. This made the learning process closer to actual volleyball performance. Previous research also indicates that game based teaching approaches can improve decision making in sport learning because they expose learners to realistic and changing game situation (Abad Robles et al., 2020; González-Valero et al., 2024).

These findings support the use of game based teaching methods in volleyball instruction In volleyball students need to respond quickly cooperate with teammates and make decisions during changing situations. This is especially important for the



setters whose decisions affect the organization of the attack and the performance of the team. Studies on volleyball match analysis also show that technical and tactical actions are closely connected with performance outcomes during play (Silva et al., 2016).

The findings indicate that small sided game serve as an effective instructional approach for mastering the 4–2 formation with the setter positioned at 2. The results must be interpreted considering the constraints of the study, such as the sample size, the six-week training duration and the educational environment .

Conclusions

The study concluded that small sided games had a positive effect on learning the 4–2 playing system with the setter in position 2. The experimental group showed greater improvement than the control group in tactical performance decision making, and positioning. This indicates the small sided games help students apply tactical roles more effectively during practical volleyball situations.

The results also show that practicing in game like situations gave students repeat opportunities to organize the attack cooperate with front row players distribute the ball and make decisions under changing conditions. This helped connect technical skills with tactical understanding in a practical way.

The research further concludes that altering the number of participants court measurements and gameplay activities might enhance student engagement and foster active learning. Consequently organised small sided game can be regarded as an effective approach in volleyball instruction particularly for enhancing tactical comprehension and essential positions like the setter.

The findings support the use of small sided games in volleyball instruction in colleges of Physical Education and Sports Sciences. However the results should be understood within the limits of the sample size the 6 week program and the educational setting of the study.

Recommendations

Based on the findings in this study volleyball instructors are advised to use small sided games when teaching the 4–2 playing system. This is especially useful when developing the role of the setter in position 2. These games should be designed to create situation close to real play and to give students repeated chances to move cooperate and make decisions.

It is also recommended to change the number of players court dimensions and playing tasks gradually during training. This can help students move from simple



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situations to more complex tactical situations. It can also improve their understanding of the games.

Colleges of Physical Education and Sports Sciences is encouraged to include game based teaching methods in volleyball lessons. this method may help students develop technical and tactical skills in a more practical way.

Future studies should be conducted on larger samples and on other volleyball positions. It is also recommended to study the long term effect of small sided games on tactical learning Future research may also use tool such as video feedback or performance analysis to support the teaching process.

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