

Los Angeles Times Magazine

Sand Storm

*** Forget About the Glory of Beach Volleyball at the '96 Olympics. It's Barely Hanging on as a Pro Sport--and the Players Get Most of the Blame.**

By Janet Wiscombe

Kent Steffes, bronzed beach god, Olympic medalist, towering millionaire, is furious. From his aluminum chair, he roars about the stupidity and improbity of his fellow athletes, top players whom he blames for the rotten state of professional beach volleyball. "I want to find the truth," he declares. "One way is to depose people."

It's the second day of a three-day volleyball tournament in Seal Beach in July featuring the most famous male players in the country. An army of roustabouts has worked all week to pitch tents, erect bleachers, install revolving sponsor banners and inflate gigantic plastic soda and beer cans. Video cameras whir. Hip-hop explodes from mega speakers.

But passions have shifted from the court to the sidelines, where talk is more about legal hardballs than sand-crashing digs, and the verb "to serve" has taken on new meaning. Rumor has it that some athletes might get slapped with legal summonses today. In June, Steffes sued both the Marina del Rey-based Assn. of Volleyball Professionals, which runs tournaments and acts as the sport's governing board, and six athletes on the tour--all members of the 1997 AVP board of directors. He accuses the AVP of breach of contract--for not paying him prize money--and fraud, and board members of gross mismanagement, self-dealing and "knowingly or recklessly" acting "in disregard of their fiduciary duties." Steffes, a 30-year-old hunk and the youngest player in AVP history to win 100 titles, admits the suits have strained already fragile relationships. "Whenever you stand up for something, people aren't going to like you," he says.

One of the lawsuits is aimed at AVP board member and volleyball king Karch Kiraly, his partner when the game reached its apogee in Atlanta in 1996, his brother when the two stood together to accept the sport's first gold medals. In those sizzling, celebrity-sotted days, the margaritas and the money flowed, and everybody got along--or so it seemed. Other than the unfortunate attention surrounding Holly McPeak's breast implants--in which the media exposed U.S. women's team members hissing about the relative merits of athletic skill and sex appeal--the XXVI Olympiad was very good for beach volleyball. Global TV coverage thrust the game into new galaxies where players, promoters and sponsors could cash in on the exploding "Baywatch"-stoked demand for beach glam: beer and bikinis, pectorals and ponytails, fitness and fun.

That's why today is such a bummer. The athletes are grim-faced and edgy. Steffes and Kiraly aren't speaking. Referring to the lawsuit, Kiraly says only, "I'm speechless." In a tone bleached of humor, player Dain Blanton grumbles, "If I'm not playing, I'm not here." Even the fans, once known as raucous party animals, look more like the sedate denizens of Wimbledon.

Oh, fun.

Though the crisis in pro beach volleyball predates Steffes' suits, his legal actions symbolize the sport's wrenching dysfunction. At a time when volleyball is bigger than ever as a recreational and collegiate sport, enjoyed by millions, the professional endeavor is in financial and spiritual ruin. Tours showcasing two- and four-player teams have either evaporated or degenerated into dens of vicious squabbling and finger-pointing, unfettered greed and runaway egos. Just a year ago, three major organizations staged pro events. Today, the AVP stands alone, and it clings to life like a beached whale in desperate need of a forgiving tide. Many of the same beautiful, buff players who once defined the California dream are looking for work.

The AVP is scrambling to recover from corporate desertions--particularly the loss of its title sponsor of 16 years, Miller Brewing Co. In August, the beer maker yanked its support indefinitely. Prize money and TV coverage have plummeted. Debts have mounted to \$2.8 million. Players are owed tens of thousands of dollars in back winnings. Harry Usher, a respected sports manager who valiantly tried to rescue the AVP this year by slashing prize money in half and suturing relationships, said in September, "We are either perched on the precipice of greatness--or extinction." A month later, he moved on. The ball is now in the court of Bill Berger, a former volleyball player, agent and promoter who, despite energetic plans for rebuilding the sport, concedes the AVP is on the brink of bankruptcy.

The Women's Professional Volleyball Assn., and the men's and women's "pro-fours" leagues--home to the stretch-limbed cover girl Gabrielle Reece--already have vanished. Poof. Gone. Nancy Lengel, who headed the WPVA until board members ousted her in 1997 in what she describes as a palace coup, views the sport as morally diseased. "The mudslinging in professional volleyball is malicious," she says. The men offer similar comments on their state of affairs. "I'm saddened," says former AVP board member and player Dan Vrebalovich. "I'm sickened."

What's going on here? Has the quintessential California sport become another mean, money-grubbing game, a garish forum for hawking sunglasses, beer and egos? Has the laid-back beach scene become nothing than an overhyped marketplace for an ever brasher entertainment aesthetic?

*

Before it shed its bohemian ties in the late '70s, the notion of beach volleyball as a source of paychecks, gold medals and lawsuits would have been ludicrous. The game originated near the Santa Monica Pier in the roaring '20s, invented by sun worshipers unschooled in the tradition of American stoicism--or shoes. They were fun-loving sand lizards and surfers who played while the waves built, the burgers cooked and the beer chilled. Rewards came in the form of T-shirts and six-packs. Once in a while, a beach boy won a college scholarship to play the century-old hard-court version of the game, an Olympic sport since 1964.

Volleyball legends like Ron Von Hagen, known to play from sunup to sundown, never dreamed of participating on a national tour. Von Hagen was near retirement in 1974 when prize money was first awarded--a whopping \$1,500. But by the late '80s, the AVP tour had expanded to 25 events in seven states, Sinjin Smith was raking in prize money that had leapfrogged to six figures, and TV had hit the beach. Soon, wonder boy Randy Stoklos would hit the \$1-million mark in career earnings.

To deal with heady new business realities, the AVP, and later the WPVA, were formed as player-owned and -operated entities. Each group hired an executive director, but the board members, all athletes, governed everything from the size of the purses to the scope of management contracts. It was a lot of balls to balance in the air.

Not surprisingly, as fortunes grew, so did egos--and sniping over the cut of the pie. Business and personal relations began to intertwine, making a warm bed for suspicion and mistrust. As one example of the unsettling incestuous ties, insiders point to the long-term relationship of Holly McPeak and Leonard Armato, an AVP executive director turned super-agent who represents athletes such as Shaquille O'Neal--and McPeak. Last year, Armato served as a consultant to his girlfriend's unraveling WPVA tour, a fact that several female athletes say was a conflict of interest. Armato insists his attachment to McPeak has never influenced sponsorship decisions.

Another name that incites venom is Gabrielle Reece, world-class beauty, superb athlete, fitness queen and magnet of adulation and attention from sponsors and spectators. Here's the catch: "Gabby" competes in the newer, four-player version of the game, which isn't an Olympic sport and doesn't engender big bucks. (Though the fours inarguably demands less skill than the pairs, some say it's actually livelier and more fun to watch.) Many pairs players and promoters not only dismiss Reece as an athlete but also charge her and her manager, Jane Kachmer, with hogging all the attention and sucking the sport dry.

"How can I phrase this correctly? Gabby is a very touchy subject," says Chris Schaefer, a top pairs player and former WPVA president. "She's a great marketing tool for women's volleyball. But she could be more helpful. She wants too much of the pie. Unfortunately, it's destroying us."

Reece is weary of her role as scapegoat. "People are frustrated, so it's easy to come after me. I'm the most visible. We're all competing for sponsors and TV hours, and it's a bummer. But if one of us sinks, all of us sink. I'd do anything to help grow the sport. I'd go disco dancing in Saran Wrap if it would help."

Until Usher cut AVP prize money last winter to slow financial hemorrhaging, the stakes in pro beach volleyball had grown very high, but only for the top dozen or so on a typical 64-player tour. The elite--the Holly McPeaks and Karolyn Kirbys, the Karch Kiralys and Kent Steffeses--earned six- and even seven-figure annual incomes, including endorsement deals, while lower-ranked but still hot competitors such as Chris Young pulled in five figures, if that.

This was in the mid-'90s, before volleyball's stock soured. Young was barely making expenses when he resigned from the tour in July to take an indoor job as a stock researcher. And beach celeb Adam Johnson, now Kiraly's playing partner, recently moved from Laguna to more affordable San Clemente after his income dropped by three-fourths to \$50,000 a year. He isn't complaining. "At least we have a tour," he says.

Since the WPVA and pro-fours leagues disappeared into a financial abyss last year, the pro women still in the game are playing on the international circuit and at occasional special events. "With sponsor support, we used to be able to make

\$300,000," says Nancy Reno, a top-ranked player. "Now we're competing for our mortgages."

Chris Marlowe, ESPN sportscaster and hard-court volleyball Olympian, speaks for many when he sums up what went wrong. "The problem is that everybody got greedy. The players and promoters."

With little or no revenue generated by ticket sales, the tours depend heavily on corporate money. In happier days, the AVP was the envy of the sports world, attracting sponsors such as Ford, Honda, Kodak, Procter & Gamble, Coca-Cola and Coppertone. "They had very sharp sponsors who walked away because of the incompetence of the board," says Jon Miller, senior vice president for NBC Sports. "All the money from sponsors went into prize money instead of growing the sport."

While the players/owners' eyes were trained on their personal fortunes, no one thought to build toward a brand identity as sovereign as the NBA's, much less nurture the next generation of athletes. Making money became more important than mixing with the masses, and the days when fans would arrive the night before a major tournament to bury kegs of beer died. The superstars no longer drank and danced with fans or with each other. With airplanes to board and workout schedules to meet at private gyms, they began to stiff sponsors on time and exposure.

This self-serving attitude also contributed to a lack of unity among tours, says Tom Feuer, director of television for Nike Global Sports Marketing. Sponsors and promoters were caught in the cross-fire of tours and individuals competing for the same money, and the clutter of events confused TV programmers. ESPN, the game's fairy godmother since 1980, reduced its coverage from a high of 34 telecasts in 1996 to eight this year as interest in the sport waned. NBC simply pulled the plug. "The sport never grew" a loyal audience, Miller explains. "What's sad is that when we began [broadcasting] on Labor Day of 1990, the response was so tremendous we out-delivered the U.S. Open [tennis tournament]. Beach volleyball was new, different, exciting. It got overexposed. All the matches began to look alike."

Tim Simmons, former information director of the WPVA, says the tour glut ultimately led to warring factions of players, agents and management. "They backstab and fight. The older players don't want the young pros to get too good. They are seen as competition. One of the big problems I had with volleyball people is that they all think they're legends in their own time."

*

It's a foggy summer day in Huntington Beach, and fans are filing into bleachers set up for the three-day OP Best of the Beach Invitational. The audience is largely composed of volleyball insiders and passers-by. A good number are boomers with babies, pale spectators with strollers and considerable reserve. The female players make up for the languid spirits with fiery abandon. Theirs is a dance of catlike speed and dogged, driving power, cannonball jumps and gravity-defying digs. It's formalized ballet and free-form jazz, graceful extensions and arched backs, calculated maneuvers and spontaneous combustion.

With a \$100,000 purse on the line, the women are thrilled to be on domestic sand for the first time all year at this event sponsored by the venerable clothing company.

"I am very humbled by them," says a strapping police sergeant watching the action. Near the sidelines, a maze of wooden walkways connects a forest of white tents springing from the sand--dressing room tents, tents with massage tables, tents with banquets of meats and fruits.

The sultan of the oasis is Jerry Solomon, an East Coast agent who was hired as the AVP's executive director in 1995 and fired last December, Vrebalovich says, for being at the helm when the organization nearly sank. To the dismay of many volleyball insiders, Solomon has managed to attract premier athletes such as McPeak, Lisa Arce, Barbara Fontana and Linda Hanley to this event. "It's like President Clinton getting impeached and then running for office in Canada," Bill Berger says. "It's unbelievable."

Between matches, Solomon announces plans to expand his "Best of the Beach" series to five events, including the OP and an already established men's invitational in Las Vegas. He says he plans to work with Eric Spector, an attorney/executive with Trident Media Inc., a Carlsbad firm that provides cable and satellite services to thoroughbred racetracks, and to the sports and entertainment industries.

Spector recently got interested in producing volleyball events after meeting a player fresh out of Penn State named Angie Kammer. She introduced him to a few top players. Lawyers converged, and TransGlobal Entertainment Inc. was born. Spector named himself president as well as chairman of a new women's tour, the American Volleyball League. By summer's end, scores of the world's best female pairs players had signed four-year contracts with the AVL.

"I really believe in Eric," McPeak said back then. "He's going to take us to the next level." Kammer gushed. "He's got huge [TV production] trucks. He has a knack for business. I can tell."

In his new ventures, Spector promised to host, produce and broadcast women's pro tournaments, beginning in December. The AVL also would be a means to achieve the rankings players need to qualify for the Sydney Olympics in 2000. Spector hired, as the AVL's executive director, Dave Williams, an experienced promoter and consultant. In fact, he worked last year for the WPVA, attempting with Armato to pull off a last-ditch sponsorship deal with Disney, an effort that failed.

But by October, Spector already had released both Williams and volleyball coach and consultant LeValley Pattison. And he had completely cut himself off from players, sponsors and the media. The Spector deal, Marlowe says, "appears to be on pause." With no tournaments scheduled for this month or next, Pattison says, "Things don't look good. There are other interested investors out there. I wish Spector would commit to the AVL or release the players and step out. It's all very strange."

*

Take it to the next level. It's become the mantra of the troubled sport. To some, the future of pro beach volleyball lies in tangibles like ticket sales and stadium seating. "If volleyball is going to the next level, it must have all the trappings of a major sport," Solomon says. "Volleyball is all about spectacle." Others insist a comeback hinges on the sport reclaiming its soul. "It's been so mismanaged, it's lost the vibe," Berger says.

Without Harry Usher's talents, some insiders predict more storms within the AVP. Still, Berger has been as intimately involved with the sport as anybody. He says the organization is undergoing radical change, building relationships among players, sponsors, the media and community members, and emphasizing a bond with the Amateur Volleyball Assn. to produce amateur and junior events at pro tournaments.

"Always before, the AVP told people things," he says. "We're bringing players and sponsors in to see what they want. We're pulling together like pistons on an engine. We are all going to fire together. If sponsors want player appearances, they will get player appearances. For the first time in four years, the AVP is looking at the light in the tunnel. We're getting the anger out and bringing excitement back to beach volleyball."

Getting the anger out won't be easy. In August, around the same time that Miller withdrew as a sponsor, the AVP held its last tournament of the turbulent 1998 season in Muskegon, Mich., to sell-out crowds. But at day's end, it wasn't margaritas that flowed. It was blood. Player Brian Lewis received 31 stitches in his face after Kent Steffes socked him through sunglasses near his left eye. The police report described the incident as "a mutual altercation." The AVP fined Steffes \$10,000 and disqualified him and his partner, Mike Whitmarsh, from the tournament.

Pro beach volleyball seems to have reached its nadir. If the game is to rediscover its place in the sun, it's going to have to be about more than slams and spikes, hammers and kills--on and off the court. It's going to have to be nicer, more festive and a lot more fun. There is hope. Out there on the sand, playing with raw passion, is a more humble breed of competitor. "I'm not motivated by money," says up-and-comer Brent Doble. "I play for the love of it. It requires the most amazing athleticism of any sport. There's nothing I wouldn't do to support it. Beach volleyball is never going away."

November 15, 1998
