

Techniques,
training,
and tactics
from the
game's
greatest
player

KARCH KIRALY
Byron Shewman

Beach Volleyball

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Byron Shewman



Human Kinetics

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To volleyball players from all over the world, in appreciation for your love of the game and with the hope that you'll reach your goals.

—*K.K.*

To the memory of Dempsey Holder—legendary surfer, lifeguard, and recreation director of Imperial Beach, California—an extraordinary man who helped me get started in this game.

—*B.S.*

PART I
THE GAME

In this part...

chapter 1 **The Evolution**

chapter 2 **The Attraction**

Chapter 1— The Evolution

What was that moment like in Atlanta?

Awesome. Thousands of fans were swarming down to the court. Bill Walton was trying to get his microphone in front of me, and I was looking up into all those faces and trying to pick out my family. Then I recognized my older son's voice. "Dad! The pool's closed!" Kristian didn't care about our gold medals. He just wanted to get to the nearby water park we had been visiting in the afternoons after my matches. That momentarily brought me back to earth. I spent the next several hours in all the Olympic hoopla, including the press conference.

It had been a perfect day. My dad, who had stayed away from the Olympics in protest of FIVB policies, flew in the night before the final on a red-eye. That morning, after I had my usual good-luck oatmeal breakfast with my whole family, they dropped me off at the Olympic Beach Volleyball venue, called "Atlanta Beach."

Before the final, I felt pretty loose. I remember joshing around with Mike Dodd and Mike Whitmarsh before warming up. We were all pretty relaxed, I think because both teams were feeling so good about an all-American—and all-AVP—final.

There had been daily sellout crowds of 11,000 fans at Atlanta Beach. Unlike most other events, people weren't confined just to watching. They could enjoy themselves as well—dressed in beach shorts, dancing to the blasting music, doing the wave, the Macarena—under the sun in a very relaxed beach atmosphere.

That day, it was even crazier. Kent Steffes and I played an almost-perfect match in the final. That Olympics was special compared to my other two because it was beach volleyball. It was the birth of a new Olympic game. What I felt about the sport at that moment was the same as I felt about myself. Accomplishment.



Who would have guessed that beach volleyball would ever have been included in the Olympic Games? Certainly not William Morgan, who invented volleyball in 1895. And certainly not Paul Johnson, who played the first beach doubles game in Santa Monica in 1930. Tired of waiting for more players to show up, Johnson and three cronies decided to try a game of doubles—first on a quarter court, then a half, then a full court.

Beach volleyball, much like surfing, remained primarily a Southern California cult sport for decades. For one thing, where else had the beaches and the weather? Yet even in the Los Angeles area, the game grew slowly until it got its first push after World War II with the migration of homecoming GIs to Southern California.

In the 1950s, State Beach in Santa Monica became the home of the first tournaments, and it took the zany promotions (including beauty contests) of legends Gene Selznick and Bernie Holtzman to get sunbathers to watch the first serious competitions.

From Santa Barbara to San Diego, a tournament schedule eventually formed with a rating system. With a 7-foot 10-inch net, no jump serves, and blocking over the net not allowed, a tournament game was an endless sideout battle that could last for hours—all for a trophy. The game used to be more like a marathon. Today, with the jump serve and block, it's more like a 100-meter sprint.

AVP

Association of Volleyball Professionals. In 1983, the organization was formed by top beach players—controlled by them—and emerged as the governing body of the pro tour.

The beach game seemed to lag behind the indoor version. The indoor game was introduced as an Olympic sport in 1964, and the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984 put volleyball on the map—particularly with the U.S. Men's Team capturing the gold medal. Meanwhile, prize money slowly seeped into the beach game in the late '70s, largely through alcohol companies. In 1983, there was enough prize money, and disputes with promoters, to lead to the formation of the Association of Volleyball Professionals (AVP). Beach volleyball began its breathtaking ascent, soon overtaking the indoor game as well as grabbing the attention of the American public. ESPN, then network television, increased their coverage every year. Although on a smaller scale and later in the decade, the women's pro tour also took hold.

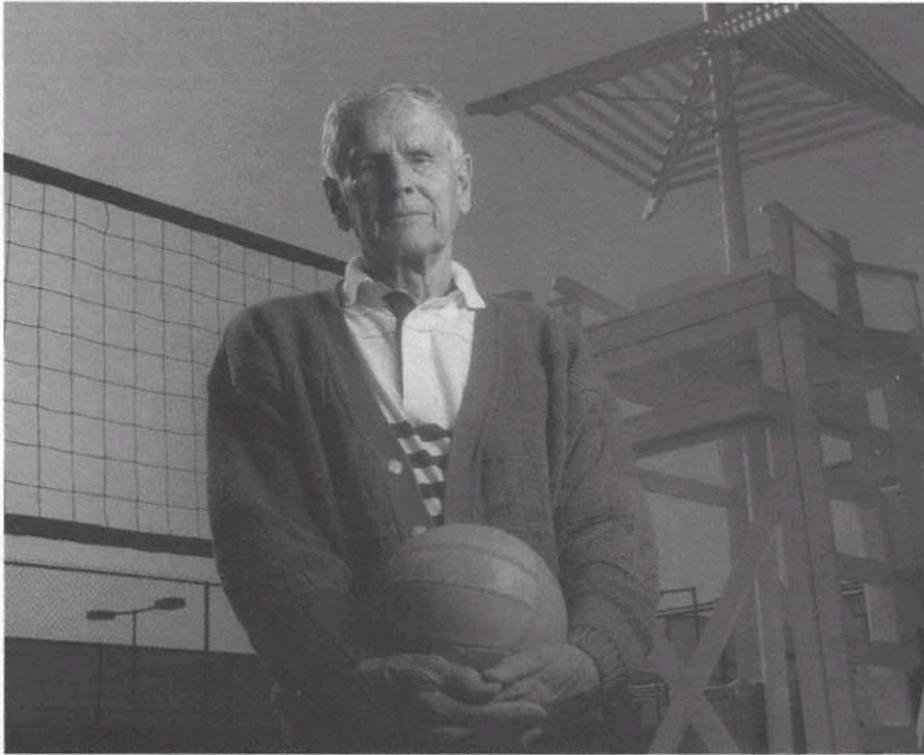
Beach volleyball continued to surge past the indoor game—in popularity, visibility, and prize money. One reason is that beach volleyball is very telegenic. It's played on some of the world's most beautiful beaches, its atmosphere is outdoors and under the sun, it's attended by young, healthy-looking people—it's sexy. Another reason is that it's easier to understand what's going on: the players are fewer and thus easier to identify.

FIVB

Federation Internationale de Volleyball (with a French accent). The sport's international governing body, domiciled in Lausanne, Switzerland, and currently run by Ruben Acosta.

In 1987, Ruben Acosta, president of the International Volleyball Federation (FIVB), saw enough promise in the beach game to create the first World Beach Volleyball Championship in Rio de Janeiro. It was a wild, and wildly successful, affair. Acosta began to develop a series of FIVB pro tournaments that would evolve into a worldwide tour. It was also Acosta who would shepherd the sport into the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

Although both the AVP and the FIVB tours flourished—by 1995, the AVP purse was \$4,000,000—the two organizations were in a fierce rivalry for control of the sport. The Atlanta Olympics, and its qualifying procedures, became the bone of contention, and bitter exchanges were made on both sides. In the end, the event went off like gangbusters and the sport was one of the most popular at the Games.



Paul Johnson, one of the pioneers of beach volleyball.

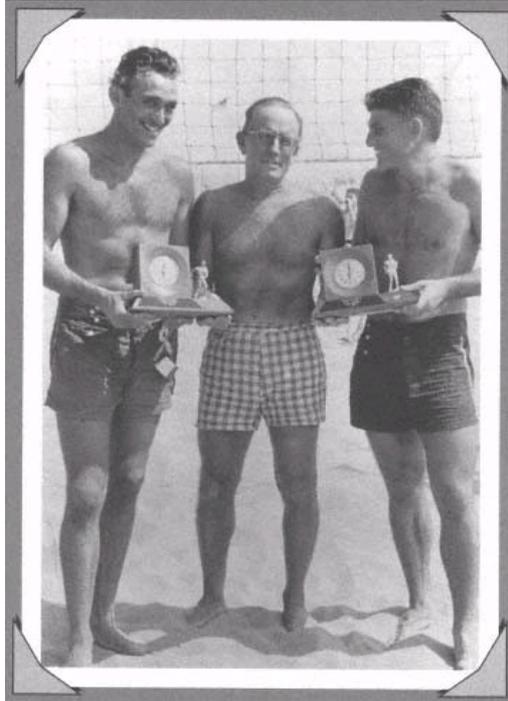
qualifier tour

The AVP Tour has a limited number of players (usually 48) who are automatically qualified—"exempt"—based on the preceding year's performance. A secondary tour allows for eight players over several tournaments to gain "exempt" status and enter AVP tournaments.

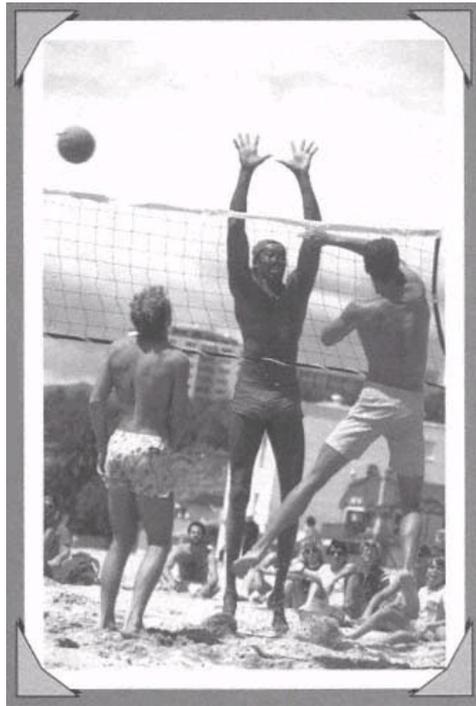
The honeymoon after Atlanta was short lived. In 1997, the AVP experienced some internal problems. Being a player-run organization, we had made some mistakes in the past and they seemed to catch up with us. Prize money had grown too fast, and our business had not been managed or operated as efficiently as it could have been.

On the women's side, things were worse. In early 1998, the WPVA (Women's Professional Volleyball Association) closed its doors and filed bankruptcy—no pro tour for women was held in 1998. Although the AVP made some needed changes in the men's tour, it was not enough. The organization's debt had run over \$2,000,000 and a lawsuit by a player, Kent Steffes, was filed against the AVP as well as its board of directors. Steffes was one of several players—including me—who had not been paid prize money for a few of the last tournaments in 1997. Since I had accepted a board position in 1997—against my own wishes—I was being sued by my former Olympic partner. Indeed, the game was undergoing unexpected, and unfortunate, setbacks.

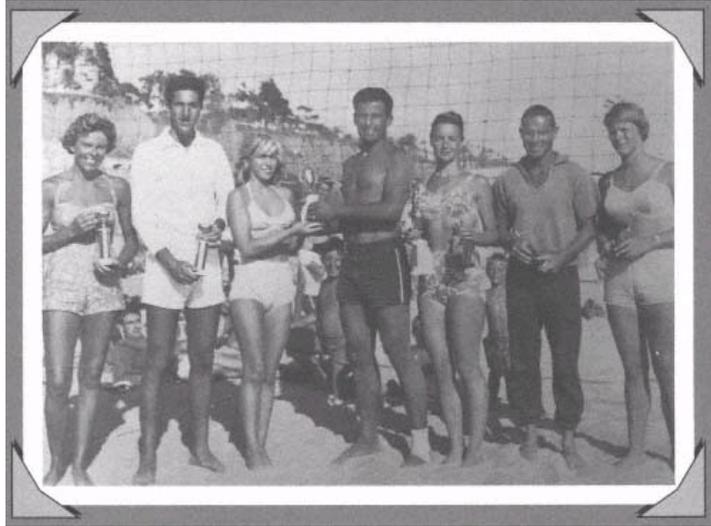
The Scrapbook



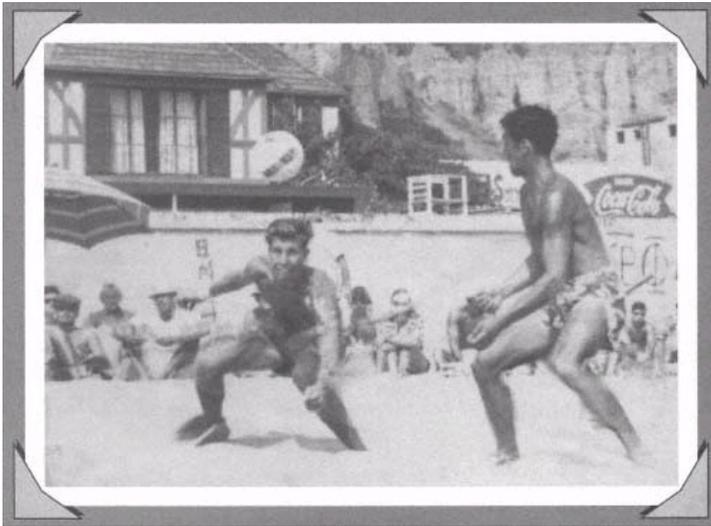
Gene selznick (left) and Bernie Holtzman (Right)
win a beach Tourney in the 1950s



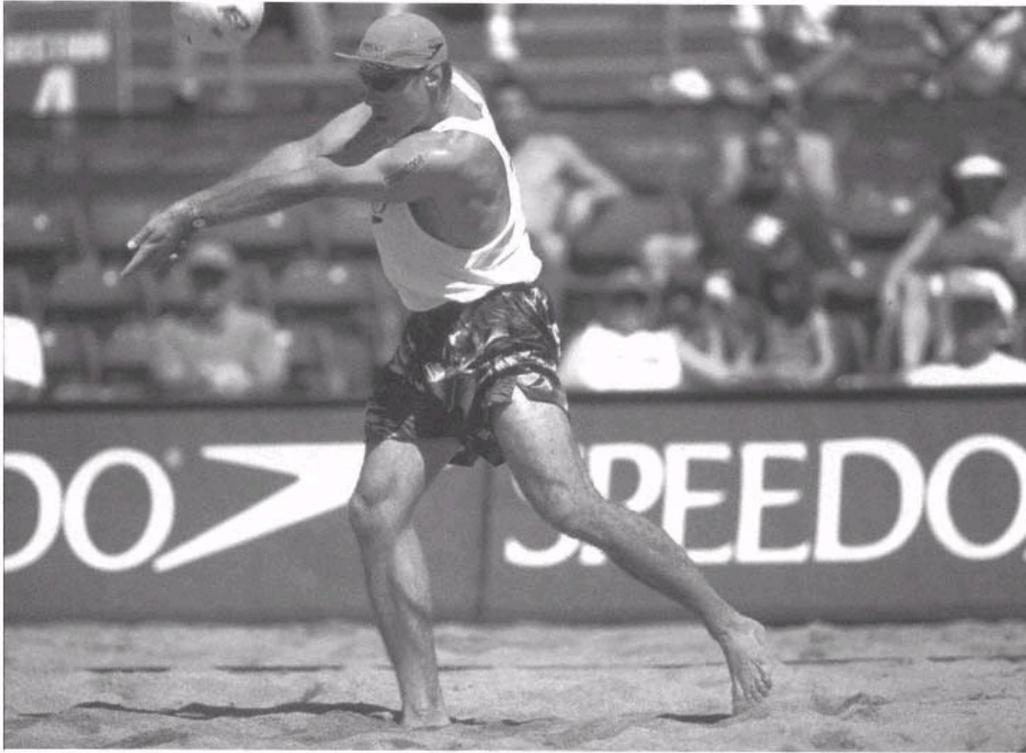
Manhattan 6-man tournament, 1984.



Beauty Queens Draw spectators in the early days.



Bob Vogelsang (Left) clown prince of beach VolleyBall for 40 years.



Sponsorships bring big money to the beach volleyball scene, increasing championship purses and sport visibility.

USA Volleyball

The national governing body of volleyball, located in Colorado Springs. Historically, the organization oversaw indoor volleyball and left the beach alone—reflecting the East/West political division in the sport as well. With the inclusion of beach volleyball in the Olympics, the organization has officially adopted its West Coast orphan.

By the end of the 1998 season, the AVP had filed for reorganization under Chapter 11 of the bankruptcy laws. The AVP could no longer continue in its former mode of operations and a restructuring plan was sought out. At this point in time, it appears that an investment group will take over the reins of men's pro beach volleyball. The intention of the new organization will be to replace the board of directors, which is comprised of players, with one comprised of professionals from the business and sports entertainment world—a welcome change in my opinion.

Admittedly, the recent problems in the pro beach game have been disappointing, but they are not terminal. As a pro sport we grew very rapidly and mistakes were made. The challenge is to learn from our errors, and I believe we will. It's still a great game to play—and to watch.

As I look to the future, I see good things for the game. In other sports, athletes are getting bigger, stronger, and better. Surely that will be the case

junior tour

A chance for young players to get good competition. A tour overseen by USA Volleyball that organizes events around the country.

with beach volleyball too. We play from March to September now, but I can see the tour becoming year-round—traveling to tropical spots in winter months, such as the Caribbean, Mexico, Hawaii, or many places in the Southern Hemisphere. The game should get another huge boost in Sydney. Also, with the advent of an AVP qualifier tour and a junior tour, junior development will increase the number of players and improve the talent.

The recreational level should also continue to boom. Huge leagues, both sand and grass, already fill the lakeshores and beaches of cities like Chicago and New York. Everywhere I go, I see interest in playing by people of all ages.

On the political level, I can see the AVP and FIVB working together more, possibly tying the Olympic qualification procedure into the AVP Tour.

As for me, I hope to be involved in the future of volleyball—broadcasting, marketing, teaching—to help fuel more growth. But I see myself more in the beach game, where I started playing and where I'll end playing. Simply, it's more fun.

Chapter 2— The Attraction

When I was 9 or 10 years old, I read one of the very rare articles on volleyball in *Sports Illustrated*. It was on Larry Rundle and what a great player he was. I also learned that he was the youngest player, at age 11, ever to play in a California amateur beach tournament. So, I got it in my mind that I wanted to play in a tournament at 11. Or even break the record—at 10.

I tied the record. When I played in my first tournament at 11—with my dad at Corona Del Mar—we got knocked out in two straight games, but both of them were very close. I immediately got hooked on the fact that I was competing against grown men and almost beating them. It gave me a sense of power, or a new-found confidence in myself, that I could compete with adults at something.

Soon I learned that I could actually beat some of these men. Even if I wasn't as big or strong as they were, I could win with finesse and consistency. Beach volleyball is a very simple game, and that's a big part of its attraction, I believe. The best players in the world are the ones who simplify the game the most.

The other part of the game I love is the environment. Being outdoors under a warm sun, playing in the sand with the ocean nearby, is hard to beat. In fact, it can't be beat.

While learning to play both games, indoor and beach, I loved both versions equally. In high school, my buddies and I would play every chance we could, even breaking into gyms around Santa Barbara to get a court. We also played a lot at East Beach in the summers. We'd race our bikes down to the beach at nine in the morning and stay on the court until the sun went down. After a last dip in the ocean, we'd run to Tri-Counties Fruit around the corner and bring back a watermelon to break open. Fifteen years old, exhausted, sunburned, and watching a brilliant sunset—how could life get any better?



The indoor game at UCLA and the U.S. Men's Team (1981–89) soon demanded most of my time. It was a great period, especially playing on the best team in the world, but the constant travel, the five hours a day in the gym, and the wear and tear on my body finally got to me. Nowadays, I much prefer playing outdoors.

A lot of things attract me to the beach. First, it's a great place to be on a summer day, and the healthy, outdoor environment creates a fun, relaxed attitude in people. It's also more fun because, with only two players on each side of the net, you're much more involved in every play—which means you'll learn faster too. Second, it's easier to find a game. All you have to do is locate three people and a court, a far cry from rounding up 12 players and an empty gym.

Even at the pro tour level, I've found the beach game to be more desirable than indoor play. I like being my own coach and trainer—or choosing either of those when needed. Travel is much easier. I make my own arrangements, which is a lot different from having to arrive at the airport three hours early and join 15 people on a 36-hour trip to some unheard-of place in Russia.

Playing on the sand is also much easier on my body, and that has helped me prolong my career. Mike Dodd, at 40, was still winning AVP tournaments, and that wouldn't happen on hardwood. Beach volleyball's first female legend, Jean Brunnicardi, won tournaments into her forties. Where outdoor volleyball requires versatility and finesse, the indoor game is one of specialization and power—exerting more stress on your muscles and joints. Finally, beach volleyball is a game you can play well into your seventies, get good exercise, and still have fun.

At the higher level of competition, players find the beach game more satisfying to the ego. For one thing, you stand out more. You're one of only four players on the court, and half of your entire team. Everyone can see you. In contrast, the indoor game has become so fast and crowded with big bodies that it's hard to follow what each individual player is doing. A great dig might get lost in the furious pace of the game as the focus shifts quickly to a dramatic spike. But on the sand, that great dig means you will also get the chance to hit. And that's what I like most about the game—you have to do everything.

In the indoor game, weaknesses in players can be covered up by teammates stepping in to do extra duties. Not so on the beach. There are three touches in beach volleyball: the pass, set, and spike. You have to perform at least one of those skills on every play. There's no place to hide.

Many players concentrate on playing one side, although I advocate learning both sides to double your list of potential partners.

Although you are required to master all the skills on the sand, you'll usually perform them on just half of your side of the court—which is plenty of area, believe me. When I was learning to play with my dad, he preferred to play the right side, so I developed into a left-side player. Many players concentrate on playing one side, although I advocate learning both sides to double your list of potential partners.

Choosing a side is one of two areas in beach volleyball where players can specialize. The other is on defense. Depending on size and certain skill proficiencies, most teams have to decide who will block and who will defend behind. So you might see a 6-foot 7-inch guy blocking every time while his 5-foot 10-inch partner covers the back court. I prefer to play with a partner where we share responsibilities, and I'll cover that later in the book.



On the beach, you stand out more.

"Wood or Sand ... or Both?"

It's easier to take your outdoor skills into the gym than to bring your indoor skills outside. Simple reason. Beach volleyball forces you to have all the skills. That's why I think it's a good idea for indoor players to play on the beach. When I was in college, certain coaches forbade players to play on the beach during the summers. When I was on the U.S. Team, head coach Doug Beal didn't want us to play on the beach, believing that it fed our egos too much, as well as encouraged habits harmful to the indoor game.