Going Coastal:
The Development of Beach Volleyball in Alberta
1987-2013

By Joelle Reiniger

Author's Note:

Upon learning about my research on the history of beach volleyball in Alberta, many friends and acquaintances commented on the apparent irony of the topic. Admittedly, it was this same sense of irony at the words "beach" and "Alberta" in the same breath – a quite visible breath in the protracted spring thaw of 2013 – that drew me to the project. Aside from the notable exception of Sylvan Lake, most of Alberta's sand courts are far from any substantial shoreline. In discussing beach volleyball in a landlocked province, it is important to note that this sport is often termed "sand volleyball" in technical documents to reflect its increasingly typical inland, man-made venues. Meanwhile, in marketing and conversation, the words "beach volleyball" represent the norm. In this article, I apply the terms interchangeably, sometimes using "sand volleyball" for accuracy and other times "beach volleyball" to reflect the place of this sport in our collective imagination.

Introduction

In 1988, four iconic underdogs of winter sport walked across Canada Olympic Park's bobsled finish line with their battered vessel in tow. Members of the Jamaican bobsled team, mythologized by Disney's 1993 film *Cool Runnings*, began training on an island where the closest thing to snow comes in a cone. In February 2013, Calgarians celebrated the 20th anniversary of the film with three of its stars present. If the trio returned to the bobsled track to reminisce, they would have seen at its base several beach volleyball courts in a province where the closest thing to an ocean is the sea of white that blankets the prairies for five months of the year.[1] The stories associated with the Park's bobsled and beach volleyball facilities illustrate the capricious relationship between

[1] At the time of writing, these courts had been closed for about a decade because the Park had forgone maintaining them in favour of its winter sport venues. Most of the Calgary's sand volleyball courts are found in other locations, where they are used regularly. The Olympic Park courts were slated for re-sodding in the summer of 2013.

climate, culture and sport in an increasingly globalized world. The story of beach volleyball in Alberta began with the sudden importation of California culture via NBC, but media hype alone could not sustain widespread investment in the sport and its resilience over more than 25 years. There are other factors and preconditions that made beach volleyball in Alberta more than a novelty.

Although the province is best known for winter sports, its athletes have more than held their own in a game synonymous with summer vacation. Given Alberta's population and prairie geography, it has produced more competitive beach volleyball players at the national and international level than one might expect. In discussing these successes, I will consider Alberta's physical geography, economic climate and the symbiotic relationship between beach and indoor volleyball. I will also look at the popularity of recreational beach volleyball in Alberta due to the nature of the game itself. Over the past quarter century, all these factors, combined with the popularization of the sport through mass media, have led sand volleyball to flourish in a prairie province.

The Origin, Development and Spread of Beach Volleyball

Hawaii is believed to be the birthplace of beach volleyball. The first game on record took place on Waikiki Beach in 1915, 20 years after William G. Morgan invented indoor volleyball at the Holyoke, Massachusetts YMCA. Beach volleyball soon spread to Asia and other parts of Europe via the American Expeditionary Forces.[2] The sport, as we know it today, evolved during the 1920s and '30s at the beach clubs of Santa Monica, California.

[2] Fédération International de Volleyball, "Beach Volleyball: History," accessed April 20, 2013, http://www.fivb.org/EN/BeachVolleyball/History.asp.

Its most obvious divergence from indoor volleyball, apart from the sandy playing surface, is the number of people on each team. Beach volleyball began to break off from indoor volleyball's six-player tradition in 1930. That year, Paul "Pablo" Johnson, organized beach volleyball's first two-player game in Santa Monica on a day when there were not enough competitors for his beach club's usual multi-player format. Though he is often credited for devising the two-player game, Johnson had previous experience playing indoor volleyball doubles during the 1930s and 1940s – the prototype for beach doubles.[3] The two-player format became the norm in southern California's private clubs, while six-player games were more common on public beaches because of the limited number of courts.[4] This changed over the course of the Depression as private clubs invited the best public beach players to compete in their tournaments. For club members, this was meant to create a more exciting game. For public-beach players, it was an opportunity to "hustle some money from the 'rich-guys' at the clubs."[5] This period marked the turning point from beach volleyball as pure recreation to a competitive sport for elite athletes.

[3] Arthur R. Couvillon, *Sands of Time: The History of Beach Volleyball: 1895-1969*. (United States: Information Guides, 2002), 39-40.
[4] Ibid., 41.
[5] Ibid., 39.

Figure 1 – Ralph Morris, *Jonathan Beach Club, Santa Monica*, 1910, photographic print, b&w, 21 cm x 26 cm, used with permission by the Los Angeles Public Library, Ralph Morris Collection, LAPL 00078595.

Like hockey in Western Canada, local rivalries helped to further the development of beach volleyball as a sport, even as it remained primarily recreational. Dane Selznick, Olympic beach volleyball coach and Santa Monica native, said the growth of the game from a popular pastime to an organized sport is due, in large part, to competition between two Los Angeles area communities. "We've always had a rivalry between Santa Monica and Manhattan Beach. It's similar to hockey teams up there, Edmonton and probably Calgary. And it's still that way," Selznick said. "It's just made all of our players better – competing against one another. It's healthy."[6]

[6] Dane Selznick, in an interview with the author, April 4, 2013.

His father, the late Gene Selznick, was one of beach volleyball's first and most prominent celebrities. Gene was fourteen years old in 1944 when the first organized tournament on a public beach took place. After the Second World War, organized beach volleyball spread across the California coast.[7] The sport came to Canada in the late 1950s as a leisure activity along the shore of Lake Ontario. There, Toronto's Balmy Beach Club organized beach volleyball triples tournaments, where players competed for vacation-themed prizes such as lawn chairs and coolers.[8] These were not unlike the prizes traditionally offered at California tournaments.

The material incentive to win increased with the professionalization of American beach volleyball in the mid-1970s. Its subsequent cable television debut opened up the world of sponsorship income to beach volleyball stars. In 1988, Canadian beach player John May spearheaded the launch of Canada's Labatt Pro Beach tour.[9] As North American beach volleyball surged in popularity, the Summer Olympic Games picked up the sport. After a successful 1992 trial in Barcelona, the Games incorporated beach volleyball as an official Olympic sport in Atlanta in 1996. This was an important milestone for Canada as Ontario players John Child and Mark Heese took the Bronze.[10] Though this is Canada's only Olympic beach volleyball medal to date, it is not unusual for Canadians to place, or come within spiking distance of the podium at international competitions. To reduce seasonal barriers to training for these events, Volleyball Canada opened Toronto's Full Time Beach Training Centre in 2012.

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[7] Couvillon, 63.
[8] Volleyball Canada, "History of Beach Volleyball," accessed April 22, 2013. http://www.volleyball.ca/sites/www.volleyball.ca/files/userfiles/file/INFO-HistoryofBeachVolley[1](1).pdf.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

Inside Out: The Role of Hard Court Volleyball

Before beach volleyball crashed onto the Alberta scene around 1990, Calgary served as Canada's headquarters for elite men's indoor volleyball. From 1979 to 2000, the city hosted the national men's team. The concept for a central volleyball training centre arose out of preparation for the 1976 Summer Olympic Games in Montréal. Organizers founded the Centre so players could train full-time in one location, in order to increase the chance of winning a medal on home soil.[11] At the 1976 Games, the women's and men's teams ranked eighth and ninth respectively. John Paulson, 1976 volleyball Olympian and administrator of the men's team, put the Training Centre up for bid in 1979. It was hoped that competition to host the team would make for a better Centre. Calgary won the bid for many of the same reasons it succeeding in hosting the Olympic Winter Games in 1988. At the time, the city, along with the rest of urban Alberta, was booming. As natural resource wealth flooded into the province during the late 1970s, the University of Calgary could afford to build world-class training facilities, which would first attract the men's volleyball team and then be used for the Olympic Games. The University poured investment into its physical education department in order to fund cutting edge sports medicine and training research. Also important, Calgary's thriving job market made the city an attractive place for players to relocate. "You can't survive on training grants. You have to work for a living, too," Paulson said. These among other factors clinched the bid, which was a joint venture of the Alberta Volleyball Association (AVA) and the University of Calgary.[12]

[11] John Paulson, in an interview with the author, April 15, 2013.
[12] Ibid.

The development of elite indoor training, through the National Team's move to Alberta, helped to lay the groundwork for the development of beach volleyball. As Team Canada players retired, many turned their attention to organizing and coaching both indoor and beach versions of the game. Among these, Terry Gagnon (National Team 1985-92) went on to become AVA Executive Director. Don Saxton, who played on the team during the late 1970s and most of the following decade, would build Alberta's only year-round indoor beach volleyball training centre.

Saxton played his first game of beach volleyball shortly after competing in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. "Brian Gatzke[13] and I were in California on a tour. We went to the Southern California beach courts and we challenged a couple little guys, who weren't very good, and they kicked us. So, it was kind of a humbling experience because both of us were good volleyball players but knew nothing about beach."[14] That changed when Saxton retired from his pro indoor career in 1991 and shifted his focus to the development of beach volleyball. In 1994, he and two volleyball friends opened Calgary's Volleydome, a private facility that made year-round sand-court practice possible. They expanded the Dome in 2000 and later replaced the indoor beach courts with hardwood floors, retaining the facility's four outdoor beach courts.[15]

Just as indoor volleyball paved the way for beach volleyball, beach volleyball was, and remains, a training tool for indoor volleyball during the off-season. Sherri Jones, AVA beach league founder, said about 65 per cent of her beach league participants also play on indoor leagues. At the more competitive end of this spectrum, the number is even

[13] Brian Gatzke is a beach volleyball player from Vernon, B.C., who, among other achievements, placed third on the 1997 AVP tour.
[14] Don Saxton, in an interview with the author, March 15, 2013.
[15] Ibid.

higher. Due to its sandy playing surface, beach volleyball is more physically taxing than its indoor counterpart. As a result, indoor players improve their endurance and lower-body strength during the beach season. "I know for a fact that a lot of people who play beach for a summer go back to indoor and their vertical has improved so much," Jones said.[16]

Alberta Bound: The Beach Boom of the '90s

The province's first recreational beach volleyball games likely took place in Medicine Hat, when the community opened its first beach court in the mid 1980s.[17] This early start might represent a regional advantage in the adoption of beach volleyball. Like Medicine Hat residents, those living in the southern border town of Milk River dug their toes in the sand before most similarly sized communities across the province. In 1990, the town built one Alberta's first sand courts at the nearby Gold Springs campground.[18] The fact that this region boasts the province's longest summers is likely no coincidence. In fact, Medicine Hat's greatest climactic challenge has been the heat. "The year-end tournaments are always challenging," wrote Vern Jerome, president of the city's volleyball league. "The heat is intense and everyone carries socks in their bags to play in (to protect their feet)."[19]

The 1990s, particularly the first year of the decade, represented a critical time in the development of Alberta beach volleyball. Between 1989 and 1992, the province went from having a handful of sand pits to dozens of beach volleyball courts, as well as a

[16] Sherri Jones, in an interview with the author, March 6, 2013.
[17] Vern Jerome, in an email message to the author, April 20, 2013.
[18] Gail Matlock, in an email message to the author, March 20, 2013.
[19] Jerome, April 20, 2013.

professional tour. The AVA hosted its first sand tournament in 1989 at a ranch near Alberta Beach. That year, Colin Young, fresh out of university and recently hired as AVA Marketing Coordinator, began looking for places to host a professional beach volleyball tour featuring Alberta athletes. Sylvan Lake was the AVA's location of choice, but it would be two years before the venue was ready. While the organization was already hosting beach volleyball events at the lake, Sylvan's narrow strip of beach and hard-packed sand were not pro tour material. In 1991, the Lake opened sand pits on its grass pier with room for nine courts. That summer, it hosted a professional tournament with major corporate sponsors and cash prizes of up to $1,025.[20] One of its winners, Barb Broen, would go on to compete in beach volleyball's Olympic debut in 1996. Others would win prize money nationally and internationally.

In 1990, beach enthusiasts founded the Calgary Beach Volleyball Association and the AVA beach volleyball league – the latter with its roots in grass volleyball. Since 1974, the AVA's popular Jasper Outdoor Volleyball Camp had been giving players a chance to develop their skills in a national park setting. By the time the AVA founded its beach league, volleyball camp participants were used to taking their game outdoors. Sherri Jones, who ran the league from 1990 to 2010, also organized the Edmonton Volleyball Association's indoor tournaments. When summer came, these players wanted to make the most of sunshine and jumped at the opportunity to play in Edmonton's university-area sand courts.[21]

[20] Alberta Volleyball Association, *1991 A.V.A. Summer Volleyball Series Final Report*.
[21] Jeff Anderson, in an interview with the author, March 7, 2013.

The beach league relocated to 12 new courts at the Edmonton Research Park, which opened in the summer of 1992.[22] Jones recalls a period of exponential growth in league participation following the construction of this facility. "Around 1995, it just grew like wildfire. It went from running two days a week, to three days a week, to four days a week, and we went from, like, 50 teams to 100 teams to 200 teams."[23] By 2005, 246 teams were registered.[24] This coincided with the league's move to 16 courts at John Fry Park, which hosted beach volleyball for the World Masters Games.[25] The rapid growth Jones described refers to Edmonton teams, but the mid 1990s also saw the sport spread across the province as organizers of the Alberta Summer Games added beach volleyball to their schedule in 1995. The Games' hosting stipulations catalyzed the construction regulation-size sand courts throughout Alberta. This, in turn, led to an increase in the formation of beach volleyball leagues.

'A New Sensation': Mass Media and Alberta's Beach Craze

To understand the suddenness of the sport's growth in Alberta, it is necessary to consider global influences, especially those from the United States. The inclusion of beach volleyball in the Olympic Games, first as a demonstration sport in 1992 and then as an official sport in Atlanta in 1996, certainly boosted its popularity. During the Games, Albertans had a hometown athlete to cheer for in Barb Broen. Nationally, Child and

[22] Alberta Volleyball Association, *Executive Committee Meeting Minutes*, May 22, 1992.
[23] Jones, March 6, 3013.
[24] Alberta Volleyball Association, *Executive Meeting Agenda*, October 3, 2005.

[25] At the time of writing, these courts are slated to relocate to the University of Alberta in 2014 or 2015. The plan to open 16 courts at the Saville Community Sports Centre, formerly known as the GO Centre, is intended to consolidate the Alberta Volleyball Association's indoor and outdoor courts on the University of Alberta Campus. Terry Gagnon and Hugh Hoyles were instrumental in this process, part of a multi-sport expansion of recreation and competition facilities at the university's South Campus.

Heese's bronze medal asserted Canada's competitive presence in the sport. Yet, as Jones noted, the AVA's greatest growth spurt predated the Atlanta Games. Anderson, who helped run the AVA Summer Series from 1990-94, said he saw the greatest increase in the organization's beach tournament participation during those years. "The Olympics always have an influence and we always get to see it but I just know our athletes were playing (beach volleyball), and playing it very well, before the '96 Olympics," Anderson said.[26] Terry Gagnon also recalls a spike in the sport's popularity prior Child and Heese's victory – a trend he said carried on after the Games. "We had big growth in the '90s and then it's kind of levelled and just stayed there," Gagnon said.[27] From a logistical perspective, the construction of 12 tournament courts in Edmonton made the growth in the capital region possible. On a more subjective level, the trendiness of beach volleyball, as broadcast on NBC, contributed to enthusiastic adoption of the sport outside California.

It would have come as no surprise to Albertans watching the Atlanta Games that American teams took the gold and silver medals. This is because beach volleyball fans had already been following these athletes' progress on the AVP (Association of Volleyball Professionals) tour. Moreover, the timing of Alberta's beach volleyball boom was closely linked with trends in American television coverage of the sport. The AVP, founded in 1983, achieved broadcasting fame on NBC in 1990.[28] In 1987, Calgary hosted a professional American beach volleyball game as part of an international AVP tour. The tournament brought a handful of AVP celebrities to the city's Corral arena, including beach volleyball legend Karch Kiraly. Selznick, who competed in the event, said it was

[26] Anderson, March 7, 3013.
[27] Terry Gagnon, in an interview with the author, March 8, 2013.
[28] ABC hosted the organization's cable network debut in four years earlier in 1986 but NBC's subsequent coverage is better known. Network coverage of this sport expanded through the early and mid 1990s.

the first time he played beach volleyball indoors. "Unfortunately … it was during the hockey playoffs, so we just didn't get the turn-out with the crowds," he said.[29]

While the AVP could not compete with the NHL for spectators, its athletes' celebrity was not lost on Albertans. In describing the trendiness of this sport, a video is worth more than 1,000 words. NBC's 1990 introduction to the sport tantalized viewers with neon skies, a lengthy scene of a woman strutting in a bikini, and the sound of roaring crowds over the song "New Sensation" by INXS.[30] Elements of this scene, such as a giant inflatable beer bottle, are echoed in footage of Canadian pro tours.[31] According to Young, the AVP also set the tone for Alberta's tournaments.

> It was all sort of modelled after trying to have a piece of the California lifestyle up here in Canada, where (there are) a lot of good indoor volleyball players but the climate and the location don't necessarily suit the beach volleyball game. We sort of faked it, trying to copy as much of it as we could with what we had to work with – that's the building of courts and mimicking the layout of the AVP tournaments with how the signage was, how there was announcing, music and all those sort of things that were typical in the California lifestyle. It was almost like we were emulating something that was long ways away from us. I think everybody that played beach volleyball probably wished they were living in southern California and playing on the AVP tour. At that point in time, there were some real colourful characters playing … A lot of people would wear the same clothing as the (AVP stars) down south. They would pick their favourite players and some of them would start to look like those players.[32]

[29] Selznick, April 4, 2014.
[30] You Tube, "Classic AVP on NBC Intro," accessed April 22, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgksksl9AeA.
[31] You Tube, "Retro Spike #3 (Windsor OPEN 1998)," accessed April 22, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESYjGrxYQCM.
[32] Colin Young, in an interview with the author, March 8, 2013.

With corporate sponsors in mind, the AVA chose Sylvan Lake for its beach tournaments because large crowds at the busy vacation hub proved that Albertans were watching. "(Sylvan Lake) had the best California-type vibe of any place in Alberta," Young said. In 1998, Sylvan Lake hosted Canada's Labatt pro tour, which aired on TSN.[33] This event was a point of local pride for the community and was said to "put Sylvan Lake on the map as one of the best beach volleyball facilities in the country."[34]

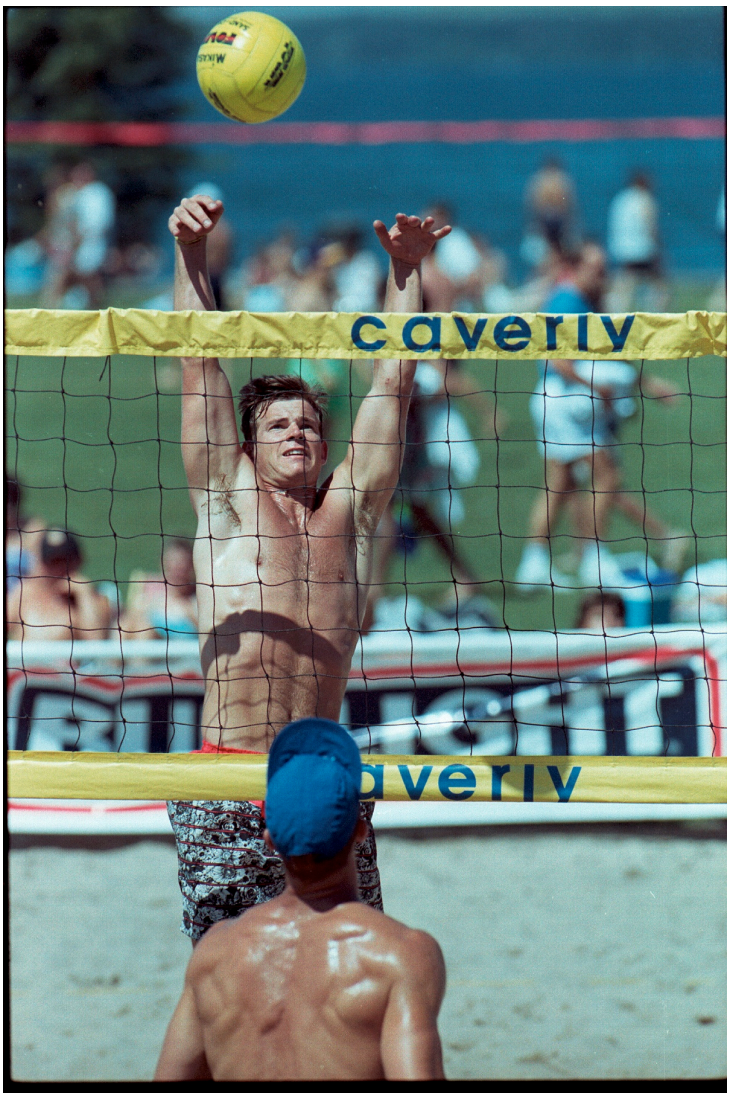

Figure 2 – Canada's beach volleyball elite converged at Sylvan Lake in for the Labatt Pro Tour of 1998. Photo courtesy Sylvan Lake and District Archives, Dave Brunner Photography.

Building Beaches: The Construction of Coastal Culture in Alberta

Ultimately, professional volleyball tours were selling a lifestyle and Albertans were willing buyers. Though the province's landlocked coordinates offer an obvious

[33] Sylvan Lake and District Archives Society, *Recollections Beyond Reflection: Sylvan Lake Memories Book*. (Alberta: Friesen Printers, 2000), 373.
[34] Sylvan Lake, *Recollections*, 373.

explanation for its comparatively late leap onto the beach volleyball bandwagon, this geographical reality has also contributed to the establishment of popular, pre-packaged beach experiences. West Edmonton Mall's World Waterpark, built in 1985, bills itself as a "tropical paradise." Though the Mall lost its status as the world's largest in 2010, it still boasts the globe's biggest indoor wave pool, with rounded contours, sand-coloured flooring and adjacent palm trees. In 2009, the Waterpark launched Sound Wave, "the world's largest indoor beach party," with a DJ, beer gardens and, of course, beach volleyball.[35]

In 2011, Edmonton mayor Stephen Mandel proposed taking the beach party outside.[36] His pitch to city council involved creating an urban beach in a city where sand is most commonly used for winter road safety. Mandel's location of choice was Hawrelak Park's man-made lake, but councillors also considered the North Saskatchewan River bank. Coun. Amarjeet Sohi, a strong supporter of the idea, called the potential for a stretch of sand along the river valley "phenomenal," even if it was only used for sun tanning and beach volleyball.[37] Ultimately, concerns over cost, sanitation, and space reduced the scope of the proposal to a Hawrelak spray park with sand for children to play in. The fact that a full beach would have displaced up to 14 of 60 Heritage Festival pavilions on the site clinched city council's decision to reject the project.[38] Each of these pavilions represents one of Edmonton's many cultural communities in an event that is the world's largest festival of its kind. The event is also an anchor festival for Edmonton,

[35] West Edmonton Mall, Sound Wave Poster, 2009.
[36] City of Edmonton, *Executive Committee Minutes*, July 13, 2011.
[37] Elsie Stolte, "Committee Volleys Beach Idea Back to Staff," *Edmonton Journal*, Sept. 17, 2012, accessed April 20, 2013, http://www.edmontonjournal.com/Committee+volleys+beach+idea+back+staff/7255547/story.html.
[38] Elsie Stolte, "Council beaches $60 million vision for Hawrelak swimming," *Edmonton Journal,* October 17, 2011.

which prides itself on its jam-packed summer calendar. In this case, civic identity trumped fantasy.[39]

From Fantasy to Function: Rising to the Challenge of Prairie Geography

Alberta's most northerly beach volleyball courts are located in the town of High Level, a two-hour drive from the Northwest Territories border. High Level Community Services Director, Adam Clarkson, said the town's northern location might actually enhance the experience of beach volleyball, among other summer sports. For example, it is not unusual to see golfers on the local course until 11:30 p.m., thanks to long hours of daylight. Though the city-run beach volleyball league occupies normal evening recreation hours, short, intense summers positively impact participation. "People just want to be outdoors," Clarkson said. "It's one of the benefits of living in the North – our long days."[40]

Although High Level, which brands itself "Gateway to the South," boasts the province's northernmost beach volleyball league, it is nowhere near Canada's northernmost. The City of Yellowknife has a well-established beach league, whose tournaments, though unrelated to indigenous culture, have become a local Aboriginal Day tradition. In 2001, an Ontario newspaper compared the league's Canada Summer Games competitors to a familiar group of underdogs:

[39] Paradoxically, the years spanning the discussion of an outdoor "sand experience" coincided with a civic movement to embrace Edmonton's identity as a winter city. From 2009 to 2011, city council piloted Winter Light, a series of festivals spanning three of the provincial capital's coldest, darkest months. This event harmonized the concepts behind two local slogans, "Gateway to the North" and "Festival City." During that time, the city picked up the festival tab, with the understanding that the non-profit organization running Winter Light would find its own funding thereafter. Fundraising did not meet expectations and the event was cancelled, with some of its activities absorbed into the existing Silver Skate Festival. Meanwhile, the cornucopia of summer festivals between May and September illustrated the cultural importance of maximizing long summer days in a northern climate.

[40] Adam Clarkson, in discussion with the author, April, 2013.

> If the Jamaicans can have a bobsled team, why shouldn't the Northwest Territories have a beach volleyball squad?
> Yellowknife buddies Nabil Nadji and Mike Argue are living that dream on the Grand Bend beach at the Canada Summer Games this week.
> "I guess, in a way, we're kind of like those Jamaican bobsledders," Nadji said yesterday after the Northwest Territories duo dropped a two-setter to Saskatchewan, "but I don't think those guys ever finished their race, did they?"
> They won their first set in a 2-1 victory over Newfoundland.
> "We may not win gold here, but at least we know we're going to finish our competition," Nadji said. "So I guess we're already better than those guys were."[41]

A sidebar to this article listing the semi-final contenders is headlined "Albertans alive," possibly for easy alliteration, or at least as likely, out of surprise that Alberta ranked among the top four provincial teams. Indeed, Alberta's short summer season and dearth of natural beach put the province at a geographical disadvantage but, like the optimists of High Level, beach volleyball enthusiasts have found ways to adapt. In at least one location, sand courts double as hockey rinks to maximize outdoor leisure space. This is the case at Edmonton's Lendrum Community League, which installed four beach volleyball courts in its rink just before the 2012 summer season. "It works like a charm," said community league member Elizabeth Stromsmoe. "The place is just humming in the summer."[42] With this innovation, Lendrum now has seven volleyball courts, which are home to Edmonton Sport and Social's beach volleyball league.

In Calgary, members a former hockey family, who converted to beach volleyball, flipped the concept of the backyard rink on its head. Rather than having a rink that doubled as a sand court, the Lindemulders' sand court doubled as a rink. In 1997, Jim Lindemulder built a home on one of his two adjacent residential lots, hoping to develop both of them. Within three years, he had indeed developed the neighbouring lot, but not

[41] Ryan Pyette, "Life's a Beach in N.W.T.: Northern Volleyballers Often Compared to Jamaican Sledders," *London Free Press*, August 23, 2001.
[42] Elizabeth Stromsmoe, in discussion with the author, March, 2013.

in the way he expected. Lindemulder, along with his four sons, ended up building a regulation-sized beach volleyball court.

> Our plan was always to (build) another house … but my boys started to dream that we could make our side (lot) into a full-sized volleyball court … I thought it was, of course, kind of nutty – having basically a full-sized city lot. It was (graded) at an angle and it needed a lot of work, but the boys all got more and more into volleyball and they basically convinced me that this would be a great idea ... I sucked up the money and, with the boys' help, we converted our side lot into a full-sized beach volleyball court with a full sound system and lights and everything … We put netting all around the outside of it and the fence, and it's still used today in a big way. You can see kids there all the time.[43]

Figure 3 – Mark Lindemulder, left, and his brother Paul enjoy the convenience of a regulation-size backyard volleyball court in Calgary, Alberta. Photo courtesy of Jim Lindemulder.

All four of Lindemulder's sons originally played hockey, but shifted their focus to volleyball through school programs and hours of backyard practice. In 2003, three of them were crowned provincial beach volleyball champions in separate competitions. The

[43] Jim Lindemulder, in an interview with the author, March 6, 2013.

success of the family court, combined with the dissolution of the boys' children's volleyball club, prompted Lindemulder to found the Cal-Air volleyball club in 2002. The club began as an indoor volleyball organization and expanded to compete in beach tournaments two summers later. Lindemulder's youngest son Paul was part of a Cal-Air team that won two national championships. As the boys' volleyball skills progressed, the court became a community hub shared between everyone from neighbourhood kids to Calgary's volleyball elite.

> About three or four times a year I organized big tournaments, including a huge King and Queen of the Beach event. We had, I'm not exaggerating, probably about 100 kids with their parents and lawn chairs … and we had this massive party that went on and it wasn't until midnight or one in the morning until the final king and queen of the beach were crowned.[44]

The phrase, "If you build it, they will come," is readily applied to Lindemulder's court and those constructed by the AVA. Yet, efforts to build prairie sand courts pose considerable challenges. The AVA's 1992 installation of 12 courts at the Edmonton Research Park was a costly and risky endeavour. Builders took great care not to lose their most valuable asset, expensive fine-grain sand, to the whims of prairie weather. Grass berms helped to prevent wind loss, which as Anderson recalled, was the builders' main concern. Sand that was coarse and heavy enough to stay put could cause injuries to diving players. "It had to be the finest grain of sand available, almost like the playground sand we would give to elementary kids," Anderson said. Hoping for the best, the AVA brought in truckloads of processed sand, moving it by backhoe and tractor – not without injury to the equipment. They then covered a base layer of coarse sand with a mixture of medium and fine grade sand, which has been likened to the consistency of flour.[45]

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[44] Ibid.
[45] Anderson, March 7, 2013.

After all these efforts at the Research Park and other beach tournament venues, leagues had to contend with a short season, playing through adverse conditions in order to make the most of the summer. Anderson recalls playing in sleet and "very, very cold" weather. "It's just part of being a tough Canadian and Albertan, that we're ready to play in any climate," he said. AVA beach league founder Sherri Jones had a rule of thumb that the game would go ahead in all weather short of a thunderstorm. Although Alberta's handful of career beach players tend to migrate south for better weather and facilities, northern conditions can also be viewed as an asset. According to Gagnon, the climate is a challenge, but fosters resilience and flexibility.

> I think it makes our players really good, because the weather is just all over the place. Some days, the rain's just coming sideways and it's windy and they play in that. Sometimes in May, when you start, there's snow. It makes for some challenging conditions, which I think makes them quite resilient, quite good beach players. We've done very well nationally and even internationally. We've produced some of the best beach players this country's seen, in spite of the fact that we don't have ocean and beach.[46]

Marc Lomeli, director of San Diego Beach Volleyball Club, agrees that certain geographical disadvantages can work in the sport's favour. Lomeli said California's beach volleyball clubs have struggled to compete with indoor volleyball registration, ironically, because of the abundance of beaches. "It's a simple issue of over-saturation," he said. "Literally, there's probably 500 courts, 600 courts between Huntington beach and Santa Monica. So, there's such an abundance of supply, that nobody sees the need to pay somebody money to teach them the game, because they could do it for free." From a club perspective, he added, Canada's limited court space has ironically put the country ahead of California in some respects. To increase participation in organized beach

[46] Gagnon, April 8, 2013.

volleyball, Lomeli's club introduced its first seven-month season in 2009, which runs at the same time as the indoor volleyball season.[47]

Recreational Roots: The Loose Organization of Beach Volleyball

Californians' reluctance to register in beach volleyball programs also stems from the culture of the game. Because beach volleyball was founded as a recreational activity and evolved into an organized sport, coaching is frowned upon. In other words, pick-up games of beach volleyball are so entrenched in the region's culture, some view professional training as cheating. Nothing in tournament rules prohibits training with a coach, but participants who refrain often feel that they've come by their skills more honestly – by playing on the beach since childhood and developing their technique on their own.[48]

Indoor volleyball is more structured than beach volleyball because it came to its first players with a predetermined set of rules. Given the beach game's recreational roots, its rulebook is much shorter. First, the sport's small team size allows players greater flexibility on the court. Those occupying its two roles, blocker and defender, must take turns serving, but may move about the court as they please. Unlike indoor volleyball, beach volleyball allows players to penetrate under the net as long as they do not interfere with their opponent. Athletes enjoy substantial autonomy and FIVB (Fédération Internationale de Volleyball) rules even limit communication between players and coaches during the game.[49] In the AVA beach league and similar clubs, self-officiating is

[47] Marc Lomeli, in an interview with the author, April 4, 2013.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Tough, Kathy, "Rule Differences: Beach vs. Indoor," accessed April 15, 2013. http://www.albertavolleyball.com/content/beach-volleyball-resources.

the norm. Gagnon attributes the popularity of beach volleyball, in part, to its relaxed format. "You don't have all the structure of indoor, so I think it was a nice break for people after the indoor season, to go out and just play, have fun and learn the game by playing and not sitting on the bench or by a coach telling you where to position yourself," he said.[50]

When Jones founded the AVA league, she included teams of six to ease beginners into the game. Today, the league comprises a combination of competitive two-player teams, as well as more recreational divisions for players at every level. Adult team members range in age from 18 to 60. Though some members take the game very seriously and compete at high levels, Jones made an effort to preserve the casual, California vibe by giving out beach-themed prizes and hosting a pub night at the end of each season. Jones said the social atmosphere was an important ingredient in the league's growth. This is seen in the fact that co-ed teams accounted for most of the league's rapid growth in the early to mid 1990s.

> When we changed the game from co-ed sixes to co-ed fours, we actually grew so fast that we had to carry it over two nights," she said. "The women's and men's doubles has been pretty much the same for the last however many years. The thing about the fours is it's a social atmosphere. You're playing with your buddies or some people at work, coming out, having a few beers, playing beach. It's just a different atmosphere than if you go watch a night of doubles, because those guys tend to be more competitive.[51]

Beach Boys and California Girls: Gender in Sand Volleyball

The growth Jones saw in co-ed volleyball was part of a larger trend. Compared with indoor volleyball, the numbers of male and female beach volleyball players are

[50] Gagnon, March 8, 2013.
[51] Jones, March 6, 2013.

nearly equal. By contrast, girls outnumber boys in Alberta's indoor school volleyball by about two to one, Gagnon said.[52] According to Young, the ratio of female to male players is even more lopsided south of the border. "In the U.S., it's predominantly still a girls' game."[53] An American study analyzing school sport participation supports this statement. The survey compared gendered participation in intramural and interscholastic sports at a southeastern middle school. Girls outnumbered boys in intramural volleyball by roughly double to triple the male participation rate. On the more public interscholastic teams, volleyball and cheerleading were the only two sports in which boys did not participate.[54]

Laurie Eisler, a long-time University of Alberta volleyball coach who also coached Broen and her partner in Atlanta, said Canadian attitudes toward the sport do not reflect this gender bias. "I don't think its because its perceived as a girl sport. I think its because we're a hockey country."[55] Competitive indoor volleyball is a late-entry sport, whereas Canadian children, usually boys, begin climbing the hockey hierarchy at a younger age, Eisler added. Most Alberta beach players register in indoor volleyball first, further delaying entry into beach volleyball. Therefore, the beach volleyball age demographic is such that many boys have left the competitive hockey stream by the time they turn their attention to the sand court.

A different form of gender parity in beach volleyball is seen at the professional level in that TV networks began to air women's games not long after beginning to televise men's matches. However, this trend has raised questions about the role of

[52] Gagnon, March 8, 2013.
[53] Young March 8, 2013.
[54] Michael B. Edwards, Jason N. Bocarro, Michael Kanters and Jonathan Kasper, "Participation in Interscholastic and Intramural Sport Programs in Middle Schools: An Exploratory Investigation of Race and Gender," in Recreation Sports Journal 35 (2001), 157-173, accessed April 22, 2013, EBSCO*host*.
[55] Laurie Eisler, in an interview with the author, April 8, 2013.

women's uniforms in female athletes' popularity. In both AVP and Olympic matches, men must wear shorts and tank tops while women wear bikinis. In 2012 the IOC relaxed its uniform rules, allowing female athletes to don less revealing attire for religious reasons or in cold weather. The latter provision was tested at the London Games, when the Canadian women's team covered up on a day that was one degree too warm to do so, according to IOC regulations. Officials made headlines by ordering the team to remove their extra clothing.[56]

AVA provincial tournaments take a different approach. Athletes are under no uniform obligations, except to layer their number over whatever they choose to wear. "We just stay out of that (issue) completely," Gagnon said, explaining that the organization does not want to create barriers to participation by making someone wear a uniform they are uncomfortable in.[57] However, Gagnon and Jones agree that the more competitive the level of play, the more revealing the uniforms tend to be.[58] From Eisler's perspective, it's ultimately an issue of practicality.

> These places (elite female athletes) were playing would be 35 degrees, humid and hot – and they're playing in sand. If you think of what their alternatives are as far as clothing, imagine wearing a t-shirt and shorts, landing in the sand and having the sand go up your shirt, up your shorts. It would not be your first choice … It was the athletes who drove the uniforms. They're the ones who wanted to wear a bathing suit … because, I think, it's very functional. Once it got to the Olympic stage, there was a speculation that it was the sport telling them they had to wear it, where, in fact, that was the tradition of the game. It did become exploitative … in Brazil when the tournament governing body was demanding that the athletes wear the bathing suits on the podium when they were getting their medals … That's where the athletes drew the line and said, 'No, we're not doing that.[59]

[56] Doug Smith, "London 2012: Canada's Beach Volleyball Team Feels the Chill," *Toronto Star, thestar.com*, July 29, 2012, accessed April 20, 2013.
[57] Gagnon, March 8.
[58] Gagnon and Jones, in interviews with the author, March 8 and March 6.
[59] Eisler, April 8, 2013.

Though men choose to wear long shorts on the beach court, Eisler suggests these uniforms represent "fashion over function." Not only do the use of boardshorts at Olympic beach volleyball games fit a cultural norm for men's clothing, they also hide unsightly tan lines, she said. "There was an attempt to bring Spandex into men's (indoor) volleyball, but it didn't last very long … I just can't imagine them even considering a Speedo."[60]

Taking the Heat: The Fast Growth of Competitive Beach Volleyball in Alberta

When Eisler was hired to coach Broen and her partner Margo Malowney in Atlanta, she had to adapt to the sand court in a hurry. "Really, there weren't any beach coaches at that time in Canada," Eisler said. Broen and Malowney, like most of their peers, qualified for the Olympics without a coach. Though many elite teams resisted formal coaching, for fear of losing their autonomy on the court, Broen and her partner had a different attitude. Broen had already competed as an indoor volleyball Olympian, where coaches have a high degree of control over the game. To her, working with a coach seemed natural.

To this day, Broen is the only Canadian to have competed in both indoor and beach volleyball Olympics. At first, she found the transition to beach volleyball difficult, but she was not alone. Alberta's first wave of international beach volleyball competitors also perfected their game on the indoor court. When the AVA launched its 1991 Bud Light pro tour, they were all in the same boat. Up to that point, beach volleyball was primarily a social activity. Players battled it out for pride, t-shirts and whatever beach-

[60] Ibid.

themed prizes the AVA could rustle up."[61] Alberta's 1991 pro-tour, with its cash prizes, motivated elite indoor players to take their beach game to the next level. After the tour, winners were flown to Kentucky for co-ed tournaments, as well as to Ontario and Quebec for national competitions. "(These events) gave us the opportunity to train." Broen said. "We were all very, very skilled indoor players and we were trying to bring our game to the outdoors … and we really didn't know what we were doing." Of the winners, at least six placed nationally or competed internationally. Among them, Jody Holden won Gold for Canada in the 1991 Pan-Am Games with his partner Conrad Leinemann. Janette Solecki (née Degner) won two national titles and placed fifth in an international FIVB competition. Another noteworthy player from the decade, Kathy Tough, won FIVB prize money each year from 1996 to 2001. Ahren Cadieux of Edmonton, who began his career toward the end of the 1990s, is now partnered with Canadian Olympic medallist Mark Heese.

Figure 4 – Downtown Edmonton hosts a sand volleyball game during the 1994 Labatt Pro Tour. Photo courtesy of the Alberta Volleyball Association Collection.

[61] Barb Broen, in an interview with the author, April 9, 2013.

Though it was not uncommon for Alberta players to take part of the national prize pot, the cost of travel to out-of-province competitions ate away at their winnings. Alberta athletes had only two opportunities to win money on home soil. In 1994 and again in 1998, the province hosted one of several stops on the Labatt pro tour. When Sylvan Lake reapplied to host the tournament after its 1998 event, a letter from the tour's production company to Volleyball Canada explained that it was necessary to limit western Canadian stops for cost and convenience. The rejection letter explained that Manitoba's 1999 bid was stronger and the tour had already included two prairie locations the previous year.[62]

These realities posed challenges for Broen in her run up to the 1996 Olympic Games but, when she realized she had a shot at returning to the Games, she swallowed the expense of touring from Western Canada and met her Eastern Canadian partner for matches as often as possible. With a teammate on the other side of the country, Broen had to adopt an unconventional training process.

> I was in Edmonton teaching full-time, coaching my Grade 9 boys that year ... and I would serve balls at them in practice and I'd go and play wallyball. Then I'd drive up to Calgary and play at the Volleydome on the weekends and try to get people to play with me. Then, all of a sudden, I'd fly off to Australia to a tournament with Margo, and we had a day (to practice). I hadn't seen her in a month. And we had to just hang in there for dear life with our fingernails on the edge, because right behind us was every other country trying to get our spot.[63]

Since Broen's return from Atlanta, competitive sand volleyball in Alberta has come a long way. She and other elite indoor players who took up beach volleyball laid the foundation for a second generation of sand-court pros, which has emerged over the past five years. Among these, Calgary's Ray Sewell and his partner took the top beach volleyball prize for North America and the Caribbean in 2010.

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[62] Zanel Walt Zanel to Suzie Judd, March 19, 1999, Volleyball Canada, Gloucester, Ontario, "Re: 1999 Labatt Blue Pro Tour Sites and Candidature File Status."
[63] Broen, April 9, 2013.

Don Saxton's son Ben followed in his father's footsteps as an international volleyball competitor. However, Ben's story is somewhat unique in that he began his career in beach, bypassing the transition from hard court volleyball altogether. "When he was 14, him and four buddies went down to California … and they stayed there and became beach players," Saxton said. "Ben ended up falling in love with the sport that summer and basically told me right then, 'Dad, I'm going to play beach.'"[64] Ben learned the game quickly and won two consecutive U18 world championships. More recently, Ben narrowly missed qualifying for the 2012 Summer Games,[65] but he and his partner remained ranked as Canada's top men's team. With the 2016 Games on the horizon, he splits his time between Toronto and California, training and competing year-round. His current teammate, Chaim Schalk, is from Red Deer, Alberta.

Recent growth in Alberta's youth volleyball programming offers new opportunities to those hoping to compete nationally or internationally. Increasing interest in elite youth volleyball training is reflected in the 2009 launch of a privately run, high-performance program in Calgary. Corrado Culterra, a sports chiropractor and trainer who worked with AVP players, founded Calgary Beach Volleyball to fill a niche in elite training for teens and young adults. "You have to start developing them from age 13 and 14 on," Culterra said.[66] A day's drive north of Calgary, the increasing appetite for youth participation in beach volleyball is seen in the Grande Prairie region. The 2013 season marked the launch of a new club for players aged 11 through 16.[67] Through AVA programming, people as young as 12 and 13 can begin honing their skills at Sylvan

[64] Saxton, March 15, 2013.
[65] Ben Saxton's team entered the qualifying match as the top team in Canada but lost to the second-place team.
[66] Corrado Culterra, in discussion with the author, April 15, 2013.
[67] Sarah Herman, Grande Prairie Beach Volleyball Coordinator, in an email to the author, July 24, 2013.

Lake's volleyball camps, which incorporate both indoor and beach volleyball training. In 2012, the AVA launched its first U16 and U18 high performance camps for provincial beach teams in these age categories.[68] Those who compete at the provincial level, through such events as the Alberta Summer Games or the AVA's provincial tournaments, are eligible to compete in nationals through Volleyball Canada. From there, the best of the best will make Canada's national beach volleyball roster in Toronto.

Conclusion

From the made-in-Alberta pro tour of 1991, to Broen's Olympic match in 1996, to the rise of a second generation of sand court pros, competitive beach volleyball has moved in from the margins of Alberta summer sport. Over the past quarter-century, the strength of indoor elite indoor volleyball, combined with the widespread expansion of beach leagues, has helped to fuel this growth. Yet, most career players will ultimately leave the province for the national beach volleyball training centre in Toronto. This reality poses challenges for Western competitors, as Broen experienced. Yet, in other ways, Alberta athletes are at no greater

Figure 5 - Young members of Grande Prairie Beach Volleyball sport new uniforms during the youth club's inaugural 2013 season. League participation with this organization, among both adults and youth, has doubled since the league was founded in 2008. Photo by Sarah Herman.

[68] Ray Sewell, in an email to the author, April 12, 2013.

disadvantage than anyone else an airline ticket away from the GTA. The province has the facilities, expertise and participation to funnel players to the national and even international levels. And for the majority who simply crave fun in the sun, there is no shortage of places to play. From Milk River to High Level, Alberta's California dream has become a reality – even 600 kilometres from the nearest coast.

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