



The beautiful game

With its sexy outfits and pop-concert pyrotechnics, beach volleyball is one of the most oversubscribed events of next year's Olympics.

Jim White visits the world championships in Rome to see if the sport justifies the hype. Photographs by **Davide Monteleone**

Flanking Rome's Foro Italica are dozens of neoclassical statues of almost naked athletes. These huge pieces, inspired by ancient Roman Forums, were commissioned by Mussolini, who built this sports complex in the late 1920s in an attempt to bring the Olympic Games to Italy (the Games were finally staged there, 15 years after his death, in 1960). Fifteen feet high, the muscular marble figures strike various poses – flinging javelins, putting shots, addressing hurdles – their modesty preserved by artfully positioned fig leaves.

Earlier this summer, two new statues took their place in the line-up, erected to honour the arrival in the Italian capital of the world's fastest-growing sport. The Beach Volleyball World Championships were coming to town, and to mark the occasion two enormous effigies of the sport's most feted practitioners – Emanuel Rego, the Brazilian three-time world champion, and the American Kerri Walsh, the current women's Olympic champion – were installed. Despite being full colour and made

of fibreglass, they fitted perfectly into the tradition of the existing statues: both wore very little.

When tickets for the London Olympics went on sale earlier this year, the most oversubscribed, with the exception of the men's 100m final, were those for beach volleyball. About 480,000 people have already paid to watch the 13-day competition, which will take place in one of the most dramatic venues of the 2012 Games: a 15,000-seat temporary stadium, roughly the size of Wimbledon's Centre Court, will be built on Horse Guards Parade in Whitehall, better known for Trooping the Colour.

In no small part, the rush for tickets has been precipitated by what the players will be wearing. Beach volleyball is perhaps unique in that the women's game is a bigger draw than the men's; though the prize money is equal, women players earn more in sponsorship and endorsements. And female beach volleyball players in London will be obliged by the sport's ruling constitution to

Cheerleaders whip up enthusiasm between and during games. Nearly half a million people applied for tickets to see beach volleyball at the London Olympics

perform as they always do: in bikinis. Just as the organisers of Wimbledon insist that its participants wear white, the Federation Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB) stipulates that the bottom half of female competitors' kit can feature 'no more than 6cm of cloth at the hip'.

'Let's face it, sex sells,' says Nik Berger, a former Olympic beach volleyball player, and now coach to the Austrian national squad. (Austria is one of the top beach volleyball nations, behind Brazil, the USA, China and Germany.) 'And in beach volleyball we have a lot of sex to sell.'

This has always been a sport associated with having a good time. A decade or so after volleyball was invented in 1895 by William G Morgan, the physical director of the Holyoke YMCA in Massachusetts, nets were erected on the shore-front of Hawaii. The beach proved the perfect setting for the game, sand providing a soft landing for any tumble or dive. From there, it took off in California – first, with at least six players per team, as in traditional volleyball. By the 1920s, two-a-side games had become popular, and the idea stuck. It spread to Europe during the 1930s and 40s, and by the 1980s a full-time professional tour was rolling around the American coast, peopled by holidaying Europeans, Brazilian dudes and Californian beach bums.

But what launched beach volleyball into a wider orbit was its acceptance into the Olympics. After it appeared as a demonstration event in Barcelona in 1992, the first medals were handed out in Atlanta in 1996. The sport took its opportunity with aplomb. In Atlanta spectators were thrilled not only by the sheer energy of the contest but also by the bikini-clad cheerleaders, the lights and the music blaring out between points.

By 2008 and Beijing, 156 nations were competing to send teams, and standards rose as competition increased. Countries without a hint of coastline – Switzerland, Austria, Slovakia – began to boast specialist squads. London 2012 provides the biggest opportunity yet for the sport to advertise itself. 'London is when we go global,' says Angelo Squeo, the director of the FIVB and beach volleyball's leading evangelist.

Squeo understands the power of aggressive

'I have no problem with the uniforms. They're sexy, but what's wrong with sexy?'

Right Kerri Walsh (right) and her USA team-mate Misty May-Treanor were gold medalists at the last two Olympics. **Main picture** the pair in action in Rome against a team from Germany

marketing. Across Rome, almost every billboard seems to feature images of giant athletes decked out in brightly coloured beachwear. In the run-up to the competition, impromptu games are staged outside the Colosseum, near the Spanish Steps and wherever a crowd might gather, all featuring beautiful performers wearing very little. Though the Games are still a year away, London will get a sense of the sport's publicity machine from next week, when a test event, featuring 24 international teams, takes place at Horse Guards.

Are you hooked yet, or what?' Kerri Walsh says as she stands in front of her giant fibreglass statue, just ahead of her first match of the competition. Known by the sobriquet 'Six Feet of Sunshine', the statuesque Walsh, 32, is a tireless ambassador for her sport. With her playing partner, Misty May-Treanor, 33, she has become its most notable figure.

'People recognise me back home all the time,' she says. 'Misty and I are two of the top female athletes in America. For me this sport has so much momentum, there's so much rallying behind it. It's because it combines all the things you want from life: the lifestyle is beautiful, the sport is very entertaining and sexy, but it's also very intense and world-class. All of this makes it easy for the public to relate to – people want a piece of it.'

While nothing like as well-remunerated as other American sports stars, the pair earn a good living, far better than most of their rivals. About \$8 million is shared out annually in prize money in the men's and women's game, and the two American women take a fair proportion of that. Heavily sponsored, wearing armbands carrying their backers' logos on to the court, they are the main attraction at any meet.

'Nobody's going to get rich playing beach volleyball,' Walsh says. 'But that's not why we do it. Most of us would pay to play. It's just great to be around such an athletic, attractive sport.'

Does she worry that many spectators are drawn to it for its aesthetics rather than its athleticism, and that no other sport enforces such a dress code on its competitors?

'I have no problem with the uniforms,' she says. 'They're sexy, but what's wrong with sexy? And hey, you've been down on that court, it's hot down there. Would you like to play down there in a roll-neck sweater and long pants? If people come here because of what we're wearing, then great. But you know what? When they get here they'll find a compelling, exciting sport. Guaranteed.'

Walsh is right: a beach volleyball game can be thrilling. The aim is simple: ground the ball on your opponent's side of the net, or prevent your opponent from returning it, and you gain a point. The first team to reach 21 points wins the set; the first to two sets wins the match.

Flinging themselves around a playing area slightly smaller than a tennis court, players can flick the ball to each other three times on their own side before they are obliged to send it – spike it – across the net. In the furious slapping and padding (or bumping, dinking and digging, if you prefer the technical terms), at times all four competitors can be spread-eagled in the sand.

Surrounding the centre court in Rome, the



steeped stands are jammed with Rome's beautiful people. Out of the stadium speakers disco music is pumped out at such volume that, if repeated on Horse Guards, it would require ear plugs in Buckingham Palace. Lasers and lights dance across the court. On big screens, action is replayed in heroic mega-slo-mo. A group of teenage cheerleaders in fluorescent bikinis, temporary tattoos of the sponsors' logos on their backs and shoulders, sit to one side of the court, like reinforcements at a bunga-bunga party. Every couple of minutes they strut out on to the sand and throw their hair extensions around, pouting and gyrating to Gary Glitter's *Rock and Roll Part 2*. A DJ loudly exhorts us to clap our hands.

What strikes the first-time observer is how integral the entertainment is to the action. After every point, during every time out, between sets, there is not a moment when the senses are not assailed by music, dancing and sponsors' messages. At times it feels more pop concert than sporting event.

'That's the joy,' Angelo Squeo insists. 'A sport such as tennis is so restrictive, you cannot even cheer during a rally. In beach volleyball, there is total freedom. This sport is a laboratory of ideas, it never stops developing. We try things. Why not put a stadium on Horse Guards Parade? Which other sport would dare do that? None.'

Now in his forties, Squeo was a pioneer of beach volleyball in Europe. An Italian volleyball international in the 1980s, he first saw the beach version during a holiday in California and was immediately hooked. After playing on the American tour, he determined to bring it home and has ceaselessly promoted it ever since, staging tournaments of ever-growing sophistication and pizzazz. His giant frame is visible courtside throughout the championships, his enthusiasm evident in every gesticulation. But doesn't even he – the sport's most aggressive promoter – sometimes worry that the peripherals overwhelm the action? What will a visitor to Horse Guards recall: the manner in

which a player blocks a rival at the net? Or the dancers, the light shows and the outfits?

'They will remember the show in London, you are right,' he says. 'We've hired an MTV director as our live-action coordinator. He has great ideas: street dancers, the Queen's guardsmen, mascots, flag waving, an army of people to provide entertainment – what a performance!' he says. 'And sex, yes. The sexy part is important, I will not deny it. We have beautiful athletes with beautiful bodies. To me, the athletes are perfect, physically. Slim, not over-muscled. They could all be fashion models. So why preclude an element that people are attracted by?'

'But the sexy part is only a part, a small part. We are an entertainment, but the entertainment programme has to be additional to the athletic part, it must not compromise the athleticism. This is what you must understand: it is a sport with a lot of elements, a fantastic chemistry.'

And now it has a British element. Brits were

entirely absent from the previous Olympic beach volleyball competitions, but they will not be this time. Twenty-four men's and women's teams will be in competition on Horse Guards, drawn from the top of the FIVB rankings. Competing at the World Championships, seeking to claw their way up the list, are the leading British pair Zara Dampney and Shania Mullin, ranked, at the time of writing, 28th in the world. As the host nation, Britain has the right to enter every sport, whatever the level of expertise. But Dampney and Mullin are performing well enough on the international tour to suggest they may qualify without recourse to a wild card.

Dampney, 25, first played the sport as a child on a beach in her home town of Bournemouth. A good indoor volleyball player, when she heard the 2012 games were to be held in London, she determined to be there. After being identified as a potential Olympian by the British Volleyball Association and put together with the South Africa-raised Mullin, 27, she was given National Lottery funding to enable her to train full time. Since then she has been on the beach circuit, living in budget hotels, sharing rooms, scraping by on the UK Sport development programme grant of about £16,000 to achieve her dream of competing at the Olympics.

'It's going to be awesome,' she says of next summer's event. 'We're trying to getting better and better to get up there, to give a good account of ourselves in front of the home crowd.'

The world championships, however, are not an unequivocal success for the pair. After losing to competitors from Brazil and China, their final preliminary group match is against Walsh and May-Treanor, the beach volleyball equivalent of the Faroe Islands taking on France at football. They emerge into the brightly lit court to the strains of Shania Twain's *Let's Go Girls*, jogging through a guard of honour formed by the cheerleaders. Dampney and Mullin – eager, puppyish, enthusiastically slapping each other's hands between points – get off to a brilliant start. They win the first two points. They seem so surprised by their unexpected ascendancy, hugging each other in celebration, that they barely win another.

The gulf in class is soon apparent. Where there always seem to be spaces on the Britons' side of the net for the Americans to find, their opponents fill all the gaps. Walsh – languorous, with piston-like limbs – reaches almost all of the Britons' potential winners. The squat, muscular May-Treanor cleans up whatever Walsh misses. The Brits are beaten in straight sets, registering the lowest score of the evening.

'What did we learn from that?' Dampney says afterwards, wiping the sweat from her forehead with a Union flag beach towel. 'I guess it makes us realise that we've got to dominate the net. But it was a great experience. We've never played against a team like that in a place like this. I really enjoyed it. Roll on London.'

For Walsh, it has been a gentle workout ahead of trickier matches. Later in the week, she and May-Treanor progress to the final, losing to Juliana and Larissa of Brazil (like their male footballing compatriots, female Brazilian beach volleyball players are known solely by their Christian names).



'Playing on royal ground, how awesome is that? I'm hoping some of the Royal family might come watch'

Above watching the bikini-clad players, many of the spectators dress accordingly. **Below** Cheerleaders welcome Kerri Walsh to the arena

Already, she is looking forward to next year's Games. 'I'm getting chills just thinking about it. Playing the sport I love, on royal ground, how awesome is that? I'm hoping some of the Royal family might come watch. You think Prince Harry might enjoy what we have to offer?' As she stands at the side of the court, blond, lissom, statuesque in her bare feet, still wearing very little, one suspects that he, and many others, just might. ■

