

# Trainers play key role in volleyball success

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Brooke Hanson looked down at her feet as she did some stretching exercises on the beach this week.

"My toenails are almost gone," she observed. "They got burnt off in Tempe."

The sizzling sands of Arizona were a recent stop on the pro beach volleyball tour. This weekend, the traveling circus of the Association of Volleyball Professionals has come to West Beach, where persistent clouds have been keeping the temperatures mild.

Although fried toes are unlikely here, the 128 men and women competing in AVP Santa Barbara Open the next three days will not be having a picnic. It is a test of athletic skill, but the sport also induces fatigue and exhaustion.

That is why Mrs. Hanson, one of the top female players, was running as hard as she could while dragging a 50-pound weight behind her in the soft sand a few days ago. It was part of her regular exercise regimen between tournaments.

"It's torture to me," said Mrs. Hanson (before she was married last year, she was known as Brook Niles, a former UCSB volleyball star), "but it's paying off. I was served every single ball in Tempe, and I didn't get tired."

Supervising her 45-minute workout was Sandy Combs, a local physical trainer. Next to their playing partners, trainers have become the most important figures in a beach player's support network. All the AVP's top athletes submit to exercise specialists. With \$3.5 million in prize money at stake on the tour this year, they are motivated to do anything that will help them compete more effectively.

"It is necessary to have a training program," said Karch Kiraly, the winningest player in history who remains competitive at age 45. "I can't be the most physical player anymore, but I can have an advantage in conditioning."

While they sometimes swear at their trainers for pushing them to the limits of their endurance, the athletes also swear by them.

"Most trainers are extremely arrogant," said Todd Rogers. "They think they're the best. That's what makes them good trainers."

Rogers, one of the most consistent players on the AVP tour, has been working with Combs for six years. This year he brought his new partner, Phil Dalhausser, into the program. Combs got them started in January running on the track and up the steps at La Playa Stadium. They also do weight training with UCSB strength coach Bob Alejo. Rogers and Dalhausser won the championship two weeks ago at Tempe.

Marcus Elliott is another local trainer who has a growing reputation among elite athletes. His volleyball clients include a foursome that comprised the two top AVP men's teams of 2005 < Stein Metzger, Jake Gibb, Dax Holdren and Jeff Nygaard.

Holdren credits Elliott for rebuilding his strength after he had knee surgery in 2002. Holdren and Metzger made it to the quarterfinals of the 2004 Olympics at Athens.

"He's the Doogie Howser of trainers," Metzger said.

"I don't know where I'd be without Marcus," Holdren said. "He took me out of retirement and put me back together."



Kiraly has had several shoulder surgeries and, a month ago, his knee was scoped. But he keeps coming back. He says Mike Rangel, his trainer for the past four years, has engineered his resilience.

"My body craves his workouts," Kiraly said. "It's 45 minutes of hell, but it keeps me going."

Rangel said his association with Kiraly is good for business. He founded PlyoCity, a workout facility in Southern California, and is selling franchises across the nation.

"I get a lot of juice from Karch," Rangel said. "He's doing things we've never seen done in sports, without steroids. Lance Armstrong was a great athlete; he's retired at 35. Michael Jordan never played a good game after 38. Jerry Rice didn't do anything significant after 38. Andre Agassi's 36, his game has dropped. Karch stands alone at 45. He is the man."

Rangel has begun putting Olympic gold medalists Misty May-Trainor and Kerri Walsh through his regimen of leaps and bounds on the beach this year.

There are similarities in the exercises prescribed by all three aforementioned trainers. They emphasize brief bursts of explosive effort, repeated in various ways. Their workouts last less than an hour.

Rangel, 48, travelled around the world as a volleyball player in the '70s. He became interested in the training methods of different countries.

"Guys were doing jumps, hops and skips in Brazil," he said. "What we call plyometrics got started in Russia. They'd take an athlete, run him uphill, load him down with a log or bag of sand. That's the way they developed Valeriy Borzov, an Olympic champion sprinter."

Combs, 41, was a track athlete at Dos Pueblos High and UCSB. He still holds the Gaucho records for the 100- and 200-meter sprints. He received a master's in kinesiology at Cal State Northridge.

"I learned a lot from (former UCSB coach) Sam Adams," Combs said. "He was training guys for the decathlon. A lot of Europeans came to train at UCSB. They were doing wild things."

Elliott, 39, went through Harvard Medical School and did research on football injuries before moving to Santa Barbara seven years ago. He does his training in the gym, prescribing movements that mimic the speed at which the athletes perform in competition.

"It's training the nervous system to fire in the right sequence," he said.

"If they're doing hops for more than eight or 10 seconds at a time, lactic acid builds up and slows them down. If you keep them going, you're just training them to be slower."

Most of the beach players have lean physiques. George Roumain, who had a massively muscular build back when he was a high schooler, is a notable exception.

"We're not going to win bodybuilding contests," Combs said. "Volleyball is not about size and strength. The players have to jump 500 times, maybe as much as 800 times, during a tournament."

While it may appear that the athletes are having fun in the sun this weekend, remember it would not be happening for them if they did not diligently get slim in the gym.