

Still Going Strong

AVP legend Karch Kiraly has shown absolutely no signs of slowing down at the age of 42.

By Mike Miazga

AVP men's tour veteran Mike Whitmarsh was asked recently who his toughest opponent had been over the course of his 14-year career.

Whitmarsh, who announced his retirement earlier this season, would have a laundry list of names to choose from considering he's played in over 250 tournaments in his storied career.

But the answer to the question was almost instantaneous.

"The guy in the pink hat," said Whitmarsh.

In beach volleyball circles everybody knows who "the guy in the pink hat" is.

His name is Karch Kiraly and he's arguably the single greatest men's professional beach volleyball player to ever step foot on the sand.

His triumphs indoors with the U.S. Men's Olympic Team, outdoors at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta and on the AVP Tour for the past 20 years have been well documented.

With three Olympic gold medals (two indoor, one outdoor), over \$3 million in career beach earnings and the most career wins ever by a men's pro beach player, Kiraly has cemented himself as a bona fide legend in the sport.

But it looks like it will be some time before Kiraly will be talked about professionally in the past tense.

Because where this story takes an interesting turn is the fact that at the current age of 42 (he doesn't turn 43 until November) when most players in that age bracket have retired or slowed considerably, Kiraly and his trademark pink hat (more on that later) show no signs of letting up any time soon.

In fact, if his victory with his 33-year-old partner Brent Doble at the Huntington Beach Open in August is any indication, those many accolades—many of which may never be touched due to the current schedule of the sport—will continue to grow for years to come. The victory at Huntington made Kiraly, the only U.S. volleyball player to ever win three Olympic gold medals, the oldest player to win an AVP title.

“I have been able to find different challenges over the course of my career,” said Kiraly, who has also endured a pair of shoulder surgeries over the years. “A new challenge is can I play at a top level at ages 41, 42 and now 43? Can I try and hang with the young bucks? That’s my new challenge. In the middle of my career, it was could Kent (Steffes) and I win 10 or 12 tournaments in a row? In the beginning of my career could Sinjin (Smith) and I be the best team? Now, I’ve found new challenges to fuel my fire.”

That fire has been aided by an intense workout regimen that Kiraly has instituted with the help of noted plyometrics guru and PlyoCity Youth Development founder Mike Rangel (www.plyocity.com), who has trained over 20,000 athletes, including numerous current NBA stars.

The premise of the plyometrics workout revolves around intense drills that load muscles with large amounts of weight over a short period of time. These exercises enable a muscle to reach maximum strength in a minimum amount of time. The big catch here is all of Kiraly’s drills are conducted in the sand, which raises the degree of difficulty to another level.

“We’ve created a workout that is easily harder than anything I have done in my life,” said Kiraly. “I enjoy the results. I feel like I’ve been able to turn back the clock. I jump higher. I’m stronger and I’m quicker than I was a year ago. I’m always looking to add things to the workout regimen. This seems to paying the results.”

Rangel, who also trains AVP women’s standout Misty May, hasn’t seen too many athletes of Kiraly’s caliber in terms of conditioning.

“Karch is in the best shape of any athlete I’ve ever trained,” deadpanned Rangel. “At 42 years of age, Karch is the best conditioned volleyball athlete in the world. He’s as quick as he was in 1996. He works his (butt) off. Every time you give him a chance to do less, he does more. It’s a testament to who Karch Kiraly is. He is the hardest working athlete around.”

After the 2003 NCAA National Championships, current BYU standout Carlos Moreno took to the sand with Kiraly for one of those patented workout sessions.

“I had just played in the (NCAA Tournament). I was in shape,” said Moreno. “A week later, I’m practicing with Karch. I figured it wouldn’t be hard at all. Once we started, I told them we needed to stop and take a break like three times. Wow. The guy’s amazing. I’ve never seen anybody like that. The shape he is in is unbelievable.”

May, who along with partner Kerri Walsh went undefeated on the AVP women’s tour in 2003, isn’t simply displaying a politeness to elders when she talks about Kiraly’s age.

“He looks like a lot of the young guys out there,” said May. “He doesn’t look 42. He’s in excellent shape. He was my favorite player when I was younger and he’s someone I still look up to. I don’t see why he couldn’t play until he’s 50. He still keeps up with the young guys and he still dominates.”

Whitmarsh likens Kiraly, a four-time All-American at UCLA, to a certain basketball player.

“I’ve referred to him as the Michael Jordan of beach volleyball,” said Whitmarsh. “I think that’s pretty accurate. This guy is 42 and he’s still up there. He has the drive and he wants to win and puts in the practice time. I’d probably have some more victories if he wasn’t around, but if you did beat him, you knew you did something special.”

Doble says he feels like he’s back in school.

“I feel like I’m enrolled in an accelerated PHD program for volleyball and he’s the teacher,” said Doble. “I’ve learned a lot from him. He plays hurt, he plays sick and he plays with the weather is poor. He works out harder than anyone else.”

There is also a mental part to Kiraly’s conditioning that is as equally important as the conditioning drills.

“One of the things I must contend with is staying healthy,” said Kiraly. “I’ve had a couple of shoulder surgeries. In practice, if there is a ball I have to stretch out for, I might have to hold back a little. The most important thing is to be healthy on the weekend. I have to listen to my body more. I don’t ignore the aches and the pains. If I’m rundown, I have to scale back workouts so I am ready and fresh for the next event.”

And it’s that next tournament that Kiraly likes to focus on as opposed to the gargantuan amount of history he has his name affixed to.

“I haven’t spent too much of my time looking back,” said Kiraly. “I look forward to improving as a player. That’s one of the great things about this game. If you do really well, you have about a week to enjoy it and if you have a poor tournament, you have a chance to make amends. I’ll look back maybe when I’m done.”

Kiraly does concede there are a pair of accomplishments he does take great pride in.

“The three gold medals and when Kent and I won 13 tournaments in a row those are special feats,” said Kiraly.

But that’s about as far as the walk down memory goes with this legend.

At his home, you won’t find those gold medals sitting on a fireplace mantle.

“People ask me if I have the medals displayed prominently. I do not. All of that stuff is tucked away,” said Kiraly. “I don’t have much on display. I don’t want the house to be a shrine to my accomplishments on the volleyball court. I want it to be our family home.”

Family is something Kiraly holds in the highest regard. He’s been married to his wife, Janna, for 16 years. The couple has two children, Kristian (13) and Kory (11).

“The most important things to me are my wife, my kids, my family and my friends,” said Kiraly. “Having a good marriage and a good family have made me a much better volleyball player. After a match, I drop what happened there. I don’t define myself by what happened on the court.”

When he was playing for the U.S. Olympic Team in 1984, Kiraly admits he had no way of predicting all of the future spoils that would come his way.

“Absolutely not,” said Kiraly. “Even going into 1984, I wasn’t sure how we would do. Our goal was to win some sort of medal. That’s 19 years ago. No way did I expect to win a gold medal let alone still be playing at this stage of my career. We had a meeting the day after the Olympics. People broke up and went their separate ways and a number of people decided to stick around for four more years. And then the beach kept growing and here I am still playing almost 20 years later.”

But just how much longer will the career meter keep running?

“I take it year by year and approach each season as possibly being my last,” said Kiraly. “It depends on if my body holds up well and if we continue to be successful. I’ve already made the decision to play in 2004. I’m happy with how I’m playing right now.”

And as long as Kiraly keeps playing, the ever-present pink hat will be right there as well. The hat now bears Kiraly’s sponsor Speedo on it.

“It was around the time Kent and I were winning all the tournaments in a row. There were black, lime green, optic yellow and hot pink for colors. The black one was frying my head,” recalled Kiraly. “I put the pink hat on and stuck with it for superstition and luck. What began as superstition has become a tradition. A lot of hecklers try to make fun of me and challenge my manhood. Somebody asked me once if I got a free bowl of soup with the hat. It just makes it easier for my family to find me at tournaments.”

Kiraly says the thrill of competing in an event hasn’t changed one bit from when he first started.

“Oh, yeah. There is still such a rush,” said Kiraly. “It is a thrill to take a guy’s hardest hit and take it up in the air and get a set and put it away for a point—especially in front of a big crowd. I started learning this game when I was six-years-old and I still love to play the game today.”