

ALL HAIL THE KING



Beach great Karch Kiraly's impact on the sport is immeasurable. But his greatness goes beyond just simple victories and gold medals.

By Mike Miazga | Photos by James Rulison

Recently, Karch Kiraly's son, Kory, had a question on an essay he was writing for school.

He asked his father for help.

Remember, this is three-time Olympic gold medalist Karch Kiraly we're talking about—the same guy whose photo is likely next to the word excellence in the dictionary.

So instead of simply going off any previous knowledge he had on the subject, Kiraly went after answers from the best in order to help his son.

"He had out a collection of videos from one of the best writing teachers in the country," said Kiraly's wife, Janna, who along with her husband home-schooled their two boys (Kristian and Kory) for five years. "He wanted to review those before he sat down and helped."

Kiraly's coach and trainer Mike Rangel can remember asking beach volleyball's all-time wins leader for help several years ago in selecting flooring for his American Sports Centers facility in Anaheim, Calif.

"He flew out to Michigan with me and there he is at midnight on a Friday night jumping up and down on this floor to test it out," said Rangel. "That's how good of a friend he is."

It's examples of that kind of commitment and dedication that also typified Kiraly's spectacular 31-year beach career that came to a close this past season at the amazing age of 46.

Sure there are the 148 victories and over \$3 million in earnings (both all-time pro beach records).

But to those who have played with him and know him best, there is so much more that goes into the excellence of one Charles Karch Kiraly (He legally changed his middle name from Frederick to Karch, which means "Chuck" in Hungarian).

For instance, UCLA men's coach Al Scates remembers a scene when Kiraly was a freshman that would be a harbinger of things repeated constantly over parts of the next four decades.

"With the freshmen here, they set up nets, mopped floors, shagged balls, things like that," said Scates, whose vivid memory of past events rivals that of his former prized pupil.

"Karch is shagging balls and has 12 balls in his hands. We're running a drill where we are hitting against the block. A ball comes off the block and Karch instinctively dives for it, throws



Kiraly is the only volleyball player to ever win three Olympic gold medals.

all the other balls up in the air and slashes and dives on the hardwood floor and dug the ball. He wasn't even in the drill."

And then there was the time UCLA was playing an exhibition match in Japan in 1979.

"We're down 2-0 because we wouldn't dive on the concrete floor," said Scates. "It was so cold players warmed up with gloves on. Karch does a full-out dive on the concrete floor and digs a ball. All of a sudden everybody starts digging and we won in five."

Scates holds Kiraly in the highest regard.

"Nobody had as much desire and passion for the game as Karch," said Scates. "He was surrounded by others here who felt the same way. We only lost five matches when he was here and won three NCAA titles. It's been a long time since he's been here. I haven't seen anybody like him since. Even international guys, I haven't seen anybody close to him when he was in his prime."

Kiraly feels his much-talked about focus and drive were derivatives of the many teachers he's had over the years.

"I know what I had to go through with my high school coach Rick Olmstead and how hard we worked at UCLA with Al and how hard we worked at USA Volleyball with Doug (Beal) and Marv (Dunphy) and on the beach working with Rangey (Mike Rangel)," said Kiraly. "I've tried to apply all of those lessons to myself. I still try and apply that focus and singularity of purpose and try to put everything I have into what I'm doing on any given day and try to make the most out of it."

Former beach standout Brent Frohoff, who won nine titles with Kiraly, remembers competing with a player who brought many different tools to the table.

"Karch did everything within the facet of beach volleyball and he did it as good as or better than anybody else whether it was setting, hitting, passing, defense or using his mind," said Frohoff. "He would out-strategize people. He had great focus, that's for sure. The strange thing with Karch was he was



Kiraly, setting Doug Partie, won three NCAA titles while at UCLA.





Family Matters: Kiraly with, from left, sons, Kristian, Kory, and wife, Janna. Kiraly will again be the co-coach of his sons' high school team this spring.

KARCH BY THE NUMBERS



JAMES RUISSON

- Only volleyball player to win three Olympic gold medals (two indoors, one beach)
- At age 46, led all 2007 AVP men's players in digs per game, swings per game and swings per match.
- Appeared in a documented 205 finals in 353 career starts (252 total podium finishes) on the beach.
- Played in his first open tournament at age 15 in Santa Barbara with partner Rich Payne. The duo finished ninth (one of their wins came against current AVP commissioner Leonard Armato and partner Jeff Jordan). Kiraly finished ninth in his final AVP event this past season in Tampa.
- All-time winningest partners: Kent Steffes 75, Sinjin Smith 21, Adam Johnson 16, Brent Frohoff 9, Scott Ayakutubby 8

he was in the U.S. I was on the other side over there and got a unique perspective on how he could control a match. Trying to minimize his ability was almost impossible."

Fellow Hall of Famer Sinjin Smith, one of Kiraly's early beach partners, originally turned down the opportunity to play with him.

"I don't think most people know that he asked me to play with him when he was a senior in high school (near the end of Kiraly's senior year)," said Smith. "I turned him down and then realized I had made a mistake. That was the summer after his senior year. He was a skinny kid. I thought there were other guys out there with more experience. He played with

so darned good, no matter who he was playing with, he could take anybody to the winner's circle. Without a doubt, he's the best to ever play the beach game."

"I've never, ever seen anybody as focused as him on the volleyball court," said 2007 AVP Crocs Cup co-champion Todd Rogers. "That's why he's the best player ever to play the game."

Beal, the current CEO of USA Volleyball, coached Kiraly as part of the 1984 U.S. indoor Olympic team that won the gold medal in Los Angeles. He also coached in the same Italian pro league that Kiraly played in (Kiraly played in Italy during the 90-91 and 91-92 seasons).

"Karch is someone who kept getting better and better," said Beal. "Those two years he played in Italy may have been really the peak of his career in my mind as an indoor player. He may have been as good or better those years than



COURTESY HOLLY STEIN/AVP

Kiraly was honored at this year's Manhattan Beach Open. He won a record eight Manhattan Beach Open crowns.

Don Shaw (who went on to coach both the Stanford men's and women's teams) in the world championships in Redondo Beach and they got third, which is very respectable for a (17-year-old) kid who was playing with a guy who hadn't won any events. If we would have played together that summer, we would have won opens.

"The next year he came to UCLA and we relied heavily on each other. We picked up where we left off indoors (The first undefeated NCAA title in 1979) on the beach. We won our first event and then won most everything we played in the next couple of years."

Smith said Kiraly's mental acumen put him over the top for a sustained period of time.

"All of the best athletes don't always win," said Smith, who won 21 of the 28 events he played in with Kiraly. "It's the guys who are able to concentrate and keep their heads in the game. The success he had was pretty phenomenal. To have the kind of success he had takes something special mentally."

Kiraly played on the beach for three decades despite enduring three shoulder operations, a number of knee surgeries and other nagging injuries in the latter part of his career.

"I'm probably most impressed by his longevity," said Janna Kiraly, a former player at Pepperdine who met Kiraly when he was still at UCLA (the couple will be married 21 years in December). "I didn't quite expect those last 10 years—that was icing on the cake. I didn't think it was physically possible. It might have been after his first shoulder surgery, he didn't come back that quickly and he didn't look as strong. But as soon as you think that, he recovers and has a string of wins. It was amazing to see some of the things he did on sheer will and brains."

Kiraly, too, is blown away by his volleyball longevity. He mentions knee and shoulder injuries that have slowed top women's college stars like Cynthia Barboza (Stanford) and Christina Houghtelling (Nebraska) in recent years.

"I didn't have anything like that until I was 36," said Kiraly. "I think part of it has been training hard and training smart and trying to be as prepared as possible." ►



COURTESY HOLLY STEIN/AVP

Kiraly is introduced to the crowd prior to his last finals appearance at the Tampa Open this past season. Kiraly and partner Kevin Wong lost to Jake Gibb and Sean Rosenthal in the title match. It was his 205th career title match.

Kiraly's greatness is further measured by the humility he has shown. His final AVP season—one where he was honored at a number of the AVP tour stops—was cut short due to a calf injury. His AVP career ended in Seaside Heights, N.J., in July after a loss to Jake Gibb and Sean Rosenthal.

But instead of bemoaning the way his career came to a close, he preferred to shift focus elsewhere.

"I wasn't disappointed with how it ended," said Kiraly. "I was disappointed knowing that a lot of people made special trips to places like Manhattan Beach or Cincinnati to cheer me on one more time and they didn't get to do that. I felt bad for them. I got to play so much longer than I thought I ever could. I can't be disappointed."

His unexpected final AVP match in New Jersey turned out to be extremely special for Kiraly. His wife, children, parents (Las and Toni), sisters (Kati and Kristi) and uncle (Fred Ifland) were all in attendance.

"It makes it significantly better that they were all there at Seaside Heights," said Kiraly. "It was a great family weekend."

And speaking of family, this "king of the beach," rates even higher away from the sand.

"I had no idea how great it was going to be," laughed Janna Kiraly. "What he has done as a husband, father, son and

friend far surpasses anything he's done in volleyball. He keeps the ship going in the right direction around here. I'm stunned at times by his kindness and understanding. I'm very lucky to have found someone like him to share my life with."

"He's a very sincere and authentic human being," said Rangel. "He cares about people. This guy is a role model. He's someone kids should look up to."

Kevin Wong remembers being awed by Kiraly when he was younger. Now, Wong says the experience of being Kiraly's final AVP partner lived up to the memories he had and then some.

"All of his volleyball skills were up to my recollection," said Wong. "But the things that put it over the top are how good of a teammate he is, how good of a father, husband and son he is—just how good of a human being he is. Those things stand out so much more because there just aren't that many people like that."

In terms of his illustrious career, Kiraly declined to opine where he falls among the sport's legends.

"I don't think about that in those terms," said Kiraly. "That's for everybody else to talk about."

But when you're talking about this sport's undisputed all-time icon, there's not much room for debate.

"I am quite confident in saying we will not see someone like him again," said Beal. ■

10 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT KARCH KIRALY

As told by coach and trainer Mike Rangel with commentary from Karch

1. When an AVP player wins their first tournament, Karch always calls that person. "I try to do that," said Kiraly. "It became a tradition the last three or four years. I don't know if I have a perfect record, but I like to give my congratulations."



Kiraly and wife, Janna

2. Kiraly and his wife, Janna, home-schooled their sons, Kristian, and Kory, for five years. "I will never trade that time in," said Kiraly. "It was special to be able to spend that much time with my kids. My wife was the principal and I chaired the math and science departments. I'm glad I did it."
3. With the tour starting in Florida in recent years, Kiraly, in the days leading up to the tournament, would go to bed earlier and earlier in order to acclimate himself to East Coast time. "This year it turned out it didn't help at all," laughed Kiraly. "The night before in Miami, I laid there in bed for nine hours and then played with no sleep. Even the best laid plans falter."
4. There is nothing in Kiraly's home displayed that indicates he is a volleyball player (his gold medals are packed in a drawer). "I don't want our house to be a shrine to my accomplishments," said Kiraly. "I want it to be a home for our family."
5. Kiraly's secret hydration formula during workouts and tournaments is water mixed with Pedialyte. "I think it's 2 to 1 water to Pedialyte," said Kiraly. "It has served me well over the years. I learned it from Adam Johnson (former partner.)"
6. Kiraly would work out with Rangel on days like Christmas Eve, New Year's and his birthday. "It's all a part of training and preparing as well as you can prepare," said Kiraly. "Every hour that I train is time in the bank. I call it the scout account. If you make a lot of deposits in the scout account, you can make bigger withdrawals when you need them in a match or tough tournament."
7. The hardest decision Kiraly has ever had to make dealt with marrying his wife, Janna. "The most nervous I have ever been was getting married," said Kiraly. "I knew she was the one. I wanted her to be the last person I was ever going to marry. There is that hope and expectation and finality to it. It was a little intimidating. But it has worked out better than I could have ever hoped for."
8. Rangel said in his five years with Kiraly, the beach great never once asked the AVP to play on center stadium court. "I go where Matt Gage (AVP competition director) feels we need to go," said Kiraly.
9. In 2004 Kiraly was approached by USA Volleyball officials to return to the U.S. Men's National Team as a libero. "I was asked," said Kiraly. "They expressed interest in having me return to the team as a libero. I thought about it for a few days and decided to pass. But it was an honor to be asked back."
10. Kiraly's wife, sister (Kati), agent (Steve Lindecke) and Rangel all have the same birthday (Jan. 26). Current beach standout Phil Dalhausser also has the same birthday.

MORE THAN JUST BUSINESS



Royal Footrest: Rangel (seated) and Kiraly clowning around

JAMES RILSON

Mike Rangel is one of many players who competed against Karch Kiraly over the years.

"I played against Karch in fellowship tournaments (1979 and 1980) when he was at UCLA," said Rangel.

Six years ago, on the suggestion of a mutual friend, (the late Tom Ashen, who played on the U.S. Men's National Team), Rangel approached Kiraly about trying his plyometrics workout (Rangel is the owner of PlyoCity, a national chain of plyometric franchises).

"He said he would look at it and then he came back and said he loved it," said Rangel. "Those first couple of practices was all business. I was very nervous. I told him I thought I could make a difference in his career. But did I think it would lead to this? Are you kidding?"

Beyond just a coach-trainer relationship, Rangel and Kiraly have developed a close friendship during their six years together.

"He's my best friend," said Rangel. "If I got married tomorrow, my son (Steffin, who played at BYU and UC Irvine) and Karch would be the co-best men."

Kiraly credits Rangel with helping him continue to play at a championship level well into his 40s.

"Mike was a big rejuvenator for me," said Kiraly. "He's got some hard workouts, but they're fun with him. We added a lot the last four or five years of my career. I felt like I was in great shape. I had to be. I was getting served every ball and taking more attempts than anybody else on the tour. That can wear on a mid 40-year-old. I was taking more attacks per match and doing a lot of jumping and swinging. You have to be in good shape to do it."

Kiraly also enjoys the silliness that comes with those plyo workouts.

"We have a lot of fun together," said Kiraly. "We have a great time out there giving each other (a hard time) and making fun of each other. Mike's always been there. If I want to get together and train, there has never been a time when he's not been available."

But Kiraly is ultimately impressed by something that has nothing to do with Rangel's medicine ball drills.

"He's raised his son alone since he was (11)," said Kiraly. "I admire how he's been such a good dad to Steffin. I aspire to be a good dad like that too."—M.M.