

SPORTS

Beach Volleyball Rises in Shifting Sands of College Sports

By MARC TRACY MAY 5, 2016

ATLANTA — The members of Georgia State’s beach volleyball team attended virtually every one of their university’s home football games last fall. It was a gesture of support, but also of gratitude.

“We wouldn’t be here if they hadn’t started it,” the senior Alexis Townsend said.

What she meant is that when Georgia State created a football team in 2010, that put an immediate strain on athletic department finances but also required a rebalancing to comply with Title IX, the federal law mandating gender equity in higher education. A result was that Georgia State dropped its men’s cross-country and track and field programs, and added one in the nascent women’s sport of beach volleyball.

The Georgia State football team has had its own achievements: It led the university’s move to a more prominent conference, the Sun Belt, in 2012, and last season it qualified for its first bowl game.

But the beach volleyball team is by far the more successful new sport. On Sunday, the Panthers were seeded seventh in the eight-team field for the N.C.A.A.’s inaugural championship tournament. They will play No. 2

Southern California on Friday.

Beach volleyball, a sport that enters the wider public consciousness every four years at the Summer Olympics, is now a fast-growing N.C.A.A. sport. At least 60 colleges field programs. And while the fact that Southern California, Pepperdine and Hawaii have teams is not surprising, it is the presence of programs at places like Georgia State, South Carolina, Nebraska and Boise State that shows how gender-equity requirements could be the most significant driver in the sport's growth.

Last Sunday night at Georgia State, the team and a few staff members gathered at Coach Beth Van Fleet's house in the Old Fourth Ward neighborhood to watch the bracket unveiling streamed live on the N.C.A.A.'s website. As a home-cooked meal wrapped up and several players studied for final exams, Van Fleet put on a documentary about North Carolina State's improbable run to the N.C.A.A. men's basketball championship in 1983.

The show came on at 10 p.m. Though the Panthers expressed shock that a regional rival, Florida State, received the top seed, the overall trend in the bracket was unmistakable: With the exception of Florida State, all of the highest seeds went to teams from the western United States.

"Look at the other seven schools," Georgia State Athletic Director Charlie Cobb said, referring to a field that also includes U.C.L.A., Hawaii and Arizona. "They make sense."

Georgia State, by contrast, plays on three tiered courts tucked into the middle of downtown Atlanta. There are a few palm trees and a boardwalk, and a sophisticated drainage system under the sand ensures that the courts do not flood when it rains (the team even practiced as snow fell one day in February).

At a recent practice, the beeps of trucks backing up and the rumble of trains passing through mingled with loudspeakers blaring Top 40 radio. The

Marta passenger rail system runs about 40 yards from the courts, and a freight train passed even closer.

“That’s our beach out there,” Cobb said. “Right next to the Marta track.”

Van Fleet, who played traditional volleyball (known as court volleyball or indoor volleyball) as a Georgia State undergraduate, said that while it would be easy to be cynical about the fact that her team owes its existence to the creation of the Panthers football program, she is simply appreciative.

“We wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for football,” she said, “and I think it’s important that every female on this team knows that.”

Beach volleyball — which had been an “emerging sport,” an N.C.A.A. category for gestating women’s sports — is almost laboratory-created for athletic departments looking to balance their gender-equity numbers. As Kathy DeBoer, executive director of the American Volleyball Coaches Association, which used to run the national tournament, explained in an email, it is well known and popular; it is relatively inexpensive to add, particularly for colleges that begin with so-called crossover players already on scholarship for court volleyball; and it has existing advocates with know-how, namely court volleyball coaches.

“It’s a great way to add a women’s program and be able to phase it in, because it’s very cost-efficient,” said Cheryl Levick, the former Georgia State athletic director who presided over the additions of football and beach volleyball. Cobb said that even with six scholarships, which can be subdivided among more than six athletes, the annual cost of beach volleyball at Georgia State was less than \$500,000.

At practice Monday, the team’s first since learning its N.C.A.A. seeding, the sky was overcast and the wind blew fiercely, skidding balls across the sand. On one court, an assistant coach increased her height by standing on a table to block, while on another, a former player who volunteers with the

team, used his height to present the Panthers players with a similar challenge. The drills were intended to simulate the “blockers and hammerers” the team will face this weekend in Gulf Shores, Ala., Van Fleet said.

Beach volleyball, which features two players on a side who play on courts that are slightly smaller than those that hold six players in court volleyball, “requires the same skills and is called the same name, but it’s a different sport,” Van Fleet said.

In competition, it is more akin to tennis; teams seed five pairs, which play the other team’s equivalents — No. 1 vs. No. 1, and so on. The team that wins more matches prevails.

The N.C.A.A. reined in the skimpy uniforms that are sometimes required on the professional circuit and are a not-so-secret Olympics draw. Players’ tops must cover their midriffs while they are standing still, and shorts or briefs must have at least a one-inch inseam. “We want them to be able to feel comfortable out there and yet not be in a bikini, because that’s not what the image is for us,” said Kristin Fasbender, a championships director at the N.C.A.A.

Young women’s participation in beach volleyball jumped nearly 50 percent from 2007 to 2014, according to the volleyball coaches association, but the top talent still gravitates to court volleyball, where there are hundreds of college teams, each offering up to a dozen full scholarships.

But Georgia State’s players insist beach has much to recommend it.

“If you play beach, you get to touch the ball once every play at least,” said Townsend, who grew up in Houston playing court volleyball before Van Fleet persuaded her to switch. “Indoor, you can go six plays without touching the ball.”

The freshman Brooke Weiner added, “It’s a lot more fun than being inside of a gym.”

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