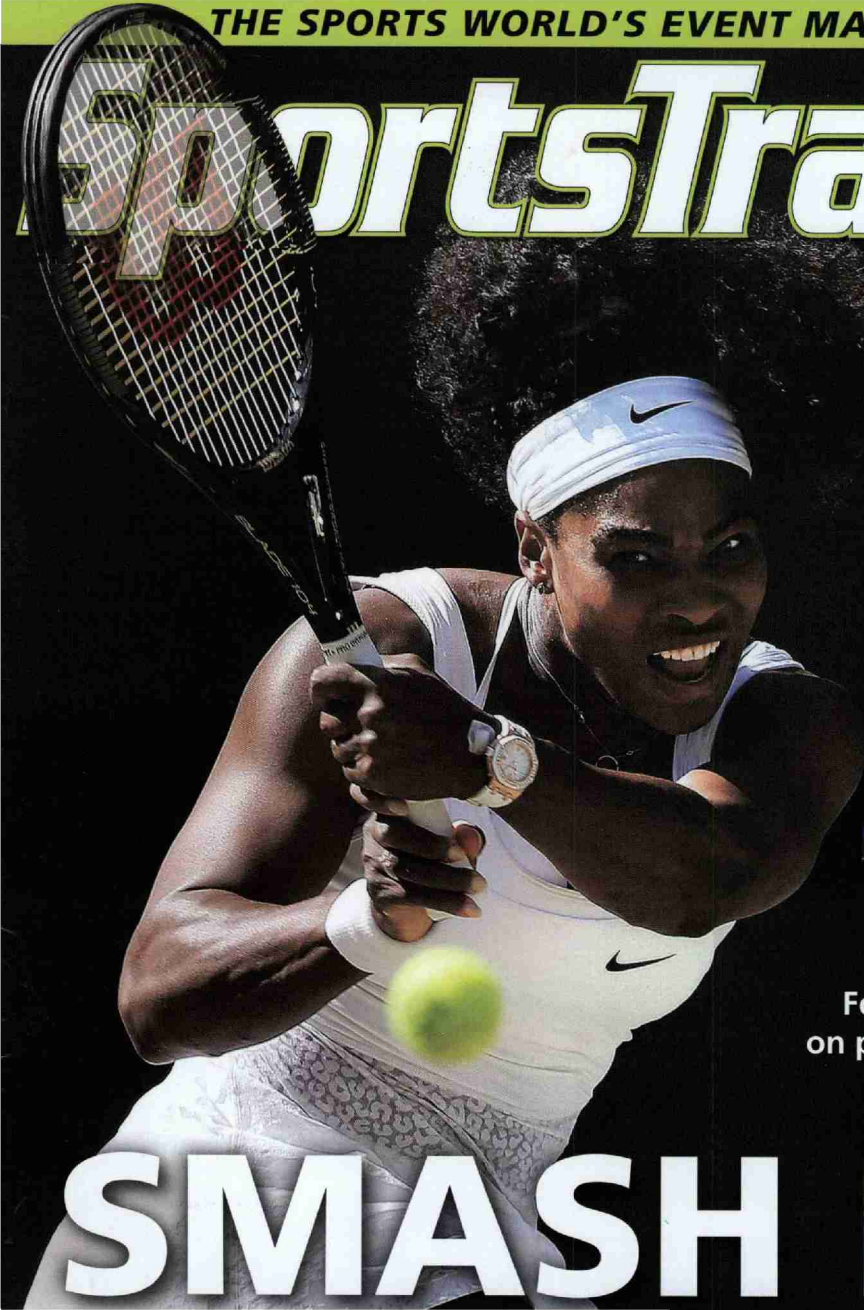


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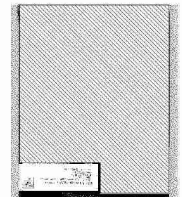


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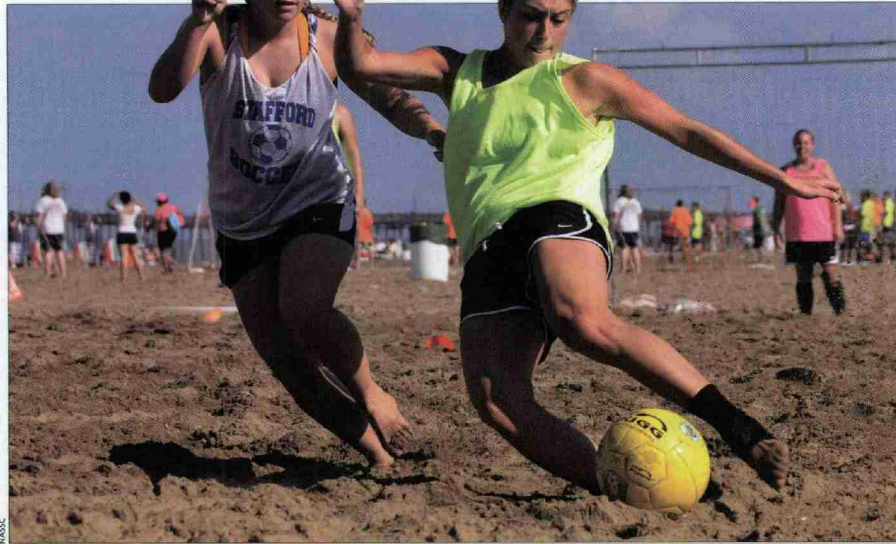
## Sports Spotlight



# Beach Sports Put a Stake in the Sand

*Events that feature competitions on the sand are experiencing growth in sports such as tennis, volleyball, soccer, ultimate and wrestling*

By Zoie Clift



*The North American Sand Soccer Championships have been staged in Virginia Beach, Virginia, for 22 years and attract more than 10,000 participants. Soccer is one of several traditional sports thriving on the sand.*

**T**hough beach sports have been around for years in various forms, recent years have seen considerable growth across sports that haven't always had a strong tradition on the sand. Volleyball has been a mainstay, but soccer, ultimate, tennis and wrestling are also enjoying newfound popularity on the beach, even at destinations not known for sandy shores.

## Beach Volleyball: Power Approach

**A**s the world gears up for the 2016 Olympic Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro, beach volleyball is already a favorite. "Tickets to events on Copacabana Beach are the hottest ticket in Brazil," said John Ruger, senior director of beach operations for USA Volleyball.

The United States team also has high hopes; it has medaled at every Olympics since the discipline became part of the Games in 1996, and its longtime star, Kerri Walsh Jennings,

has a good chance of making history in Rio as the first woman to win a gold medal in beach volleyball in four successive Games. (Her partner in gold-medal wins, Misty May-Treanor, retired after the London Olympics.)

But that success is filtering down to other levels of the sport as well. Ruger said that 1,500 athletes recently participated in the USAV's Beach High Performance Tryouts, used to select players for national elite player camps, which resulted in one of the strongest teams the United States ever had at the FIVB Age Group World Championships. About 7,000 athletes took part in the governing body's Junior Beach Tour in 2014, while more than 8,000 were expected to compete in this year's tour, which concludes this month. Also expected to strengthen the pool is the first NCAA women's sand volleyball championship, scheduled for May 2016 with 44 Division I teams competing.

FIVB, the international volleyball federation, has also been adding events in the United States, and professional leagues continue to make strides. In the pro realm, the Association of Volleyball Professionals Tour, in its third year under new



Alyson Cadena Ovalle/REUTERS/USA Wire

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Beach Tennis Aruba

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- 1 | Beach tennis is a version of the sport played on sand using smaller rackets than traditional tennis.
- 2 | The Aruba Beach Tennis Open, staged in November, is considered the largest beach tennis event in the world, with more than 1,200 players participating.

ownership, began in May with seven scheduled stops: New Orleans; New York; Seattle; Manhattan Beach, California; Chicago; Cincinnati; and Huntington Beach, California. This year's tour is offering more than \$1 million in prize money, and NBC has agreed to broadcast 17.5 hours of the tour, including the finals of all seven tournaments.

In addition, three FIVB events in the United States offer their own sizable purses: \$800,000 at each of the Grand Slam events—the first staged June 16–21 in St. Petersburg, Florida, and the second scheduled to run August 18–23 in Long Beach, California—and \$500,000 to be awarded at the Swatch FIVB World Tour Finals in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, scheduled to run September 29–October 4. All three events will be broadcast on NBC.

Hosting a beach volleyball event reflects a lot about that city and its residents, Ruger said. "Beach volleyball is a lifestyle sport, one you can participate in recreationally as a means to stay active and healthy. There is a certain glamour and panache to participation and for a city to host such events," he said. And as USA Volleyball tours the country with tournaments and camps in search of the next Olympic stars, Ruger anticipates that the popularity of beach volleyball will only grow.

### Sand Soccer: Alive and Kicking

While beach volleyball may be the most high profile of the sand sports, it is by no means the only one played in front of big crowds. The North American Sand Soccer Championships, which celebrated its 22nd anniversary in June, is the nation's largest single-weekend beach soccer festival, boasting 10,000 participants who come to Virginia Beach, Virginia, from around the world to play. "The tournament got started here in Virginia, which is kind of a hotbed for conventional outdoor soccer," said Dick Whalen, the event's executive director.

While beach soccer began to evolve on a competitive international level in the late 1980s, according to FIFA, the rules of the game weren't formally established until 1992. The first professional beach soccer competition was held in 1994 in Miami Beach, Florida, with teams from Brazil, Italy, Argentina and the United States. Then, in 1995, Rio hosted the first Beach Soccer World Championship, which FIFA later began running.

With five players per side, the speed of the beach game is constant and goals are common. "Salsa on the sand" is how Whalen described it. "Unlike conventional soccer, you

get about 60 shots on goal in the average beach soccer game," he said. "There is a lot of action. As you move up in skill level and age, a lot of that action is aerial. So lots of heading, lots of bicycle kicks, and it always brings the 'oohs' and the 'ahhs.' The sand itself causes a lot of challenges because of all the mounds and divots. If you hit the ball on the ground, you're not sure where it is going to go. They say sand is the great equalizer. And it really is."

The NASSC welcomes all skill levels, from novice to pro, a decision that has proved to be a good one from a participation perspective. The first tournament in 1994 drew 26 teams, but the next year registration jumped up to 135 teams and the year after that to 256 teams. "We have had a rising positive trend for 22 years," said Whalen, noting that the most recent tournament had 1,075 participating teams, a feat that required 63 sand fields set up on more than 1.5 miles of beaches.

The tournament is also used to raise funds for the maintenance of one of the top soccer fields in the country, the 75-acre, city-owned Hampton Roads Soccer Complex. "All the revenues go straight to the soccer complex to continue the evolution of the facility," Whalen said.

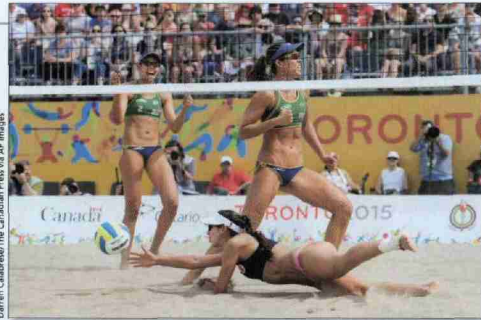
The tournament has 85 divisions, the centerpiece of which is the U.S. Open men's pro-am, which draws top international and U.S. teams competing for a purse of \$25,000. Those teams play in a 3,000-seat beach stadium built each year. Additionally, the event has expanded its offerings to include other beach sports such as beach field hockey and volley futbol and has brought in big-name sponsors like McDonald's. "We have grossed probably \$5 million in revenue toward making this thing the monster festival it has become," said Whalen.

There is also considerable discussion about adding beach soccer as an Olympic discipline, said Peter Mellor, owner and president of Major Beach Soccer, an organization that also stages beach soccer events across the United States. Mellor, who is a former Premier League goalkeeper and U.S. national and Olympic team coach, said the sport needs further support from FIFA and U.S. Soccer to promote growth and help develop coaches and referees since the rules are slightly different than the regular game.

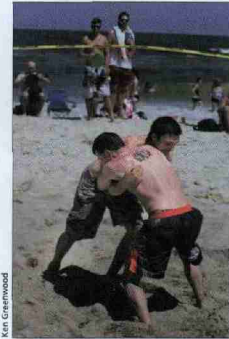
Major Beach Soccer's summer series, which wrapped up in late July, included youth and adult divisions and was held in four Florida beach cities: Fort Lauderdale, with 21 participating teams; Daytona Beach, with 35 teams; Clearwater Beach, with more than 100 teams; and Bradenton's Coquina Beach. The series is used as a qualifier



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for the organization's national championships (entering its fifth year) in December in Clearwater Beach, a finale that also invites affiliate sand-soccer organizations from around the country such as California's Soccer in the Sand, Florida's Beach Bums Sand Soccer and New York's Long Island Rough Riders.

Mellor founded his Florida-based organization (then known as "Soccer on the Beach") in the early 1990s after an impressionable visit to Copacabana Beach in Rio, where he was enticed by beach soccer. "For a number of years no one seemed to be running beach soccer tournaments in the United States, but it started to catch on," he said. "In the last seven years in particular, the growth has accelerated. We are seeing it now all over the country."

### Ultimate: The Flying Disc Takes Off

A 2014 Sports & Fitness Industry Association report recently cited ultimate, a field sport played with a flying disc, as one of the fastest-growing sports in the United States, with more than 5 million players. A variant of the sport played on the sand is quickly making an impact as well. "Beach ultimate is incredibly fun," said Tom Crawford, CEO of USA Ultimate, the sport's national governing body. "The vibe is as cool as it gets."

Recognized as an official disc sport by the World Flying Disc Federation in 2010, beach ultimate combines action seen in both soccer and football. Four- or five-person teams compete on a sandy area about half the size of a football field, generally up to 13 points. Players cannot run with the disc—it must be passed from person to person or to score a goal—and the game is self-refereed. "There are a lot fewer injuries, fewer turned ankles, because you are on sand," Crawford said. "It's really fun and action-packed because of the smaller fields and teams, so advancing the disc up the field is super quick."

The first beach ultimate tournament in the United States took place in the mid-1980s in Texas, and since then, the sandy version of the sport has grown considerably. Today there are leagues across the nation, games are played on anything from oceanfront to lakeside beaches and, in May, USA Ultimate hosted the inaugural USA Ultimate Beach Championships, held over two days in Virginia Beach with 56 teams coming from 22 states. The tournament had men's, women's and co-ed divisions. "The oceanfront boardwalk was just full of spectators," Crawford said of the event. "It was really cool to have literally thousands of people watching

the competition. That whole boardwalk beach vibe is just perfect for exposing the sport but also for families to bring their kids and have a blast."

Crawford said the plan is to have a beach ultimate national championship every year. He said there is already television interest in the sport, and the national governing body is talking to two different networks about televising the beach championships next year. USA Ultimate has introduced a new beach committee tasked with creating programs and competitions that will serve as qualifiers for the championship. Those events are expected to launch next year.

As to what USA Ultimate looks for in a host city, Crawford pointed to Virginia Beach as a prime example. "The reason they were so good is that the venue and all the hotels they had arranged for the athletes and teams to stay at were within 50 feet of each other," he said. "So you could walk out of your hotel and onto the fields, which was very cool for the athletes because everyone was right on the water. There was no need for rental cars, no need for vans, no need for any of that because you were literally right at the fields. You just got up in the morning, ate some breakfast, walked across the beach and started."

Jim Ricketts, director of the Virginia Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau, said his organization is starting to see an increase in the number of sports like ultimate that are offering a beach component. "Hosting beach sports has been a growing focus area for Virginia Beach," he said. "We got into the business early, and our efforts have paid off."

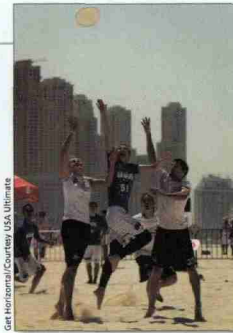
This year also marked the fourth World Championships of Beach Ultimate, held in March at the Jumeirah Beach Residence Resort in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The event was hosted by the World Flying Disc Federation and Beach Ultimate Lovers Association. More than 71 teams participated and Team USA reigned during the event, winning six gold medals and one bronze across the seven divisions.

### Beach Tennis: An International Hit

Sjoerd de Vries, co-founder of Beach Tennis Aruba, described beach tennis as a mix of beach volleyball, badminton and tennis. "It is a very easy game to play and learn and is growing now in every continent," he said.

De Vries, who is a former professional tennis player, brought the sport to Aruba in 2000 and created a beach tennis organization there with Jochem Ros a year later. Today the duo, along with co-owner Marc Kiezebrink, run the largest

- 1 | *The AVP Tour planned to stage seven events in 2015, its third year under new management. In May, the tour made a stop in New Orleans, Louisiana.*
- 2 | *Beach volleyball was a popular draw at the Pan American Games in Toronto and is expected to be a highly attended event at the 2016 Olympic Summer Games.*
- 3 | *The USA Wrestling Beach Nationals were staged in Carolina Beach, North Carolina, in May. Athletes from across the country competed, including members of the Marines.*
- 4 | *The beach version of ultimate has taken off in recent years, with events held both nationally and internationally.*
- 5 | *The World Championships of Beach Ultimate were staged in March with the United States winning six gold medals and one bronze medal across seven divisions.*



Get Horizontal/Courtesy USA Ultimate

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Get Horizontal/Courtesy USA Ultimate

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beach tennis tournament in the world: the Aruba Beach Tennis Open. This year's event, scheduled for November 16–22, is expected to be the biggest to date with more than 1,200 players competing on 35 courts in various tournament divisions, including singles, mixed doubles, pro doubles, masters and youth, as well as a nations and team cup tournament. Organizers added another day to the tournament this year to accommodate the increase in scheduled matches.

Top players from around the world travel to Aruba each year to compete in the event, including a record number of players from Italy (the birthplace of beach tennis) last year. Spectators average around 10,000 people and for the Sunday-night finals on center court. More than anything, Kiezebrink said it's the ambiance that makes the tournament especially popular with fans. "It's very laid-back, with music during the matches and DJs," he said, "It is more a part of a party."

Also unique is the way the amateur group—a particularly large division—is split into categories by ability level, such as beginner and intermediate, Kiezebrink said. "Most countries just make a distinction between amateurs and professionals," he said. "We use the distinction between the different amateur levels and then the pro level."

Kiezebrink said the tournament was quite small in 2007 but attendance spiked after Italian players came to play in 2009. The following year, players showed up from Brazil, and after that, numbers continued to increase thanks to word of mouth. "To me, to play beach tennis is a lot of fun, but to watch these beach tennis pros is amazing," said de Vries. "I would rather watch beach tennis than tennis, and I am talking top-level tennis. The action is so quick."

### Beach Wrestling: Grabbing Hold

Beach wrestling has been recognized as an organized style of international wrestling for just over a decade. "But really, beach wrestling in some form goes back to the beginning of time, when the sport was one of the first developed in civilization," said Gary Abbott, director of communications and special projects for USA Wrestling. "Think of before there were sports arenas and wrestling mats, when all of the sports were held outside. That is what the roots of beach wrestling are, back in the ancient Olympics and before. Wrestling was held in the dirt."

Abbott said that beach wrestling is still in a growth-and-development stage, not only in the United States but worldwide. "There could be a huge opportunity if the

sport gets more involved on the grass-roots level, and/or becomes recognized as an Olympic sport," he said. "Right now, it is something that is enjoyed within wrestling but does not have a commercial aspect to it."

The rules are fairly simple: one scores by taking an opponent down to the sand for a takedown or by pushing an opponent out of a circle in the sand. "What people may not understand is the technical skill needed to either take the opponent down or force them out of the ring," Abbott said.

The beach wrestling division of USA Wrestling stages events and tournaments annually, most on the local or state level or as part of a larger wrestling event. The biggest event USA Wrestling hosts is the Beach Nationals, which have been held at Carolina Beach, North Carolina, for the last five years; before that, the event was hosted in Rochester, New York, and Singer Island, Florida.

What does a city need to host an event? Sand and sunshine. "It is that simple," Abbott said. "It doesn't have to be near the ocean. Beach events can be held lakeside. It doesn't have to be on a beach. Sand in the desert could be used." He noted how beach wrestling events have even been held on beach volleyball courts owned by private clubs or bars.

It generally boils down to a desire to host an event, Abbott said. "You need a group of local organizers who are enthusiastic, have a good base of volunteers and have support within the community in terms of sponsors and access," he said. "Places that are popular vacation areas are excellent, but really it's more about those who lead the local organizers."

In some cases, beach wrestling events have been added to multi-sport beach activities like sand soccer and beach volleyball. "If a city has a beach sports festival and is in a region where wrestling is popular, they often work with the local USA Wrestling leadership and can add a beach wrestling segment to the activity," he said. The biggest challenge of this variation of the sport tends to be just getting people to try it. "When people try it, they enjoy it, and it grows from there," he said.

### The Fun Factor of Beach Sports

A main lure of beach sports in general is the fun factor. "Once the competition is over, there's a whole lot of other things to do because you are almost always in a beach, vacation or community environment," said Abbott. Like its burgeoning beach counterparts, he said, "This is a good-time sport." ■