

COMMUNITY BEACH VOLLEYBALL: A PANACEA OF BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS AND MUNICIPALITIES

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We are here together, thousands of delegates from over 60 countries, to share our stories and experiences, successes and failures - so that we can personally learn and grow and bring back to our individual countries and local communities programs which have succeeded in enhancing the quality of the physical and social lives of participants in other parts of the world.

I am here today from Montréal, Québec to present to you a phenomenal success story in the field of recreation and leisure, which since its inception 35 years ago has had over 400,000 participants, from over 155 countries, ranging from pre-teens to septuagenarians. A program which has thrived on being equally open and accessible to men and women, gay and straight, regardless of their abilities; has created a positive social and physical environment which actively promotes co-operation, team-work and self-esteem; advances social integration amongst diverse ethnic groups, as well as encouraging life-long exercise and fitness.

This program has optimally used public park space in a municipal/non-profit organizational partnership, created part-time and full-time employment for dozens of people, and has helped to produce men's and women's champions, who have played at the highest levels of the sport.

The sport is VOLLEYBALL and the program is Community Beach Volleyball.

Many people do not realize the universal popularity of Volleyball. It is one of the most popular sports in the world with over 1 billion players – 46% of which are women. The Fédération Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB) has 218 members, representing every known country in the world.

Volleyball has become immensely popular over the years because it's easy to learn, it requires real team-work, there isn't any physical contact with opponents, there are a minimum of injuries, and it's accessible to both sexes..

Physical education programs in schools throughout the world teach their students Volleyball and most of them have teams which play competitively against other school teams.

Beach Volleyball was invented in California in the late 19-teens. Interestingly enough it was initially developed as a 6 x 6 game. In the late 1920's 2 x 2 volleyball started to be played on California beaches, and in France they started to play 3 x 3 beach volleyball.

For many decades beach (sand) volleyball remained a niche sport played almost exclusively on ocean-side beaches, camp grounds and nudist colonies. Its development and acceptance were slowed by a lack of opportunity for the

immense amount of indoor volleyball players to play on the sand anywhere else except on courts installed on ocean-side beaches.

2 x 2 Men's and Women's Beach Volleyball got streamlined into the Olympics in 1996 and has already generated spectacular world-wide interest for such a new Olympic event, being one of the top three most popular televised sports during the Olympics in many countries.

Although 2 x 2 Beach volleyball has become popularized because of its exposure in the Olympics, 4 x 4 and 6 x 6 Men's, Women's and Mixed beach volleyball are every bit as legitimate a game and are highly accessible to those of all abilities – maybe some day even making it into the Olympics as well.

Montréal is not an ocean side resort. Yet through years of dedication we have created a hugely successful “drop-in” Community Beach Volleyball program in the middle of a public park on imported sand courts, with a mixture of 2 x 2, 4 x 4, 6 x 6 and other derivations of volleyball.

It all started for us in 1973 when some people, including myself, who'd been playing volleyball indoors at a local community centre in the Milton-park area asked the Ville de Montreal if some volleyball courts could be set-up in Mont-Royal Park , near the Centre where we played. One of our members, Bicycle Bob Silverman, went scouting around with a Ville de Montreal Parks and Recreation Official and found a quiet, totally unused section of Parc Jeanne-Mance right below the landmark cross on Mount Royal , which didn't have any playing fields or activities in the summer or winter.

That very summer the Ville de Montreal made four courts for us by installing eight metal STOP sign-poles, imbedded in concrete, on a grass and dirt surface - and a number of people from all walks of the community started playing together a couple of times a week.

This was the start of a positive lengthy relationship between the Ville de Montreal and us, which saw them furnish us with our day to day and year to year needs, provide physical maintenance of the area, and make the constant improvements needed to meet the requirements of greater and greater amounts of people – which we provided and took care of on a daily basis.

Although our needs might not have always been met as quickly as we wanted, our relations with the Ville are an excellent example of a public/community partnership which benefits so many people from all aspects of the community in so many tangible and intangible ways.

The people who have played with us had a huge assortment of volleyball abilities and aptitudes. However from the outset we insisted that the rules pertaining to how the ball was touched and all other rules were respected and adhered to..

We established a program in our little part of Parc Jeanne–Mance, which was absolutely cost free - and open to everyone, but where getting individually better through working at improving ones skills was a fundamental tenet.

We loved our volleyball.

We loved teaching volleyball to our friends and strangers. We loved watching people getting better and better - and in turn teaching others how to play. We loved the camaraderie, the spirited games, and the après volleyball hanging out. We loved our volleyball so much that our program in Jeanne Mance Park continued to grow as more people became aware of it.

To more effectively organize sporting, recreational and educational activities in our area and lobby for more improvements to our Park, in 1986 we formed ourselves into a legally incorporated non-profit organization, the Association Récréative Milton-Parc (A.R.M.P.), which still administers the volleyball program, from the same community centre where our volleyball program started, and where I have served as the Director for the past nine years.

By the late 1980's and early 1990's, a system of volunteers was in place that took care of the nets almost every day and night. We had four courts with a gravel surface and portable nets were set up on the grass to handle some of the overflow of players.

In 1992 ARMP applied for and received a grant from a Québec provincial government program which allowed us to hire 2 people on social assistance to install the nets everyday throughout the summer. These people became the first paid Volleyball Animators.

Seeing the popularity of the beach volleyball in other places, we lobbied the city to provide us with sand courts to replace the dirt and gravel courts which we had been playing on for 20 years and were related to a number of ankle and leg injuries. Finally, in 1994, our Mayor Pierre Bourque found funds to install four sand courts with new permanent posts. In 1999, Molson Brewery and the Ville de Montreal combined to provide two more sand courts, and in 2004 a seventh court was magically created one week-end on a patch of grass by some local volleyball activists.

The sheer (almost primal) pleasure of playing on the soft natural surface of the sand, its forgiving nature on the joints and muscles, and the beach-like party atmosphere which accompanied play, drew in thousands more players to the courts.

Our program is now open everyday, seven days a week, from noon (ten on the week-ends) until dark, from around May 1st until the first week-end in October - approximately 150 days. The previously quiet little part of Parc Jeanne-Mance is now the busiest part of the Parc, with hundreds of players coming in every day.

For the past five years we have averaged about 25,000 players a summer. During the past two years we have started charging a modest membership fee of \$5.00 per-year per-player, and have had approximately 3,000 individual members registered each summer.

These players range in age from 10 years old to the mid-seventies, 36% are females. There are millionaires playing next to people on welfare. They come from all walks of life, all socio-economic groups, all countries, nationalities, and

religions. Their one common ground is that they love (or at least enjoy) their volleyball.

New immigrants and visitors to Montréal from over 155 countries started coming out, playing, meeting new friends and learning and being exposed to French as well as English. French and English Québécois and Canadians from every province and territory also got a chance to learn and be exposed to the others' language and beliefs.

The courts have also proven to be a tremendously valuable place for Canadians and immigrants to do professional networking, and hundreds (if not thousands) of people have found jobs through contacts made at our park.

It has also become a nice neutral place for men and women to meet and get to know one another better.

In our urban lives it is difficult for adults to find a setting to meet a person or a bunch of persons of the opposite (or the same) sex, other than at a bar, a party, or a continuing education course. Over the years we have had over 35 cases of babies being born to men and women who met on our community volleyball courts – including my own two children.

The large percentage of women who can play volleyball, in many cases as well as men, uniquely places it amongst team sports. The sizable presence of women and the fact that there is no physical contact between players of the opposite team also gives the game a unique status amongst team sports and contributes greatly to the spirit of “friendly competition”, which is the main pillar of sports. There have been almost no incidents of verbal or physical violence on our courts over all of these years.

We have been able to develop this outstanding program because we have established a set of basic rules which encourages and promotes fairness, accessibility and participation.

Our Community Beach Volleyball program is extremely popular because it has been developed and functions totally on the principle of “drop-in”, “pick-up”, or “walk-on” participation, coordinated by trained animators.

Basically, players arrive whenever they want and sign up to play individually or with friends. They play 2 consecutive games win or lose, and then if there are other teams waiting to play, they must sign-up again, either with the same people or with different ones on a different court.

Through charging a minimal annual \$5. membership fee and a \$2. a day fee to play, we have been able to hire 7 people, offer a community sport open to all, over 150 days a year, and have even managed to break even financially.

Although we could charge much more for membership and play, we have consciously kept the price low so that it is economically accessible to everyone. There are ways, including sponsorships, selling of food and drinks, leagues, rentals, and fund-raising tournaments, which could be put into place and can

significantly increase profits, while maintaining the low daily membership and playing costs.

Our animators ensure that the park rules are respected and that all players have an equal chance to play. The animators have a comprehensive knowledge of volleyball. They co-ordinate the equilibrium on the courts to try to make sure that the courts and teams are well balanced. They put up and take down the nets and lines everyday, teach new people how to play, perform the administrative tasks related to collecting money and doing registrations – and try to make people feel welcome!

We believe that this program model could easily be replicated in large and small communities throughout the world.

We believe that you can bring back our model of “Community Beach Volleyball”, which provides a place for positive interaction between men and women, of all ages, from all backgrounds, promotes social integration between native born and immigrants, encourages life long fitness, and creates jobs, to your own countries and implement it in your own communities.

Currently there are more and more beach volleyball facilities being created, yet they oftentimes remain a private domain. If you don't know anybody who owns a net and ball, it's very difficult for the average person to walk up and ask some strangers who are playing - if you could join in.

Municipalities can and should establish programs such as ours in centrally located parks or areas, with paid animators who welcome all new players and charge a minimal playing fee to help pay for operating costs. This can be done in conjunction with existing volleyball or community groups, federations or directly through municipal sports departments.

The potential of “Community (drop-in) Beach Volleyball” to build bridges amongst people and promote fitness within communities is outstanding - and will only grow as more people dust off and turn their indoor gymnasium trained volleyball abilities (in so many cases acquired years before) to the beautiful outdoors and the organized municipal beach volleyball courts open to everyone – in the wonderful natural sand.

Municipalities which constructed courts in an easily accessible central location and entered into an agreement to hire and oversee volleyball animators, need only publicize the opening and the “drop-in” nature of the courts, and then try to accommodate the thousands of people who will come each summer to play and watch.

A typical soccer field accommodates 22 soccer players at a time. On the same amount of space twenty sand volleyball courts could easily be constructed which could accommodate up to 240 people at a time.

A Canadian author, W.P. Kinsella, wrote in his book “Shoeless Joe”, which was adapted into the successful baseball movie “Field of Dreams”, “Build it and they will come”.

We have found this to be a very, very true prophecy, as everyday we put up the volleyball nets and hundreds of people come in to play. Everyday is different - there are different people, different weather conditions, different games, different friendships developed.

We strongly urge you to build these sand courts in your communities and the people will come.

Starting at this Congress, I am pleased to announce that our group is initiating a movement to develop and promote organized community beach volleyball in cities and towns, large and small, rich and poor, throughout the world. Its name is the International Community Beach Volleyball Movement (I.C.V.B.M.)

We will do whatever we can to help you to develop this program in your own localities, because **we love our volleyball** and want to share and spread our love of volleyball, through this marvellous program that we have successfully developed in our (social) scientific laboratory in Montréal's Parc Jeanne-Mance, to every community where they play, or would like to play, beach volleyball throughout the world.

If you are interested please contact us at **icbvbm@yahoo.com**

The web site of our video has a video of our courts **www.miltonpark.org**

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