

Olympic stars try to put sport on map

By Steve Kowalski
staff writer

Karch Kiraly — two of the world's best volleyball players.
Playing in the second stop of a five-match Stars & Spikes American tour, the U.S. defeated the Soviet Union national team 15-11, 15-8, 15-4 in front of a Palace crowd of 10,012.

More important, the players left a lasting impression on the little ones in the crowd, those who will have the option to play volleyball in the future instead of basketball.

THE PLAYERS were there to promote volleyball and no doubt did a good job of it. (The Observer & Eccentric was one of the event sponsors.)

"One of our functions is to promote volleyball itself, and it doesn't matter if it's girls, boys, women's, men's or coed volleyball," said setter Jeff Stork, a member of the 1988 gold-medal winning U.S. Olympic team.

"Our job is to present volleyball in such a way that it looks fun so people would like to play it. It's one of the fastest-growing sports in the world."

It hasn't grown as fast competitively among boys in the states. Of the 12 players on the touring U.S. roster, 10 were born and raised in California where boys volleyball is as popular as basketball.

GIRLS VOLLEYBALL in Michigan and most states is well-established at the high school varsity level, but only California, New York, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Hawaii have varsity volleyball for boys.

The U.S. men's team has captured the gold medal at the last two Olympic games, but coach Bill Neville isn't sure how long that success can last relying mainly on West Coast talent.

Remember the hoola-hoop craze which had its roots in California in the 1960s before spreading across the country? Neville has his fingers crossed for boys volleyball.

"Obviously, we're doing it with mirrors," he said. "We have the best team in the world, but there's no telling how much stronger the program would be if we could tap into the whole country instead of one geographic area."

"Everyone that comes up to me and has never seen men's volleyball before says 'This is great,' because it's a different image. If we can keep the team in front of the public, then they'll follow us."

Timmons, 30, who plans to retire from the U.S. team at the end of the tour, has become one of the sport's best role models — something he didn't have when he was younger.

"It's gotta start with the kids," he said. "They have an advantage I didn't have, because now there is a team and stars to emulate."

"WHEN I STARTED playing, I looked at basketball players as role models because I didn't have that. Now we see kids who are jump serving and doing things we've started doing in the last couple years."

Team members also are fighting myths about their sport. "I always thought it was a family reunion sport," said Lois Franchino, 35, who traveled from Lansing to watch the exhibition. "When I went to high school, they had nine players

(now there are six) on each side, and the sport has changed a lot.

"It's a really big sport now in Lansing. Unfortunately, it's just for girls."

Susanne Martin, assistant director of the Michigan High School Athletic Association, predicts boys volleyball will be the next varsity sport added in Michigan.

Martin said several Michigan high schools have turned away boys who wanted to play on girls varsity volleyball teams, because "the schools were trying to preserve the girls program" under Title IX.

INSTITUTED in the mid 1970s, Title IX stated that tax-supported institutions had to provide equality in programs among the sexes regarding facilities, coaches and money.

Martin said a girls sport does not need to be added under Title IX if a school adds a boys volleyball team. The biggest barriers instead are facilities and budget costs. Schools must also worry about jeopardizing other programs, such as football or basketball, if volleyball were scheduled in the fall or winter, Martin said.

"There is interest," Martin said. "It just hasn't formulated yet. There are pockets of interest in Michigan, like in Kalamazoo, the southeast section, Grand Rapids, Muskegon, Flint and Bay City."

"But programs can't exist without opponents and leagues. And you have to figure where you're going to fit it in — the fall, winter or spring. You don't want to pull away other athletes from other programs."

George Lovich, athletic director at Livonia Franklin, played volleyball while attending high school in Pennsylvania in the 1960s. Male students have queried about starting a boys program at Franklin, but they've also asked Lovich about starting up



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Bob Civitlik, a member of the United States national men's volleyball team, helped his teammates to a 15-11, 15-8, 15-4 triumph Monday in the second game of the five-game Stars & Spikes American Tour.

a gymnastics team and even equestrian riding.

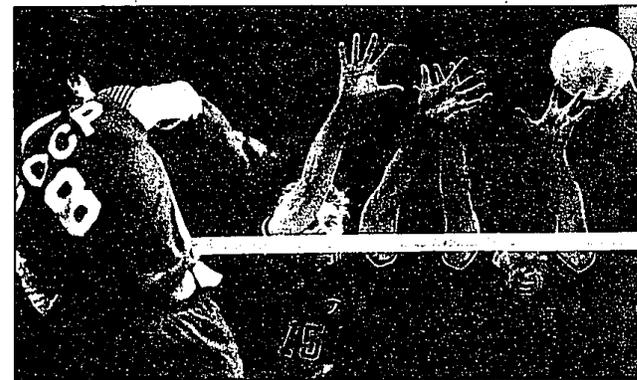
"If I had the facility, I'd love to see volleyball; it's a great sport," Lovich said. "But I have trouble practicing. In the winter, our gym is taken from 2:30 until 9:30 every day, and we have the ninth graders sometimes practicing from 7 until 9, and that's not good."

"Plus, it dilutes the pool of athletes. If we schedule volleyball for the winter, we're taking from basketball; in the fall, we take from football; and in the spring, baseball. When I played volleyball — and I'm ancient — we played between basketball and baseball seasons, and we had only live sports then. Now we have 20."



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Steve Timmons lost a bet with the Observer sports staff over the Pistons-Lakers series. He was a good sport, wearing a Bad Boys T-shirt during the warmups.



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

USA blockers Jon Root (right) and Karch Kiraly (center) go high against Soviet spiker Dimli Tri Fomien during Monday's Stars and Spikes Series at the Palaco of Auburn Hills.

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