

Olympic legacy



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No messing, beach volleyball is a

Elite athletes from all around the world arrived in the UK to battle it out during the 2012 London Games. But how can readers get involved with the sports that kept millions glued to their televisions? In the coming weeks, the Echo will be offering an A-Z guide of the clubs and groups that offer the chance to participate, as well as taking a close look at how the Olympic legacy will have an impact in and around Exeter. Richard Birch looks at the glamour of beach volleyball

"IMAGINE being here on a Tuesday night in the summer when the sun is starting to set," says Ali West, the director of Exmouth Beach Volleyball Club.

"There's no wind and the heat of the day can still be felt.

"There's holidaymakers playing in the sand nearby and kite-surfers in the sea. And you are barefoot in the sand with your friends playing beach volleyball with a smile on your face.

"I can't imagine anything better."

Today, however, is not that Tuesday night. Our pre-training interview is conducted on a bench in a beach-side shelter which is only fulfilling 50 per cent of the purpose for which it was named.

Rain is being driven in horizontally by a gusting coastal wind, giving us a thorough soaking before we make our way on to the court. The sea churns and foams as grey waves under leaden skies pound the sand.

But when the sport proves to be enormous fun even in the most challenging of conditions, Ali's assessment would appear to be difficult to dispute.

Originating in Southern California and Hawaii, beach volleyball was added to the Olympic programme in 1996.

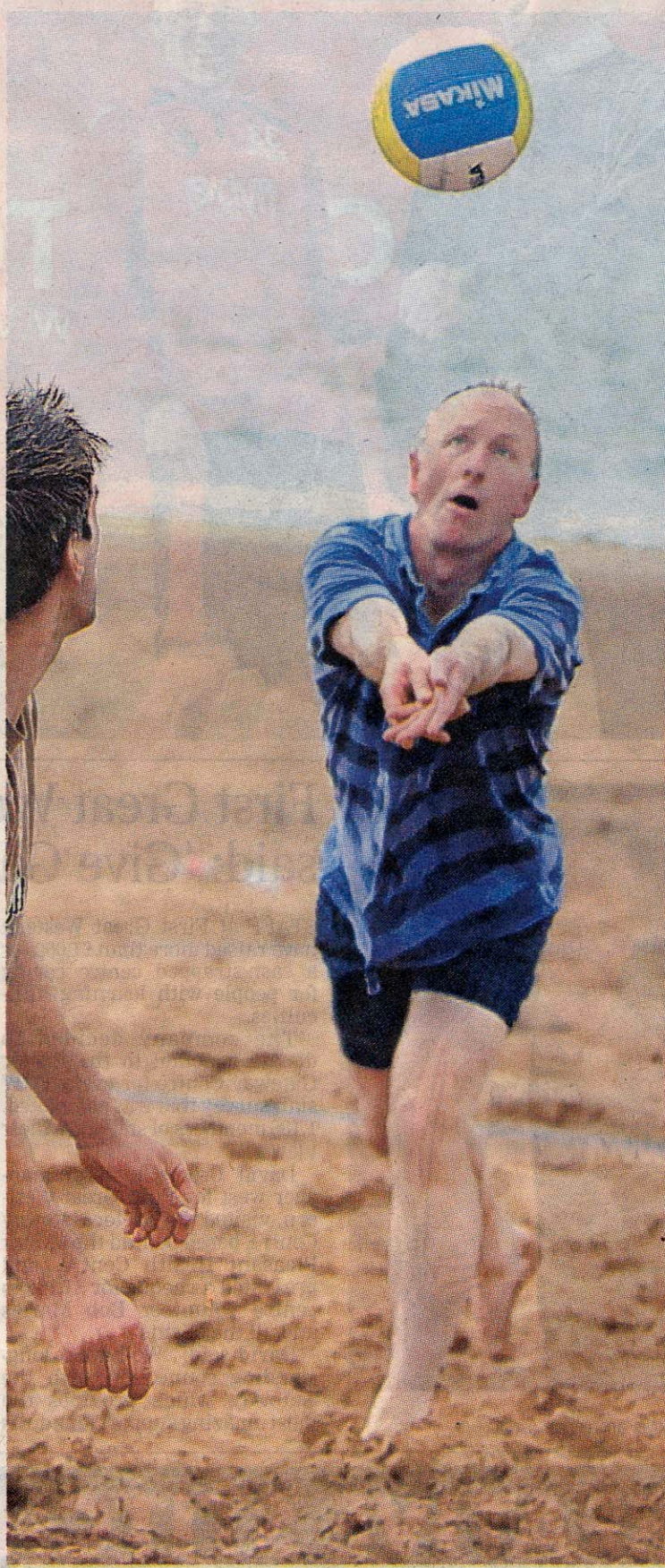
Initially derided in some quarters for being little more than an excuse to draw in additional audiences with its bikinis and surf-culture cred, Ali insists these factors should not lead people to conclude it's more about showbiz than sport.

"It's certainly worthy of its place in the Olympics," she said, "And because of the sand, I think it can actually become a more physical and tactical game than indoor volleyball. There's also a number of different rules, for example, in professional games you can only have two players, although we also play with fours."

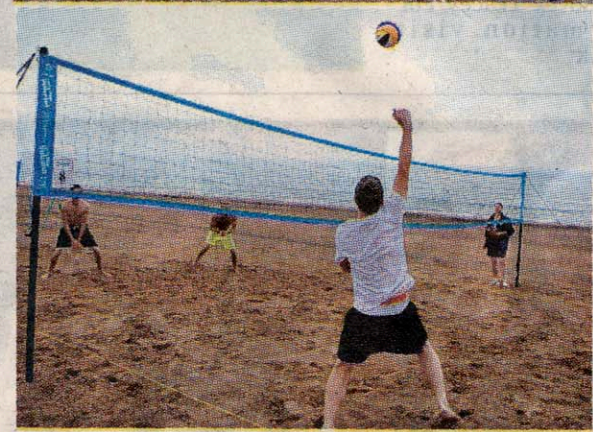
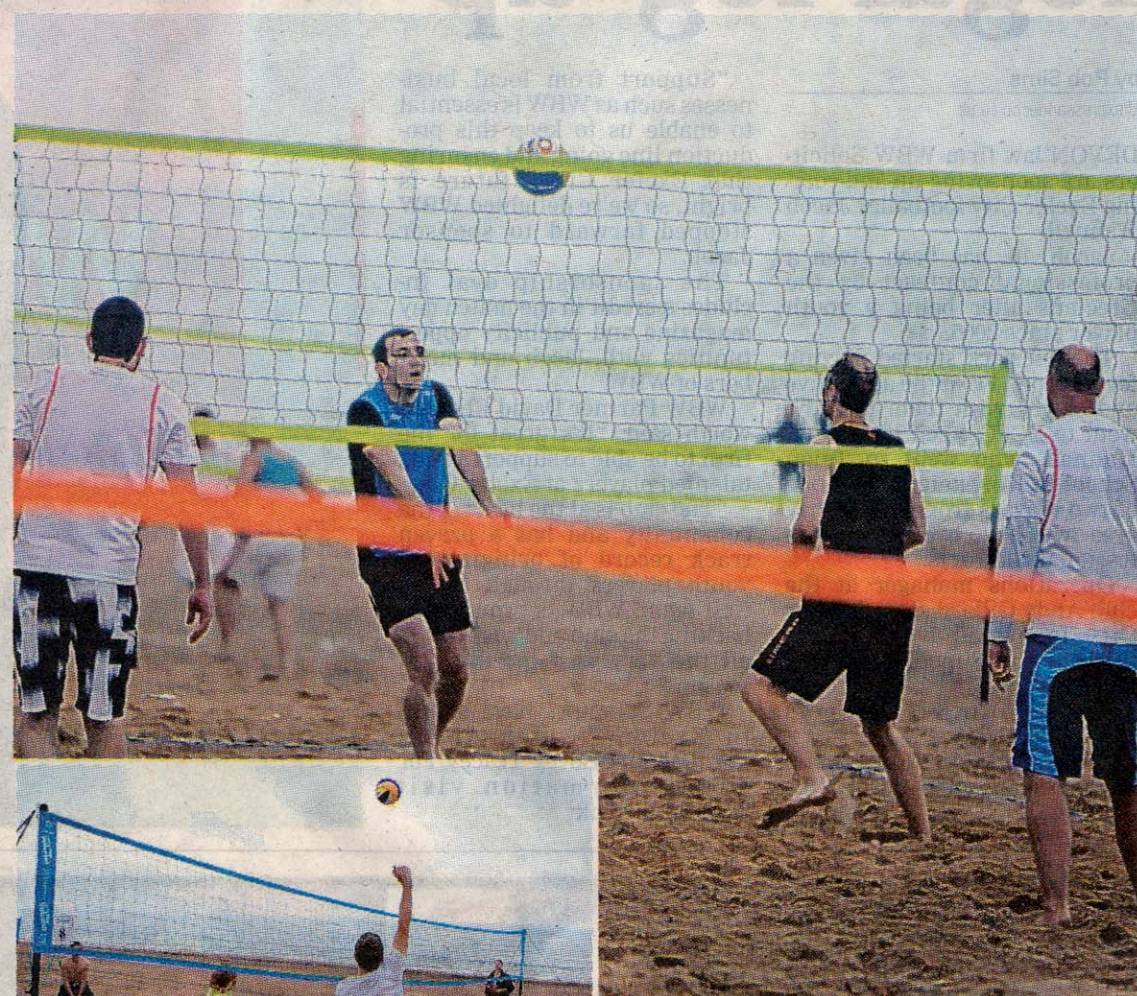
Volleyball has been played on Exmouth beach since the Eighties but the structure of the town's Beach Volleyball Club became more formalised around 2007.

It now has around 50 members who form themselves into teams and compete throughout the summer season from May to September.

East Devon District Council is



In the air: Nick Maye in the Exmouth Beach Volleyball pairs tournament
Pictures: EXJM20120812A-1447_C.jpg



Ball games: Far left, Exmouth Beach Volleyball organiser Ali West; other pictures, action from the summer beach pairs tournament

responsible for the courts which feature vandal-resistant nets (although, from the looks of them, not necessarily wind-proof) which are located between the lifeboat station and the sand dunes in the no swimming area of the beach near Exmouth Cricket Club.

They are free to use and the beach volleyball club has its training and league sessions on Tuesday, although it meets on several other occasions including for an end of season barbecue. "Having the beach courts is a fantastic resource for us as it means we can survive without having to ask for too much money from our members," said Ali, "We have our own nets and balls, but other than that, it's pretty low maintenance."

The club can accept members

from the age of 12 and the excellent coverage the sport received this summer at the Olympics has seen a number of newcomers make inquiries and get signed up.

"It's not a sport which enjoys a high profile and I think that what sometimes leads to the perception that is about messing around on the beach," said Ali, who first got involved when seeking a summer sport to play after the hockey season ended.

"Getting the chance to see the high level of skill involved at the top of the game was great and I think it will have changed some people's minds. That said, anyone who joins us as a beginner is encouraged to have fun. It is a beach-sport so we're laid-back and will help you learn what to do in a friendly environment.

All you need to have is a little co-ordination."

Ah, suddenly I'm about to hit the first stumbling block. Fortunately, the climactic conditions give me the chance to learn my first lesson fairly swiftly. If you shout "it was the wind" in a timely fashion, you can excuse yourself from all manner of failures to keep the ball aloft.

And there really is something about leaping around in the sand that makes beach volleyball hugely infectious, as Ali guides me through the basics of digging, setting, serving, spiking, blocking and poking.

"It's all about timing," she says, as we both drag ourselves up from the sand after exchanging sets, "once you get the hang of that, it all becomes a lot easier."

The club has a number of trained coaches and will be offering beginner sessions for next year. They will be suitable for those who have never played before and those who want to improve their skills.

"A number of members play indoor volleyball through the winter to stay sharp," said Ali, "And I encourage people who want to try beach volleyball to do the same as you'll learn all the basic positions and skills you need to enjoy the version on sand."

Anyone who excels is urged to get in touch with the Academy of Beach Sports in Croyde where opportunities exist to get involved in the game at a national level.

"They've got a great facility there," said Ali, "Because of its

profile, it's not the easiest sport to go on to compete at at the highest level but nothing's impossible if you have the talent."

Anyone who wants more information can visit www.exmouthbeachvolleyball.com or send an email to aliwest31@yahoo.co.uk - this is also the point of contact for anyone wanting to register interest in next year's beginner sessions.

The club is also linked to the Exeter and District Volleyball Association - more information can be found at www.edva.org.uk

Next week, the focus will turn to badminton. If you are part of a club which would like to feature in the Echo, get in touch on 01392 442241 or email rbirch@expressandecho.co.uk