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Spring into Sand Volleyball

By Rebecca Eckland



Saint Mary's is 3-1 in its inaugural season. Photo
Tod Fierner

Coach Brent Crouch has noticed a shift in his athletes since the new sport was added. "The girls are eager to play, to practice and work on their game in ways I haven't seen before," he explained. "The new surface and the warm sun, the opportunity to play often and touch the ball more and the venue at Moraga Commons have all seemed to contribute to a new level of enthusiasm for volleyball."

Sand volleyball is, without a doubt, about fun. There's no coaching allowed from the sidelines, but there's plenty of cheering from teammates and the community that has enthusiastically embraced this sport.

On April 18, Saint Mary's (3-1) takes on Pacific on their home court at 4:30 p.m. SMC swept Pacific in the first match-up earlier this season.

There's a new team in town, and they've taken over Moraga Commons. On sunny-and the occasional rainy-days, the Saint Mary's sand volleyball team is hosting its home games at the park. Beginning its inaugural season in February, players were offered something they hadn't had before: a chance to play outside.

"Sand volleyball allows us to be complete volleyball players. Indoors, you can hide if you can't pass. But here, you get picked on," said junior Natalie Loos, "so you have to develop your skills."

Sophomore Sam Tinsley and junior Kristina Gravin echoed the sentiment.

Unlike indoor volleyball with six players on the court, sand volleyball is its minimalist cousin. There are only two players on the sandy court, and they play without shoes. A game consists of five best-of-three doubles matches.

Tinsley, who started playing volleyball when she was 15, added that playing outdoors is also more physically demanding.

"I like the physical challenge of it," she said. "I never played in sand before, and moving, jumping, in sand is a challenge."

The NCAA only approved the addition of sand volleyball last year and, so far, less than 30 schools have added programs. Although sand volleyball is not yet a WCC sport or a Pac-12 sport, the new team offers players opportunities to learn other positions and try out new skills.

For sophomore Rachel Gillcrist, a native of Denver, playing in the sand is something new, but she enjoys playing the game in a new way.

"[For the indoor season], I'm a middle and ender-- and I'm never in the front row," she explained, "It's exciting to have a different role in the game."

Her goal echoes those of her teammates: to improve. "I'm just learning how it all works," Gillcrist noted.



Photo Tod Fierner

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