

11th Pan American Maccabi Games – USA Beach Volleyball Write-up

As a proud American, I think anytime you can represent the United States in international competition it is nothing less than an honor and a privilege. But there are a few sports where there is just a little more at stake for an American athlete. I'm talking about sports that because of their unique history and status in our society are like the Chevy Camaro, Bruce Springsteen, and apple pie --- they're distinctly American. Those sports include baseball, basketball, football (the American kind, played with your hands) and, of course, beach volleyball, a sport invented, defined, and perfected on the beaches of Southern California. While goodwill and healthy competition are the goal of any international contest, an American beach volleyball player is also tasked with upholding the proud tradition of beach volleyball that has been cultivated for decades on the sands of our native shores.

At the 2007 Pan American Maccabi games in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the men's and women's beach volleyball teams from the U.S. delegation played exceptional volleyball. Not only did we bring home the men's gold medal and the women's silver medal, but we proudly upheld the tradition of American beach volleyball by playing with passion, skill, and demonstrating the good sportsmanship that is the hallmark of the Maccabi Games. Playing against teams from Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Australia, and Israel, we had the unique opportunity to enjoy a wonderful week of competition while making friends with Jewish volleyball players from around the world.

The following are highlights from the beach volleyball competition:

The Venue aka "The Litter Box": Argentina is a hotbed of volleyball talent and yet, oddly enough, there is a serious shortage of beach courts in Buenos Aires. To create a venue, the Maccabi Games imported a truckload of sand to refill a recreational court located in a park-like outdoor complex called Circuito KDT. The court at KDT is clearly not used on a regular basis and only a day before the competition began, it was just a big hole in the ground – a hole that wafted a mysterious and violent odor that distinctly (and unfortunately) smelled just like cat poop. Lo and behold, we returned the next day to find the hole filled with the new sand, the sand nicely groomed, and the court set up to tournament specifications complete with Gatorade sponsored player tents, bleachers, a PA system, and a deejay blasting a mix of disco, rock and bossa nova tunes between points and side changes. Even the mystery smell had disappeared...well, sort of.... In any event, smell or no smell, the amazing transformation of this low budget barbeque court into a functional international beach venue qualifies the facilities to be listed as the first "highlight" of the tournament.

USA Women's B / Team Can-Am: Doris Trachtman and Sarah Susson were the clear fan favorites in the women's bracket. Underestimated by some of their taller opponents, Doris and Sarah shocked the rest of the field in pool play with their tenacious defense and consistent play, earning their way to the semifinals and a shot at the bronze medal. Unfortunately, in the bronze medal match they had to play against their good friend and neighbor from the "Can-Am" team, Team USA member Melody Khadavi. Melody had suffered a gut-wrenching defeat the day before so Doris and Sarah were hoping that she and her Canadian partner Marni Krell would be vulnerable targets. But to Melody's credit, she and Marni bounced back to play a great game. In

the first of many matches that saw the thermometer sail past 90 degrees, Doris and Sarah fought tooth and nail, making one amazing defensive play after another. Finally, with the possibility of heat stroke threatening both teams, Melody and Marni scored the final points for Team Can-Am to take the Bronze. It was certainly bittersweet to see Americans play each other with a medal on the line, but it's difficult to think of someone more deserving of a medal than Melody.

USA Women's A: One of the top teams in the tournament, Aleeza Miller and Stacey Gould dominated pool play to earn their way into the gold medal match against the Argentina A team. Aleeza (known amongst the other players as "The Hebrew Hammer") and Stacy played some of their best volleyball in the finals. Unfortunately it wasn't enough to beat an Argentine team that played an absolutely flawless match. Aleeza and Stacy were able to reveal some weaknesses in the Argentine team that no one else in the tournament had been able to exploit but, nonetheless, the Argentines were able to make the necessary adjustments and take the top position on the podium.

USA Men's B: The Bad News Bears of the beach volleyball squad, Matt Susson and Max Sloves just missed the medal round after losing two closely contested matches – both in three games – to Australia A and the eventual bronze medalists, Brazil A. Nonetheless Matt and Max turned in some striking performances. In what can only be described as a "clinical" display of volleyball, Matt and Max completely dismantled a strong Mexico B team in early pool play. By stringing together aggressive serves, perfectly placed shots, and a stifling blocking scheme, Matt and Max were able to rattle the normally strong Mexicans and sweep the match. While we were certainly proud of the win, the best part of the match was getting the opportunity to get to know the players on Mexico B. "Chavo" and "Beto" – in addition to being great volleyball players – were also two of the funniest and classiest sportsmen at the competition. Their humor was infectious and we quickly found that when we weren't rooting for Team USA, we were rooting for or with them in support of Team Mexico. Beto and Chavo really epitomized the spirit of the Maccabi games.

USA Men's A – Part I: One of the most entertaining matches of the tournament again involved the USA and Mexico teams, only this time it was the USA's A team of Jon Aharoni and JT Wenger facing off against the Mexico's A team of Solomon Sarfati and Danny Swarcz. This early pool play match was highly anticipated as it pitted the two most likely contenders for the gold medal against each other in what was essentially a preview of the finals. As the match started, a light drizzle that had begun to fall during the previous match grew into a steady rain, which ultimately climaxed in a full-fledged downpour. The referee didn't flinch and as the rain soaked him through, he blew the whistle to continue play. Jon and JT didn't flinch either. Rather than let themselves get rattled by the slippery ball and the midcourt mud puddles, they totally embraced the chaos. Making the rain their friend, Jon and JT laughed and joked around like a couple of little kids as Mother Nature unleashed her fury. Of course, Jon and JT also unleashed a little fury of their own. With a relentless barrage of service aces, kills, and savvy shots, they mopped up the court with Sol and Danny, leaving the formidable Mexican team totally sunk.

USA Men's A – Part II: As expected, the rumble in the rain wasn't the last time these two talented teams would meet. The Mexicans rebounded from the loss and didn't drop another

match *en route* to earning a second shot at Jon and JT, only this time with the gold medal on the line. As the match started, the sun was shining bright and there wasn't a storm cloud in sight so there was no need to worry about the rain. Having regained their form, Danny and Sol were clearly more confident and comfortable than the first time the two teams played and they opened the match by executing their game plan flawlessly. It was the first time during the entire tournament that a team really pushed Jon and JT. As the match went on, Jon and JT weren't just battling the Mexicans, they were also fighting the 90-plus degree heat that was causing all the players to suffer from dehydration and cramping. In spite of these extreme conditions, both teams played inspired volleyball and the match went to a decisive game three. While Danny and Sol played brilliant ball throughout the match, they were ultimately bested by JT's amazing athleticism and Jon's impeccable execution. In an emotional finish to a fantastic tournament, Jon and JT won the gold

Pan American Maccabi Games 2007: The final highlight is the games themselves. As a first time Maccabi participant, I was blown away by how positive an experience the whole thing was. To meet and compete with other Jewish athletes from around the nation and from around the world is unlike any experience I've ever had. In particular, I think the volleyball players were really lucky. We had an amazing group of people on the beach and indoor volleyball teams and while a few of us went home with medals and a few of us went home with busted knees or broken fingers, I know that all of us came home with irreplaceable memories and new friendships that are only bound to get stronger with time. Despite many obstacles, the Pan Am Maccabi games were a huge success and I hope that we will all see each other again in Israel in 2009... if not sooner.

- Max Sloves

USA Rosters & Finishes:

USA Women's A Team: Aleeza Miller and Stacey Gould – **Silver Medal**

USA Women's B Team: Doris Trachtman and Sarah Susson

USA Men's A Team: Jon Aharoni (beach chairman) and JT Wenger – **Gold Medal**

USA Men's B Team: Matt Susson and Max Sloves