

## Six Pac-12 teams already adding sand volleyball with eyes on better recruits

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Liz Kritza has positioned the couch in her office at the Coors Events Center so recruits have a clear view of the Flatirons out the window while she's making her pitch.

In the near future, Colorado's volleyball coach hopes to be able to talk about a beach-like experience in Boulder to go with the stunning mountain vistas.

Five Pac-12 athletic departments -- Arizona, Cal, UCLA, USC and Stanford -- have already added or announced plans to add sand volleyball by 2014. The conference needs six teams to organize as a league.

Kritza believes if the Buffs jump on the bandwagon it will help her indoor program keep up with its peers on the recruiting trail and give CU volleyball a better chance to compete in the nation's best and deepest volleyball conference.

"Clearly we want to position ourselves well in the league with our competitive ability, much like we want to do with our announcements about all of the facilities upgrades and the general support we need for our sports to do well in the Pac-12," Kritza said. "I think this goes in line with that thinking. We're at the beginning of the discussion and a lot of pieces have to be put in place, but we're definitely talking about it."

Ceal Barry, CU's associate athletic director/senior woman administrator, is closely monitoring the sand volleyball boom in the Pac-12 and around the country.

CU has already added women's lacrosse, which will play its first game at Folsom Field in one year, since joining the Pac-12.

"It does have some nice traction," athletic director Mike Bohn said of sand volleyball, which already has 29 NCAA programs competing this spring with another 47 schools planning to add or considering adding the sport by 2014. "I know Ceal is doing a great job of collaborating with other Pac-12 institutions and what they're looking at and what they're doing. That will be a sport that we'll have to keep our eye on."

CU's chief volleyball rival from its days in the Big 12, Nebraska, is the first Big Ten school to add sand volleyball. The Cornhuskers made the announcement on a snowy January day in Lincoln and are already scheduled to begin competing this spring.

"As more schools go to this, I would rather be on the forefront, especially with recruiting, because we're recruiting so far out now," Nebraska volleyball coach John Cook told the Lincoln Journal Star. "I don't want to wait three years to decide we're going to do it, and then you have another three years until those recruits even get here."

Nebraska is currently using players from its indoor team to field a sand volleyball team. The NCAA allows a total of six scholarships for the new sport, which can be split among the roster.

Players who arrive on a sand volleyball scholarship are not allowed to play indoor for two seasons.

Arizona deputy athletic director Kathleen LaRose told the Arizona Daily Star that the Wildcats will be adding sand volleyball, which helps with Title IX compliance, at a total cost of about \$200,000 per year.

Because sand volleyball is an emerging NCAA sport, programs can receive \$30,000 from the NCAA.

"The sport in itself is going to be great because it's going to provide more opportunities. We want more young girls playing volleyball in any fashion," Kritza said. "The more opportunities that exist the more likely it is the sport will grow. It's not an accident it happened in an Olympic year because that's where volleyball really has popularity in the U.S."

Misty May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh Jennings, who won their third consecutive Olympic gold medals in beach volleyball last summer in London, have helped the sport's dramatic rise in popularity.

The duo played indoor volleyball in college at Long Beach State (May) and Stanford (Walsh), respectively, before gaining rock star popularity in the sand.

"I know my role models are sand athletes, Kerri Walsh and Misty May, I look up to them tremendously because they started out in the indoor game," said CU freshman setter Nicole Edelman. "I think the Olympics are just a great thing for promotion of the indoor and outdoor game."

Unlike a lot of her Californian teammates, Edelman wasn't exposed to a lot of sand volleyball growing up in Boulder.

Due to the spring climate, CU would have to plan to host home matches indoors if the sport were added.

"That's one of the barriers for us because clearly the climate is an issue, so there has to be some sort of indoor facility for us to do it here," Kritza said. "And travel becomes a concern because you have to play a schedule."

Sports Oasis, a sand volleyball facility with seven indoor and three outdoor courts, could possibly serve as a home venue for the Buffs.

"I think having both indoor and outdoor would be a huge deal," said Edelman, a former Fairview High School standout who is trying out for a spot on the U.S. Women's Junior National Volleyball Team this weekend in Colorado Springs. "I hope it comes to CU because I think it would be a great thing for the program with recruiting."

Kritza said if CU decided to add sand volleyball the program would need its own head coach to thrive.

"To compete properly you have to have a coach that has sand experience because they really are two different sports," Kritza said. "It's not just taking a volleyball out and putting it on the beach."

Several former CU players have made successful transitions to professional beach volleyball. Rachel Scott (formerly Wacholder), a first-team, All-Big 12 player for the Buffs in 1996, has won eight beach volleyball championships, including a victory with partner Elaine Youngs over May-Walsh at the 2005 Huntington Beach Open that ended a 50-match win streak for the dynamic duo.

In the future, elite prospects like Scott -- who is from Laguna Beach, Calif. -- will be asking about playing both indoor and sand volleyball on recruiting visits.

"I think it would help recruiting. I went (to CU) because it was such an amazing place," said Scott, who is from Laguna Beach, Calif. "Now that they're in the Pac-12 it's even better for volleyball because you can play matches back home. If they had (sand volleyball) it just adds even more. I hope they do it."

Scott noted that tall athletic players dominate indoor and sand volleyball gives an opportunity for shorter quicker players to also play. at a high level. She said they are very different games. And that sand volleyball in college could help revive the sport professionally in America. She also said she would be interested into getting into coaching.

"Right now it depends where they're from. If they're from the West Coast, all of them ask about it. For some of them it's the first question," Kritza said. "It's a point of discussion in all of the clubs on the West Coast and it's becoming a big factor in the decision for a lot of kids that have this option, especially when you are recruiting against the top programs.

"In the Pac-12 you're recruiting against all the other Pac-12 schools, so I think that has been the impetus for this quick addition by some of our colleagues. They want to stay in the mix for top recruits."

The American Volleyball Coaches Association sponsored a national championship tournament last year in Gulf Shores, Ala., which was won by Pepperdine.

A sport can reach NCAA status after 40 teams have competed for two consecutive seasons, which means the first official NCAA championship in sand volleyball will likely be awarded in 2016.

Beach volleyball will also be back in the spotlight at the 2016 Olympics in Rio De Janeiro, where the world will be looking for the next Misty and Kerri.

"I can think of countless little girls that have Misty and Kerri posters and they're looking for a role model in volleyball," Kritza said. "Because those two are the most visible, they've served a great purpose for the sport."

The Buffs volleyball program wants CU will join the movement.

"The administration are open to it, they're listening, we're talking about it, and it has all been very positive," Kritza said. "Nothing has been finalized yet and nothing has been set that the wheels are in motion. But I appreciate that they're willing to go out and look and actually see what's going on."

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