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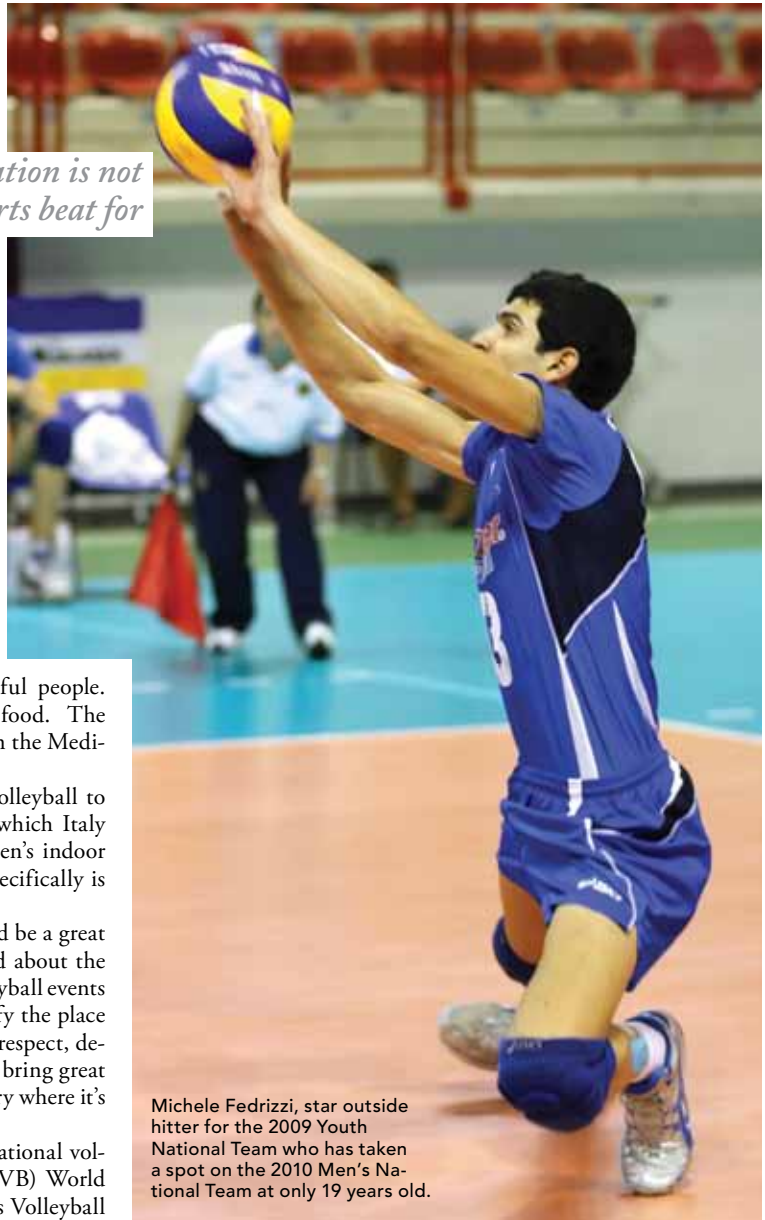
PASSION SHINING THROUGH

Italian Volleyball gets the spotlight

By Alix Cirac

“Even though the economic situation is not as good as it was, our hearts beat for volleyball as much as before.”

- Andrea Celani, president of the Italian Volleyball Trainers Association



Michele Fedrizzi, star outside hitter for the 2009 Youth National Team who has taken a spot on the 2010 Men's National Team at only 19 years old.

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istory. Culture. Beautiful people. Fast cars. Delicious food. The boot-shaped country on the Mediterranean.

Now you can add volleyball to this list of things for which Italy is known. Whether you're talking about men's or women's indoor or the beach circuit internationally, Italian volleyball specifically is guaranteed to come up in the conversation.

The high-competition level of the athletes alone would be a great conversation starter, but now there is also a buzz in and about the country because of several high-profile international volleyball events taking place there in 2010 and 2011. These events signify the place of Italy on the international volleyball stage—a place of respect, dependability, and competitiveness. And now, these events bring great opportunities for our sport to grow even more in a country where it's already very popular.

September 2010 saw two significant events for international volleyball: the Fédération Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB) World Congress in Rome from Sept. 9-10, and the FIVB Men's Volleyball World Championships from Sept. 25-Oct. 10.

“The big events here in Italy generate a tremendous amount of attention and excitement in Italy,” said USA Volleyball president Doug Beal, speaking in Rome at the end of the World Congress. “A very large number of cities are involved in hosting various parts of the tournament. It's huge, and the fact that they just finished organizing the Congress is very significant as well.

“It's a major series of events for the Italian Volleyball Federation and for volleyball in Italy.”

As of press time, 25 countries' national teams are gearing up for the men's tournament, a worldwide dogfight that is battled in the Italian cities of Trieste, Verona, Milan and Rome. And there is another huge event that follows, the SWATCH FIVB Beach Volleyball World Championships in Rome, June 17-26, 2011.

“Rome has a dedicated history when it comes to hosting key sports events, such as the Olympic Games,” Italian Volleyball Federation President Carlo Magri said in an October

2009 interview. “The Italian Volleyball Federation is honored to have this new sports event, which is the most celebrated sports tournament of a discipline and in a couple of years will become one of the most followed and practiced sports in the world.”

The excitement for these events is growing, especially among people in the Italian volleyball community.

“We're looking forward to the coming World Championship,” said Andrea Celani, president of the Italian Volleyball Trainers Association. “Federations, clubs, players,

coaches and many, many people who love our sport are helping to create a great and perfect event.”

Not only is Italy worth talking about because of the events it's hosting, but because of the players that the country will have competing in them. It's impossible to deny the famous, or maybe infamous, passion that the Italians have for everything in life, a passion that translates into the players' and country's love of volleyball. Behind soccer, volleyball is likely the country's second most popular sport, Beal said.

“Passion is what really keeps volleyball at a high level in Italy,” Celani said. “We had some ‘dream years’ [in the 1990s with coach Julio Velasco] when the men's national team won so much. Our clubs were developed and doing well.

“Volleyball has grown up a lot: on a physical perspective as well as with scouting and technique.”

- Cristina Gatty, editor of Italian website vivovolley.net

“Now, even though the economic situation is not as good as it was, our hearts beat for volleyball as much as before.”

And for good reason. The men's national team has struggled slightly in international competition in recent years, but had a number five FIVB ranking in January of this year. Under coach Velasco in the 1990s and early years of the new millennium, the men won gold in several international contests. Most notably they won in three straight FIVB World Championships: in Brazil in 1990, Greece in 1994, and Japan in 1998. They also won in the World Grand Champions Cup eight times between 1990 and 2000, and won six times in the European Championships between 1989-2005.

“They're certainly not the world power now that they were, but they are good, really good,” Beal said. “They played in the final round of the FIVB World League this year and they're well coached. They have some individual performers in Alessandro [Fei], who's a world-class player, and in [Luigi] Mastrangelo.”

If men's indoor seems to be leveling off in recent years, men's beach volleyball has been slowly garnering attention, according to Beal.

“When I coached here in the 90s, beach volleyball was just starting and had limited attraction and presence,” he said. “It's pretty significant in Italy right now.”

But people in the volleyball community in Italy think that more attention can still be gained.

“Beach volleyball still needs more promo-

tion on the media side so that people can know more about the events that are organized,” said Cristina Gatty, editor of *vivovolley.net*, a renowned Italian web site for women's volleyball.

Elisa Cella, captain of club Cariparma's A2 league, who plays beach in the summer, agreed. “Beach volleyball is just not followed that much in Italy, even if it is now a bit more than in the past.”

The Italians have a great reason to start paying attention to beach volleyball, and it comes in the form of twin brothers from Brazil who play doubles and on the Italian beach national team. Paolo and Matteo Ingresso, or “I gemelli Ingresso” in Italian, are making waves in the sand.

“They are great,” Celani said. “They are the Italian Beach Champions and are doing

According to Celani, there are thousands of clubs in the country and they are divided into levels and age groups. This is similar to the system in the U.S., but the club team divisions go all the way into professional leagues with decent money-earning opportunities for the players. The national teams recruit directly from these clubs, unlike in the U.S where players are mostly recruited from universities.

No one knows for sure how the Italians will perform in the upcoming events that the country will host. We can all agree though that it will be worth watching. Maybe after a while our hearts will beat for volleyball in Italy, too. •



Paolo Ingresso spikes against Paolo Nicolai in the May 2010 Foro Italicò Beach Volley Grand Slam. Ingresso and his partner and twin brother Matteo, went on to win the title.



The 2010 Italian Women's National Team hopes to keep their winning streak going and finish high in the 2012 Olympics.

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