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The Capital Region isn't particularly beach-like these days, but the AVP Beach Volleyball Tour tries to create the ambience on the floor of Times Union Center. (James Goolsby / Times Union)



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Indoors is the only place to play volleyball in mid-February in Albany, especially if you're wearing a bikini. Oh, yes, there was a game going on, too. Pros Kerri Walsh, [more...](#) (James Goolsby / Times Union)

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Where beach meets snow

Pros play volleyball in February on sand of Times Union Center

By **DAVID FILKINS**, Staff writer

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The big screen on the roof of Times Union Center said it all. Thirteen degrees. That's how cold it was Tuesday night when fans, bundled up in insulated coats, wool hats and winter boots, ambled into the arena for the most ironic of sporting events.

It's mid-February, and in these parts that means it's cold. Really cold. There are no beaches here, no sand, no boardwalk and no surfboards. Sunblock won't be in demand for months, and the nearest ocean is almost three hours away. Basketball is the spectator sport of choice right now, because it's played indoors, where you don't need animal fur or a bonfire to keep from getting frostbitten.

Sometimes, though, the rules don't apply. We go crazy. We get cabin fever. We do wacky things. We play beach volleyball in the middle of winter.

The AVP Pro Beach Volleyball Tour came to downtown Albany on Tuesday, as eight of the world's best players put on an exhibition before a crowd of 2,700. It was the first time in the tour's 24-year history a match was played inside. Good thing, considering the frigid temperature and threat of a massive snowstorm.

"I had no idea what it was going to be like," 2004 Olympic gold medalist Kerri Walsh said after winning an early match. "It feels like February. My game feels as ugly as the weather."

Walsh didn't look so ugly. She and the other three female players wore their usual bikinis; the four male players wore board shorts. They played on a regulation-size area, with the nets at their normal height -- 8 feet for men, 7 1/2 feet for women. But make no mistake, this wasn't beach volleyball. The "beach" was a pile of sand surrounded by railroad ties. From the outside it looked like a giant sandbox. Plastic palm trees and strategically-placed folding chairs completed the cheesy ambience.

didn't seem to mind. They roared after every diving save or thunderous spike.

It's not often this sort of event occurs in Albany, especially during the winter. Some fans couldn't contain themselves. Canajoharie resident Mike Houghton, the girls' volleyball coach at Duanesburg High, climbed over the wall minutes before the first match, ran onto the playing surface, and asked Walsh to sign one of the two balls he had tucked under his arms. A security guard sent him back to his seat, but didn't arrest him, and Houghton returned to the stands wearing shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, and a wicker hat that had two wooden figures playing volleyball attached to the top.

What made the event enjoyable for Houghton and many others was how laid-back it was. Players signed autographs during the exhibition, took turns doing commentary for television stations, and swatted T-shirts and miniature volleyballs into the crowd. There were no hushed moments as in golf or tennis; no intense, screaming players and no timeouts. It was cool. It was fun. It was California.

After losing the first match of the night, former AVP Tour champion Sean Scott grabbed the microphone and, with a smile on his face, explained why he lost: "I got stuck in the snow," he joked.

Sounds about right.

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