

Medallists help make Toronto a beach volleyball mecca

WON BRONZE IN ATLANTA

Despite injuries, Childs, Heese confident as they head to Athens

BY ALLAN WOODS

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• There used to be a sign next to the white wooden toilet shed at Ashbridges Bay warning athletic sun worshippers that beach volleyball was barred from being played anywhere on the expansive patch of sand next to Lake Ontario.

Now, the land by the boardwalk on Toronto's waterfront is the mecca of Canadian beach volleyball, with some 90 courts set up among the sand each morning. It's the house that three-time Olympians and 1996 bronze medallists John Childs and Mark Heese built.

"We used to hang our T-shirts on [the sign] when we were practising. We used to go down and set up a court anyway ... and literally just hang out by that sign," said Childs, 37. "It's kind of a silly thing. I don't think people really had a good idea of what [beach volleyball] was. I guess it was the association with party life and they were trying to keep the beach-volleyball crowd out."

Yesterday morning was evidence of how far Childs and Heese — and the sport in Canada — have come. An official send-off for the Athens-bound team, scheduled to have been held at the Ashbridges Bay court they have called home for the last decade was bumped to an indoor location at the other end of the city at the prompting of a national television network concerned about rain. "It sucks," said Fred Koops, the team's sponsor and owner of the Overkill line of beach clothing, "but what are you going to do?" Though the men of the hour were nowhere to be found, it was clear as the sun in yesterday morning's sky that Childs and Heese, 34, have already left a legacy in their wake. On Court No. 1, professional competitor Mark Reilly, a Calgary native, instructed six tykes through their bumps and sets. Court No. 2 featured the determined play of the six 20-something Canadian volleyballers from B.C. and Nova Scotia who have come to ply their trade in the hopes of using the game they love to earn a living. "If you're a Texan and you want to surf, you get in your car and you go to California," said Reilly, 29. "There's the surfers waiting for you and there's the common interest waiting for you."

Toronto, he said, is beach volleyball's equivalent.

"I'm just really thankful," said Reilly. "Without those two I wouldn't have a lot of the friends I have and I wouldn't have the business I have."

It was a different world in 1996 when Childs and Heese won bronze in Atlanta, the first time beach volleyball was an Olympic medal sport. After they stepped off the podium, a bewildered pack of reporters pushed them to explain the sport's draw. Surely it was the sun and sex appeal, they asked, the women in bikinis, the feeling of ones toes in the warm sand.

"[Spectators] got to see the sport for the merits of the sport, not just for the sun and the sex appeal like most of the questions we fielded leading into 1996," Childs said. "We're fielding less and less of those questions all the time."

Increasingly, the questions are turning to their chances, as the only Canadian men's team in their field, of winning another medal. At the Sydney Olympics in 2000, they finished fifth after a narrow loss to the then-top-ranked Brazilian squad in the quarter-final round. In 18 months of Athens qualifying tournaments, the team was hampered by repeated knee injuries and finished in 22nd spot out of 24 teams.

The 23rd spot was reserved for the host Greeks while the last qualifying spot was reserved for an African team, which eventually came from South Africa.

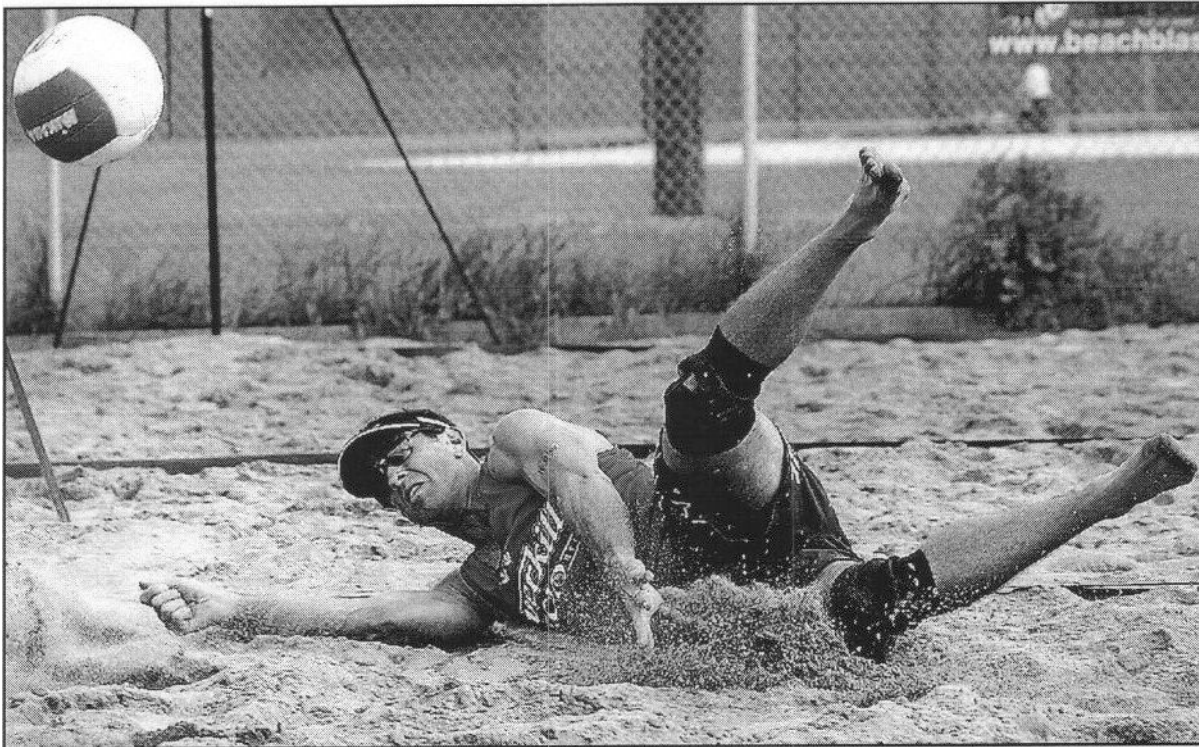
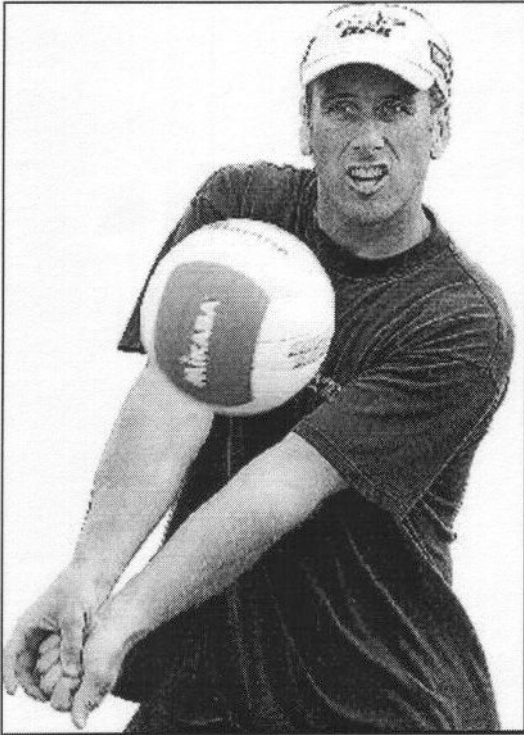
"It was very stressful at times," Childs said. "For the eight previous years Mark and I weren't ranked out of the top 10, so qualifying wasn't an issue. But getting to the next level — the gold medal — was our concern. With all the injuries, our concern shifted to just getting there."

They did it, and board the Olympics-bound plane tomorrow evening with Dr. J.P. Pawliw-Fry, a motivational speaker and author of *You Can't Stop the Waves But You Can Learn How to Surf*.

Pawliw-Fry is the team's long-time mental trainer and "a key instrument" in their success to date, according to Childs. "He's probably been the biggest advantage that we've had that a lot of other teams may not have experience with or access to," he said.

Whether Pawliw-Fry will put Childs and Heese on the podium or whether two years of repeated injuries will spike their volleyball dreams this time around is another matter.

Even Childs admits a game could go any way on any given day, so closely matched are the 24 teams. "The teams in our pool, we've beaten them all and we've lost to them all on different occasions. Whether we qualified fifth overall or 22nd overall, like we did, the Olympics is the ultimate equalizer."
awoods@nationalpost.com



ZORAN BOZICEVIC / NATIONAL POST Mark Heese, top, and John Childs, below, played volleyball at Ashbridges Bay when it was still illegal. Now, fans of the sport come from all over the country to practise on the Lake Ontario beach — legally.