

Survival of the Fittest

Sacrifice and perseverance are part of the program for players on the AVP tour.

By Josh Stephens

Long before television contracts and Olympic medals, a pro beach volleyball player could subsist on the cost of a 12-pack and just enough leaded gas to get from Santa Cruz to San Diego.

No longer.

For many aspirants—and even a few stars—on this season's AVP tour, the only thing more daunting than seeing Karch across the net on a Friday morning is figuring out how to get home that night.

Though only a shadow of the 25-city cavalcades of the early 1990s, the AVP expanded this past season to 16 tournaments, ranging from the usual California events to new stops in Atlanta and Birmingham, Ala.

Traversing back and forth from California to Coney Island, Boulder, Colo., and Cincinnati over three weeks amounted to a hectic, and costly, game of cross-country picnic ball.

"We're gone for days, we come home, do laundry, train, re-pack and then go somewhere else," said former USC star and



Former USC star April Ross just completed her rookie season on the AVP tour, earning \$6,288 in 13 open events.

HOLLY STEIN/AVP

AVP rookie April Ross.

Veteran Elaine Youngs said that with international tournaments, she spent up to 20 consecutive weeks on the road this year.

Especially with increased airport security, Youngs said, "travel is the most difficult part of what we do. I can train all day."



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And with final rounds on Sundays, the itinerary has been particularly brutal for players who endure the whole weekend.

"The biggest change this year has been the three-day events," said Matt Fuerbringer, who along with partner Casey Jennings comprises the longest-tenured men's team on tour. "It means you have to leave a day earlier and have an extra day of hotel and food costs."

For teams finishing ninth or higher, where prizes top \$2,000 per team and can rise to \$50,000, the money may offset the hassle. But despite its growth, the AVP does not aid players with travel, and it does not yet offer living wages to the whole field.

The schedule has especially taxed qualifiers and younger players who haven't secured sponsorships or ever had to set their alarms for Saturday morning.

"It's tough for those players," said AVP announcer Chris "Geeter" McGee. "There are guys in the main draw every weekend taking 17th or ninth and not making any money even though they're playing against the best in the world."

A whole season could cover 20,000 miles, and it's a fair bet that none of them will be in first class, or, for that matter, in a plane. Add the cost of hotel rooms, meals, and lost wages from day jobs, and teams that go one-two-barbeque can dine out on little more than ambition.

"We would love to give more prize money," said AVP commissioner Leonard Armato. "But we're limited in how much we can distribute."



This year's Manhattan Beach Open paid \$25,000 to the winning team. A team that finished 17th split \$800.

"Younger players struggling to make ends meet (should) think of the money they are spending to travel and play as an investment," said Fuerbringer, who has reaped nearly \$200,000 on tour in his career. "You can't get better if you don't play in the tourneys, so you have no choice."

Success on the AVP, then, amounts to, literally and figuratively, "survival of the fittest," according to Ross.

Would-be stars emerge from qualifier tournaments in certain cities only to cede their spots to locals, and miss out on valuable experience, when gas prices rise or vacation days run out.

"Qualifiers can't go to all the tournaments," said McGee. "The more remote tournaments have a lot of new names. It's good to get new people, but it hurts that qualifier who puts in so much time."

Meanwhile, for players who want to earn enough points to bypass the qualifier tournaments, the AVP's sales pitch sounds more like a page from the "Army Manual" than from any playbook.

"They have to understand that it takes perseverance and sacrifice," said Armato. "They have to love the game and the lifestyle."

Economizing plays a central role in the AVP lifestyle, and the effort to save money relies on friendships among partners and foes alike.

"People share rooms and cars," said second-year pro Will Strickland. "In Ft. Lauderdale we crammed seven people in a room—plus a dog."

The need to snuggle up has even blurred the lines between convenience and romance.

"Some guys date girls on the tour, so they travel together," said Ty Trambie, who has finished as high as ninth this year.

McGee said that he nearly has to assign seeds to decide who gets to bunk in his hotel room. Other players ply the highways in overstuffed motor homes or assemble lists of every friendly couch between Tempe and Brooklyn.

Back at home, Fuerbringer said he saved money by cooking his own meals. He offered this additional advice to young players.

"If some of your friends in the working world have already started to make some cash, get them to sponsor your nights out on the town."

While the tap eventually runs dry as players turn to more stable careers and home lives—Trambie said he can play precisely because he has "no girlfriend, no job, and no kids"—today's mileage may herald rewards for both players and the AVP as a whole.

"We will continue to expand," said Armato. "That gives us more depth and breadth, and leads to more benefits."

"I'm never going to complain about having too many AVP events," said Youngs.

Even in the bottom half of the draw, players hold no grudges against the players they hope to beat eventually.

"I feel like everything about the AVP is pretty fair—rankings, point system, etc.," said Ross. "Obviously I would like to have more prize money, but the tour is still growing and everyone understands that."

Until then, players can count on some priceless moments to compensate for poverty.

"All these guys are my heroes," said Trambie. "My biggest challenge is not to be in awe. We played Karch, and I was like, 'Karch is serving me a ball!'"

"It's kind of crazy," added Trambie.

And not a bad way to spend a couple summers. ■



2004 Olympic bronze medalist Elaine Youngs said she spent up to 20 straight weeks on the road this year between the AVP and FIVB tours.

PHOTOS BY JAMES FULISON