

How it all started in Australia.....

ANNIVERSARY OF THE AUSTRALIAN VOLLEYBALL FEDERATION

Unheralded and seemingly forgotten, this month (April) held a very significant date for Australian volleyball. The 50th Anniversary of the foundation of the Australian Volleyball Federation was on the 14 April. Here are some of the events leading up to it.

As most of you are aware, competitive volleyball was introduced to Australia by post Second World War refugees from Eastern Europe and many of their descendants have continued in the sport. Although local competitions in the major cities have been going on since the early 1950s, without face book or even twitter there had been no contact between the States. It was not until 1961 that a group of Latvian friends from Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide communicated with each other and decided to get together for an Interstate Tournament. Thus, on Saturday, June 2, 1961 three teams came together for an afternoon of volleyball. The Victorians in their inimitable style scheduled the interstate visitors to play consecutive matches and in the first ever representative volleyball match in Australia, SA beat Victoria 3:1. Immediately after they had to line-up against a fresh NSW side to lose a hard fought match 2:3. Victoria then thrashed the exhausted winners, to win bragging rights by a percentage on set and everybody went home agreeing to meet next year in Adelaide, this time over the Easter long weekend.

By then, the author had been a reasonably successful administrator of a blossoming SA Volleyball Association and, for his sins he was "awarded" the roles of tournament organizer, coach of the State team and State referee. I am proud to say that, acting in those roles, I introduced a number of innovations, most of which continued for many years thereafter. There was a tournament program, a commemorative pennant (the original still exists in the Volleyball SA office), selection of best players from each State and presentation of trophies, selection of an honorary "Australian Six" and a match for that team against the Rest of Australia, a social on Sunday night and a meeting of State representatives on Monday morning.

To be fair to the visiting teams, which all came by cars, since air travel in those days was prohibitively expensive; the home team was scheduled to play its two matches on the same day, but with several hours break in between. In some part it was due to the coaches' feeling of confidence, after all, we even had a Hungarian international (Les Maklary) in our side.

On the day, it is pleasing to record that everything seemed to go according to schedule. Playing in what was then the Hackney Hall in front of up to 100 spectators, SA thrashed Victoria and several hours later, although tiring badly, managed to hold out against NSW to win the title. The next day, Victoria squeezed through against NSW and the All Australian Six, with four South Australians thrashed the Rest of Australia. The four, Sasha Suchwiercha, Les Maklary, Charlie Berezny (all Lion) and George Dancis (ALS, State and Australian basketballer) became the mainstays of SA teams in future years.

The social in the evening was a grand affair, with (quite) a few drinks, interminable post mortems and lectures to the referees on what they have done wrong and how to improve for next year. There was universal agreement that it was a well organised, first class tournament in every respect and it served as a pattern for many years.

The meeting of State officials was held in the author's home on the morning of 14 April 1963. Here South Australia ruled the roost and its well prepared proposals were adopted almost without discussion. This, it was decided, was to be the Inaugural Meeting of the Australian Volleyball Federation. The interstate tournament was grandly christened, the Volleyball Championship of Australia and an all South Australian committee elected unanimously with John Versteegh (President), Walter (Wally) Lebedew (Secretary) and the late Eugene (Skip) Kolodoczka (Treasurer). The Secretary was charged with writing the

constitution, incorporating the fledgling organisation and doing all those others things to put volleyball in Australia on the map. For yours truly, this became the continuation of a life time love affair with volleyball including almost twenty years as AVF Secretary and dozens of other tasks and titles.

And so, fifty years have passed! Australian volleyball has moved from Wally's home desk, his portable typewriter (three of them worn out during that period) and many thousands of voluntary hours of work by the pioneering officials, to offices staffed by full time officials, computers, elite development managers, full time national squads and coaches (including, as most of you know, my sons Mark and Alexis) and many, many other changes.

And what about the next fifty years? If my fairy godmother were to promise me a wish – it has been ready for a long time! A REAL NATIONAL LEAGUE with home and away matches, promoted as real volleyball, played in stadiums in front of enthusiastic fans barracking for their teams. Australia, after all, is rated Number 11 in the world! The response for many years has been, that it requires sponsors. Of course! But it also requires hard work, energy and vision. That was all that the volleyball “founding fathers” had in their favour those fifty years ago and if they had not blundered on against all adversity volleyball in Australia today could well have been on the same level as another world wide Olympic team sport – handball.

PS: Berlin RV, the reigning German Champion team, coached by my son Mark, is currently involved in the final play-offs for the 2013 Championship of Germany, that is played on the basis of best of five matches. They won the first match playing in the biggest indoor stadium in Berlin, in front of almost 8,000 screaming fans. A couple of months ago, playing in the European Champions League, they travelled about 5,000 km to play the away match against the Russian Cup Winners Lokomotive Novosibirsk in Siberia.

Here is a comparison. Before the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, the standard and popularity of volleyball in Germany was on the same level as that of handball is in Australia today.

Wishing you all success and lots of fun in the current SA League

Walter (Wally) Lebedew, OAM



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