The History of Volleyball

Initially, volleyball was a game designed as a recreation activity for businessmen. It was first invented in 1895 in Holyoke, Massachusetts. William G. Morgan, a YMCA physical education director, blended elements of tennis, handball and basketball to create the game, which he first named "Mintonette."

The first rules, written by Morgan himself, called for a net 6 feet 6 inches high and a 25 by 50 foot court. Any number of players could participate in the game, and a match was composed of nine innings, with three serves for each team each inning. A year later, after seeing a demonstration given at the YMCA in nearby Springfield, Massachusetts, a businessman named Dr. Halstead suggested the name be changed to "Volleyball" because the basic idea of the game was to volley the ball back and forth over the net. A few years later, in 1900, a modification of rules was suggested by W.E. Day. He proposed that the height of the net go up to 7 feet 6 inches and match length be set at 21 points. These changes were accepted and published by the YMCA.

Although originated in the United States, volleyball quickly gained popularity around the world. Canada was the first "foreign" country to adopt volleyball in 1900. Six years later, Cuba discovered volleyball, thanks to Augusto York, a North American army officer who took part in the second military intervention in this Caribbean island.

Japan was the next to catch on in 1908, as Hyozo Omori, a graduate of Springfield College in the United States, demonstrated the rules of the new game on the YMCA courts in Tokyo. In 1910, volleyball officially landed in China, thanks to Max Exner and Howard Crokner. This same year, the Philippines also got to know the new game, as it was imported by the YMCA director in Manila. At this point, there were almost 5,000 public and private courts established worldwide.

In 1912, the rules of volleyball were changed yet again. The court size became 35 feet by 60 feet, and a uniform size and weight of the ball was established, calling for a circumference of 26 inches and a weight of between 7 and 9 ounces. Additionally, two other important rules were established: the number of players on each team was set at six and the players must rotate before service.

With the beginning of World War I, volleyball really began to spread worldwide. George Fisher, secretary of the YMCA War Office, included volleyball in the recreation and education program for American armed forces in 1914. Consequently, American soldiers fighting in the First World War in Europe brought volleyball over to the beaches of Normandy and Brittany.

Its popularity grew rapidly, but the game took root especially in the Eastern countries, where the cold climate made gym sports particularly attractive. The opening days of World War I also brought volleyball to Africa, where Egypt became the first country to learn the official rules in 1915. Volleyball continued to spread like wildfire, as in 1917, at the Allied Forces air base in Porto Corsini, just where Ravenna's sports palace is now located, American airmen introduced the volleyball into Italy.

In 1919, Dr. George J. Fisher, as Secretary of the YMCA War Work Office, made volleyball a part of the program in military training camps, both in the USA and abroad, in the Athletic Handbooks written for those responsible for sport and recreation in the Army and Marines. Thousands of balls and nets were sent overseas to the US troops and were also presented to the Allied Army's sports directors. More than 16,000 volleyballs were distributed.

Also during this time period, more new rules were established. In 1916, the score for a game was changed from 21 to 15, and it was decided that in order to win a match, a team had to win two out three games. The net height was raised once again, this time to 8 feet, while the standard ball weight escalated from 8 to 10 ounces. It was also decided that if a player holds onto the ball or the contacts the ball twice in a row, it would be considered a foul. In addition to the new rule changes, this year marked volleyball's official affiliation with the NCAA, the body that oversees college and university sports in the USA.

The 1920's marked many important advances in volleyball's history. The rules changed again at the beginning of the decade, as court size went down to 30 x 60 feet, and the ball could be played by any other part of the body above the waist. Another major innovation involved the rule allowing a team to play a ball no more than three times before sending it over the net. Scoring rules were also changed, providing that, with the score at 14-14, 2 consecutive points were needed to win. Also in the beginning of the decade, the Philippines developed the first kind of spike, known as the "Filipino Bomb." Various attempt at blocking were also made, although they were not yet codified by the rules.

At this time, volleyball also made its first official appearance in Russia in the cities of Volga-Gorky and Kazan-and at the same time in Khabarovsk and Vladivostok (Russian Far East). While Russia was just being introduced to the sport, a national federation was being established in Czechoslovakia in 1922-the first one ever. Bulgaria quickly followed and established one of their own. The first national championship was played in the USA, in which only YMCA teams competed.
In 1924, volleyball got its first taste of the Olympic Games in Paris, as the program included a demonstration of "American" sports, and it was among them.

More rule changes also came about in the mid 1920's, as two time-outs per game for each team became the standard. There was also a change in the scoring rules for the most hotly contested sets: at 14-14, to win it was no longer necessary to score two consecutive points, but rather to have a two-point advantage. Net length was set at 32 feet. Also during this time period, volleyball was played for the first time in the Netherlands, as Father S. Buis introduced the sport to the Sint Willibrord mission house in Uden after having stayed at the Seminary of Techny in Illinois, USA.

The late 1920's brought about the Japanese Federation and nine men's competitions were organized as a result. China, taking their cue from Japan, adopted the nine-player-per-team system. At this same time, The U.S. Volleyball Association was founded basically under YMCA principles as the organizing body for the leisure sport. Additionally, Cuba organized the first men's tournament according to the "American" rules at the Caribbean and Central American Games. Between the two World Wars, great efforts were made to give unity to the volleyball movement by establishing a single set of rules and creating an international federation. These were just the first efforts as nothing concrete was yet established.

In 1933, the first national championship was held in the USSR, where there were already over 400,000 players. For Soviet Volleyball, it was the year of enshrinement. In January, a challenge between Moscow and Dnepropetrovsk was one of the biggest events of the year. Books published this same year helped to diffuse ideas and information about volleyball across the world. A book entitled Volleyball: Man's Game by Robert E. Laveaga, made an important impact on teaching methods and scientific training techniques. Volleyball for Women by Katherine M. Montgomery was also very useful for teaching the game.

A year later, the first concrete steps to establish international relations in volleyball were taken during the International Handball Federation Congress in Stockholm. The fruits of this conference were seen a few months later in Tashkent and Moscow, when the USSR played the first official international volleyball matches against Afghanistan.

By the end of the 1930's, the Czechs had perfected blocking, which was officially introduced into the rules under the concept of "a counteraction at the net by one or two adjacent players." For almost twenty years, blocking had been a part of the game but was not spelled out in the rules. The Czechs were the first (and soon followed by the Russians) to attribute decisive importance to the new skill, which facilitates the ungrateful task of volleying defenses.

The relentless and successful advancement of volleyball in the world experienced another major boost after the Second World War. An attempt to establish an international volleyball federation took place in Paris, France in 1946, with success. The initiative, mainly by France, Soviet Union, Poland, Yugoslavia and the Czech Republic, founded the International Volleyball Federation in which fourteen other national federations were represented. Frenchman Paul Libaud was the first President.

The American and European rules of the game were harmonized, as the court was to measure 9 x 18 meters and net height was to be 2.43 meters for the men and 2.24 for the women. Only in Asia, the rules were different: the court had to measure 21.35 x 10.67 meters, and the net was to be 2.28 meters high for the men and 2.13 for the women; there was no rotation of players and on court, there were 9 athletes arranged in three lines. Since its founding, other nations have joined, and there are now over 120 national federations affiliated with the FIVB.

Everywhere from the South Pacific to the Finnish front, volleyball drew crowds among the troops engaged in the Second World War, even aboard aircraft carriers. Volleyball was recommended by Chiefs of Staff for training troops, believing it kept them in condition, strengthened their morale, and taught them how to stay together as a group - something essential at that point of the War.

In 1948, the first European Championship was held in Rome and won by Czechoslovakia. A year later, the first Men's World Championship was held in Prague and won by the USSR. The USSR also took first place in the Women's World Championship, which was held a few years later in Moscow.

After the war, the rules were rewritten and clarified to make interpretation easier. In particular, a better definition was given to the idea of blocking, and service was limited to the right third of the back court boundary. It was also made clear that each player had to be in his right place during service; points scored by the wrong server were to be nullified; simultaneous contacts by two players were to be considered one; time-outs were to last one minute, while time-out due to injury could last five minutes; and rest time between one game and another was set at three minutes.

The 1950's saw the birth of many new volleyball-related happenings, as the Chinese Federation was established in 1953, the Asian conference was founded in Manila in 1954, and volleyball was put on the program for the Pan American Games in 1955. In 1956, the first truly globe-spanning World Championship was held in Paris, France and
included over 24 teams from four continents. Czechoslovakia won in the men's division and the USSR won in the women's division.

The early 1960's marked the first time ever that a World Championship was played outside of Europe. Held in Brazil, the victories went to the USSR, both the men's and the women's teams. The USSR continued their World Championship domination until 1962, when the Japanese women's team was able to oust the USSR women's team from their spot as returning champions.

Shortly after the European Confederation was founded in 1963, volleyball made its first official appearance in the Olympic Games in Tokyo, with 10 men's teams and 6 women's teams competing. The gold medal for the men went to the USSR and the women's to Japan.

In 1969, a Coaches Commission was established. The FIVB recognized its fifth Continental Sport Zone Commission when NORCECA was born in Mexico, July 26 with the merging of USA, Canada and the Caribbean countries joining to form the North Central American and Caribbean Confederation. The five Sports Zones Commissions (Africa, Asia, Europe, Norceca, and South America) eventually became The Continental Confederations in 1972.

The late 1970's saw the birth of the first Junior World Championships, which were held in Brazil. The USSR won in the men's division, and the South Korea was victorious for the women. Also during this time period, the women's team of Cuba surprisingly held the world title for the first time ever in 1977 after their win at the World Championship in Leningrad.

Cuba didn't hold onto their title for long, however, as at the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, The USSR pulled out a dual victory for both the men and women. This same year, at the seventeenth FIVB Congress, the rules of the game were adopted into three different languages-French, English and Spanish.

New innovations in service came along in 1984, as at the Los Angeles Olympic Games, the Brazilians (who took the silver medal) attracted attention with their ability to make jumping serves. The idea was not new (Argentina has already tried it at the 1982 World Championship), but no one had ever seen it used so effectively before. These Olympic Games also marked the last time it was legal to block a serve—it was deemed a foul from that point forward, although referees became more permissive in evaluating defense.

In 1985, for the first time a volleyball representative (the FIVB president Acosta) was named for an IOC Commission, which was the prestigious Olympic Movement Commission. At this same time, Beach Volleyball received official status by the FIVB, and the first Beach Volleyball World Championship took place later in 1987 in Ipanema, Brazil. The first edition of the Beach Volleyball World Series (a world circuit) followed shortly after in 1989.

In 1990, a revolutionary idea for team sport was born. The first edition for the Men's World League debuted, with one million in US prize money. It had professional organization and wide TV broadcasting in an itinerant competition reaching all corners of the world. Playing formula for the World Championship was changed.

After the qualification phase, play proceeded by direct elimination matches right up to the finals for 1st to 8th place. Italy won the first one-million-dollar World League in Tokyo, Japan, before a crowd of 10,000 spectators. Italy upset Brazil in Rio de Janeiro and became the first Western European country to win the Men's Volleyball World Championship. USSR won the women's world title against China in Beijing.

Three years later, during the 101st IOC session in Monte Carlo, beach volleyball was admitted as a gold medal discipline in the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. Another major event that debuted this same year was the Grand Champions Cup, which is to be played every four years in Japan, alternating on odd years with the World Cup. Winners will be continental champions. The first gold medal winners of this event were Italy in the men's division and Cuba in the women's division.

The centennial anniversary of volleyball was celebrated in 1995. Having come such a long way, it has received enormous popularity on a global basis, as volleyball is ranked number two, only behind soccer, in participation sports worldwide. Today there are more than 46 million Americans who play volleyball, and 800 million players worldwide who play it at least once a week. Clearly, this sport has become one of the biggest influences in sports' history worldwide.