

OLYMPICS

Canadian beach volleyball duo gives world's best a scare



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RIO DE JANEIRO—Josh Binstock, the Olympic beach volleyball player from Richmond Hill, was shaking his head at the unpredictability of sports injuries.

Growing up playing Triple-A hockey, Binstock said he can't remember getting seriously hurt on the ice, even if he laughingly recalls the shock of an occasional blindside hit from an opponent named Raffi Torres — yes, the same infamous headhunter who grew into an oft-suspended NHLer.

But away from that madness, Binstock seemed to constantly get injured playing other sports. He rolled an ankle playing basketball. He developed a condition known as jumper's knee from hoops and volleyball. He tore up a hip doing plyometric training in a gym. And he once needed shoulder surgery, not from the toll of bodychecks but from the repetitive wear and tear of spiking a volleyball.

He was, in short, an expert at getting hurt. So he wanted to become an expert at the opposite. Now age 35, along with being a two-time Olympian, he's a licensed chiropractor.

"I wanted to learn what really keeps somebody healthy and strong and pain-free," Binstock was saying in a recent interview. "I knew how great it felt when somebody could relieve pain for me. I just wanted to bring that to other people."

It didn't take a gifted prognosticator to project that Binstock's first match at his second Olympics would bring some measure of Canadian hurt. The draw pitted Binstock and 26-year-old partner Sam Schachter, also of Richmond Hill, against the world's No. 1 duo: Alison Cerutti and Bruno Schmidt of Brazil. That the home team was playing in front of a raucous home crowd numbering about 10,000 on famed Copacabana Beach, the sport's very mecca — none of it boded well.

But the Canadians, who'd lost all three previous meetings with the defending world champions, made a match of it. Though Canada never led in a tight first set won 21-19 by the home team, the visitors led 20-19 late in the second set. Alas, after Canada lost a video challenge on a disputed net fault and Schachter shanked a match-point pass, the Brazilians, 22-20 winners, were celebrating a victory with their adoring crowd.

Bruno called the experience of playing in the stunning oceanside setting "a dream come true." The Canadians, meanwhile, were left to ponder visions of what might have been.

Said Schachter: "When you're playing at this level, it's just a couple of breaks that's the difference."

One of those breaks — the result of the video challenge — went Brazil's way. With the score tied 20-20, Binstock said he saw Cerutti — a six-foot-eight, 240-pound monster of a man — touch the net. At that point, Binstock said, challenge protocol would have required him to halt play and demand a video review.

But perhaps in part because the challenge system isn't used regularly on beach volleyball's pro tour, Binstock said he was unaccustomed to taking such action.

"You're just taught in sport never to stop the rally, to keep playing. And the rule is if another play happens, you can't (challenge) the (previous) play," he said.

Indeed, Binstock allowed the play to continue, and in the ensuing action Binstock touched the net on a spike. So by the time Binstock challenged the call, he was told that only the most recent net infraction could be challenged. Binstock did not dispute that he'd touched the net — only that Cerutti had done so well before him. Brazil got the point.

"I'm kind of kicking myself now because I should have stopped in the middle, challenged him and then we would have got the point and it would have been a different story," he said.

The Canadian duo has at least two more matches remaining here in the preliminary round and hoped that their fine showing against the world's best team would propel them to a berth in the single-elimination round of 16.

"Do I think we're able to take a medal? Yeah, I can say that," Binstock said before the competition began. "We're maybe not the biggest most powerful team, but we like to think we're a cognitive and intelligent team."

They're also, touch wood, currently a healthy team. And should any harm come to them, Binstock always has the option of morphing from athlete to clinician. He has more than once treated Schachter for various ailments during their travels on the pro tour, even if he has largely left his work as a chiropractor on the back burner to pursue his athletic dreams.

"It helps to keep my partner healthy," Binstock said. "And if something's going on with myself — I've had pretty much every injury you can think of. So I know a little bit about how to fix things."

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