



Misty May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh celebrate after winning the first set of a match during the 2005 Beach Volleyball World Championship in Berlin, Germany.

ANDREAS RENTZ / BONCARTS / GETTY IMAGES



# SANDY SYNERGY

What's it like to have to totally depend on someone else to win? Beach volleyball darlings Kerri Walsh and Misty May-Treanor wouldn't have it any other way.

BY JESSICA RIDENOUR





Although beach volleyball players Kerri Walsh and Misty May-Treanor were favored to take home the gold at the 2004 Olympics in Athens, no one was quite prepared for exactly how decisive that victory would be. The darling duo, who were rated number one both domestically and internationally that year, blasted the competition, Brazilians Adriana Behar and Shelda Bede, in a short 43-minute match. They didn't drop a single set in seven matches; and once Kerri clobbered a spike inside the line on match point, it was official: Misty and Kerri were the undisputed queens of the court. Their celebratory hug knocked them both off-center, dropping them to the sand. Not that they cared—it was obviously a moment of pure joy, made possible through intense training, moxie, and ultimate teamwork.

Today both Kerri and Misty are bigtime celebrities with generous paychecks, TV appearances, sponsorships up the wazoo, and countless hits on Google (including numerous fan sites and blogs dedicated to both their outstanding athletic prowess and their rock-solid bikini bods). They've attended the MTV Music Awards and the Emmys and have shot an ad for Visa, but beneath it all they're still serious athletes, gunning to win and willing to bust their butts to do it.

Each is a gifted athlete, yet they are truly dependent on one another to win. Their synergistic relationship propelled them to Olympic gold as well as numerous domestic and international victories. This summer's Association of Volleyball Professionals (AVP) Pro Beach Volleyball Tour should be no exception. They've been together since 2001, and their combined résumés read like something from the volleyball hall of fame history books.

Born and raised in southern California, 28-year-old Misty May-Treanor grew up watching volleyball at the bustling Santa Monica Pier and started playing at around age 11. Misty's parents were volleyball players and gifted contenders in their own right, practically guaranteeing that she would swim in the competitive end of the gene pool. Her father, Butch May, was an indoor volleyball Olympian in 1968; her mother, Barbara May,

was a nationally ranked tennis player who bumped her share of volleyballs in college. (Sadly, Barbara succumbed to cancer in 2002.) Misty's cousin, Taylor Dent, is a pro tennis player. By the time Misty attended Long Beach State University, she was also a superstar on the court. On her college team, she racked up top honors, including a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Athlete of the Year award and an NCAA Championship Co-MVP in 1998, and she was an NCAA First-team All-American from 1996 to 1998.

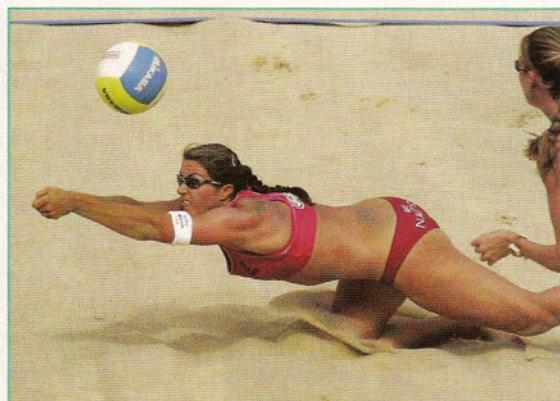
Twenty-seven-year-old Bay Area native Kerri Walsh was also blessed with born-to-win genes. Her father, Tim Walsh, played Minor League Baseball for the Oakland A's, and her mother, Margie, earned two MVP distinctions at Santa Clara University. She says her family, including her older brother, two younger sisters, and aunts and uncles, are all sports-minded and insanely competitive. She has upward of 55 cousins, many of whom go to support her at her games. "They come to the tournaments, and I immediately have 20 people in my corner, which is nice," she says. At Stanford University, Kerri played indoor volleyball and became only the second player in NCAA history to receive First-team All-American honors all four seasons and won two back-to-back NCAA championships. She, like Misty, was considered the cream of the collegiate volleyball crop.

As young volleyball prodigies in California, each was aware of the other as an up-and-comer on the court. "In volleyball it's such a small community; you compete against the same people growing up through the years," says Misty. "So you know everybody."

Kerri, who is a year younger than Misty, kept an eye on her future partner's advancement through the ranks. "I was always chasing her," says Kerri. "She was pretty much my idol from 14 on. It's so funny to think about that because now I know Misty so well."

It wasn't until after the 2000 Olympics in Sydney that the now-famous dynamic duo joined forces. Kerri played on

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From left: Kerri makes a diving dig at last year's AVP Hermosa Beach Open; Misty in action at the 2005 Beach Volleyball World Championship in Berlin, Germany; doing what it takes to win the 2005 World Championship



the indoor Olympic team that year, winning fourth place; while Misty, who left the indoor national team in 1999, partnered with legend Holly McPeak for the beach competition. After taking fifth place and fighting burnout, Misty and Holly amicably parted ways. In search of a new partner, Misty invited Kerri down to the beach for a practice game. Both were eager for a change, and the rest is Olympic history.

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Now they're the ultimate power couple, winning AVP Team of the Year for 2003, 2004, and 2005. Like a jigsaw puzzle, the pieces of Kerri's and Misty's individual talents snap together to form one perfect picture. At 6 feet 3 inches tall, long-limbed Kerri is seemingly able to reach everywhere at once. "Kerri is one of the more intimidating blockers out there," says coach Dane Selznick, a former volleyball world champ and pioneer of the sport. "She's got so much range, and for her size she's probably one of the fastest players to ever play this game."

While Kerri is the blocker and the intimidator at the net, 5-foot-10-inch-tall Misty is the powerful defender and shot maker. "She's got great ball control and court sense, and that's probably why she's considered one of the best sideout players in the world," says the veteran coach. "They complement each other very well."

Like their on-court skills, their personalities have a certain yin/yang quality as well. "Kerri's more emotional," says Misty. "On the court, if I'm having a rough time, the emotional side of her will pick me up, 'Come on, let's play!' She has a

cheerleader side, and then I'm there to calm her down. Kerri might show her competitiveness because she's more emotional, but I'm competitive in a silent way. I want to beat you, but I'm not going to let you know. It's a good balance."

At first blush Misty tends to be calm and controlled. On the court she's like a predator waiting to strike: patient and cool yet deadly. Her teammate, however, sees a side of her to which most people aren't privy. "Misty, to me, is just so quirky. She's hilarious," says Kerri. "She's very keen and aware, but you might not know that because she's so quiet. As I've gotten to know her more over the years, it's more of a common occurrence for Misty to make me pee my pants, laughing."

The combination obviously works. They're often described in the media as being like sisters, business partners, or best friends. The truth lies somewhere in between. "We share a lot of events, a lot of things together," says Misty. Together the majority of the year, they relish the off-season as time to be with their husbands and families.

"We have so much love and affection for each other and so much respect, but off the court we know where each other stands," says Kerri. "We don't have to hang out every second of the day. There's very little BS between us."

One thing for certain unites them: victory. "What makes them so good is that their desire to win is through the roof," says Kerri's husband, pro volleyball player Casey Jennings, who will be teaming up with Matt Fuerbringer again for this year's AVP Tour.

"They're confident," says AVP contender Nancy Mason, who is currently partnered with Jen Kessy-Boss. "They step out on the court, thinking they're going to win every time—and that's the mind-set that we have also—but they've had more wins to back that up."

Regardless of their individual talents, beach volleyball is all about teamwork. Unlike indoor volleyball, where the teams have 12 to 15 players, the beach scene is a two-woman gig. Perhaps what makes Kerri and Misty the top-ranked U.S. women's team is that they are so synchronized with each other's mission. "It makes it a little easier knowing where each other stands," says Misty. "We sit down every year and say, 'What do you want to accomplish?' and we lay it out on the table and we know from the get-go what's going on."

"It's one of the exciting things about team sports—being able to work with somebody in tandem toward the same goal," says Kerri. "Beach volleyball is kind of like the ultimate team sport because there are just two of you. We have confidence in one another, so I have no problem putting our fate in Misty's hands. When I'm struggling, I know she's going to be there to pick me up and vice versa."

The Walsh/May-Treanor team is currently flexing its muscles at this summer's AVP Pro Beach Volleyball Tour, a yearly event that showcases the biggest beach volleyball talent in the country. The tour runs from late March through September and travels through 16 cities. Now in their fifth year of the tour, the awesome twosome are still just as psyched to hit the sand. "The AVP is blowing up," says Kerri. "It's gotten bigger and bigger every year. We have high expectations. Hopefully, we're going to win all 16 [matches]."

The competition is getting more intense; new partnerships, like Mason and Kessy-Boss, and the return of old favorites like Elaine Youngs and Rachel Wacholder promise to keep things interesting. "It's a bit of a deeper field this year," says Kerri, "so it should be very competitive and very compelling for everybody." Running concurrently with the AVP Tour is the Swatch FIVB (Federation Internationale de Volleyball) Beach Volley World Tour, an international competition that in 2007 will be a qualifier for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Adding an overseas tour to the mix means a grueling 26-tournament run from March to November for Kerri and Misty.



The 2005 Hermosa Beach Open



To prepare for battle on the beach, the two women train five days a week for two to three hours a pop. Some days are spent at the beach, working on fundamentals with Selznick or doing a plyometric program with Mike Rangel, who trains several other top AVP players. A couple days a week, they do a fast-twitch program with trainer Tommy Knox that hones their dynamic movement and core strength. "We work our butts off—we've got to fit in those little bikinis!" laughs Kerri. "We feel like we're in pretty good shape. This is what our job is all about from January to about April. We're busting our butts practicing, and then when the season hits it's nonstop madness."

Misty has been plagued by a few injuries over the years, but she doesn't let them slow her down. She suffered an abdominal strain in 2000, an injury she carried through both Olympic Games that contin-

her the opportunity to see the other side of the media, interviewing athletes and reporting on local hotspots. She also has a gig on Sirius Satellite Radio for the Faction 28 channel called *Sixty Minute Set* with Kerri Walsh. (Other Faction 28 hosts include Bode Miller, Kelly Slater, and Tony Hawk.) When she's not being a superstar, she spends time with volleyball-player hubby Casey, whom she married in December 2005. Casey is also a competitor on the AVP Tour and is known for his enthusiasm and ability to fire up the audience. "He's a stud," says Kerri.

Earlier this year Misty used her celebrity to cheer up a young fan who was hospitalized after a near-fatal car accident. She and Kerri also had a cameo appearance on *CSI: Miami*, something Misty would like to do more of. "I really want to be on *Saturday Night Live*!" she laughs. In November 2004 Misty tied the knot with Florida Marlins catcher Matt

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Hamming it up after winning the 2005 Beach Volleyball World Championship

ued to pester her through the 2005 AVP Tour. A heavy-duty core program has since made her stronger and pain-free. "I don't feel anything now," she says. Shoulder surgery was the latest challenge, but she's bounced back from that as well. "I think I'm in even better shape now," says the powerhouse.

Misty's coach Selznick agrees. "She's the fastest I've seen her in a few years," he says.

Being on tour or in training for most of the year doesn't leave much time for a life outside of volleyball, but these wonder women make the most of their downtime. Kerri worked for NBC as a special correspondent for this winter's Olympic Games in Torino, Italy, giving

Treanor. They met at the Sports Medicine Institute in Orange, California; she was training there, and he was rehabbing his knee. Now they divide their time between southern California and a home in south Florida, where she takes a break from volleyball for fishing and playing golf.

The future looks bright for these two champions, who plan to spike and dig their way to a gold medal at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. They're in it together for the long haul. "This Olympics," says Misty, "I couldn't pick anyone better."

"It's been a wonderful journey with her," says Kerri. "Hopefully, we'll have many more years together." **WZ**

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Celebrating yet another win