

LA WEEKLY

A CONSIDERABLE TOWN

¡VIVA BORDER VOLLEYBALL!

No changing sides allowed

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California's most desolate and unknown beach is desolate and unknown for a reason. It has no name, no facilities, no parking lot. There are no signs for it inside Borderfield State Park. There are no signs for the park either. To get there, you depart the 5 freeway 10 miles south of San Diego, follow the roads to where the gas stations give way to horse stables, get lost in the overgrowth and streams of the Tijuana River delta, and from there walk the dirt road two miles through coastal dunes to emerge at the Pacific.

This is a filthy beach, where the Tijuana River deposits human waste, heavy metals, toxic poisons and other industrial effluvia from Mexico into the ocean. "CONTAMINATED WATER; DEEP HOLES; RIPTIDES; NO LIFEGUARD; NO SWIMMING!" the signs announce.



No switching sides allowed

This is also a geopolitically divided beach, purposefully hidden, a DMZ in miniature where the men and women of the U.S. Border Patrol would prefer no distractions as they monitor the fence of metal pylons that draws a 20-foot-tall line in the sand all the way into the sea.

It is the perfect beach, in other words, for the world's first game of international border volleyball.

This is the idea, at least, as I trek to the beach with no name to meet Brent Hoff and three other collaborators who plan to stage the match. There, under the noon sun, are a lone umbrella, some towels, lots of water and a brand-new volleyball. Hoff is the editor of *Wholphin*, a new DVD magazine published by McSweeney's. For the DVD's menu, Hoff wants to film a game of beach volleyball using the border fence as the net.

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Through the pylons we can see hundreds of people — families, kids, ice-cream vendors and fishermen — all hanging out on Mexico's side. The fence itself has kind of a beach vibe here: It's broken in parts, and Mexican nationals wander back and forth, left alone by the border-patrol units perched up on the hill unless they happen to wander a bit too far.

"Why not use this no-man's land as a real beach," Hoff adds, now spinning the volleyball in preparation, "and see if we could strike up a friendly pickup game? There's no law against that."

Or is there? Hoff suddenly wonders if hitting the ball back and forth constitutes a violation of U.S. Customs law, since goods are technically being transported across an international border. "Does a nice volley amount to three strikes? Can we all get thrown in the slammer?" One friend of Brent's refused to come down because he thought we'd all get shot.

We decide to take our chances. Here we are, under the perfect sun of San Diego, where beach volleyball reigns, so why should that be any different just a few miles south?

With Hoff's three collaborators filming, he needs a second, and so I am volunteered to be the other half of Team USA. By chance, we are both wearing white tank tops, beaded necklaces and swim trunks — just the right uniforms for Team USA to show everybody who's boss. (U-S-A! U-S-A!) Hoff's shades are yellow and mirrored for a nice finishing touch. We approach the fence. Within seconds Team Mexico is formed, and the match begins.

Beach volleyball is a much different game when played over two-story metal pylons. Strategy and nuance go out the window. There are few sets and certainly no spikes. Mostly, it's tit-for-tat power bumps that send the ball in 30- and 40- and even 50-foot arcs. The ball hangs in the air so long that a lot of time is spent looking skyward, bracing for another bump that hopefully goes in the right direction. Waiting for one good knock to fall from the blue, it occurs to me that our entirely new sport makes for some extreme, if inadvertent, political theater. Despite the difficulty, the game is fun — and surprisingly uninteresting to the border patrol, who zipped down at the drop of a hat several times earlier but now seem content to observe us with binoculars.



Spectators line up on the other side too. Beachgoers watch the game, and a bunch of kids doing a college art project film us as well. We learn that our opponents are two guys named Jerry and Larry. Jerry grew up in El Monte. He's in Mexico because he "made mistakes in his life" — I notice a big "EMF" for the El Monte Flores gang on his arm. But now, he says, he's on the right path. Larry is a student with long, rocker hair; he's wearing a black shirt and jeans.

Although we're not really playing for points, it's clear we're losing. Hoff makes heroic dives, and I'm (sort of) pulling my weight in the volleys that develop, but Jerry and Larry have strength and stamina, despite the fact that Jerry is older and wider than me and Hoff combined, and Larry looks like he should be melting.

After an hour or so, we call it quits. Our wrists are red and raw as we go to the fence to shake hands. A crowd gathers for this moment of cultural exchange, which turns into a photo opportunity. Like China's pandas, Hoff and I are goodwill ambassadors. See how furry and friendly we really are? We're not all saber rattlers up here! We take pictures with Jerry and Larry, with the art-school kids, with some tourists from Canada who are marveling at the whole thing.

All this activity finally brings down the hammer of the border patrol, and a jeep shows up to separate us. The officer is friendly but firm. He's just come on shift and has no idea we've been playing volleyball over the fence for the past hour.

"Really?"

He tells us that a daredevil launched himself across the border in a cannon a while back, but that ours was, in fact, the first-ever game of international border volleyball.

"And it worked over that tall fence?"

"Yup," we say. "We're up for one more round if you want to play."

"No, man," the officer says. "I'm on duty."

[Click here to see video of border volleyball!](#)