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A NEW RACKET: Introducing America's newest sport, beach tennis, to the sands of Santa Barbara

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Stares of bewilderment are bound to appear this weekend at Santa Barbara West Beach volleyball courts. Instead of players digging and spiking on a sand court, they'll be hitting a tennis ball back and forth.

Local tennis devotees Bob Grebil and John Gerngross are introducing Santa Barbara to America's newest sport -- beach tennis.

The first-ever Semana Nautica beach tennis tournament begins with an introduction to the sport on Saturday and a round-robin style tournament Sunday at the West Beach volleyball courts. Tennis rackets and balls will take over the sand in what founders of Beach Tennis USA call a combination between beach volleyball, tennis and badminton.

"I want to start the trend. No one's done it or seen it here," said Grebil, organizer for the Semana Nautica event.

The game is played on a regulation-size beach volleyball court with a 6-foot-high net. Players on each side volley a depressurized tennis ball back and forth without letting the ball touch the sand. Unlike volleyball, the ball is hit once per side.

"It's a quick game. You have one serve, no-add scoring and the first team to four wins," Grebil said.

Scoring is just like tennis, with no-ad at deuce. The players will an eight-game pro set.

Grebil said he has custom nets with smaller holes, so the ball does not go through. The nets are courtesy of Beach Tennis USA, based in New York City. Gerngross, Grebil's friend and tennis partner, read about beach tennis in a magazine article.

"My tennis buddies and I went and played and we didn't know the rules," Grebil said.

Grebil said his love for volleyball, tennis, and the beach inspired him to promote the sport.

"We have the beaches and we have the weather, so why can't we have the game?" Grebil asked.

Nick Port, co-founder and vice president of Beach Tennis USA, said he is

supporting Grebil on the event by sending equipment and promotional materials.

"Santa Barbara is a perfect location because you can play year-round," Port said.

The company started after New Yorker Marc Altheim saw the sport played while on vacation in Aruba. The sport originated in Brazil, according to the company's Web site. Since the company's inception last February, Altheim and Port went on two tours to promote the sport -- and it was a hit, according to Port.

"They'd look at you like you're crazy but they were curious enough to ask and before you know it they were out on the courts trying it," Port said.

In 2005, Port and Altheim hosted two-day tournaments in North and South Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey, and Long Island. This year's beach tennis tour has included California and Florida. Winners of last year's U.S. Beach Tennis Open, competing in pro and amateur divisions, took home \$15,000 in cash and prizes.

"We are looking forward to 2007 but we really need corporate sponsors," Port said. Besides sponsorships from Penn and Head, the company is privately funded.

The company's full-time public relations firm promotes the sport in local newspapers of tour locations and on their Web site at www.beachtennisusa.net.

Port said he hopes Grebil's initiative will establish permanent beach tennis locations in Los Angeles and all over the West Coast.

"I have people calling me in Santa Monica saying, 'When are you coming back? We want to play!' " Port said.

Grebil said he wants to help the company fulfill its goal of making beach tennis a mainstream sport in America. Port said the game is already on its way.

"It took beach volleyball 10 years to do we did in two years," Port said.

The next step to building the sport will be to establish leagues throughout the country and hold a national championship tournament at the end of the year.

A national champion will be crowned at the U.S. Beach Tennis Open during Labor Day weekend in Long Beach, N.Y.

"This is our chance to be world champions at something," Gerngross said as he joked with his daughters, who have taken to the sport.

Even non-tennis players will enjoy the game because the sport is easy to learn and requires less technical form to play well than regular tennis, Gerngross said.

"Beach tennis is easier to have fun and get gratification early on," he said.

"It's so much more fun to play tennis on the beach with sand in your toes and a nice breeze," Port said.