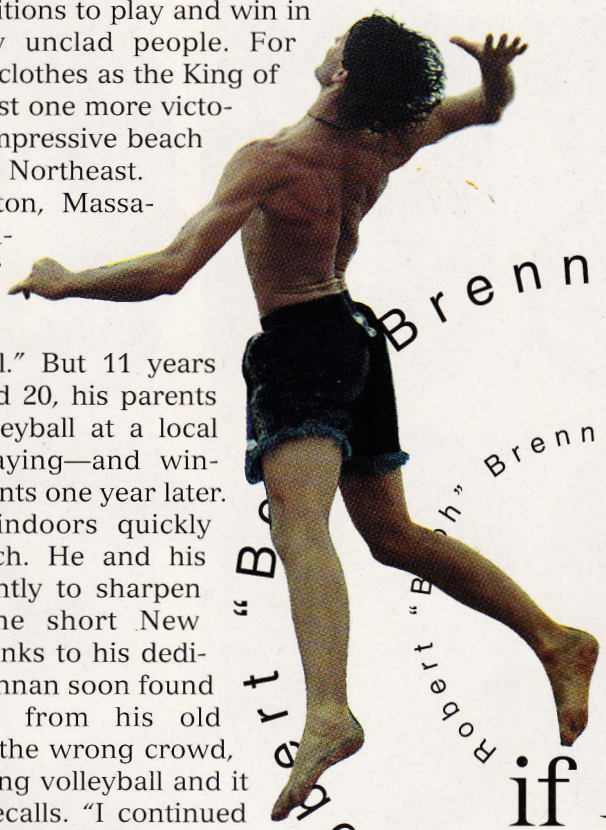


When it comes to volleyball, Robert "Booh" Brennan casts off all pretensions and, if necessary, his clothes.

You're warming up before a match. You connect with a perfect set, and the ball bounces off the court.

You walk into the crowd of spectators to retrieve the ball, but something seems odd. You're naked. Everyone around you is naked. Then you wake up at home, making a mental note to keep this story to yourself. Unless you're Robert "Booh" Brennan, in which case this isn't simply Freudian fodder to hide from your analyst.

This particular incident occurred at the Annual Nudie Nationals in Pennsylvania, where Booh (a nickname from a girlfriend—the name stuck, she didn't) and his partner shook off their underdog seeding and their inhibitions to play and win in front of 500 similarly unclad people. For Brennan, known in his clothes as the King of New England, it was just one more victory added to the most impressive beach volleyball résumé in the Northeast.



Growing up in Easton, Massachusetts, a quiet community about an hour south of Boston, Brennan was an adolescent in a "downward spiral." But 11 years ago, when Booh turned 20, his parents introduced him to volleyball at a local YMCA. He began playing—and winning—indoor tournaments one year later.

Brennan's success indoors quickly translated to the beach. He and his friends played incessantly to sharpen their skills during the short New England summers. Thanks to his dedication to the sport, Brennan soon found himself far removed from his old lifestyle. "I got in with the wrong crowd, but then I started playing volleyball and it got my interest," he recalls. "I continued from there, never knowing where it was going to take me."

In 1993 it took him to the Collegiate Club Nationals, where he made the All-America team. Identical honors followed in 1994 and 1995 at the USVBA Championships. Then, while competing in Portugal and Switzerland, Brennan made a name for himself on the international volleyball scene. A second-place finish in Lausanne, Switzerland, brought an offer to play professionally indoors. But by that time, Brennan had seen enough of the road.

"I love to play the sport at the highest level

Photos: J.C. Cummings, left; Chris Nelson, above

Naked in New England

By Ed Grasso

Robert "Booh" Brennan

Photo: Chris Nelson



Photo: J.C. Cummings

possible," he says. "But I refuse to change my whole lifestyle just to do so."

Brennan still finds time to be the undisputed outdoor volleyball king in the six-state New England region. Brad Van Dussen, whose Shot Block Promotions runs the New England Volleyball Series, comments: "We're in our fifth year doing beach and grass tournaments. Every year we attract more and more people, but every year Booh simply rules the beach."

Brennan seldom loses NEVBS tournaments, and he's consistently ranked as one of the top three seeds. In 1996 he added the King of New England and Team Championship titles to his burgeoning list of achievements. Van Dussen adds: "I don't think I've run an event where I haven't written, 'Pay to the order of Robert Brennan.'"

Brennan credits a lot of his success to his work with East Coast volleyball guru Ed Glasberg. Booh has trained with Glasberg in Florida over the past three winters, and he has nothing but praise for his 70-year-old mentor. "He taught me a lot about playing the overall game. On the East Coast, when you start playing it's just bump, set, spike. [With Glasberg] I slowly changed my game from just hitting the ball to moving it around the court."

For Brennan, tempering raw aggressiveness with savvy and intelligence extends beyond the beach. Playing smart is a technique Brennan has used in his personal life as well. Part of the reason he passed on the offer to turn pro was to finish working toward a degree in exercise physiology at the University of Rhode Island. But he doesn't plan to let his academic pursuits keep him from the sport of volleyball.

"I love to play the game. And as long as I enjoy it, I'll keep on playing."

He continues with both the openness and confidence of a man who has spiked naked: "I'm not afraid to play at the highest level, but I'm not about to chase it down anymore."

Van Dussen recalls an incident that demonstrates Brennan's perspective on the game: "Booh and his partner were playing in the Jose Cuervo [National Amateur Championship] tournament this summer. His partner didn't show up in time, so Booh played with someone else and didn't make it out of the pool. Booh and his regular partner had a pretty good shot at making the playoffs, but he didn't freak out; he didn't blow up. He handled it a lot better than most guys would have."

Robert "Booh" Brennan

Somehow, that doesn't come as a surprise. Robert "Booh" Brennan just loves to play volleyball, whether he wins or loses, whether he wears his shorts or not.

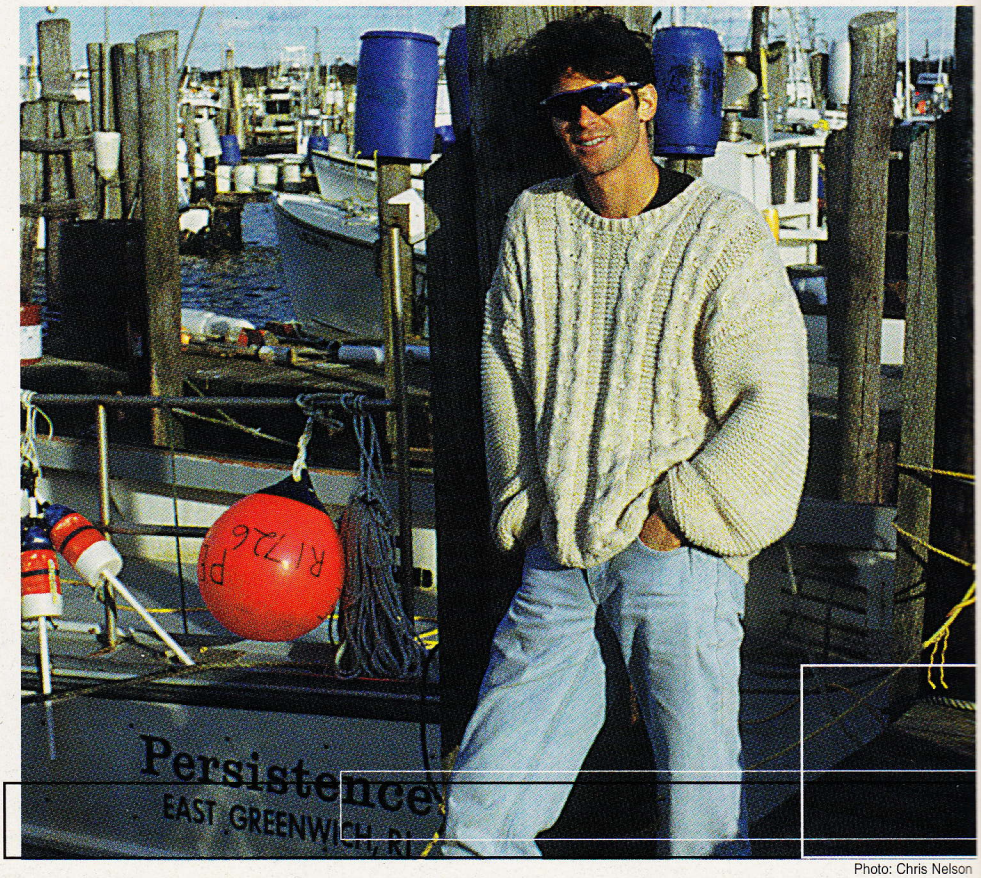


Photo: Chris Nelson