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FEMALE VOLLEYBALL STARS PLAY IN FEAR; HARASSMENT BY OBSESSED MALE FANS GROWS AS BEACH SPORT GAINS POPULARITY

BYLINE: By **ADRIAN MAHER**, TIMES STAFF WRITER

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For almost a decade **Elaine Roque** has enjoyed star status in the fast-growing professional sport of women's beach volleyball. It has brought her an annual income of nearly six figures, trips abroad, keen competition -- and constant fear.

Roque keeps a baseball bat under her bed, in her car and at the office. And she frequently travels with a security escort. They're a necessary response, she says, to the disturbing stream of visits, letters and phone calls she receives from obsessed male fans.

Roque is not alone. Many female beach volleyball players report a steady increase in harassment by overzealous men. The trend, the sport's experts say, is eroding what is left of the casual and funky atmosphere that has helped pro beach volleyball thrive.

For spectators, part of the sport's allure is its accessibility. Players walk over beach towels to get to the court, dive into the crowd for loose balls and often take breaks only an arm's length from fans.

"Many of them are attractive, athletic and are wearing designer swimwear. They play on a public beach in a small and intimate setting. . . . People are attracted to that," said David Kraft, managing editor of Volleyball Monthly, one of the sport's leading trade magazines.

Roque's problems started even before she turned pro. While she was on the UCLA volleyball team, a fellow college student attended all of her classes and filled a photo album with pictures of her competing. Then there was the fan who followed her from California to an Olympic training center in Utah. And last year, when she was competing professionally, there was the hulking man who presented her with a three-page love letter.

"I can understand the drawbacks in this sport, having a bad day or suffering a devastating loss," said Roque. "But growing up playing volleyball, I never thought I'd ever have to worry about fans or anything like this."

Many attribute the problem to the sport's growing popularity.

In the 1960s and '70s, when players were barely earning enough to cover their travel expenses, beach volleyball was more akin to a cult, with a few hundred die-hard fans traveling to Southland beaches to watch a few top players compete in informal weekend matches. Spectators were encouraged to bring their beach chairs to the court's edge and cheer along, point by point, with their favorite athletes.

Today, crowds of 20,000 attend many tournaments, which are backed by large sponsors such as Coors, Reebok and Chevrolet. Court-side seats cost \$10.

Once a summer sport and confined largely to California, the men's and women's pro beach tour is now year-round and stops all over the world. The game will be an Olympic event in Atlanta in 1996. CBS, NBC and Prime Ticket, a regional sports channel, regularly televise events, expanding the sport's popularity.

Numerous televised interviews at court side allow players to develop distinct public personalities, and many of the game's top women players are encouraged by their sponsors to remain accessible and project a friendly persona.

"In the old days you might have 100 people and one wacko," said Kraft. "Now, with a million watching, you've got dozens of wackos. There's a line that's being defined right now between allowing the players to mingle with fans and the need to protect them."

A year and a half ago the Women's Professional Volleyball Assn., a primary sponsoring organization, increased security measures by adding extra police and security staff at each tournament and creating a special players-only tent that is cordoned off.

Female players now speak knowingly of a wide range of harassment: Lewd questions and comments directed at them during autograph sessions. Strangers who show up at their houses with presents on Christmas Day. Promoters seeking partners in marketing scams.

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The other member of Roque's two-woman team, Gail Castro, once had a fan befriend her elderly parents during a tournament. After finding out about the family's dinner plans, the fan showed up uninvited at a buffet meal. The group was unable to get rid of the voluble guest and ended up paying his bill, she said.

Sometimes a string of small incidents can prove burdensome.

For two years, Karolyn Kirby, one of Roque's chief competitors on the tour, received a deluge of anonymous phone calls that recently ended when police captured the culprit. During that time, someone broke into her house.

"It's every little thing that compounds the problem. You just don't feel safe anymore," Kirby said. "You think, 'Is it someone across the street looking through the window?' Your mind just goes and takes on all scenarios."

Roque knows the feeling all too well.

For two years, she said, one man appeared at all of her tournaments in California, where he continually tried to talk to her. Another man, after watching her compete on television, peppered her with phone calls and tried to arrange a meeting through the college where she teaches. (She described the man as a former high-ranking federal government official but declined to identify him.) A California millionaire incessantly sought an encounter on the pretext of employing Roque at his company.

In August, 1993, at a tournament in Santa Cruz, Roque came face to face with a 6-foot-4, 280-pound man who had followed her on the tour for nearly five years. Without talking, the man handed her a three-page, single-spaced typed letter entitled "Ode to Elaine," a collage of weird fantasies involving the man and Roque.

He then sat court-side to watch her compete. In the middle of the match, Roque called a timeout and broke down, sobbing. Months of letters and phone calls from this and other men -- and the security precautions she was forced to take -- had taken a psychic toll. She managed to return to the court and finish the match.

Roque turned the letter over to the FBI. Soon after, she said, she obtained a court restraining order against the man that prohibited him from coming closer than 400 yards to her or the college where she teaches.

"Even now, I still double-check my (car) mirror. I'm always scared," said Roque, who has never been attacked physically. "It really makes you think twice about people."

Roque has an unlisted address and phone number and screens all her calls. Though unmarried, she always wears a wedding ring. She lives in a guarded community with a dog, and has begun taking classes in kick boxing and other forms of self-defense.

She says she and other female beach volleyball players have no choice but to deal with the changing climate of their sport.

"I have always tried to be open, friendly and honest," said Roque. "But it doesn't always pay. It might have gotten me into trouble."

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GRAPHIC: Photo, COLOR, 'I never thought I'd ever have to worry about fans or anything like this.' -- **ELAINE ROQUE** ; Photo, COLOR, Volleyball star **Elaine Roque**, center, often travels with security escort because of obsessed fans' calls, letters and visits. JONATHAN ALCORN / For The Times; Photo, COLOR, **Elaine Roque** hits ball during volleyball match.

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