

China's Xue/Zhang defeat USA's Kessy/Ross Sunday for gold medal at Phuket Thailand Open powered by PTT



Phuket, Thailand, November 6, 2011—While one player was challenged with a knee injury, China's Chen Xue/Xi Zhang came out strong and got even stronger against USA's Jennifer Kessy/April Ross to capture Sunday afternoon's internationally-televised gold medal match as the 2011 FIVB Beach Volleyball Swatch World Tour gathered for the sixth time in Thailand for the women's season-ending \$190,000 FIVB Beach Volleyball Swatch World Tour Phuket Thailand Open powered by PTT.

In Sunday's gold medal match on the tropical Karon Beach center court, China's top-seeded Xue/ Zhang defeated USA's second-seeded Jennifer Kessy/April Ross, 21-16, 21-14 in the 40-minute title match. Xue/Zhang leave Phuket with a perfect 6-0 record with each match being won in two sets while Kessy/Ross finished with a 5-1 record.

The FIVB Beach Volleyball Swatch World Tour visited Phuket for the sixth consecutive year at the purpose-built venue on Karon Beach for this extremely popular event at the dynamic tourist destination on the southwest side of exotic Phuket province. Many of the world's current top and rising stars of women's beach volleyball tandems were in Thailand to conclude the 15-event 2011 women's FIVB Beach Volleyball Swatch World Tour.

The winning pair shares the \$30,000 first-place prize while the silver medal team will split \$21,000, the bronze \$15,000 and the fourth place team will divide \$11,200.

In a battle of former Phuket champions, China's Xue/Zhang, who won the inaugural Phuket Thailand Open in 2006, earned the ninth gold medal of their FIVB Beach Volleyball Swatch World Tour career while finishing in the final four for the 35th time in 67 tournaments

together as well as earning their 30th podium finish. The win was the Chinese pair's second gold medal of 2011, with the other won in August in Aland, Finland. China's Xue/Zhang also increased their lead in the series history with USA's Kessy/Ross to 7-2, avenging a defeat to the Americans the last time the two teams met in Beijing in June.

For USA's Kessy/Ross, the 2008 and 2009 Phuket champions, the Americans earned their 10th FIVB career silver medal in their 30th final four and won their 27 career podium finish.

With the status of the knee injury Zhang suffered during her team's semifinal win on Saturday leaving her questionable for today's gold medal finale, her teammate Xue helped significantly to 'cover' for her teammate as they jumped out in front early and stayed there in the first set with seven point leads at 12-5 and 14-7 after the last tied score of 2-2. The Americans finally closed the gap to 19-16 but Zhang scored the last two points to close out the set.

A similar scenario played out in the deciding second set but the USA kept it close longer with six ties early. At 6-6, China's Xue served an ace and she and Zhang were off running, building leads of 13-8, 17-11 and 18-12 before closing the match with strong kills and net play by both Xue and Zhang.

In the bronze medal match Sunday, Italy's fifth-seeded Greta Cicolari/Marta Menegatti overwhelmed Australia's 19th-seeded Louise Bawden/Becchara Palmer in two-sets, 21-19, 21-15 in 47 minutes. This was the Italians sixth final four in the 25 tournaments they have played together in three years as a team, second bronze medal and third overall medal while it was the Australian team's second final four appearance and first time in a bronze medal match. Italy's Cicolari/Menegatti increased their series edge to 2-1 against the Australians with their season-ending bronze medal victory.

Because they lost in the second round of the tournament, the Italians were forced to fight back through the contender's bracket, ending the tournament with a 7-2 record, the most matches played by any team in the tournament.

The first set in the bronze medal match was very tight with six ties and two lead changes as Italy's Cicolari/Menegatti overcame a 12-15 deficit to come back and take the lead at 18-17. After a tie at 18-18, the Italians closed out the set with a Menegatti kill and a Cicolari ace to go up 20-18.

In the second and final set, Australia scored first and after three early ties, Italy's Cicolari/Menegatti took the lead for good at 4-3 and quickly built it up to six points at 12-6. Australia then called a medical time out for back spasms. After the five-minute time out, the Italians kept the Australians five points down until the final margin at the finish.

"My teammate carried me on her shoulders today and was always there when I wasn't quiet there, it was remarkable to experience," said Zhang following her team's gold medal performance. "We really didn't make very many mistakes and by controlling the tempo like that we got what we really want—a happy ending. The Americans are a great team but somehow today we didn't miss on very many, sets, digs, kills and blocks. My knee hurts but obviously it feels a lot better now."

Reflecting herself on the title match, Xue said, "This was the last competition of the year and it's very important to end it well which we did this week. My teammate is injured, but it hardly showed during the match. She is tough and what showed was how all of our practice and hard work prepares you for different situations and we played extremely consistent this entire tournament."

The internationally-televised women's season-finale of the 2011 FIVB Swatch World Tour schedule, the Phuket Thailand Open powered by PTT, featured 53 teams from 26 countries.

Also on-site in Phuket was a special production crew from IMG, the company that not only produces the live international telecasts of select matches, but also the weekly FIVB Beach Volleyball Swatch World Tour highlight show that is syndicated throughout the world.

The Phuket Thailand Open was being produced by Pentangle Promotions Co., Ltd. of Bangkok in association with the FIVB and the Thailand Volleyball Association.

The 2011 calendar features 15 women's and 14 men's events within all five FIVB confederations plus one special 24-team single-gender women's test event held August 9-14 at London's Horse Guards Parade, the venue for beach volleyball at the 2012 London Olympic Games. The 2011 FIVB Swatch World Tour is offering \$7.64-million in prize money. Twelve of the tournaments were combined men's and women's events, including the World Championships and the six Grand Slam stops. The men's tour concluded in October in Agadir Morocco.

The Phuket Thailand Open is the 232nd women's event on the FIVB Beach Volleyball Swatch World Tour (open, grand slam, Olympic and Goodwill). The first men's FIVB Swatch World Tour event was played February 17-22, 1987 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and the first women's event was played August 14-16, 1992 at Almeria, Spain. There have been 271 men's events in FIVB Swatch World Tour history.

For more information on the 2011 FIVB Beach Volleyball Swatch World Tour, please visit www.fivb.org.