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Sports

Wong returns to Olympics as announcer

By [Cindy Luis](#)

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DENNIS ODA / DODA@STARADVERTISER.COM

Kevin Wong will be an NBC broadcaster for beach volleyball at the Rio Olympics.

Things happen for a reason. Sometimes that even includes regrets.

U.S. beach volleyball Olympian Kevin Wong did not walk in the opening ceremonies of the 2000 Sydney Games, a decision he has carried like a torch for a dozen years. But he has come to terms with what he calls “a youthful mistake” knowing that his absence allowed history to take his place.

Instead of Wong and playing partner Rob Heidger entering Stadium Australia, it would be U.S. beach volleyball coaches Gene and Dane Selznick. It also would be a rarity in Olympic annals: the two legends of the sport were father and son.

“For as much as I do regret it, the cool thing is it opened up the opportunity for them to walk together,” Wong said. “All things happen for a reason and it’s all been part of my journey.”

Of late, it’s been a frequent-flyer journey for Wong, who will be part of the NBC broadcast team for Olympic beach volleyball for a second consecutive Games. The Punahou School product and three-time indoor volleyball All-American at UCLA estimates that between June and August he will have flown over 120,000 miles.

“It’s crazy, I’m traveling more than I have ever in my life, even more when I was on (the AVP) tour,” the 43-year-old Wong said. “I figure I have spent 10 percent of my life in airplanes.

“This has been a very different voyage than last time.”

Four years ago, Wong’s rise to the international broadcasting scene was quick and intense.

Within three months, he went from local broadcasts of JV boys high school volleyball to NBC’s pro beach telecasts to the London Olympics.

“This time I was more entrenched in the process,” he said. “You’re never sure (of getting the job) and you want to be afraid. Fear keeps you on your toes. But I did feel that it was mine to lose.”

Wong again will be partnered with 1984 Olympic team captain Chris Marlowe. But as a sign of the continually growing popularity of beach volleyball, NBC is sending a second crew to cover the men’s and women’s matches.

“I was just at 30 Rock (NBC World Headquarters in New York) and was asked why there was such interest in our sport,” Wong said. “I think on the big scale it’s a sport that works well with millennials. The success that the U.S. has had in the Olympics, particularly with Misty May and Kerri Walsh Jennings (three consecutive gold medals) ... it’s very bankable.

“Plus with the NCAA now offering (women’s beach) scholarships, it’s really changed the landscape. It’s one of the few sports that has grown over the past few years. Times have changed. People are more athletic, you could say they are buying into the Hawaii lifestyle.

“Beach volleyball has been out there for a long time.”

Try since 1915, with the first documented game played on the sands near the Outrigger Canoe Club with club captain George “Dad” Center putting up a net on the beach. Although the OCC’s historical committee had written accounts of the “official birthplace of beach volleyball,” Wong said that when he started doing research for the 2012 Olympics, he found that Wikipedia was crediting California as creating the sport. (USA Volleyball still does).

“We did a lot of research, had to go back into the archives and oral history at Outrigger to verify that it started in Hawaii,” Wong said. “That was one of the things I spearheaded, wanting to set the record straight.”

It led to mini-documentary special with Wong on OC16: “100 Years of Beach Volleyball.”

Wong knows he’ll be busy with broadcasts from the courts on Copacabana Beach but he hopes to be able to break away and see some of the U.S. men’s indoor volleyball matches. With three players from Hawaii on the team, “It’s a great story,” Wong said. “Volleyball runs deep in our state, spread out through all the islands. There’s a lot of volleyball knowledge here and it’s passed down through the generations.

“I love that, as a former Olympian, I can still be part of the movement and what it stands for. The core of the Olympics is still there with everyone chasing down childhood dreams.

“When you give up playing, you do miss that rush. But it’s back now that I get to do a live opening in front of 30 million people where I’m literally freaking out inside. You have to put this calm face forward as part of the team.”