

## *Irish teams among the medal fight at the NIVA Grand Slam in Portrush*

Two teams representing the Republic of Ireland travelled to Portrush East Strand for Northern Ireland's showpiece beach volleyball tournament of 2011. Benny O'Regan and Jonathan Whitty were looking to make amends for consecutive second places on the VAI Tour while new pairing of Sergej Rodin and Piotr Szulc were hoping to do some damage of their own at the competition.

This was the first time any team from the VAI travelled to a competition outside of the Republic since Miriam Gormally and Lina Klimkeviciute competed in Weymouth two years ago. A scorching summer's day with little wind added to the high standard of volleyball to be played on the beach that day. The men's section saw a total of eight teams enter and right from the first game it was apparent that there wouldn't be one clear winner. The group stages saw top seeded team, Jeff Park-David Scott win their group undefeated but only after a ding dong battle in the opening game against O'Regan-Whitty, with northerners winning in the tie break 15-11. However, both teams had easy victories over the other two pairings in the group, Wilson Greenlee-Nick Wright and Stanev-Vasilev., ensuring both qualified for the semi-finals.

While in group two, with one team pulling out on the day, Rodin-Szulc only had to win one of two matches to advance to the semi-final also. They did with ease overcoming Callum Currie / Matthew Scott in 2 sets. A good warm up game for the pair to get accustomed to each other's play, the next game was against top seeds Alan McKnight-Jonathan Workman. The winners of the previous NIVB beach tournament, McKnight-Workman showed that size doesn't matter on the beach as they defended everything the southerners threw at them and ran out easy winners in 2 sets.

Both VAI teams had reached the semi-finals, both coming second in their groups and now would face off against the top two northern teams to make the final. Rodin-Szulc were making hard work to win some points against Park-Scott. Nothing seemed to go right as the Northerners managed to defend and kill every attack, thus running out convincing winners in 2 sets.

The other semi-final was a tighter affair where O'Regan-Whitty and McKnight-Workman did battle to claim the final spot. This was an enthralling contest, with every inch of their bodies used to good effect. Rallies went on for what seemed like an eternity as both teams were not going to give up that easily. It went down to a tie break. The Republic boys held their nerve till the end as the energy levels were zapped out of them, making basic errors as the vital closing stages. In the end, experience shone through with O'Regan-Whitty winning 21-13, 19-21, 21-11.

The 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> place playoff allowed Rodin-Szulc to meet McKnight-Workman for the second time that day but obvious lack of form and playing together from the Dublin pairing saw McKnight-Workman grab 3<sup>rd</sup> place on a convincing scoreline 21-11, 21-14.

Both pairings had played each other in the group in the day in an enthralling battle and more of the same was to follow from these teams. O'Regan-Whitty started with all guns blazing, with everything working at vital times, from serve aces to clinical finishing. 1st set went to the Southerners, 21-6. However the tables turned rapidly as the 2<sup>nd</sup> set saw the momentum with Scott-Park. Almost a mirror image of what happened in the 1<sup>st</sup>, the contest was evened out, with Scott's jump serving causing the Irish boys problems, ending with a 21-7 win. Thus, second time in the day, the two teams did battle in the tie break. It went down all the way to the wire, both teams at it hammer and tongs. In the end, Scott-Park just about got their noses in front and won the tie-break 15-13.

A merited placing for the Boys in Green, although disappointed not to come out on top, another second place is nothing to take away after from some fine performances put on show at Portrush.

Gold Medal- Jeff Scott/Alan Park

Silver Medal – Benny O'Regan/Jonathan Whitty

Bronze Medal – Alan McKnight/Jonathan Workman

4th Place- Sergej Rodin/Piotr Szulc