

San Diego Woman azine

**SAN DIEGO MOJO CELEBRATES ITS
INAUGURAL SEASON**



SAN DIEGO mojo™

MAKING DREAMS COME TRUE

By Judith A. Habert

It's exciting, exhilarating, and ground-breaking! San Diego's newest addition to professional sports is the San Diego Mojo. The Pro Volleyball Federation is the latest breakthrough for women's professional sports. The PVF includes athletes from all over the world, but this is the very first time that our American talent has had the opportunity to pursue their dreams without traveling halfway around the world, away from friends and family to do so. It is no longer a choice between pursuing your dreams or staying in the States; the advent of the PVF and, even better, the existence of a local team gives talented female volleyball players a chance to play close to home.

The International Volleyball Federation has over 200 governing nations with pro volleyball teams for both men and women. Countries that American players traveled to play at the pro level have included Turkey, Japan, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Israel, Russia, Finland, Portugal, Poland, and Denmark.

Many players have had the opportunity to fulfill their Olympic dreams with the United States Women's National Team, and many ended up attaining gold medals, so it was obvious that we had a litany of great players here, but they had nowhere in this country where they could showcase their talents and turn their love into a profession. Thankfully, that has all changed now due to the advent

of the PVF and the visionary leadership of one of the all-time greatest volleyball players, Kerri Walsh Jennings. She has been instrumental in bringing this exciting sport to San Diego. Walsh-Jennings is a renowned beach volleyball player, three-time Olympic gold medalist, and one-time Olympic bronze medalist, and is now the owner of the San Diego Mojo, our own professional women's volleyball team based in San Diego. This had a great impact on our local stars who have now been able to find a home right here in San Diego. Of course, the team does not only include American players, but some of the top players from around the world.

We had the great fortune of meeting some of the players and

their magnificent coaching staff. With practices held at the Wave Volleyball facilities in Del Mar and games played at the Viejas Arena, we had the opportunity to watch them in practice mode and during a recent game against the Columbus Fury. And yes, our girls shined, defeating the Fury in a very exciting matchup.

Ronika Stone (#7) is a middle blocker who stands at 6'2" and has been playing professionally for 4 years. Although Stone was born in Passaic, New Jersey, she spent the majority of her life in San Jose, California.

We had the chance to speak with her and learn a bit more about her passion for volleyball; Stone said, "My dad is a former NFL player, and I always wanted to be an athlete. I played a lot of



Photos Courtesy of San Diego Mojo

sports growing up, but ultimately, when I started playing volleyball at the age of 12, I instantly fell in love with it.

Stone is in her fourth year as a pro volleyball player. “In my first season, I played for Volero Le Canet in France. Then, I spent the next two years playing for AU (Athletes Unlimited) and in Puerto Rico for Las Pinkin de Corozal, where we won back-to-back championships.

I asked Stone what advice she could share with young girls wanting to follow in her footsteps. She said, “Never stop learning—always strive to be a student of the game. You don’t become a professional overnight. It takes years of hard work and

dedication to your craft. Be patient and continue to find joy in the growing process.”

When you watch Stone play it is obvious that she has a tremendous work ethic and approaches each match as if it was the biggest of her life. You can tell from watching her, both during games and in practice, that she is a force to be reckoned with. She dominates the court and is a consummate professional. She has definitely gone on to fulfill her childhood dream.

Nootsara Tomkom (#13) has been playing volleyball professionally as a setter for 16 years and is considered one of the best setters in the world. She was born and raised in Thai-

land but has played for various teams during her career. She stands at only 5’ 5” but is quick and agile, and always seems to anticipate where she should be in every play. Her commitment to the game is obvious as well as her ability to be a team player. Her experience on the pro level includes playing time in Spain, Switzerland, Asia, Turkey, the USA, and, of course, her homeland of Thailand. She is a ten-time Southeast Asian Games Champion. With her varied experience and expertise, she is a major asset to the Mojo roster. Tomkom is in her 17th year as a pro and is most definitely a major force within the San Diego Mojitos.

These are just two of the amazing members of Team Mojo. Take a few minutes to visit the Mojo site and check out their impressive roster (<https://provolleyball.com/teams/san-diego-mojito/roster>).

Along with the importance of the team that the Mojo has placed on the court comes the expertise of the coaching staff, which is of utmost importance. Head coach Tayyiba Haneef-Park was born and raised in Laguna Hills, attending Laguna Hills High School and Long Beach State. A standout player in college, she went on to participate in the Olympics and won silver medals in 2008 and 2012. Haneef-Park played for various



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Clubs professionally, as well as with the U.S. National Team. She was an integral part of clubs in Italy, Poland, Asia, and Istanbul.

Haneef-Park's coaching career began in 2014 and has been going strong over the past ten years. This included the position of assistant coach for the University of Oregon, assistant coach for the Beach Volleyball team at the University of Arizona, the Director of Sport for

Athletes Unlimited Professional League, and as an assistant coach, USA Volleyball Women's Collegiate National Team. She also served as an assistant coach for the U.S. Women's team at the Pan American Cup, where they secured a gold medal, and as head coach for Team USA during the NORCECA Continental Championship. The list just goes on and on. Watching her on the court, she not only

shows great leadership but an in-depth knowledge of this sport and what it takes to be a winner. It quickly becomes obvious that the women are not only doing their best because they are accomplished professionals, but they are doing their best because they are proud to be playing for this accomplished leader. Standing at an impressive height of 6'7", Haneef-Park may very well be the tallest head coach in professional volleyball. However, it's not just her height that sets her apart; her experience as a world-class athlete, along with her innate ability to relate to her players on a personal level, makes her an exceptional coach.

Her experience as a player is impressive. Haneef-Park is no doubt an exceptional athlete, having played basketball and competed in track & field until her true love of Volleyball won out. Her career spanned over a decade with the U.S. Women's National Team, which includes three Olympic appearances and two silver medals. She retired from playing in 2012 when she took on a professional coaching career.

In addition to their skilled head coach, their leadership is strengthened even further by their experienced assistant coach, Deitre Collins-Parker.

Collins-Parker is a widely respected figure in the volleyball community, having served as the head coach of the San Diego State volleyball squad for ten years. She has also held head coaching positions at Cornell, UNLV, and the University of Arizona. Her assistant coaching positions at Coastal Carolina, Northern Arizona, Houston, the University of Arizona, and South Alabama are impressive as well. She has been named conference coach of the year, won Ivy League titles three times, and made two appearances in the NCAA tournament. With

these two powerhouse coaches at the helm, there is no wonder why this team exudes so much excitement every time they hit the court.

As a player, Collins-Parker was a star for Hawai'i, where she was named an All-American three times. The middle blocker won back-to-back national titles with the Rainbow Wahine in 1982 and 1983. She was the National Player of the Year in both 1983 and 1984 and was part of the 1988 USA volleyball team at the Seoul Olympics. She was the first volleyball player to ever win the Honda Broderick Cup as the best female athlete in college sports. With these two powerhouse coaches at the helm, there is no limit to the bright future of the San Diego Mojo.

Attending a San Diego Mojo game is exciting; the audience is electrified by the incredible athleticism shown by the team, and as time goes by, it becomes obvious that it will become more difficult to secure tickets in the near future due to the growth of female professional volleyball. It is an exciting fan experience that cannot be appreciated unless you come out to the arena and watch the fantastic team and coaches that make it a life-changing experience.

The San Diego Mojo is offering some amazing deals for the 2025 season, and our staff agrees that we fans need to move fast before seats disappear. With a small deposit of just \$20, you can secure your spot and gain priority for seat selection for next season. This is an offer you cannot beat.

We are so proud of this amazing group of women, and you will be, too, after witnessing just one game.

Bring the family out and let them all see the impact being made in women's sports. If you attend just one game, you will certainly be hooked!