

BEACH VOLLEYBALL

California screaming as injury robs Spokes

INJURY denied UK beach volleyball Olympic hopefuls Debbie Spokes and Hedda Meijer's their shot at the Chinese national team in the semi-final of a Californian tournament.

Spokes from Poole and her Nottingham-based partner are in USA training and competing against some of the best beach volleyball teams in the world as they aim to make the Olympics in Beijing in 2008.

But a rock buried beneath the sand court left Spokes with a badly gashed arm after she dived to retrieve a smash and left the pair seeing red, literally, at their bad luck.

Spokes said: "I have never seen so much blood. They banded my arm so we could carry on the game which was okay for a while but blood started pouring out again.

"We eventually lost by just two points in the third set to take third place in the tournament."

The pair had made good progress in the Extreme Volleyball Professional tournament in Santa Barbara as they breezed through the opening round.

Defeat in their second match placed them in the lower half of the draw but they made their way to the last four of the com-

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petition and led by a set in the semi before Spokes' unfortunate injury.

It is not the first time the duo have suffered knocks in their stint in the States. Meijer picked up an elbow injury in training which left her sidelined for three months while Spokes has only recently recovered from a broken finger.

Spokes, however, was philosophical. She said: "We were really on-form and looking forward to playing the Chinese before they return home.

"But our coaching is everything and has improved our technical game immeasurably in the time we've been out here.

"The standard here is exceptional, beyond anything we could dream of in UK, simply because beach volleyball is so big in California.

"Everybody plays here and the sport has huge amounts of sponsorship.

"Weekend tournaments are regional events and draw huge crowds. The experience has opened our eyes to just how much sport and its supporters in the UK still have to learn."



INJURY AGONY: Debbie Spokes (bottom) and Hedda Meijer