

Volley good show at the Commonwealth Games

Australia, the conquerors of Scotland's women's beach volleyball team, eventually had to accept second best for the second Commonwealth Games running.

Team Scotland hopes, blocker Melissa Coutts, aged 51, and her partner, Lynne Beattie, aged 36, were beaten by Aussie pair Mariafe Artacho del Solar and Taliqua Clancy in the quarter-final, the same stage they reached four years ago in Australia when the sport was first introduced to the Games.

Canada's Sarah Pavan and Melissa Humana-Paredes successfully defended their Commonwealth women's beach volleyball title, but they had to do it the hard way with a 2-1 comeback victory over the tough Australia pair.

The final was a replay of the one played at Gold Coast 2018 and the Australians took a tight first-set lead after a 24-22 scoreline, but 2019 world champions Pavan and Humana-Paredes struck back to take the next 21-17, after a surge at the end, and 15-12 respectively to seal victory before a packed crowd at the city centre Smithfield complex.

Coutts from Edinburgh, and Glasgow-born Beattie, who captained the Team GB volleyball squad at the London 2012 Olympics, are both members of the Edinburgh Beach Volleyball Club and are coached by Felipe Humana Paredes.

The pair, beaten 2-0 (21-11, 21-11) by the talented Aussie duo, were in the same accommodation block as the the Scotland's women's hockey squad and watched from the players' enclosure in the fifth/sixth place contest with Canada which they lost 3-1 at The University of Birmingham.

The beach volleyball event was, undoubtedly, one of the hits of the Games and not just for the sport, it was fun to be there.

The venue was a few minutes walk from the city centre in a specially-constructed court (pictured) on a former market site

which is part of a multi-million pound regeneration project. Also, Birmingham's weather, bright sun and clear blue skies plus balmy nights, proved ideal and crowds, even those watching the sport for the first time, were wooed by the entertainment package.

The rakemen, who smoothed the sand between games, went viral on social media as fans switched on to their "I Want to Rake Free" dance routine to music from legendary band Queen.

And James Lambert, one of the dance team, said the reaction to their performances had been "crazy" and he added: "We come on doing ordinary routines and we just improvise."

Entertainment was the key word and it was ramped up on finals night by a four-piece band, and the arena compere and DJ kept the audience involved throughout, chanting "volley,volley, volley" and urging them to stand and clap at game point. Not what one would do at Wimbledon, but it worked in this charged environment.

Back to the on-court action, and Vanuatu beat New Zealand to seal the bronze medal with the same team which competed at the Gold Coast.

Miller Pata and Sherysyn Toko beat Alice Zeimann and Shaunna Polley 2-1 after losing the first set 21-10 and looking, at one stage, down and out.

However, they rallied and it was a second-straight Commonwealth bronze medal for Pata who revealed she has been away from home for three months. That's obviously the type of sacrifice one has to make to win at this level.

She said: "I am very happy, I don't even know how to explain it. I dedicate it to my two kids back home. I have a boy and a girl. I spoke to them before the match and they said: 'Good luck, mom'.

The sport is an optional one for the organisers after making its debut on the 2018 Games but, having witnessed the fun, yes it is fun, one hopes that bosses continue to give this hugely-enjoyable event, which combines great skill, athleticism and tactics, an international stage.

And it would be wonderful if the Edinburgh club could project

the sport more at Portobello, their home base. Yes, it needs a number of things to click into place, including the fickle Scottish weather, for this feel-good project to work.

Fully aware that an initiative like this requires a large cash injection, and, post pandemic, cash is in short supply, but if the reaction generated by an event at Costa de Porto becomes anything like it was in Birmingham, then the organisers are onto a winner.

Furthermore, one would hope that showcasing the sport to a wider audience would encourage more young women, and even men, to give the sport a chance. That would be a huge bonus for Scottish Volleyball.